

# DURNNESS

In

## MACKAY COUNTRY

A collection of informative material,  
descriptions, reports and stories.



**Mackay Country Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh**  
**An area in North-West Scotland of natural  
unspoiled beauty, rich in heritage & history.**

*"We value and respect our past as much as we strive to make our  
present and future secure and vibrant."*

*"We are on the edge, and what a beautiful edge we are on!"*

Jannete Mackay of Strathy

Ronald Lansley

A collection  
of informative  
material,  
descriptions,  
reports and  
stories  
historical and  
current from  
projects  
carried out  
between 1990  
and 2019.

## Foreword

In November 2019 I left Durness after living in the parish for 37 years. 17 Years in Balnakeil Craft Village and 20 years at Sangomore Headland. During that time, working with very supportive and enthusiastic people, I was involved in several local studies projects and gathered abundant amounts of local information, historical and at the time current. Since 1981 I was involved in many community activities both practical and on committee, a few have been paid consultancy and others voluntary.

Along with acting as the local correspondent for the Northern Times, Development Officer for CVS North supporting community and voluntary groups undertaking a wide range of ventures within the wider locality, I initiated, managed, designed, sought finance, over saw, reported, commissioned and liaised with a wide range of academics and others with local knowledge in a comprehensive range of schemes, mostly heritage. These were both specific to Durness and contextually relevant to the situation and circumstance of Durness in the area recognised as Mackay Country. The projects I was involved in were instigated from ideas and concepts from a range of individuals after conferring, researching, and referring to past writings.

The account of the projects I was involved in was originated from understanding the background and historical feature of the concept. To my understanding and clarity none of the elements of the projects undertaken are indivisible from a whole. All these projects were detailed in web sites which have expanded to include several sites interlinked. Durness.org and mackaycountry.com are the principal domains retained to maintain the names but the data which is considerable is held on free sites hosted by Wix.

In 2000 I compiled the first book about Durness Past and Present, a short publication containing historical background obtained from various sections of the public domain prior to the internet and observed information pertinent to delivering a wide-ranging depiction of Durness at the turn of the century. I always intended this book be a starting point and a stimulus for others to elaborate and enhance with further detailed knowledge, accounts of life and times and stories.

The turn of the century and the start of a new millennium is a significant time in history, a marker, and point of reference for future generations. Not only will it be exciting and relevant to leave local memorials that indicate the way we lived but to purposely leave relics that will add instructively to knowledge.

Jim Johnston an inspiration wrote: *“you’ll find that there’s book shops in Orkney that are full of books written sometimes by incomers but very, very often by Orcadians who have selected aspects of their own environment to write about, and that is so rare in Sutherland; it almost just doesn’t happen as far as I can see, ... it’s a record of how people feel and a record of attitude and a record of events and a statement of pride in place and it’s ongoing, it’s not something that people did in the past and stopped” ...*

The time I spent in Durness I was intrigued by the constant visits by academics and lay persons from a range of disciplines carrying out research for a multitude of aims. Much of the information gathered never easily became available to the people of the locality. Much of the information was written in academic research journals and if not published was only available through university libraries. I connected this with the availability to recognise a way of life in a unique setting still embedded in the everyday living of culture and traditions of the Scottish Highlands. Every community is unique in its character and I recognise Mackay Country as a community of communities.

This book is about bringing all the information I collected elaborating on Past and Present and including new material discovered from projects containing the collections maintained on the

web sites. Defining and understanding community requires learning about the past in a structured context which gives an understanding of the present in a perspective framework. The setting and relatively recent unaltered environment offered in and around Durness lends to be examined in many different ways.

The approach was identifying areas and topics of local interest and developing projects related with diverse methodology. My interest in all the schemes undertaken was the detection to achieve a better understanding of a community perception. The activities, the relationships, the generation differences in historical and successional awareness. This was a general and personal pursuit. This work is taking a wide and inclusive view taking information and activities through time to give an angle of vision into a perspective of community creation, development and succession.

Projects undertaken were budget constrained designed to unfold as much information as possible with input from as many interested parties, from all levels of interest as achievable but presented in an understandable and in layman's terms. Apart from original material concluded from projects most of the information is available from other sources: this book strives to bring the information together. Information from scholarly studies to daily life observations and recordings. I have tried to distinguish primary and secondary sources.

During the research for this book my understandings of Durness and the surrounding localities was only reinforced that to maintain a perspective the area has to be understood in a larger context, Sutherland, Reay Country, Mackay Country, and Strathnaver depending on the period but even today the interdependencies are considerable. This is an attempt to understand the landscape through time and the people living and shaping that landscape. As in any compilation of information only the surface of some very in-depth studies can be noted. These in depth studies themselves in many cases ask more questions than they answer. But in combination the visions of the landscape in time become more apparent in a very general picture. Mackay Country is a large area and deserves more than bits and pieces of information gathered together.

Developing a picture of the area requires input from different and diverse sources. This volume is made up of contributions from a range of local people. Much of what you find here was also included in the events and exhibitions held right across the area. Through photography over one hundred participants' young and old recorded life today and their hopes for the future. Through oral history recordings, a further fifty people discussed life in the past and possibilities for the future.

What makes this part of Scotland exceptional is the people - they welcomed me and encouraged me to try some challenging activities and gave their support unquestioningly. Many made my continued stay in Durness possible, without their sensitivity and generosity my family and I would not have been able to remain and enjoy the quality and lifestyle possible. I would have had to return to the lowlands and get a proper job! I take this opportunity to thank everyone who has made this possible. I unreservedly thank the people of Durness and beyond for this.

Three memorable events have marked my involvement with the people of Mackay Country, having a tune written and recorded for me by Carol Anne Farquhar Mackay during the Pibrochs and Poppies project *Reel for Ronnie*, being appointed in 2012 as chieftain of the Durness Highland Gathering and being elected to the Durness Community Council.

The amount of information gathered from enthusiastic participants should not be confined to digital archives, lost to eternity, used in funding reports or only used in reference to academic interpretations. I feel an obligation to all the people involved that the collected material, stories and time given should be acknowledged. This publication only scratches the surface. I continue to ensure every image taken and donated during the projects, stories told and material scanned

is catalogued and archived in the Mackay Country Archive available at Strathnaver Museum which at the time of writing is an ongoing process.

The northwest corner of British mainland is the classic Scottish Highlands with large areas of coast, inland mountains in the background and rolling rivers, massive lochs and numerous lochans. The rugged grandeur of this area is beautiful with an overwhelming abundance of wildlife all around and is sparsely populated. There is an ever-changing light and a powerful sky, breath taking expanse with dramatic and diverse changes. During long summer hours of daylight there is a radiance illumination and the other extreme of hours of darkness with vast starry skies in winter.



IMAGE 1 MACKAY COUNTRY

## **Acknowledgements**

I have been privileged to have worked with many talented, skilled and friendly supporting people without whom none of the detailed projects, and more not covered, could have been carried out. I had the pleasure of being involved with people active at diverse levels of interest and diverse specialities that encompassed examining both historic and then current activities of the localities in an area that held exceptional social and collective values. Their partnership, trust, collaboration and encouragement I value more than I can express.

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The start of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is bringing rapid and sometimes incomprehensible changes and within Mackay Country, in my opinion, is no different. Although many undertakings were taking place a slower understandable recognisable changes were able to be perceived. This work was carried out at a time of relative stability in Mackay Country and will be for others to decide what changes time has made since.

**I hope there is a representation created of Mackay Country at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and in the 20 years at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by the actions carried out by all involved and a legacy remains from all those engaged.**

**I am solely responsible for the information, presentation and interpreting and errors are entirely my responsibility.**

**This work is dedicated to the people of Mackay Country  
Past Present and Future.**

**Ronald Lansley**

**2024**

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## Introduction to Durness

In a spectacular corner of the Highlands of Scotland, the most North Westerly Village on Mainland Britain and the centre of the ancient lands of Clan Mackay, Mackay Country, is the village of Durness. A stunning and tranquil area in the Scottish Highlands. Durness prides itself in being an area unspoiled by the pressures of recent convention and remains a community village with many traditional values and life styles diversifying from crofting customs. Visitors are welcomed and offered the chance to see and participate in true Scottish hospitality as is the expectation worldwide.



IMAGE 2 DURNESS FROM THE AIR

Durness is the most north westerly inhabited locality of mainland Britain. Magnificent mountains, spectacular seascapes, beautiful beaches and friendly people make a slower and more traditional pace of life, subject since early time to a great many influences and strong contrasts. Durine, Balvolich, Balnakeil, Sangobeg, Leirinmore, Lerinbeg, Smoo and Sangomore are the small settlements dotted along the coastline that have survived to give rise to Durness Village in the parish of the same name. The ruins of many of the earlier settlements are still visible around the present dwellings. The crofts are laid out around the coast, the cottages fronting the road with strips of arable land stretching in front and behind. Durness Village has developed on the main road, succeeding the Kirkton at Balnakeil as the centre.

There are two food shops – a family run grocer, Mathers, and a Spar supermarket Richard Mackay & Sons, housing a post office. A self-service petrol station with an outside payment terminal requiring a chip and pin card, a golf course, Balnakeil Craft Village, a camp site, public house and restaurant, one hotel and several bed and breakfast establishments. There are small businesses and a host of craft enterprises. The Royal Bank of Scotland travelling bank visits once a week for two hours parking their vehicle in the Village Square. The Highland Council mobile library service has a well-stocked library van calling at several points once a fortnight. Until 2016 the Sunday papers were sold from a car or van travelling from Lairg but

the Spar opens for few hours for sale of Sunday papers. In 1993, an Environmental Improvement Scheme renewed the Village Square. The village hall was sited here until 2000 and three houses now occupy that space (2022). The stone feature with the information of Durness local interest was built in 1886 and was originally located opposite the road junction and housed a clock. George Whyte of Sangomore the local stonemason was reputed not ever to have been paid for the structure as public subscription never materialised.

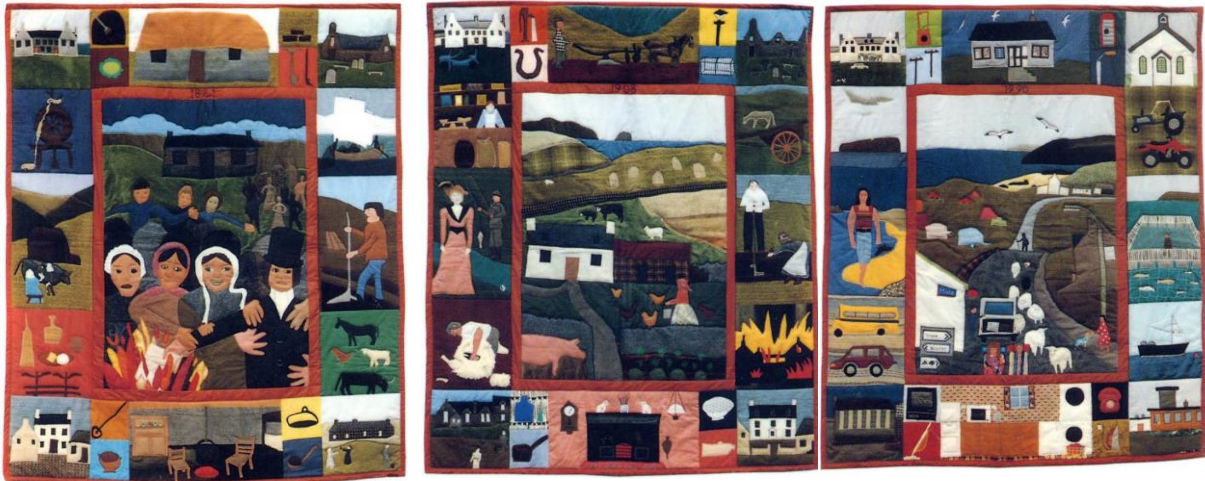


IMAGE 3 CLOCK TOWER

Much of Durness is related to its history. Describing the areas prominent features inevitably means referencing the past to understand where they stand in the present. Being within a crofting community until recently sheep wandered randomly throughout the village. With cooperation between crofting, farming and community groups the village was ring fenced and sheep prevented from entering the village. This has allowed a regeneration of the natural flora and a distinct renewal of many habitats. Domestic gardens have flourished with the absence of wandering animals.

Following a Durness Primary School Project “Dig for History” in 1990 there were several areas of interest and historical periods in Durness history that were worth further investigation. The outcomes of the project highlighted the little written legacy of Durness history and production of three beautiful wall

hangings depicting life and events in Durness in 1841, 1908 and 1990. They were created with the children, parents, teachers and people from the Durness village. Until 2019 the wall hangings were on display in a purpose built cabinet in Durness Tourist Information Centre.



Balnakeil House built 1744	Darg Pile Carla Stephenson Cabbage	A Highland House Often called "A Black House" Eleanor Gallant	Peat – the only fuel Rowan Van-Mysen Peat cutting Tools Neil Macrae	Balnakeil Church The parish church Jamie Mitchell
Spinning Wheel Cloths had to be made locally Carla Stephenson	1841 The Durness Riots The attack on the Durine Inn 17 <sup>th</sup> September 1841 The constables flee from the crowd. The burning of the eviction writ Sheriff-officer James Campbell is forced to burn the writ by the women of Ceannabhac and Sangobag.			Fishing Boat David Mackenzie
The Shieling In summer the women and children took the cattle to hill pasture where they made dairy produce. Michelle Cordiner	Ploughing – on a raring with a chain team or foot plough Lazybeds in the background The burning of the eviction writ Sheriff-officer James Campbell is forced to burn the writ by the women of Ceannabhac and Sangobag.			Animals Rebecca Anderson Horse Hen sheep Cow Eilean Mitchell
Diary Implements Butter churn Milk cog Mug Plater with cheese Cheese press Catriona Morrison	Harrook Spade Rowan Van-Mysen	Inside a "Black" House Dresser Box bed Central Hearth Eilean Mitchell and David Mackenzie	Girdle James Miller	The General Assembly School Durness. Built about 1830 on the present site. Wooden Ladle Neil Macrae Jamie Mitchell
Home of James Anderson who ordered the eviction that caused the riot Bryony Smith	Wooden Bowl Scott MacPherson			

Balnakeil House	Lawn Mower Tristram Lansley	A Kit Built house 53 Sangomore Julie Mackay	Telephone Box Heather Sutherland Street Light Charlotte Sutherland	Durness Parish Church Built as a Free Church in 1891 in Sangomore
Garvie Island Bombing Range	1990 Durness Today Oasis Restaurant Muthers Shop Tourist Information Centre Caravan and Camping Site Council Housing Sheep Mainstay of Crofting Moose Shop, supermarket and PO Responds Bus, passengers and mail Tourists Kirsteen Mackay, Julie Mackay, George Cordiner, Ewan Macrae, Jonathan Gallant, Kate Weatherhead, John Campbell, Heather Sutherland, Charlotte Sutherland, Duncan Anderson, Allan Mackenzie, Juliet Frazer-Hall, Rhannon Van-Mysen, Tristram Lansley			Tractor Duncan Anderson Quad Bike John Campbell Fish farm cages On Loch Eriboll Ewan Macrae And Jonathan Gallant The Beautiful A local fishing boat Ewan Macrae
Tourists on the beach Kate Weatherhead	Bas Allan Mackenzie	Car Juliet Frazer-Hall	T.V. and Video Tristram Lansley Modern Kitchen George Cordiner Vacuum Cleaner And Kirsteen Mackay Charlotte Sutherland Rhannon Van-Avon	Telephone Heather Sutherland Iron The Craft Village Jonathan Gallant

IMAGE 4 WALL HANGINGS DEPICTING LIFE AND EVENTS IN DURNESS IN 1841, 1908 AND 1990.

Durness, sited on the A838, is now one of the few remaining places of any size in mainland Scotland that you can only access by single track road. Tourism, fish farming, sheep farming and crofting are the mainstays of the economy. The splendour of Durness is expressed in its extended horizons, in certain parts a view of over thirty kilometres is not uncommon. The northwest coast line around Durness is formed of precipitous cliffs and sandy beaches. Entering or leaving Durness south the A838 road runs along the eastern shore of the beautiful Kyle of Durness on the southern section. The Kyle is a coastal inlet on the north which extends 5.5 miles (8.9 km) inland from Balnakeil and divides the Cape Wrath peninsula from the mainland, (Kyle comes from the Scottish origin meaning Strait, Channel, Narrow from Gaelic origin.) A crofting village spread out along the coast, Durness is basically a string of hamlets. The crofts with houses and strips of land lying out behind towards the coast on limestone rocks giving rise to good pasture land.

Durness village stands slightly proud from the sea with sandy beaches and rocky coves. Lying 16 kilometres (10 miles) east of Cape Wrath and 100 miles west from John o Groats on the

north coast and home to some 320 people. A collection of scattered townships and farms. The pace of life is slower and more traditional than in more densely populated areas. On the “corner” of Scotland from here you can only go south or east. Durness makes an ideal base for touring the rest of the North West Highlands, a vast area of outstanding natural beauty. There is an abundance of magnificent scenery and wildlife, a natural stopping place. The scenery around is magnificent and for those accustomed to city dwelling the sheer scale of the landscape is awe inspiring. This is surely one of the most beautiful areas of Europe with sparkling rivers, scattered lochs, shimmering beaches, rugged mountains and vast expanses of open moorland, here visitors will find peace and quietness, clean, uncrowded beaches; some of the world's best fishing; and space in which to enjoy the clear invigorating air.

The name Durness, or, as it is pronounced by the natives, Duirinish, is evidently of Gaelic origin could be from the Norse Drya-ness meaning Deer Cape or Deer Point and has been referred to as an oasis in a barren land. By some it has been derived from Dorrain, i.e. storms or tempest, and nis or nes a promontory. Others derive the word from Dubh, black; raon field; and ness or nis, a promontory,-Dubh-thir-nis. But as the word, less or nis is seldom, if ever, used to signify a point or promontory in Gaelic, it may with greater probability be derived from Durin, the principal township in the parish, and innis, a green patch or grazing, literally an oasis in a desert. Hence the word Shineness, a green knoll near the Deer Forest in this parish, is derived from sithin, venison, and innis, a grazing. Formerly the parish of Durness comprehended the whole of the district known as Lord Reay's Country, or, as it is called in Gaelic Dùthaich Mhic Aoi, i. e. The Land of the Mackays, extend from the river of Borgie near Strathnaver, to the Kyle of Assynt and comprehending a space of about 800 square miles.

### **Reaching Durness**

Getting here by car or public transport provides few problems with huge investment in Highland roads in recent years, the journeying north from Inverness via Lairg and Laxford takes only just over two and a half hours. The alternative journey by Ullapool adds on about another half an hour. Inverness is a major regional centre with direct bus, rail and air links to other Scottish cities and to London. Local rail services run north to Lairg where the bus connects for the onward journey to Durness. Durness is 74 miles from Dornoch and 103 miles from Inverness. The last 52 miles of both journeys is on single track road.

### **Single Track Roads**

Sutherland's single-track roads can actually attract some tourists. A note, though, that single-track roads can contribute to visitors' perception of peace, quiet and open spaces. More often, however, they are a threat to tourism. During the summer months, single-track roads are potentially dangerous for drivers not used to them. Increased traffic levels can conflict with local business use of the roads, especially in the primary sectors, where road transport of livestock, fish landings and timber is the only option available.

On narrow, single-tracked roads use passing places correctly:–

- Pull into a passing place on your left, or wait opposite a passing place on your right.
- Give way to vehicles coming uphill where possible.
- Be prepared to reverse to the nearest passing place so that oncoming vehicles can pass.
- Don't park in passing places.

Single track roads into and out of Durness are constantly being maintained, passing places widened and improved, edges being extended and holes filled. Occasionally small stretches are improved by widening and made double track. In 1993 a stretch at Gualin Lodge was re-routed and widened to allow more privacy. The cost was met by the owner of Gualin House. In 1990, the corner to Balnakeil was widened and made less sharp, and the removal of the temporary toilets at Balnakeil in early 1996 have been followed by improvements to the road around the farm entrance. The removal of the toilets provoked disquiet and letters were sent in protest to the Member of Parliament, Community and Highland Councils.



IMAGE 5 SINGLE TRACT ROAD HEADING NORTH FROM LAIRG

### **Population of Durness**

A census taken in 1724 shows the numbers did not exceed one thousand. The population increased slowly during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although some families had emigrated to North America and some had gone to work in the cotton mills in south Scotland. Healthcare was improving. Higher numbers of children were surviving thanks to Dr. Dunnet from Thurso who had started inoculating for smallpox in 1760.

In 1772, the "Adventure" put into Loch Eriboll taking two hundred people to South Carolina.

In 1790, the population was 1182.

In 1801: the population was 1208.

People lived in scattered tiny clachans in huts of turf or dry stone, plastered on the inside with clay. They raised black cattle and goats, grew potatoes and inferior oats, used their wooden plough to break the earth, brewed rough beer, and distilled raw whisky.

In 1811, the population was 1155.

In 1815 from thirty to forty families migrated to America.

Year Number

Year Number

1821: 1004  
1831: 1153  
1834: 1180 (206 families)  
1841: 1109  
1861: 1109  
1871: 1049  
1881: 987  
1891: 960  
1901: 903 (870)

1921: 610  
1931: 529  
1951: 413  
1971: 418  
1981: 338

The 1951 census revealed there were forty nine more males than females.

1997's population of about three hundred and fifty in one hundred and fifty households, live in the main in a group of townships strung along the A838.

### Demography 2001 Census

Population 353 Households 154

#### Age Structure % in Each Age Group

0 - 4: 4.8  
5 - 14 13.9  
15 - 24 8.5  
25 - 44 25.2  
45 - 64 31.2  
65 - 74 9.1  
75+ 7.4

Housing Stock which is holiday home or second home 15.8%. Sheep and Cattle Numbers  
Source: SEERAD – June Returns

Cattle & Sheep Durness			Employment (%)	
YEAR		<i>Units</i>		
	<i>Number</i>		Agriculture, hunting, forestry	6.8
1985 Total Cattle	9	275	Fishing, Fish farming	4.9
Total Sheep	37	19,400	Mining & quarrying	0.6
1986 Total Cattle	7	211	Manufacturing	10.5
Total Sheep	38	19,398	Electricity, gas, water	0
1991 Total Cattle	18	365	Construction	10.5
Total Sheep	90	42,139	Wholesale, retail, motor vehicle repair	8.6
1995 Total Cattle	8	55	Hotels & catering	11.7
Total Sheep	35	19,843	Transport, storage, communications	8
1996 Total Cattle	8	176	Financial	0
Total Sheep	36	19,654	Real estate, renting, business	10.5
2000 Total Cattle	*	*	Public admin & defence	2.5
Total Sheep	28	17,555	Education	12.3
2001 Total Cattle	*	*	Health & social work	9.9
Total Sheep	28	16,546	Other	3.1

In Durness over 20% of working people are self-employed. Many people have more than one job and incomes and employment in tourism-related activities is very seasonal.

### **Employment at 2014.**

Many of the small business are seasonal usually self-employed proprietors working in some cases in more than one employment. Seasonal Craft Village operations have come and gone providing some work at various levels at various times. There are a few men working in the fishing industry, crofting mainly involves sheep with muscle farming, lobster and prawn fishing in Loch Eriboll on a small scale by two or three persons. Fish farming employees three or four local people, Highland Council “road squad” of four local men, Keoldale farm employs three people. The joiners and contractors employ apprentices from time to time with a steady role of about seventeen people including the owners. The primary school is staffed with one full time teacher, two on job share with visiting local artist teacher. Administering provides a local job and nursery provision one sometimes two jobs. The advent of the development of the “Third Sector” provides work for a job share for two with Durness Development Group, a CVS (Highland Third Sector Interface) support worker part time and advocacy work for the area. The hotels, restaurants (as they come and go) provide some season local work and “incomers” work recently from Eastern European countries. The Sango Sands Oasis has regular seasonal staff also supplemented with student or visiting staff. The Tourist Information Centre hosts Visit Scotland staff one full time seasonal and one part time and one full time Highland Council employed Countryside Ranger. The Durness Bus, a quite recent addition as Mather’s service slowly retires provides employment, part and full time for drivers. The food supply shops provide local full and part time employment for eight people and some seasonal work for young people. The golf course employs a full time green keeper. Self-catering accommodation offers maintenance and cleaning to locals when owners are not resident. Two people are employed with the Westminster Estates at Achfary admin and gullie.

Mobile phone coverage is acceptable with little problems through the village but sporadic reception once out of the village area. Broadband speed is around 5mb download and 0.5 up loads within about three miles of the exchange. Choice of service provided is restricted to three. At Laid there is a satellite service in operation to households. Costs are higher and speeds and downloads are restricted.



## Durness Buildings of Interest

### Smoo Lodge



IMAGE 6 SMOO LODGE

A former sporting lodge dates from 1790. A wide crow stepped house said to incorporate the 17th century house of Murdo Lowe, an Orkney merchant who traded out of the geo (inlet) of Smoo. He is reputed to have employed local women to carry sacks of meal up the steep track from the beach to the clifftop, in return for an oatmeal biscuit. Used as an officer's mess and headquarters during WW2. Owned by the brewers, Buxton, Truman and Handbury whose top brass stayed there on fishing trips in peacetime. The property privately owned has recently been refurbished and furnished to a high standard throughout, the lodge offers a variety of comfortable and stylish B&B rooms.

### Lerinbeg House



IMAGE 7 LERINBEG HOUSE

A simple, dignified regularly fronted two-storey white washed house built for the Sutherland Durness Estate Ground Officer, The traditional house has a date stone of 1810 along with Sutherland Coat of Arms in the gable wall. The house has been extended over the years and lived in now as a private home.

## Old Manse at Balnakeil



IMAGE 8 BALNAKEIL MANSE

Overlooking Loch Croispol at the edge of Balnakeil Craft Village and incorporated into the township of Knockbreck (Cnocbreac) this house was built in 1772 with a drawing room and dining room addition in 1865. A plain house with mural sundial re-used moulded door piece dated 1727 inscribed MMD (Murdoch MacDonald) and God Sees You. The Rev Murdoch MacDonald was minister of Durness in 1726, an accomplished musician, and well known as a melodious and powerful singer and supporter of the Gaelic poet Rob Donn. The old manse is said to have played a special role in the history of poetry and music in Scotland in particular in its connection with the Gaelic poet and the MacCrimmon family of pipers. It was used as officers' quarters when Balnakeil Craft Village site was first commandeered and built. Lived in now as private home.

### **Cape Wrath Lodge**

This substantial property overlooking the Kyle of Durness at Keoldale celebrated its 80th anniversary in 2007 as a hotel, known as the Keoldale Hotel until 1927. Prior to 1927 Keoldale House was centre of the farming enterprise of that name. Built in 1835, for the Duke of Sutherland probably by the builders of the lighthouse. Farm offices up to 1915 set in green fields on a sheltered site and long occupied by the Balnakeil Factors serving the Lords of Reay. Many years later it became a private dwelling house for a family called Robertson in about 1926, before it was turned into a hotel. Since about 1950, this establishment has been a famous shooting and fishing hotel. The change from Keoldale Hotel to Cape Wrath Hotel was accompanied by substantial enlargement with the addition of outbuildings.

The interior changed very little. The building is a typical double-pile north-west Sutherland



IMAGE 9 CAPE WRATH HOTEL

estate house, crow stepped gables, and diagonal chimney stacks with black and white paintwork. It does have an unusual circular walled garden.

Bought in 1983 by a local couple who gently brought the property up to modern standards of comfort and service without losing the charm of a genuine Highland Fishing Hotel. In 2012 Cape Wrath Lodge, formerly the renowned sporting hotel, was completely refurbished and is now a luxury self-catering retreat for families and groups of friends. The accommodation in the main house flows from welcoming reception and inner halls and comprises an extensive sitting/dining room with wooden flooring, wood panelling, large picture windows and window seating opening into a large breakfast room with bespoke serving counter and a feature fireplace with wood burning stove. There is a generous family room, a music room, and a kitchen with large central island and breakfast bar, composite stone worktops, modern integrated appliances and neighbouring walk-in pantry and store room. A glazed corridor leads to a large sitting/play room with wooden flooring, store room, cloakroom and sauna with shower room. The ground floor accommodation is completed by a principal bedroom with en suite shower room. The first floor offers five en suite, double bedrooms and a second concealed staircase leads up to a further bedroom with en suite shower room, while a third staircase in the sitting/play room gives access to a self-contained suite with a bedroom, dressing room, study and bathroom. On the second floor the property offers one further double bedroom together with seven store rooms, all suitable for a variety of uses including conversion to additional accommodation, if required. There are two fully equipped and sumptuously presented detached cottages within the grounds. Shore Cottage is a luxuriously appointed, 2 bedroom cottage located on the shore side and Kyleview Cottage is a renovated former Shepherds cottage with 3 bedrooms.

Externally, the property provides store rooms adjoining the main house and a useful laundry room, adjacent to which a staircase rises to an apartment with living room/kitchen, two bedrooms and a family bathroom. The property is approached over a tarmac in-and-out driveway the whole sits in approx. 5 acres.

## Parkhill Hotel (Mackays Rooms)



IMAGE 10 RENOVATED AND UPGRADED FORMER PARKHILL HOTEL MACKAYS ROOMS

Parkhill was built between 1887 and 1888 and is sited in the centre of Durness, this family run hotel was temperance until 1995 when a table licence was obtained. This hotel had a reputation of friendliness and highland hospitality. The hotel has tastefully improved the facilities expected by guests over the years providing the modern comforts without tasteless decor. Great pride was taken in traditional Scottish home cooking and all sporting activities of the area could be arranged. Run by Mrs. Dottie Mackay, employing local assistance this establishment was revisited year upon year by return visitors many keeping close friendships and ties with the proprietor. On the death of Dottie her son and daughter in law took over the property and changed the name to Mackays Rooms and Restaurant. After a few years the restaurant was dropped and is now known as Mackays Rooms.

*25<sup>th</sup>. August 2004 Star Hotel*

*Fiona and Robbie Mackay have renovated and upgraded the former Parkhill Hotel now Mackay's Rooms and Restaurant and have been awarded 4 Star status by the Scottish Tourist Board. The former Parkhill has an established history in the village. Built in 1880's and has always been a home to the Mackay's general merchants to the village. Robbie's great grandfather used to return from trips and his wife would sell small quantities of the merchandise thus starting the store. In the early 1930's the then Mackay's Andrew and Jemima started a small hotel business providing accommodation, main meals and afternoon high teas. It very quickly became a family business. The small establishment can even claim to have hosted a wedding reception. Dottie Mackay came to the Parkhill in 1965 and after her husband Dickie died she continued the business while bringing up their son Robbie. Before Dottie died last year she saw the renovations Fiona and Robbie were having carried out and now this establishment has been given the highest award that could be possible.*

## Smoo Cave Hotel



IMAGE 11 SMOO CAVE HOTEL

In recent years much renovating and improvements has been undertaken in this small hotel. Started from a croft house as a bed and breakfast in the early 1950's and slowly expanded with first a table licence and then a public bar this establishment has always been a favourite of the locals.

## Gualin



IMAGE 12 GUALIN LODGE CIRCA 1930 FROM MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

Just over eight kilometres from Durness village square on the A838 from Rhiconich overlooking the entrance to Strath Dionard. This handsome white harled Victorian lodge was originally built as an inn for the Duke of Sutherland in 1833 and now provides comfortable self-catering accommodation for up to nine guests. It is now a fishing and shooting lodge operating as a successful commercial sporting estate, with Gualin Lodge at its heart. The house enjoys a spectacular outlook over the hill lochs and Strath Dionard with the majestic Foinaven

beyond; it is an outlook that is ever changing, as weather fronts ebb and flow from the sea, revealing and then shrouding in mist this extraordinary landscape.

It was purchased by Commander Ferguson with part of the River Dionard in 1932 from the Elliot Family of Balnakeil including the Elliot's part of the River Dionard. Guilin is currently owned by a trio of partners, each with an equal share, the management of the estate and the letting income is shared between the three members of the partnership.

Its situation gives a good starting point for an abundance of splendid walks. This Highland Estate is known for its superb fishing in unspoilt and dramatic surroundings of Sutherland. Gualin Estate, Durness, includes both in its 6,239 acres, a 7.5 mile stretch of double bank fishing on the River Dionard and 60 acres of deep water as one of the nation's finest sea trout lochs. Ending at the Kyle of Durness (where the Estate also has netting rights and a boat for catching migratory fish), the river is classic Highland water, The Gualin fishing's comprise the upper reaches of the river from Rhigolter Bridge to Loch Dionard and are divided into 59 named pools. Each of the six beats (rotated on a daily basis) has its own unique character and there is a mix of slow and fast water.

Serviced by five fishing huts, there is also a bothy on the shore of Loch Dionard for up to three fishermen. Catches are impressive, with an eight year average of 219 salmon and 255 and 297 sea trout caught in 2014 and 2015 respectively. If the rain has been lacking, there is always good sea trout fishing to be had on the loch.

### **The Old Blacksmiths**



IMAGE 13 THE LAST BLACKSMITHS WORKSHOP. (NOW PRACTICALLY DEMOLISHED)

Sited in Sangomore this is a redundant building that used to house a blacksmith's workshop. The building was built in 1910 and still retains many of the original tools and features. This is the last of many blacksmiths that were present in Durness.

## Township and Place Names around Durness

There appears to be no definitive passage for the place name of Durness to have come about and all the etymology recorded have been based on the understanding of language at the time.

A further elucidation is the place name elements from Norse and Gaelic, Dyr meaning or denoting a wild beast (fox, deer) ness meaning Cape Dyra-ness Deer Cape or possibly wild beast (Wolf Cape). Durness, in Gaelic spelt Diuranais meaning black point. It is worth noting that the spelling of the names has altered slowly but obviously over the last two hundred years. The interpretations of the names have been defined from different sources and collected and should not be taken as definitive but as a guide.

- Achins is from the Gaelic Achadh a field or meadow.
- Arnaboll, Arni's steading
- Balnakeil, Bailenacille, Balnakill; various connotations all signify with the church, from the Gaelic, `Baile na cille` Village or Place of the Church, settlement of the church or church town, ground of the church.
- Balvolich, is Gaelic Baile a' mhullich, the homestead at the top.
- Borralie, Borralie is from the Old Norse Borghlid, fort slope.
- Brivard from Braigh a' bhard, the top of the meadow.
- Caladail may be from the same source as Keoldale, the cold dale although some authorities maintain it is from Gaelic Call, hazel, the hazel dale.
- Cranstackie, Hill of the rowan tree.
- Croispol, Crosspool has been suggested as the Loch of the Cross, having some affinity with Balnakeil as a religious centre, but it actually means Loch of the Gallows, Poll-na Croich. The gallows were near the shore of the loch. Females convicted of witchcraft and other crimes, were drowned in the loch females were never hung.
- Druim Bhlair; appears to have the meaning boggy land or soft marshy ground.
- Durine, Durin; The principal township in the Parish
- Eilean Hoan is from the Old Norse How-ey, the burial island.
- Faraid Head has been defined as a projecting cape from Celtic names but no Gaelic connection can be found. It is more likely to have been derived from the Norse Forao, a dangerous or difficult situation. Old maps show this point as Faroe Head.
- Freisgill possibly connected with Frasa "to quash." The quashing water ravine.
- Garvie Island is A' Garbh Eilean, rough Island. Thousands of bombs have been dropped on this island but it is as resistant as ever.
- Gobernuisgach is also from Gaelic Gob an Uisgach, the beak of the water shed or place.
- Gualin means shoulder in Gaelic.
- Hope is Gaelic for Bay.
- Lerinbeag, Lerinbeg; the small half of a point
- Lerinmhor, Lerinmore; the large half of a point
- Loch Eriboll is derived from the Norse meaning "home on a gravelly beach." Eyrar-bol" Sandbank steading." Bol- a farm, and Eyrr – a beach.
- Knockbreck cnoc – hill, knoll, breac – spotted, speckled. The speckled knoll – referring to the knoll which is very green, but speckled with outcrops of limestone
- Fuaran Fheoraidh fuaran – well, spring fheoraidh – possibly feoran – green. The green well – the spring at NC392 672

- Bealach-nam-fualtach bealach – pass or gorge of a mountain nam – of the Fualtach fual – urine, water fualachtar – marsh-wort. The pass of the marsh-wort (unlikely) – top of Keoldale Brae
- Druim-a-chraise druim – ridge of a hill a-chraise

Many of the hills have Gaelic names but at least two are from the Norse. They are Fashven, Faishbheinn in Gaelic derived from Hvass-fjall, pointed peak, and Sgribhisbheinn from Sgrioa, scree or landslide.

- Parph, Norse word meaning turning.
- Rispond, bay with small sloping hill.
- Sangobeg; the small sands.
- Sangomore; the large sands.

Gaelic interpretations and translations of the stories about King Harco and his Vikings suggest there was an authority and effect of their presence here. There are definite inferences from old related imprecise stories but only vague references to exploits and influences in place names around the locality.

Commencing at Loch Croispol by the march dyke at Druim-a-chraise by the road side to Croispol, the current Glebe boundary comes from the loch up to the manse gates on the sharp road corner on the west side of the Craft Village and Croispol may have been approximately where the entrance to the Craft Village is – the east side of the Craft Village formed the boundary of the Glebe. This would mean that Druim-a-chraise is the ridge which the present Durine to Balnakeil road more or less runs along coming from Balnakeil the road rises to the Craft Village corner then drops to the manse – in other words, crosses the ridge.

Field names from the formation of the Glebe in 1726

- Gealachiebraghid geal – white achadh – field braghad – throat
- Polnaha pol – hole/pit/mire/bog/pond/stagnant water/ wet, miry meadowna – of the h'a – possibly chariot/wagon/hill promontory
- Buailnangabhar buaile – fold nan – of an gabhar – goat Fold of the Goats
- Maginnanthearnih maghan – field, level country, field of battle nan of searach – six month old beast (horse). The field of the six month old horse.
- PolraonPol – wet, miry meadow raon – mossy plain. The wet, mossy meadow
- Glacnanlian glac – hollow /narrow valley nan –of the lian – of many fields, plains or meadows. Valley of the many fields.

### **Pre Clearance Townships in Durness Parish**

Portover, Aldan, Geachreamh, Borrallie, Clashneach, Balnakeil, Keoldale, Sarsgrum, Grudie, Rispond, Ceannabeinne, Sangobeg, Smoo, Sangomore, Durine, Port Chamuill, Slones, Dornaigil, Freisgill, Inverhope, Mhuiesil, Arnaboll, Bregisgill, Buddamhair, Badillahamnise, Heilam, Eriboll, Faolinn, Solmar, Loch Sian.

### **Post and pre Clearance Townships**

Known to have been in historical existence in Durness Parish

Gualin, Rhigolter, Carbreck, Glashbhiniochdarr Shinins, Aultnacealich, Achchairn, Auchucharn, Grudie, Aultcorifraisgil, Sarsgrum, Auchunamar, Aultan, Geodhanahairbhe, Geodh Chreamha, Achiemore, Daill, Port Odhar, Kearvaig, Auchnah-Anaite, Buaillebhig Keoldale, Keoldale, Clashneuch, Borley, Lanlish, Uibeg, Knockbreack, Balnakeil, Aodann Mhor, Faraid, Balmhulich, Camas an Duin, Ard Neackie, Heilam, Auchnalochie, Hope, Inverhope, Freisgill, Durine, Balvoolich, Sangomore, Smoo, Lerin, Sangobeg, Ceannabeinne,



Clashcarnach, Eilean Hoan, Rispond, Uaighehaichie, Lochsian, Port Chamuill, Portnancon, Laid, Polla, Strathbeg, Phoalin, Eriboll, Inveran, Eilean Choraidh, Auchugarsaid, Kempie, Arnaboll, Craigiemhulin, Braesgill, Merkan, Badamneair, Dail an, Anairt, Cashel Dhu, Badnahachlash, Muisel, Lubain, Aultnacaillich, Dalnaheru, Elanroiar, Dun Dornaigil, Dalnadun, Crannach, Blaid, Dainaharow, Gobernuisgach, Altnabad, Strathurradale, Strath More, West Moine.



IMAGE 14 DURINE 1886 FROM DURNES ARCHIVE

## **Durness Infrastructure**

### **Durness Housing**

There is a mixture of types of houses in Durness. There are traditional stone built houses; council housing and modern kit built bungalows. Most croft houses have been modernised and enlarged.

A survey in 1993 revealed forty persons in Durness had varying housing needs and the advantage of having a day centre was highlighted. A summary reported that one house in five is a holiday or second home. Seven caravans and three wooden chalets provide accommodation for ten households with a permanent housing stock of one hundred and ninety two including caravans. The survey highlighted the immediate need for eight to ten houses to rent. Between 1985 and 1992 eighteen houses were built on croft land and only two council houses built in the previous sixteen years. The first council houses were erected at Bard Terrace in the central section about mid-1950s. The houses opposite the then Mace supermarket were next,



IMAGE 15 TWELVE HOUSES AT DRUIM BHLAR

School Road and Hames Place followed and in 1975 the twelve houses at Druim Bhlair were built. They were the first houses in the area to be all electric. In late 1996, early 1997 eight houses were constructed in Hames Place by Albion Housing Association. When suitable accommodation became available, a move around from people in council housing, private rented houses and people returning to the area was a consequence. It was late 1997 that the last inhabited croft house was fitted with an indoor toilet and bathroom.

Around the late 1960's some buildings, which constituted RAF Sango at Churchend, were demolished and two council houses were built. The others have been improved and converted into comfortable private homes. The buildings constituting Balnakeil Craft Village have been converted to provide comfortable private homes. From around the millennium several new houses have been constructed. This is due mainly to land becoming available for house plots through the Durness Estates and local crofting grazing committee relinquishing land from common grazing.

### **Housing Survey October 2010**

The Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust was engaged by the Durness Community Council to undertake a study of affordable housing needs and to explore the relevant priorities and attitudes of the local community. Specific questions were asked regarding the future use

of the old village hall site. The results emerging from the study were primarily intended to evaluate local demand for future new affordable housing provision and specifically to indicate whether any particular local approach to allocations needed to be considered. The survey was issued to all Durness residents by Community Council volunteers on and around 10<sup>th</sup>. June 2010 to invite them to share their views, even if their household had no immediate need. The majority of the respondents to the questionnaire would like to see the old village hall site developed for affordable housing. The preferred options were for semi-detached or terraced houses which would suit families with young children or secondly, new households. There was reasonable current and imminent locally generated demand for additional affordable housing in Durness and in particular for rented and low cost home ownership accommodation. There was some opposition to having houses built in the centre of the village on this site.

In 2019 three houses were being constructed in the village square on the land formally accommodating the village hall.

Notes from the Durness Estate report 2004

#### 6.2.1 Housing:

- The area's housing population of approximately 350 has remained constant since 1971. The majority live in the centre of Durness and a series of neighbouring townships.
- Of the 154 households 98 are owner occupied, 27 are Local Authority or Housing Association rented accommodation and 14 privately rented.
- Approximately 22 houses are presently unoccupied.
- Between 1991 and 2001 the number of households increased by 10 including 8 Housing Association dwellings in Hames Place.
- In the 1980s, 2 amenity houses were completed by the then District Council adjacent to the church at Sangomore. This site proved remote from the shop in Durness to the elderly tenants.
- Approximately 33 dwellings are second or holiday homes.

#### 6.2.2 Social care facilities:

- None exist in Durness. Those in need of day-care facilities, have to travel to Kinlochbervie approximately 20 miles away.

#### 6.4.10

- There is a desperate need for day-care facilities in the parish. Several projects have been embarked upon in an effort to provide them over the last ten years but all have failed mainly due to the lack of funding.

#### 6.4.11

- It can be seen from the 2001 census that 16.4% of the population in the Durness area are over 65 years of age. This age profile is expected to continue in the future as it is an attractive place to retire to – both for people with no connection to it and locals who have been forced to find work elsewhere but wish to return in later years.

#### 6.4.12

- Primary care is provided by a GP resident in Durness but there is no provision for respite care. Visits are organised to the Kinlochbervie Day Centre, a 40 miles 2 hour round trip, very often in atrocious weather conditions. It is claimed that there is a very definite demand for respite beds to be provided locally to allow carers the essential breaks they deserve. Not all requiring these beds are elderly.

#### 6.4.13

- There has been a significant number of residents over the last 10 years requiring long-term care and they have had to go off to various establishments such as at Migdale resulting in at least a 4 hour round trip for family and friends at visiting times.

### **Durness Water Supply**

Loch Caladail was dammed in 1906 to provide a water supply for the village the first mains water to Durness. Mains water arrived in 1906 piped only as far as Durine to begin with and



IMAGE 16 WELL AT CHURCHEND

cost five shillings for an outside tap and ten shillings for an inside tap. The school in the Durine was amongst the first to have an inside supply followed by the doctor's house and the Durness Hotel. The reservoir is Loch Meadaidh. There are discussions and plans to transfer the supply to Loch Borrallie in 1999. There are several definite springs where water has been collected from in the days of yore. One sometimes used today is situated in the Glebe. Another more obvious well is at Churchend where on the hill the standpipe and fittings are unmistakable. This was erected in 1902 from a pump and fittings removed from the Durine School. Tests have shown the water very pure but the source has never been detected.

At the outbreak of war in 1939, Durness had no mains electricity, no adequate mains water or sewage. An account from 1955 reports householders in increasing numbers were preparing to take in water and adding bathrooms and lavatories to their buildings. An appeal to the council was to be made shortly for the installation of a proper drainage scheme for the whole parish. By 1985 almost all houses had a public water supply, mains drainage and electricity supply.

### **New Water Treatment Plant**

In August 2001 Chairman of NOSDWA Colin Rennie and a large delegation of officials were joined by community representatives and the children of the primary school to welcome the recently elected Viscount John Thurso MP to officially declare open the new £880,000 water

treatment plant at Keoldale Durness. Unveiling the plaque Lord Thurso revealed that this was his first opening ceremony to expose a memorial plaque bearing his name since he became a Member of Parliament. On the bright sunny day the gift of an umbrella to Lord Thurso was not a practical necessity. Presented to the MP on behalf of NOSWA by local children Clair and Nicola Morrison it was used as an appropriate prop for the commissioned photographer.

The new plant treating water from Loch Borrallie with a very high natural quality of water replaces the old plant which treated water from Loch Meadaidh to a very basic level, consisting of nothing more than a chlorine dosing plant. The local water is now running crystal clear from the taps meeting tough new drinking water quality standards. Part funded from the European Regional Development Funds the works can treat up to 250000 litres of water per day, for up to 400 people. A new storage reservoir at Sangomore was included in the project as well as 4 kilometres of new water mains to link with the existing distribution system. A tour of the plant was offered with questions being answered from the NOSWA specialists. The treatment consists of four steps. First the water is screened through a coarse screen chamber located at the Loch side, which prevents debris passing into the main treatment plant. The water is then passed through a graded bed of sand and gravel that removes impurities. Step 3 is disinfection and pumping when chlorine is added to kill any harmful bacteria and renders the water safe to drink. Chlorine levels are continually sampled and automatically adjusted. The chlorinated water is then pumped to the reservoir. Treated water is stored two to three days in the event of an emergency.

The tour was ended with light refreshments supplied by the village hall committee in the old Durness hall. The contractors involved in the construction were Maclean – Ardgay Ltd. and Prosheid Ltd.

### **Durness Sewage System**



IMAGE 17 JUMMA MACKAY AND BOISEY MURRAY FROM FORTROSE WERE PRESENTED WITH ENGRAVED BEER TANKARDS

On the 24<sup>th</sup>. July 2006 there was a report that Durness new sewage system had been completed. Work had been finished at the Smoo outlet and laterally at Sango. For nearly two years Scottish Water vans and personnel, with contractors Morrison Construction have been familiar sites

around the village. There was no official opening but an informal celebration of the departure of two of Morrison workers who became friends with many local people. Jumma Mackay and Boisey Murray from Fortrose were presented with engraved beer tankards. A surprise celebration and presentation where they were given their gifts was held at the Sango Sands Oasis on Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup>. July. The two men have practically been resident in the village for the duration of the work living in local rented accommodation and only returning home for the occasional weekend. John and Marty provided a selection of tunes with a specially written composition for the two. As usual with Marty and John the lyrics were true to form and hilarious but unrepeatable in print. Along with the contractual commitments connected to the sewerage installation they have been helpful in several community projects.

## **Shops**

It is suggested that it was a branch shop of a businessman from Orkney, Robert Gordon that around the 1890's, he discovered the untapped market of the isolated north and west and had a string of shops supplied from a little steamship. Deliveries used to come by a coastal steamer once a month to Rispond or Portnancon and delivered by horse and cart to Durness. Sugar, cheese, dried milk was the kind of supplies delivered in bulk and the shop would have then packed the produce to the required amounts. There is local knowledge of the croft house, now a holiday home at fifty four Sangomore housing a shop run by the Sutherlands but details are unknown.



IMAGE 18 FROM DURNESS PICTURE ARCHIVE CAMPBELL'S SHOP PRIOR TO MATHERS WITH IRIS MATHER

The oldest known shop in Durness is the Mathers grocer and has been a family business for over eighty years. At some time in the past the shop repaired shoes. Iris Mather's great grand uncle took the shop over from people called Gall, and was called Campbell's for a time,



IMAGE 20 MATHERS SHOP 2016



IMAGE 19 RICHARD MACKAY SPAR SHOP

originally built as cottager's houses the building now housing the shop was divided into four. As the years passed, the shop has expanded to three quarters of the building with the remaining quarter as a holiday home of a distant relative of the original owner. Up until 1994 Mathers was the only licensed shop for wines and spirits. Mather's shop is well known for the local social news and discussions of community interest that are debated regularly over the counter.

In June 1981 the Richard Mackay shop, which had been housed in the corner site of the Park Hill Hotel for over ninety years, moved to its present position and became the Mace Supermarket. Previously this site was garages and stores for provisions. The post office moved into this shop from its site within the house opposite the footpath entrance to the school in the early 1960s. The stone buildings beside the Mace Shop were the stables for the Durness Hotel (referred to in old accounts as the Inn) which stood in The Square until it was burnt down in 1908.



IMAGE 21 PARKHILL HOTEL WITH R. MACKAY & SONS SHOP DURNESS PICTURE ARCHIVE

The start of R. Mackay and Sons General Merchants according to family lore, Jane (although she was always referred to in the community as Mrs. Mackay of Parkhill) began to sell some small items requested by villagers from her kitchen cabinet "store." She would have Richard purchase the requested items while he was at ports selling his fish hauls. Gradually this kitchen table enterprise evolved into an "official" store with regular business hours and supplied Durness with essential items. It continued to be operated out the Mackay's home Parkhill which was located at the village cross roads. Jane Mackay died 18th March, 1920 at the age of 57 years. Richard died a year and a half later on the 4th of October, 1921 at age 62 years. They had two sons and one daughter. The business stayed in the family and passed to subsequent generations. After operating for over 90 years at the original site, the Richard Mackay Shop



IMAGE 22 DURINE OLD HOTEL EARLY 1900S DURNESS PICTURE ARCHIVE



finally moved across the road to expanded space in 1981 and later became the Durness Mace Supermarket. This new association with the Mace Supermarket chain provided direct supply distribution to the store. Prior to this, a large van went to Inverness once a week to collect needed stock. Later the change was made to Spar.

A diverse stock is held, food, clothing, farming supplies, gas, fuel, and practically every want of a remote community. In 1982, application was made to the planning department to resite the petrol pumps to their present location opposite the shop. In 1994 this shop was granted an off sales licence. For a number of years a large van was taken to Inverness at least once a week to pick up supplies. This practice has ceased since more deliveries are now made to Durness from suppliers. Until about 1975, the store operated a mobile van that loaded up each Wednesday night and delivered each Thursday in and around Durness.

The primary hotel in the village at that time was the Durness Hotel, with nearby Parkhill serving overflow. However, after the devastating fire which destroyed The Durness Hotel in 1908, the need for a traveller's inn was met by the Parkhill Hotel.

In November 1999 after many years of campaigning and lobbying, especially through the community council, Durness had a cash line installed. Numerous financial institutions were approached over the years and it was The Bank of Scotland that agreed to establish the facility. For two week's construction work was underway installing a secure safe like room in the rear of the Mace shop with the machine to dispense the cash sited on the wall adjacent to the entrance. The facility was functioning on the 25<sup>th</sup> for the first time. Engineers were called to correct a fault on 26<sup>th</sup> after a lightning strike made the machine inoperable.

In the 1920s, the Durness community was much more self-sufficient. A butcher's shop in Durine next to the then church supplied meat. The bakery now demolished on the Durine was a busy enterprise. There was a number of small grocery shops scattered throughout the area. The shop at Sangomore, The McCallum's (Miss McCallum was the French and Latin teacher at Durness school) operated a grocery from Rispond and delivered around doors by van. Mathers was a bootmakers shop where footwear was bought and repaired. There was a tailor's shop at Lerin.

### **Durness Village Hall**

At a meeting open to all inhabitants of Durness Parish of age 18 years and over a vote was taken on the proposal to "discontinue use of the hall and land and permit it to revert to the superior" the superior being the Durness Estate. This had to be undertaken for the hall



IMAGE 23 OLD DURNESS HALL SITED IN THE VILLAGE SQUARE

committee to obtain the "Feu Disposition" for the land at Druim Bhlair, the site of the new hall. Following this vote in favour the Scottish Executive released their contribution to the funding package made up from the National Lotteries, Highland Council, Social Inclusion Partnership, Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise and the community's contribution. This completed the formalities and O'Brien's was given the instruction to start work at the new site.

Until 2002 the village hall, built in 1935 from funds raised by local subscriptions, sales of work, and local entertainment augmented by grants and a loan from the National Council of Social Services, stood in the village square. An extension for gent's toilets and storage was added in the early 1970s.

In 1980, the hall was re-roofed after severe storm damage for two successive winters. Labour was supplied voluntary and carried out over three consecutive Sundays. By 2000 the old wooden village hall in the square was requiring considerable repairs and was no longer able to



IMAGE 24 NEW DURNESS HALL2001

provide the facilities needed by the community. The hall had been the venue for many village gatherings. Badminton, dances, ceilidhs, plays, sales, parties, wedding receptions, the visiting bank until 1990, hairdresser, school gym and meetings. The hall was used for some event every day. Before 1935, the school records show the school building was the central focus for village events. The village hall has long past the state of running repairs. Demolition day involved a large squad of volunteers and the old hall was raised to the ground with much of the timbers being locally recycled.

In 1989, a subcommittee was appointed to look into the feasibility and costing of either repairing or rebuilding. In 1994, the hall committee started to raise funding for a new village

hall. Intricate debates about sighting and extended usage concluded to rebuild on a new site, behind the Mace shop about two hundred and fifty metres away, with an improved facility. Outline planning permission was applied for in December 1996. In early 1997, plans for the new hall suffered a severe setback when an application for financial aid from the Millennium Fund was rejected.

The new multipurpose building was planned to have a separate day care facility for the elderly and the nine members' strong community care group had joined forces with the village hall committee. The fund raising campaign started some years before had raised around twenty two thousand pounds and it was hoped that half the cost would be met by the Millennium Fund. Once this core funding was secured it was expected to unlock the door for grant aid from other organisations. People were very disappointed. The County Committee of the Highland Council agreed that a Durness hall should be a priority under the Village Hall Renewal Scheme and a renewed plan slightly less ambitious plan was pursued. Planning permission was obtained for a building at Druim Bhlairst and an application for funding to the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations was successful.

The new Durness hall was opened on 24<sup>th</sup>. August 2001 by Councillor Frances Keith. This was the result of ten years fund raising and applying to agencies for funding. It was close to 6pm when local piper James Mather started the proceedings that the realisation that the long awaited dream of a new facility began to sink in as a large community contingent arrived on a beautiful summer evening. Chairperson Mary Mackay of the hall committee thanked everyone involved for their help in the many different ways that made this facility happen. The Rev John Mann was asked to dedicate the building with a short prayer and Councillor Francis Keith gave a short speech before opening the new hall by cutting the ribbon on behalf of the people of Durness.



IMAGE 25 BROKEN CHORD

The evening was filled with celebration catering for all tastes. Katy and Donny MacDougal playing a selection of accordion tunes, the children of the primary school singing a variety of Scottish songs, Marty Mackay, John and Alex Morrison and John Scott on accordions and guitar. Local band, Blue Ridge provided the well-liked dance tunes. A popular young man Andrew Mackenzie sang a selection of well – known Scottish songs and gave the crowd a chance to join the singing. For their second only public performance the young rock group Broken Chord with David Bruce (16) lead guitar and Eusten Morrison (14) drums from Durness with Sarah Buist (16) singing and Stuart Mackay (16) playing bass guitar from Scourie were a credit to the youth. They were greeted with great enthusiasm and played an appropriate selection of songs for the crowd.

The Gaelic singers visiting from Caithness were a total contrast and filled the hall with the song of the voice without any



IMAGE 26 DOTTIE MACKAY

amplification or aid. Gaelic MOD winners Willie Macdonald and Raymond Bremner sang solo and were joined by David Morrison also singing a Gaelic song especially for his mother Jess. Celia McDougal from Edinburgh sang and Don Campbell gave his very local rendition of OMO. There was no best act but the one that will be recalled as the review of the time the village hall was built at Drumm Bhlair will no doubt be the poem written and presented on the night by Dottie Mackay. Dottie had the audience laughing helplessly at her account of the escapades leading to the opening.

### **Hall Geothermal**

In February 2006 Highlands and Islands Enterprise awarded grant funds towards the cost of the installation of a geothermal heating system at the village hall. The oil fired boiler was replaced with a heat exchanger unit connected to underground pipe work. The under floor central heating remained with the new system connected. It was expected that the running costs of the facility would be dramatically reduced.

In February 2009 the Durness Village Hall Committee distributed a questionnaire to establish the level of interest in creating a fitness room within or adjoining the Village Hall. This questionnaire resulted in a strong response with nearly 50 individuals expressing their support. As a result, the Village Hall Committee decided to investigate the possibility of creating such a facility. A fitness room would provide the potential for the members of the community to exercise throughout the year using indoor fitness equipment such as treadmills, rowing, and cycling machines etc. A working group was formed consisting of Tony Jackson, Graham Bruce, Lucy Mackay and Kevin Arrowsmith. The group presented a working paper which represented the first step in taking this project forward. It outlined various building and equipment options and identified the potential benefits, costs, and issues in proceeding with the project. It also discussed ongoing sustainability, staffing, health and safety, general governance and funding. The ultimate objective was to proceed to a detailed design stage and work towards identifying funding. This project was unable to raise the finance.

### **Durness Proposed Care Centre**

In April 1999 a joint group set up from a subcommittee of the Community Council and Durness Community Care Group was gathering momentum and support for a Day Care Centre for the elderly to be built in Durness. The group chaired by Kenneth Hillcoat Mackenzie, with members Iris Mather, Dr. Belbin, Johnny Morrison and Janet Cordiner compiled a paper outlining the background, including a detailed community profile, with available present primary and secondary care, GP referrals, long term care, objectives, proposals, costing and funding.

The building specification was seeking a sitting room for twelve people with dining facilities for thirty, treatment room, and six bed sitting rooms fitted out for the disabled with en suite bathrooms that would be available for respite beds, GP referral beds and longer term residents on a flexible basis. Accommodation for a resident nurse was included. It was envisaged that the Centre would be similar to that at Loch Carron and proposed siting is at Druim Bhlair beside the then planned new village hall. Support was obtained from Caithness and Sutherland Social Services Department and the Highland Health Board. It was expected, without formal commitment, that these bodies would fund annual operating expenses. The capital cost of building the Centre, estimated at £576,000, was intended to be raised by the Care Centre Committee, which would then be formed into the appropriate corporate body to be responsible for the overall management.

Community Council 9<sup>th</sup>. July 2001

*Harriet Dempster Director of Social work and Councillor Guy Coats chairman of the Highland Council Social work committee came to Durness to meet with the Community Council and Durness Care Centre Committee. The Chairman of the Care Centre Committee Mr. Mackenzie Hillcoat gave a historical perspective of the action taken and the case for a facility in Durness. He was stressing the point that the communities further from the populated centres suffered dramatically and the area wanted services analogous with those on the east coast. The Care Group are confident that if the Social work Department and the Highland Health Board agree to splitting the revenue funding of a facility they could raise the capital finance required to build. The social work department admitted that they did not know where they could find the funding to help with revenue costs.*

*The group were given a sympathetic hearing but there concerns are the same as many other small communities in the rest of the country. The aim to keep the elderly in their communities requires many resources to be shifted and to accommodate this is not a cheap option. The group were informed that the Social work and their group were working to the same agenda. At present there is an excess of beds in the Highlands and this is not a viable use of resources. The Highland Council is undertaking a new review and will not be taking any financial decisions until this is complete. The results are expected in March. Dr. Belbin a member of the Care Group informed the meeting that the Health Authority was also carrying out a review and there should be a close cooperation to ensure that the results and decisions made from the reviews were in harmony. The Social work has members of the Health Authority involved on their review so this should ensure that there is close collaboration.*

*The group and the aspirations for a facility in Durness were given a fair hearing but there must be strategies put in place to accommodate the wider area. It may be more realistic to invest more in home care and home support. It is not possible for a commitment for a rest bite and care centre in Durness at present.*

*The group are determined to continue to press their case and want the opportunity to discuss their concerns with ministers from the Scottish Executive. The policy of having care for the elderly equal throughout the country no matter about location appears not to apply to the remote areas.*

22<sup>nd</sup>. April 2002 Community Council

Dr. Belbin and Johnny Morrison discussed the current situation of Care for the elderly in Durness and their efforts to have a small-scale rest bite centre. The final review is due to be published in the near future and they are concerned that elected people properly represent Durness. Dr. Belbin clarified the category of facility that is required. More than just a meeting

place for healthy elderly is needed. The facility must be able to cater for those needing treatment and constant care.

#### Highland Senior Citizens Network

A meeting between the Highland Senior Citizens Network and the Durness Community Care steering group attended by Jamie Stone MSP was held in Durness.

Johnny Morrison who has been actively involved in campaigning for a respite facility in the village expressed extreme disappointment that elderly people still have to be taken away from the community in their later years of life because of the lack of care facilities in the northwest. He was disappointed that services are now going to be again centralised and this is detrimental to the locality and he will continue to pursue the case for a better deal. The Highland Senior Citizens Network with a membership largely based around the inner Moray Firth area are a campaigning organisation and as part of their remit are on a fact finding mission discovering out about care and the needs of the Highlands. They have a concern about the number of elderly people dying in Raigmore Hospital from the North West Highlands. They blamed much of the unfair distribution of services on the Highland Councils policy of parity of service and expressed their concern about the very disadvantaged area of North West Sutherland.

There may be a window of opportunity to secure a facility that would be appropriate under the Scottish Executive Joint Futures scheme that involves a working partnership between the Highland Health Board and Social Work Department. The Durness Community care group have carried out a study that reveals over the last two years 11 people have died away from the community who could have remained to end their days if a facility that had long term care beds, respite beds and GP referral beds was available locally. Much of the problem is seen as a political opposition to remove any resources from the east coast of Sutherland. East Sutherland should provide services for themselves but that should not deter west Sutherland from having the services that they need. The Northern Times was cited as not supporting the west coast situation as any development in the northwest as seen as a threat to the east. They have not published press releases that have been sent.

The solution of innovative packages of respite care being submitted by the social work department is being seen as not a solution to the problem. The social work department were accused of providing third world services without public scrutiny. If after over three years of a review to conclude that all that can be offered is the possibility of a day care centre that would only cater for the healthy people in their late years of life then it is believed that a proper facility to allow the proposed services to be given in the community and the local needs is being misunderstood.

#### **Day Care and Respite**

Lord Thurso MP met with Johnny Morrison a long time campaigner for respite care in Durness, Dr. Alan Belbin, Kenny Macrae chairman of Durness Community Council, and several concerned senior citizens in Durness. Lord Thurso was asked to help with the case to have a respite facility built in the village. Dr Belbin is confident that an eight bed facility would have five or six beds constantly filled. He wants to have assed day care as opposed to non-assed day care. This is what is being proposed and only provides a facility for the healthy elderly. Jamie Stone MSP has agreed to raise a question on the matter in the Scottish Parliament and Lord Thurso will bring the matter up at meetings with the Health Trust and Highland Council Social Work department. Johnny is adamant that long term respite care should be in the community for elderly in the twilight years and that families should not have to travel round trips of over a hundred miles to visit aged relatives.

This ambitious but socially important project never came to fruition and residents of Durness still have to move away as their elderly needs become series requiring long term or palliative care.

### Sango Sands Oasis



This complex comprises of a campsite, restaurant and pub, busy during the summer months. This family run enterprise is a well-established business which has a trading history since the 1970's.

The building has a large footprint with two internal trading areas plus support facilities and an external grassed area offering an alfresco dining option during warmer weather. The restaurant and bar internal areas can each comfortably seat around fifty six guests. The bar has a number of nooks, which provide a cosy and enjoyable bar experience. The bar area also benefits from a wood burning stove. The original aspects of the building date back to the early 1800s, with more recent additions. The original building is of rendered stone/brick



IMAGE 27 SANGO SANDS OASIS

construction under a slate roof and was originally constructed in the early 1800s. This part of the property is set over 2 floors, the upper floor being used for storage and staff welfare accommodation. The kitchen, restaurant and bar were constructed around 40 years ago and are of rendered block wall construction with a dual pitched metal profiled roof. Located in the centre of the areas is an attractive wood panelled bar servery with a striking gantry behind. The beer store is located immediately separately behind the bar area. From the main central area there are four further independent seating zones, including a conservatory, which provide a more intimate drinking experience with a variety of seating types. The bar has dedicated toilets located nearby. The bar and restaurant are connected via a single door.

Until around 2000 the building opposite in the car park was a popular craft gift shop The Last Resort. This has had a few different uses since but has been converted to accommodation used for staff.

The campsite is normally fully open from April through to the end of October with limited facilities in off season. For tents and those who don't require electric hook up you don't need to book pitches as these are on a first come first served basis. Site facilities include toilet and shower blocks. There is also waste disposal, dishwashing and laundry facilities. For those in tents, a camper's kitchen is available and there is a breakfast bar. This area of the site has a new modern toilet and shower block completed in 2019. Pets kept under control are welcome, and are free. The Sango Sands Oasis has regular seasonal staff also supplemented with student or visiting staff.

## Fire Service



IMAGE 28 THE CORRUGATED SHED USED BY THE FIRE SERVICE UNTIL 2005

The corrugated shed used by the Fire Service until 2005 was a Nissan hut and dated from the radar station built in Durness during the Second World War. The Volunteer Fire Service has been in operation for a number of years and in the summer of 1997 moved the station where the small-equipped vehicle was garaged at Smoo to the old county depot in School Road. The vehicle is taken out once a week and tested. Ten volunteers, regularly attending instruction sessions and being trained locally by visiting professionals, are on twenty four-hour call. Up until recently for an attendance at a fire, which are generally chimney fires, a call would be made to the chief volunteer or any of the fireman and the matter would be dealt with. The regime now requires an emergency call to the Inverness headquarters who in turn contact the local volunteers. All have been issued with belt beepers and respond accordingly. Should the fire be suspect and requiring further assistance the unit from Kinlochbervie, or the appliance from Lairg, is despatched. In recent years three substantial fires have caused devastation, one in 1989 when a house was burned down (Brivard House) killing an occupier and one at



Balnakeil Farm destroying a large barn and killing animals and the third in December 1997, the fire fighters had to attend a house fire at Daill on the Cape Side. Equipment had to be loaded onto the passenger ferry and across the Kyle of Durness. A shepherd from Balnakeil was using the house and he alerted the emergency services from the lighthouse telephone when he returned after tending sheep. The fire was extinguished with the destruction of one room. In January 1998, a new, larger and improved fire appliance was allocated to Durness.

In 2005 the Northern Times reported about the heath fire at Laid. Lotte Glob returned home to discover how close the fire had been and learned that it was the quick action of neighbours in calling the fire brigade and their swift action in diverting the flames that helped save her award winning house. Over 2000 young trees were destroyed on the croft and sections of the recently erected deer fence were burnt.

In April 2005 moves were underway to build a new fire station at School Road in Durness. The service moved from the old shed to temporary accommodation at the coastguard office at Smoo. Building work was scheduled to start in May.



IMAGE 29 NEW FIRE STATION AT SCHOOL ROAD IN DURNESS

On Saturday 18 March 2006 the new long awaited Durness fire station was opened by Mr. Drew MacFarlane Slack MBE fire board convener.

*“Our fire-fighters make our communities safer by providing community safety advice and emergency response service that is second to none. In recent years we have made increasing demands upon the fire-fighters of Durness, expanding their role and asking them to learn new skills. They have met this challenge and today I am proud that we are able to provide them with a station that meets their professional, safety, dignity and welfare needs. I am confident it will be an important community resource for many years to come.”* said Chief Fire Officer Brian Murray in his welcoming opening address to invited guests.

The occasion started with an informal gathering with guests being offered light refreshments on their arrival and a guided tour of the new station by the Durness fire-fighters. The facility replaces an old Nissan hut that at best provided covering for the appliance. Their new building offers office space, drying facilities, changing rooms, toilets, and storage with specialist rooms for breathing apparatus maintenance. The area for keeping the appliance is large and roomy where the opening ceremony was held. After all the guests, about fifty took their seats local piper James Mather piped Chief Fire Officer Brian Murray and Drew McFarlane Slack MBE into the building. They were welcomed by District Officer Gareth Edwards. Before the official unveiling of the plaque chief fire officer Mr Brian Murray gave his welcoming address and thanked the hard work of the Fire Board to secure the necessary resources to fund the service and thanked the convenor for attending to open the station.



IMAGE 30 HUGH MORRISON, GORDON CLARK AND JOHN MACKENZIE

Officer in charge of the Durness station Mr Hugh Morrison gave a short address referring to the commitment of family to enable his retained fire-fighters to be able to provide a professional service and his pride in being the station officer for this memorial event. Two previous sub officers were present Gordon Clark sub officer from 1977 – 1990 and John Mackenzie from 1990 – 2004 and Hugh paid tribute to them.

Fire Board convener was called on to perform the ceremonial unveiling and of the memorial plaque. The reverend John Mann gave the station a blessing and joined the throng present in prayer.

With the immanent opening of the new station two occasions had been postponed to allow them to be the first conducted in the new Durness Station. For 20 years long service and good conduct Tom Mackay, Bettyhill, Hugh Morrison Durness, Sandy McLeod and Paul Murray from Scourie were presented with their medals from Chief Fire Officer Brian Murray. John Mackenzie who had been Sub officer until 2004 when he retired after 31 years of service was presented with the Highland and Islands retirement axe.

James Mackay sub officer of Bettyhill station presented Hugh with a small memorial shield as a commemoration of the day and the close links between the two stations. Mr Gareth Edwards's district officer thanked everyone for attending and supporting the service and inviting them to the Smoo Cave Hotel for refreshments and a buffet. The station remained open for members of the public to visit and view during the afternoon.

## **Policing**

The policing of Durness is from Rhiconich where the one-man station has the biggest beat in Britain covering crime from Laid to Kylesku. There was supposed to be an additional police officer based at Durness from 1985 but this never transpired. Violence and crime are uncommon with the exception of increasing minor offences during the tourist season. Unrecorded violations are mainly to do with motoring and alcohol and although serious ordinarily amount to very little harm.

## **Policing In the County Of Sutherland<sup>1</sup>**

As one who served for 30 years in the Police, 22 of which were spent in Sutherland and 8 in Caithness, I hope that this account of Policing in the remote north of Scotland will be of some interest to the readers.

I originally joined the Sutherland County Constabulary in 1956 at what was then the Force H.Q. at Dornoch, the county town of Sutherland. In what now seems those far-off days, the strength of the Force was the Chief Constable (the late 1>.c. Ross), one Inspector, three sergeants and eighteen police Constables. The Force headquarters was, as stated, in Dornoch where all those who held rank were stationed. Those were the days of one-man Police Stations except for the east coast stations of Golspie, Brora and Helmsdale where two officers were usually stationed as the majority of the population of the County resided in this area. The Police Stations at Bonar Bridge, Lairg, Lochinver Rhiconich, Tongue Bettyhill and Melvich were all manned by one Constable. In all the stations the Constable was on call for 24 hours and overtime was unheard of, each station was equipped with an office and cell which were all practically outdated the officer was provided with a motorcycle in order to patrol the areas outside the village, which he had to patrol on foot several times daily no panda cars then. The stations had little administrative facilities, no typewriters were provided and all police reports had to be prepared in longhand by fountain pen. Each office had naturally a telephone however, there was also a telephone book with a Force instruction that all calls had to be recorded 'verbatim' i.e. word for word. As usual, there were certain officers who did actually record all that was said in verbatim and in later years it was a source of hilarity to read some of the entries in the old telephone books e.g. "Hello.... is that you? What's doing with yourself today? Yes it's not a great day here either. I was planning to start the garden today and get my tatties down next week if the weather improves". After various more day-to-day pleasantries there then would be mention of some police matter which was of interest to both constables. The ending of the message would usually be "Well I'd better be going now and I'll give you a ring tomorrow if there is anything doing, cheerio then..... The ending was then dutifully signed by the officer who had made the call.

The majority of the village constable's duties were of a set routine nature. There was little serious crime and happily no drug problems then. He would spend a lot of his day and night carrying out foot patrols of his area during which he kept in touch with all that was going on in his beat by speaking to as many people as he could. Some of these routine duties would be such as checking hotels and bars, attending to local complaints, attending to road accidents,

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<sup>1</sup> From Durness government scheme 1998 submitted by Bernard Hames

attending sheep-dipping, which is still a police duty today, carrying out visits to farms to check stock registers, dealing with lost and found property, renewing and checking all firearms on the local register, visiting the schools in his area and various other mundane duty. The week-end was as it is now, the busiest time for the village constable. There would always be a dance on a Friday night and the pubs would be busy until closing time when there would often be the usual punch-up involving local worthies. This had to be handled with discretion as in those days the constable was often on his own and had to do the best he could to maintain the peace and keep law and order. As the Constable was usually on his own and did not have the required corroboration the matter was normally settled on the spot and there would not be any resultant 'Court Appearance' for the wrongdoers. In many ways the constable then was like the old time Sheriff of the Wild West, kept the peace of his village in his own way and was consequently judged by the population and his superiors by the way in which he did this. However, there had to be persons prosecuted for certain offences and then, as today, the local court was the Dornoch Sheriff Court. In those days the county of Sutherland had its own Procurator Fiscal, who resided in Dornoch, the sheriff was based in Ross-shire and had the jurisdiction of Dingwall Sheriff Court and Dornoch Sheriff Court. The latter sat each Tuesday of the week. This then was the law and order scene in Sutherland up to the year, 1963 when the first of the Police Amalgamations took place. The Sutherland Constabulary merged with the Ross and Cromarty Constabulary and was known then as the Ross and Sutherland Constabulary. This new Force took a long time to settle owing to many administrative and operational difficulties. The new H.Q. was at Dingwall and Dornoch now reverted to the status of the Sutherland Sub-Divisional office, the new Chief Constable was Mr. Kenneth Ross who had latterly been the Chief Constable of Sutherland. There were quite a number of problems encountered by the two forces, having their local jealousies and the jostling for position amongst the senior ranks went on for years. Another change brought about was that the villages of Bonar Bridge, Brora and Bettyhill were elevated to the status of Sectional Stations, where a sergeant was stationed with the responsibility (of the surrounding villages e.g. Bettyhill section now composed of Tongue and Melvich Police Stations as well as Bettyhill. One of the good things that emerged from the amalgamation was the more or less demise of the motorcycles and the advent of the use of mini-vans which went to most stations. As one can imagine the motorcycle was pleasant enough in the good weather (we did have some then) but it was hell in the winter 'months, if the reader can imagine what it was like to patrol say, the Lairg to Crask road during the month of January. The other operational advantage was that if a person had been apprehended in an area away from Dornoch he could now be taken to the cells at Dornoch instead of as before having had to be held at the local station to await the arrival of the patrol car from Dornoch, to take the prisoner away from the Court. The previous method was unsatisfactory as the patrol car generally did not come until the following day, depending on the circumstances and this entailed the local constable having to sit up all night at his station in order to keep a check that the person in the local cell was all right, because if anything did go amiss with the prisoner then the local officer was in hot water. The other factor that caused problems was the transferring of officers between the former forces, if an officer had joined his force prior to the amalgamation he could not be transferred from his original area unless he agreed to do so, however, this factor was often overcome by the offering of a promotion which was not usually declined and thus many new faces started to appear on the scene and the result was the start of what is now prevalent in the northern counties. The public did not know the local bobby and this started the problem of the public losing contact, it was only of a minor nature in the late sixties, however, nowadays it is, unfortunately, a fact of life. Another factor that emerged was that the police were not seen to be about their areas on foot patrols as they had previously been the motor patrol (panda cars) had slowly started to commence and as the reader will be

able to testify nowadays, how often do you see your local policemen (if you happen to know who he is) carrying out a foot patrol of his area?

This in the writer's opinion was a big breakdown in the area of the Police/Public Relations problems. However, the actual job of policing the two counties did go on in a fairly satisfactory manner notwithstanding all the difficulties that the first amalgamation of the Sutherland Constabulary brought about. In respect of amalgamations, it may be of interest to the reader that other small forces in the north were also amalgamated in this era. The former Caithness Constabulary, Orkney Constabulary and the Shetland (Shetland) Constabulary were now known as the Northern Constabulary (not to be confused with the present Northern Constabulary) with their now H.Q. at Wick. As stated all these small forces had in the past been very much local forces with the advantage of each force knowing the local area and population intimately.

From a police point of view conditions of service and pay had now improved and overtime was now paid and an 8-hour shift system was in operation. Gone were the days of the 24 being on call system which was of advantage to the police but not to the public in the remote areas of Sutherland, e.g. if an incident of a serious nature occurred in the Lochinver area and the local constable was not on duty it would often be hours before an officer from another area was summoned to attend, this often happened in respect of road accidents in remote areas and carried much local adverse comment towards the police, The position nowadays is actually worse than then, because as often happens the officers do not know the area in which they are working.

As we entered the 1970's there was further talk and rumours of another amalgamation and soon rumours became fact and in 1975 the present Northern Constabulary came into being. This - new force covered the area of Scotland from the north, the northern Isles, the mainland as far south as Argyll-shire all the western isles and in the east to the County of Nairn. The new H.Q. was at Inverness and the new Chief Constable was Mr. Donald Henderson. To say that this latest amalgamation provided both operational and administrative problems compared with those mentioned before is an understatement. However, I will dwell on the facts which in general relate to the policing of the County of Sutherland. Dornoch still retained the status of the Sutherland Sub-Division, however, the Divisional office for Sutherland was now Dingwall, the Dornoch Sheriff Court was still retained as it is today, however, Sutherland lost its Procurator Fiscal, this duty is now done by the P.F. from Tain, the present Sheriff is the well-known and somewhat controversial Sheriff Ewen Stewart. The main factor which affected Sutherland and one in which I myself was actively involved was the close proximity of Caithness and Sutherland along the north coast areas. On viewing the situation it made geographical sense that Wick and Thurso were closer than Dornoch and Dingwall, with the resultant fact that the Bettyhill Section now came into the Caithness Sub Division from the Sectional Station at Thurso and the Sub-Divisional office at Wick, however, another headache arose by the fact that although the police forces of the north had amalgamated the jurisdiction of the law courts had not. To clarify this somewhat clouded issue, if a crime or offence is committed in the north coast area i.e. from the boundary of Caithness and Sutherland at Drumholiston on the west side i.e. in Sutherland this is dealt with by the Dornoch Sheriff Court although policed by the Caithness Sub-Division. From an operational point of view, the Bettyhill-Section (Sergeant's Station) now composes the Police Station of Tongue, Bettyhill, Melvich (all County of Sutherland) and Reay Police Station (County of Caithness. The section has a constable at Tongue, a Sergeant and constable at Bettyhill, a constable at Melvich and a constable at Reay. The section Inspector is stationed at Thurso and the sub-divisional Chief Inspector at Wick. As one can imagine the population of the north coast of Sutherland was somewhat bemused by this new regime and the local reaction at first was that they did not know

if it was the Caithness or Sutherland police who were responsible for them, however, after a few years the matter now appears to have resolved itself and certainly from an operational police point of view it is a sound idea. From a personal point, I myself had been transferred from Dornoch to Melvich in 1978 and was involved in the original problems that arose in the early years of amalgamation. The area covered by the Bettyhill section stretches from the Caithness village of Reay to as far west as Loch Eriboll (which is then policed from Rhiconich) to as far south as Altnaharra (which is then policed from Lairg). I hope the reader is now quite clear about the Bettyhill section!

In conclusion, I would have to accept that in today's modern world there just had to be amalgamations of the smaller forces, however, it must be remembered that those small forces like the Sutherland Constabulary gave long and faithful service to their communities and the village constable then was part of the local scene and was always available day or night. Sadly those days have gone and the police, like society, are changed. Personally, I found that serving in a smaller force was a lot happier time than in the larger amalgamated force, probably the time spent in the old Sutherland Constabulary being the best years.

### **Coastguard**



IMAGE 31 VOLUNTEER COASTGUARD GARAGE AT SMOO

The Volunteer Coastguard operates actively around the area. Based at a garage at Smoo the well-equipped Land Rover is manned by a regularly trained and committed group. Durness Coastguards have over twenty calls a year.

### **Coastguard Exercise Northern Times 21st. March 2005**

*Twenty nine coastguards from stations north of Bonar Bridge including Kinlochbervie, Melness, Dornoch, Scourie, Lochinver, Ullapool, Portmahoeach and Durness were together for the whole day "Faraid Head Cliff Exercise" last Sunday 20 March. The combined exercise*



IMAGE 32 TWENTY NINE COASTGUARDS FROM STATIONS NORTH OF BONAR BRIDGE INCLUDING KINLOCHBERVIE, MELNESS, DORNOCH, SCOURIE, LOCHINVER, ULLAPOOL, PORTMAHOACH AND DURNESS

*was instigated by Area Officer Sandy Taylor but unfortunately due to ill health Sandy was unable to be present. Peter Goding sector manager from Claypool and Alex Morrison station officer of Durness ensured the exercise went ahead and took responsibility for its implementation. The operation started with a briefing at the Durness Station and continued on the cliffs at Faraid Head peninsula. The cliffs tops at Faraid are excellent for this kind of practice where all the team members are able to learn the different jobs involved in cliff rescue by practical experience with those skilled. An opportunity for the different stations to work together and meet each other and learn to be able to work together was one of the aims. One part of the exercise involved team members swapping around to ensure that different stations were working together. After several runs of moving personnel up and down the cliff face a stretcher was used to simulate an injured person.*

*After an interval for lunch the Stornoway Coastguard helicopter flew in to join the exercise. The coastguard personnel were instructed in carrying and safely boarding a casualty on a stretcher into the helicopter. All the coastguards were then given training on boarding, travelling and alighting correctly from the aircraft. This was praised as a very successful exercise with many gaining valuable experience. All the coastguards wished Sandy had been able to participate; he is wished a very speedy recovery but can convalesce with the knowledge that the exercise was a great success.*

### **HM Coastguards 2005**

Alex Morrison station officer of the HM Coastguard at Durness was one of 18 chosen from sector 3 Scotland and Northern Ireland, to represent the area at the most prestigious occasion ever for the organisation. The presentation of Her Majesty's colour and honorary Commodore's award by his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, the honorary commodore of her Majesty's Coastguard. This was a one off occasion and such a ceremony will never happen again. The

coastguards were the Queen Mother's guard of honour and have never had a colour ceremony. There are 6000 coastguards in Britain and Alex Morrison, Sandy Taylor, Sector Manager from Wick, and Alistair Armistead from Alt Bay represented the northern Highlands from Cape Wrath to Wick.

The representatives were in Portland for three days last week running up to the occasion on the 20<sup>th</sup>. July. They were drilled in marching properly by a Royal Marine drill sergeant and had to perfect the procedure before being allowed to participate. The term "colour" has been used for



IMAGE 33 COLIN COVENTRY, JOHN MORRISON AND DONNIE MACDOUGAL AREA SUPERVISOR SANDY TAYLOR MADE THE PRESENTATION

centuries as the need of some mark of distinction between units and a conspicuous rallying point. "Colours" today fulfil a symbolic function and are used on regimental occasions. While Her Majesty's Coastguard is a civilian operation the term "colour" remains rooted in two practical requirements, a physical reminder of the service and sacrifice by coastguards since its inception and a symbol of the modern day service of Her Majesties National Civil Emergency Service responsible for maritime search and rescue.

On the parade Prince Charles was accompanied by his wife Camilla, Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Cornwall, who spent time in conversation with the Highland contingent and was interested to compare the jobs tackled in the north as

opposed to the "smash and garb", quick rescue work, which accounts for a large majority of the call outs further south.

### Long Service

There have been several occasions when members of the Durness Coastguards and fire service have received long service medals. The commitment the local people have given to the services carrying out civic duties is largely forgotten.

This is an extract from a published report 24<sup>th</sup>. December 2007

*Colin Coventry, John Morrison and Donnie MacDougal were awarded 20 years long service medals for their service to the HM Coastguards. Area supervisor Sandy Taylor made the presentation at a special occasion held at the Smoo Cave Hotel. Sandy praised the work of the men and their dedication for over 20 years they have carried pagers which could call them to*



*any kind of emergency. Today's Officers of Her Majesty's Coastguard are benefiting from nearly two centuries of maritime experience of their predecessors. Many changes have taken place over the years and Coastguard co-ordination centres of the 21st century have been transformed by new technology. HM Coastguard's role is now clearly focussed on search and rescue at sea and the prevention of maritime incidents through education and the promotion of safety.*

### **Interview with Alex Morrison.**

Station Officer Durness Coastguards October 2005. Synopsis transcription.

*How long have you been in the coastguards Alec?*



IMAGE 34 ALEX MORRISON

Twenty six or twenty seven years, one of the old veterans. Massive changes have occurred especially on the equipment side. I remember many moons ago we had one set of the yellow oil skins, a yellow sow wester hat, a pair of wellie boots and if you're lucky you had a torch but nowadays equipment is bombproof really.

Everything's changed the training as well. Before we used to come out and you got an hours training in a little cold shed and basically did not learn anything but nowadays you sit down with several people and have plenty of training manuals. You go to your training from Friday night till Sunday afternoon. Really good because you learn more in one weekend. Concentrated training teaches more than what is spread over 3 years with an hour each month. It's more than just a volunteer pastime now. I have got to be kind of dedicated, not there for the money.

Rescues can be beach and rock face and cliffs. You don't just tumble down them, there's hundreds of foot below you. Boats on the shore line but here they don't run to shore but against the cliff face, which is 100ft high.

The volunteer numbers are 11 since it kind of balances with no changes in the team for a few years now but I think the volunteer numbers overall Scotland are pretty stable. You realise how many you need maybe a pool of 20 in a team each member may have another job working away from home, so you need it, but we're lucky here.

*Can you give an example of the kind of Incident that you might train for?*

One of the new things just coming into training is Swift Water Rescue.

Basically we were not allowed into the water, you could if someone was close but the bottom line was we were not allowed into water. Swift Water Rescue has come about due to the occurrence of flooding with global warming. Especially the flooding at Nairn there in a few years back and then realised well someone's got to rescue people out of this. Fire Service not really into the marine side of it, someone had to sort this out people were losing their lives. Swift Water Rescue could involve someone stuck in a river, exceptionally high tides, heavy rains, a town flooded various things. So they're coming with this what's called Swift Water Rescue, it's the first we come up against this, although they have teams already in the country for this. But it's very interesting stuff.

*He gives an instance of a flooded Street.* You can see the water moving, may be walking speed down the street and he says would you wade down that street to get the person at the end? And of course we all said yes, it's just a street.

What about what is called street furniture. There could be 100's things in that water pieces of bikes flying under the water, dustbins upside down. Biggest bogie of all is manhole covers, at one stage of flooding, it may blow the top of it. After water rises somethings change. It actually makes shooting down through the man hole possible so you might find that a big hole is certainly possible and you would be sucked in. It's quite a dangerous place to be. The Coastguard now, are moving. I think of this moment 90% we do is water rescue. But recent incidents have been 2 broken ankles within 200 metres of each other. Totally different rescues. When the phone goes you're told right away a job or a routine. Maybe I'm lucky, we haven't had many fatalities. The last one I remember was Faraid Head.

Every time the phone goes, there is never a rescue the same. Down cliffs is also one of our main jobs. People do stupid things as we all do. They think they can climb up and half way up they look back and say this is higher than I thought, I'm not going back down and they look up and say I'm not going up either! What happens is they just freeze. They are stuck against the cliff face. This is where the training comes in because for some unknown reason, someone as soon as you come down beside him with a rope seemed to relax they think I'm saved but they are not they are not saved until you get a strap on them. Were trained that when you get down don't really speak to them until you get a hold of them and they are secured then tell them they are not rescued yet. Untrained persons have a different approach and give confidence too soon.

*Can I just take you back since being with the coast guards for 26 years? How did you get involved?*

I got involved with the two chaps from Kempie through a rescue of a tourist in a small boat in Loch Eriboll when the engine stopped and could not get started again, wind blowing and a bit of a hustle and bustle. There was no real system working then people just wanted to help. Could we get a wee rowing boat or something? Communications were pretty poor but I got word and went to see if I could help. The helicopter arrived from Lossiemouth, the old Wessex. We got to the boat and got the engine started. Billy Morrison was in charge then, station officer in today's terms, he said since you're here you would probably be as well be in the team and that was it. No signatures no paperwork you were part of the team and got word next week about an exercise. I liked that sort of work. I find it interesting, a personal buzz. It's a new world we live in now and we encourage a much more professional approach. There's a horrible Americanisation in rescues now you have to very careful. Can't let things slip. Health and safety popped its head in and tightened things up. Station Officers get good training but if things go wrong the first stop is the station officer you have to be clever to pass the buck. You have to be professional.

Questions were being asked about who is responsible for this incident and the UK Search and Rescue is developed. It covers I think 250 miles out to sea round the British Isles down to the English Channel partner in Northern Ireland. Search and Rescue covers all rescues in the UK. Coastguards mostly coordinate all rescues in British waters the marine side, between all the services. Also cover the coastline, rescue teams Police, fire, ambulance, Army, RAF, and Navy provide their services. There's people like chief coast guard, chief of police, and they all sit on the UK search and rescue board. Things are going to be different in the next 15 years. Achieving what is required is a look at search and rescue overall. Why should, for instance, the coastguard be working on VHF channels. Communication was operating on different channels with different services, it's only right that everyone should be together. So to shut the loop we all now communicate on the same frequency. Everyone using the same language which makes

sense. The next coordination will be the uniform. So everyone knows. Everyone will be in a uniform or a jacket or something with a badge. That will either be UK Search and Rescue, maybe Fire. Or maybe search and Rescue Coast Guard,

Another thing is just coming out just now is a Land Search Management. This is very clever stuff. We do our searching our way the Coast Guard are renowned for searches, but we train on it and we do all the background but we do completely different ways from the police but both very good at their jobs but they obviously, for obvious reasons, do things differently. The Police Force see someone missing, then got to click and think has a crime been committed? Remember to watch that they don't sort of crash over and miss anything, so they've got to think crime. We think missing, get him rescued so everyone thinks differently and this does not really do when everyone gets together, Because of the Land Search Management initiative, it was designed and came up with it for the Canadian Woodlands. The chap started collecting all that he could to do with searches. Police records, put a lot of stuff together and its amazing stuff. He worked on a theory of percentages and POD, Probability of Detection.

You see now this it is very, very good stuff and he looked at different scenarios. An infant up to three years old, three to five and then from five to twelve right up to vintage guys. What he came up with was a casualty profile, it's coming out very shortly, so once this comes on stream, mountain rescue have this, police have this, fire will all have this. It is amazing stuff, you know, but he came up with a child up to three year old up to 7 years old they don't actually realise they are lost. So searching for them will be a completely different way from a child of 7-12 years who realises he is lost. He thinks when he gets home he is going to get into absolute trouble. You see so not good. It's a different way of searching you've got to look at places differently. He might hide, watch let you pass change hiding place. So this is kind of thing would be different.

One of the interesting thing was people suffering from Alzheimer's. You know it's just all of a sudden they realise, they may be in a care home somewhere, and all of a sudden it clicks and they want to go home. For some unknown reason they will go from where they are, perhaps a Hospice, to their original home in a straight line. And it doesn't matter what's in their way, they will try to get through it. You know it could be water, it could be a cliff, and it could be thorns. It could be anything. The case was highlighted when a chap left his Hospice care home one night making a straight line for home and the most important thing you know, this guy was missing for months. Only found him in whin bushes. He actually ploughed his way, he was swimming in whin bushes until he buried himself in the foliage and in the winter, images came together before his skeleton was found. So it gives you a completely new view this casually profile. It brings the chances of finding within first hour are up to 70%. All searches I heard of over the last 20 odd years and it fits in perfectly. Decisions are typically made by looking at the psychology involved. Before it would be 3 go that way 3 go that way etcetera and meet back and tell findings. That's all gone.

*Back to more local perspective and what area do you cover?*

Well what we actually cover at the moment is from the lighthouse at Cape Wrath to the mouth of Hope River is what the Durness team actually cover. But now, especially with this, new things are coming out they tell us there's no boundaries. If I get a shout, for a search first thing I do is pulling in your flag teams. You do that whether you're going to need them or not. Reason for doing it, so it's a lot easier to tell him to go home if not needed than need them and they are not there. If we got a shout at maybe Hope and Alan from Hope may get a call. Whoever gets the call is better left with job. So you might find that he may be over here. I might be over there but theoretically from Hope to Cape Wrath. What happens is a call goes to Aberdeen. First thing they usually ask is what your post code. Who do you require and what's wrong –maybe

chap in the sea off Durness that's basically all they need, from the time you give post code they're pressing buttons for the helicopter and lifeboat.

The phone rang and Alex was called to an injury of a serviceman at Faraid Head. Local coastguard stabilised the patient and RAF Lossiemouth took the casualty by helicopter, every shout is different but a textbook job under the bonnet.

Rescue centre at Kinloss controls helicopter needs. If a doctor needs a helicopter or anyone needs a helicopter it's all plotted from Kinloss, they plot the helicopters at all times. Depends on what's available nearest Stornoway but like as tonight could have been busy, not available or RAF Lossiemouth may have been in the air.

*Over the past few years there has been at least two occasions that you've been awarded medals or you have been involved with royalty and the most recent one was at Portsmouth. How would you like to just tell me about that?*

I thoroughly enjoyed that one actually. Coastguards have been on the ground for 130 something years and never had their own colours processions although Prince Charles was commodore of the coastguards for a while. Queen mother was close to Coastguard especially when at the Castle of Mey. I think I'm right in saying HM Coastguard was the Queen Mother's guard of honour. When they came into Scrabster first in line was the HM Coastguards. I think Prince Charles is following the Queen Mother's footsteps. I think he likes to learn that way, but it was very nice.

I went down on there I think the hard bit, I felt he change in the weather a wee bit hot, I had to learn to march and parade and always thought that's not difficult but a totally different thing when I went down there. It's hard tiring work 2 days hard training then the third day was a deep swimming pool. He and Camila inspected each and every one of us. It was good I enjoyed every minute. We got wat was called a penny quite a large medal to commemorate the occasion.

*Just before we finish off, I'd like to ask you about something not connected with what you've been involved in Coastguards. As a child you obviously had quite different experience from most people. Can you summarise that what it was like to be living at Carbreck.*

Well, there's things today people will be talking about old times or we remember from that person on TV. We had no TV to look at and even if we had there's no signal up there, you know?

Even some of the hits around the 60s we never got in on that. I don't know if I am actually too bothered. Because I spent a lot of time just running about the hill and fishing. Another thing about being there if I wanted a bar of chocolate I couldn't just get it, I got it next Tuesday you know! It was a different life but enjoyable. It didn't do me any harm. I think the TV was probably the biggest difference. People talk about this that and I still don't know what they are talking about. I pretend I do!

*Well, thank you very much. That's been very enlightening and most interesting.*

## Medical Services

In 1883 Alexander Morrison a crofter at Sangobeg when examined during the Napier Commission stated the closest doctor was 31 miles away in Scourie and a foot messenger has to be sent.

July 1883 - Rev James Ross Free Church Minister, Durness reported,

*"I am a member of the Parochial Board, and always have pleaded for having a doctor nearer than thirty miles off. Several cases of emergency would pass the crisis before the doctor could be got. Sometimes a foot runner is sent off to Scourie, and sometimes a rider, and it might be the second or third day before the doctor came, and several times the disease has been at the crisis, before the doctor could reach the place. Since I came here, eight years ago, we have had, I think, seven doctors. One died and the next had to leave—I was told he was ordered to leave—another, Dr. Smith, had a dispute with the factor. The doctors stand on their professional etiquette, and do not like to take orders.*

*The next one left too, in some huff or other. Dr. M'Callum left of his own accord. Dr. Ross left a year or two ago and went to Islay; and now we have the seventh doctor. The late General Scobie supported me always in trying to get a doctor for the parish, and we applied to the Duke, through the factor, to get a share of the grant which he gives. The Duke gives £40 to help to get a doctor for the two parishes of Eddrachillis and Durness. If we got £20 from the Duke and £25 from the Lighthouse Commissioners, we agreed that we would assist the parish to make up a salary for a doctor. Mr. McIver sometimes said—what would we do with Eddrachillis? And I said that was their look out. We pay half of the doctor's salary, and the doctor lives three miles from Scourie."*

From 1938 for nearly 40 years Dr. Charles Sandeman served the people of Durness as their medical practitioner. He was the 5<sup>th</sup> generation of his family in the medical profession educated at Fettes College and Edinburgh University where he graduated MB, ChB. He was a native of the city and his childhood and adolescence was spent on Jura and Colonsay where his father was the doctor. Doctor Sandeman was a ship doctor with a company trading to the Far East before becoming a GP at Forres before he took over the Durness practice.

He was a member of many medical and lay committees including the Scottish General Medical Services Council and he was a founder member of the Royal College of GP's. He was a keen and able sailor and when his father was doctor in Jura he frequently sailed his racing skiff to victory in the Jura regatta. He was probably one of the leading archaeologists in the north and visitors frequently approached him for information on hut circles, souterrains and premonitory forts. With his wife Rona and the late Dickey Mackay he revived the Durness Highland Gathering which had been dormant for a number of years, he was subsequently chieftain of the games. He died aged 78 and was interned at Balnakeil cemetery.

*In 1981 the Highland Health Board have appointed a new female doctor to take over the Durness practice, which became vacant following the retrial of Dr J Fraser. But they have had to re-advertise for a GP at Scourie. Unless the two doctors can come to a "gentlemen's agreement" over covering each other during days off, they could face the same problem of overwork that finally forced Dr Derek Murphy to leave Scourie.*

*Officially appointed for the Durness post this week was Mrs. Jean Rennie, who previously practiced in Galashiels. Although she gave up medicine for a time, she recently decided to return.*

*It is the Scourie practice, however, which is giving the Health Board a headache. The doctor there is responsible for a very large area from Kylesku to Kinlochbervie and 20 miles inland.*

*Dr. Murphy was on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, apart from his annual holidays, because there was no agreement between him and Dr. Fraser to cover during days off. Dr. Murphy said he could not even go out for a walk with his wife with a clear mind, and last year he was advised to give up the practice because his health was suffering. He left to take up a post in Bristol three weeks ago. Since he announced that he was to leave, the Kinlochbervie community council and Sutherland Local Health Council have suggested that the doctor be housed in Rhiconich, which is nearer the main centre of a sparse population, and would leave the practitioner with less travelling. If the two doctors could also work together, it was felt there would be less strain on both of them.*

*Mr. Robin Stewart, secretary to the Board, said on Wednesday: "The Board have twice considered the possibility of basing doctors at Kinlochbervie, but it is just not possible because of the vast areas involved.*

*"What we have done is to explain to candidates for both the Durness and Scourie posts the position as regards covering each other, and suggest that they work out a system. But we cannot direct them to do so, it is up to them." Mr. Stewart said that although they had received many replies to their advertisement for the Scourie post, a much lesser number had attended interviews, and none of these were thought suitable. The practice has now been re-advertised, but it will be mid-July before any decision will be made.*

Up until 1994 the Durness physician lived in the house belonging to the Health Service and



IMAGE 35 1995 DURNES HEALTH CENTRE WAS OPENED

gave up the property on leaving or retiring. The house now being separate from the surgery has been purchased by the local doctor of thirteen years standing before retirement. The replacement General Practitioner has to find their own accommodation. The Health Service house for use usually by the district nurse and health visitor in Bard Terrace was purchased by Durness Development group in 2003.

For many years a very successful service was provided by The Red Cross car service operated by a local contract and was used to help those with no transport to visit outpatient clinics. This ceased.

In 1995 Durness Health Centre was opened. The resident Doctor at that time was Dr. George Sanderson who remained in post for an extra year before retiring to see the opening of the facility. The surgery was until this time a small annex at the side of the doctor's residence, a

tiny waiting room, small consultation room, and minuscule WC. Dr. Sanderson took over from Dr. Rennie in 1987 and on his retirement (Dr. George as he was affectionately known locally died in March 2002 age 73) Dr. Alan Belbin was appointed. Dr. Belbin retired in 2015 and since then locums have worked the practice. Appointing a full time GP has not been a success. Several changes occurred in management in the area coverage between Scourie, Kinlochbervie, and Durness.

The press and Journal reported on Dr. Belbin's retirement.

*Dr. Ken Proctor, associate medical director for NHS Highland, said:*

*“Alan’s retirement sees the end of an era in terms of healthcare provision to Durness. When Alan was trained it was a time when GPs were expected to join and work in a practice for their whole professional lifetimes. He has given almost two decades of constant service, serving the patients’ needs around the clock, often for weeks at a time without a break. Whatever the new arrangements of care may look like in the future for Durness, it will not distract from the dedication Alan has shown to his community throughout the years. Health historians in the future will reflect with some awe, I suspect, on the extraordinary commitment that single-handed doctors gave to their practices during the 20th and early years of the 21st century.”*

The practice has now been taken over by NHS Highland with medical services provided by locum cover and support from the Kinlochbervie and Scourie Practice. The Ambulance service works out of Kinlochbervie covering the area from Kylesku to the end of Loch Eriboll.

### **Medical History in Mackay Country**

From 1890 onwards a full-time Medical Officer of Health was appointed in each county in Scotland with a remit to report on the state of health of the county and its various parishes and towns. The annual reports of the Medical Officers give an objective view of the living conditions, diseases and major health issues in different parts of Scotland.

Medical Officer of Health reports, 1891 - Sutherland

Durness - Population, 960; acres, 140,812.

The want of water of proper qualities is a most prominent defect, particularly in the village and houses near. A great deal of lime is present in the water, and none of softer quality is taken in by gravitation. Much hardship is therefore entailed on people who have to go considerable distances for a suitable supply, or store up what rain water they can. Consequently there is not a sufficient means of flushing out drains and the few water-closets which exist. Much danger attends the use of water-closets in a place only scantily supplied with water, as the traps dry up, and backflow of sewage gas to the house is then uninterrupted, and I know dangerous disease to have resulted in this way. The misused road drains are frequently choked up with waste and sometimes putrid materials, and whatever surface wells are used can readily be polluted.

Farr - Population, 188,355 (Farr proper); 70,396 (Reay of Sutherland) added; total, 258,751. 1857; acres,

This is the most extensive of all the parishes, and some of the worst examples of insanitation are to be found in it. Visits, general and special, have been made several times to its various districts, and, summarily, the case may be said to be – bad drainage or none at all; heaps of refuse; and polluted water supplies. In Kirkton district the largest proportion of one-roomed houses, 27.3 per cent., were found in 1881. In Portskerry and Melvich there is much deficiency of water; what is used of good water is, as has been reported already, so far distant and most difficult of access that there is a high premium on its use. But of bad water the amount

used is necessarily large, and it is always liable to additional impurity at stated times, after rain washes all readily removable filth into surface wells or small burns. Good water can be got by gravitation.

Portskerry (which in its rooms is second for overcrowding - 2·0 persons to each room) and Skerry are both much alike, but the first- named is, if anything, the worse village of the two. It is not surprising to know that Typhoid has been very common in some past years. In many places no attempt whatever is made to remove manure heaps, which give off sickening exhalations, till a use is found for them in agricultural work, and so road drains are very foul. Portskerry could be easily drained, but the case of Skerry, in some parts, is not so easy. Inquiries had to be made regarding typhoid fever in two places, scarlet fever, and whooping cough. There is considerable crowding in a good number of the houses.

Tongue - Population, 1946; acres, 81,036.

The sources of water for Tongue Village were investigated, and they will need careful looking after lest they at any time become polluted. Beyond some choked drains, no particular nuisance was investigated; but all over the Parish there are large heaps of refuse and middens abutting on public roads, and liable to pollute water supplies. This is particularly the case in Melness and Portvasco districts, where typhoid fever existed for several successive years. Many of the houses are damp because of the nature of the stones of which they are largely built, as in Melness School and dwelling- house, whose condition is referred to in School Report. Some houses are placed on very undesirable sites for good drainage, and are not exposed to sunshine sufficiently.

Eddrachilles - Population, 1409; acres, 133,555.

An extensive parish, with a people, a great many of whom, in Kinlochbervie district especially, have to combat many difficulties and natural deficiencies by sea and land which greatly militate against a tranquil healthy life. The houses in the main are very poorly built, and a good few have one sole entrance for people and cattle. Infectious diseases, like measles, are very readily spread in houses and circumstances of such poor capabilities, as regards isolation. There can be no proper isolation or nursing of the sick in these houses and epidemic disease of a virulent type consequently commits widespread and unpreventable damage.

Even though the schools are closed during epidemics, the potent cause of epidemic fever clings to the clothing and furniture of such smoky, damp, and ill-drained houses, and those not stricken by sickness themselves may yet communicate it unwittingly to their friends and neighbours with whom they come casually in contact. Ophthalmic diseases are very common in smoky houses. Inquiries and proceedings in relation to an epidemic of measles (which prevailed over the west coast generally) were set going during the early part of the year. A great mass of the people are too distant from a doctor for regular attendance, which in grave illness is absolutely necessary, to be satisfactory to either doctor or patient.

Bad drains and water have been found here as elsewhere. In Scourie district roads or foot-paths are pressingly required. Considerable overcrowding occurs in some houses, which are regular hot-beds for producing or encouraging an attack of disease. Typhoid fever occurred during the end of the year. The water supplies are very fickle and changeable, and what may be of passable purity at one time may be polluted at another, because of the shifting nature of the agricultural operations in fields through which water comes or cattle congregate. And fouling of water also exists in consequence of there being an insufficient number of privies where most required.



## Mary Beith

Born: May 22, 1938; Died: May 13, 2001 aged 73 after a short fight against cancer, was one of the characters of the modern Highlands. A writer, journalist and historian, she had immersed herself in the study of the heritage of Gaelic Scotland, becoming a recognised authority on the traditional Celtic medicines and concept of healing. She was seen to bring an intellectual rigour to the study of local traditions and the oral history of her subject.

Mary Beith lived in Melness. She lived there for over twenty years and continued her research and writing from her home. She wrote a regular feature for the West Highland Free Press on the history of traditional medical matters and has also done work on the same subject for radio and television. A second edition of her book *'Healing Threads'* was published in 2004. *'Healing Threads'* is a very significant and very enjoyable book, filled with stories about traditional medicine and Highland history. Mary's work shows us that while it is currently fashionable to seek alternative cures from plants sourced in the Amazon or some other far flung corner of the globe, similar treatments abound closer to home. Modern medical experiments have shown, not surprisingly, that many of these traditional cures have significant scientific merit. Mary Beith made it her latter life's work to investigate traditional medical practices in the Highlands and Islands. She has been able to combine rigorous academic work, searching through ancient Gaelic texts, with a lifetime talking to people in Island and Highland communities about traditional treatments and cures.

Accounts in Melness of the medical college located there in the 14<sup>th</sup> century accord with documents held in the National Library of Scotland. These documents show that a medical school was endowed in Melness in 1379 by King Robert II. Since these documents were only rediscovered in recent decades it is clear that they have not influenced the local tradition regarding the medical college. Tradition bearers such as the late Joseph Mackay, the late Hugh Macdonald and Alec George Mackay were able to show Mary Beith the sites in West Strathan and Achininver used by the college.

- The College – Larach Taigh na Leighis
- The Surgeon's House – Larach Taigh Fhearchar
- The Students' House, Dal na Frith
- The rock where seaweed was collected for cures – Clach Fhearchar
- The place where a descendant of Fhearchar sat and thought – Leac Iain MacCailean
- Glen Golly where Fearchar found the white serpent

They also explained that the college was charged with training surgeons for the Scottish Army. The College specialised in eye conditions with one of the principal plants used to treat eye disorders Eyebright which grows in profusion in parts of Melness. This combination has made it possible for her to compare accounts from the oral tradition with written sources. From this work she was able to vouch most strongly for the accuracy and importance of the oral tradition, which she describes as 'self-correcting'. By this she means that as a story is told other people, those listening, will offer up their own comments and corrections until an agreed 'version' of the incident emerges.

In many rural places there were very few doctors. Over centuries people learned how to make cures and medicines from things they could find where they lived. Each generation passed on this knowledge to the next. Some people had a particular talent for treating a very particular kind of illness. Each clan chief employed doctors as well as bards, lawyers and teachers. Certain families became renowned for their talent and skill in a particular field: the MacCrimmons were famous pipers; the Beatons were famous doctors. The doctors went to university and often studied at several different locations in Europe before coming home to work.

## **Medical Services in Scourie<sup>2</sup>**

The first known recorded name of a doctor in the area was that of Robert Smith surgeon in 1871, in 1876 Dr. James Ross and in 1878 Dr. James Bruce. About 1893 Dr. Charles Jameson came here and spent the remaining forty years of his life as a local doctor. Soon after the death of Dr. Jamison Dr .W McFarlane became GP till 1937 when he was succeeded by Dr. Hunter. Dr MacFarlane returned to the practise about 1848 and stayed till he retired about 1964 the next doctor was Dr. John Anderson then Dr. William G Conn in 1966. Dr. Jordan in 1969, Dr. Ian Penny 1970, Dr. Derek Murphy 1977, Dr. Suruil Srivastava 1981, Dr Watmough 1986 and Dr. Hamilton January 1987.

Dr. Charles Jamison was a professional violinist in his youth and actually played in an orchestra. Charles Jamieson inherited money which enabled him to study medicine. He was doctor in Scourie Eddrachillis and part of Assynt until he collapsed and died in his surgery. He used a pony and trap to visit his patients and the park in Scourie was given to him for his horse and this park is still called the Doctors Park. Laterally however he used a type of motorised tricycle. In those early days when they were neither cars nor telephones people from such as Tarbet went to Badcall by boat to summon the doctor.

Note: Mr McIvers book *Memoirs of a Highland Gentleman* speaks of a doctor Thompson as being a local doctor in Scourie in 1864.

The first district nurse was Miss Mackay at that time about 60 years ago the nurse was called a cottage nurse because she stayed in the house where there was a new born baby for a few days. Before this woman Mrs. Mary McLeod Scourie village and Mrs Annie Mackay Skyrim carried out the duties of midwife in the area.

In 1939 there was an outbreak of smallpox in the parish. The Duke of Sutherland appointed and paid for a doctor to attend to those who were ill and the epidemic was soon brought under control.

## **The Dewar Report.<sup>3</sup>**

### **Or The Report of the Highlands and Islands Medical Service Committee**

This was published in 1912 and named after its chair, Sir John Dewar. The report presented a vivid description of the social landscape of the time and highlighted the desperate state of medical provision to the population, particularly in the rural areas of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. The report recommended setting up a new, centrally planned provision of care that within 20 years transformed medical services to the area. This organisation, the Highlands and Islands Medical Service was widely cited in the Cathcart Report and acted as a working blueprint for the NHS in Scotland. The report is written in clear language and many of its findings continue to have relevance to how medical services are planned and financed in Scotland and beyond.

The report was commissioned in 1910 to overcome the difficulties of implementing the forthcoming National Insurance Act 1911 in the crofting communities. In industrial areas the working population were expected to contribute a proportion of earnings to a central fund to provide medical care when needed.

In the Highlands and Islands this was seen as unworkable as the majority of the population were in crofting occupations with little or no regular income. This report was following on

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<sup>2</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

<sup>3</sup> From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

from others such as Coldstream's report issued by the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh in 1852 and the Napier Report that both deplored the parlous state of medical services in the area. The remit of the enquiry was settled to be "...the counties of Argyll, Caithness, Inverness, Ross and Cromarty, Sutherland, Orkney and Shetland and from the Highlands of Perth shire, comprising the area in which isolation, topographical and climatic difficulties, and straitened financial circumstances are found most generally in combination, and, therefore, the area generally within which the question of adequate medical provision is most pressing."

The Committee gathered information by questionnaires sent to 102 doctors and 158 other persons and this was followed on by direct observation by an itinerary of meetings visiting: –



IMAGE 36 COLLECTING THE EVIDENCE, DEWAR COMMITTEE AT ACHLYNESS CROFT 1912

Inverness, Thurso, Kirkwall, Fair Isle and Lerwick; at Lairg, Bettyhill, and Rhiconich in Sutherlandshire; at Stornoway and Garrynahine in the Isle of Lewis; at Tarbert, Harris; at Lochmaddy in North Uist; at Dunvegan and Portree in the Isle of Skye; and at Kyle of Lochalsh, Perth and Oban. They also held meetings in Edinburgh and Glasgow and reviewed available published reports and papers.

### **Highlands and Islands Medical Service (HIMS)<sup>4</sup>**

The Highlands and Islands Medical Service was a unique social experiment in Britain long before the NHS. It was formally set up in 1913 with a Treasury grant of £42,000 in the wake of a report by Sir John Dewar's committee. Medical and nursing services were either poor or non-existent in many areas within the crofting counties. Crofters did not qualify for services under the new National Insurance scheme. Doctors struggled to make any living in such sparsely-populated areas – apart from occasional summer visitors from the south on sporting holidays. War delayed the introduction of the service although a resident nurse was found for the island of St Kilda in 1914.

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<sup>4</sup> Explore 60 years of the NHS in Scotland

## Durness Golf Club

Local enthusiasts founded Durness golf course in 1988 following many years of planning and hard work. Although there are only nine greens the clever positioning of a second set of tees ensure there is variety on the back nine. It is no easy course; the record stands at sixty eight, and is a test for any level of golfer. The course is open to visitors all year round seven days a week from dawn till dusk. Restrictions are only in force on open days and on Sunday mornings when local competitions are under way. Visitors are asked to check with the secretary but the club will endeavour to make it possible for all visitors to have a game on the course. Visitors are welcome to play this stunning golf course, which has featured on TV with Peter Allis and in all the golf magazines. It is highly praised and recognized as part of the Highlands golfing circuit. There is tuition available for all age groups and the club provides local employment.



IMAGE 37 DURNESS GOLF COURSE AND CLUBHOUSE OVERLOOKING BALNAKEIL BAY

For a number of years, the native people of Durness, and in particular the Regional Councillor Frances Keith for over twenty years, had been attempting to have a golf course sited locally. The present site was determined a number of years before and outline planning permission was granted in 1971. The land was grazing ground for Keoldale Farm and owned by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, objections were raised and no development of the area was possible.

The first golf match in Durness was recorded in April 1987 when the caravan and camping site was redesigned for a temporary course hosting a game between Durness and Kinlochbervie over eighteen holes. By May 1987, circumstances had changed and the stony land at Culiken, the stretch of land behind Balnakeil Cemetery started to be cleared for a nine-hole golf course. Nearly all the work in the early stages was done by hand and minimal equipment, dedication and commitment have established the developing and improving popular course seen today. Francis Keith, Ian Morrison from Achfary and Lachlan Ross from Kinlochbervie designed the original course. Slight alterations have been created as the course has advanced. In August 1987, the first match was played on the ground, far from being completed but as a celebration of obtaining planning consent and in anticipation as to what was to come. Durness was beaten by a team from Kinlochbervie.

Singular objections were lodged mainly to do with conservation. Detailed botanical surveys were carried out as the sites' boundaries are within a site of Special Scientific Interest and the

Golf Club have worked closely with Scottish Natural Heritage and other conservation bodies to have an acceptable facility. Support and sponsorship was received from a variety of sources and funds quickly accumulated. The first president of the Golf Club was appointed in October 1987, Mrs. Dottie Mackay of the Parkhill Hotel. Billy Morrison, Jack Watson and Lachlan Ross were appointed as trustees. The aim was to have the club open for 1<sup>st</sup> June 1988. Membership forms were available to start from the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1988 and sixty one members were enlisted by March 1988 when the first competition was held. The first trophy donated was a pewter tankard from One Four Eight Commando Brewery in Dorset. As work on the course was continuing, play was running parallel with most games on Saturdays and Sundays. In May



IMAGE 38 DURNESS GOLF CLUB PRIZE WINNERS 2003

1988 the first Annual General Meeting was held just thirteen months after the inaugural meeting.

This course is thirty five hectares in a conservation area of two thousand hectares. At five thousand five hundred and fifty five yards (about five hundred and eleven metres). The sixth and fifteenth run alongside Loch Lanlish and there is a request in the rules that golfers should not disturb the anglers when playing these holes. The ninth and eighteenth hole has encouraged a reputation where the green from the tee requires a shot some eighty metres over an inlet of the sea. It is a part links course with a par of sixty nine and a course record of seventy one. In 1990, moves started to draw plans, obtain planning consent and raise funds for a clubhouse. By the end of April 1991, the club held their annual general meeting in the new clubhouse.

The new season starts in mid-May after closure for about a month when the lambing is complete. Although the winter is quieter in terms of numbers frequenting the fairways and greens there are a few members playing whenever possible. The club runs a winter league for

such people. Catering facilities are available and a hire service of clubs and trolleys. Each year the membership increases, presently about one hundred, and in the summer distant visitors use the most north westerly golf course on mainland Britain.

In the Northern Times on April the 11th 1997 under the local reports for Kinlochbervie there was a report from a renowned commentator and international player Peter Allis who had toured Scotland's greatest golf courses and included Durness for a BBC television programme screened the previous Friday.

An agreement is in operation that was established in 1992 for twenty years between Durness golfers, crofters and the Nature Conservancy Council to protect the grassland from rabbits and sheep. The proposal aims to repair erosion resulting in large patches of bare sand caused by rabbits and gale force winds. The Nature Conservancy Council has concerns about the loss of wild life. The crofters concerns are about loss of grazing and the golfers concerns are about loss of greens. Sheep have to be fenced out of eroded patches and rabbits are to be culled.

### **New Clubhouse**

July 1991 Northern Times. Lucy Mackay traces the history of the club and details the holes.

*Durness Golf club and its members have come a long way since the inaugural meeting in April '87. By August of the same year permission had been granted and contractors "Sports Works" were ready to move in. By October the grass and trees had been laid, but a lot of work had still to be done, including fund- raising!*

*Come December there were still jobs to be done but the committee were now talking about green fees. The new greens were needing cut and the club had obtained a disused porta cabin to act as a club house. By March 1988, the club had 60 members and the first competition was arranged for Easter Sunday. The first open tournament was scheduled for 4<sup>th</sup>. June and was being sponsored by Morrison Construction.*

*During the winter of '88 more work was carried out mostly voluntarily and now the club was becoming involved in matches with other clubs such as Bonar Bridge, Ardgay, Thurso and Strathpeffer. The club was the proud owner of its own flag and flagpole donated by Vice-president Kenneth Macleod. In March '89 the club received an award from the Sutherland District Sports Council for best new club of '88. The club continued to prosper and in May 1990 there was talk of a clubhouse. By October the go ahead was given and the rest, as they say is history.*

*The course with its standard scratch score of 68 is not as easy as it might seem. After three years, the course record still stands at 73. The sandy terrain does not give a lot of run on the ball so the course plays long with several natural and man-made hazards accuracy is essential.*

*The first hole is only 296 yards long but, being steep uphill is quite a testing start. Up on the green, the course flattens out and the 321 yards second hole appears to be straight forward if you can avoid the strategically placed bunkers. The green is small (due to NCC stipulations) so is testing to hit with your second shot.*

*The long third is downhill following your drive and now the scenery is startling. Away from the sea this is one of the most sheltered spots on the course. The fourth hole is a player needs to drive over a protruding ridge or risk a blind second shot.*

*The sixth is the longest hole and the only par five on the course. On a calm evening it is beautiful peppered by water hazards, some with ducks swimming or fish jumping. The seventh is a short but testing par 3 with menacing rough so an accurate drive is a must.*

*The view changes on the eighth as we head back towards the sea and a downhill slope shortens this hole.*

*The best is saved till the last. The ninth hole is only 108 yards long but tee and green are separated by waves crashing on to cliffs. This hazard is very much physiological!*

*A clever idea of building 18 tees means you can play the same course again but from a completely different angle.*

### **Hole in One**



IMAGE 39 JOHN AVISON CONGRATULATES JOHN MACKENZIE

After fourteen years in existence Durness Golf club has registered its first competitive hole in one by a gentleman. Club treasurer John Mackenzie playing in the Winter Stableford League accompanied by John Avison achieved this feat on Saturday 13<sup>th</sup>. March. Into a head wind, John used a gentle eight iron on the one hundred and eight yard ninth hole to land the ball just short of the hole and to watch it role and disappear.

Marion Mackay from Wick was the only other player to “hole out” in competition. She did so on the eighteenth in the 1994 Ladies Open, the shot helping her to win the scratch prize on that occasion. Two other members Alistair Corbett and Michael O’ Shane have both shot “holes in one” in the past but in bounce games.

## Durness Activities Groups, Events & Pursuits

For its size Durness has an active community. At varying intervals there has been community political involvement with Community Council elections and other times when co-option of members has occurred to keep the council active. Until 2007 when reorganisation took place Frances Keith from Durness was the Highland Regional Councilor. The community council marked the resignation of Francis Keith as Highland Councilor with a small presentation to thank him for his years of dedicated and committed work. For 33 years Frances had served the ward and maintained continuity between community councils, his constituents, and the Highland Council. Frances has been involved in many major developments over the years and traveled between his home in Durness to Inverness and beyond in all weathers and thorough the years to represent the area at official meetings ensuring the fair distribution of resources and maintaining a high profile of the needs for the area. Of all the changes he has been involved in it was the establishment of the golf course at Durness that has given him his greatest satisfaction. Three Highland Councilors now represent North West Sutherland and in 2013 Hugh Morrison from Durness was elected as an independent councilor.

For visitors there are few organised activities with the exception of a guided geological tour of Smoo Cave and an excursion to Cape Wrath, zip wire at Ceannabeinne, walks with the Countryside Ranger but many areas for independent exploration.

In 1981, the first Durness three-day Gala was hailed a success. To advertise the occasion which was organised with plenty of events and activities puzzle questionnaires were circulated at hotels and other centers between Inverness and Durness to be picked up by passing tourists. The events in some likeness have continued, some being modified and specialised while others have been turned into fund raising events for differentiating community requirements. The gala itself was drawn to a close.

### Hall Committee



IMAGE 40 DURNESS HALL COMMITTEE 2000 JANET CORDINER, MEG MACRAE, KENNY MACRAE, DAREN MACKAY, GRAHAM BRUCE, LUCY MACKAY, JOHN MACKENZIE, MARY MACKAY, TRISTRAM LANSLEY, AND MIKE FITCH.



Following ten years of fundraising, three refusals of agency funding and determination, / a new village hall was built in Durness. Opened in August 2001. This multipurpose building is where many village events are held/ dances/ meetings/ activities. Village hall encouraged many of the village activities to develop. Attracts many outside agencies to what is recognized as one of the best facilities in the area., HISHA, CASE, SIP/ Highland Council, North West Cattle Producers Association, North West Care Alliance, Tourist Board, NHC and Sutherland Partnership are all regular users from outside Durness. The hall runs its own sports club.

### **Badminton Club**

Durness has a well-established and very popular badminton club. Enthusiasts come from the surrounding communities to the meetings. A local league is active every year with participation at county level. The session runs from November to April annually with participation from the age of 8 to 60 years old attending. Over 82 people attend during the session. The prime movers for a new village hall came from the badminton club. This game has been popular in Durness for a long time and is played by members at a high level competing around the county. The first village hall was also built because of the requirement of a badminton facility. A local trophy held in high esteem is the Bobby Morrison Memorial Trophy awarded each year to the best young player. A competition is run annually in the junior section and the prize presented at the end of term school prize giving. Mrs. Lucy Mackay is the local primary PE teacher and has a qualification in badminton coaching which is used at all levels.

In an interview with Lucy Mackay

*... I think 1936, the badminton club was set up, and it appears to never have stopped ... since then. Maybe, sort of, during the war, it might have. But, I have the minutes from the old hall, a thick brown book, and it's quite interesting, reading that, because when they started at first it was Tilley lights. And how on earth you played badminton with Tilley lights I have no idea. That's sort of the gas lamps – they're not even gas lamps – but it was, I think, around the early fifties that Robbie's father, Dickie, had the Parkhill Hotel and he must have let the hall join on to his electricity supply, and they had electricity to play by for the first time.*

### **Cape Wrath Challenge**

During the summer of 2000 a round-Britain relay of approx. 4,200 miles, The Island Race, took place. The relay was to be completed in 100 days and on Day 93 the Island Race reached the far North West tip of Scotland and the small community of Durness and Cape Wrath. When you get to the lighthouse at the end of the Cape you can go no further. Richard Haldane MBE who has a holiday house in Durness and whose family have been regular visitors for many years and become integrated into the Durness community was chairman of the event and was raising money for the charities which HRH Princess Anne was patron. The people of Durness asked the Island Race organisers if they could come back the following year and hold another event so the Cape Wrath Challenges were born, almost. The 2001 event had to be cancelled due to foot and mouth. The first Cape Wrath Challenges proper took place in 2002 with a week of running events cumulating in the marathon to Cape Wrath and return and were very successful.

The Cape Wrath Challenges were designed to give a totally unique experience where runners can take part at their own level, competing against their contemporaries or challenging themselves to improve times over a fixed distance. Options were offered for the beginner and the serious runners catered for with challenging and competitive courses. For the first two years a running promotions company were employed to provide a race director and technical team to arrange all aspects of the management. From the third year the whole event was organised and run locally with involvement from many people on a voluntary basis. The technical and

marshalling, administration, time keeping, social activities and catering were only possible because of the dedication and cooperation of enthusiastic and supportive people. For the marathon event to be safely monitored and controlled RAYNET, The Radio Amateurs' Emergency Network the UK's national voluntary communications service provided licensed radio amateurs.



IMAGE 41 START OF THE FANCY DRESS BEACH RUN AT THE CAPE WRATH CHALLENGE

Although over the years slight alterations were made the original format remained the same. The Cape Wrath Challenges could not be compared to any other running event, the week event provided a totally unique experience, The running challenges started on the Monday with the choice of a half marathon or a ten kilometre. Tuesday's event was the hill race an option of 5.3 or 4 miles, on Wednesday an 8.4 mile run round the village on tracks and paths through Keoldale and Balnakeil. Thursdays run was sponsored as a fun run with a fancy dress option and a prize for the best fancy dress. Competitors had to estimate their time over a three mile beach course and the closest to their guess was the winner. The running proceedings cumulated on the Saturday with individuals and teams running to the most north westerly point on mainland Britain. This is reputed to be the toughest marathon on the mainland. From west Keoldale on the Kyle of Durness participants were started to run the 11 miles to Cape Wrath and return by the same route on the tract over the Parph. On returning to the Kyle, where their time was stopped, they were transported over the Kyle of Durness to East Keoldale where their timing was started again and they continued the run of 4.2 miles to the village hall.

The week of running was combined with a range of social events and they included a pub quiz, clay pidgin shoot, wine tasting, sheepdog trial demonstration and farm visit, barbeque and beach games, coastguard demonstration with a helicopter visit. The whole experience was concluded with a dinner ceilidh dance where the presentation of prizes was carried out. The Cape Wrath Challenges which always had a limit on numbers due to logistics and available accommodation became a fixed event and many were booking their accommodation for the

following year before they left Durness. During the course of the event three families moved to Durness bring a much needed input to the local schools.

The event was cancelled in 2020 due to coronavirus but it had been hoped to celebrate its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2021 – although that was to have been the last challenge. Organisers agreed that it should not now go ahead because the safety of runners could not be guaranteed. The group posted on its social media page:

*“Indications are that the situation will not have substantially changed by next May and it has become increasingly apparent that, due to the extent of Covid-19 precautions required, it will not be possible to host either the running or social events with adequate safety.”*

That difficulty, coupled with a lack of volunteers, led to the conclusion the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary challenge in May 2021 would be the last. A statement issued by Cape Wrath Challenge’s honorary president Richard Haldane read: *“It strikes me as more than a little tragic that, having been robbed of our first challenge in 2001 by foot and mouth disease, we should now be robbed of our 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> by this beastly Covid-19 pandemic.”*

### **Christmas Treat**

For many years the people of Durness have been celebrating Christmas by coming together at the Christmas Treat. The party is the highlight of the year for the children and eagerly anticipated by them and indeed many adults. Father Christmas brings a gift for all the junior children of the parish but everyone is warmly invited to attend.



IMAGE 42 2002 CHRISTMAS PLAY BY THE CHILDREN OF DURNESS PRIMARY SCHOOL ALL AROUND THE WORLD.

The annual Christmas treat for the young children of the parish is an event that has been held in Durness for many years celebrating the festive season and bringing families and the community together, new residents and those that now come to share the excitement with grandchildren alike. The first record of the Christmas treat is mentioned in the Primary school record book for 1922 but it is believed that this was not the first as the mention makes reference to this as an annual occasion. The history is lost in the annals of time but was started and paid for by the Durness Estate with recollections of the visiting forces participation particularly during the war years, Miss Elliot who resided at Balnakeil House contributed generously and

asked in return that the children sing the Holly and the Ivy, her favourite Carol. In more recent times a small donation is requested from everyone in Durness who wishes to give. In recent memory the format that has proved successful has been very little altered. On Friday night the hall, all decorated for Christmas traditionally by the fathers of the primary school children with decorations and a wonderful tree. On the Saturday the school children perform a play in which each child has a part, the costumes, make up and technical aspects have become more elaborate.

After the play tea is served prepared by the parents with sandwiches, cakes, juice and other goodies before the dancing and games. No Christmas party would be complete without a visit from Santa Clause and this is definitely the highlight of the evening. From around the Christmas tree all the children are given a gift before the night is drawn to a close. Nowadays the event is in the new hall, previously in the old hall in the village square built in 1935 and demolished in 2001, and until that time held in the school.

### **Grazing Committee**

Work with estates and other community groups to identify projects of mutual benefit. They are supportive of many community activities and were involved in feasibility studies undertaken. Grazings committees are set up with certain management responsibilities regarding the common grazings. They are appointed into office by the crofters who share in the common grazings and have responsibility to make and submit grazings regulations to the Commission for approval. Each common grazings has its own grazings regulations which are administered by the grazings committee. Common grazings are areas of land used by a number of crofters and others who hold a right to graze stock on that land.

### **Youth Club**



IMAGE 43 DURNESS YOUTH CLUB OUTING TO THURSO VIKING BOWL 2001

Durness Youth club started in the 1960's by Lotte Glob and David Illingworth in Balnakeil Craft Village as a Saturday club and became established in 1970 and covers the parish of Durness, dealing with age groups from 5-16 in three sections – yogis, juniors and seniors. Durness Youth Club was renowned in NW Sutherland with visitors from Kinlochbervie, Achfary and Scourie to the meetings and events. The club is run on voluntary basis by parents

and is seen as an important step in children's maturation. Parents and leader volunteers supervise on a rota system which worked well. In 2007 funding was sought through Durness Development Group and secured to employ part time youth workers and ensure all the child protection and health and safety legislation was in place. The aim of the club is to help and educate girls and boys through their leisure time activities so to develop their physical, mental and spiritual capabilities that they may grow to full maturity as individuals and members of society and that their conditions of life may be improved. The nature of the club is to provide a diverse facility with informal but organized activity meeting up to four times a week for eight months of the year. The main areas of work are regular Friday evening weekly meetings for various established group activities and games. A further two evenings a week, for badminton and football with specific interest pursuits on Saturdays which included photography, multimedia discos, outing to Strath Dionard to feed the deer, archery, creating a ceramic wall with the local potter, shopping and cinema excursions to Inverness and Viking Bowl Thurso. The youth club organizes many community events involving families of children attending i.e. bingo sessions, Down Memory Lane (for elderly), bonfire, night walks in torch light with the countryside ranger and craft sessions to name a few.

The management of the youth club is by a committee. Experienced people involved in many different aspects of the social, business and political infrastructure of the village. All people residing in Durness are eligible for participating in the meetings of the club but in practice parents administrate the club with help and assistance as needed from all sections of the community. A chairperson, treasurer, secretary and leaders are elected annually and are responsible for arranging and organising the youth club for the year that includes providing activities and outings with appropriate adult supervision. The club is affiliated to the Highland Associations of Youth Clubs and Youth Clubs Sutherland Associations. On several occasions funding through grants has been secured to run various youth projects including art residencies, creation of a millennium standing stone and in 2005 durness youth club hosted visitors from the world youth congress.

Teenagers attending the secondary school in Kinlochbervie area are a recent return to the community. Until 1994 children of secondary school age were hostel away from home during the week only returning for weekends. This left a gap in the community for most of the time of youths. When this was rectified a slow and determined process has been happening to provide constructive challenges and activities for this age group. The Youth Club worked closely with Scotland against Drugs to provide indoor and outdoor recreational facilities. In recent years as the numbers of youths diminished the youth club has become less active and funding for youth workers dried up.

### **North West Youth Initiative**

This group constituted through the local secondary school and Community Education address's youth focussed services – motivation, learning and skills development including new technology skills, peer-led activities and education, advice and information and access to services to enable young people to fulfil their potential. It provides information on drugs issues for young people and alternative or diversionary activities for, with and by young people. It consults on a regular basis with young people on a range of health issues and seeks their views on how to develop a wider range of opportunities for their involvement in community life.

In Durness we have developed a 14+ drop in centre for over 16 and opening hours for 14-16 years. This group have worked closely with the Durness Development Group in setting up of a youth cafe in Durness as a safe recreational, leisure and learning facility. Funds were secured for the purchase and renovation of 1 Bard Terrace. There was a commitment to provide for the specific needs of young people taking particular account of the needs of the most vulnerable:

marginalised and socially and economically excluded young people not taking part in more formal activities. This would involve providing a drug free environment for young people to meet and ensuring that the range of services is coordinated and responsive to the needs and aspirations of young people.



IMAGE 44 DURNESS CONTINGENT OF THE NORTH WEST YOUTH INITIATIVE

The strategy aimed to improve the chances of young people realising their potential as they progress towards independence. We tried to ensure the provision of safe, high quality educational, social and recreational facilities. We also ensured that young people reach the highest standards of personal health and live in a safe environment. The aim of the project was to allow young people to learn from each other, share experience and gain confidence. It provided a safe and drug free environment for them and is also ensuring the provision of social and recreational and learning facilities.

It was the aim of the project to work in partnership with the communities of northwest Sutherland in promotion of any events or activities, which help improve opportunities for young people in northwest Sutherland. This would include link work with for instance Durness Youth Club who are developing a local drugs awareness/sports facilities project of activities with a community focus, in encouragement of alternative healthy lifestyles as a diversionary approach in drug prevention: this work is in collaboration with local business support and drugs development officers, part funded by Scotland Against Drugs' Scottish Drugs Challenge Fund – and Highland Youth Voice, an elected Youth Parliament who have prioritised drugs issues as a focus of work and are addressing what is believed to be an information gap, through the production of educational material and forthcoming media campaign.

- To help promote a positive attitude to young people in their community.

- To provide young people with the necessary support, advice, information and training on youth matters.
- To help young people express views they feel strongly about and to help young people feel good about themselves and participate in democratic decision-making procedures.
- Create new ideas that would be of benefit to the wider community, particularly youth.

Two Members of the Highland Youth Voice, an elected Parliament of seventy young people from throughout the area are from Durness. This is an important forum to ensure that young people have a say in issues that affect them and also take action on issues that they think are important. They meet with Highland Councillors and MSP's from Scottish Parliament.

### **Pre-School Group**



IMAGE 45 DURNESS PRE SCHOOL 2012

Durness Nursery is an extension of a small village playgroup. The playgroup started over twenty years ago by a group of local mothers who ran it voluntarily. It is now government funded and run by the Highland Pre School Services. It is still based in the Primary School. At the moment there are five preschool children in the village that all attend Nursery. Two sessions for mothers and under three year olds are on offer weekly. They have a wide range of activities to choose from in the playgroup room as well as outings to local areas and the use of the school playground. With regular visits to the village hall to play on bikes and use large play equipment.

## Angling Competition

The annual competition was held on Loch Meadaidh.



IMAGE 46 FISHING CONTESTANTS IN 2009

## Screen Machine

Where the Screen Machine works is where people can't get access to the cinema. We cherry pick the best of the films that come out, based partly on what's doing well at the box office. We can't afford to show films on first release and our audience is pretty similar to the rest of the UK.

In terms of public funding, we receive money from Creative Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, North Ayrshire Council, Western Isles Council. Our main sponsor is the Royal Bank of Scotland. We've also got a new sponsor in Highland Fuels. Screen Machine was one of the first large-scale projects to receive Lottery funding bringing movies to remoter parts of the country. Screen Machine is an 80-seat air conditioned, digital mobile cinema bringing the latest films to Durness.

## Sheep Dog Trials

From what started in 1981 with a few local handlers competing against one another has developed into a popular annual event attracting enthusiasts from around the country. Keoldale Farm Manager Jock Sutherland is a dedicated trials devotee and attends the events around the British Isles. He has worked endlessly in ensuring the Durness event has become recognised as a must on the highland circuit. Each September Sheep Dog Trials are held in Durness. The Gala committee started the Durness Sheepdog Trials as a local event and the first year they were run, only local handlers took part. They grew to be so popular that Jock Sutherland formed a band of helpers to run the trials attracting handlers from all over Caithness and Sutherland.



The venue for the trials is Keoldale Farm by the Kyle of Durness next to the Cape Wrath Ferry and Cape Wrath Hotel. The setting at the farm is from the man-made gap in the dyke at the top of the field, to the exhaust pen which is the farm fank. Balnakeil Farm ewes from the Sarsgrum hirsels are used for the trial – they do not know the escape routes as the Keoldale ewes do! Some of the handlers including top national and international competitors can be seen working their dogs at the Durness trials. Jock Sutherland himself won the County Trials in 1989, was runner up in 1990, and won them again in 1991 with his thirteen-year-old dog Maid. In 1996, he was second in the televised Grampian Sheepdog Trials Novice Brace event.



IMAGE 47 JOHN LENNON'S COUSIN STAN PARKES PRESENTED A TROPHY TO THE PROCEEDINGS

A committee and sponsors who support them now run the Trials. Over five hundred pounds prize money is on offer with the winner receiving one hundred pounds and a prize which can be a framed portrait of his or her dog. The organisers are out to attract competitors from all over, encouraging local participation. There is a barbecue and refreshments on the site and a raffle with quality prizes.

As the first John Lennon Northern Lights Festival fell during this event in September 2007 John's cousin Stan Parkes who spent childhood holidays in Durness, inherited the croft he visited and lived in Durness for 10 years before having to move closer to medical services presented a trophy to the proceedings. This was for the best young dog and was won Hamish MacLean and his dog Tym. Stan presented the trophy at the prize giving.

27<sup>th</sup> August 2007

Jock Sutherland from Durness was in action with his dog Maid who at nearly 11 years old was the oldest dog in the Scottish National Sheep Dog Trials which took place in Fearn near Tain Ross-shire over three days last week. They have won a place in the Scottish National team and Jock and Maid will now go on to compete as part of the Scottish team in the International Sheep Dog Trials in County Kilkenny, Ireland in September.

Jock 45 years old has been trialing for 25 years and has worked at Keoldale Farm Durness for 15 years and has been farm manager for 12 years. The Highland Collie dog, Gaelic – cuilean, whelp, used to shepherd the white faced Cheviot is probably the oldest Scottish breed as well as one of the most smart, alert and faithful.



IMAGE 48 JOCK SUTHERLAND WITH HIS DOG MAID AT THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL SHEEP DOG TRIALS

In January 2006 by popular request from fellow dog handlers Keoldale farm manager Jock Sutherland organised a nursery trial for working sheepdogs under the age of 3 years. Due to the lack of opportunities to run and test young dogs Jock held the first nursery dog trials last Saturday at Keoldale the same course as used for the annual sheepdog trials in September. Sixteen dogs ran in excellent conditions and weather that was perfect. The judge for the event was Grant Nicholson from Lairg.

### **Pantomimes**

December 1999

Two shows of Jack and the Beanstalk performed in six acts by the comical players in Durness village hall were both sold out in advance. The occasions were described as "the most magnificent evening's entertainment that they have seen in their entire lives, it is sincerely hoped that this is the start of a long tradition of pantomime and plays and when we look back that this is the start of one of the most wonderful things that has happened in Durness."

Mary and Martin Mackay adapted the traditional story about the well-known tale of a poor Durness crofter trying to scrape a living. Jack, played by Kerry Conlon, is plagued with bureaucracy whose fortune is changed with some magic beans from a local merchant. The cast of 25 included all age groups from Dottie Mackay playing Jack's mother to the youngest Richard Belbin playing the outrageous chicken. The topical jokes and the colourful costumes kept the audience laughing throughout the hour and a quarter long performance.



IMAGE 49 CAST OF THE 1999 CHRISTMAS PANTO JACK AND THE BEANSTALK

December 2000

Durness Drama Group is scheduling two performances for this year's pantomime Sangobella. A local story based on the poor, pretty daughter of Lord Laid seeking employment to support her family leads to a series of hilarious encounters as she approaches the Durness employers. As luck would have it the Royal Family are in residence at Cranstackie for their annual sports and a ball is arranged to find suitable partners for the bachelor princes. With Sangobella job hunting her ugly sisters are left to entertain Royalty. To add a little excitement the "Spice Girls" arrive. Sangobella eventually finds love with the rich Barron of Balnakeil after his magic spell is broken by a kiss and he wins his fortune on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*

The script written by Mary and Martin Mackay was a very funny portrayal of the many community issues that have occurred over the year. Without insult fun was poked at many local characters. The players were versatile in their parts most playing more than one role. They all deserve special acclaim. This is the second year of an amateur production that is created within a month including scenery, props and costumes. The hard work, commitment and nerve-racking experience often go underestimated. The group fashioned a very local and challenging performance with all the ingredients of a traditional pantomime obviously having a great deal of fun in the process. From the two shows over £1000 was raised towards interior accessories for the new Durness hall.

December 2002

This year's pantomime was the story of Ali Maca and the five thieves is loosely based on the well-known Ail Baba and the forty thieves but has many local connotations. What is proving to be a very funny performance was played out at the Durness Hall on two separate nights. The story was about Ali Maca and the five robbers. The familiar plot was interspersed with the comic capers of the robbers. Poor camel-driver Ali Maca played by Darren Mackay stumbles across a cave containing the loot of local mobster Al Kapoun played by Charlie Downie. Ali becomes famous when he restores the Sultan's crown, but is captured by the robbers when he returns to the cave for more loot. He escapes, but is tracked down by evil Al Kapoun, bent on revenge. After the big showdown, good finally prevails. If no serious acting was expected and a large amount of amateur dramatics with plenty artistic license is accepted then the audience experienced as much fun as the cast in staging the performance! The production with plenty

local connotations was adapted and produced by Mary and Martin Mackay with a cast of seventeen and a crew of technical assistance.



IMAGE 50 CAST OF THE 2002 CHRISTMAS PANTO ALI MACA

December 2005

After several weeks of dedicated rehearsal and enthusiastic participation from all concerned in ensuring the fine details of the arrangements were ideal, the Durness Drama group presented two performances of the traditional story of Snow White on the 28 and 30 December. Involving a mix of young people and adults this story, adapted for a local audience by Mary and Marty Mackay, was full of humorous anecdotes and leanings to many local events, intertwined with amusing and witty takes on events that have occurred during the year.

The setting is Mackay Country and Snow White, played by Nicola Morrison, encounters the wrath of the wicked step mother and Queen played by Fiona Morrison in various guises, but eventually is able to marry her beloved Prince Jamie played by Donald Morrison. Snow White encounters the seven dwarfs and their antics only protect snow white for a short time from the wicked queen. The cast were dressed in marvellous costumes and, music was provided by local duo John and Marty, make up and scenery all perfected by a supporting band of helpers.

December 2009

After many weeks of rehearsal and preparations the Durness village pantomime held two performances both well attended. The well-known Aladdin is tricked by wheeler dealer magician Abanazar into retrieving the magic lamp from Smoo cave.

The lamp enables him to pay court to Princess Ting-Ling, but Abanazar gets it back and usurps the throne of Durness. However a combination of luck and youthful ingenuity restores the status quo and all ends happily. Great fun with first night nerves was had by all involved. The well-known story was adapted with many local funny stories woven into the plot by Martin and Mary Mackay

## Flower and Veg Show



IMAGE 51 WINNERS OF THE 2009 FLOWER AND VEG SHOW. WITH JUDGES PETE AND JILL TUCK FROM SCOURIE, MEMBERS OF THE FOOD LINKS PRODUCERS GROUP. MARY MACKAY, GRAHAM BRUCE, KATY LEE, AND BILLY MORRISON.

An annual event with some friendly rivalry between the keen and persistent gardeners of Durness the flower and vegetable show attracts some excellent entries. The show proves just what is possible to grow in this corner of Britain which can a very demanding and challenging climate to cultivate in. The sections with entries are usually Potted Plant, Flowers, Floral Art, Vegetables, Veggie Aliens and a Junior Competition, Veggie Creature. The social event is accompanied by an afternoon café in the village hall rising funds for the hall upkeep.

### Food and Music Festival

In September 2001 Durness held a Food & Music Festival Weekend. The Friday night buffet supper dance was acclaimed as a magnificent spread of what was possible with produce available from the local food producers. The buffet included local food prepared by a band of volunteer helpers and although there were worries that either there would be not enough food or too few people to enjoy the banquet the evening turned out to be the wished-for success. The new village hall provided the venue and after the meal the dance to the Celtic rock group Rhythm and Reel had the relievers dancing the night away.

On Saturday afternoon while browsing the old photographs exhibition in the lounge teas, coffees and home baking were available. This attracted a great deal of interest as names and places were put to the display. On Balnakeil beach Cape International were offering Boogie Boarding and land Yachting and the windy conditions were no deterrent but the planned

barbeque had to be cancelled. The local group Sheneagan played in the lounge of the village hall.

Saturday evening brought a very entertaining and skilled event with a local interpretation of Ready Steady Cook with compare Graham Bruce keeping the order and ensuring fair play. The first team were Lesley Black of Portnancon assisted by Richard Belbin. Richard produced a bag of food that Lesley turned into haddock on a bed of hot tomato salad followed with a sweet of “mountain marshmallow”. Sergio Blanco from Laid was assisted by Sarah Fuller and cooked a very appetising Brazilian dish. The next two teams were Monica Ross helped by Martin Mackay and from the bag she was presented with Monica made a Tie Chicken dish. Fiona Belbin took charge of the forth group and her husband local doctor Allan and Dottie Mackay produced a salmon dish in a tasty sauce accompanied by a selection of boiled vegetables. The majority of the food was locally sourced and the results were of a very high standard. The evening and indeed the whole weekend activities of the first Music and Food festival were declared a success and is hoped to become an annual occasion.



IMAGE 52 A EXAMPLE OF THE FOOD SPREAD AT THE FOOD FESTIVAL EVENTS

On the 9<sup>th</sup>. September 2002 the weekend saw a second gastronomic and musical extravaganza held at the Durness village hall. On Friday evening a banquet was presented for those attending the buffet supper dance. Local produce sourced from local producers was turned into a vast array of superb dishes. A three-course meal started with a choice of malt whisky or sherry, wine available throughout and finished with liqueurs or Atyhol Brose. The food present and offered demonstrated the quality and diversity of the locality. The organising committee estimated catering for 100 guests and the number attending the meal paying the full £15 per ticket was 120. Approximately a further 25 attended to the dance following the meal. The Scottish dance trio led by Ian Muir supplied a first-rate selection of country-dance music.

On Saturday afternoon local cooks prepared a variety of dishes from around the world and although numbers attending were small the food was excellent. This event was an unknown

quantity but the high standard and efficient way all the participants catered with the recipes was magnificent. The people attending were treated to a fine selection of food and were able to taste all the dishes. Joining the local cooks was representation from the Northwest Cattle Producers Association supplying tasting samples of cooked local beef.

On Saturday night Coinneach entertained a good crowd fully appreciative of the quality of music that this band provided. More than just another Celtic rock dance band they supplied original song in a professional manner. Performing their own compositions of Highland life this talented and enjoyable group bestowed a pleasurable and exciting atmosphere.



IMAGE 53 LESLIE BLACK AND DOT SHERRIFF COOKED AN AUSIE FISH BARBEQUE WITH A CHOICE OF SEVERAL LOCH ERIBOLL FISH DISHES

The first weekend in September 2003 was the third Durness annual Food and Music Festival. On Friday the buffet created with local produce and presented in a variety of dishes made from recipes prepared by a group of local volunteers could not have been given higher praise. This occasion demonstrated that some of the finest food available could be obtained in this area. The three-course meal offered a selection that catered for every taste. The disappointing aspect of the evening was the band engaged for the evening was unable to provide any quality of music. After coming with good recommendation but retained at short notice after the first choice were double booked they failed to give anything close to a professional performance.

On Saturday the event of International Cuisine was also given the highest acclaim by the crowd. Nine local cooks prepared a selection of dishes from countries around the world. Most were cooking recipes of their nationality but now residing in the area. German, Austrian, South African, Belgian, Turkish, Spanish, Australian, Russian, and Scottish. The North West cattle producers association serving local mince and Tatties represented the latter! People were

encouraged to walk around the hall visiting the various stands, talking to the cooks and taking a sample of the dish. A licensed bar was serving drinks from the several countries to accompany the food. All those participating in cooking and eating gave this event the supreme commendation. A Corra Glas supplied music and this provided a pleasant background with an informal and friendly atmosphere. The displays of old photographs were exhibited along with the millennium albums.

The events held on Friday and Saturday September 2004 in the hall under the forth food festival banner were both a resounding success. The local produce buffet was an extravaganza of dishes made from food products produced locally and prepared by an army of volunteers. The selection of food was split into three courses with a wide variety for each course. The music was provided on the Friday evening by Colin Dewar and his Scottish Dance band from Stirling. Colin and his band consistently produce albums which confirm their undoubted right to the title of one of Scotland's finest Scottish Dance Bands. They are very much in demand up and down the country, playing for Scottish country dancing, accordion clubs, ceilidhs, reel parties and wedding receptions. They've also made numerous trips abroad playing for country dance holidays in Majorca, Malta, Turkey, Cyprus and Spain. Colin and the boys play in an inimitable bouncy style, but they also respect the tradition of the dances with precise timing and phrasing. The dance floor was never empty from the time the music started.

On Saturday Serge and Jane Blanco cooked Albondigas with rice, a Spanish dish of meatballs in a sauce of tomato, onion garlic and coriander, Ludo Van Mysen made Belgian waffles, Nicola Poole prepared a South African dish of cornbread and chilli sauce, Leslie Black cooked an Aussie fish barbeque with a choice of several Loch Eriboll fish dishes. Nicola and Becca Illingworth served a spicy hot green Tie soup, Martina McLeod an Austrian Rindsrouladen beef and vegetable dish served with pasta and Jenny Andrews, Patates Bastisi, a Turkish potato casserole dish with spicy garlic mushrooms and a nutty sauce. The North West Cattle Producers Association prepared traditional Scottish fare of mince and tatties. The festival committee served a selection of homemade soups, cheeses and oatcakes. The event was packed to capacity and every piece of food was finished. Music was supplied by local musicians Katy, Donnie and Carina and after the food the ceilidh got underway with Scottish country dancing and David Morrison providing a Gaelic song.

Durness held its fifth annual festival of food and music and had some of the best experience that could be performed. On Thursday night popular Scottish duo Aly Bain and Phil Cunningham presented a new approach to their performance and piloted what could become a new show. They each prepared and cooked a dish on stage. Inter linked with a comical and interesting banter and played a selection of tunes while the food was cooking. Aly opened the first half with an Iranian Chicken curry cooked with as much perfection as he pays to his fiddle playing. Phil cooked meatballs in smoked chipotle sauce, a Mexican dish. They are both proficient cooks and recently were guests on the popular television show Ready Steady Cook so had plenty of funny stories to tell. The cooking did not distract from the music and they played a diverse selection of music quite different from their previous visit at the end of July. A large screen erected at the front of the stage with a camera operator focusing on the finer details allowed all the audience to see precisely what was cooking. Graham Bruce acted as comi chief and kept a watchful eye on the dishes as the celebrities performed. To finish the evening the food was tasted by the audience, a small portion to each and the overwhelming conclusion was extremely affirmative.





IMAGE 54 PHIL CUNNINGHAM AND ALY BAIN PREPARED TO COOK AND PLAY

On Friday the buffet was exquisite, a selection of local produce as never before seen. Every product of cuisine that is available locally was available. A three course meal with a selection of soups and starters followed by the main courses and rounded off with sweets that displayed the cooking talents of many in the community. All the dishes were prepared by local volunteers and the committee would like to express a sincere thank you to all those that helped. Local musicians Marty, John and Donnie supplied a range of music appropriate for the occasion and those that were able, after such a fill of food, graced the dance floor.

On Saturday the festival was drawn to a close with what must be the best and most talented young people currently in the Highlands. The Feis Chatabibh Ceilidh Trailers supported Dochas a five girl and one lad band from across Scotland with Gaelic Shetland and Irish influences. Both groups held the audience spellbound with their music. As a finale the Ceilidh Trailers joined Dòchas on stage

and gave an outstanding performance. There is little doubt that it will not be long before the talent of these groups is in very high demand. Something very special happened in Durness this weekend and those that participated and attended were treated to a unique experience of food and music at its best.

The final food and music festival in 2006 had local produce prepared and cooked to local recipes and was the central part of the Durness food festival. Held in the Durness village Hall, transformed into a banqueting hall for the event, a four course buffet for lovers of good quality food was on offer and some of the best food produced in North West was available. A band of volunteer helpers were involved in ensuring the evening ran smoothly and the occasion was declared a great success. Over 60 people attended the event which was followed by music from Golspie based musicians the three B's.

The amount of work and the commitment necessary to hold such an event became overwhelming. The experience gained laid the foundation for the Northern Lights John Lennon Festival.

## **Light Up a Life**

Highland Hospice September 2006

Representatives were in Durness discussing the involvement of the community in the Highland Hospice Light up a life scheme. This offers people the chance to remember friends or loved ones in a tangible way. Donations can be accompanied by a message which is included in the treasured dedication book. Each donation is represented by a symbolic light on a chosen Highland Hospice Christmas tree during the course of advent. Durness has the chance to join in with trees being lit in Skye, Lochcarron, Wick, Thurso, Fort William Granton on Spey and Inverness. The non-emotive service can be led by the Highland Hospice Chaplin or can be from the local church. The Community council were very supportive of the idea and are discovering the logistics involved and coordinating with the Highland Hospice. While in Durness chieftain of this year's Durness Highland Gathering Michael Mather presented the Linda McDonald with a cheque for over £900 raised to help the movement. Michael is passionate about the work carried out by the Hospice and has been active in raising this amount.

Light up a Life Dec 2006

Highland Hospice in conjunction with Community Council are holding a Light up a Life, an opportunity to dedicate a light on the Hospice light up a life tree, to any individual, group or cause. As well as honouring the memory of those who are no longer with us Light up a Life is also an opportunity to remember a person or people who are special to us in some way. The event will be held in Durness Village square on Monday 11 December at 6pm. This will be followed by refreshments in the village hall.

The 20 minute service which included the singing of 4 Christmas carols, a reading from the bible, the recital of a Burns poem and the switching on of the lights by local man Michael Mather was followed by refreshments. Light up a Life is a special event allowing people the opportunity to celebrate the life of a loved one. Everyone celebrating the life of a loved one in this way is entered in a special Book of Remembrance, which is kept permanently in the community.

## **Senior Citizen's Christmas Party**

Each year a full Christmas meal is provided with drinks and a party for all the over 65's in the parish. This has been a tradition for several years. The photo archive of Durness has images from 1966. An obituary in the Northern Times reads

*The death occurred on the 28<sup>th</sup>. December 1990 of Mr. Calum Macleod who was headmaster of Durness Primary School in the late 1960's. Mr. Macleod who had been a popular member of the community during his years in Durness was 90. He graduated from Glasgow University in 1924 and taught at Ghuroch High School, Valparaiso, Tynecastle School Edinburgh and Scourie Primary School before coming to Durness. He made frequent return visits to the village his final one last year.*

Mr. Calum Macleod initiated the Christmas Parties he enlisted the help of Richard Mackay (Dickie), Dr. Sandeman, Christy Campbell and Willy Campbell. From 1966 – 1967 inclusive these people plus Lady Rootes financed the parties. Many people helped by collecting and delivering the guests. Visiting artists gave their services without charge. Much has not changed over the years. The organisation has become established from a band of dedicated helpers and fund raising during the year. The event originally was held in Cape Wrath Hotel, in 1977 in the Sango Sands Oasis, 2001 in the new Village Hall and since the Smoo Cave Hotel.



Image from 1966

Back Row

Dr. Sandeman, Mr. Calumn Macleod, Mrs. Madge Campbell, Donnie Campbell (Rispond), Mrs. Sandeman, Robert Mackay, Hendry Macdonald, Donald Macdonald, Mrs. Campbell (Brivard)

Front Row

Mrs Hendry Macdonald,? Mrs. Fraser, Williamina Campbell, Mrs Margaret (Campbell) Morrison.

The senior citizens Lunch Club meets weekly on a Friday in Durness and one day during the week alternate between visits for lunch to Tongue and Kinlochbervie

IMAGE 55 SENIOR CITIZENS CHRISTMAS PARTY AT CAPE WRATH HOTEL 1966 IMAGE FROM 1966 DURNESS PICTURE ARCHIVE

### **Marty Mackay Memorial Cycle**

Martin Angus MacKay was born on the 15th April 1967, to Martin and Mary MacKay of Sarsgrum in Durness. He married Roberta Laurie in 1993. They were blessed with two sons, Martin and Murray, of whom he was immensely proud. Marty was a son, brother, husband, father and uncle, a popular man with many friends.

On leaving school in the summer of 1983, Marty was apprenticed to McCaughie's boatyard in Wick where he learned the skills carrying out masterful work in building and repairing boats as well as working with all manner of engines and things mechanical. He was a true craftsman capable of working with traditional and Modern materials to construct small boats for loch and sea fishing starting his own business in Durness.

At the age of 16 he began to play football for the Durness team which he would do for the next 26 years. Marty could not only play the guitar, but could sing, compose his own songs and music and inspire others to be musical too. He became a part of a leading Durness band 'Blue Ridge', a band which became well known and liked throughout the north. Marty was involved in many things and he understood the value and need for commitment to the Durness community to keep it what it is. He was in the Coastguard for twenty years, the Fire Brigade for ten. He was always involved with the Highland Gathering where he competed as well as helped and was a star of the local panto both on and off the stage. His willingness to help others stood out, whether it was to fix petrol pump at the shop at a moment's notice or start a failed engine. He was always obliging and helpful and he had the wonderful ability to galvanize others to help too.

Marty died from renal cancer on the 16<sup>th</sup>. April, the day after his 43<sup>rd</sup> birthday, at home in Bard Terrace, surrounded by family. His funeral at Durness Church of Scotland was possibly the biggest ever seen with an estimated 700 from all across the north attending.



IMAGE 56 MARTY MACKAY

His friends and Family want to ensure that Marty's life is celebrated and that other families put in this situation have the support that was shown when Marty was diagnosed and received his palliative care along with helping research into causes and treatments. Since Marty's death in 2010 each year in April a cycling event has taken place and money donated has distributed to good causes through a family established Memorial Charitable Fund to ensure donations and funds raised make a significant difference too many families in the Highlands during difficult and emotional times.

Report from the Northern Times May 2011

*On the 16<sup>th</sup> April Donald Morrison organised a sponsored cycle from Lairg to Durness a total of 57 miles in memory of Marty Mackay and in aid of Mari Curie cancer care. 42 cyclists from Inverness, Ross shire, Caithness and Sutherland started and completed the challenge. With a 10 am start all were safely in Durness by mid-afternoon first arrivals being Russell Mackenzie from Dornoch and Jim Cunningham from Brora. All levels of*

*capability participated and expressed explicitly as not being a race. The weather was kind with a head wind for about three quarters of the route. Food and drink were available at the half way stage at Achfary and welcomed refreshment at Guilin at the start of the home run. There were on-going celebrations at the hall after the event and this challenge is to be repeated again next year. The date and final amount raised has not yet been ascertained but will be announced as soon as all the donations and sponsorship money has been collected. Donald expresses sincere thanks to all those that helped to organise this event, took part and made a donation.*

### **Local Studies Group**

Has gathered information about all aspects of the people and the environment within the parish of Durness. Four files containing information gathered during Manpower Services commission project have given an insight into the changes since the project 20 years previous. Reports on Smoo Cave and other academic studies have been sourced, videos of various events are continually being made and added to a community collection, photographs and a building database were produced, and articles about Durness appearing in the Ambratach and NT articles have been scanned and databased. Event photograph albums are kept and photocopies and originals of various relevant Durness articles. A video of One year in Keoldale Farm a Millennium Photograph album of all the residents has been compiled and currently a Flora,

Fauna, and wildlife database is in construction. An Old photograph collection is constantly being added too and a Book Durness Past and Present was written and sold for community funds.

### **North West Field Group**

The Group was set up in Durness in 2000 to encourage and undertake local studies in the far North West. Although Durness based it does encompass Scourie and Kinlochbervie as the wider remit of Field Studies requires a bigger context in which to base research and investigation. The principal strengths of the group are archaeology, ornithology, and botany, but members have a range of interests. The group meets several times a year, occasionally has guest speakers, and organises field walks.

### **Gun Club**



IMAGE 57 MALCOLM MORRISON JACK MCPHERSON, ALEX MORRISON, DONNIE MACDOUGAL, JOHN MORRISON, EDDIE LAID, BILLY CAMPBELL, DUNCAN SHAW, WILLIAM CAMPBELL, RAYMOND MACKAY

The Gualin Gun club was formed with the main objective to foster and encourage the sport of clay pidgin shooting as a leisure pursuit, and to arrange and organize matches and competitions. The club is keen to get youths interested in the sport as they feel there is a lack of younger people having the opportunity to try and experience clay pidgin shooting. The club has secured a site at Lerin Beag as shooting field in April 2002 and has continued to develop by steady work on the site by laying down stands and erecting of trap houses. The club holds practice shoots and currently one main shoot annually. In March 2003 funding was approved from CASE enabling the club to purchase a state of the art trap, which has proved to be invaluable in helping to improve the standard of shooting. And will be great assets to the annual shoot in November.

Much of the work has been carried out in the 20 months by volunteers with a passion and drives to see clay pigeon shooting stay very much alive in the extreme north of Scotland. Clay Pigeon shooting is very popular and there are many accounts of local competitions and competitions between the armed services and local enthusiasts.

Shooting Champion 2007

Alex Morrison a local clay pigeon shooting enthusiast has won the Scottish North Area clay pigeon Championships. Alex was first in eighty competitors from north of Fort William and Inverness.

### **The Durness Gardening Group**

This group has the aims to promote gardening in the parish of Durness, both for individuals and the community in a harmonizing manner with habitats for wildlife, and have initiated an ambitious landscaping project on the grounds of the village hall working closely with local crafts people to incorporate wildlife and historical aspects of the townships. The Durness community garden has been entered into the Dynamic Place Awards- this is a prestigious range of Scottish awards set up to recognise projects of environmental regeneration significance. In 2002 the long running BBC television program Beech Grove Garden filmed an episode in Durness and was on air in the Beechgrove Garden on 22<sup>nd</sup>. August.

*“Jim McColl, Carole Baxter, Lesley Watson, and Carolyn Spray are not in the Beechgrove Garden in Aberdeen this week, they are all up in the far north of Scotland in Durness helping to finish off a new Community Garden for the next in this series of Community Garden Specials.*

*The Community Gardens are gardens created by the community for the community with a little help from the Beechgrove team. While Jim, Carole, Lesley and Carolyn are in Durness they will be helping to finish off the new garden but they will also be out and about in the Durness area trying to solve a few problems, answer a few questions, visit some local gardens and gardeners and as ever, best of all, glean some hints and tips from the locals.*

*A Community Garden is where the community design and build a garden by themselves for themselves with only a little help from the Beechgrove team. Durness is the most northerly community garden on mainland UK and is the most exposed the team have ever tackled surrounded by, stunning, edible scenery and the most challenging site for a garden.*

*Brimming with ideas and hope, Durness are tiny community who have already raised the money (£400,000) for and built their own Community Hall, which is in constant use and booked up months in advance. The garden is between the hall and the sea/cliff and will be as big or small as their imaginations. The group would like to create all sorts of shelter for people and wildlife and have already prepared an outline plan, which is made up of distinct rooms. One of the rooms features a "John Lennon Garden" as he spent many years in the community there in the Lennon family holiday cottage there.*

*Nick Dawson, the Project Manager of the new Pitlochry Theatre (Plant Collectors) Garden is the designer on this challenging project.*

*Like all small isolated communities each resident has several jobs as part of the community. They are ably led by the local headmaster and are joined in the group by locally based, well known sculptor the Danish born Lottie Glob, who will add her very unique touches to the garden. Lottie has already run classes with the local school children to create pottery tiles that will be used as a wall feature within the garden. The group has a particular eye for re-cycling because of their isolation and non-availability of materials that we take for granted. Nick has designed an intricate quite complicated garden for the community to build but there is no question that they will manage it. The design features a courtyard and plenty of imaginative*

*shelter. The planting will all be small in order for it to survive the almost constant windy conditions and the materials are all local. The Tree Festival initiative are donating trees that they reckon will survive in Durness (a place where there are normally very few trees).”*



IMAGE 58 PARTICIPANTS AND VOLUNTEERS FOR THE VILLAGE HALL GARDEN WITH BEECHGROVE

This is a community garden initiative, which aims to encourage people to identify and undertake an environmental improvement project in our local community. This scheme involves a variety of unusual and imaginative elements. The idea behind the scheme is to prove gardening is possible even in the most difficult location. The various areas of the site are being developed appropriately and the overall project includes a memorial garden to John Lennon – The most famous beetle who used to spend childhood holidays in the village – a memorial to the pre clearance townships, trees and windbreaks, paths and seating area, alpine beds, large rocks to provide shelter and a diverse selection of specific planting sites. The ceramic water feature and ceramic garden will be a specific area for sheltered and quite seating. This feature will be close to the hall and have no open water. The water will cascade from the fountain over the stones and be recycled by pump back to the fountain. This project will give public access to a garden in the area.

### **Football Club**

The football club develops football skills for all age groups in the community and wider area. Organises training and brings professional teams to the area organising training sessions and workshops.

Durness has fielded a regular football team since 1971 although football was played previously and occasionally, there was never enough men to supply a regular team prior to 1971. Formal records show a structured organisation since then. People can recall players and matches some 50 years ago. Games were played against Skerray, Alnaharra and other local teams. A fair amount of support has accumulated over the years. To have all the players strictly from Durness has not always been possible and at times, imports from other areas have played for the Durness team. The team has developed keeping the older more enthusiastic players on actively being involved in the management and administration. A mixture of ages ranging from fifteen to forty

meet on a Saturday afternoon, as any other amateur football match, where a friendly rivalry with constant vocal encouragement's are delivered for ninety minutes on the pitch with plenty of enthusiastic action. This is accompanied off the pitch from car horn blasting from the spectators as goals are scored, referees decisions are disputed and exciting and good moves are appreciated. Football is treated with commitment and dedication during the game but none or very little training and practice occurs. One or two of the team players encourage the young of Durness by holding a training session for the juniors and organising friendly matches.

During the years there has been times when the football has been little more than a frolic while at other times, as appeared in the 1997 season, the team was top of the league, playing in peak form and working ambitiously to succeed. The North West Sutherland Amateur Summer League includes seven further teams and along with being included for a few other trophies and cups the team has a home game and an away game alternate weeks with a free week approximately every month.



IMAGE 59 DURNESS WON THE LOCAL LEAGUE IN 2002

Much work has been carried out on the pitch over the years and is kept in a very reasonable condition. Sited beyond the Mace shop toward the coast in front of Shore Park, where the Durness Highland Gathering is held, it is a continual process to keep improving and the obvious gradient and centre dip are beginning to disappear. The shack, which served as changing rooms eventually, had gone past the state of repair and in January 1997, was demolished for the provision of modern club facilities. This brought new difficulties. Because the club was granted funding from the millennium for the provision of improved changing rooms certain criteria over and above what was requested had to be supplied. Thirty thousand pounds more for additional facilities were needed to ensure showers, referee room, etc. were made available. Solicitors had to be instructed, constitution prepared and ownership of the ground had to be clarified. The new facility was open in July 1997 with a football extravaganza. 12 five a side teams participated in the bi annual football extravaganza. Teams from around the northwest from as far as Thurso and Inverness, spent the day last Saturday in a knockout tournament. The winning team was Raven Dogs from Thurso. The day was completed with a dance in the village hall music supplied by local band blue ridge.

When Durness are playing at home the referee is a local man and the arrangements have been simple. In return for his services, an occasional bottle of whisky is accepted as remuneration. Currently the Durness strip is yellow and black. Sponsors K. Macrae and Sons Joiners are



clearly supported upon the chest and the all in one warm suits for substitutes and waiting players are clearly marked with the sponsors of Wm. Campbell Builders. The strip design and colour have changed often when new sponsors are procured. The Sango Sands Oasis has been a prominent sponsor in the past. A weekly sweepstakes, a collection from spectators and occasional fund-raising and donations with players meeting their own expenses are the main methods of meeting financial commitments.

### **Motor Club**

Set up by the youths for the youths after identifying a need for adolescent activities. Consultation with peers and after close community consultation with groups concerned they applied for funding to Princes Trust, CASE, CED, SIP. Worked through bureaucratic process of planning permission on their initiative and acquired a building from the estate. They re-roofed and fully equipped the workshop.

The list of groups and activities is not finite but those mentioned give a flavor. Many groups are formed for specific purposes which may only be pertinent to the moment, serve their purpose and disband. Others are for specific interest recreational, social, and political for a coherent approach to pursue a means.

### **The Calor Scottish Community of the Year Awards 2003**

The application was made through the community council on behalf of all the groups and current activities within in the village. After being short-listed in three categories representatives from the community were invited to Edinburgh for a formal lunch and presentation ceremony and were presented with first place for youth work in the community, highly commended for environment and commended for community life. Plaques were presented to be displayed and a total of £750 in prize money. Margaret Curran MSP Minister for Communities presented the awards. The application was made after a suggestion to the Development Group from Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise. Over one hundred entries were received from throughout the country for the Calor Scottish Community of the Year Awards 2003, which are organised in conjunction with the Association of Scottish Community Councils (ASCC), and supported by SEPA (Scottish Environment Protection Agency) and Scottish Business in the Community (SBC). Now in their sixth year, the awards aim to stimulate local people to take responsibility for their communities and enhance them for the common good. The Calor Scottish Community of the Year Awards were launched in 1998, and since then more than one third of all Scottish communities from the Borders to Shetland, and all the country's major urban areas have taken part.

In determining the outcome of the awards, the judges sought best practices within communities, which could be used as examples for other communities throughout Scotland. Commenting on the community's success Gavin Tomlinson Communications Manager of Calor Scotland said:

*"The young people of Durness are very involved in the community, and they are represented on Highland Youth Voice, an elected youth parliament, which helps to promote a positive attitude to the community's youth. They have also successfully set up and secured funding for a motor club for scrambling and quad bikes in consultation with the local community.*

*"There are a variety of activities available such as golf, football, badminton and archery, and many of the young people participate in these sports at competition level. The local primary school has an annual educational camping trip, and the youth club caters for all ages and interests, as well as working closely with Scotland Against Drugs to provide drug-free indoor and outdoor facilities. In addition, a drop-in centre offers a safe recreational leisure and learning facility.*

*"The community's environmental success stems from a commitment to self-reliance that has led to the community protecting and promoting both the natural environment and the historical and socially relevant built environment. In general, this small and remote community has a real sense of community life and is successful in catering for the local population as well as the tourists."*

As with small villages community groups come and go. Here is a sample collection of those that have been constituted and operated in Durness.

## Highland Gathering

An annual event that deserves a dedicated article is the Durness Highland Gathering which has been the main community event since 1970. In his opening address in 1993 Don Morrison stated that it is written in a chronical<sup>5</sup> “In 1830 the people of Durness Parish decided that one day each summer should be set aside for local people to enjoy games music and shinty”

An annual event usually held on the last Friday in July has all the trimmings of traditional Scottish Highland Games. Revived in 1970 after a break of approximately ten years. Difficulty was experienced in obtaining the cups and gold bar from the bank when they were deposited. Some members of the original committee were reluctant to sign over the trophies for a revival. The original gold bar Hugh Mackay Piping medal is in safe keeping and has been replaced with a mounted replica and engraved with the competition winner each year. The local shops and businesses with sponsors from a range of sources contribute towards the prize money, cups and shields for the competitions.



IMAGE 60 CHIEFTAINS PRESENT FOR THE YEAR 2000 DURNESS HIGHLAND GATHERING

The Gathering always used to be referred to as the Sports and have developed from local people competing to an event when old friends, relatives, and natives of Durness return and meet up. Athletes from all over come to participate. In 1914, the Sports can be recollected as being held at Achins in September. In An account from 1955 originally by Wm. Morley Hames vice convener of Sutherland there is mention of a Highland Gathering Committee in Durness. Christie Campbell games chieftain in 1977 said that the early games had been held on ground behind Mathers shop. Evidently for around 177 years at the turn of the century the Durness games have been going on in some shape or form and at a few different locations around Durness. Since 1970, the Gathering has been held in the present field, Shore Park, beyond the football pitch. There can be little doubt that traditional Games of agility and strength have been practiced in the Highlands from very early times. Durness Highland Gathering is a small event with all the trimmings.

The committee meets in January when a president is appointed and a chieftain is selected. Sometimes a celebrity, someone with Durness connections or a local person and this appointment is a local honour. On the day of the Gathering, the parade of officials, chieftain,

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<sup>5</sup> unidentified

and competitors leaves the Village Square at twelve noon following the pipe band to the game's field to declare the games open.

Entry to all competitions are free and open to everyone no matter which country you come from. The Durness Highland Gathering Association are members of the Scottish Highland Games Association and registered to accept both amateurs and professionals. If you do not wish to compete just come and watch and maybe meet up with old friends or make new ones. This is a day not to be missed when touring this beautiful part of the Highlands of Scotland. There is much to offer in the way of a Scottish pipe band, highland dancers, field, track, and heavy events.

### **The Chieftains**

- 1970 Angus Macpherson of Achany M.B.E.
- 1971 George Y Mackie C.B.E. D.S.O. D.F.C
- 1972 Mr. Addison F. McCoubrey M.B. Ch.B. O.P.H
- 1973 Colonel A.M. Gilmour OBE M.C
- 1974 Mr. Angus MacPherson of Achany M.B.E.
- 1975 F.G. Armstrong Chief Ex. Highland Regional Council
- 1976 Mr. Charles Mackay
- 1977 Mr. Christie Campbell
- 1978 Julia Mackenzie Strathpeffer
- 1979 Mr. Gordon Burr Tongue
- 1980 Mr. Norman McAskill Lochinver
- 1981 Dr Sandeman, Durness
- 1982 Mr. John Mackay
- 1983
- 1984 Mr. Joseph Mackay Melness
- 1985 Mrs. Dottie J Mackay, Parkhill Hotel Durness
- 1986 Mr. L Montgomery Moiraville Durness
- 1987 Mrs. Madge Campbell Atlantic View Durness
- 1988 Mr. Charlie Simpson Wick
- 1989 Mr Fraser Wilson Dornoch
- 1990 Mr. Charlie O'Brien Strathnaver
- 1991 Mr. Colin Campbell Fochabers Moray
- 1992 Mr. Iain Anderson
- 1993 Mr. Don Morrison
- 1994 Mrs. Lelia Mackenzie Achriesgill
- 1995 Mr. W H Morrison, Durness
- 1996 Dr. Winifred M Ewing
- 1997 Mr. Ken MacRae Durness
- 1998 Dr George Sanderson Durness
- 1999 Mr. A Robertson, Durness
- 2000 Mr. Iain Keith
- 2001 Mrs. Janette Mackay Strathy West
- 2002 The Rt.Hon. Lord MacLennan of Rogart
- 2003 John Ridgway Ardmore
- 2004 Jim McCall MBE Beechgrove Garden
- 2005 Ally Bain and Phil Cunningham
- 2006 Michael Mather Durness
- 2007 Willie Morrison
- 2008 Catherine Jackson

- 2009 Lachlan Ross
- 2010 Mrs. Iris Mackay
- 2011 Angus Ballie
- 2012 Ronnie Lansley
- 2013 Jill & Graham Bruce
- 2014 Kenny MacRae
- 2015 Anne & John Mackenzie
- 2016 Margaret MacRae
- 2017 Mary Mackay
- 2018 David Morrison
- 2019 Frances Gunn
- 2020/21 (*COVID Pandemic*)
- 2022 Donald Campbell, Corps of Royal Engineers (RE)



IMAGE 61 HIGHLAND GATHERING OF CHIEFTAINS 2002

## **Celebrations**

This is a short note of organised celebrations for specific events.

### **Queens Golden Jubilee**

The Youth Club and senior citizens celebrated and commemorated the Queens golden Jubilee on Monday with a buffet lunch. The lounge of the village hall was decorated in union jacks and the children mingled among their guests and discussed the changes that have taken place over the fifty years. Samples of pre decimal coins and the value along with a telegram from the Queen to congratulate Edith Rodgers on her diamond-wedding anniversary were on show. About 40 senior citizens and twenty-five children took part in the event.

### **Millennium**

#### Photographic Record

Photographs all people living and working in the parish of Durness are being taken and compiled into a millennium photographic album.

#### Smoo Cave Party

Two small beacon bonfires marked the entrance to Smoo Cave for the start of millennium celebrations on Hogmanay. As darkness fell the cave was lit with over 100 candle lights. For just over a couple of hours family of Durness and visitors heard music from John and Marty, spooky stories from Graham Bruce, lit sparklers and ate barbecue beef.

### **Standing Stones**

Stones Required 21<sup>st</sup>. February 2000

It is hoped that work can be started imminently on the Millennium Cairn and Maze at Lerinbeg. People are being asked to help with the acquisition of local stone. Any donation would be appreciated from one stone to represent a household to anyone with a load wishing to dispose of a broken dyke, tumbled building or similar.

27<sup>th</sup> March

The Cairn and Maize at Lerinbeg is ready to have the concrete founds laid. David Campbell and Robbie Mackay are dealing with this aspect and Dave Goulder, the dry sane dyke specialist is to visit this month to build the cairn. Kenny MacRae will be digging out the car-parking lay-by. Final decisions about wording for an information stone are still under discussion. The maize never materialised.

10/4/2000. The Standing stone being prepared by Neil Fuller and the junior youth club and school children has been ordered from Caithness.

17<sup>th</sup>. July 2000

Work is progressing well with local stone mason Neil Fuller and the children of the community in producing a lasting commemoration of the millennium. The four metre high stone of Caithness slab to be erected and surrounded with small satellite stones individually designed by the children is to be sited on Keoldale Green. The project being arranged between the youth club school and community council should be able to be completed sometime in August. A meeting on Keoldale green is being arranged for all interested parties to discuss and decide on the final site. The planning authority has been informed and the standing stone in scripted with a Celtic design is not subject to planning permission.

4<sup>th</sup> June 2001

The millennium stone carved by local stonemason Neil Fuller was erected at Keoldale Green last Friday. After the first attempt last December when the original length of Caithness slab broke this creation was fitted on site without a hitch. Assisted by Kenny Macrae and Sarah, Neil's wife, the stone carved with a Celtic cross will eventually be accompanied by a display of smaller satellite stones. This will be accomplished after giving the standing stone time to settle. The smaller stones have been designed by the children of the primary school on the theme of the Durness environment.

### **VE Day**

The 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VE Day will be celebrated in Durness with a service and wreath laying ceremony on Sunday the 8<sup>th</sup>. May at the war memorial in the village square. A small crowd assembled just before ten o'clock to observe a minutes silence at the village green war memorial. Graham Bruce in his role of session clerk to the Church of Scotland gave a short well-expressed speech and offered a prayer to mark the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of victory in Europe after the Second World War. Ex-service man Don Campbell laid a wreath on behalf of the community. Formal representation from the local fire service session officer Hugh Morrison and Coastguard officer Alex Morrison were in attendance.

### **Annular Eclipse**

The 31<sup>st</sup>. May 2003 is the opportunity to see an annular eclipse. It is predicted that if the weather is kind it should prove to be pretty spectacular. In the northern latitudes of Scotland the Sun rises very early and this date is only 3 weeks away from midsummer. If you choose Durness to observe this phenomena one of the best sites, the eclipse will start at 2:51:42 am, the sun would rise at 3:24 am so the start of the eclipse would not be seen and the sun would rise with the moon already eating into the sun. Mid eclipse and hence the maximum eclipse would occur at 3:47:06 am 23 minutes after the sunrise and be at a latitude of 1.4 degrees above the horizon. The sun is approx. 0.5 degrees across so the sun will be three solar diameters above the horizon at this point. The moon will completely be within the suns disc for 2 minutes 8 seconds. Finally the eclipse will end at 4:44:36 and the sun will be entire once more.

Early in the morning on Saturday 31<sup>st</sup>. May 2003, 4.30am, the moon will pass in front of the sun but will not quite cover its entire face and will leave a golden halo round the rim leaving to the observer a cold ring of fire otherwise known as an annular eclipse. As soon as the sun rises above the horizon the moon will pass across it No sooner will it be dawn than it will appear as dusk! The ring will last for 2 minutes and the sun will become a crescent. Anyone in the north of Scotland will be able to view this phenomenon with Durness being the best site, somewhere with a sea view. Accommodation providers are reporting a succession of advanced bookings for the event. Professional and armature astronomers are coming north. This is the first Annular Eclipse over Scotland since 1921 and there won't be another until 2093. It is a once in a lifetime opportunity to see this occurrence.

With a large arrival of people to the village there was nobody that could be disappointed. The accommodation providers had been reporting bookings for months in advance and the village had been inundated with enquires about the best spots for watching. From Faraid Head to Ceannabainne and excursions taking people to Cape Wrath there were people at every available situation. Passing places all along the coast road and car parks overlooking the sea were full. Nobody can recall the village ever being as busy.

As dawn broke and the timed neared the appointed hour the sky slightly reddened and although there was clear skies inland the horizon was levelled with a thin strip of horizontal cloud. For the first few minutes there appeared to be no more to watch than the start of a regular good sunrise. The cloud seemed to separate and the sight of the moon eclipsing the sun started to

appear in a spectacular vision and for a moment the whole area was standing motionless in a breath-taking sight as the predicted series of events occurred. This happened after a night when streams of cars had constantly been arriving in Durness. The night was calm, breathless of wind and warm. Comparison could be made to a summer's day in the dark but the night never really got dark as the dusk and dawn merged and intermingled together. The atmosphere around the village was amazing like a massive festival with small groups congregating playing music, having barbeques and dancing by the light of small beach bonfires. An estimate of actual numbers has varied from two and a half to just over five thousand in and around Durness. A more diverse mixture of people would be hard to find. The dedicated amateur and professional astronomer, star gazers, spiritualists, Druids, the typical "anorak" and those with a curiosity of the natural phenomena. Photographers and film crews mingled with people from all over the world. It has been a long time since Durness has seen such a large number of people at the same time and almost all stayed around for the weekend with a slow emigration south after what was agreeable a superb occasion. As the village emptied it was noted on how well behaved and tidy the visitors had been.

### **The Doing**

A week before the wedding they had to undergo a tradition that is certainly being upheld in Durness called "the doing". Robbie and Fiona were gently secured in a trailer, pulled by a tractor with cars leading the way, horns blaring and lights flashing, driven to all quarters of the village. People greeted the entourage and emptied all kinds of concocted compounds from flour and water to quite revolting looking mixtures about the couple.



## Music

Songs and music are a fundamental part of Gaelic culture. Gaelic songs are also one of the most recognisable aspects of Gaelic culture. Songs served an important function in traditional Gaelic society. The topics covered by Gaelic songs vary from politics to love, from spinning to religion. The biggest Gaelic singing event in the year is The Royal National Mod, which is held in a different part of Scotland every year. Thousands attend the competitions, concerts and ceilidhs which constitute the Mod and it is a good opportunity to find out more about Gaelic culture and singing. Many of today's best known Gaelic singers are former winners of singing competitions at the Mod. Today the popularity of Gaelic singing attracts many learners to the language.

Songs served a very important function in Gaelic society. Until the 20th century there was no distinction between songs and poems since all poems were intended to be sung. Before 1700, a clan chief would normally have had a hereditary bard in his retinue. It would be the bard's role to compose songs in praise of the chief. Songs were also the means by which important information (e.g. history, genealogy, legends etc.) was passed on to successive generations.

Long ago, as in English-speaking society, the majority of Gaelic speakers could not read or write their own language. Information and knowledge were therefore passed on orally. This required, and usually produced, an impressive memory. Even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century some Gaelic speakers could accurately memorise a song 40 verses or more in length, after hearing it just once!

Many non-professional poets emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Although mostly well-educated, these poets were free from the constraints of the hereditary bards and the subject matter of the songs expanded to include new topics. Song making was not the preserve of the scholarly in Gaelic society. There are work songs which were composed to accompany everyday activities such as spinning, waulking, milking and rowing. The rhythm of these songs is meant to compliment the rhythm of the work being done. We also have *puirt à beul* or mouth music, songs in which the rhythm of the words is meant to replicate the rhythm of certain dance tunes. Some of these songs may have been composed to assist fiddlers, and occasionally pipers, in learning a tune. Others may have been composed as a means of remembering tunes when the playing of the bagpipes or fiddle were proscribed or frowned upon. There are also religious songs in the form of hymns and psalms. Gaelic psalm-singing in particular has a very distinct style and sound.

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed Gaelic poetry became increasingly detached from Gaelic song making. As poetry evolved into a separate art form the number of Gaelic songs being composed decreased. As a result, the majority of Gaelic songs which are sung nowadays are old compositions. There is a wide range of bodies dedicated to traditional music including pipe bands, accordion and fiddle clubs, folk clubs, traditional dance societies in all their rich diversity, many Highland Games and the wide range of local festivals and events travelling bring a blend of classical and contemporary drama.

Three instruments figure strongly in traditional music bagpipe, fiddle and harp, the latter having enjoyed a revival since the 1970s, form the backbone of today's Gaelic music. The accordion has a recent popularity. The clan chieftain would frequently maintain as part of his household a harper, piper, or fiddler to entertain him and his guests.

**Harp:** The harp had a close connection with Gaelic poetry, the harper frequently accompanying the poet in his recitation.

**Bagpipe:** By the 17<sup>th</sup> century the bagpipe had become more popular than the harp. The earliest historical references to bagpipes in the Gaidhealtachd date from the mid-sixteenth century, and from about 1700, piping 'colleges' began to appear; teaching families included the MacKays of Gairloch, the Rankins of Mull, and the McCrimmon's of Skye.

**Fiddle:** Fiddle music became very popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, especially for dancing when tunes were played in sets of two strathspeys and a reel.

A very brief framework can only be given as over the years one hears many stories of people who were accomplished musicians and impromptus sing and playing would start as people visited to ceilidh.



IMAGE 63 MARTY MACKAY AND JOHN MORRISON CARBRECK

Many excellent musical occasions with local and professional musicians have been heard in the village hall. Marty Mackay and John Morrison Carbreck a local duo of guitar and accordion provided music for many celebratory occasions. Katy and Donnie MacDougal, Katy an accomplished accordionist and Donnie a talented musician able to play a wide range of musical instruments also played at many concerts, dances and ceilidhs. Katy started The Ceol Clo Mor music group which operated from 1998 to circa 2004 encouraging people of all



IMAGE 62 A VERY EARLY LINE UP OF BLUERIDGE. PHOTO BY JIM A JOHNSTONE. IAN JAMES CAMPBELL, ALEX MORRISON, PETE KEDDIE, DONNIE MACDOUGAL

levels and ages to learn musical instruments. Blue Ridge, a very popular dance come pop country band covering many of the hits of the time played throughout Mackay Country. The line-up has changed over the years with Donnie MacDougal and Ian James being the longest serving members. Alex Morrison Carbreck, Daren Mackay, Marty Mackay and Malcolm “Shifty “ Morrison have all played a part.

## **Concert Events**

### **Feis Chataibh ceildh Trail. 25th July 2005**

The second occasion of the Feis Chataibh Ceilidh Trail was in Durness village hall last Thursday night. The ten girl’s, average age between 16 and 17 years, performed amazingly with a full two part concert that included jigs, reels and all categories of music. They all played a selection of instruments fiddles, accordions, pipes, whistles, and keyboards and sang some beautiful Gaelic songs. The whole performance was presented in a professional and practiced approach, hard to believe that these young people from the North West Highlands were so young. In a time that many are concerned with keeping culture and traditions alive and creating new ways to present the historical significance, it was extremely disappointing that only a very few people turned up to experience this event. It was poor indeed that the obvious effort that these young people had put into the preparations for the performance was not recognised. The skill and dedication of the young ladies had to be seen and heard to be appreciated and it can only be hoped that other audiences throughout Sutherland are far larger than that in Durness. Those that did attend were treated to an exceptional evening of music, skills of young people plus highland culture and were very much appreciative of the group’s dedication to making those present, enjoy the night.

### **Phil and Ally concert**

February 2006 Durness hall was packed with an enthusiastic and appreciative audience. As part of the Blas Music festival Durness Hall committee promoted to groups of musicians. First on stage were Donald Black and Malcolm Jones, Donald is an outstanding harmonica player and provided a display of his talent in a selection of tunes accompanied by the quite but superbly talented Malcolm of Runrig fame. For the third year running Phil Cunningham and Aly Bain played a selection of music, some from their new album, and gave what many said was their best performance. For a finale the four musicians gathered together on stage and gave a much appreciated musical treat of skill and high technical ability.

### **Ùrachadh August 2007**

Last Thursday evening five exceptionally gifted musicians and singers told the story of North West Sutherland through music, song, poetry and visuals. Ùrachadh composed of James Graham, Gaelic singer who comes from Lochinver, Rhona Sutherland on violin guitar from Dalchalm, near Brora, James Ross Piano from Wick, The Strathy-born piping instructor Carol-Anne Mackay played bagpipes, accordion whistles and Catriona MacLeod, Gaelic singer who plays accordion and whistles from Strathnaver who conceived the idea and has spent two years bringing the concept to fruition. The music was faultless as it brought the film running constantly in the background to life. The audience was taken on a journey through half a millennium of the heritage of Assynt and Mackay Country, A unique and remarkable experience.

## Tourism

Being involved in the tourism industry in a small but necessary way to earn a living I observed the frequent and changing demands of tourists to the area. For many visiting Durness and surrounds was an annual event and they returned for what the area offered, generally a lack of being commercially developed allowing visitors to find their own recreation in an environment not transformed for holiday makers. They came prepared for the environment and took midges and weather as part of the experience. At various times unaccustomed holidaymakers looked for and expected high end accommodation and guest houses. Bed and breakfast establishments had to adapt and offer on-suite facilities. The days of visitors joining in with the family croft life were disappearing. Self-catering became popular also with expectations of high quality and facilities. Durness and around was not a destination as such for many tourist more a "pit stop." As roads improved and the North Highlands became more accessible, within an hour or two from Inverness visitor numbers and road traffic increased although very few leave the roads to explore the scenery they admire as travelling through. The North Coast 500 was in early embryonic stages when I departed but was becoming obvious that with aggressive marketing and arguments for economic benefits for some was going to alter the different requirements of the visitor.

The history of tourism in Scotland is essentially a literary one. The first "travelogue" of Scotland, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* by Martin, was published in 1698. It provided the inspiration for others to record their journey. Geographical collections relating to Scotland made by Walter MacFarlane in 1767 mostly with reference to hunting grounds "*In Durines, where it inclines to the south-west of Dirimoir, there is a celebrated hunting-ground, commonly called Parwe very famous throughout the whole kingdom on account of the attractions of the chase.*" From the late eighteenth century onwards increasing personal wealth meant that travel was no longer limited to the aristocracy. From this time to the present day, Scotland, especially the Highlands, has been associated with romantic wilderness.

The tourist, says Blacks Guide for 1863, must not look for woodland beauties, but he will find himself compensated by the severe grandeur of the majestic mountain forms by the unbroken stillness of the large inlets of the sea or of the freshwater lakes and the impressive altitude of its abrupt and rugged seaward and cliffs. The Inns and all parts of Sutherland Shire are in most cases excellent, clean, comfortable and frequently provided with unexpected accessories of progress in the arts of life and very reasonable accommodation for families and gentlemen.

Sutherland Shire, says the abridged statistical history of 1853, was the last district in Scotland, which was subject to the improvements of modern times the beginning of the present century. It was a country living in nearly the same condition as it had exhibited centuries before, and in many respects shut off from the progress of that civilization which had been so beneficially spread over the rest of Britain. To this day, let us realise the larger part of this great county of 1800 square miles has no railways few bus routes but with the most infrequent and inconvenient services. There are no sea ports at which passenger vessels call, and there is no airport to get from one valley to another by public transport can take anything from 12 hours to two days.

Small and wildly scattered as the population of Sutherland is it as shown in the past 30 years, a sharper decline as that of any other mainland county, and only Banff has a smaller proportion of people in the 15 to 65 year old age group. There is only one burgh, the little cathedral town of Dornoch and that followed by Brora with a population of just over 1000. There are no inhabited islands today, although it recently as 1931 Roan or Ellan na Roan at the mouth of the Kyle of Tongue supported more than 60 people. This is one of the loneliest regions in Western Europe. Over vast tracts of country. As far as the eye can see, there is neither human being nor

human habitation, often not even an animal to be observed. Yet, there is nothing in these islands to equal the scenery of this region.

Tourism began in the nineteenth century under the influence of writers such as Sir Walter Scott. Scott is credited with the invention of clan tartans and the modern tourist industry. King George IV visited Edinburgh in 1822, presenting Scott with the opportunity to portray the grandeur of Scotland's past and present. He was in charge of preparations for the visit and hit upon a scheme of asking the main clan chiefs to dress "in the masquerade of the Celtic Society". The visit was a great success with the city awash in kilts, tartans, and bagpipes. The King himself wore a kilt. However, before this date clans (and remember the clan system was only in existence for a relatively short period of time and its purpose was to provide fighting units) had distinguished themselves by, for instance, wearing a cockade, or heather etc. The tartan industry grew strongly under the Victorians and continues to be a defining element of Scottishness throughout the world. Tourism is now a major industry employing people in every part of the country, twelve months of the year. It generates a great deal of wealth but also an enormous amount of garbage. As in war, truth is often the first casualty. Providing peace and quiet recreation for the rest of Britain was a familiar role for the Scottish Highlands. There had been early travelers, like Boswell and Johnstone in 1773 but not until the nineteenth century that visitors came in significant numbers to holiday in the area.



IMAGE 64 NORTHWEST SUTHERLAND IS VAST AND DIVERSE IN SCENIC BEAUTY

North West Sutherland is one of the last great scenic secrets of Europe. It is a vast wilderness of extraordinary mountains set in ancient rock, moorland and heather-clad hill. It is where you will find the highest sea cliffs, the highest waterfalls, and many other extremes of the natural world. A spectacular coast road weaves its way around numerous sea lochs and mountains. It is a wonderful journey known as the West Highland Tourist Route (before the North Coast

500) which takes you through a traditional crofting landscape and provides a fantastic insight into the nature of life on the edge of Europe.

The northern coast offers a rich variety of scenery, from tall storm-swept cliffs to gentle sandy bays. The interior offers equally dramatic contrasts between low-lying windswept bogs and dramatic mountain peaks. Fishing boats shelter in the area's many harbours and fish farm cages are tucked into sheltered corners. Numerous nature reserves protect the moorland's rich plant and animal life, with sea birds to the fore. It is also one of the few places in the UK with some remote pockets of the Scottish Highlands yet to be explored. This is indeed a land of contrasts, from the austere majesty of the mountains to the subtle undulations of the valleys, and from the dramatic cliffs to the tranquillity of the most beautiful and peaceful white sandy bays and beaches.

This is wild country and beautiful, don't rush it. This is the land of the midnight sun and of glorious sunsets when the entire western horizon is bathed in glory as the sun dips and is quenched in the waters of the Atlantic. The rugged grandeur of this area is beautiful with an overwhelming abundance of wildlife all around and is sparsely populated. There is an ever-changing light and a powerful sky, breath-taking expanse with dramatic and diverse changes. During long summer hours of daylight there is a radiant illumination and the other extreme of hours of darkness with vast starry skies in winter.

To sustain an economic stability the area has become more dependent on tourists and Durness is no exception. From May through to September visitors from all over the world venture north to the spectacular and rugged scenery. Durness is a natural stopping place on a route around the north coast. I left Durness as the North Coast five hundred was becoming popular and many of the issues that arose were covered in the press and various internet sites. I have no intention of examining the specific scheme here as my experience would not be sufficient. At the early stages I was called by the Press and Journal which happened occasionally for a comment and I explained that the area lacked the infrastructure to cope, their article described me as the *lone dissenter*.

The present day settlement pattern is essentially a coastal one, with few habitations away from the coast. Tourism, in terms of direction of tourist movement, and availability of accommodation, is rigidly controlled by both these factors. The main arteries of flow are the north and west coast roads, with comparatively little inland penetration, while the existing nucleated or semi-nucleated settlements have developed as the main centres of hotel and bed and breakfast accommodation.

Durness has very few old reports of being used as a holiday destination but old writings from about 1700 mention good hospitality at the inn in Durness on travels around Sutherland. This Inn stood in the village square and was burned down in 1908. Many of these travels are accounts of bird and wildlife. Fishing and shooting has always been popular. As early as 1808, a special guidebook was advertised in the Inverness newspaper regarding visiting and holidaying in the Highlands in general, but the familiar role was of providing peace and recreation.

Before 1965 the tourist industry had been left pretty much to its own devices. In the twenties and thirties, there was practically no tourist industry. In Durness, there was the Cape Wrath Hotel that dealt primarily with the fishing and shooting fraternity. These were mainly the landed gentry from the south. This hotel was the only licensed premises in the area. The Parkhill Hotel took in guests during the summer and there were three or four houses that were known as boarding houses and catered for a few summer visitors. The majority of tourists travelled

from the south by train to Lairg and the daily mail bus to Durness. During the war years 1939-1945, the only persons visiting were connected with the war.

After the war and into the fifties tourism started to get under way. People were becoming slightly more prosperous and some families owned their own motor car. Overseas visitors started to appear, unknown in this area in pre-war years. After the war, most of the children in Durness went barefoot for almost all of the year. There seemed to be a milder climate. The only footwear the majority of the locals were used to would be heavy boots, built to last. When visitors arrived from the city, they were immediately noticeable by the sandals and more casual footwear. These items were much longed for especially among the young girls of Durness. They were a source of bitter feelings of jealousy and rivalry.

As the fifties passed away the swinging sixties brought an influx of visitors. In 1969 the Highlands and Islands Development Board sighted that "Tourism will develop successfully only if local tourist associations are organised on a strong professional basis." Frequently a grievance about the Highlands being marketed as one destination is aired. A report written in 1987 indicates that tourism in the late 1960's was mainly made up of wealthy English visitors who came for the fishing and shooting out of peak season to take advantage of the quiet period. During the early 1970's, tourism was very big. The Craft Village was flourishing and predictions were being offered about expansion.

In 1994, a geological display featuring the rocks of North West Sutherland was erected outside the Information Centre that caused local consternation. The massive stones appeared without any local consultation and although have proved very popular with much interest they have never had any kind of interpretive information.

Norther Times 1994

*"The assortment of large boulders which have sprung up recently next to the Tourist information Centre has sparked a number of theories as to their purpose. They are neither a copy of the Callanish Stone Circle or examples of rock from a super quarry but part of an exhibit into the interpretation of the geology of NW Sutherland. Financed by Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise the display has been provided by the Orcadian Stone Company from Golspie. Durness Community Council recently had the standing stones of Sangomore as top of the agenda, members supported the local view that the stones were obtrusive and inappropriate to the site. Contact has been made to David Richardson of the Tourist Board and developments are awaited."*



IMAGE 65 THE STONES OF SANGOMORE

### **The Stones of Sangomore by Dottie Mackay**

*Even in those modern "High-Tec" times, we still don't understand,  
The measuring of the Standing Stones that grace our ancient land,  
But now to add to the great mystery, of those monuments of yore,*

*Comes the miraculous appearance of 'The Stones of Sangomore.'*

*Now while to simple crofting folk they may seem a costly blunder,  
There's little doubt in years to come, experts will gaze in wonder,  
But as they earnestly debate the When?, The why?, The How?  
They'll be just as B——y baffled as the folk who live here now.*

*Some talk of devil worship, and Druid Rituals in the nude,  
And fear the stones will bring decline in moral rectitude,  
But when asked Old John the Crofter said "Och I've seen it all before,  
Did it myself when I was young, chase many a bird, round the rocks of Sangomore"*

*The Anti Quarry folk are happy, for its better far they say,  
To see new rocks being imported than the old ones taken away,  
But their opponents smile, and take the view, that from the Sango Site,  
Ian Wilson can have loads of stones with no need to dynamite.*

*Now Iris and Dotty are both bound to "Have it Made"  
As they sell their "Sango Souvenirs" to a growing tourist trade,  
And as Colin Coventry escorts folk around, he'll state it in his view,  
That the Stones hold much more magic than the famous "Cave of Smoo."*

*When the "Top Brass of N.A.T.O." decide to hold an exercise,  
They'll be danger for' Low Flying Jets' that streak across our skies,  
For where before they saw Meall nan Cra, and the Hill of Ceannabeinne,  
Its now the Stones of Sangomore that will fill the radar screen.*

*The collies from each croft around will gather at the site,  
And the "Inviting Stones of Sangomore" will view with great delight,  
And when nature calls our canine friends will bark aloud in glee,  
For a stone comes in very handy in a land without a tree!*

*A local crofter who's been known to take a dram or two,  
May shake his head at what he sees as he staggers home from Smoo,  
Where he used to see pink elephants, his befuddled brain will find,  
Great heaps of rocks at Sangomore, when he's stoned out of his mind.*

*There's a worry over graffiti, and what some lager -drinking lout,  
May spray made words on -" Rural Framework"- or "Keep White Settlers Out'  
But if the hooligans won't listen to the save our "Save our Stones Appeal"  
Then we'll have to get security from the "Fence at Balnakeil'*

*Archaeologists, in future years will ponder o'er the site  
And use carbon dating methods on the heaps of seagull sh—e  
Then scrape away the moss and lichen to decipher words beneath,  
That say "There's free drams at the Oasis if you vote for Francis Keith"*

*Some say there's no need to go to see the Coliseum in Rome,  
Or to travel out to Egypt when we've got pyramids at home,  
But local cynics disagree, and want the stones put back,*



*And denounce poor David Richardson and Invergordons Jamie Jack*

*But the Tourist Board is happy, and say with stones like these,  
There's no need to visit Callanish in the far off Hebrides  
And Orkney's famous Standing Stones, the tourists will ignore,  
And flock to Scotland's new Stonehenge, The Stones of Sangomore.*

### **Tourist Information Centre**



IMAGE 66 DURNESS TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRE

In 2021 Durness is well furnished with a wide range of accommodation providers. One hotel, a camp site, a diverse selection of self-catering and bed and breakfasts.

This area may not offer many “attractions” in the theme-park, tour bus, sense of the word, but you will find that Durness and Mackay Country is enough of an attraction in itself. It is a paradise for all walkers, climbers, bird-watchers, historians, naturalists, and Scotland-lovers of every kind. Visit and you may very well feel as though you have gone back in time. The empty lochs, vast skies and sprawling moorland have not changed in centuries.

The interpretative panels for the interior exhibition of the Tourist Information Centre were renewed and updated and the appliqué wall hangings by the children of Durness primary school were hung in a purposely-manufactured display case. The opening gradually increased from a few hours for a couple of months in the year to opening from mid-march to mid-October six days a week and seven days a week in June July and August. Around twenty eight thousand visitors are counted at the Information Centre in 1994 rising from twenty one thousand six hundred in 1989. In 1996, thirty four thousand people were counted. In 2019 the building was closed and sold. The Tourist Information Centre was built at Sangomore in Durness in 1985. A caravan was sited in the village square prior to that for tourist information.

Visitor profile data is not available for the Durness area specifically.

### **Face-to-face visitor survey findings**

In August 2007, Rowan Tree Consulting undertook a survey to gather information on visitors to Durness, visitors’ views on the existing interpretation at the Durness Visitor Centre, and how to improve the experience of visiting the Centre. The face-to-face surveys were undertaken in and around the TIC over 5 days. In total, 60 visitors were surveyed.

It should be noted that the results give a “snapshot” of the profile of visitors over the survey period and for this reason we have highlighted any major differences between our survey findings and the findings of the Highlands Visitor Survey 2002.

The results can be summarised as follows:

**Origin of visitors:** The survey findings indicated that visitors to Durness Tourist Information Centre in August typically.

- Are likely to be from overseas (60%), particularly continental Europe (14% of those surveyed were from Germany, 8% from Italy and Switzerland and 6% from France).
- If from the UK (40%), are likely to be from England (26%). (26% were from England and 12% from Scotland).

*Note: The Highlands Visitor Survey found that 80% of visitors were from the UK.*

**Age of visitors:** the survey found that visitors are fairly likely (43%) to be aged between 25-34 years old (17%) or 35-44 years old (26%). Over 55s accounted for 18% of visitors.

*Note: The Highlands Visitor Survey found that 35% of visitors were aged 25-44 years, and that over 55s accounted for 43% of all visitors, suggesting that the profile of visitors to Durness is younger than for Sutherland and Caithness as a whole.*

**Visit profile:** Visitors surveyed:

- were typically on holiday away from home (100%)
- travelling with a friend, relative or partner (58%) i.e. in a group of two. In all, 70% were travelling alone or in a group of two people, compared with a corresponding figure of 56% in the Highlands Visitor Survey.
- 13.7% of those surveyed had children aged under 18 in their party.

**Main reason for visit:** The main reason people cited for visiting Durness was for general sightseeing (90%) with many visiting Durness as part of a tour around the North West Coast of Scotland. This figure of 90% is exactly the same as the corresponding Highlands Visitor Survey, and reinforces the fact that very few visitors have been influenced to visit the area as a result of a strong interest in its natural and cultural heritage.

**Activities/interests:** Data from the survey indicates that visitors to Durness:

• are likely to go for short, low-level walks of 2-8 miles (55%); watch birds and /or wildlife (40%); buy gifts and souvenirs (35%) or visit a museum/ historic building/ archaeological site (33%). Corresponding figures from the Highlands Visitor Survey were 51%, 23%, 23%, and 45% respectively. This suggests that, in comparison to visitors to Sutherland as a whole, visitors to Durness are:

- Marginally more likely to go for short walks.
- Much more likely to watch birds and/or wildlife.
- Less likely to buy gifts and souvenirs.
- Less likely to visit historic/archaeological sites.
- Are most likely to visit the beaches (45%); visit Smoo Cave or Balnakeil Craft Village (35%); and go to a tearoom/restaurant/pub (33%).
- Are fairly unlikely (only 25%) to want to see or find out about the area's geology.
- Are likely to visit two or more sites in the local area (43%).

The Durness survey findings highlight the potential to encourage visitors to go on short walks or watch birds and wildlife while also flagging up the need to take an imaginative approach to promoting the area's historic, archaeological sites and geology to visitors who are less likely to have a particular interest in these. It is interesting to note the lower proportion of visitors to Durness saying they had bought or were going to buy gifts and souvenirs locally, particularly given that this survey was undertaken in the peak season, the Highlands Visitor Survey found

that peak season visitors tended to spend more generally during their visit (as per the findings of the Highlands Visitor Survey), and there consequently appears to be an opportunity to promote local opportunities for buying gifts and souvenirs more actively.

**Length of Visit:** The survey findings indicated that almost half (46%) of visitors surveyed intended to spend fewer than 4 hours in Durness, with a further 12% saying that they would be spending a day or less in the area i.e. 58% of those surveyed (almost six visitors out of every ten surveyed) were staying a day or less. There is clear potential for encouraging longer dwell-times, with knock-on benefits for the local economy.

Visitors surveyed were also spending fewer nights overall in Sutherland than visitors surveyed in the Highlands visitor survey (3.48 nights as opposed to 4.2). As the

Highlands Visitor Survey was undertaken five years ago, it is impossible to know whether this is due to a declining length of stay in Sutherland overall since 2002 or if it is a general feature of visitors to Durness. In either case, however, the findings suggest that working to increase length of visit in Durness should be seen as important.

**Likelihood of return visit to Durness.** Data from the survey indicates that visitors to Durness:

- are very unlikely to return to Durness during their current holiday (68%); but, are fairly likely to return to Durness again in the next 2 years (33%).

**Enjoyment of visit to Durness:** Data from the survey indicates that visitors to Durness:

- found their current visit to be better than expected (38%); 33% thought it was the same as expected and 28% did not know what to expect.

**Conclusions** In terms of interpretation, the main conclusions from the survey seem to be:

- visitors will be primarily adults, travelling in groups of adults but with a reasonable proportion (20%) of groups with children, indicating that facilities for children may enhance the experience of visiting the Centre or, even, help attract more family groups (if actively promoted to these groups).
- fairly likely to be from out with the UK – even if the August 2007 survey findings show an abnormally high proportion of overseas visitors compared with the Highlands Visitor Survey, the chances are that a minimum of around 40% of visitors will be from abroad (mainly Europe), with implications for the way in which interpretation is presented.
- the majority of potential customers for new interpretation are likely to be primarily interested in general sightseeing (90%) while a substantial proportion will also be interested in going for short, low-level walks of 2-8 miles (55%); watching birds and /or wildlife (40%); buy gifts and souvenirs (35%) or visit a museum/ historic building/ archaeological site (33%);
- The majority of visitors are likely to be interesting in visiting one or more sites in the local area (82%) – suggesting that there is scope to use interpretation to encourage visits to local sites of interest.
- only a minority will be likely to have a specific interest in sites of historical/archaeological or geological interest, suggesting that interpretation should be designed to appeal primarily to the general public rather than those with a special interest, and that promotion of local sites in the area might attract more visitors if they are promoted as destinations for short walks and as places where you can also enjoy bird/wildlife-watching

Visitor numbers	
Year	Total
2003	32,858
2004	26,707
2005	23,494
2006	19,948

Length of stay	Current %
30-60 minutes	12 5
1-2 hours	17 8
2-4 hours	17 8
4-7 hours	5 12
7-12 hours	5 12
12-24 hours	12 15
24-48 hours	13 15
2-4 days	12 15
More than 4 days	7

#### <sup>6</sup>Fight to save 'vital' Durness tourist centre

*A vital tourist information centre is facing closure amid accusations that VisitScotland has failed to act. Community leaders are now fighting to save the centre at Durness, which ironically has never been busier with booming trade from being in a prime spot on the North Coast 500 route. Inquiries at the centre have soared by more than a quarter this year alone. But mystery surrounds an apparent breakdown in talks about renewal of the lease, which expires next March, between the property owner and tourism agency VisitScotland. Dorset-based businessman Michael Bonham Cozens owns the building. But an email, apparently from his company, to the staff states that his lawyers "will be serving VisitScotland the necessary notice to quit and, in turn, I very much regret that they will be doing the same thing in respect of your lease." He said he had been unable "to make any sensible conclusion with them (VisitScotland) in spite of every effort." Highland Councillor Hugh Morrison, who represents North, West and Central Sutherland – and lives in Durness – said he spoke to Mr Bonham Cozens last week. "He is pulling his hair out over VisitScotland. He has been trying to speak to them for a year but they won't answer his letters and emails. "I've also tried contacting VisitScotland but they also will not respond to my emails. I hope they don't treat visitors the same way. "They should be renamed 'Missing in the North of Scotland.' "In fairness to the owner he has been trying hard to resolve extending the lease but he has been left with no alternative but to say 'enough is enough.' "The lease runs out on March 29. The staff have been kept in the dark – there are two staff there in the summer and one in the winter – as well as the community. "You have so many people visiting Durness now throughout the year we need the centre. "Nobody has seen this coming. The owner has been left with no alternative but to issue the termination of the lease. "Maybe the time has come for community groups to take it on and run it as tourist information centre for the area." The venue is shared by tourist information and Highland Council's countryside ranger service, which is separately under threat, and could be axed as a result of budget cuts. Groups including the John Muir Trust and Mountaineering Scotland have urged the local authority to protect the organisation and safeguard 18 jobs. Long-serving northwest Sutherland ranger Donald Mitchell and his wife Valerie could both lose their jobs because she is part of the tourist information facility. Mr Mitchell said: "It is a very worrying time. The centre is increasingly important for the community, particularly with the success of the NC500." The Durness Development Group is fighting to retain the building for the community but was unsuccessful in an attempt a few years ago to buy the building. Group chairwoman Sarah Fuller said: "This has come out of the blue. That building is more than a tourist information centre – it is stuffed full with all kinds of information and resource.*

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<sup>6</sup> Published: Northern Times 23/12/2016

The organisation of camping came about in 1979 when the campsite at Sango was privately opened and operated, encouraging people camping around the area to use the designated site and provided facilities. The site has steadily improved with toilet facilities, showers, electric hook ups, permanent reception building and ground maintenance. In 1995, the site was expanded. Wild camping is discouraged locally although Balnakeil dunes are popular for campers for a night or two. There are numerous Bed and Breakfasts and only a few registered with the Tourist Board mainly because of the high costs of commission and lack of local consideration in the national policy making. Self-catering accommodation is plentiful from small single caravans on crofts to chalets and houses for rent. The Youth Hostel usually opens from May to September but in 1998 started to open in March.

The attraction to potential visitors is expressed in a variety of adverts giving descriptions of what is often called 'Europe's last Wilderness'. Nothing can exceed the view from Durness, the scenery is magnificent and the wild sheltered little sandy bays afford excellent bathing. The sheer scale of the landscape for those accustomed to town and city dwelling creates awesome scenery. The peace and quiet typifies some of the world's best fishing and reveals the natural abundance of plants, animals and birds. One of the most beautiful areas of Europe, rocky rivers, scattered lochans, shimmering beaches, mountains and moorland. Arts and crafts, photography and natural history in all its guises, scientific, amateur and professional have been pursuits in the unrivalled expanse of Durness where the solitude can inspire the individual to a creative end. Poetry and prose have been written both here and about here. This space tends to lend itself to the visiting creative individual and interpretation in countless contrasting ways. Recreation in its most natural state appears to be a function of this area.

Crofting and the tourist trade are becoming inextricably woven together and forty years ago there was the fear in Durness that crofting would be neglected for tourism and for employment people had to travel to distant parts of Sutherland. Durness remains a great attraction for people who want to escape from the urbanised areas, finding relaxation, recreation and restfulness. While it was a difficult destination to reach, the attraction of simple natural uncommercialised facilities and services have been very welcome. The area has become easier to arrive at and the increased numbers of persons move around at greater speeds. The capacities have not expanded and been provided for at the same rate.

The high majority of the tourists are only passing through Durness. The camp and caravan site has an average stay of two to three nights. There is no accommodation large enough to allow an overnight coach party and therefore a coach stops only for about an hour on route to the evening's destination, insufficient to have more than one stopping site. Most touring motorists come through Durness between 11am and 3pm and make at the most two stops, depending on the weather. The Bed and Breakfasts quickly fill in the middle of summer and the self-catering establishments are usually booked in advance.

Organised activities are scarce but are on the increase slowly. Access to the most north westerly point on mainland Britain by passenger ferry and a minibus ride is a popular journey. A small dinghy expedition to the second chamber of Smoo Cave, rock abseiling, guided walks with the Countryside Ranger to distinct and diverse wild life colonies are available throughout the summer.

Around 1994 sea trips around Cape Wrath and Faraid Head were available with a local fisherman to view the scenery, seabirds, seals and other attractions dependent on weather. The trips departed from Smoo Cave and lasted about ninety minutes. The itinerary is tide and weather permitting. The cruise vessel was nearly eight metres long and fully equipped for passengers. Fishing by arrangement in the lochs and sea fishing by boat has all become available.

The area is spectacular for endless hill and coastal walking with wonderful cliffs. There are no organised water sports but the sheltered bays are becoming popular for windsurfing and body boarding. In 2017 a zip line with speeds up to 45mph with amazing ocean views from up to 100ft above Ceannabeinne Beach was established.

The natural environment attracts people in its own right and the unspoiled beauty with little commercial development is one of the reasons the corner of mainland Britain has a high percentage of return visitors. Hill walking and mountain climbing are popular pursuits and while the mountains around Durness are lonely and remote, they are quite easily accessible and enjoyed by novice hill walkers, when the correct routes are used. There are no great heights to be conquered but challenging, rewarding and impressive views can be obtained. Walking in isolated locations is hazardous and it is always advisable to inform someone of the route and expected time of return. Important reminders are issued about responsibilities and the speed weather conditions can change. Lives can easily be put in danger not only of the walkers but also of others when rescues are launched.

The notion of authenticity is an important element in the promotion of tourism. In Scotland, the commercialisation of culture is obvious. It is an ideological framing of history, nature and tradition. Today, there is a tourist demand for authenticity rather than 'facts' and for the believable over the true. Many tourists have indeed been lured to Scotland in search of evidence of an older, traditional culture. There is a desire to see things in their original location and condition, to experience them as people in the past would have done. It is however problematic for reasons as diverse as the fragility of an item, the uncertainty as regards its original location or the desire to display items to the widest audience. It also raises the issues of restoration and of making newly made replica, which might give a better impression of how an object would have looked, when the original item is damaged. Therefore, it frequently runs the risk of creating a past that never existed. The phenomenon is due to new technologies that permit the reconstruction of heritage in real and virtual space. These technological advances allow a more active participation from the 'spectator'. It is a form of remaking the past for the purposes of the present. Nowadays, culture is commercialised and heritage becomes a theme park, 'an archaeological zoo'. It is opposed to tradition and creates conflicts between traditionalists and those who demand a more active involvement in heritage. Authenticity may also mean that the reconstruction of the past proceeds with notions of history. In that case, it is better to use the term of historical authenticity. Therefore, the issue of authenticity also refers to the problem of interpretation of the past. Many historical events and traditions have been reimagined and reinterpreted for tourist promotion regardless of their origin. In Scotland, many features of Scottish iconography are today presented as traditional, even though they are of recent origin (e.g. Tartan, Highland games and gatherings). Mackay Country has a definite advantage of seeing how these perceptions have altered the true and real communities they try to portray. Mackay Country is a living example of what many try to recreate and we interpret what we find in this locality for the twenty first century.

### **Countryside Ranger**

The Highland Council employs Countryside Rangers in serving the tourist industry and protecting the environment, the visitors come to see. The Rangers' job is to encourage a good relationship between people and the countryside, enjoyable for people and protecting the countryside. The main aim is for people to understand the environment, especially visitors who will behave more responsibly towards a countryside they understand and appreciate.

In July 1996, a full time all the year round post of Countryside Ranger was created to allow more work with the local community and of the wider county at large. Prior to that, the post was seasonal. The Countryside Ranger has organised guided walks to destinations of interest,

bird colonies etc. Since May 1991, a German who came to visit Durness in 1988 and settled has held the post. In December 1997 the post became vacant and was not filled until August 1998. Since then Donald Mitchell has been in post. Until its closure the ranger was based in the Durness Tourist Information Centre where information is displayed about most of the natural aspects of the area. The Rangers have been responsible for starting various clubs of natural historical interest and become involved with the children of the primary school and the Youth Club.

### **<sup>7</sup>Nature's Call**

As a ranger it is challenging to offer some guided walks covering topics that one may not feel entirely cognisant with; indeed it is a fairly common event for me! My interests are wide and non-specific. Perhaps I am most confident on birds and mammals but even then, if a real enthusiast comes along pointing out a rare variant species I am nonplussed. Such was the case with a ring-billed gull and ring-necked duck in Durness fairly recently, and although I may note a difference the penny doesn't necessarily drop that it is something rare. For me this is particularly the case whilst "leading" geology-based or wild flower walks, especially the latter, although the north-west is a wonderful area for both. The machair of Oldshoremore and Durness is fantastic in the summer and the sheer mass of blooms is astounding. No one really needs to know each species name to be in awe, walking across and over the flowers (they cannot easily be avoided) is a sensual hedonistic perambulation. Sometimes the more you know about each flower the greater the pleasure and wonder — there are also quite a few "twitchers" in the plant world, desperately keen to add a new species to their list.

We try to please all types and cater for all interests and after many year's repetition I have become familiar with most of the flowering plants of the north-west — but then there are the orchids. There are masses of them, from spring and all through the summer, all over the place, on the hill, on the moors, in the bogs, by the roadside and even on the lawn. Wonderful, remarkable flowers they are too with a great variety of shapes, colours, complex life cycles and extraordinary relationships with insects and fungi. It would be possible to take a guided walk with only the orchids as the subject of interest. Perhaps fortunately for me as a non-botanist, most people on holiday have general interests and are not too bothered about which particular species or sub-species or which probable cross-pollinated species hybridised with which. It is interesting however and the more I learn of orchids the more interesting they become — like most things. In general, visitors are content to know the common name and any peculiar facts or idiosyncratic details about a particular plant. Such as that the early purple orchid smells of tom cat's urine and the same plants tubers were once used in aphrodisiac love potions. They were and possibly still are synonymous with fertility and virility. The tubers are supposed to resemble testicles; so hence the association.

There are over 25,000 species of orchid worldwide with about thirty of them found in Scotland (that may include sub-species). It seems to surprise people to learn just how common they are: many widespread and abundant, some elusive and rare. One rarity we have in the north is almost invisible — the bog orchid (*Hammarbya paludosa*). It is tiny, inconspicuous, and green and lives in a bog camouflaged amongst soggy sphagnum moss but is none the less quite remarkable. Dr Ian Pennie of Scourie first pointed it out to me. We had to get down on hands and knees to examine about six spikes protruding from the peat through the edge of the moss. Each flower head or inflorescence has about twenty minute green flowers, which look upside

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<sup>7</sup> From the Newsletter September 2006, NO. 179 By Donald Mitchell

down compared to other orchids as the lip points upwards seemingly twisted right round. Interestingly the bog orchid is alone amongst Scottish species in producing tiny bulbils at the edges of its lower leaves which detach, floating off to later become a new plant.

Most orchid seed is as fine as dust and does not produce a seed leaf, the absence of which means seedlings are dependent on an association with fungal mycorrhiza for an outside food source until mature green leaves are formed. It may be many years before a flowering shoot forms. Common twayblade (certainly common around Durness) can take up to fifteen years before flowering, which may then occur only once or twice before a plant dies, depending on species. One of my favourites, the fragrant orchid, does so — it is well named having a beautiful aromatic scent. In the north we do not have to search hard to find these unusual plants, as once more we are fortunate in nature's abundance. Incidentally plaudits must go to the Scourie roads department for delaying the cutting of road verges where butterfly orchids were growing in abundance — all credit to them.

### **Puffin Link from Faraid Head to Durness**

#### **Tourist Information Centre August 2007**

With assistance from Scottish Natural Heritage, Highland Year of Culture and the Lottery Awards for All Durness community council have been working to have installed a CCTV link from the established Puffin Colony at Faraid Head to a plasma display in the Tourist Information Centre. This ongoing work has been disrupted by small but fragmentary problems. The work was supposed to be completed in time for the arrival of the puffins this year but with a catalogue of errors the puffins have left the area and the link is still not functioning constantly. The atrocious weather leading up to the spring at the beginning of the year hampered the voluntary work to have concrete plinths created; camera mast erected a solar panel installed and cables laid between the cameras and the solar panel. With this completed the electrical work and technical matters were started. The contractor had given all the details of the system to the supplier as there is no "off the shelf system" but the loss of power between the cameras and panel with a 250 meter run was not accounted for. A further cable had to be laid and adjustments to the components to compensate were undertaken. The power for the system, running the cameras and transmitting the signal is from six heavy duty batteries charged from the solar panel. As more than 12 volts is required to be carried to the cameras the batteries had to be wired in a sequence that gave sufficient voltage for the 2 cameras and allowing for loss on the cable but had to be wired to allow the trickle charge from the solar panel to maintain each individually. This has taken many visits, each time arrangements for transport and volunteer time has to be arranged, to get right as only after a lapsed time period was it clear if all the settings were correct. Furthermore a timer switching the equipment on and off at set times had to be incorporated to ensure that for a period in 24 hours there was no use on the batteries and the system could charge. Due to an ongoing unidentified fault in the timer the whole system kept failing to maintain a constant level of charge and therefore continue operating. The system has worked but only for 24 hours at a time without having manually to recharge the batteries. All involved are now confident that the system will provide the CCTV link allowing recording of the colony for times when the TIC is closed and out of season but unfortunately the puffins will not be televised this year. There is yet a further interruption due to the reluctance of using vehicles unnecessarily on farm ground while the Foot and Mouth scare affects Britain. As soon as this is cleared the CCTV puffin link will be switched on!

The long awaited CCTV link from Faraid Head to the Durness Tourist Information centre is now running successfully. After replacing the technical consultant that provided the equipment and initially installed the system the new advisor has improved what was poor workmanship and has the system functioning correctly. Two cameras on a mast at Faraid Head overlook the



Puffin colony where the birds come to breed annually around mid-April and stay until around the end of July. The signal is transmitted back to the village and displayed on a television screen in the visitor centre.

The system was constantly breaking down and several faults were identified mainly to do with the distance from the site to the reception. Due to ongoing incurred costs that could not be met the system was discontinued.



IMAGE 67 PUFFINS ON FARAID HEAD

## Durness Estates and Quarrying

<sup>8</sup>*The annual rents were collected by Mr Gunn of Smoo Lodge when the Durness crofters maintained their exceptionally good name as rent payers. There being not one arear. The most considerate landlord Mr Buxton on learning how low prices of sheep which prevailed this season, kindly granted each crofter a reduction of 25% of the year's rent. He and his charming lady make their tenants on rent they provided a light refreshment for them and gave to each the most useful Christmas present of a package of tea.*

*Last week, Mr and Mrs Buxton visited the schools at Durness and gave to each child appear of very warm and searched serviceable house slippers. The people of Durness are very grateful for further extreme generosity and thoughtfulness.*

The ownership of Durness Estates has been rather complicated to discover with veils of apparent secrecy and complex transactions difficult to follow.

In 1989 A London based quarrying company Redlands Aggregates started to carry out test bores at Durness with the intention of trying to establish a mayor coastal quarry to export minerals from a deep water jetty at Loch Eriboll. Lime and potash were two possibilities. The company is understood to have negotiated the mineral rights from the Belgian syndicate in Antwerp which owns the Durness Estate. They have also received all the necessary consents from the estate proprietors for access for a proposed quarry site between Rispond and Portnancon on the west side of Loch Eriboll. The hope was for major jobs for Durness with the prospect of employment for local people for years to come. If commercially viable the quarry would have to have reserves to last at least 20 years and it is envisaged that the workforce would increase the population of the village by about 25 per cent.

Throughout 1993 there was several newspaper reports with argument discussions from an anti-quarry lobbying group and a local contingent supporting the possibility of a mineral extraction quarry.

In 1994 a report was received that two large scale quarry projects were not viable. "Developing the Durness Eriboll rock deposits for large scale export quarrying would be inappropriate" The consultants concluded that the quality of rock was not of national significance to the aggregates industry and would not constitute good use of resources.

<sup>9</sup>*Last week it was reported in The Herald that a director of Vibel had been contacted. It is understood that Mr. Karl Heinz Buchel, the first name to be given to this company in the 12 years since they have owned the Estate, refused to answer questions on his stewardship of the 9400-acre Estate. He stated "Vibel is a company, we have several businesses, land and so on". He refused to identify any other director and directed all enquires to the legal representative at their solicitors in Edinburgh.*

Around the same time there was a report that Mr. Ian Wilson, the Dunblane based mineral developer, was currently negotiating to take ownership of the 9400 acre Durness Estate.

At the end of March 2000 Mr. Iain Wilson met with community councillors, Durness Grazing Committee and Councillor Francis Keith. Mr. Wilson started by giving some details as to the history of Durness Estates and how he became the agent for Vibel SA. He indicated that it would be useful for him to have an assistant, possibly the Durness Grazing Clerk chairman to keep him informed and updated as to the village plans and concerns. He has noted the concerns

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<sup>8</sup> From the Northern Times December the 15th, 1932.

<sup>9</sup> Publication 31<sup>st</sup> January 2000

of the inclusion of the Super Quarry in the Highland Council Structure Plan and implied that there would be no consideration of development until the Harris Quarry Report was published. He was reassuring in empathising that there would be no development without the Durness Community being consulted at all the stages. There is interest in developing a small quarry in pegmatite granite on a small scale employing up to 15 people forecast to produce up to 100 ton per annum. The rock is foreseen as being transported by a track formed over the hill and by conveyor belt to a shore base between Portnancon and the top of Loch Eriboll. This proposal is in its infancy and will require more testing and examination. Future meetings will be arranged in the autumn to update the community.

Mr. Wilson was asked about assistance with the proposed Loch Eriboll Pier Development and he wants to be kept updated on the progress. Both the development of an Angling Club requiring the use of lochs and the Day Care Centre requiring land will be considered and the actual requirements should be addressed in writing to Mr. Wilson. An associate of Mr. Wilson, Mr. Derek Prestell, gave a talk on development and the environment and ways to best advance sustainable projects without sacrifice.

Perhaps prompted by the recent publicity about Laid Crofters Estate representative for Viabel SA, the Lichtenstein Company that owns Durness Estates and mineral right proprietor Ian Wilson and his associate David Pretzel were in Durness last Monday. They were addressing a series of meetings.

After meeting with the Durness crofters, the community council, with the largest turnout of public in recent times, was presented with a proposal that was described as a proposition to bring the Estate back to the community. To transfer the Estate and mineral rights with a 60% shareholding in the public sector effectively giving this sector control, with 40% held by Vibel, 40% owned by the community with no financial input, 10% in Highland Council and 10% with the Local Enterprise Company. Mr. Wilson declared that negotiations are presently ongoing regarding the funding. The agencies would be expected to supply working capital. There would be two companies established. The first to own the land the second to control the land resources. This scheme was likened to the situation on Eigg but this was fiercely contested and no clear parallel was agreed. This raised questions about the meaning of the intentions of communities actually taking control of the land and this split did not actually give the community what the Land Reform Legislation plans.

Mr. Pretzel describing the Durness landscape as biologically degraded chiefly addressed the meeting and his interest is in using the biological, cultural and social resources to diversify the economic potential of the area to achieve the biological potential with sustainable development. When asked directly if he had any specific proposals his answer was that he preferred not to reveal anything that may set minds in a rigid framework.

The first declaration that was made stated that both Mr. Wilson and Mr. Pretzel were against quarrying but very quickly the debate was centred on quarries. The super quarry is still included in the Highland Council's structure plan although the public consultation is complete the Highland Council Planning Committee meet to start the discussion on the draft proposals of the new document on the 11<sup>th</sup> November. What became clear as questions were put is that for Mr. Wilson's backers, who must remain anonymous, are only prepared to put up the finance for the buyout if a small scale pegmatite quarry, able to supply specialist mineral stones that has a high demand in Europe for the glass and ceramic industries, is the cornerstone of a development plan. When questioned about financial return to the community on such a development it was discovered that only around £30,000 per annum would be available as market royalties.

The next step envisaged is to design a development plan for the Estate forming a working party to produce a document for discussion. The issues identified were categorized into three, minerals, purchase of Estate, and the development of the Estate in association with the community. There was a lot of concern and a good deal of mistrust about the motives and sudden concern for the Durness Estates although Councillor Keith defended the track record of the proprietors with a list of benefits the community has obtained. Some quarters felt that the proposals were set to a pre-arranged agenda with the option of not becoming involved as not being part of the only realistic alternative to Durness slipping down a slippery slope. There was consensus that there is an opportunity but all parties must approach the task prepared to "break the bonds of history with a good working relationship".

It was agreed that this could be the major village influence and must be considered with full available information, involving the whole population when clear identification of a proposal is available. An investigative steering committee would have to be the first step. The result from this meeting was that after discussions with their respective committees it should be considered that the chairpersons from the Durness and Laid Grazing Committees and Durness Community Council should take on this role.

The Laid crofters have been working independently developing economic projects to re-establish Laid with its own identity. They have found working with the landlords very frustrating. They have been examining the possibility of taking control and ownership of their common grazing land. Should this succeed it would be the first hostile Highland land buy out. During recent weeks there has been national news coverage of their aspirations and this proposal has stimulated interest from the television and radio news magazine programs. There is a complex set of circumstances for the participants to resolve and it was suggested that the Council and Enterprise Company participation should be omitted at this stage.

Mr. Derek Pretswell, who currently works in Rural Partnership, discussed some proposals for the Durness Estate. He proposed that the Durness Estate is brought into the local community and this is achieved by means of a private and public sector partnership. He indicated that a small quarry could pump-prime other developments, and thus create sustainable developments. Concerns were raised regarding the mention of a quarry. Mr. Pretswell advised that this would not be a super quarry development, a small-scale pegmatite quarry. It was pointed out that the possibility of a small quarry had been discussed in March and at that time Mr. Wilson and Mr. Pretswell stated that they would update the community in the autumn on these proposals. Mr. Wilson indicated that he was very confident that he would acquire the Estate from Vibel SA, and that they have been looking into funding for development. Several points were raised in connection with Vibel SA, the current owners, Mr. Wilson stated that he hoped these could be overcome by his purchase of Durness Estate which would remove the current absentee Landlords. Councillor Keith stated that he was very concerned about the past statements, as Vibel SA was not as bad as many of the Landlords in the Highlands. Councillor Keith then produced a list of transactions between Durness Estate and the communities of Durness and Laid.

The formation of a working group was discussed at some length and it was suggested that there be a public meeting. It was decided that a public meeting would take place once there were some proposals and ideas had been discussed and there was a better idea as to what would be involved. In the meantime it was decided that a steering group be formed consisting of the Chairpersons of the three groups, Durness Community Council, Durness Grazing Committee and Laid Grazing Committee. It was suggested that each of these groups should have a meeting with their own communities in order to decide whether they wish to be part of the steering

group and then advise Mr. Pretswell as it is hoped that the first meeting would happen sometime this month.

In May 2000 Mr Ian Wilson notified the Community Council that all further matters relating to the interests of Durness Estate should be addressed to his office in Dunblane. He has publicly announced that he has taken over the control and returned the Estate to Scottish ownership. The community council briefly discussed this at the recent meeting and is being urged to initiate a fact finding mission on matters relating to land reform and the possible effects for Durness. It was revealed to the community council that Mr. Ian Wilson with a company called Marine Development Ltd. has a lease on a large area of seabed on Loch Eriboll from the Crown Estate.

On 13<sup>th</sup> November 2000 the Community Council records that there is to be a letter sent to Mr. Ian Wilson requesting information about the ownership of the Durness Estate. Various groups in the village have had to make contact and have documents signed by the Estate owners and there still appears to be problems in identifying the correct people for appropriate signatures.

### **Estate letter 3<sup>rd</sup>.December 2001**

Ian Wilson mineral consultant and Durness estate factor has written to the Durness Common Grazing, Laid Common Grazing and the Durness Community Council. The reason for writing was to encourage and ensure that that Durness can be amongst the first communities to approach the Community Land Unit following publication of the Land Reform Bill. Durness Estate are encouraging the crofting and non-crofting interests to seek funding in order to progress the studies necessary to convince themselves and the community land unit that they should acquire the Durness Estate. In promoting this initiative the estate has had discussions with the Community land Unit. There is no mechanism in place that would allow the existing owners of crofting estates to work with the community Land Unit to initiate studies with a view to assisting community ownership. The Durness Estate was informed that the approach to the commission for the studies required by the Land Unit in fulfilment of their terms of reference must come from the community. The Estate expect that there will be two separate Community Trusts one encompassing Durness Common Grazing and the other Laid Common Grazing.

Applications to the Land Unit are dealt with on a first come first served basis. Mr Wilson sees this offer as bringing to fulfilment undertakings to seek to return the estate, initially to Scottish Control then to community ownership thus ending the role of anonymous absentee foreign owners. Mr Wilson urged the groups approached to contact the Community land Unit.

### **Durness Estate Current Position 1<sup>st</sup>. July 2002**

Mr. Ian Wilson has circulated information about the Durness Estate and Vibel SA. Mr. Wilson is a minerals entrepreneur and he attempts to bring about development that benefits the peripheral communities. He achieves this by securing lengthy leases of mineral rights and then promoting the development of the minerals.

In the case of the Durness Estates which comprises of two common grazings, Durness and Laid he became interested in the minerals around 1987. At that time the Durness Estate was split in two parts. Half was owned by a Lichtenstein Company Vibel SA and half by an individual Sitzje Katz. Vibel SA in two transactions acquired the Estate in 1988. Vibel SA has Belgian shareholders that were not prepared to disclose their identity.

Mr. Ian Wilson was asked to help run the Durness Estate and as unpaid factor worked out a deal with local leaders of the Durness Community and some of the problems were sorted out. One problem area was the breakdown of relations between certain Laid crofters and Vibel SA. These Laid crofters wanted to take control of their own future by acquiring the Laid Common

Grazings. In pursuit of their aim the Laid Crofters portrayed Vibel SA and Mr. Wilson as faceless absentee entities opposed to every development plan put forward.

Mr. Wilson states that he made it clear he was committed to returning the Durness Estate, first of all to Scottish Control and then to Scottish ownership. Scottish Control was achieved around April 2000 but still remains in the ownership of Vibel SA but is able to be transferred to Community owned trusts when the communities decide what they wish to do. Mr. Wilson is willing to work with the local communities in trying to achieve sustainable development.

In existence there is a mineral lease between Vibel SA and a company owned by Mr. Wilson. It is this mineral lease that has allowed the control of the Durness Estate in spite of the ownership by Vibel SA.

15th. July 2002. The Durness motor club with members from the catchments area for Kinlochbervie High School and being organised primarily by the youths has been awarded a grant of £11000 from the Princes Trust. The group have acquired a disused shed from the grazing committee and the Durness Estate on the Lerinbeg Headland in Durness and have renovated the inside. With the help of supporting adults and the school the successful application will allow funding for tools, equipment, vehicles and computer technology to be purchased.

#### **Durness Estate 2<sup>nd</sup>. February 2004**

There will be an open meeting and opportunity for any member of the community to meet and discuss with the consultants aspects of the two feasibility studies being carried out on the Durness estate.

Two consultants have been appointed to carry out feasibility studies on the Durness Estate. This will identify what can be done for the good of the community with the Durness Common Grazings. The Scottish Land Unit and the Scottish Land Fund have funded a general study of the Estate. Helen Smith of Rowan Tree consultants have been commissioned to in general terms, approach the study as follows:

Identify and assess the existing resources/assets (natural and built) of Durness Estate and their condition and to identify the potential for developing the Estate's resources (current and potential). The needs and aspirations of the local community and how potential developments of resources on the Estate might address these will be taken into consideration. This will involve consultation with local people, to identify the potential economic and social impacts on the village and the wider community of developing the Estate or of doing nothing.

Grangeston Economics have been funded through Highlands and Islands Enterprise and appointed to carry out an evaluation of the feasibility of developing a renewable energy programme on Durness Estate. The specific objectives of the study include: Explore and analyze the potential for renewable energy development in the area of Durness. The potential for electricity and heat generation for domestic properties, halls, community facilities, including an analysis of demands and infrastructure, e.g. loads, roads, grid, spare grid capacity; Potential income streams from the sale of renewable energy and the possibilities for job creation resulting from cheaper energy for local use.

The consultants will be available in the village hall on Tuesday 24th February from 3pm until early evening. An opening discussion will be conducted at 3pm and thereafter individuals can meet and talk with the consultants.

## **Durness Estate December 2004**

Ian Wilson agent and mineral consultant with the lease of the mineral rights on the Durness Estate has announced that he has now taken over the majority shareholding in Vibel SA.

12<sup>th</sup>. September 2004 Estate Reports

Two final reports have now been completed by the consultants on the Durness estate. They are lengthy and weighty documents.

Jan 2005

“In general terms, although the Durness area offers a range of development opportunities for the local community, it does not appear that community acquisition of the Durness Estate would be a critical factor in taking them forward”

“Coastal Resources having previously obtained effective control of Durness Estate has now acquired ownership of Vibel. The name Vibel is being changed to Durness Estate and will come under the UK tax regime, the end of unknown owners.”

Presently the Durness Estate is registered with owners at PO Box 18 Stadtle 35 9490 Vaduz Liechtenstein. In the last few years the mineral consultant, factor acting on behalf of the owners Vibel S.A. and holder of the mineral rights on the estate Mr. Ian Wilson has been the Scottish contact in the management of the estate. The Durness Estate (which includes the Durness Common Grazings) was purchased in 1982 by Vibel SA, a Lichtenstein firm. In spring 2004, Mr. Wilson acquired a controlling interest in the estate.

## **Durness Estate April 2006**

Durness has the opportunity to pursue from the renewable energy study carried out on the Durness estate a scheme that would provide electricity to the national grid and create an income to the community. A Feasibility study of renewable energy on the Durness Estate Prepared by Grangeston Economics was carried out in May 2004 and a review of all possibilities was reported on. This would be a small scale scheme that would involve a maximum of 3 wind turbines and because of the infrastructure capacity would not lead to a larger scale development. To continue on such a scheme the community must determine with the help of the Highlands and Islands Community Energy Company several consultations and assessments. The research and development of such a project can take 2-3 years and would involve an in depth community consultation. The community Council have given their backing to the development group investigating and examining the pros and cons.

## **Durness Estate September 2006**

Renewable Devices Energy Solutions Ltd, SAC Bush Estate, Edinburgh, has been commissioned to carry out a study to assess the opportunities for wind energy development in Durness. The aim of the study is to provide an understanding of the potential for on-shore wind energy development and local capacity for both construction and maintenance of the technologies.

They plan to meet the objectives through four studies. A Technical Feasibility Study: to consider the wind resource, access to the site, the local resources available and the electrical infrastructure at the site to produce a preliminary wind energy system design A Preliminary System Specification: produced from the results of the technical feasibility study, will provide specifications on the location, number and size of the wind turbine(s) An Environmental Feasibility Study: which will assess the likelihood of the project consent in the planning system through the submission of an environmental screening study and initial contact with all project stakeholders, followed by a full proposal of the scope of works to the council and A Financial

Feasibility Study which will take the results of the technical and environmental feasibility study and determine the marketing opportunities, community involvement, capital and operational costs of the system and returns on investment. These studies will enable the community to take an informed decision on future investment in renewable wind technologies for the Durness. All during this and all stages the community will be informed of progress through newsletters and public meetings. The first meeting with representatives of the company and steering group composed of members of the community council, grazings committee and Development Group are meeting later in September.

April 2004. Major shareholder in Vibel SA which owns Durness Estate and holder of the mineral leases on the Estates Ian Wilson met with AMEC, representatives of Keoldale sheep stock club, Highland Councilor Keith, Community Council Chairman and Durness Development Group chairman recently. Mr. Wilson wished to peruse a joint venture with Amec and Keoldale in the possibility of establishing wind turbines on the Durness Estate. AMEC have been discussing with Keoldale the possibilities of developing a wind farm on areas of ground on Cape Side. This would encompass the majority of the turbines and be capable of supplying enough energy to allow negotiations to develop methods of carrying the power to the National grid.

### **Land Court**

As land becomes more valuable and the uses become more apparent with status and wealth attached to the ownership a disagreement about where a beast drinks, where sheep graze, where peat's are cut are no longer being disputed with a shaking of fists, a few nasty words and neighbourly argument that continue with name calling and deformation of characters for generations. When the wilderness land was undisputed the needs to formally and officially define the boundaries at local level were in practice unnecessary as human restrictions and limitations were practiced as an understood margin.

Early in the 21st Century could this be a defining time of separation from the past, one of series of dramatic events that brings the far ranges of the Scottish Highlands to nearer society's ways, a blip in the timeline, one of the continuous adjustments that mostly go unnoticed or a necessary event that alters nothing. Whatever it will be talked about locally and interpreted and remembered in different ways. Recorded in officialdom and local history and forgotten by those that whatever the outcome has no effect on the life and times. Will the result be accepted as definitive, will there be appeals? Will there be long-term repercussions and effects as yet unanticipated? This event occurs at a time when perceived changes are happening, could happen, and must happen in the village and community at large.

Crofting has seen its period and much of the ideal and idea of crofting is all that remains. Living off the land in the time honoured way of highland crofting is not a productive approach of making a living and although crofting and the crofting fraternity still remain in existence the romantic past holds more of the ideal together than today's crofting. Times are changing and expectations are different, knowledge is giving the crofting life and its meagre returns something to think about. Huge assets are held in quality of life and property of land is now being viewed with not only its growing and grazing capabilities.

The Durness village hall still new in its appearance and recent in its service, continuing regularly with the events from the past and providing services for the community has seen many meetings for community groups, leisure and recreational activities and hosted a diverse range of pastimes. On the 23 March 2004 the lounge was set up as a court and its most formal role was practiced.



A legal lady, a presiding gentleman acting as chairman sitting behind a top table facing the respondent Hugh McClellan and solicitor Simon Frazer, defendants Martin Mackay and Charles Marsham with their solicitor David Flynn. A witness table to the right of the chairman and the public seated behind the legal representation facing the front of the court. An air of formal authority with importance of occasion was present and all involved acknowledged the recognition of a process that has the decisive authority above the individuals concerned.

The proceedings are declared as an official sitting of the Scottish Land Court to hear in the process of law the boundary dispute between Laid Common Grazings, Durness Common Grazings, and Rispond Estate. The proceedings must be presented between individual people and although the clients of the solicitors may represent their group's interest the court has to hear the evidence between people. What started in formality with the first written correspondence between Hugh Maclellan and Martin Mackay more than four years ago, and longer in informality has reached a time when learned consultation has declared the law of the land must bring the matter to conclusion. About 25 public congregated for curiosity, press reporting, and support of their belief of the circumstances. Those being called as witnesses were ushered in to the main hall out of earshot. The fitness group had to cancel their exercising scheduled for the afternoon but the computer course continued in the caravan outside which had been running for almost two weeks. At the participant's coffee break, which they held in the foyer, being unable to utilise the kitchen they could be hard chatting in the court and were asked to quieten a little. There was military exercise occurring that day and on a couple of occasions the noise of an aircraft and explosion on Garvie was clear. For about five minutes in the afternoon the electric power was switched off but this was scheduled and caused no disruption to proceedings.

The solicitors sat with piles of papers, files, old looking documents, and maps. Legal and official words about evidence productions and numbers were agreed and the proceedings started. Simon Frazer called Hugh Maclellan to the witness stand. The chairman stood and asked Hugh to raise his right hand and repeat an oath to tell the truth.

The dispute is about the area and boundaries of common grazing. The 17 full crofts and 2 half croft of Laid give an eighteenth share of common grazing to the crofters. On their tenancy agreements they have a share of 2300 acres and although there has been transactions and past Land Court hearings no definitive boundary map exists. Hugh took it upon himself to draw a map that showed the boundaries giving the Laid crofters their entitled share using what he described as natural features and submitted this as the boundaries the Land Court should recognise. This was supported with romantic stories from the past when Hugh came to Laid on holiday and stayed with his grannies and how he had been told by men and woman, who had no reason to lie but were now dead, about where the boundary between Durness and Laid lay. All Hugh's spoken evidence revolved around stories from Hugh's grandmother and there was times that the proceedings although conducted in a formal manner and maintained an air of serious authority began to have a sense of fiction. Hugh spoke to his solicitor with a well-practiced story and the questions appeared to lead Hugh to a romantic and endearing picture of why he was able to determine boundaries and discuss the history of Laid. From times of the clearances and the many hardships his family endured as though they were they only survivors amongst a people with no past and ancestor line to call for stories. At times it was touching. Hugh was desperate to protect his grandmother's reputation and shrewdly stuck to a series of stories that he felt backed his claim. Unfortunately he was using hearsay and all the people he related stories about were dead. To his mind they were all good people and would not lie. He omitted to understand or acknowledge that living people were telling different stories. Any deviation from Hugh's story was a decent on his grandmother's reputation. Any direct answers was avoided when questioned about any dispute to his story.

The boundary dispute has affected more than the crofters whose use of the land has been at stake as the political and social implications appear to have been as readily involved. Anyone wishing to have the opportunity to make submissions, personal invitations and citations were not necessary at this public hearing, could have made advanced notification. Newspapers for anyone to give representations or comments gave notice. A land court will examine and sit in judgment of hearsay evidence and this is a main difference from civil and criminal courts. Very different versions from varying times were heard and the production of evidence was not always agreeable. Minutes from meetings regarded by some as unapproved and recently drawn maps to suit the circumstances were presented with dates from the past when official documentation was unclear of actual borders. After the witnesses had given all their evidence the solicitors summed up. Simon Frazer intimated that his client had no alternative but to have the boundary clearly defined. Clarification was needed if a buyout of common grazing through the Scottish Land Unit was to be pursued by Laid. David Flynn declared his clients had no option but to defend what has been recognised as the status quo and the boundaries by all official bodies. He suggested his clients should be awarded all costs for the defence of this action that was believed to have ulterior motives. The case will be decided in about six weeks with written confirmation to all parties.

The boundary decision went in favour of Durness common grazing and Rispond Estate. The boundary being at Portnancon.

## Historical Context of Durness

2,500 BC      4,500 years black chert arrowhead made and used in Durness area ‘Heads of arrows are occasionally found in the mosses; they are from two to three inches long, formed of a brown, red or whitish flint-like stone.’[i]

c. 1 AD      2,000 years ago Tollund man died in ‘Denmark’ ‘The Bog People’ - The first Bog man was found in 1950 in Tollund Fen and was researched by Lotte Glob’s father, chief Archaeologist in Denmark.[ii]

83/4      Defeat of Caledonians at Mons Grapus by Agricola.

c. 1600 - 1610      Timothy Pont is minister in Dunnet. His brother, Zachary, is minister in Bower – another Caithness parish. Pont was a mapmaker and his maps are the earliest known of Dùthaich MhicAoidh. [iii]

1616      Scotland has access to sugar plantations.

1618 - 38      The Thirty Years War Mackay Regiments involved.

1619      Balnakeil Church rebuilt.

1654      The Atlas Novus (5 volumes) is published by Blaeu in Amsterdam. The maps for Province of Strathnaver, Sutherland and the other areas of Scotland are based on Pont’s maps. [iv]. The text is by Robert Gordon, derived from Pont’s notes.

1660      The Restoration Charles II is returned to the throne. 2nd Lord Reay is recommended for restitution and compensation for loss of lands and fortune and significant periods of imprisonment. Instead of seeking such recompense from Sir Robert Gordon of Gordonstoun’s (Earl of Sutherland d. 1656) heir, Charles II directs that it should be sought from Robert Gray of Arkboll, one of Sutherland’s commissars since 1649. Settlement concluded in 1681. [v]

1707      Act of Union of Parliaments.

1714      Rob Donn is born in Strathmore.

1715      Jacobite rebellion.

1724      Parish of ‘Durness’ is split. Three parishes were created – Tongue, Durness and Eddrachillis. It was directed that a church should be built at Duartbeg but the other 2 new parishes already had churches.

1733      Sherriff forbids the wearing of arms at market. Lord Reay writes to concur and pledge that he will communicate this new custom in Duthaich MhicAoidh. [vi]

1744      Balnakeil House is rebuilt.

1745      Jacobite Rebellion. 3<sup>rd</sup>. Lord Reay and Mackay Country are not Jacobite. It is related locally that a French ship carrying gold to feed and pay the Jacobite army comes ashore at the Kyle of Tongue and that gold which was hidden in a great rush while being pursued is still hidden in the hills locally.

1746      Battle of Culloden. Presbytery of Tongue sends a letter to the Duke of Cumberland congratulating him on his success at Culloden. [vii] Durness minister Murdoch MacDonald is in attendance at the meeting in May. George, 3<sup>rd</sup> Lord Reay, writes in September of this year to the government suggesting that the forfeited estates should not be settled on anyone but should be held and by the government who should appoint factors and arrange lettings.

1748      3<sup>rd</sup>. Lord Reay, George Mackay, dies. Son Donald, resident in Balnakeil House succeeds as 4<sup>th</sup>. Lord Reay and Chief. Donald had been living at Balnakeil House and while the principal Mackay residence had traditionally been in Tongue, Donald, the eldest son, stayed on at Balnakeil House after succeeding to the title of Lord Reay and as Clan Chief. Hence in this period Balnakeil becomes the centre of Clan Mackay activities and administration of the estates.

1755      Population is 1,000. Account by Dr Webster referred to in First Statistical Account. Area covers ‘peninsula’ of Durness and Westmoin.

c. 1760 Smallpox inoculation introduced by Dr. Dunnet of Thurso. Reduction in infant mortality resulted as noted in First Statistical Account. Inoculation became general locally in 1778 due to charitable support of ‘a gentleman’ belonging to the parish.

1760 Joseph MacDonald’s ‘Complete Theory of the Scot’s Bagpipe’ is written on a voyage to India. Joseph’s father was the Reverend Murdoch MacDonald, minister in Durness and a key campaigner for the establishment of the parish school at Loch Croispol. It is said that Joseph and his brother Patrick and sister Florence were taught violin by the Keoldale Factor, Kenneth Sutherland – and that Joseph and Florence composed some of the airs for Rob Donn’s songs. Joseph gained a position with the East India Company and sailed to India in 1760. He wrote the manuscript for this book on the voyage. Joseph died of ‘fever’ in Calcutta in 1763, aged 24 years old. The book was published in 1803 in small numbers and then rediscovered and reprinted in 1927. It was not until the 1950s and the scholarly work of Archibald Campbell that this book becomes acknowledged as the earliest known primary source on Highland bagpipe music. [viii]

1766 The Potato arrives in Assynt It is noted in The First Statistical Account for Assynt that there were no potatoes in 1765 but half a boll of seed was ‘got’ in 1766. It is also stated that ‘at first the natives were indifferent’. It may be that potatoes arrived in Durness and Mackay Country before this date via Caithness trading links.

1778 Rob Donn dies.

1782 & 1783 Crops fail. ‘Supplies liberally provided by the late Lieutenant-General Alexander Mackay, together with the share of what Parliament granted, for the relief of the north of Scotland, contributing greatly to alleviate the sufferings of the poor, in those seasons of general want’.

1788 & 89. Two sloops built in The Bay of Durness. They are the property of the Tacksman and are used for kelp harvest and shipping, salmon fishing, cod and herring fishing. 20 men are employed in this way and sail out of Rispond.

1790 Population is 1,182 as at 12th June – mentioned in First Statistical Account. Average deaths is 30; average births is 41; marriages 10.

1791 Parochial School has 45 pupils. Statistical Account states that the schoolmaster is Mr Thomas Ross. His salary is paid by Lord Reay (10 merks Scotch). The other half of the salary is payable by ‘his Lordship’s tenants’ – rates per quarter are 2s 6d for teaching Latin; 2s for arithmetic; 1s 6d for reading and writing; 1s for teaching to read. The Schoolmaster’s salary is augmented by his work as Session Clerk. A second school is operating in Westmoine and has circa 30 pupils. There the schoolmaster’s wife teaches ‘some branches of female education’.

1791 First Statistical Account – Mr Rev John Thomson. It is reported that Cape Wrath was already a sheep walk and carried far more stock 30 years before when it was still part of Balnakeil Farm.

1807 – 1821 Key ‘Sutherland Clearances’ period. The Second Statistical Account mentions new lotting, creation of sheep walks and clearance. The writer expresses scepticism about the impacts for the common people and notes that these changes have eradicated the middle classes and eroded the previous high regard for education locally.

1814 Sir Walter Scott visits the Freisgill and Smoo Caves, Second Statistical Account.

1815 20 to 30 families emigrate from Durness Parish to America.

1822 The Inverness Society for the Education of the Poor in the Highlands Survey of Gaelic and English speaking and literacy at parish level. A questionnaire survey was sent to 171 parishes and 89, including Assynt, Eddrachilles, Durness, Tongue and Farr were returned by the ministers for these parishes. In all of these parishes in 1822 over 80% of the population was reported to prefer speaking in Gaelic and less than 20% preferred English. In these parishes in our study area less than 20% of the Gaelic speakers could read but in Assynt between 20 and

39% of Gaelic speakers could read. Amongst the parish population who could speak English it was reported that all of them were literate. [ix]

1829 Last part of the Mackay lands sold to the Marquis of Stafford. It has recently been asserted that a small piece of land which is still legally 'Clan Mackay' land remains in the vicinity of the golf course at the village of Reay.

1841 Durness Riots & Clearance of Ceannabeinne Township.

1843 The Disruption – creation of The Free Church of Scotland. In Durness Rev William Findlater and most of the congregation secede and for years worship is in the open air in the Sango area.

1844 Royal Commission on Poor Law (Scotland)

1845 Second Statistical Account published - written in 1834. There are now 4 schools – 1 parochial; 1 Assembly and 2 subscription.

1846 Potato Blight takes hold. The potato crop fails in the Highlands and islands for several years. Famine conditions and famine relief – 'the Live Aid of its' day' follows.

1852 Foundation of Highland Emigration Society Assisted passages become available – the preference is for large family units with useful skills. As demonstrated in the case of the Munros from Armadale, literacy is an advantage in getting a place and residency essential.

1861 Education Act changes conditions of service for teachers and allows the teacher, William Ross, to be retired. School closes.

1883 The Napier Commission. Royal Commission into the condition of cottars and crofters – evidence taken at Kinlochbervie and Bettyhill.

1884 The Geological Survey. Peach & Horne – to settle the mystery of why older rocks were to be found underneath younger rocks. The findings were of global significance in terms of scientific enquiry. The 'Memoir' of this study was published in 1907 and remains a key text.

1886 The Crofting (Scotland) Act Security of tenure; a right to fair rents; a right to compensation for improvements on exiting the tenancy and the tenancy is now heritable. But no land taken out of 'crofting' is returned to that system and cottars are not dealt with.

1888 - 99 Formation of 18 clan societies[x] Balmoralisation races ahead after Victoria and Albert buy Balmoral in 1848.

1890 Crofters Commission visit to Durness. Fair rents set – a reduction of £2, 13s on the rental. Arrears cancelled (£15, 17s, 9d) and ordered £30, 3s 9d to be paid – mostly still outstanding.

1892 Royal Commission – Highlands and Islands Reported in 1895 – the stated aim was to ascertain what land in the 'crofting counties' at that time under deer forest, grouse moor or other sporting purposes was suitable and capable of profitable cultivation for crofters and small tenants. Evander MacIver gave evidence as did several local representatives from amongst the crofters. Evidence was taken in Durness on 16th October 1893 – Donald Whyte, 31 Durine; James Sutherland 52 Sangomore; Robert Mackay, Sangomore; Alexander Sutherland Durine and Rispond; Roderick Campbell Durine and Rispond; Kenneth Sutherland, cottar, Sangomore; George Campbell, fisherman, Laid; Thomas Mackay, fisherman, Laid; George Campbell Durine; Evander MacIver – Factor – aged 82 years. Includes discussion of 'The Black Park' at Balnakeil being allocated for exclusive use of the farm in exchange for the Farm giving up shared rights in the crofters' common grazing.

[i] Rev. William Findlater, Second Statistical Account, 1845, p. 94.

[ii] P. V. Glob, The Bog People, 4th edn (Paladin, 1972).

[iii] Map Library National Library of Scotland, 'The Pont Maps' <<http://www.nls.uk/pont/historymaps.html>> [accessed 16 June 2010].

[iv] Map Library National Library of Scotland, 'Blaeu Atlas of Scotland - Maps - National Library of Scotland' <<http://www.nls.uk/maps/atlas/blaeu/index.html>> [accessed 16 June 2010].

[v] Angus MacKay, *The Book of Mackay*, 247th edn (Edinburgh: Norman MacLeod, 1906); Grimble and Saltire Society.

[vi] MacKay, p. 448.

[vii] MacKay, p. 453.

[viii] Editor's notes from Roderick D. Cannon (editor) *Joseph MacDonald's Complete Theory of the Scots Bagpipe* (c. 1760) New edition with Introduction and Commentary (Glasgow: The Piobaireachd Society, 1994)

J Macdonald, *Joseph MacDonald's complete theory of the Scots Highland bagpipe* (c. 1760), Edited by Roderick D. Cannon. New ed. with introduction and commentary. (Glasgow Scotland: Piobaireachd Society; Distributed by the College of Piping, 1994).

[ix] C. W. J. Withers, *Gaelic in Scotland 1698 - 1981: The Geographical History of a Language* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1984).

[x] Michael Lynch. *The Oxford companion to Scottish history* (Oxford [England]; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

## Lord Reay<sup>10</sup>

Reay in the County of Caithness, is a title in the Peerage of Scotland the hereditary Clan Chief of Clan Mackay, whose lands in Strathnaver and northwest Sutherland were known as the Reay Country. The title was created in 1628 for the soldier Sir Donald Mackay, 1st Baronet.

- Donald Mackay, 1st Lord Reay (1591–1649)
- John Mackay, 2nd Lord Reay (c. 1612-c. 1680/1681)
- George Mackay, 3rd Lord Reay (1678–1748)
- Donald Mackay, 4th Lord Reay (died 1761)
- George Mackay, 5th Lord Reay (c. 1735–1768)
- Hugh Mackay, 6th Lord Reay (died 1797)
- Eric Mackay, 7th Lord Reay (1773–1847) (second son of George Mackay of Skibo)
- Alexander Mackay, 8th Lord Reay (1775–1863) (third son of George Mackay of Skibo)
- Eric Mackay, 9th Lord Reay (1813–1875)
- Aeneas Mackay, 10th Lord Reay (1806–1876)
- Donald James Mackay, 11th Lord Reay (1839–1921)
- Eric Mackay, 12th Lord Reay (1870–1921)
- Aeneas Alexander Mackay, 13th Lord Reay (1905–1963)
- Hugh William Mackay, 14th Lord Reay (1937–2013)
- Aeneas Simon Mackay, 15th Lord Reay (b. 1965)

The heir apparent is the present holder's son the Hon. Alexander Shimi Markus Mackay, Master of Reay (2010).

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<sup>10</sup> From Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia

## Durness Parish

Since the year 1724 Durness has been separated from the parishes of Tongue on the east, and Eddrachillis on the south-west. Until 1724 the parish of Durness extended from Kylesku on the west to the water of Borgie, thus including modern Tongue, Durness and Eddrachillis.

It is the most sparsely populated parish in Scotland, two point four persons per square mile, and the most remote area in Great Britain.



IMAGE 68 MAP OF DURNESS PARISH

Occupying the North West corner of the county of Sutherland Durness parish covers nearly six hundred and six square kilometres. One thousand five hundred and eight hectares are water; one thousand and twenty eight hectares of foreshore, just over thirty three kilometres in length; and nearly eighteen kilometres wide with several inlets. Scarcely one-hundredth part is under cultivation. On the Northwest and north, the parish is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean, on the east by Tongue and Farr and on the west by Eddrachillis. Durness Parish covers a vast area and the expanse has altered at different times in history but each leaving its imprint. There have been abundant social establishments, some lasting for hundreds of years. These have come and gone in a changing landscape.

The surface is covered with deep peat and accordingly the region is bleak moorland and peat bog. The blanket peat that covers most of the territory has not always been the hallmark. On close inspection, many remnants of time past can be detected. The immediate sites of pre-clearance settlements are numerous and after simple inspection can be readily identified although many are removed from any roads and tracts of today. Some are ruins of ancient townships that at one time were advanced and well organised. Definite old and elaborate but simple life styles can be understood. The settlements at first when discovered can appear situated at random and remote locations. When considered away from the roads and transport of today the sites become more understandable. Many are close to lochs and rivers, situated in

sheltered and fertile situations in the lee of hillsides. When plotted on a map there are apparent connective routes usually direct either by sea, loch or mountain pass. Before the 1800's, at least twenty eight townships were in existence around the parish. The most noted are listed as archaeological sites and recorded monuments. Within the parish boundaries can be found evidence of cave dwellings, stone circles, chambered cairns, 8<sup>th</sup> century Christian settlement, the Vikings, 18<sup>th</sup> century architecture, the notorious clearances and the Second World War.

The coast is mainly of precipitous cliffs fringed with spectacular beaches of silver sand, soaring cliffs and deep caves. The impressive mountain scenery is formed from some of the oldest rocks in the world, Lewisian Gneiss. There are considerable remains of ancient wood, consisting principally of birch and hazel, growing in sheltered situations; but no plantations have been formed. Of the small portion of land under cultivation, the soil is generally clay or moss, resting on a substratum of limestone and clay, and the crops grown in the past were grain of various kinds and potatoes; but the parish is principally rural, and dependent in a great measure on its fisheries.

### **The Durness Parish Districts**

The parish is bounded on the north by the North Sea. Its surface, which is diversified, and abounds with magnificent scenery, is naturally divided into three mountainous districts, separated from each other by spacious inlets from the North Sea.

1. Parph district, between the Atlantic and Kyle of Durness.
2. Durness itself, including the land between the Kyle and Loch Eriboll and
3. Westmoin, which extends from Loch Eriboll to the middle of the morass below Loch Hope, known as Moine.

The district of Parph, extending from the Atlantic Ocean on the west to the Kyle of Durness, occupies an area of more than seventy square miles; there is several deep ravines; but no straths of note. This territory consists mainly of loans and deep morasses several miles in extent, which are intersected by mountain streams, and a few green and fertile spots may be seen on the eastern shores. The district of Durness, reaching from the Kyle to the western shore of Loch Eriboll, has an area of about eighty square miles. The district of Westmoin, extending from the eastern shore of Loch Eriboll to the mire east of Loch Hope, contains nearly 100 square miles.

The principal mountains in the parish are, Sgribhis bheinn, Fashven, Fairemheall, Creigriabhach, and Beinn Dearg, all in the Parph district, varying in height from 1500 to 2500 feet. Ceannabeinne, Meall Meadhonach, Cranstackie, and Beinn-Spionnaidh, in the Durness district, of which Ben-Spionnaidh has an elevation of 2566 feet. In the district of Westmoin where there are several ranges of high and precipitous hills on the east side of Loch Eriboll, various shapes between Strath More and Strathbeg. In this division is Ben Hope (3,150 feet) at Cassildubh near the upper end of Loch Hope, it rises here in abrupt and towering magnificence with dark-blue terraces. Ben Hope the most northerly Munro, is best approached by following the track road along the side of Loch Hope. From the keepers cottage at Alltnacaillich (the old woman's burn) the route follows a burn up to a water fall and then crosses north along the ridge of Leitir Mhurteil that rises toward the summit. On a clear day from the summit, may be seen the Lewis and Orkney Islands and most of the principal mountains of Sutherland and Caithness; while numerous lochs, throughout the country resemble specks of silver glory and the firths, rivers, when their view is not obstructed by adjacent hills, to say nothing of mists.

The basins are, Strath-Dionard, extending from the Kyle of Durness along the River Grudie for about fourteen miles; Strath-Beg, a narrow fertile vale about two miles in length; and Strath More, extending from the north base of Ben Hope, for about six miles, along the banks of the



river to which it gives name. Among the rivers are the Strath More River, which has its source in Glen Golly, and having run for ten miles, flows into Loch Hope; the Hope, which is merely a continuation of the Strath More Water and the Dionard, which rises in Loch Dionard, and after a course of ten miles falls into the Kyle of Durness. These rivers are impetuous, especially when swollen after heavy rains, and afford good fishing. There are numerous inland lochs, of which the most extensive is Loch Hope, six miles in length, and about half a mile broad. Loch Borralie is one mile in length, and in its centre is a beautiful green island. Loch Croispol is about half a mile in length. Loch Dionard and various others are of still less extent.



IMAGE 69 KYLE OF DURNESS LOOKING TOWARD FARAID HEAD

The coast is generally bold and elevated, and in most parts defended by a chain of rocks, rising precipitously from the sea to heights varying from 200 to 700 feet; in some places the shore is low and sandy, and at the bay of Balnakeil are hills of shifting sand.

The headlands are, Cape Wrath, Faraid Head, and Whiten Head. Of the inlets that intersect the parish, the principals are, the Kyle of Durness, about six miles in length, and one mile in average breadth, there are bars and shallows on the west side of Balnakeil Bay in the Kyle, which, at times, shift their position with north winds. At ebb, they appear as large fields of sand. Seals are to be seen on the banks and different species of shellfish are to be found. To the east of the Kyle, Loch Eriboll, ten miles long, and varying from one mile to four miles in breadth. The chief bays are, Durness, between the district of Parph and the long promontory of Faraid Head; the small bay of Balnakeil, to the east; and the bay of Camas an Duin, in Loch Eriboll, affording excellent anchorage, and resorted to by vessels unable to round Cape Wrath or enter the Pentland Firth.

There are several islands off the coast, of which Garvie, to the east of the Cape, and about a mile from the shore, is 100 yards long, nearly of equal breadth, and sixty feet high, and is frequented by various species of sea-fowl. Eilean Hoan, near the entrance of Loch Eriboll, is one mile in length, and half a mile in breadth, covered with verdure; and Eilean Coraidh, within the loch, is of equal dimensions and fertility: in both there are places of burial, said to have been originally selected for security from the depredation of wolves which infested the parish. Numerous caverns have been formed in the rocks along the coast by the action of the waves; the most remarkable is Smoo, two miles eastward of Balnakeil, having natural arches, and abounding with features of character. About a mile from the eastern part of the coast, towards the north, are the rocks called the Stags, whose summits only are above water; and at some distance from Cape Wrath are others, visible only at neap tides; all of which, previously to the erection of the lighthouse, were frequently fatal to vessels making for the Cape.

Loch Eriboll ten miles long and from one to four miles broad, has a depth averaging from fifteen to sixty fathoms. No perceptible current is felt and saltiness is the same as the ocean. The tides of Cape Wrath and Whiten Head are strong and run, on an average, at the rate of 10 M.P.H. The River Polla, takes its source from a few hill burns and after a run of about two miles through Strath Beag, falls into Loch Eriboll.

Loch Hope, is the largest. It is roughly six miles long by one and a half miles broad. The mean depth of this loch does not exceed six fathoms shallower at the Strath More end. Loch Dionard is roughly one mile long by half a mile broad, Loch Borrallie and Loch Croispol are supplied by subterraneous streams through limestone rocks in the district. The former (one mile long) has a green islet 200 yards. The latter lies near the manse of Durness and extends to about twenty-nine acres (being about half a mile long) Loch Lanlish lies near Balnakeil Bay. Many other lochs abound in the interior.

Among the streams and rivers are the Rivers Kervaig and Inshore in the Parph district. The Kervaig rise in the hills above Kervaig near Cape Wrath and falls into the sea after a run of about six miles. Inshore rises in Loch Inshore and falls into the Pentland Firth after a run of about two miles. The River Hope is really a continuation of the Strath More Water which has its course from Glen Golly in the Reay Forest and the contiguous mountains and after draining a distance of about twelve miles through Strath More, empties itself into Loch Hope, eventually flowing into the sea at Loch Eriboll. The River Dionard (or the Grudie of Durness) is roughly twelve miles. It takes its rise in Loch Dionard, in the Reay Forest and after traversing roughly ten miles through Strath More, falls into the sea at the head of the Kyle of Durness. Its banks are rugged and this stream, when in spate, is very wild.

### **Topographical Dictionary of Scotland, Samuel Lewis – 1851**

*The annual value of real property in the parish is £1745*

*The herring-fishery commences in June, and continues till September; a small kind of herring of superior flavour is found in Loch Eriboll, but it is used only for home consumption. In this fishery are engaged ten boats, manned with four men and a boy each, for which the harbour of Rispond affords good accommodation. The lobster-fishery commences in May, and continues till August, employing six boats, with two men each; when taken the lobsters are kept in a perforated floating-chest, whence they are forwarded weekly in smacks to the Loudon market. Cod and ling are abundant off the coast, but they are taken only for domestic use. Salmon are found in the River Dionard and in Loch Hope, and the number caught annually, including grilse, averages about 1 1,000. The cattle and sheep of the parish are sent to Falkirk, and the wool to Liverpool and Hull. The harbours are Loch Eriboll, affording safe anchorage and ample shelter for vessels of any burthen; Rispond, where a substantial pier has been*

*constructed; and Port na Con, near the bay of Balnakeil, which is adapted only for boats. A boat-slip, also, has been constructed at Clashcarnach, two miles to the east of the Cape. At Balnakeil is an ancient mansion-house, formerly the residence of Lord Reay, but now occupied by a sheep farmer. There is no village properly so called, but in various parts are clusters of small houses consisting of from ten to thirty each. Good roads have been constructed, among which are those from the Kyle of Durness to Cape Wrath, from Loch Eriboll to Tongue, and a line from the west to the east of that parish, thirty-four miles in length round the loch, or crossing the ferry of Loch Eriboll twenty-four miles. A post-office has been established, which has communication with Tongue twice every week.*

*Ecclesiastically the parish is within the bounds of the presbytery of Tongue, synod of Sutherland and Caithness. The minister's stipend is £158. 6. 8., of which more than two-thirds are paid from the exchequer; with a manse, and a glebe valued at £20 per annum: the patronage is in the Crown. Durness church, situated within a few yards of the sea-shore, is a plain structure erected in 1619, and containing 300 sittings.*

*In the Eriboll district, about ten miles from the parish church, is a small church in connection with the Establishment, built in 1619, and containing 100 sittings.*

*There is a place of worship for members of the Free Church, containing 400 sittings.*

*The parochial school is not well attended; the master has a salary of £30, with a house and garden, and the fees average £11. A school, also, is maintained by the General Assembly, and another in connection with the Free Church.*

*Durness (Norse, deer and nes point, point of the deer) – in old manuscripts it is always written Dyrnes.*

*Owing to the smallness and quality of the lots, there is an annual importation of from 300 to 500 bolls of oatmeal. The cattle are of the Highland breed, and the sheep, with the exception of a few of the black-faced, are chiefly of the Cheviot breed. Several tracts of waste have been reclaimed and laid down in pasture, and comfortable cottages have been built on most of the small holdings.*

### **Church History in Brief**

Scottish Presbyterians have been meeting in "kirk sessions" ever since John Knox thundered his fiery sermons from the pulpit of St. Giles in the 1560's. Today, their denomination is the official, as well as the largest, church in the country. The Church of Scotland, as it is called, claims the adherence of nearly half the population. Roman Catholics, make up the second-largest group of worshippers.

The ruins of the church at Balnakeil ceased to be used for worship in 1843. In the summer of 1996, a student minister of the Church of Scotland held two services as they might have been when last used for regular practice.

The Durine church, built to replace the ancient church at Balnakeil, a plain substantial building, erected about the year 1844, and would have seated to accommodate about three hundred and fifty, but, is not attended by more than twelve or fifteen of a congregation reported in Sutherland OS Name Books, 1871-1875. Originally this church was erected in The Green near the present village centre but as no surveyor was employed it was not until after being built it was noticed the church was subsiding on soft ground and was taken apart brick by brick and moved. This Established Church of Scotland was closed in 1945 and is now a joiner's workshop. In 1996, the roof was replaced and an extension was added to the rear. There are

local people who can recall the Durine church being used for a wedding service in the 1930's and during the war the Durine church was used as a Home Guard canteen.



IMAGE 70 DURINE CHURCH NOW A JOINERS WORKSHOP

The current church for worship Sangomore Church of Scotland at Churchend where the parish minister for Kinlochbervie and Durness holds a service each week. The Sangomore Church was built as a Free Church of Scotland in 1891 and joined with the Durine Church in 1929 to become Durness Parish Church. Nothing has changed inside the church except for the electric lights. There was no organ before 1940. The Church of Scotland Parish Minister resides and also holds services in Kinlochbervie church.

The history of the parish is very closely intermingled with the religious and social account; related writings are primitive actual boundaries are challenging to discover. The early Celtic Church formed portions of land into Parishes and from church records, there is apparent evidence to show that those favouring the Roman Catholic Church received grants, the Celtic owners being dispossessed. The new landowners dedicated a portion to the church and gave a tenth of their produce. This granting of a tenth became a right of the church and it is safe to presume that the parish of Durness was formed at this early period. Durness was church land owned by the Bishop of Caithness and in 1559 granted by the then Bishop to the Earls of Sutherland. While this area is popularly proclaimed as Mackay Country, the Mackay lands did not include Durness parish. Their land was known as Strathnaver or Farr and extended from the bounds of Durness at Dirimore eastwards to the bounds of Caithness and Southwards to Ben Chilbrig.

Up to the time of the Reformation, the parish of Durness was more or less under the jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic Church. Strathnaver, Durness, Sutherland and Caithness formed one diocese and from the reformation to the Revolution Settlement in 1688, they remained as one ecclesiastical unit alternatively Presbyterian and Prelate. On The tenth of April 1638, an agreement was made between the First Lord of Reay and the Bishop of Caithness regarding a

Parish at Tongue. This agreement mentions that there had been two parishes covering Farr and Durness since Papal times. The agreement was registered in the Presbyterian books but erection did not take place as the Bishop was deposed a few weeks later.

The first Protestant minister in the parish of Durness was John Reid; Farquer Reid followed him in 1574. About eighteen ministers in the next one hundred and fifty years are recorded and laterally in that period the ancient order of Catechises were employed by the wealthier families, where there were no settled ministers, to act as family tutors.



IMAGE 71 CHURCHEND

Until 1724 Durness parish stretched to Tongue in the east and to Kylesku in the south; “....*But, as one clergyman was not equal to the task of instructing the inhabitants of so extensive a district in religion, and inspecting their manners...*,” it was divided in three; Durness, Tongue and Eddrachillis. The Rev. Mr. Macdonald of Durness in his diary for June 1741 states that the death of Mr. Mackay, the minister of the Parish of Eddrachillis who had been ordained only two months previously, was brought about by a reputed witch whose daughter of Mr. Mackay had severely rebuked. Action was brought against this woman by the church and she suffered great punishment.

In 1772, the Presbytery, finding that the Parish of Durness was divided by a Kyle and that another preaching station was necessary besides the church, appointed a mission house at Westmoin. On occasions when Lord Reay or his eldest son stayed at Durness, the minister there would preach for four Sundays at the church and the fifth at Westmoin. It would further recommend that one discourse at least would be in English each Sabbath at Durness.

Although God fearing people most Highlanders had little interest in Presbyterian Protestantism until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The main mission of the Established Church was to put down Episcopalians. The Presbyterian offensive intensified after each Jacobite rebellion and reached a climax in 1746 when many Episcopalian Chapels and meeting houses were destroyed. The

Established Church was identified with the landlords. Ministers objecting with the evictions were rare. Disorientated and demoralised by the social and economic changes and without their traditional leadership the small tenantry were unable to look to the Established Church for guidance and assistance. The Evangelism led most of the people into the Free Church.

The Gaelic bible was the only book widely available in Gaelic and used in society schools after the translation was completed in 1801. It was of great importance to the crofting population. Society ministers were looked on with disfavour by the moderate ministers and often persecuted, being summoned before the church courts but it brought a new self-confidence amongst the crofters. Lay preachers became prominent, the first leadership of any sort to emerge from the crofting population. The laymen were known as 'na daoine' The Men.

The clearances, removals and evictions were questioning times and led to the formation of the Free Protestant Church of Scotland in May 1843. In Sutherland eight out of eighteen parish ministers came out into the new Free Church, approximately eighteen thousands of the twenty five thousand population. On the first Sunday after the Disruption the Durness Church bell was muffled with an old sock and the congregation reduced to practically nil. Only the sheep farmers and their shepherds attended. The landlords were very suspicious of the Free Church and harassed and obstructed them whenever possible. It was a danger to the landowner as it threatened to end the crofters' political isolation and translate their wrongs into English. In 1843, it was the first time the crofting community had stood up to the proprietors and won. Through various sequences of events and Parliamentary enquiries the Crofters Act was passed in 1886.

The Disruption of 1843 affected the parish when the Rev. Wm. Findlater was one of those ministers who came out followed by a great majority of his congregation. For a few years they had neither church nor manse and were compelled to worship in the open. Eventually a site was obtained at Sangomore on which a church, manse and school were erected. The old church at Balnakeil remained the church of the Established congregation. They moved to the Durine with the Established Manse at the Gleb. The two dominations continued like this for years except the Free Church became the United Free Church in 1900. At the general assembly of both churches in May 1929, it was resolved to unite as one denomination and in April 1931, on the death of the minister of the former Established Church a local union was consummated. In July 1931, the minister of the former United Free congregation was inducted to the charge of one congregation of The Church Of Scotland. The United Free Church in Sangomore became the Church of the Parish and the Established Manse the manse of the parish. The United Free manse was sold in 1935.

Durness used to be a Gaelic speaking ministerial charge but was departed from around 1935 because of the difficulties of securing a minister. In 1955, it was reported there had been a vacancy for three years with no prospect of an early settlement. The Air Ministry, who had acquired twelve acres of land in the Glebe in 1954 offered to buy the manse and the congregation, accepted their offer. In 1955, there were two elders, ten communicants and an average attendance of about twenty. From 1991 to 1998, the Rev. Donny MacSween was the Church of Scotland minister to the Parish. The Rev. John Mann followed before the current Rev. Andrea M Boyle. The Church of Scotland owns some land around Durness mostly in the region called the Glebe in Durine.

### **Maelrubha**

*Maelrubha had travelled far. There are a few parts of the north and West of Scotland, says Doctor Frank Knight that have not some association with his name. Born in the neighbourhood of Londonderry on the 3rd of January 642 AD He was of royal blood on both sides. His father,*

*a descendant of Nile of the Nine Hostages a Scot his mother Calgall of Bangor a Pict. Few men could have been better qualified by family connections and heritage to work, for the commencing of those two hostile races. Educated at the famous monastic and Missionary Training Centre at Bangor in Northern Ireland it was a young man of 29 that set sail for Scotland with a full complement of disciples. Following in the footsteps of his famous relative, Columba who had preceded him by little over a century.*

*The first two years were spent in exploration and investigation and the final settlement was made at Applecross. The one port of call made by the modern passenger ship as she voyages from Kyle of Lochalsh to Stornoway in Lewis. From this remote and quiet spot Maelrubha Evangelist with extraordinarily zeal increased his influence and spread into the heart and mainland and throughout the Western Isles. From 673 when he founded his monastery till 722 when he died, a period of 49 years, Maelrubha was the Great and Reverend Father of the Pictish Church.*

*On his last missionary journey he came into what was then the Wilds of Sutherland Shire northwards through the mountains to Strathcarron from his home and base at Applecross. From Loch Shin he went over the lonely moors and through the mountains. This intrepid missionary came at last to Durness. It was here on the shores of Balnakeil Bay that the first Christian building on a site that has ever since been a centre for religious worship. From Durness, thinks Dr. AB Scott the historian of the Pictish Church, to trace the footprints up Strathnaver long centuries afterwards to the scene of the celebrated Sutherland clearances that this heroic missionary met his death by martyrdom. The first to suffer for their faith in the northern counties of Scotland. Against the interior wall of a Pictish tower, says Doctor Frank Knight is an ancient beehive cell probably erected by the saint. At the edge of a wood below Skail at a spot still pointed out by local tradition Maelrubha, while preparing the gospel, was set upon by Danish pirates who had landed upon the coast and had penetrated in land. Ferocious pagans as they were hating if the very name of Christ and rejoicing in brutality towards all Christian bodies. They attacked him with swords, murdered him and dragged his body into a thicket. His disciples reverently laid their master, not far from the Teampool near which he was slain. A rough cross marked stone single in type on the banks of the Naver marks the spot where this pioneer for Christ rests. The date of its martyrdom was the 21st of April 722. It was 51 years since he had sailed from Ireland.*

*There is another tradition. To the effect that the body of their master was reverently carried back to Applecross by the disciples who had accompanied him on his journey.*

*He was not the first minister of the Gospel in the North West but he was by far the most significant. No one quite like him before there has been no one quite like him since. He came to the district remote and savage to a people steeped in ignorance and superstition, and he left the parish of Durness, a centre of light and power throughout the whole of the north. <sup>11</sup>*

Durness from Earliest Times<sup>12</sup>

### **The Culdee Missionaries.**

Before the Norse invasion took place, strangers of a gentler mien found their way to far Cape Wrath. These were the Culdee missionaries from the monastery of Iona. Fired with apostolic zeal, they carried their truths of Christianity far and wide, and effected settlements among the islands and on the western sea-board at a very early date. Nor did they rest content here. Some

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<sup>11</sup> From Tales of the Farr North West a Sutherland Shire miscellany by D.P. Thomson 1955.

<sup>12</sup> This section is from the Transactions of the Gaelic Society

of these early pioneers sailed in their wattle-currachs to the Orkney Isles; while others, crossing the mainland, found their way to the Continent, and became the scribes of the Continental Monasteries. In this way it happens that for the literary remains of the Culdee Missionaries we must look rather to the records of the religious houses on the Continent than to those of our own land. Their chief work there was that of transcribing the Gospels in the Latin tongue; but a gloss here, and a marginal entry there, in the Gaelic language, reveal the nationality of the scribe. There is every reason to believe that each monastery in our own land took care to possess a written record of its history, although hardly a trace of these can now be found. The Norsemen made it a special part of their mission to desecrate and destroy the religious houses.

But there was one record which it defied them to efface. That is the topographical; and by means of it we can form a good idea of the movements of these Christian pioneers. About two years after landing in Iona Columba found himself face to face with King Brude on the banks of the Ness. The object of his visit was political, to secure leave to preach the Gospel among the Northern Picts. This was granted; and under royal auspices the work of propaganda was fairly begun. Their method seems to have been as follows: they first of all selected a suitable spot for an establishment, on which they built their bee-hive cells. They next turned their attention to agriculture, for the monastery must be self-supporting; and judging from the sites still discernible it is clear that in the work of selection they manifested considerable skill. A way of colonising as well as a Christianising power. Some years would thus be spent in settling themselves in their new quarters gradually gaining a knowledge of the surrounding country, and, in the extreme north at any rate, a knowledge of the language. With regard to the south-western part of Scotland, where the Dalriadic colony had previously settled, it is likely that the Culdees would not require an interpreter. But in the north it was different; and Columba required the services of an interpreter both in his negotiations with King Brude, and in the conversion of the Skye Chieftain Artbrannan. The chief opposition they had to encounter came from the Druid, whose power waned in exact proportion to their success. The chieftain would soon discover that he had nothing to fear, but a good deal to gain from the residence and influence of those holy men of God (Ceile-De); and as a rule he left them unmolested. Not so, however, the Druid. It was to him a matter of life or death; and there can be no doubt that ancient Caledonia was once the scene of that cruelty, treachery and bloodshed which we find described in the graphic pages of Paton, Hannington, and Maokay of Uganda.

### **The Norse Invasion.**

But a change was at hand. That scourge of early Celtic Christianity—the Norse invaders—broke loose upon our Scottish shores, and for three centuries enveloped the land in heathen darkness. At first they came in quest of booty and plunder, and seized upon the treasures of the religious establishments with avidity. Nothing escaped their ravages; three times in succession was the lamp of Iona extinguished, and the lesser monasteries of the sea-coast shared the same fate. The shores of Caithness and Sutherland, from their proximity to the Orkney Isles, were early infested with these ruthless pirates. Pagans themselves, they had no scruples in making the monasteries their prey, and what they could not carry away with them they subjected to the fire and sword. In this way the labour of years was undone, and the history of the early Celtic Church abruptly closed. We may rest assured that settlements were not affected without a severe struggle with the native population. The many tumuli which are met with so frequently on the north coast are ascribed by tradition to this period, and point out the battle-fields of the contending parties. If we look upon the ninth century as the enchanting period of the Norse invasion, we are left with the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries as the period of occupation. During this period active hostilities would cease, and a certain fusion of the hostile races would take place. We read that on one occasion a peace was concluded at Camrigh, an eminence overlooking Durness, between Sweyn, King of Norway, and Malcolm II of Scotland.



The effects of this occupation are traceable in the place-names, in the language, and in the moral and physical characteristics of the people. I have on a former occasion tried to estimate the influence of the Norse language upon the Gaelic of Sutherland, and already referred to its effect on the topographical record. What we owe to the Norseman in the physical and moral spheres can never be ascertained with certainty; but that a blending of the races took place is absolutely certain. To them are due the light, sandy hair, the blue eye, and the powerful imagination which characterise the native population of the North Coast; and judging from the adventurous spirit, ready tact, and sanguine temperament of the people of this parish it would seem as if they could lay claim to a more than average share of the blood of the Vikings.

It would be interesting to know the conditions of life which obtained in Sutherlandshire under Norse rule. We may gather a few facts bearing on this from the pages of Torfaeus, but they are exceedingly meagre. Reference has already been made to the peace established in Ard-Durness—which is by mistake located in Strathnaver; and we further learn from the same source that Alexander, King of Scotland, took Sutherland from Magnus II., Earl of Orkney in 1231, which until then was reckoned part of the Orkney Earldom. It is likely that along the sea-coast a bi-lingual race would spring up; but it does not appear that a complete fusion ever took place. The dominant Norseman imposed tribute upon the vanquished population; and claimed for himself the richest parts of the soil. But in everything save military power, the conquered were superior to their conquerors. They were superior in point of numbers and civilisation; and the presence of the Norwegian fleet alone accounts for the quiet submission of the Celt to the foreign power. When this received a check at Largs, and the storms of the North Coast completed the destruction of the fleet, Norwegian rule may be said to have ceased in Scotland. Thereafter a process of evacuation set in; and the more determined and adventurous spirits, who would not submit to the new order of things, looked about for new lands and eventually settled in Iceland. They carried with them there the principles of civilisation and the truths of Christianity.

The Norsemen in the tenth and eleventh centuries settled in and occupied the lands on the east coast, and along the Oyckll valley and possessed several settlements on the north and west coasts. In the reign of David I, after the rebellion of Malcolm Macheath, the Mackays migrated from Moray and settled in Strathnaver and Reay. It was in a latter migration that the Murrays, the natives of Sutherlandshire, came over from Strathbogie under Hugo, son of Freskyn de Moravia and took up residence on the shores of Loch Eriboll.

### **The Clan Period.**

The last encounter between the Norsemen and the native population took place towards the close of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In 1263 Haco, King of Norway, made vast preparations to go to the rescue of his countrymen in the Hebrides. Three of his captains, Erling, Ivarson, and Andrew Nicolson had got the start of the main fleet, and resolved to while away the time by making a descent upon Durness. They sailed their galleys up the Eriboll Loch, and then disembarked, probably on the Eriboll side. Thence “they went up the country, burnt twenty hamlets, and destroyed a castle.” From the description given it is clear that this descent was made upon the villages lying to the south-east of Loch Eriboll, and that the Castle referred to is the far-famed Dornadilla. But the fortunes of war are variable. When Haco returned from the west, and his fleet lay becalmed in the Gia-fiord (Loch Eriboll) after rounding Cape Wrath, some of his men, in ignorance of what had taken place, landed to secure a supply of water. They were immediately surrounded “by the Scots” and slain, and their graves are pointed out to this day.

In order to provide against such inroads as the preceding, a certain amount of organisation became necessary, and in this way a beginning was made of what is known as the Clan system. The Kings of Scotland were willing to recognise the services of the most successful leaders

against those invaders, and portions of land were freely granted in return for such services. There can be no doubt that this was the origin of the two leading clans in Sutherlandshire, the Sutherlands and Mackays. And not only were lands given for military services, but for other purposes as well. Sir Alexander Stewart had granted a charter to Farchard, the King's physician, of certain portions of Durness, and we find under the date 1379 this charter duly confirmed by King Robert II., giving the lands of Melness and two parts of Hope to the same Farquar, and nine years subsequently giving, in addition, a large number of islands on the North Coast, including Eilean Hoan and Eilean Choery, in Loch Eriboll. This this connection it is curious to observe how traditions come down through the generations. There yet lives in Durness an old man (great-grandson of Rob Donn the poet) who is thoroughly convinced he could make good his claim to all these islands, on the ground of direct descent from the famous physician; According to his version, his renowned ancestor effected the cure of the King by the timely discovery of a white serpent, and the words of the charter ran, "*Na h-uile h-eilean tha's a' mhuir Eadar Storr is Stroma 'n t-sruth.*" which substantially agrees with the islands named in the charter of 1386.

What is now embraced in the parish of Durness frequently changed hands during the clan period. At one time it would seem to have formed part of the possessions of the House of Sutherland; at another time we find it in possession of the Mackays, while the MacLeod's of Assynt, who gradually developed into the leading power in the west of Sutherland, also claimed a connection. From about the year 1500 till its recent absorption into the Sutherland estates, it remained in the possession of the Lords of Reay. The following notes serve to show the uncertain character of its tenure about this period:—

In 1499, for the good service of Odo Mackay, James IV granted him in heritage certain lands, including Davoch Eriboll, which had been forfeited by Alexander Sutherland for treason.

In 1511, by a deed at Inverane, Donald MacCorrachie resigned the lands of Melness, Mussel, and Hope, in favour of Y Mackay and his son John.

In 1530, James V. gave Hope, Huinleam, Amaboll, Eriboll, Mussel, Kin tail, and Westmoin, in heritage to William Sutherland of Duffus—the dues of said lands.

In 1539 the same King gave to Sir Donald Mackay of Strathnaver, in heritage, the free barony of Farr created a new, including Davoch, Eriboll, Hoan, and the lands of Hope.

This last gift brought about a dispute between the Sutherlands and Mackays, in the settlement of which we find the Earl of Moray arbiter in 1542.

During this period, a formidable chieftain obtained considerable power in Durness. This was Donald MacMurrach-mac-Ian-mhor. He was a Macleod, and originally hailed from Lewis. It is likely that owing to some misdeeds he had to flee his native island, and he was harboured for some time by Macleod of Assynt. We next find him as chief of the Macleod's of Durness, and holding in life-rent the lands of Westmoin. This was conferred upon him by Hugh Mackay of Farr, father of Donald, first Lord Reay. At this period what is now known as the Reay Country was held as follows: From Cape Wrath to Assynt, by Donald, brother of said Hugh, or as he is better known in history, "Huistean Dubh nan tuagh" (Black Hugh of axes); Durness, by Donald Mac-Murchon in life-rent; Strathhalladale, by Niel Mackay, a near kinsman of the Chief; and the remainder of the Mackay Country by Hugh himself. When Donald, first Lord Reay, succeeded to the property and title, he succeeded in gaining possession and charter rights to the whole of the Reay Country; and ever since, the Master of Reay always resided in Balnakeil, Durness, in the present Mansion House, which up to that date was the Bishop's, residence.

In the Judiciary Records, under the date of 10<sup>th</sup>. December 1668, mention is made of another Durness warrior of some note in his day. This was William Mackay or Maccomash, who had his floruit in the time of John, Lord Reay. This latter nobleman, possessed the lands of Spittal in Caithness, but found it difficult to secure their rents. So he took the law into his own hands; made a raid upon Caithness and carried off a great booty. The Earl of Caithness naturally resented this, and criminal letters were lodged against the raiders, “making mention that the said William M‘Comash, in Durness, and others, in the year 1649, under the command of Niel Mackay, kinsman of Lord Reay, robbed and spoiled the said country of Caithness,” but the diet was deserted, and the proceedings terminated.

The most important local family at this time was that of Hurley, near Balnakeil. This family was connected with the Scourie branch of the Mackays; and furnished some of the ablest men that ever bore the name. Donald of Borrallie was second son of Scourie, and brother of General Mackay who fought against Dundee. He had a son who succeeded him in the lands of Borrallie, Captain William Mackay; and under date 18th May, 1675, he obtains a charter from Lord Reay of the Scourie district. He led a company of Mackays at the battle of Worcester, on the side of Charles II. His brothers also were men of note. Donald, who took a leading part in what is known as the Darien Scheme, and which ended in failure; and the Rev. John Mackay, who was educated at St. Andrews and on the Continent, and became minister first of Durness, and afterwards of Lairg. He was succeeded there by his son, Rev. Thomas Mackay, whose family also was distinguished. It was a son of this clergyman of Lairg that wrote the “Shipwreck of the Juno,” to whom Byron owes so much in “Don Juan.”

All through this period, the eldest son of the chief resided at Balnakeil. It was impossible to estimate the value of such an arrangement in civilising a region which until then was so isolated. Owing to this it happened that the natives of the most inaccessible portion in the north were brought into personal contact with men of wealth and culture, and the effect made itself manifest in their general bearing. They became more intelligent, sprightly, and chivalrous than their neighbours, and there is a valid foundation in fact, as well as evidence of caustic Celtic humour, for the name by which they are known in a neighbouring parish—uaislean Dhuirinah (Durness gentry).

Ecclesiastical Records.

Perhaps in no way was the beneficial effect of the Balnakeil Mansion House more apparent than in securing for the natives from time to time the services of the ablest and most cultured clergymen. It may at first sight appear strange that such an outlandish parish as Durness could command such men; men who not only had brilliant careers at our Scottish Universities, but who also drank deeply at the continental seats of learning. The reason was twofold. In the first place the parish of Durness, until recent times, was a very large one including the three parishes of Tongue, Durness, and Eddrachillis. In the second place, the Reay family was among the first to adopt the Protestant religion, and took a special pride in securing the services of the ablest men. One of the Lord Reays made it a boast, that for praying, preaching, and singing, “he would back the Presbytery of Tongue against any other Presbytery in Scotland.” The clergyman to whom he referred as so proficient in singing was Mr. Murdo Macdonald, A.M., minister of Durness.

The story of the ecclesiastical history of Durness would, of itself, form no inconsiderable essay. It begins, as we have seen, with the Culdee Missionaries settling in Balnakeil, who underwent the same kind of usage from the warlike sons of Lochlin as their Iona brethren. But they did not give up the struggle in despair, for we find that the Church of Durness, between the years 1223 and 1245, was assigned by Bishop Gilbert “to find light and incense for the Cathedral Church at Dornoch.” It would be unreasonable to expect a connected history of the fortunes of

this monastery, for such does not exist, but, judging from the subsequent history of the north coast, it would appear that while the influence of the Celtic Church waned in proportion to the aggressions of Rome, Balnakeil Monastery would have been among the last to come under such influence. In England, which had been Christianised mainly by Papal emissaries, it was but natural that they should acknowledge the supremacy of the Roman See. But it was quite otherwise in Scotland, and down to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Scottish Kings on the one hand, and the Scottish clergy on the other, resented with all their might the foreign influence. But it was a losing battle in which they were engaged; the Scottish clergy retired gradually before the representatives of Rome, first from England, and latterly from the south of Scotland. But as late as 1320, eight earls and thirty-one Barons of Scotland sent a spirited remonstrance to the Pope, asserting their determination to preserve their ancient freedom alike in State and Church, declaring at the same time their spiritual obedience to Rome.

The Culdees continued until the fourteenth century, when they were finally superseded by a regular order of clergy owing allegiance in worship and ritual to Rome. But in the more inaccessible districts there is no question that they held out against the innovations of Rome much longer; and the same century which saw the decline of the Scottish Church, saw the rise of the Lollards and the Wickliffe's. Considering the slower pace of events in our northern peninsula, it is not too much to say that the influence of the Culdees remained until the fifteenth century, and this accounts for the almost entire absence of traditions relating to Roman Catholic priests in the north coast.

In no part of Scotland was the Reformation earlier launched and more effectually carried out than in the Reay Country, where the soil, had been favourable for its reception, through the labours of the Culdees. Roman Catholicism flourished but a short time here, and was looked upon by the people as an exotic plant. The only tradition which the writer heard, which owes its origin to this influence, is that about a certain priest called the "Sagart Ruadh," and the curious thing in connection with him is that almost every parish in the North Coast preserves very much the same traditions concerning him, and claims his grave. In Durness, a spot is pointed out where he had a chapel; in Strathnaver again, forty miles distant, his grave is to be seen in the valley of the Naver. When the river will have removed his bones (and it is now within a few yards of it) the tradition is that "the Cheviot sheep will give way again to men." In one way the scantiness of materials dating from this period is very natural, when we consider that the chief, Hugh Mackay of Farr, and father of 1<sup>st</sup>. Lord Reay, adopted with his clansmen the principles of the Reformation. He flourished between 1571 and 1614. So attached was the family to the cause of religious freedom that his son, Sir Donald, mentioned above, served on the continent under Gustavus Adolphus, and drew so largely upon the resources of his estate to equip him in this undertaking that it never afterwards recovered financially.

I shall bring the ecclesiastical record of the parish to a close by subjoining a number of notices, gathered from many sources in the Advocates' and Free Library, Edinburgh, adding, where possible, further information from local tradition.

1541.—James V. presented the vicarage of Ard-Durness to Mr John Jackson, vacant by the death of Sir Gilbert Dynocht. He resided in Balnakeil House.

1544.—Mr John Jackson was still vicar.

1551. — On a letter from Queen Mary to the Bishop Elect of Caithness, the latter received Robert, Bishop of Orkney, as tenant of the lands of Durness and tends of the parish. In 1559 the same Bishop granted the same lands in heritage to John, Earl of Sutherland.

Between 1561 and 1566, the teinds of the parish continued to be leased with the lands and Barony of Ard-Durness.

In 1567, John Reid is appointed exhorter there. At this time the parish extended for fifty miles from east to west.

1576.—King James VI. Presented the vicarage to George Mernes.

1580.—(Date of National Covenant—directed against Popery) the said George Mernes “is placid conform to warrant.” He is said to have demitted before 8th March 1580, when William Mernes was presented to the vicarage by James VI.

16— . — Mr Alexander Munro was appointed to the benefice in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He is styled in Macrae’s MS. “catechist of Strathnaver”—which at the time formed part of the parish of Durness. He found the natives in a state of heathenism almost, so far as religion was concerned, which demonstrates what many a writer has affirmed concerning the religion of Scotland in the centuries between the decline of the Celtic Church and the Reformation, that for its influence on the moral and intellectual life of the people, it may be said to have had no existence. The labours of Sandy Munro, as he is called by tradition, were greatly blessed. He was no mean poet, and translated or paraphrased portions of Scripture for the benefit of his parishioners. Some of these are preserved in Macrae’s MS., and are of much interest as showing the northern dialect of Gaelic as it existed about two or nearly three centuries ago—being written phonetically. He was converted under the preaching of Mr Robert Bruce, second son of Bruce of Airth, one of the barons of Scotland, and a connection of the Royal Bruces. This took place while the latter was prisoner at Inverness, on account of resisting the Episcopal designs of James the Sixth. Soon after he believed he heard a voice from heaven calling him to the ministry, and informing him of this his future settlement. He studied for the Church, and was duly licensed and ordained for this remote parish, through the influence of the Reay family, whose leanings were with the evangelical party. His son, Hew Munro, succeeded to the benefice, and his daughter Christian married John Mackay of Achness, chieftain of the Clan Abrach branch of the Mackays.

For some years, since the death of the preceding incumbent in 1653, the parish was vacant, and the Presbytery Record of Caithness shows, under date 5th Dec., 1659, that Mr Alexander Clerk, minister at Latheron, was sent to officiate in Strathnaver, “according to the Lord of Rhaes desire to supply them.” The same Record contains also the following:—“Wick, 4 Dec., 1660.—All brethren present, except David Munro, absent in Strathnaver.”

“Thurso, Jan. 1st, 1661. Letter presented showing that Mr David Munro had come the length of Strathie, but was detained there by tempestuous weather. Excuse admitted.”

Thurso, Sept. 26, 1662. The said my Lord Bishop, and the brethren of ye Presbytery present, Mr He we Munro (son of Sandy Munro above) had his popular sermon on Math. xiii. 24, as a part of his trial, in order to his call to the Church of Durines, in Strathnaver, and being removed was approved. This was the first meeting after Prelacy was restored.

1663, Ordained said Hew Munro to Durness. From this date forward there are many references in the Presbytery Record complaining of his non-attendance at the meetings. He excused himself on the grounds of distance, and difficulty of the journey, but was sharply admonished. He did not take the test in 1681, but on petitioning the Privy Council, he was allowed to do so before his Ordinary on 16th March, 1682. He died in possession of his benefice in 1698, aged 59 years, in the 36th year of his ministry. A daughter, Isabella, married Robert Mackay of Achness.

A vacancy again occurs between 1700 and 1707, and we find the General Assembly of -1704 directing to send “a probationer having Irish (Gaelic) to Caithness, with a special eye to Durness.”

1707.—John Mackay, A.M., 3rd son of Captain Wm., of Borley, referred to above, was ordained minister of the parish. It was on a distinct understanding that the parish should be divided, and another minister placed in it. This promise was set aside by George, Lord Reay, the heritor. A lawsuit followed, and the minister failed in his endeavour to secure justice, with the result that a call to another charge was procured for him, and he was transferred to Lairg in 1713, after a ministry of about seven years in his native parish. This lawsuit preyed alike on his health and resources, but at Lairg he proved of great service in civilising the rude inhabitants, the Earl of Sutherland conferring upon him power to inflict corporeal punishment where necessary. He was educated first at St Andrews, and then on the Continent and connected as he was with the Reay family, was a man of culture as well as education. He was of great physical strength, which was much required in those days, when moral suasion failed; and tradition points to an island in Loch Shin, where this worthy divine imprisoned for a time his more lawless parishioners. Left alone there during the night, there is no question but the method, acting in concert with their fears and superstitions, would have a salutary effect.

1715.—George Brodie appointed to the parish by the Presbytery, *jure devolvio*. It was in his time that the parish was divided by the Commissioners of Teinds (1724), and he betook himself on its erection to the newly-created parish of Eddrachillis.

The next incumbent was Mr Murdo Macdonald, A.M., who was inducted in 1726. An account of the diary kept by him was furnished some years ago to your Society by Mr Hew Morrison, now of the Free Library, Edinburgh. He was minister of the parish for nearly 40 years, and was succeeded by Mr Thomson, whose daughter married the pre-Disruption minister of Durness, Rev. Mr Finlater. But as my paper has already exceeded the length usually granted to such contributions, I must reserve for a future occasion the events in Church and State during this most interesting period. It was during Mr Murdo's ministry that Rob Donn, the Reay country bard, and native of Durness, flourished; and in justice to this interesting period of our parochial history.

### **Statistical Account Number LXXIX. Parish of Durness. 1792**

By the Rev. Mr. John Thomson.

Origin of the Name.

Various etymologies are assigned for the name of this parish. Among others, it is said that Dur is a construction of Durrin or Dourin, which signifies, in the Gaelic, a storm, so that Durness would seem to mean the ness or promontory of storms, an appellation to which the neighbouring coast is not unentitled. But whatever may be the meaning of the name, it is well known, from tradition, that the application of it, to this parish, took place, not from the nature of the ground, but in consequence of the Bishop of Caithness disposing of it to Morrison, (Ay Mac Hermaid, as they call him), a Lewis man, and a nature of a place called Diurness there, on occasion of his being married to his natural daughter, or, as such were usually termed in those days, his sister. This Ay Morrison gave it its present name, to commemorate the place of his own nativity. Whatever its former name might have been, it surely has been sheal, or summer dwelling of old, belonging to the bishopric of Caithness.

Extent and Situation.

The parish comprehends the cultivated lands on the eastern side of Loch Eriboll, common called Westmoine; with the tract denominated Strathmore, and intersected by the River Hope. It forms a part of the county of Sutherland, of the presbytery of Tongue, and of the synod of Caithness and Sutherland. The greatest length of the parish is computed to be fifteen miles, and the greatest breadth,

## Surface and Scenery.

The scenery of this parish is mostly wild and mountainous. Considerable tracts are occupied by mosses. Towards the shore, however, where the peninsula terminates in Far-out-head, there is a series of beautiful fields, and rich green pasture. On the sides of the hills, too, upon spots where shields have been occasionally erected, to shelter the shepherds, in summer and harvest, when feeding their stocks at a distance from their ordinary dwellings, the sward is richly variegated with clover, daisies, and other valuable grasses and wild flowers. Loch Borley, a lake which is a full quarter of a mile in length, and about two thirds as much in breadth, lies in the middle of the peninsula of Durness. A small river falls into the Bay of Durness, and the River Hope holds its course upon the east side of Loch Eriboll. Along the shore, a tract of flat land extends, in some places, to the very verge of the ocean; in others, there is a considerable extent of bare sands; at the head lands, piles of rocks tower to a vast height.

## Shores and Tides

The shores are almost everywhere rocky, barren, and even destitute of vegetables. In Loch Eriboll, and indeed in some creeks, red-ware, or sea-weed, is produced in such quantity, as to afford, yearly, 10 or 12 tons of kelp; and on the shores, upon both sides of Far-out-head, great quantities of this weed are driven in by the waves, and used for manure by the possessors of the adjoining lands. Great plenty of sponges, but not of the best quality, are also inter-mixed among those sea weeds. The tides rush in with great rapidity and violence upon this coast, especially on the head lands; and, above all, at Cape Wrath, where their violence is increased by means of a shoal, running out north by east, from the extremity of the Cape, for 5 or 6 miles, and covered by a depth of water, measuring only from 16 to 24 fathoms. About a mile from the coast is the Staigs, a rock the top of which is always above water; but which is, nevertheless, formidable to ships approaching the Cape by night; but a still more dangerous rock, the top of which can be seen only in neap tides, is said to lie 9 miles due north from the Cape.

## Lakes and Rivers

Loch Eriboll is a spacious harbour, in which even the smallest sloop enjoys perfect safety, and which appears large enough to receive perhaps the whole British Navy. On the east, it is bounded by the bright and elevated rocks of Whitenhead, which mariners distinguish at a distance, even in the night; and on the west by Ruspín, a small dry harbour, lately much improved by the tacksmen of the fishing's and the kelp shores. At Far-out-head, there is a large bay of rough sea, too open to afford shelter for vessels. Cape Wrath, Far-out-head, and Whitenhead, are the only headlands on this part of the coast.

## Caves

In the cave of Smoo, sounds are distinctly repeated by a remarkable echo. This cave is, indeed, in many respects, an object worthy to attract and engage the notice of a curious observer of nature. It is, in some places, 100 yards wide. The natural vault is about 70 or 80 yards in height. A short way within the mouth of the cave, there is a persoration in the arch, through which a stream of water descends, and is received into a subterraneous lake, that extends backwards to a length that has not been ascertained. Tradition says, that the only person who ever had courage to attempt to explore it, was one Donald, master of Reay, and that the extinction of the lights, by soul air, obliged him to return, before he could advance to the extremity of the lake, or the boundary of the cave. Many other caves, besides Smoo are scattered through the peninsula of Durness; but none so singularly remarkable, so large, or so magnificent.

Minerals, etc.

The tract of country is not known to afford any uncommon minerals. Through the whole peninsula, no less upon the flowers, than in the interior parts, the soil seems to rest upon one unbroken bed of limestone, perforated here and there, indeed, by the caves above mentioned, but intercepted by no veins or strata of stone of a different nature.

#### Fish.

Loch Borrallie affords, in great abundance, a species of trout called Red Bellies, and, in Gaelic, Tarragan. They are caught only in October, when they repair to the shallow water to deposit their spawn. Both the small river, which empties itself into the Bay of Durness, and the Hope, afford salmon, like other British rivers communicating with the sea. These, with all the other fishing in Lord Reay's country, are under lease to a company, who export the fish caught. The former river yield about 24 barrels of salmon annually. The Hope may afford 20 barrels. Cod, ling, skate, turbot, haddocks, whiting, and flounders, are the most common sea fish upon these coasts. Loch Eriboll sometimes affords a small tack of herrings. Seals abound all around the coast. When the tide is at ebb, scores of them are daily to be seen, basking upon the banks of the channel. As they seldom go out to sea in quest of food, they are commonly in a pitiful lean condition; and yet they are so shy, that it is scarcely possible, by any artifice, to come at them.

#### Birds and Quadrupeds

The quadrupeds and birds, in this tract of country, are the same as through the rest of the Highlands. Grouse and moors owl are, however, less plentiful here than in many other places; for the hills and fields are too bare to afford much cover for these birds; and, as there are few corn fields, neither can hares or partridges find much food or shelter here. Both the black cattle and the sheep of Durness are esteemed to be of an uncommonly excellent breed. Cape Wrath has long been reckoned an excellent sheep walk; the sheep stock said upon it was, however, much more numerous 30 years pass, than at present, having been disjoined from the contiguous farm of Balnakeil, and affording, itself, no sit pasture for the younger stock, it has same suffered a rapid decrease.

#### Agriculture and Produce

The grain produced here is barley and black oats. White oats have been found to degenerate greatly in a few successive sowings. Great quantities of potatoes are planted every year. The plough is used in planting and honing them, and answers extremely well for this article of crop. Cabbages, green kale, turnips, carrots, etc. are produced in the gardens. In favorable seasons, the parish produces as much as maintains its inhabitants. In years of scarcity, it is supplied from Caithness. It is a happy circumstance, that the bottom of Loch Borrallie contains an inexhaustible sand of the richest shell marle.

#### Roads.

No roads have yet been made through this tract of country, and, of consequence, on no occasion has the statute labour yet been exacted.

#### Shipping.

About 20 of the natives of this parish are employed in navigating two floops, the property of the tacks-men of the kelp shores and salmon fishings. These sloops were built in the Bay of Durness, in the years 1788 and 1789. They fail from Ruspín, to the herring and cod fishing, in which they have hitherto been pretty successful.

#### Price of Labour

The wages of day labourers are commonly from 6 d. to 7 1/2 d. a day; carpenters receive 1 s. and masons the same, daily wages, for building walls of dry stones. The usual half yearly



wages, which farmers pay to their men servants, are from 26 s. to 11. 16 s.; women servants are paid from 10 s. to 15 s.

#### Fuel

Peats are the fuel universally used through the parish. These every family cut and prepare for themselves.

#### Language

The Gaelic language is still generally spoken through this parish; but the English makes considerable progress among the people.

#### Heritor and Rent.

Lord Reay is sole proprietor of the whole lands of this parish. The whole rent of the lands help shores, and fishing, may be about 4501. Sterling.

#### Population

As to the population of this parish, it appears, from lists completed upon the 12th of June 1790 that the whole number of souls then amounted to 1182, of whom 509 were inhabitants of Westmoin, and 673 of the penin of Durness. The return to Dr. Webster, in 1755, was 1000. The annual average of births appears, from the parish register, to be 41; of the deaths 30; and the marriages.

#### Diseases

Although the atmosphere be frequently moist, and very large quantities of rain fall here in the course of the year, yet the people are not greatly infested by diseases, Dysenteries, (often occasioned, perhaps, by the inordinate use of cow's milk in summer an harvest), and slow fevers, (probably produced, in many instances, by sleeping in the shiels, upon the damp ground, or on green bulrushes; by long fasting, by exposure to wetness of feet, and by neglect of personal cleanliness), are the most prevalent distempers, especially among the poorer inhabitants in this parish. The small-pox used formerly to cut off great numbers of the children; but inoculation was introduced here more than 30 years ago, by the late Dr. Dunnet of Thurso; and about 12 years past, the practice was rendered general, by the active benevolence of a gentleman belonging to the parish, and was attended with the greatest success.

#### Emigrations

About 17 or 18 years ago, several families emigrated from this parish to North America. A few have removed, within these 2 or 3 years, to seek employment at the cotton mills.

#### Church, etc.

This, with the adjoining parishes in Strathnaver, known by the names of Tongue and Eddrachillis, comprehending a tract of country, which is computed to be 30 miles in length, and 15 or 20 in breadth, were formerly united in one parish, under the common name of Durness. But, as one clergyman was not equal to the task of instructing the inhabitants of so extensive a district in religion, and inspecting their manners, George Lord Reay, in the year 1721, applied to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, for aid towards the religious instruction of the inhabitants of this country. The Assembly agreed, that a collection should, for this purpose, be made through all Scotland. A contribution of 1500 L. Sterling was thus obtained. The original parish of Durness was, in consequence, divided into the 3 present parishes of Durness, Tongue, and Eddrachillis, in the year 1724. Stipends were assigned for the ministers of these parishes, in certain proportions, out of the teinds of Lord Reay's estate, and the interest of the money contributed. The stipend then allotted to the minister of Durness,

was 800 merks Scotch, with 40 merks more, in the same money, for communion elements. Of these sums, 150 merks were constituted payable out of the teinds of Lord Reay's estate; the other 690 merks were to be received out of the interest of the general contribution. By a reduction of the rate of the interest upon the mortified fund, this stipend has been since diminished to the small sum of 42 L. 16 s. 8 d. Sterling. The glebe may be worth about 4 L. of yearly rent. The king is patron; but the family of Reay have always presented, and their presenters have ever been acceptable to the people. A part of the church seems to have been built in the year 1692, and some part of it may have been built still earlier. The manse was first built in the year 1727; in 1771, it was repaired; and in the years 1785 and 1786, it was entirely rebuilt.

#### Schools

The salary of the parochial school is only 10 merks Scotch, payable by Lord Reay, with recourse on his Lordship's tenants for the one half. The quarter payments are, 2 s. 6 d. for teaching Latin; 2 s. for arithmetic; 1 s. 6 d. for reading and writing; and 1 s. for teaching to read. The schoolmaster has sometimes 20 s. and sometimes 1 L. 10 s. a year, as precentor and session clerk. He has 1 s. for every marriage, and 3 d. for a baptism. But the salary and perquisites could not maintain him, if his employers did not accommodate him in board and lodgings. The present master, Mr. Thomas Ross, is approved for his diligence and success. The number of scholars is 45, or thereby. The school house and room for the master will be in excellent repair very soon. There is a Society school in Westmoin, a district of this parish. The master has 10 L. 2 year; and his wife 3 L. for teaching some branches of female education. The number of scholars never exceed 30 at any time; there are indeed seldom so many.

#### Poor.

There are 35 poor people who are assisted from the funds, under the direction of the kirk session. The amount of the weekly contributions, for their relief, with the interest of a mortified fund of 57 L. 10 s. may be about 12 L. a year. In the years 1782 and 1783, when the crops failed, the supplies liberally provided by the late Lieutenant-General Alexander Mackay, together with the share of what Parliament granted, for the relief of the north of Scotland, contributed greatly to alleviate the sufferings of the poor, in those seasons of general want.

#### Antiquities

The only remarkable monument of antiquity that remains in this parish is the famous Dun Dornadilla, in Strathmore. That portion of the wall, of this ancient tower, which is still standing, is 18 feet at the highest part. The area appears to have been surrounded with 2 concentric walls. A large triangular stone covers the front door, as a lintel. The opposite side has been reduced to rubbish.

#### Eminent Men.

The celebrated Gaelic bard, Robert Donn, was of this parish. His songs are well known, and discover uncommon force of genius. It is a pity that they have not been printed, to secure them from mutilation, corruption, or oblivion.

#### Proposed Improvements

It would contribute greatly to the safe navigation of vessels upon these coasts, if a light house was erected upon Cape Wrath. The bearings of the rocks, lying off the Cape, ought also to be accurately ascertained. Some shipwrecks that have happened, within these last 10 years, upon the coast of Durness, seem to point out the necessity of these measures.

#### General Character

Of the character of the inhabitants of this parish, it may be observed, that they are moderately industrious, hospitable, and fond of a military life. Many a brave hardy soldier has gone from Durness; and of these, some have raised themselves considerably in the army.

#### **Account XV from 1834. Rev. William Findlater**

The principal amusements in Durness are playing at the ball and shinty on the fine sands of Balnakeil. The whole population turns out on old Christmas Day and New Year's Day and even old men of seventy are to be seen mingling in the crowd; remaining until night puts an end to the contest. To keep up the tone of the actions they retire in the evening and mingle in dance to the music of the bagpipe, regardless of the bruises and scars of the contest. The natives are generally lively in their dispositions, social in their habits, although it cannot be said they are remarkable for their cleanliness, cattle and people using the same shelters. When engaged in labour either at sea or on land they endure a great deal of fatigue. Spending evenings in each other's houses in the plentiful hamlets sharing the news of the country, repeating the songs of their native bard or listening to legendary tales. All natives speak Gaelic, a proportion of the young can speak English. The habits of dram drinking, acquired by both sexes in the course of

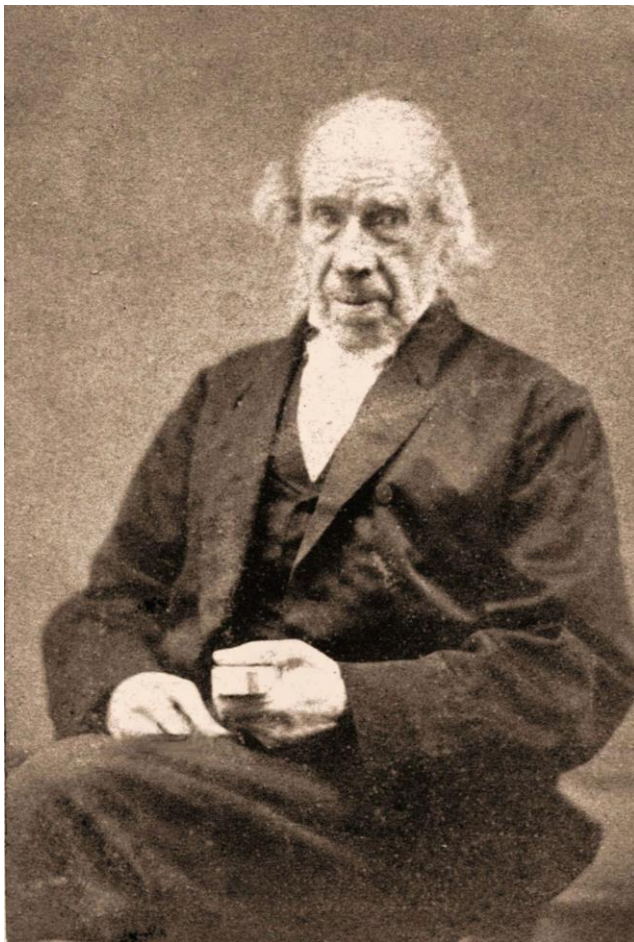


IMAGE 72 REV WILLIAM FINDLATER, DURNESS MINISTER, 1811-65

their mixing together have tended to deteriorate the morals of the people considerably. Their attendance at religious ordinances, however, is pretty regular. Smuggling, foreign and domestic is now totally depressed.

#### **Statistical Account the Rev. William Findlater, Minister. 1845**

The most important change since the last Statistical Account has been the introduction of sheep-farming, which commented about thirty years ago, and has been extended since. Though some respects this may have augmented the revenue of the processor, and added to the commercial wealth of the nation, yet it a very questionable, if it has added, in the meantime, to the intellectual, moral, or religious superiority of the inhabitants. The division of the parish into such extensive farms has also depressed almost entirely the middle classes of society, who paid counts of from L. 10 to L. 50, and has thereby tended to extinguish, a great degree, the intelligence, and laudable emulation of the new classes. The former generally felt a desire of giving every advantage of education to their children at

school, and their example diffused an emulation among the latter. The great sheep-partners who are resident employ teachers in their families; the schools are attended by the poorer classes, who are all on the same level,-and that, for the most part, during the winter only. Lads when they can handle an oar remove to Caithness, and after two or three years training there, getting the share of a boat on credit, they have arrived at the summit of their ambition, and

marry. From the extinction of the middling classes of society, the writer hereof, in common with several of his brethren, has to regret the difficulty of finding men suitable for being ordained elders. It cannot be expected, however worthy the individuals may be who may be nominated to this office, that while poor and in some cases illiterate, they can be so influential in checking immorality, stimulating to intellectual and religious attainments, and suppressing superstitious and enthusiastic feeling.

While such improvements have been made on the physical aspect of the parish, by the liberality of the late Duke, and which there is every confidence will be continued, in making the harbours and creeks more accessible and available, it is hoped that the tenants will gradually acquire the knowledge of artisanship, as well as of fishing, and thus add to the productive capabilities of the country, and their own individual comfort.

### **A Shinty Match in Sutherland 1894**

Originally with illustration of play on the beach. London-Robina Findlater.

This article was written by the daughter of the Rev. William Findlater and describes the events surrounding the game of Shinty that was at one time very popular in the parish. This game is no longer played although a version with refined rules is taught to the school children.

Times have changed in the North of Sutherland, and with them the habits and customs of the people have undergone an alteration. The amusements of the winter months are still indulged in, but not so heartily, I fear, as they were in the days of long ago. Shinty was a favourite game on the sands of Balnakeil overshadowed by the fine baronial residence of the Lords of Reay, and on New Year's Day the game is still played. It may not prove uninteresting, to the readers of the *Celtic Monthly* to describe a New Year's Day Match as it was played on these beautiful sands many years ago.

It is a fine clear morning, with a touch of frost in the air sufficiently keen to add zest to the exertions of the day. The players having arrived, the Shinty is thrown down, and boys, lads, and men play merrily for half-an-hour without drawing sides, like the first flourish of offence before beginning in earnest.

The crowd thickens, old men appear upon the ground, and young wives and maidens also, as spectators, come dressed in their best attire. A murmur goes round that, it is time to begin; it gets louder and they collect in a group. The company having, assembled, it was proposed and unanimously carried, that the game be commenced in earnest. Retiring to the middle of the sands, two persons are chosen to draw sides, and a club is tossed in the air for the first call. The chosen one standing out in the ring looks around for companion-at-arms, who modestly holds back until called by name, when he advances, not unconscious of the honour conferred on him, but with affected humility, perhaps finding fault with his principal for having made such a bad choice. His opponent next selects his man, and so proceed, at first cautiously, each party consult together as to whom they should choose. At times, both call out favourite players simultaneously and then the battle wages long, and loud. But they now get impatient, and the names are called out still faster, until none are left save a few half grown boys too young to join the strife of heroes, and too old for entering the battle of the pigmies. A hole is then made in the sand, the men are seen stripping; shoes, stockings, bonnets, clothes are left in the custody of some daughter or fair favourite, or upon a sand hillock.

Two field marshals are appointed who take their stations; the ball is tossed out of the hole, each man firmly grasps his club, each eye is on the alert, up it ascends, and then begins the fight of heroes. All else is forgotten, brother comes against brother, father against son, for their blood is up. Now they seem all in a knot, next instant they separate, they press in a body upon one end, and they then diverge like mountain streams; but though many they are one, for they have

a common object, though only a piece of wood three inches in diameter. The fair ones, gentle and simple, group along the shore, while many a loving look is exchanged, no doubt stimulating some greater exertions. The running of one is beautiful, another's playing is awkward, that of a third is superb, of a fourth ludicrous. The masculine exhibition on that sea shore is really fine.

What flashes from that young man's eyes as he strikes forward the ball! What a proud step after he has done it! What attitudes that field marshal puts himself into as the ball is deliberately hid on a fulcrum of sand before him! Conscious of the gaze of a thousand eyes, he retreats a few steps, and measuring the object with the eye, clutches more firmly the club, and comes down with it in a circular sweep, hitting the ball beautifully, and following it with his eye as it rises into the clear blue sky. No rest being allowed, the ball is at times by mistake thrown into the sea, into which though the surge should be considerable, a dozen stalwart fellows leap, and even amidst the breakers struggle for it. As a tribute to bravery, the one who finds it is permitted to strike without molestation, a sufficient reward, he considers, for his ducking.

But look at that group who support a fainting man. From an accidental stroke of the club on the temple of his skull is laid bare. He is deadly pale as they carry him out of the melee. Women also surround him, among whom is the young man's sweetheart. Pale and trembling, she takes the handkerchief off her neck, and binds it round his head. His eyes open; that look she gave him has acted like a cordial. The warm blood once more mantles his face, he says he is quite well, and wishes again to enter the melee, but is kept back by a beseeching look from the maiden, and the tears by which it backed have more weight with him than the remonstrance's of a thousand tongues.

But we see another and a larger group, but it is difficult to wedge one's way into it. There is a ring and loud words; inside are two fellows with brawny arms, pale with anger, collaring one another, while others try to hold the determined fighters back. "Let them alone," cries a sensible old man, and, left to themselves, they see what a ridiculous figure they cut; they look at each other, shake hands, and set off once more in their pursuit. Sometimes, however, they are not so easily separated, and blood flows ere they desist from fighting. But see that poor limping dog which had faithfully followed his master, and for his fidelity has got a broken leg. What has so suddenly dispersed that female group?

The ball has effected this with as great expedition as a shell falling among a party of troopers. Off it goes, however; that handsome young fellow who eyed it intently had a design upon it, and now is his time, beautifully does he send it along, never missing, and as skilfully does he out-manoeuvre his adversary, who meets him; he waits, strikes it, and passes him. With the ball at his foot, a false step and all would be lost, for he is hotly pursued, the whole field being in full cry at his heels. But he knows his power, and reserves his strength to the last Forward he goes, only now pursued by two or three, and, out-distancing all, he is cheered by his own party, while the opposition only sullenly growl. Reaching the goal now, he strikes the ball against the rock, while a triumphant hail rises from a hundred voices, and meets him gratefully as again he draws breath.

By this time it is almost dark, and as each youth, weary with the day's exercise, returns home in the gloaming, he looks out for the girl he loves best, and engages her as his partner for the evening dance.

### **An Account from 1912 from the edited Parish Register of Durness Hew Morrison.**

The Register commenced in 1764, the year in which the settlement of the Rev. John Thomson as parish minister took place, to 1814. Hew Morrison notes that evidently Mr. Thomson was not a proficient Gaelic scholar although able to preach in the native tongue. He could not master the spelling of popular local surnames but he has preserved in the registrar a careful and minute

phonetic rendering both of names of persons and places. To identify persons he gave the proper and popular cognomens and in many cases names of fathers, grandfathers and great grandfathers. Careful noting of people with the same name was apparent especially Mackay. There is also a considerable mixture of other names, Morrisons, Munros, Macintyres, Sutherlands, Calders, Campbells, Macleods and Macdonalds. The Register contains detailed accounts of Baptisms and Marriages at a time when registers were hardly kept at all. It throws light on the social and moral condition of the people and the various classes are clearly defined. The very lowest person is designated, as residing "sometimes with his father and sometimes with his father-in-law" The next step in the social grade is a person living *in* a certain place. Then follows "little tenant", "tenant", "farmer", "tacksman." and some of the tacksmen have the prefix Mr. or Esquire and the parish minister seems to be at the top of the social ladder. At the beginning of the register of notices of baptisms, the entry of children not born in lawful wedlock is written clear. If this is considered with the time and strictness with which Mr. Murdoch Macdonald, Mr. Thomson's predecessor, held sway over the people during his ministry it does not cause a deal of surprise. Robb Donn in an elegy to the late minister Macdonald speaks of extremes in moral laxity to which people had declined since his death.

Early marriages were not readily approved of and when a young man probably not much out of his teens married, the register shows him as either a "simple young lad" or a "single young man" single signifying in this connection that he had little or no responsibility. The register also shows that there were many who plied a trade of some kind or another. There were masons, carpenters, boat builders, shoemakers, tailors, and weavers. It is interesting to note that Lord Reay employed a chef at Balnakeil House. Every leaf of the original register is signed by "John Thomson Minister" and up to 1811 in his own handwriting after 1811, it is in the handwriting of his successor the Rev. William Findlater.

#### **An account from 1955. Originally by Wm. Morley Hames Vice Convener of Sutherland**

Progress in road reconstruction has been severely handicapped in post war years owing to lack of funds. Work had commenced on the main road through the parish from the Gualin Lodge boundary and proceeded through Durness to Heilam on the East Side of Loch Eriboll where it was halted by the outbreak of war in 1939 and has not yet resumed. The road, which connects Durness with Lairg; our railhead, is in a deplorable condition for about forty miles.

A piped water supply for the whole parish, including the hamlet of Laid on the west shore of Loch Eriboll is now in progress of construction. A drainage scheme serves a portion of the parish and it is hoped to extend this in the near future. A scavenging area has also been formed for the more populous portion of the parish, and it is hoped to extend this in the near future. It is understood electricity will be brought here by the autumn of 1955. Social organisations are difficult to maintain. At present, there is a Football Club, a Badminton Club and a branch of the Woman's Guild, a Highland Gathering Committee, A British Legion Branch, and a Community Club. During the war, branches of the W.V.S. and of the W.R.I. were very active but these have now lapsed. A mobile library provided by the County Education Committee visits monthly and a local branch library is shortly to be set up by the Education Committee.

The standard of housing has been immensely improved during the past twenty-five years. Most of the older houses have disappeared with only three or four of the old fashioned bent house still in use. The County Council has completed six houses since the war and another four almost ready for occupation. A demand still exists for more houses. In the centre of the village are the ruins of a substantially built stone hotel that was destroyed by fire in 1908. The County Council has now acquired these ruins and hopes to be able to convert them into two houses. Householders in increasing numbers are preparing to take in water and are adding bathrooms and lavatories to their buildings. An appeal to the council is to be made shortly for the

installation of a proper drainage scheme for the whole parish The county rates are high at seventeen shillings and ten pence in the pound, half from the owner and half from the occupier.

The agricultural statistics at June 4<sup>th</sup>. 1953 were; tillage one hundred and eighty nine acres, temporary grass, one hundred and eighty two acres; permanent grass four hundred and ninety four acres; rough grazing, one hundred and eight thousand five hundred and seventy nine acres; nineteen horses, two hundred and seventy four cattle, twenty three thousand seven hundred and sixty two sheep, eight pigs, one thousand eight hundred and sixteen poultry. Holdings over one acre numbered ninety six. Total tractors at February 18th. 1954 were four. The number of milking cows has considerably decreased in recent years (could be due to the fact many crofts are occupied by bachelors). An increasing number of residents are receiving milk from the nearest branch of the Milk Marketing Board at Lairg, the milk being delivered by the daily mail bus in one pint bottles.

The Air Ministry are erecting buildings to house personnel engaged on a scheme, the construction of a radar station which is reported to be the most modern in the country. A survey party of the Scottish Council is taking samples for analysis regarding large scale Dolomite and silica deposits.

### **Account from March 1985**

Charles Stewart Sandeman.

The present population is two hundred and ninety seven, about half are incomers. There are twenty four children in the primary school.

There are no draught horses or milk cows. Milk comes in on the bus from Lairg. Frequently crofts have been combined and used for the grazing of sheep. The standard of housing continues to improve. A further twenty-one council houses have been built. Many croft houses are derelict. On the Cape Side there were until recently nine occupied houses, there are now only three occupied by lighthouse keepers whose families live on the east coast. The road from Gualin to Tongue and from Gualin to Lairg has been greatly improved although much of it remains single tract. Almost all houses have public water supply, mains drainage and electricity supply. A mobile library visits once fortnightly. There is a resident medical practitioner and district nurse. The parish of Durness has been combined with that of Kinlochbervie. Despite the fact that special surveys have been carried out it is unlikely any minerals found will ever be worked. The main development has been tourism.

Throughout the area is partial evidence of ancient works related to limestone. It is believed locally that at one time this must have been a very active industry with settlements developing in localities where small mining actions were possible.

## The history of Durness: from Clanship to Crofting

Malcolm Bangor-Jones (Loch Croispol Project)



IMAGE 73 MALCOLM BANGOR-JONES

This short essay on the district of Durness concentrates on the period between the mid-18th century and the mid-19th century. It was a period of extraordinary change which saw changes in landownership and land tenure, in peoples' livelihoods, and in social relationships. This essay is a selective account and should be read in association with the work of Graham Bruce on The Old School House of Croispol and the Clearance settlement of Ceannabeinne.

### Historical Background

Over the last five hundred years Durness has had a number of identities. The lands of Durness as they occur in old charters included not just Balnakeil but all the territory between the west side of Loch Eriboll and the River Laxford. They did not include Eriboll or Strath More. On the other hand, the medieval parish of Durness was huge and reached from the border with Assynt to include Tongue. In 1724 it was reduced in size and new parishes of Eddrachillis and Tongue

were created.

The lands of Durness lay within the province of Strathnaver which reached from Assynt to Caithness. Although Strathnaver came to be associated with the Clan Mackay, the lands of Durness belonged to the church (though the Mackays may have been tenants). At the time of the Reformation, Durness passed to the earls of Sutherland, and the Mackays were eventually confirmed as their feudal vassals.

The ambitions of the Mackays peaked in 1628 when Sir Donald Mackay was created Lord Reay. The clan had also reached their greatest territorial extent. Thereafter there was to be a long and drawn out decline. George Lord Reay, who succeeded as a minor in 1680, grew up to be a staunch Presbyterian and supporter of the Government. His influence, allied to that of the Earl of Sutherland, ensured that Sutherland was largely free of Jacobite influence.

The growing integration of the Mackay gentry into the mainstream culture of Scotland was obvious by the early 18th century. More expensive tastes and ways of living brought about financial pressures. While leading members of the clan were to assist by lending money, the narrow agricultural base, where the main commercial emphasis was on livestock farming, posed severe constraints on estate income. The Mackay gentry had always adopted a commercial attitude towards their estates, for instance, selling their produce by way of contracts entered into with Lowland merchants from places like Inverness, Aberdeen, and Edinburgh. From the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, these attitudes were to take stronger root.



## **The Reay Estate and Agricultural Improvement**

In the eighteenth century Lord Reay was a leading member and correspondent of the premier agricultural society in Scotland, the Society of Improvers, and was latterly its President. His agricultural experiments included sown grasses, inclosures, water meadows and even a 'trial' of wheat. These experiments took place either on the Mains of Tongue, or on the Mains of Balnakeil to which were attached the fine grazings on Faraid Head and the Parph between the Kyle of Durness and Cape Wrath. The inventory of Lord Reay's farm stocking following his death in 1748 suggest that the experiments had included the introduction of some Black Faced sheep onto the Parph and that, while they may have been few in number initially, the flock had continued to increase. These would have been significantly larger than the native sheep.

Donald Lord Reay possessed the two mains farms until his death in 1761. While initially circumscribed by the family trust, his son George was able to take possession of the estate, including the mains farms in 1764. He entered into a ten year contract with Charles Gordon of Skelpick for the disposal of the estate produce, including wedders, sheep, hoggs, lambs and wool, and also goat's and sheep's cheese. He also had an interest in estate improvements. In 1767, the naturalist James Robertson, noted that, while there were few sheep in the north, 2500 were kept by Lord Reay and they "had succeeded so well, that he intended to bring from the south 5000 more." Part of the Faraid Head was enclosed "for the purpose of receiving My Lord Rae's newly weaned lambs". The inventory of Lord Reay's moveable effects after his death in 1768 revealed that his stocking included £1000 worth of cattle and over £600 of sheep. Balnakeil, including its sheep flock, was let in 1770 to Colonel Hugh Mackay, the eldest son of John Mackay of Clashneach, and who had prospered in Jamaica. In 1780 the Parph continued to be devoted to sheep, though without the benefit of Balnakeil.

Lord Reay was succeeded in 1768 by his mentally incapable younger brother Hugh and the estate was managed by various tutors and factors until the latter's death in 1797. The tutors took a positive attitude to the development of the estate, but largely left its improvement to the local tacksmen. This, and the limited personal expenditure of Lord Reay, enabled the family to survive financially for a while longer.

The tutors regarded the future of the Highlands as a 'grazing country' but while they were prepared to allow the tacksmen to remove subtenants and take more of their farms into their own hands, the tutors did take steps to protect the subtenants and ensure that they were not removed from the estate altogether. In general the tacksmen concentrated on the cattle trade but the high prices of sheep in the Napoleonic Wars encouraged them to introduce flocks of their own.

## **The Fisheries and Kelp**

The Reay estate contained several salmon rivers which were fished by traps or net and coble, including the Grudie. The herring, cod, and ling fisheries were important for many coastal communities, not only as a source of food but also of money income, even if the visits of the herrings could be erratic. In the 1720s and 1730s Lord Reay was directly involved in the fisheries and sold herring to Lowland merchants. The herring could attract many herring 'busses' or ships from the Clyde and other ports. Interest in the herring fisheries of the North West Highlands took off in the 1770s with the establishment of a number of fishing stations. In 1775 the tutors of Lord Reay gave a 21-year lease of the salmon fishing's to Thomas and James Arbuthnot, merchants from Peterhead, and their local manager, James Anderson, who had been granted a lease of various coastal farms to enable him to pursue the herring and cod fisheries. Under a new lease of 1787, the merchant partnership built a fishing station at Rispond.

The local fishermen were able to sell fish to the merchants and visiting herring busses, and people were also employed in gutting the fish and packing them in barrels.

Another development which was to be of considerable significance was the manufacture of kelp from seaweed. On the Reay estate kelp-making began in the 1730s although it does not seem to have become continuous until the 1750s. In 1754 Donald Forbes, tacksman of Ribigill, became responsible for organising it on behalf of the estate. In 1764 he took over the manufacture himself under a lease which gave him right to the 'whole ware and Tang...in the Parishes of Edderachillis and Durness...excepting that ware and Tang as will be indispensably necessary for manuring the Arable Lands of the respective Inhabitants of the said Shoars'. The tenants of the coastal farms were encouraged to manufacture kelp and Forbes undertook to provide those making kelp with meal. The shores were afterwards let to the merchant partnership based at Rispond. Rising prices for cattle benefited the small tenants as well as the tacksmen. However, increased money income, particularly from fishing and kelp, also enabled them to buy meal. The introduction and rapid uptake of the potato, which could be grown on poor ground, was another factor enabling population growth in the second half of the eighteenth century, particularly in the coastal townships.

### **The Kelp Industry**

The parish of Durness was a centre for the collection of kelp to use the extract in the manufacture of soap and glass since the 1760s. In 1790, the price soared from about two pounds per ton to ten pounds per ton rising to twenty pounds by 1808. The kelpers working conditions were noted as being worse than those of workers in the southern factories. Remuneration was only a tiny fraction of the gross proceeds of kelp sales. Few tools were needed and many of the tenants applied themselves to the trade. Sickles were used to cut the wares and long iron pokers known as clatts used to stir the burning seaweed in the kilns. Kelper's wages were generally between one and three pounds per ton.

The landlords and employers deliberately maintained the kelper's connection with the land. The tenants lived on the land growing crops and raising cattle and the landlords were able to depend on their labour in the kelping season. As the provider of the land the kelpers were indebted to the landlords and forced to labour to subsidise their living and meet rent commitments. To ensure the crofters would be willing to work at the kelping they were moved to areas of poor soil so the holding alone would not support a family. The landlords went to extreme lengths to keep tenants on rocky and boggy land of least profit to the estate and keep better farming land for sheep farming concerns.

Where previously kelp was used as manure almost all the kelp was put to manufacture. The land was in very poor condition barely capable of supporting the tenant with some milk, a few lean sheep, horses and cattle, a poor crop of barley, black oats and potatoes. The land was falling into desperate neglect, as the kelping season was the time most attention was needed. By the 1820s, the tax had been lowered on imported kelp and landlords could no longer depend on kelping. The kelping finally ceased in the 1940s.

### **The Clearances**

When Eric Lord Reay succeeded in 1797 he inherited an extensive estate but one burdened with debt. His desire to maintain the style of living which he felt appropriate to his status was to have enormous consequences for the people of Durness. The Highlands were enjoying an economic boom which not only encouraged him to reorganise much of the estate into sheep farms but also made it financially advantageous to resettle those cleared to the coast where they were expected earn their livelihood mainly from kelp manufacture and fishing.

Emigration from the parish began in 1772 when 200 people left for South Carolina. This was before the notorious clearances when people were forcibly evicted to make way for sheep farming. Despite having been on the government side during the Jacobite Uprising of 1745, the Mackays were hit by the economic downturn which crippled the Highlands in the aftermath of the Battle of Culloden. Poor management of the Mackay estates did not help and in keeping with elsewhere in the Highlands, sheep farming was seen as the salvation. The first enforced clearance was in 1820 in the Westmoin district of the parish, followed by the Keoldale Estate clearances and in 1841, the Rispond Estate Clearance.

The Reay estate was cleared in a series of phases commencing in 1801. With the exception of John Dunlop of Moreham who took the farm of Balnakeil – mainly as an inducement to introduce a “new and more improving system of management” – the remainder of the sheep farms were taken by local tacksmen. Their leases were renegotiated between 1805 and 1809 to take in additional lands at higher rents. In 1815 new leases were entered into for most of the farms. The end result in Durness was the creation of three large sheep farms: Balnakeil (which included substantial arable lands), Keoldale, tenanted by the Scobies, and Eriboll, tenanted by the Clarkes.

The clearances by Lord Reay in the parish of Durness took place over almost a thirty year period, with some townships not cleared until the mid to late 1820s. The process was prolonged by the fact that numbers of people especially the aged and infirm, were allowed to remain as subtenants or cottars on the sheep farms, even into the 1840s. Some, however, were not small tenants. In 1829 there were two cottages on Keoldale sheep farm: Borley held by John Campbell, a subtenant of Mrs. Mackay Scobie and another at Clashneach, inhabited by Mrs Scobie’s mother.

### **Small Tenant Population**

Some of those cleared are known to have immigrated to Canada. However, most of the small tenants were resettled on the estate, though some moved out with their parish, for instance, to the Kinlochbervie area. Kelp manufacture became a very important source of income for the small tenants and a good deal of the wet and cold work was undertaken by women. Lord Reay took personal control of manufacturing in 1801. Although he granted forty year lease of the shores to James Anderson junior in Rispond, in 1806 Lord Reay took a half-share in the enterprise and became bound to “take the tenants of the coastal farms where kelp can be properly manufactured, bound to give immediate assistance in such manufacture when required so to do, upon their receiving such wages per ton as shall be payable at the time by Lord Macdonald”.

Some of the small tenants actually became subtenants to Anderson: at Sangobeg, Ceannabeinne, Portchamil and Island Hoan (and later Lerin). As elsewhere, the townships became swollen with cleared households. The subtenants of Sangobeg later complained of the “the great injustice we received from the late Mr. Anderson by having added 4 or 5 additional families to the towns at the same time deprived us of a very considerable part of our ground, as shown by the old boundary land marks”.

Kelp manufacture had disappeared by 1830. Local fishing remained of importance and many of the small tenants and their sons took a share in larger boats and went every year to the Caithness herring fishery. There was employment for women in gutting and packing and young people also went every year to Caithness for agricultural work. Seasonal migration further afield was also undertaken.

## **Acquisition by the Sutherland Family**

The financial difficulties of Lord Reay increased markedly with the onset of the economic depression after the end of the Napoleonic War in 1815. Livestock prices fell and the sheep farmers had problems paying their rents. At the same time the price of kelp collapsed. A new factor, John Horsburgh, was appointed in 1825 tasked with bringing about a more efficient management of the estate. It was not enough and the estate was sold to the Marquis of Stafford in 1829.

The Sutherland estate managers found the Reay estate possessed by an over-rented and impoverished small tenantry. Part of their response was to invest in the construction of roads. Prior to this Durness was only served by rough tracks or by boat. In the early 19th century Sutherland had been opened up through the building of Parliamentary roads up the east coast and to Tongue. After 1829 a road was built from Skiag Bridge in Assynt northwards to Durness and round the coast. The work of the county road surveyor, Peter Lawson, is recorded on the plaque at the water trough between Gualin and Carbreck although the date of 1883 should be 1833. Ferries and inns were provided by the Sutherland estate. The provision of roads enabled the Dukes of Sutherland to visit parts of the estate which had rarely seen a landlord for many years. Tours of the estate were regularly undertaken, usually starting at Lochinver and progressing round by Scourie, Durness and Tongue. The Duke stayed at the Durine or Durness Inn, kept by Mrs. Isabella Ross. Lunch en route to Tongue House would be taken with Alexander Clarke, the sheep farmer at Eriboll.

The Duke inspected works and met with tenants. However, his party also enjoyed other activities. In 1845 there was a visit to Smoo Cave and local men were employed: "Clearing the Road down to Smoo and putting stepping stones in the burn" and "Six men with two boats went in to the Cove of Smoo with the Marques of Stafford". A man was paid to go "to Achumore to warn the Ferryman to be in readiness to receive such as intended going to the Cape". As in every year, payment was made to "three men employed day & night in keeping drunken and disorderly beggars &c from entering the Inn or taking anything out of the Inn". The management of Durness had remained under the factor at Tongue until the appointment of a separate factor at Scourie in 1832. The Scourie district of the Sutherland Estate included Assynt, Eddrachillis, and Durness, excepting Eriboll sheep farm which remained under the Tongue management.

## **The Creation of Crofts**

It is usually said that in the Highlands and Islands the creation of crofts (small individual holdings) was associated with the clearances. It is contended that those evicted when their townships were cleared were resettled in crofts where it was intended that they would become a labour force to manufacture kelp or fish. The crofts would be too small to allow the tenants to support themselves entirely from the produce of their holdings. This did not happen on the Reay estate: instead the small tenants continued to hold their land according to the runrig system of intermixed strips. The adoption of a more improvement-minded approach – initially from 1825 of townships into crofts. The runrig system was condemned as stifling agricultural improvement: crofts would not only stimulate improvement but also encourage more industrious habits amongst the people. The townships of Durine, Balvolich, and Sangomore holding of the landlord were finally made into crofts in 1833. The tenants had to surrender their houses if they fell on another tenant's croft and promised to build new houses on their crofts or lots. The tenants of Sangomore signed an undertaking to the factor: "Considering that as you are now about to relocate this township and thereby that many of the houses will fall to be upon lots not to be possessed by the occupiers of the said houses we the undersigned hereby agree and engage that if under the new arrangement any of our houses fall to be on one or other of

our neighbour Lots we shall remove them from at or before the time of martinmas next and we farther engage to commence our new houses immediately on such cites [sites] as you may point out". The crofts were laid out by a land surveyor and then valued by local valuers.

There was some dissatisfaction as to the way the re-organisation was carried out. In 1837 a majority of the tenants in Durine complained that the men who had been elected by the crofters for "valuing or equalizing the rent" of their crofts had taken the "best lots and had got them without running the chance of the rest and some got them by force." The ground officer confirmed that the men had not done "as well as they might have done in putting rent on improved ground". In Balnavolich, for instance, the croft of William Morrison was "rather dear" and that of Widow George MacLeod was "very dear and rocky and cannot be improved". The building of new houses was a financial burden for many of the tenants. In 1835 the crofters of Durine petitioned the estate commissioner, James Loch, "That since the distribution of their lands into Lots, your Petitioners have been preparing materials for building their new houses: That they have no sufficient *carriage* for the conveyance of stones, lime &c &c: That a *cart* and *harness* has been, by their noble proprietor, placed at the disposal of their neighbours in the Township of Sangomore; And that there are *six & twenty* of your petitioner – heads of families, to whom such another present would prove *invaluable*." A cart was granted. A road was also made through the Durine to 'Geo Brat' where the crofters normally got their drift seaweed for manuring.

The difficulties of the 1830s were reflected in the rising level of rent arrears. A very poor potato harvest in 1837 exacerbated conditions. All the crofters or small tenants on the Sutherland estate were forgiven their arrears when the second Duke of Sutherland succeeded to the estate on death of his mother the Duchess Countess in 1839. The appointment in 1845 of a new factor for the Scourie district, Evander McIver, brought greater efforts to collect rents. McIver also strictly enforced the estate rule whereby tenants were not allowed to take in married lodgers, including sons and daughters, except in special circumstances. Those who broke the rule were summoned to remove.

### **Laid of Loch Eriboll**

Patrick Sellar, one of several who advised on how the Reay Estate should be developed by the Sutherland management, recommended "Lotting out the West side of Loch Eriboll...That which is situated below the county road should be divided into lotts of different sizes, in the *hope* that *ultimately* it may, by the help of lime fish offal, be, nearly, entirely brought into cultivation and someday put into rotation." Such a new settlement would help to reduce the overcrowding by taking landless households from Durine and also help accommodate a number of subtenants to be evicted from Eriboll sheep farm. Laid appears to have been first settled in 1833, though it may not have been established in formal terms until two years later when eighteen tenants were entered on the rent roll. Each was to be only charged a shilling's rent for the first seven years. In August 1834 they had petitioned for better places rather than the "barren & uncultivated heath on the side of Loch Eriboll, which, on their present distressed circumstances, and without any capital, they are utterly unable to bring into a state of cultivation, with the additional expense of erecting new houses thereon". The following year they asked for possession of Island Choraidh "to provide sustenance for our families, which for several years the present lots cannot produce, not after all our exertions above three or four months in the year and from the nature of the soil being almost all pure moss on a rocky or shingly bed it is not capable of being made good land." Loch admitted that the crofts were poor, but claimed that "by industry and exertion they will be made better."

## **The Anderson Clearances**

Anderson at Rispond was also faced with rising arrears of rent from his subtenants and decided to clear the townships in favour of sheep. This process began in 1839 when the inhabitants of Port Chamuill, Port Sian and other townships were summoned to remove. The six subtenants of Port Chamuill (Donald Mackay, Alexander Munro, Neil Gunn, James Campbell, Donald Mackay, and John Mackay) petitioned the Duke of Sutherland for assistance in September 1840. Campbell had already refused the offer of a croft in Eddrachillis and the Duke was unable to offer further land. The clearances and, in particular, the riot of 1841 are the subject of the booklet by Graham Bruce.

The Duke of Sutherland was able to resume possession of Lerin in 1842. However, Anderson continued to fall behind with the payment of his rents. In 1847 he complained of his remaining tenants being a “mill stone of no ordinary nature about my neck, pay no rent, but of necessity without loss of time I must try what can be made of them”. Two years later he was bankrupt although he was able to transfer his property in trust for the benefit of his family and remained in residence until his death in 1854. In 1850 the premises consisted of dwelling house with wings, detached store house, salt cellar, coopers and curing shed, all valued at £550. The other premises, used by the tenant of the salmon fisheries, comprised a salmon boiling house and cooling house, with meal store above, valued at £1150. The lands of Rispond were taken over by the Messrs. Swanson, paying a rent of £137 10s, a significant rise from the rent paid by Anderson of £57 19s. The tenants of Sangobeg became direct tenants of the Duke of Sutherland.

## **The Potato Famine**

Given the extent of crofter’s reliance on the potato, the onset of the potato disease in 1846 was a catastrophe. Destitution conditions lasted for several years. Ensuring a supply of meal was a priority for the estate management. In early 1847 the factor McIver reported that “the quantity required is so large that the ordinary Dealer is afraid to import”. McIver pressed the merchant at Smoo, Murdo Low, to import, but he refused, so he was forced to buy supplies for Durness from Mr. Craig of Thurso. The supply of meal continued to be a challenge for several years. Works, paid for by the Duke of Sutherland, were set going to employ one person out of each family. At Laid, each tenant was allowed money to improve his croft. Tenants were also employed trenching and draining land, for instance at Lerin, and between Murdo Low’s at Smoo and the Ground Officer’s house. Young people were encouraged and assisted to go south for look for work. In 1847 and 1848 the Duke spent a good deal on arranging four emigrant ships to Canada: most of the emigrants, however, came from Assynt and Eddrachillis. Paupers receiving assistance under the new Poor Law were assisted by the Parochial Board. Those who were not on the poor’s roll but who had no family to support them and were judged unable to work, were given allowances in meal.

## **Loch Caladail**

Relief work was also provided by the drainage of Loch Caladail. Drainage of lochs to form new agricultural land had been undertaken in the North West for several decades. In 1845 a report had been made into the drainage of the loch: it was then 60 acres in extent with an average depth of three feet, and only five feet at its deepest. Although it appeared a simple task to deepen the outlet, the work of draining the loch was not commenced until June 1848.

In November 1848, McIver reported that progress had been impeded by a variety of causes, “first by our adhering to Destitution Wages – next by our contracting with a person who could not carry on the work – but principally by the extreme wetness of the summer and harvest – which made the work most difficult and at time the overseer was afraid we should have to

abandon it altogether.” The total length of the cut to the loch was about 400 yards. It varied in depth from 6 to 18 feet deep, averaging 12 feet. The soil was very soft and full of springs. The bottom of the cut was paved with stones and a retaining wall built on either side, varying from two to five feet in height. About 260 yards had been completed, the constant rains had prevented it being completed to the loch before winter.

A cut of nearly one hundred yards had been made into the loch and most of it had been allowed to drain. The surface had been found to be “principally soft mud – about twenty inches deep – below which there is a stratum of moss six inches deep and below that there is a bed of marl which appears to be from two to three feet thick – and is supposed to be more than double that thickness in the centre of the Loch.” The marl was subsequently analysed at Edinburgh and found to be very rich in lime and suitable for using on the land as a substitute for lime.

Effort continued on the works until 1850. In 1851 the agricultural advisor and surveyor, John Russell, measured the surrounding lands with the aim of creating a new farm. The cost of enclosures, roads, and buildings, as well as improving and fencing a portion of Keoldale, was estimated at £1982. The project, however, was not proceeded with. Not only was this a considerable sum but the drainage work was posing problems. It had been found necessary for two lines of piles to be driven either side of the cut to hold back the soft earth. There were also apparently problems with springs. Marl, however, was extracted and a new road made.

## **Brief History of Highland Clearances**

The Clearances began in 1760 and ended over a century later. During this time tens of thousands of men, women, and children were evicted, often with violence and cruelty, from their homes in order to make way for sheep farming. In some parts of the Highlands entire glens were cleared, homes were burned down (as were nearby trees to prevent rebuilding) and tenants were often forced to leave at sword or gun point, being allowed to take very little with them as they began a life of poverty and hunger. Prior to the enforced clearances, there had been voluntary emigration as Durness people searched for a better life in the new world. In the 1700s, a whole community from Hope immigrated to Prince Edward Island, while in the “People’s Clearance” of 1772, families from Loch Eriboll made the journey to North Carolina.

A note should be made that the clearances were a result of what was considered to be agricultural improvements especially portrayed as such in the lowlands and by the clan chiefs as landowners. A national movement was undertaken known as enclosure. Land divided into fields.

There were two types of clearance, one following on from the other. The first kind was compulsory settlement on desolate and infertile land near the sea. The Highlanders who were moved to the coast were given a small piece of land – the croft. If this land was bad, the crofter was forced into kelping (collecting seaweed, the ashes of which were used to make soap and glass) to make a living. But if the land was good, then the crofter had to pay a high rent for it and so was still forced into kelping to pay for this. For the Highlanders who had been moved to the coast life was hard. They had to try to get used to a new lifestyle and to earn their living from fishing and kelping which they had no experience of. Usually they tried to continue farming on their small plots of land. The second form of clearance was often provoked by the failure of the croft to provide the Highlanders with a living. The situation for many was hopeless. The numbers of people who were made to live on the coast along with huge increases in rent, over-fishing of coastal waters and over-kelping, resulted in starvation and poverty. When the kelp industry fell apart and the price of cattle decreased, this left a huge number of poor and needy people who were not able to pay their rent or to buy food.

By the 1850’s the Clearances were effectively at an end for several reasons. First of all there were no people left to evict, secondly the population had decreased, thirdly the economy was starting to pick up, and finally the fishing industry was improving. Also the crofters were beginning to act on their own behalf. It had taken them so long to act for a number of reasons. They were slow to organise themselves effectively and the protests that there had been against the Clearances had been unplanned and disorganised. The loss of the traditional leaders in the Highlands and the destruction of the clan system as well as the actual shock of the effects of the Clearances meant that it had taken some time to produce new leaders from amongst themselves. The Church also influenced events because it described the Clearances as God’s retribution of their sins on earth and it actively discouraged the Highlanders from protesting. The final end to the Clearances was the Crofters Act in 1886 which was passed after a struggle lasting for four years. This came about from the Napier Commission that marked the start of a century of land reform legislation and is a resource of near-unique importance.

Enlightenment of the Highland Clearances and a basic insight is necessary for any understanding of highland history. The clan system had been the determination of the life style. Since the defeat of the rebellion rising, the clans were shattered and the Highlanders were restrained in all their business. The Clearances were very convoluted and involved actions. The data of the fundamental episodes are not easy to retrieve and have usually been viewed and recorded through estate and official offices. Land rights were family and clan controlled with local interpretation and understanding of privilege and claim. Ancestral rights were no longer



applicable. Puzzling and complicated agreements gave some people favorable conditions while others had little security.

Tenants and property owners interests were regulated by an Act of the Scottish Parliament passed in 1555, modified by the Court of Session in 1756. The legal process of evacuation was a common occurrence and most tenants moved peacefully. The removal of people to instate sheep farms had the most devastating effect on all the natural cultural progressions of Highlanders. Between the late 1700s and mid to late 1800s when simple and hard life styles, but long established and complex township structures were in existence, thousands of people were forcibly removed from their homes. Most of the county of Sutherland was owned by one man George Leveson-Gower, Marquis of Stafford who was known as the 'Leviathan of Wealth' and later became the First Duke of Sutherland. Between 1810 and 1820 about fifteen hundred of his tenants were evicted. The Sutherland clearances were part of a vast modernisation scheme that also included building four hundred and fifty miles of public roads, the first in the county.

From medieval times into the 18th and 19th centuries, prolonged occupation of a piece of land gave the right to permanent tenancy known as dutchas. This was established and recognised by the whole community when a family had managed to maintain occupation of a township or joint farm for three generations or more. The tacksmen of these farms followed each other in succession from father to son. Any attempts by the feudal superior of the land in question to establish another family was fiercely resisted by both family and clan. The social form of life was based on the bonds of kinship and not on economic dependence. The tacksmen to the chief's principal role was to muster soldiers rather than ensure good financial return from the soil. They paid only a nominal rent for the farms and sublet most of it to subtenants who did the day to day farming and to cotters and mailers subtenants of subtenants constituting the lowest order of the clan.

The townships were well established and organised to supply the needs of all. A lazy bed was constructed where there was little soil. A strip of turf and soil would be cut and laid on top of the adjoining piece of ground. Gradually these grew into ridges with ditches in between. Lazy beds were manured with sea weed or old thatch and were particularly good for growing potatoes. The runrig system was the method of farming on good arable land. The ground was divided into strips rather like lazy beds but longer and wider. A person in a township owned each strip and every so often, the ownership was changed giving everyone a chance on wet or dry land. All available manure was put on the runrigs, which in the main were used for growing grain. The best land near the township was known as the infield and land further away, usually less arable was the outfield, commonly used for grazing animals.

The poorer people and subtenants were forced to work for the factors of the estates. They were oppressive and gave no acknowledgement of the services given to them. They were ordered to work thirty to forty days a year with no pay or food in return. Their rents were doubled at the same time as the price of cattle had halved. There was scarcity of bread and yet the unscrupulous factors extracted work from people and forced them to sell their cattle at prices that suited the factors. If for any reason of sickness a person could not perform work he was charged a shilling a day. Property owners despised the people and treated them as slaves or beasts of burden. They were treated with contempt and not worthy of saving or leaving in the hovels of their ancestors. The improvers believed that the people of Sutherland should be pulled out of the past by the scruffs of their necks. It was criminal to oppose any reform of the system of land tenure in the highlands. Those resisting deserved the chastisements from a constable's truncheon or an infantryman's bayonet.

Durness Village Square, in 1841 was the site of one of the first serious uprisings against the Highland Clearances, the forced eviction of tenants to make way for sheep farming. (See Ceannabeinne Township.) Balnakeil and Keoldale were first to be cleared about 1820. Durness survived. Many of the ruins that are scattered around Durness are not the remains of pre clearance townships but of ruins abandoned after the clearances. As townships were cleared the buildings were in the main demolished, the stones being used for dykes to enclose pastures for sheep.

## People

The people make the area and the Highland people are typical of the expectations, warmth, welcoming, curious and helpful.

There are some worthy of further detailing because they can share experiences that depict life and changing times of the area, are able to give interpretations of the environments, have stories that are relevant and capture the population as a whole or have memories they can share.

### Willie Morrison, Sangobeag Memories



IMAGE 74 WILLIE MORRISON

Generations of my family came into the world at or near Sangobeag, in the parish of Durness, close to the western lip of Loch Eriboll. I broke the sequence by only three weeks, when I was born in a crofthouse then tenanted by my father at Sangomore, two miles to the west. Only days after my birth, in January 1941, my paternal grandfather died at the cottage he had built 15 years earlier, on the site of his former black house beneath Beinn Ceannabeinne, and my father inherited both house and croft.

The world was at war, and although Durness itself remained a backwater of peace, the arrival of a top-secret RAF radar station straddling the community's twin Lerinbeg and Leirinmore promontories, and increasing use of Loch Eriboll by the Royal Navy, had brought international reality closer than ever before.

We moved from Sangomore early that February, as the country lay in the grip of one of the century's most severe winters. My mother still recalls resting me in the corner of an old leather armchair, well wrapped up against the elements, as she set about the business of taking over as new mistress of the Morrison croft at 79 Sangobeag. The cottage itself, though fairly spacious by standards of its time, was lacking in all the most basic amenities familiar to urban dwellers.

It faced directly into the prevailing nor' westerlies which howled in from Greenland at all seasons.

There was no porch to mitigate the effect of the elements on the front door. There were no dormer windows upstairs to defy the gales, no running water, no inside toilet and no electric light. These all came much later, at my mother's insistence.

My parents carried water into the house in enamel buckets from the wee burn alongside the croft steadings. Light, and indeed some of the heat in the living room, came from a hissing Tilley. In the bedrooms, cotton wick paraffin lamps had by then supplanted their ancestors, the centuries-old cruises, though the general principle was the same.

My brother David, now a property developer in Dundee, and head of a group called Sangobeag Investments, was born in Sangobeag three years later, and my sister Violet, today a prominent Tain businesswoman, arrived in 1947.

The golden picture-postcard sweep of Sangobeag sands, so popular with Scottish calendar publishers provided an ideal playground, conjoined as it was to our croft. Life was anything but romantic for my father, especially during the eight or nine months of the year he plied his trade as a lobster-fisherman. It was a matter of running fast to stand still, governed as it was by weather conditions, wireless forecasts and tides.

I remember well lying snug in bed at three o'clock on bitter winter mornings, hearing my father rise to catch the tide and haul in his creels. On one occasion he and his boat mates chanced on a grimmer haul – bodies from a naval frigate torpedoed off Cape Wrath in 1944. From June to August, when the weather was too warm for lobsters to travel live from Durness to Billingsgate Market, in London, the fishing boat was hauled in for its annual tarring and painting.

After that, it was time to cut, dry and take home the peats, shear the sheep, scythe, stack and store the hay. The peats arrived three miles from the moss in a cart drawn by our old mare Beaut, while the hay was transported in the same manner to the three little barns it took to hold all the winter fodder. Life on a croft revolves as much around the welfare of its animals as of its human inhabitants. The mare, the two cows, the 60-odd lambing ewes, the hens, the occasional pig, the sheepdog and the many cats, all had to be provided for. The cows and mare were rather dull creatures, the hens and sheep dirty, the collies mostly bad-tempered.

My happiest memories are of the cats, especially Percy, a remarkably gentle black-and-white tom, albeit a champion scrapper and mouser. We were largely self-sufficient in food. War shortages, apart from sweets and fruit, rarely affected our little corner.

We killed our own sheep or pigs, grew our own potatoes and turnips, collected our own eggs, and milked our own cows. There was always a firkin of salt herring in the barn, while the saithe my father caught for lobster-bait was also part of our diet.

Religion played a significant part in our lives. We attended the parish church regularly from an early age and my father's evening ritual before retiring to bed was to read aloud a chapter from the Bible. At school we learned by rote the entire Shorter Catechism, several of the more common Scottish Metrical Psalms, together with salient chapters of the Bible.

I was nearly six before I went to school. My mother had taught me to read reasonably fluently in the months beforehand. By 1946, fortunately, pupils living long distances from the school enjoyed the luxury of motor transport – unlike my father and his siblings. For most of my primary schooldays, my uncle Adam, the local hirer and contractor, held the school contract. Highlights of the school year were the annual festive season party, referred to as "The Christmas Tree", Sutherland Provincial MOD, held in Golspie, Dornoch, Lairg or Brora on the

first Friday of June, and the school bus trip, at the beginning of the summer holidays, to Inverness, in the green luxury Bedford OB coach owned by Burr's of Tongue.

I was fated to witness the sad decline of the last remnant of an ancient Gaelic culture which survived the Viking settlers in North West Sutherland. When I was born, the majority of adults in the community were still able to use the language as an everyday means of communication, although the last monoglot Gaelic speaker had long since died. Today perhaps half-a-dozen remaining elderly people speak it fluently, one of them my mother, aged 90. The death of the language in Durness was largely due to official indifference or indeed hostility from officialdom of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, while well-meaning attempts to redress this in recent years have made little impact so far. My brother and I have made a conscious effort to speak and understand Gaelic, but sadly neither of us is particularly literate in the language.



IMAGE 75 DONNIE MACKAY

My childhood came to an end when I left Durness at the age of 12 to continue my formal education at Dornoch Academy, in the tiny, ancient Sutherland capital. Though I have lived in various towns and cities, and travelled to many odd corners of the world, I still regard the croft cottage in Sangobeag as my spiritual home, and I remember my childhood with fondness and gratitude for the experience.

### **Donnie Mackay Laid Memories**

In 2017 I recorded an interview by Selena Campbell with Donnie Mackay brought up in Laid and moved to Durness when he married Iris Mather. He talked about his life. This is a synopsis text of the dialogue.

*What was life like in Laid when you were young?*

There's a lot of trees growing at Laid now. That never used to be possible. One of the crofts has even got a small forestry.

It was a hard life. It was rough. It was really hard. It was a struggle. In every way possible. There is no electricity, no running water. We got water from the well beside the house and if there

was heavy rain, there would be a burn running by the house. Every house had a well. My father used to go to the burn every morning in his life to wash his face summer or winter with carbolic soap I always remember big blocks used for washing your face and clothes and everything else.

My father worked up Loch More at the forestry. He used to drive the buses for them. There was two buses from Durness picking up people from Kinlochbervie on the way to Kinloch More.

I was in forestry after I left school. All that trees that are being cut down at Kinloch, I helped plant all those. I was at the planting of them. Of all the trees that they are cutting down when I left school.

My mum was at home. We had a Croft, but there's nothing you could do with it. My father worked on the roads before the forestry. Ten of us in the house, three bedrooms. Three of us to a bed. All ten of us weren't there at the one time always, but we were sometimes.

*When the youngest was born, how old was the eldest? Can you remember?*

Danny was the eldest. He will be 87. Ruby was the youngest. She'll be about 60. There was about two years between each of us. We all agreed very well. We all pulled together. After school we were out cutting peats and helping with the tatties. We cut the peats on the croft. And some along at Polla. There is nothing really on the croft except stones and heather but little pockets of peat. We had a car to take us to Polla to do the peats. My father had a big van for taking the forestry workers to Loch More so we use the van for the peats. It was teamwork.

We had no electricity or gas all we had was the fire for cooking on it was hard. It really was. I can remember when electricity came to Laid that was something else. I think it was about 1958 it came to Durness. It was the 60s that it came to Laid. A long time after. I always remember when the word came out that there was power coming to Laid I remember Peter Stewart saying that all the ever comes to Laid is Durness sheep.

I would walk to school about half a mile. Far enough and long enough on a cold, dark, stormy winters day. There was a lot of children in Laid then. We would all head off together. Every croft was occupied. The teacher was Georgina Campbell. There's nobody left of her family at all. She lived at the school with her two brothers. At 10:00 o'clock we used to get a cup of hot milk and biscuits for 10:00 o'clock tea. At lunchtime we got a cup of coco and a sandwich. There was no cook in the school the teacher did it herself. It wasn't really cooking. I always remember the big tins of dried milk that we used to get it was lovely. National dried milk. It was great.

There were kids in the school from Helium. All the way round from Eriboll and Polla. There would be 16 or 17 children at the school. I didn't mind school at all. We used to go to Durness School once in a while but Robina, the head teacher, she lived in that house just over there (last croft house on the Sangomore road before the church end loop) and she used to come to Laid school once a week to pay a visit. We were frightened of her. We were dead scared. She was a wild woman anyway.

School was used as a church and for dances the best dances we ever had was when we were in Laid. We used to have a lot of dances in Laid. We went as a family. It was a superb little place at one time. New Year lasted a week. We went round all the houses ceiliding in every house. Dancing out in the road. Pipes. Great times and nobody really drunk. Just in great spirits. We couldn't afford to buy drink anyway. It was as simple as that half bottle of whisky would last for months.

Shopping. Before we got a car at our own house there was only one car in Laid and that was the teacher we were talking about. She had a wee baby Austin and came to Durness every Saturday night and came around Laid to see if anybody needed anything. The Spar was just Dicky's shop then where the hotel is now. It was going then. She would get the shopping and bring it back if we were needing anything. We've walked from Laid to do shopping. I remember the big blizzard when Anne Mackenzie was born the whole route from Laid to Durness for supplies was blocked. Walking back with bags of paraffin on their back and bags of shopping.

The excitement when we were going to the games you would think we're going to God knows where. What excitement? The men of Smoo Cave Hotel had a big shooting brake car a huge car half wood and half metal. We used to call it the log cabin. He used to come and pick us up. We would be sitting on the hill down from the house from early morning waiting for this Shooting Brake coming. Absolutely mental with excitement. It was a huge excitement to go to Durness. He would bring us back as well, what a time we had. I was still at the school at the time. I was somewhere between 8 and 12 at the time.

Age 11, I went off to school in Golspie. I don't even want to think about that. I didn't have a clue where on earth we were. We had never passed Durness in our lives and then dumped in this huge place and not knowing a soul. I didn't think I'd ever get over it. Homesick we were all the same, my brothers and sisters as well. We had hardly ever passed Durness before. We were never home. We only got home at holidays. I was in the tech in big dormitories. We had to do all the cleaning work in the kitchen. Peeling tatties, washing dishes, all that. We had to make our own beds, and lo and behold, if they weren't made to perfection. Inspection every morning. If they weren't right, you got into big trouble. Clip across the backside or in front of the headmaster. Strict and regimental just like being in the army. God forbid if they found a speck of dust. But it did us the world of good. We went off at 11 until I was 15.

I left school and went to the forestry first of all. I was two years at the forestry. And then I went to help on the road at the Gualin. It was a firm from Ireland. That's when John Conlon came to this country first of all, and he was my foreman. A more vile man you would not meet anywhere. He was just an absolute bloody horror. I shouldn't be saying this. We got the job done. There was a big squad then. I left that and then went back to the forestry. Then myself and Frankie Morrison, Frankie from Laid went off the forestry school in Dunkeld where we gained forestry certificates.

34 years. I was with the county for 34 years. A long, long time. I did every job imaginable all mainly in Durness. I've seen a lot of changes. Mainly for the good. Especially transport wise.

When I first started. The depot was down by Jack MacPherson's houses. Jack McPherson's father was the foreman and he had a wee housey down beside the road then and a wee shed beside his house was the depot. Before we moved up to School Road here.

We had no gritters then we had to throw sand out the back of a lorry onto the road no matter what the weather. Two men on the back shovelling and one man driving. No health and safety then or any word of it even.

Big changes when we got a gritter. Very modern then. The gritter part was in front and we had to shovel sand into the hole in the front of the lorry only getting one side of the road at a time. Then we would turn and go back and do the other side. Then we had blizzards real blizzards. The weather is not the same, it's changed completely. We'd take turns on the gritter. I was sometimes on the digger. There would be six men working then maybe eight. When I left there was only me and Martin and Kenny Carbreck. That was all that was in the Durness Squad.

The numbers were all whittled down when they started to cut back. There is all kinds of nonsense. We would be away all day alright. We would come in and be out again at night. We had no mobile phones or the like. Eventually we got radios in the lorries but there was very few places that it would work until all the masts at the top of the hills. Now it's all mobile phones.

The big Blizzard we're talking about. The MOD they were working at the Faraid. They were actually making a road out to the Faraid then. They use their bulldozer to open the road from Durness to Laid. Of course, we were all excited about it.

Iris's family had the shop. That shop has been there since the year dot. Must be over 100 years anyway. It started off as a house. In fact, I had a couple in a wifey from Rogart and she said this was where her father was born. Started off as a cobbler shop making and repairing boots and shoes. Fellow called George. It was Iris's great uncle. I think he was. A grand uncle or whatever Iris's mother's uncle. It's always been in the family. Some changes in the shop but itself hasn't changed much. Still hanging together by the skin of its teeth. We used to do fuel at the shop. We did sell lots of fuel, once there was three filling stations then.

The place would have been busier then. I just don't know. I suppose it was. Busy then in summer time before the campsite was there. There was free parking from the back of the shop right up to the top of the Caa, you couldn't get another tent pitched anywhere. People just camped everywhere. It was like a town at times. I've seen the shop open at midnight and there would still be a gang outside the door. Every second house had bed and breakfast.

In these days the bacon came in big long slabs. To start cutting bacon at 12:00 o'clock at night and you had to cut it by hand with the hand slicer and go round and leave the bacon at the door of the bed and breakfasts after that for the next morning. Big blocks of cheese had, I to cut the cheese as well. There would be pounds and pounds of bacon that went out.

We used to go to Inverness ourselves. We had a lorry for the shop to get all our supplies. It's great now that they bring the supplies. We went to Inverness all of twice a week sometimes even three times a week when we were so busy. We would come back with a lorry loaded absolutely loaded to the gunawls. The first stop in the morning was to pick up the big boxes of bread still steaming hot and then we used to go to Grover's I think it was.



IMAGE 76 PREPARING TO TAKE THE MINI BUS TO CAPE SIDE FOR SUMMER TRIPS



It was quite a trek down. There was no bridge then. We used to have to leave about 6:00 o'clock in the morning and we wouldn't get back till after midnight then unload but now we get the deliveries all through the week, big difference. Either Tom or I would drive the lorry and Iris always came. We did the driving and the loading, Iris dealt with the money. It was a popular shop. I can tell you. It was nonstop.

We had the buses as well for schools in that. George that had the shoppie. He started the schools right out to Helium and to Carbreck.

We went to the Cape Side with the buses for a season and ended up there for 20 years. We used to get the busses over on our own rafts. That was a saga. I get nightmares to even think about it. How we never lost buses going over on that ferry I'll never know. It was ramshackle rafts we had. First ones we had were just 45 gallon drums tided together with ropes. The bus was just the size of the raft no room for manoeuvre at all. Then we got very modern. We got two boats and tied them together to make a deck out of them. That was just as scary but we managed. We took them over at the beginning of the season and they had to go back at the end of the season. It worked better than that does now by the sounds of things.

We had two buses running and one spare. We were only allowed a licence for two. An operator's licence for two. The ferryman was John Muir. He was drunk all the time, but he was good on the ferry. He was good, very good. Then Charlie Hues took over and in 1982 John Morrison Carbreck took over. It was always a worry about Cape Side. I didn't know when you were going to be called about breakdown or something.

I learned to drive in Durness. Passed my test in Durness. We just taught ourselves to drive. I was 18 when I passed my test in a 1937 car. Hand signals and I remember them to this day. Someone came up from Inverness to do your test.

We had a residential caravan before Heather Lee. Then we got a chalet a big chalet. The best home I ever had I just loved it to bits. Then we built Heather Lee 30 years ago this year.

We were tried to be taught Gallic. My mother didn't speak Gaelic. My father did. I can speak a fair bit of it, but not as much as I'd like to. I understand a good bit of it. Every house in Laid there was Gaelic speakers. There was always a ceilidh between the houses and they would be blethering away in Gaelic. I picked up most of it, every house had Gaelic then.

I've no idea where the by name came from. (The Fillisters). Nobody seems to know. But it came from my father side. He was actually adopted. He was born and brought up in Melness, Hamish at the Craggan is related to us through my father. My mother was born and brought up in Laid. She is actually related to the travelling folk. The Stewards that they tell me. She was Wilhelmina Stewart before she was married. My father's name was Robert Bobby Mackay. Robert George Mackay. If he knew anything about his adoption, he never spoke about it. In those days they didn't speak about things like that. My mother's brother lived with us and he worked with Campbell's, the Masons.

*You have seen a lot of changes around Durness.*

A lot for the good. But I don't think much of the NC 500. Fine until you have to travel on the roads. I don't see much benefit in it. Certainly this year our business has not benefited from it.

Remember the first time I went to the pictures in Durness something else I'll never forget. Films in the old hall. There's no power then. They used to carry their own in the back of their van. Highlands and Islands film Guild they were called. They used to go round all the village halls showing pictures. First time I went, Oh my God, I was scared. I remember the first film I ever saw was called Kim. There is a bit in it with a huge boulder, but away up this big hill and this huge boulder dislodged. It was rolling down the hill, getting bigger and bigger towards the

screen. We took off out of our seat. Thought it was coming out into the hall. Absolutely petrified. We thought it was the end of the world. We were so clueless on these things. I was probably about eight years old then. The films came once a fortnight. We didn't always get to go just now and again. It was a special treat. It would cost about six pence or something like that. The old diesel engine clunking away outside providing the power. The hall would be full then. There is no television or anything else.

I never really saw TV properly until I came to Durness. We could not get reception at Laid at all. In fact, there are certain areas in Durness that you couldn't get reception at all. We had to put ariels all over the place on high hills working on boosters and everything else, never a success. Poor, poor pictures until the mast was built at the top of Boo Hill.

The garage was built by the RAF as part of the camp just down there and the camp at Balnakeil and Lerinbeg. That's where they used to service their vehicles then Sutherland Transport took it over. They had the lorries from Wimpy. They used the quarries from the head of Eriboll taking stuff to Faraid Head making the tarred roads that are there now. They opened up the quarries from Laid to use for the Faraid Head road there. That's why all these quarries were opened to take the material for the road to Faraid.

We bought the garage off of Sutherland Transport that lay dormant for about 30 years before we took it over, but we had to have a service station. Now it's for sale if anybody wants to buy it.

There was a butcher down here and I worked for the butcher as well. I worked there for ages. I worked all over the Balkans. Eriboll. Walter Clark was the butcher. He took the business to its knees himself because he was drinking. He was missed. It was a good business. They really had the run of the whole north here. He got his meat from a butcher in Ardgay he used to deal with. He again had his own lorry and he was up and down that route regularly. He had a shop just up beside the garage there.

There used to be a school there as well just behind my garage. Durness high school, the secondary school. I demolished it with the JCB maybe the mid-70s? I've no idea when it stopped being a school. Andy Morrison used to have a workshop for making coffins. He was the undertaker before Ken McRae took over. I think maybe Danny went to that school. I just can't remember to be quite honest.

Colin Joyce's father. He was the last blacksmith to be working in Durness, Bob Golding was before Colin.

## Janette Mackay Strathy

Interviewer: Isobel MacPhail,

Interviewee: Janette Mackay

Date: 12/10/04

Location: Primrose Cottage, Strathy West



IMAGE 77 JANETTE MACKAY STRATHY

*How you came to be here in Strathy West.*

My mother and father both lived at Strathy Point. They were both born down Strathy Point and both Mackays. My father's people originally came from Strathnaver and my mother's people from Kirtomy.

I suppose they were cleared, actually, to the coast and then when they got married they lived down Strathy Point. My mother and father were brought up at Strathy Point; went to school in Strathy, and they both were fluent Gaelic speakers. They both, my father in particular, didn't speak anything else when he went to school, it was just Gaelic, and of course they weren't allowed then to talk Gaelic in the school. In fact, I remember him telling us that they were belted even if they were heard speaking Gaelic in the playground, and so they didn't teach us Gaelic, unfortunately, but they spoke Gaelic the whole time in the house, and it was as though they spoke Gaelic when they didn't want us to know what they were saying. That's really, I suppose, the way they used it. But because they were assured it would hold us back in our education, they didn't teach us Gaelic. But, of course, we were hearing it all the time, and getting the gist of it, and of course the Gaelic music and all that was always around us, and the pipe music, ceilidhs and whatnot. They got married in 1940, and they came to live here, in

Strathy in this house and did it up. This is where I was born, actually, up the stairs there was no hospitals or anything then! So I was born here, and I'm living in it now with my own family.

*Thinking about it now, what you were saying about Gaelic, what do you think about the fact that people didn't pass it on because they thought it would hold you back?*

That's exactly I mean, my mother and father, my father in particular, he told us that. "It'll only hold you back, and we want you to do well." And they encouraged us to stay on at school, and all my brothers and sisters, we did that, and I've a sister out in Canada who's a nurse, and another sister down in Colchester who's a speech therapist, and the boys all did their trades, and they did encourage us. They wanted us to have a better life than they had, as they said, and Gaelic of course was supposed to hold us back. Then of course my mother and father died, quite early, we were all quite young really, reasonably young anyway, and by the time that you think, "Gosh, we would like to learn this Gaelic," they're not there any longer.

*How many of a family were you?*

There's six of us, six, and my youngest sister was just 18 when my mother died, and my father died six months later. Yes, so we were just coming to an age when you could have thought, "Right, we want you to teach us Gaelic," because when you're young you don't really give it a thought, at that time we didn't, and especially when you were told it was not going to do you any good. And then when we did want to know about it, they weren't there.

*Is it hard to get people to teach it, even?*

Very hard, very hard, even ten years ago I could think of people around here that you might have been able to but now I have to struggle to think of anyone talking the Gaelic which is very sad. We're making an effort, though, through the Feis, to teach the young ones, and we have, like Roddy MacLeod and one or two people. My own daughter, she went on to the college in Skye and she did two years' total immersion, and she did it in Gaelic in the college in Glasgow as well, and she's pretty fluent. But she's not home very often, of course, but when she is home we do use her at the Feis and Mhairi did Gaelic in school as well, she took it to a Standard Grade, but it's getting people to keep it going, that's the problem.

I've a brother in Tain and he is a fitter/turner he did his apprenticeship at Dounreay and worked there for many years and the other brother, he did his apprenticeship as a panel beater and welder and he's down in Tain as well, or Kildary. And my other brother died, he died when he was quite young, he had rheumatic fever and he had heart problems following it, and he died when he was 42, so that's the six of us.

I've got five of a family, Valerie is now down in Canterbury, and she's working as a hairdresser in a big department store; Carol Anne, today she's in Cape Breton because, this whole thing, the Gaidhealtachd culture is global and we're much more aware of it now than we used to be.

*So tell me about Carol Anne and Cape Breton.*

She plays in a band, a Scottish traditional band called Dòchas, and they're out in Cape Breton at some big festival, and she's having a marvellous time. And out there she met Rhona Lightfoot from Inverness, a great Gaelic lady, piping and singing, everything, so they're having a wonderful time, and she'll be back home on Saturday, and straight into the Feis at Ullapool. And Natasha is going up there, my granddaughter, for a week next week, to Ullapool, to the Feis.

And then Mhairi, she just got married in the summertime and she's living in Thurso, and she helps at the Feis as well, she teaches the fiddle and she's in Thurso, She's working with the architectural technology and Catriona, she's living locally, and Uisdean, my son forgot about

him he's got his own business now, down in Scrabster, MPA Engineering, and they're doing well. So they're all around, and I've three grandchildren.



IMAGE 78 DÒCHAS

*Dòchas are a young and dynamic all-female band playing traditional music from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and Ireland - Kathleen Boyle, Julie Fowlis, Carol-Anne MacKay, Eilidh MacLeod and Jenna Reid play fiddle, pipes, whistle, accordion, piano, clàrsach and guitar.*

They do like to be home, in fact Mhairi is considering, and her husband, they would like to build a house in Strathy, and I'm just finding out about, whereby the family of a crofter can build on the croft, I don't know, there's something about people who belong to the area with their roots here. It doesn't change the place the same, does it? They're here, with all the values and traditions that the village knows, whether that's good or bad, I don't know, but we think it's good.

We're very laid back, I suppose, and very tolerant of each other and much more tolerant of even the services and all that. Maybe we're too laid back and come to accept things where we should be in there trying to change I don't know. Maybe, well, realistic, you have to be. When you're in a place like this you don't expect the services that you get in the city. But then again there's certain things that we must have, that we're entitled to, when it comes to health and ambulance services, doctors we must be able to call on the services. But as far as, you'll hear folk saying, "There's nothing to do here", well, the people who belong here have plenty to do. And I mean, you'll see that in the summertime, even the Region or whatever they are now, they organise different things for the youngsters during the holidays. You'll see they have a programme and no children turn up at them. The children here are very organised, they have things going on in their lives. They're organised, youngsters, there's not that many of them but they're organised.

On their crofts they have certain work to do, they're busy, the young boys are busy with tractors and digging in hay, peats all that different things sheep, gathering sheep and then they have their own interests. They have football, they have football clubs, they have swimming their parents organise them into those things. Now, the people who organise those classes they come along and they'll put on a class in the middle of the afternoon maybe in circus skills or something like that, which is great, but there's nobody there to transport them to those classes at that time, because their parents are working and the children are probably doing something

else at that time anyway, or they might organise it at night when there's another club or something on. It just doesn't work.

It doesn't work for some reason or another, and then you'll see, "Oh, we laid this on," the feedback will be "Oh, we laid this that and the next thing on and nobody bothered to turn up." I don't think they need bother organising those things. If some of that money that they're using to organise all those things in all the different village halls was split and given to the local community, they know what the people in that community could do to benefit, even if it was just organising a minibus to take them at a certain time to the local pool or whatever. I've seen it happen so often throughout the summer they have their summer programme. They have lovely, glossy magazines, don't they?

They have lovely, glossy magazines, they have it timed to perfection, they'll be at Tongue at such-and-such a time, down here and there's nobody going to those classes. Now that costs a lot of money. There's travel, there's hall rents, there's the setting up of it, the people organising it, well, that's an example of it, and it's happened so often. Another thing they want you to do is phone to book, and I don't know if it's a thing, a Highland thing or not, but people never phone to book. And then, there was one time there was something on and the children had to phone to book, and then on the day they found that they could go, and they went, and because nobody had booked the people never turned up! So you can never get it right. And nobody arrived, and they never even bothered telling the hall or anybody. Which was the same with that meeting, for the, for that hospital meeting about the maternity services at Wick.

It was an open public meeting but they still said, "Phone to book tickets", which was rather dubious anyway, how can you phone to book tickets for an open meeting but that was what they wanted. It was probably just to give them a guide on how many people would be there. But then, if people have to phone for tickets, they never ever get around to phoning, and then they think they can't go to the meeting, or, you know. That's a very strange idea. Aye, but to most people it would just be, like they were trying to be kept out.

*What was Strathy like when you were a child, compared to now?*

Very much the same as it is now, it hasn't changed very much. Only there was more people, and more youngsters, and of course the school was open. When I went to Strathy School there was over 40 in Strathy School there, but when my mother and father went, they went, of course, there until they were 14 that was the school, and they left at age 14 there was well over 100 in the school then. But Strathy School, it was two-teacher when I was there, and we walked, of course, to the school, every day, and the place itself was very much the same, only there's the new hall, the new village hall. Otherwise and, looking around, certainly the road is better, it's double but, when you look at the walls and the dykes and that, they're beginning to crumble and fall down and it's not just maybe as happy-looking a place, when you look at the walls and the fences, and the crofts too. At this time of year you would see all the hay-stacks now you see those bales, but not even that many of them. Potatoes, you don't see grown, turnips all those things the crofting is not happening the way it used to. Even the peat stacks. Everybody by this time of year would have a huge peat stack at the side of their house. Now, you can go along Strathy West or Strathy East and I don't think you'll see a peat stack, that's certainly changes.

The folks are getting older, and the young folks have no time for ... well, maybe it's a good thing. We have the central heating in here and I'm delighted with it, and you'll see the fireplace is there I can put a fire on if I want, but I haven't got it on.

But, I mean, in the winter-time and that we do, if we're in all day and at holiday times. Certainly, it's good. But I remember going up to the peats, we used to go. My mother would be putting one or two in the pram and walking away up onto the hill there, taking a picnic. We

loved it, to have a picnic, and you'd be putting ... making a wee fire on the hill and boiling the kettle. When I think of the work they had! Even doing that, going off with a pram with half-a-dozen bairns, and taking all this food with you and making a fire, and having to do the peats as well!

A great thing would be, my father, he would always have to have a pail with oatmeal in it and the water, and that was supposed to be the drink that ... did you ... It's always that wee pail, like what the tinkers would make, the wee pail, and a lid on it, and he would have oatmeal in the bottom of it. Had to have the oatmeal, and then the cold water, and he was away with that to the hill, and that was what they drank.

And, of course, that's another thing that's changed, too the tinkers, they always came. You know where our new hall is? That was every year the tinkers were there. That's where they put their stance, just right beside the river, and they had the camp there. You'd hear them playing the pipes and the accordion and dogs barking and bairns yelping, you know! It would be the Stewarts, yes, from Lairg. They used to come, there's be two, maybe, carts, and horses and they would be there, they'd spend some time there, a week maybe, before they'd go off to the next place. And then they'd be coming round the doors, the women would come, asking for a droppie milk, it was great.

A lot of music. Pipes and accordions, and they had great ceilidhs down there, but we were a bit afraid of them. Suppose we were taught not to go to their tents and things like that, and so we were just that bit in awe, you know. We didn't go. I suppose my mother would be afraid, there was a lot of us, young girls, and she wouldn't want us at the river anyway, for a start, you were told not to go near the river or ...and they were right beside it there.

*When did they stop coming?*

Goodness, I can't tell you. It's a long, long time ago, but when I was in primary school they were there, and then of course I went away to Dornoch to secondary school, because there was no secondary school here. There was a junior secondary, but we went to Dornoch, and we were in the hostel there and I'm not sure when they would have stopped coming, but I remember them in my primary school days.

*And when you went to Dornoch, did you get home just for the holidays, you didn't get home ...Just at holidays. Like they did later, at weekends?*

No, that's right. We just got home at the holiday times, and it was very hard. Oh, I remember how homesick I was. I used to be ...Just awful. It was terrible. I had a little sister who was born in 1955. She was just little, like the wee one here was, and I missed her terrible. We used to be very, very homesick, and then we got used to it, I suppose. Looking back on it, I'm glad we did go. Yes, looking back on it, it's a good job we did, because if we hadn't, well, there was no senior secondary here, and what would we have done? So, and from there, I went on to Aberdeen, and then ended up back here teaching in Strathy, in 1966 I came back here, and taught in Strathy School. I taught in Burghead in Morayshire for a year, and then they were looking for a teacher in Strathy School, they couldn't get a teacher and my mother, of course, was very keen to get us back over. She was absolutely delighted ...and my father, they were delighted, and so I came back here in '66, and taught in Strathy for, I must have been there for four or five years, I'm not sure, and went on to Bettyhill, and I've been there ever since. I think it was 1971 maybe, or around that, that I went to Bettyhill. I'm even forgetting when it was, but it was in something like that.

*When did Strathy School close?*

It must have closed about '74, maybe, or around that somewhere. Robin and I got married in '73, and they were building the new school or they were just going to build the new school in Melvich in '73, and so when the new school was ready Strathy closed, and they all went to Melvich. So it'd be around that some ... aye, it'll be around that date somewhere.

*Was there a lot of people went away to work when you were a child here like going to the herring fishing?*

No, well, that would just have been before my time, like, when my father, they went into Caithness and he was working, surely he was more working on the farms and things like that, I think. But the women really mainly went to the herring fishing at Wick, didn't they, a lot of women went there. My mother, she went – she was a cook, and she went, she was down in London for a long time. She was cook for Lord and Lady Jellicoe for some time. Yes, and she had quite a lot of quite good jobs down there, and she was on the Isle of Wight, and then she came back and they got married in 1940, and my father, he always seemed to have jobs about at home. He was a mason, a stonemason, and he was at home mainly when we were young. I think he was at home and then when Dounreay started up he was working there, building. He did a lot of bridges, on the roads and that type of thing, and he was away for a wee while at the hydro schemes. At Cannich and that.

*Did he ever talk about that?*

Yes, but that's a long time ago. But he was, himself and another man from Portskerra, Jimmy Sutherland, they were on the hydro schemes quite a bit, at Cannich and up that way, but I suppose crofting really was the main job around here until Dounreay started.

*Dounreay must have had a big impact.*

Oh, yeah. Along the coast here, I mean, all the young men, they got trades at Dounreay, and even the girls, office work and canteen. It really made a world of difference here, work-wise, whatever else it brought, it did bring work. And people. And the schools, of course, benefited, and Thurso, and maybe we didn't benefit here as much as we could have – look at our roads. But however, it certainly did make a big difference to life up here.

*Do you think it make it possible to stay at home rather than leave?*

Yes, for a lot of people it certainly did. I mean, my brothers both were able to stay at home, do apparently well, one of them did an apprenticeship there, and Donald, he worked in the labs. What do you call that again, a process worker? And, oh yes, I mean, they took on the local boys for apprenticeships and it was good in that way, very good. They're still taking on apprentices, but not so many. There seems to be more work in the line of computing and all that kind of thing now, of course there's different jobs now. I mean, when we were young, you had to be either a teacher or a nurse that was the two things!

*Do people worry about Dounreay?*

I don't think so. I don't think so. The worry is just now that it might close down earlier than they thought.

*Well, that's what I meant, actually, that for a certain generation it must have brought ... amazing opportunities ...*

That's right, changed our way of life, and now they'll wonder what they'll do if it closes. It brought lots of different opportunities, and some money into the ... but, health-wise, you think, well, maybe, but sometimes you think, well, but there's always something, isn't there. Something's going to get you anyway in the end.



*And compared to your mother's life, do you think there's a big – what sort of differences are there in the way of life from what she had compared to what it is today?*

Oh, very different. I mean, for bringing up a family now, even just from all the facilities in the house, from your washing machine well, for a start from the water. There was no water in the house, you had to go away along about 200 yards along the road to bring in the water, and you had to carry the two pails. It was easier to carry two pails than one, because you were balanced, and many's the time we – many's a pail of water. We got the water in here when I was about ten, eleven. I went away to school in Dornoch when I was eleven or twelve, you know yourself, and when I came back in the October break the water was in in the house. I always remember that, and the toilet and that. We didn't have a toilet until then, it was just out to the side of the house, and you had a pail, and, you know. Or up in the whins, whatever!

Bairns that don't believe this, you know. But that was true, and you had to carry in the water and then you had to heat it. I mean, they used to wash the blankets and big washing day out there at the side up on the hill there. You'd have a fire outside and the big black pot, heating the water. Big zinc bath, and putting the water in and we used to love tramping the blankets, it was a special day, tramping and feeling the water on your feet, and then rinsing. But it was a lot of work.

And even, there wasn't even a washing line as we call it. The washing went on the whins. I remember, I was telling the bairns this just recently, and they were just looking at me as if I was making it up, och, and listen to her. But we used to put it out on the whins, and so the pricks of the whins held the washing.

And if you were wanting something bleached up, say, like a cloth or a towel, it was left for a few days out on the whins, and, there was none of this washing-machines and tumble-driers and things. There was a lot of work where there was a lot of children, but we didn't have so much clothes, this is the thing. you had your school clothes, and when you changed you came home and put on any old clothes you could find, whereas nowadays they're putting on different clothes every day, and wanting a clean t-shirt maybe twice a day, or whatever. We just didn't have that. You had your school clothes, which was handed down, likely, if you were third in the family like I was ...so that there wouldn't be so much washing in it, but it was certainly not easy to do, because of the carting of the water. And even the shopping, well, there used to be a lot of vans, there'd be butchers' vans, the changes, the washing, that's one big thing – electricity

*When did that come?*

In 1955, when my – just about the time my sister was born, in that big snowstorm, Operation Snowdrop? My sister was born right in the middle of that. Must have been quite dramatic. We were kind of young, nowadays they're much more aware of what's going on, but I was just eleven and I wasn't just sure about the stork and all this kind of things, you know. But anyway, Valerie was born in the middle of it, and the doctor, he came down and he stayed in Strathy Inn, a couple of nights before the baby was due, but my father had to walk to Melvich for the nurse, and walk back with her through this snow that was away up to their bums, and himself and another man from the shop up there walked and walked back with the nurse, and I think by the time they got back the baby was born, but I'm not just awful sure on that, again. But she was born right in the middle of that Operation Snowdrop.

I remember my mother making clothes for her, even making little vests and things out of whatever material she had, and because whoever had the cot, that, you know how the cots were passed around, and this hadn't arrived, she slept in a drawer. It was just a big drawer, out of the chest ... and her bed, and we were amazed at this, we were delighted with it. We didn't close it! It was out on the floor!

Yes, and she's now down in Colchester, Valerie, just right in the middle of that, I remember that, and the helicopters dropping the food and that, but I think there was a couple of weeks or more before everything got moving, but of course in them days my mother fed the baby herself, so there was no problem about that, and the doctor, he went outside and he melted snow to get water, because there was no water of course, and he melted the snow. I remember him coming in with a pan of snow, and melting it on the hearth, because it was a hearth we had ...

*And the nurse did arrive and stayed It must have been a hard walk for her, from Melvich in that snow.*

That's right, yes, she was quite a young nurse, though, and they were delighted with her, coming back. She was quite young, it must have been one of her first jobs, I forget her name, and I think it was Miss Car – Nurse Cartwright, but I'm not certain of that, and she was very nice. I remember her playing with us and chasing us around the house and that. Because, I mean, that would be the sixth one. There was five of us here, so needless to say, there'd be a great stir going on, so, yes, that's 1955, in January 17th, she was born, right in the middle of it all.

*And were people panicking about food and so on, because of the snow?*

I don't think so, I don't remember us – them panicking about food because they were well used to having stores in the house, you could think just now, if the roads and everything were blocked for a week we could survive because we were used to having stores of food in, and they weren't panicking about bread because the baked, every day they would be baking pancakes and scones. They were dropping food for the cattle because of all the snow, you see, that's what I remember being dropped, was bales of hay for the cattle, but I don't remember anything having to be dropped for humans, because every house would have their store. They would have their own potatoes and turnips and they'd be making soup and ... they would all survive, they'd have plenty flour. They were used – because we didn't have shops we could go out to, so I don't remember any panic about that. Even with a baby being here, I don't remember a panic for any of that. They were much more organised, weren't they, really?

*Do you think working life here is different from other places? You were down in Moray and then came back?*

Yes, well, they have different types of work, like, with shops and maybe factories or whatever, bigger places, although there was a lot of working on the land down there as well, but fishing and that type of thing. Here, they had the salmon fishing. There used to be quite a lot of men employed at the salmon fishing, but not now, and another thing was the forestry. There was in every little village almost there was a man, a forestry man, and workers. Same with the County working on the road. There was depots all along they've all gone. That was two sources of work. A lot of men worked in the forestry, and in the County, on the different squads. Now they've gone, and they haven't been replaced with anything else. And the hotels, I suppose, are still there for work. A lot of people doing bed and breakfast, but this wind-farming is coming, definitely coming. Whether we like it or not, I reckon it's coming. Whether it'll make a difference I think it would be good if the communities would benefit. If they were far enough away not to bother us, and some benefit would come to the communities, I think that would be great. We might be able to do something. There's so many broken-down, crumbling buildings, crumbling dykes and I would like to see something happening to all that. If there was a community fund where you could do things in the community, it would be good. Of course, there's so many rules and regulations governing everything nowadays, but it would be good for each community to tidy itself up.

*It was just when you said about wind-farms, what I'd been going to ask as well was what, in terms of work, getting by, making a living, what sort of opportunities do you think there are here, now, and what might there be in the future?*

Well, in the future, I definitely think wind-farming is coming. It's very controversial, I know, whether we like it or not, I reckon it's coming. I am in favour of it, if the community will benefit, and if the windmills are not on our doorstep. Now there's plenty room away up in the hills, there's vast areas of land up in the hills. The lowest population density in Europe – surely there's ... Where they wouldn't do us any harm, I'm sure. In fact, I have no objection to them. When I look at them, say, on the Causeymire, where they are there, huge windmills, everybody says, "Aren't they awful?" but I don't find that. I think they're quite interesting.

But because of other people and that, well, you'd want them away, up in the hills. I don't mind seeing them, some folk say, "Och, you would see them on the hill", well, at least it would be something on the hill. You look just now and you see nothing, and no prospects of anything. But especially if it brought money into the community and they could bring a lot of money into the community. Not to individuals, but into the community and a proper trust or something set up to do things in the community. And the power to do things in the community, like what I'm saying, tidying up dykes that are falling down, and just the general ethos of the place, to give it a bit of new life.

Of old buildings, and not meaning to change things, but let's ... all those dykes that are surrounding crofts, beautiful dykes – yards and yards of them falling down, and nobody's ever going to lift them. Just to repair them in the old style. There's old buildings, beautiful old buildings, which I'm sure could be ... in our own community here, there's old buildings that I know we could renovate.

As you come into Strathy, there's ... it belongs to somebody, and that was a good-going, thriving business in days of yore, when I was young. There was a very, and excellent general merchant's shop up there and there used to be a shop up there, there was a shop over there, just looking there, a merchant's shop, and there was a shop along the road. There was one, two, three shops. There's no shops now, in Strathy, at all. And so, that would be a big problem. There's a post office ... no, there's not, I'm trying to think, there was a post office, but no, the post office is in Melvich now. So, things have changed. But, wind-farms, I think, I think that is a ... that is a hope. But a lot of people don't see it that way.

*We were talking about shops in the old days, and Sandra mentioned something about, er, was it Ram, on a bicycle, who came round?*

Yes, that's right.

*Other people might remember a Kushi, was it?*

Oh, I remember Kushi, he was very nice and he'd a little grey van, and he used to come and he had clothes. I think he had a wee shop in Thurso. But he came round and he came regularly, Kushi. I think he was based in Thurso. He had a wee grey van, I remember it well, and he came regularly. We used to get things from him, not that you got that much, but you might be getting a pair of socks, or knickers, and things like that. He was the only one, and then there was the butchers' vans and all that, but Kushi, really, was the main one. And then when we got older and maybe ten years later, there was Ali, darkie, and they used to come, they coming from Thurso as well? There was a fish van used to come out from Thurso as well Johnnie Mackenzie and ... that's all, really, except for the tinks that used to come round. And there used to be the men with the turbans, they used to come. It's funny, and they used to have all their wares in a great big – must have been a sheet or something, and everything was in it, and it was tied up. It wasn't in a case, it was tied up in a bundle. It's funny we should speak about this because I

was coming through, just on Sunday, with my washing, my own personal washing, and I had a nightie and I put all my stuff into the nightie, and I tied it up like a and I was passing Robin and I says to him, “Do you remember the tinks that used to come round the door, they’d be coming with their wares, well here’s me going with my washing!”

*Do you think anyone has any photos of any of these people, from when they came round?*

I doubt it although I have the old Brownie camera that my mother and father used to have. I still have it here somewhere, but ... no, photos were very rare, a very rare thing. No, I don’t think there’d be any photos.

How shopping has changed. You used to be able to go to Thurso with a ten-shilling note and buy all your shopping. You wouldn’t go with fifty pence now. Of course it was a rare occasion, I mean, we only got to Thurso in the summertime, and you had to save up for that. We used to buy savings stamps at the school – you were able to buy a savings stamp – don’t know what they must have cost, six pence in the old money or something, and we had to save – you put the stamp on the sheet of paper, and then in the summertime we used to cash them in, and we’d go to Thurso for a day out on Burr’s bus, and we’d all get to Thurso for the day. And that was your treat for the holidays. You weren’t running into Thurso like they do now, in cars and that, you know. It’s different days for the youngsters. And, I mean, before I went off to school in Dornoch, I had never been in Dornoch. That would be unthinkable now.

When I went to Aberdeen, to the college, I’d never been in Aberdeen. I mean, now, parents take them trips to see this, they’re taken from the school round all ... we went away, and I’d no idea what a city was going to look like. And I remember the morning when we went. We got up in the hostel, everybody was taken into the common-room and told, what number of bus to catch, and me being so stupid, coming from the Highlands, I said, “When does the bus come?”

And everybody started laughing, and I thought, I didn’t know what they were laughing at, and they said, “You just go to the bus stop and you stand and the buses come along all the time!” Blooming heck! I didn’t know that! Because we were very, very ignorant. Even when we got to Aberdeen, we didn’t know how we were going to find the hostel. And then somebody – there would be a lot of us – suggested that we’d get a taxi. Well, that was fine, when we found out how to get the taxi – we were very, very ignorant when we went away.

It was frightening. But the youngsters nowadays, they are much more wise than we were, we didn’t know about all those things. And, it’s funny, nobody told us. We just went and had to find out. We just had to find out for ourselves, but nowadays, you see, they’re around and they’re travelling all the time, and they’re away on holiday, so many of the schoolchildren are away just now, abroad, for their holidays, and they know about all those things that we didn’t know anything about. Worse looking back on it, and thinking what we did. When you’re in the middle of it, we didn’t know anyway! I don’t know what we thought was going to happen, when we got to Aberdeen we probably weren’t thinking And then looking back on it you think, oh God, weren’t we stupid, we didn’t know. We got there. One helping the other. Between us, we got there.

*I was going to ask people as well about local music –but obviously there’s bards down the ages and different kinds of musicians. Do you want to maybe talk a bit about that and what it means for, well, I suppose, here but Mackay Country in general?*

Yes, well, local bards, you mean. Well, down in Portskerra they did have a local bard, you’ll hear probably if you go to Portskerra, you’ll hear more about him. In fact, he had a book published. Around Strathy, I don’t know so much, but we were always into the ceilidh styles, at home, and the bagpipe music was a big thing in this house, and my uncle along the road

there, and he would be coming down and we'd have nights with the bagpipes being the main instrument and Gaelic singing, my aunties down the Point, they were very much into the Gaelic singing, and – if they had been alive – and they only died within the past five, six years, one in particular would have been a lovely lady to interview, and great with the music and Gaelic songs and singing, but ... and we'd have lots of ceilidhs there and, a lot of piping around in Strathy. At the crossroads here, Benny Manson, and he's still living, a great piper, and he's teaching, now, some of the youngsters at the Feis ...he's a good tutor. We went around a lot – I was very interested always myself in the Gaelic singing, and so the children were around – Carol-Anne says she was dragged around every ceilidh along the north coast! And we did a lot with the children in the school, like of Shona and all those, we did a lot of Gaelic singing and they were into the dancing as well. Just keeping the traditions going. And that's what we've been trying to do, through the children, and quite a lot of the children have gone on, there's the like of Catriona MacLeod, and there's Carol-Anne, and Shona even, and Eilidh Dibble. Several of them have gone even half-a-dozen keep it going, now they'll keep it going...

When you go away with the children on a tour, on a bus tour or that, when they're on the bus, what are they going to sing? They're singing Gaelic songs, every time. I was taking a group on a ... just last week there, we were going to an orienteering in the forest at Dunnet, and because there was too many for the bus I had four little children in my car. And they were just in Primary Four, and we were coming down the road and nobody was saying anything, I was just driving coming down the road, and next thing this wee boy behind me, he started singing the song that he had sung at the MOD, and in no time at all we were all singing, and then we were going from one Gaelic song to the other and it was the Gaelic songs they were singing. I notice that, and if I meet any of the pupils that I've taught throughout the years, if you go out and if you meet them anywhere, they'll say to you, "Oh, do you remember when we went to the MOD in Golspie and this is the song we sang," and they're singing the song in no time at all, they remember the songs.

Stays with them, that's right. And they tell you how much they enjoyed it and, all the other things they did. There's this chappie and he's about 30 and he was saying to me, "Remember that MOD in Golspie?" And he says, "And you took us to the swimming pool," and you did all that things and, you have forgotten but they remember it! Because it was a big thing in their lives, you know and it's good, I like to hear them singing the Gaelic songs. And now Valerie, she was working in the bar in Thurso, at nights and there was something on, there must have been a football match, she said, and she said all that boys from the west were in, they were about thirties now, they were at football and they all came in and "Mam," she says, "they was singing all that Gaelic songs that you were doing with them in school!"

The music, certainly. And the language, through the music, has a chance. I think that's what'll make it survive. If we got the right occasion, I was always, I had a wee choir that I took to the National MOD for about four years running. What I would like to do is get a hold of them, and hear them again, and they were pretty local. There was Shona and there was Dawn, from Naver, and there would be Carol-Anne and Valerie was in it I think, and Mhairi, you could gather perhaps ten to a dozen of them. Catriona MacLeod, the two MacLeod's were in my choir. You could gather quite a few of them if there was an occasion, and sing that songs. There was the O'Hagan girls as well, they're away down in Edinburgh now, but if we had the occasion, we could gather eight to ten of them, no bother at all. It would be a lovely thing to do. Yes, and then we could just record them singing 'Glen Golly', we did that. And there is a recording of that, because we did it on a television programme, and I did have it, if I could ever find it, but other people must have it too.

*Mackay Country special, how you would describe Mackay Country and its history. Just a small question?*

Just a small question, well, I suppose we like to think that we haven't changed too much, and I hope we'll not change too much in the future, that we will hold on to our traditions and our ... especially our culture, our music, which is a very dear thing to me, the music, and the language and that we won't be changed too much, or even the kilts and the tartan. Now, I don't know, but I'm very keen on people wearing the tartan and their kilts, and I don't want them to be put off by people saying, "Oh, shortbread tin," tartan and all the rest of it. Be proud of our tartan, and be proud of the traditions and don't be afraid to wear it, I would say. I don't want people to think that's just for a ceilidh or just for a special occasion, but don't be afraid to wear it at any time. I hope that will not be changed too much by ... there's a lot of people come in and we shouldn't be afraid – even the way we're speaking, and the words we use, and a lot of people don't understand some words that we use, but we shouldn't be put off using them. We should, like ... Valerie is down in Canterbury just now and she was speaking to somebody who asked her to do something, and she said, "Yes, in a wee whiley," and looked at her and said, "What do you mean, a wee whiley?" or "a wee whiley", she would have said, probably, because that's what we do say, isn't it, "a wee whulley". And things like that, words that we use, like, like "putting on a jersey", even, "jersey", is old-fashioned now. The children don't know what a jersey is now, it's a sweater or a fleece and a blouse, I mean, a blouse is unheard of, absolutely, they don't know a blouse. Isn't it strange?

*Aye, I never even thought of that.*

Yes, well it's drawn to my attention I suppose when I'm working with the children, and you'll say "a blouse" and they'll say, "What is a blouse, Miss?" And you try to tell them and, "Oh, you mean a top." "No, I mean a blouse." And if you say to them, "Where's your jersey?" they're just looking blank at you, you know. "Go and put your jersey on, it's too cold to go out without your jersey." "You mean my fleece?" "No, I mean your jersey." All those words, like, have gone out, and what else? Eiderdown, they don't know what an eiderdown is. And when I discovered that I said to them, "Well, go home and ask what it is, and when you're at it, ask about the counterpane," you know. All those words are going to be lost, words, like. And even going "ben the house", that type of thing, and "in the press", the cupboard, and ... there's so many little things that we use here that they don't use nowadays, and they're going to be gone, but maybe that's a good thing, is it, I don't know. Working with the children, you discover that. That they don't know what those things are. A lot of our words and sayings and that are going, unless we make a deliberate, you know – and even in the croft houses and all that and up the stairs and the landing ... the "landing?" The landing gone as well.

It's all conservatories and there's no porches or back lobbies or that any more, you know. Och, maybe that's good though, it shows they have a better, maybe, or a more comfortable style of life than we had and by the same token, those same children didn't know what a pulpit was. You see, there's a lot of them not going to the church, not so many. I mean, before, they all went to the ... families around here, you'd be going to the church and going to the Sunday School, but now, things are ... of course, then there's no ministers. There's so many manses and churches and that, which is sad, too. Because if there's not a minister in the parish, or ... and you're sharing with someone else, it does slip, unfortunately.

Now, the school, we always take them at Christmas time, we do at Christmas time, and since I discovered that, I mean, there's no way that they don't know now, but I remember being amazed that they didn't know, the same as I'm amazed about the blouse and the ... yes, uhuh, but "blouse" is out, I mean, just think of it yourself – do you ever hear anyone talking about a blouse?

Even my own kids, like Carol-Anne and Mhairi and them, if I said “a blouse” they’d say, “What are you speaking ...” They would know what it was because I make sure they know, but, “It’s a bit old-fashioned, that, Mam,” you know.

And are there any things you want to say about Mackay Country history, history and community, at all?

I do think that the stones are good, welcoming people to the Mackay Country. At least it’s drawing it to their attention, and if we have a sort of theme going right through, or a trail, even, every little village or community with their own bits of whatever. There’s nothing, you see, to stop in Strathy, there’s nothing, the tourists just pass right through. They’ll stop, say, about Durness, or Tongue maybe, because there’s the hotels, but what is there in Strathy to make them stop here? There’s nothing.

The beach, yes the beach, and people do, we have a lot of people come out there, say, from Caithness, on a Sunday. But if the tourists are just travelling along, they’re going from one place to the other, maybe from Thurso to Durness in a day or maybe Tongue, but there’s nothing really to make them stop unless you’d have a ceilidh on in the hall at night, that type of thing.

Do you think ... in the past, using phrases like Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh was totally every day. Do you think nowadays everyone understands what that means, that it’s a place?

Yes, I think so. At the time of the unveiling of the stones there was a bit of confusion then, and, because they thought that was a clan thing, because they thought it was just for Clan Mackay. But it’s the country where the Mackays were, it was a whole country thing for everybody who’s living in it. I think so, although we’re quite happy to think its Mackays, you know. , I mean, we want people to come here but we don’t want it to change too much – at least I don’t. It’s nice for them to come, but accept us as we are, and if we’re wanting progress in our own time, great, but we don’t want to change. It hasn’t changed that much, though, really, really. People come and go, and the people who were here always haven’t changed that terribly much, I don’t think. Better off, probably, a lot better off, but ...

*And lastly, just a few words, if you have any thoughts on what your hopes and fears for Mackay Country might be?*

Well, I think my fears are what I’ve sort of said already. We don’t want to be changed too much. Yes, we want people to be interested in us, and to let people know we’re here, but we don’t want too many people. Does that sound selfish?

*No, no.*

We don’t want to be inundated with people coming building houses here there and everywhere, or schemes or that, you know. And as well we don’t want to be left high and dry, I don’t know. But ... I don’t know what my thoughts are, really. I would like to see something happening, though, to bring a wee bit of more help into the community. Not to individuals, but communities could prosper, that the roads would be done up and that we would have quicker access to hospitals and if it was necessary, the roads are terrible here, and if you do have to go quickly to a hospital, that’s not good. I would like to see that done, or even able to go south quicker, and that we would have good hospital services and medical services, ambulances, that type of thing. Bus services, I don’t know. People have their own cars now, they need them for around here. You couldn’t live without a car. And so that does its own harm, then, to bus services.

But the price of fuel, of course, that’s another thing that we could do with either subsidised in some way or another, or at least kept ... I mean, we pay more for fuel here than they do down

south, and that ... somebody should be trying to do something about that for us. I mean, you hear all this, "Don't use your car and take a bus", well, how can we, you know? What's the point in that, or doubling up with your neighbour, but your neighbour's probably going somewhere else, we're not even going to the same centre. I mean, all those things are impossible for us. Maybe there's something could be done to subsidise that in some way or other, and buses, really, they have a very limited use here, unless for older folk who cannot drive and that, and they do have a service. But I would just like to see it, I would like to see each community tidied up a wee bit. Buildings and fences and that type of thing, with a little bit of money into the communities to help do that type of thing, so that you could get a welcome in each little village, each little village maybe having some characteristic of their own, if they had the money to do that, to make each village, you know. We often thought around here, there's lots of wells around here, and, in Strathy, and all the old wells, because there was a well at every house, and at our Community Council we did speak about maybe finding those wells and, having a sort of ... Walk round them, or something like that. Of course a lot of them have been filled in, but maybe they could be cleaned out or ... of course, there's so many different reasons why you shouldn't, if anybody would fall into the well there's insurances and all that, I don't know. But something ... for each community to have. With a wee bit of thought put into it. But then it all takes money, doesn't it, and time. Somebody to organise it and co-ordinate it, and maybe that could happen. And I mean, even down there at the crossroads there's that thing where, when they were walking, there was no bus services and they used to walk with their horses into Caithness and that, is where they would all be getting their drinks, and that. Now it's still there, just, and I've often thought and we've spoke about it in the Community Council, how we'd like to maybe sort it, and tidy it up a bit, and put a wee plaque there, saying that that is where, when they were walking with their horses to the mill or wherever they were going, this is where they got their water, drinks of water and all the rest of it. It's all just a wee bit of interest for anybody if they wanted to stop and read it and that type of thing. And I mean, in a few years, it might be gone, I don't know. There's things we could dig out.

There's also an old church up there, which I know the people who have it would be willing to let the community renovate and use as a wee museum kind of place, or tourist place or centre of interest. If the wind-farms would come and if there was money coming into the community, we could do things with it.

*With heavy hearts and great sadness that the family announce the passing of Janette Mackay, aged 74 years, of Honeysuckle Cottage, Strathy West, in Raigmore Hospital, Inverness, on Tuesday, October 23, 2018, peacefully and with her loving family at her bedside,*

### **Jim Johnston Bettyhill**

Jim was born and brought up in Shetland. He went to Teacher Training College in Aberdeen and met his future wife from Mackay Country and got a teaching post in Bettyhill.

Interviewer: Isobel MacPhail,

Interviewee: Jim Johnston

Date: 03/03/2013

Transcriber: Isobel Patience

*Can I ask you first about your own family background I suppose a mini-biography, what brought you to Mackay Country in the first place?*

Well I was born in Shetland on the west side of a small crofting township called Twatt with seven houses in it and quite remote from other places in those days although today you can go to Lerwick in a few minutes really, but then being 20 miles from the town was quite a barrier. I have, am the second in the family with four in the family and it was a kind of extended



household, there was always older people in the household and a very, very full and lively kind of upbringing really in the midst of the crofting life – I knew nothing else. I went away to school when I was 12 or 13 in Lerwick and did 6 years in the Anderson Educational Institute there and then, my aim of course was to be a teacher because, I’ve told this story before, I believed somehow that teachers were well off, you know someone had told me when I was about five that teachers earned £20 a week and as lobster fishermen who were the kind of gods of money in those days were earning £30 a week. I thought that £20 would be pretty good so it was an economic decision really. I’d always wanted to be a teacher and I went away to Aberdeen to study English and Geography and then went to the teacher training college there but the thing that brought me here to the Mackay Country was that I met a girl in my first week or so in Aberdeen, I met a girl from Bettyhill, Jenny Mackay and we got married when I was a student and an opportunity arose in Bettyhill when I qualified and I’ve been here ever since.

*That’s very interesting because obviously your Shetland background has an awful lot in common with things here I would imagine.*

Yes, there are many similarities including I found a surprising similarity in some of the words that were used for specific things which I didn’t expect because there’s no Gaelic influence whatsoever in Shetland but here Gaelic is obviously the bedrock of place names and of a whole



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lot of things maybe even of the way of life in some ways and what I found was that some of the words that I recognised from my own background, the dialect which I have classed as dialect words were existed here in Gaelic exactly the same, like what we called sillocks which was young saithe are sellacks here and what we called, I don’t know if that’s a coil, a coil of hay was called a coil and a pile of peats was called a ruag where as we would say and I found maybe, I don’t

know, twenty or more words were identical so clearly there was some kind of wording going on in the past....

That’s very interesting though, very, ‘cos well although this is a Mackay Country project it’s outward looking as well. Well bird names, like here they call a cormorant a scaraf and we called

it a scarf and it's obviously the same word, you know.....and there was a lot of things like that I discovered and was very interested in.

*And then when you came here was the, the school wasn't up to sixth year then was it?*

No, no. It had just been upgraded from a Junior Secondary school to a fourth year school but with certain very tight restrictions on how it might develop, like at the end of second year we were expected to select, the teachers, when I say "we" I mean the teachers, were expected to select all those that we deemed fit to attain, these people all went off at the end of second year to either Golspie or very commonly here to Thurso and then at the end of third year there was another selection procedure where the ones that were deemed unfit to sit 'O' Grades were sent off to the Technical School in Golspie so we were left for our certificate activities with quite a small section of the population, well maybe rather less than half of the school population going through and these people were those who could get in to the 'O' Grade system...and it really wasn't very satisfactory, or I didn't see it as being satisfactory because the whole problem with areas like this and my own home was the same, was that you left home if you were an able person in an academic sense, then you left home when you were young and very often you never came back. I have never been back really to my own home although I've come to a place which is a kind of analogue of it, you know, it's very similar, it's remote, it's rural, it's very small – everybody knows everybody else back for several generations and every second household can reel off the patronage of the one next door and so on, although that's changing, you know it's different, but what's happened now is we have been made the High School for the area and that's for the whole area of Farr and Tongue but we still lose a proportion of usually the more able although not necessarily the more able people now, because some people, mostly in Melvich, elect to send their children to Thurso High School in spite of the fact that we have a proven record at doing, you know, at least as well, maybe better than Thurso High School does with children and I think that's maybe reflects the way people feel about their own place here, in that they don't value it as fully as they ought to, they don't value the services that they get and they don't value their own people, you know.....people they know. They think that people they don't know are bound to be smarter than the ones they do know, or something like that ....maybe that's a bit simplistic.

*Very interesting. Why do you think that might be?*

I don't know, I felt that ... I never came across that feeling in Shetland. In Shetland people were more – people had a sense of place, they had a sense of worth in their own place and in Shetland in particular, like as if Shetland was country, you know, it was not a rude nationalism or anything like that but a feeling of value and worth so if you met anybody you would announce that you were a Shetlander, it meant something to you and still means something to me whereas here people didn't have the same attachment to the area although they do have quite a strong attachment to their own little corner so that people in Bettyhill will, may speak derisively of people in Tongue and vice-versa and allege that each one has undesirable traits whereas to me they all seem the same like, I mean the north coast here is an entity that shares some of their problems, and yet one of its biggest problems is that it's divided and the same is true I think throughout Sutherland, it's a very small village mentality that exists and one of the things that people said to me after I was here for a short time they would say "what are you doing here" and I said, well, this is what I want to do, I'm a teacher and I want to teach and I wanted to do something in a place like this and they'd say, "oh, there's nothing here, there's nothing here, you should go and make your fortune somewhere else" and I thought this was a really strange way to think about your own place, and people will say things like, it will all be the same in a hundred years, well it will be unless people change it and there are things that could be done if people would work together and people would take an interest, basically.

*What kind of things?*

Well, I think that, I think for example, that, like I wrote a guide book to the area. Now, why do I have to do that? Why is there not some local person talking about their own place and being enthusiastic about it and looking at the place names and looking at the geomorphology or whatever, and digging up the old stories. I was astonished to discover how little the children knew about their own background. I remember a class I had early on when I was here and they were speaking about Armadale, and they were saying, we've always been here. I said, well, I don't think you really have. You've not always been in Armadale. Armadale's relatively new. No, no, that's not true. I said well, you know, it is true, Armadale was only laid out the way it is just now in 1818 or sometime like that, at that point I had gone senile and forgotten the date but it was round about then that Armadale was laid out in its current arrangement of what's now become crofting tenure but which was then holdings at the whim of the landlord. It was laid out at that time as were Bettyhill and Skerry, etc. etc. but they said, no, no, that's not true. I said well, it is true. They said no, if it was true we would know about it. Well you know we had this long argument and it always stuck in my mind and that was the native children, native children of the place. I was amazed that they knew so little of their own background. But also I felt that they hadn't explored their environment in the way that I thought that many people did, maybe some did but an awful lot of them, they were like forbidden to go to the coastline. They weren't allowed to walk round the cliffs. This is amazing you know, because in Shetland they would be *telling* you to go – go round the cliffs and see if you can find some wood or you know, go and amuse yourselves away somewhere else. It was just different, so different, and I think that what's most needed in a place like this is to create a stronger feeling of worth in the place among the people and somehow engender in them the feeling that their own history, their own landscape, their own things that they do are every bit as valuable as anybody else's and that by leaving here and going to Edinburgh or somewhere like that you're not necessarily transferring to a better kind of life. You may well be going downhill rather than uphill. But maybe that's a bit extreme.

*That's very interesting. Do you have any ideas why there's that difference between the Shetlander, the Shetlanders' outlook and the way things are in Shetland because I've noticed it, I've been, I've only recently had the privilege of going to Shetland a few times and I'm probably going back next month and I've noticed that. I suppose a phrase that's probably over used nowadays but is appropriate in this case is that kind of sense of self confidence wide. Some people say, "Oh it's the oil" but it can't be because what you're describing is surely before the.....*

Oh yes, yes, this was before the oil came, certainly, yes. Yes I think that that feeling has always existed. I think that Shetland and Orkney and Faroe and Iceland, all these places, they have like a literature of their own, you know? Now a lot of people would think that that kind of thing didn't matter at all.....It does....but to me it does because I think that – say you go across to Orkney, just now to flit my daughter to Inverness, you'll find that there's book shops in Orkney that are full of books written sometimes by incomers but very, very often by Orcadians who have selected aspects of their own environment to write about, and that is so rare in Sutherland; it almost just doesn't happen as far as I can see, but in Caithness it's a bit more common, but in Orkney, Shetland, Faroe, Iceland that's what they do. And in any of these places you'll find compared to here a huge literature. Now they're not saying that it's a *quality* literature, it's not like ... you know, it's no sort of Shakespeare or anything like that coming out of these places but nevertheless it's a record of how people feel and a record of attitude and a record of events and a statement of pride in place and it's ongoing, it's not something that people did in the past and stopped, it's something that they're continually going on and doing and I think that one of the things that's needed around here is to establish that kind of literature. Like in Shetland for

example there are two, just now, two magazines that run, one is a monthly one, one's a quarterly one, one's called 'The New Shetlander' It's been running since 1950 continuously and it's got a quarterly magazine which gives a platform for poetry and short drama type stuff and short stories and also has a series of, a smattering of continuing articles that go on and on from edition to edition and theirs also one called 'Shetland Life' which is, must have been going for about 20 years and it does a similar job but is more a commercial enterprise, the other one is more, has more literary pretensions. Now something like that, I presented the idea to the Highlands and Islands Development Board, you know, twenty five years ago..... for this area and actually priced doing it and contemplated starting it but it seemed to me that there would have been too much work involved in it for an individual. You would need a group to do it and where would you get these people. Now, some, there has been some movement towards that in Paipear Beg and Paipear Mor and Am it needs something more than that and I think if you had that it would...

Well, I think that one of my aims, my own aims, is to write about things for the area and positive things, and try to, you know, make people aware of what goes on, I mean, don't know if it's, it's maybe a complete waste of time, I don't know, maybe nobody reads it, I've no idea but, you know, one of my purposes if you're allowed to have purpose is to do that, I mean I've done that little booklet about Farr and Tongue and I've done the Strathnaver Trail one and I've also, I also try to do as often as I can small items that depend on historical incidents or archaeological stuff or environmental interest or whatever and ...Astronomy, oh yes (*laughing*) aye but they could do that anywhere, the platform is the earth in that case rather than the light pollution...

*People speak of light pollution as getting in the way*

Well, yes, that's true but it gets in the way even here. If you go, go to the top of a hill around here and look around you, you would think that you were surrounded by suburbs of cities and in fact you go there and it's, you know, it's a place with half a dozen houses and twenty street lights, I never, I feel really bad about it – if, if you hear of the, the street lights in the north coast being sabotaged it could just be me, you know – if I can find a big pair of pliers I'll be cutting the wires, you know, I just detest it, but, what can you do, you know? (*Laughter throughout*) People view that as progress and it's *not*, that's the last thing you need is street lights, I would say.

They did that at Stoer at the junction. The Assynt Crofters' Trust at the township got ground for the housing association. I mean it took years, finally four houses were built and let, just earlier this year they were let, but in the building of that there was this thing came up that yes, they would need about twenty five street lights, you know, because, they would have to come from here and they said the rules were they weren't allowed to build anything without these street lights and people – it was interesting because people actually kicked up a huge fuss.

I wouldn't mind so much if they switched them off at midnight or something. That's what used to happen in Lerwick when I was a child going to school there. Not that you were often allowed out until midnight but sometimes you jumped out the window and went for a walk about, you know, in the middle of the night and if you did then at midnight, the lights went out. It was great! But I think in most places in north Sutherland that could still be done. I mean they say that, that these lights that costs the council the same to have them on or off but I mean, that's ridiculous, everyone is drawing current, everyone is using some amount of electricity and surely to switch them off at midnight would not be all bad. There's only about seven nights in the month you can't actually see by moonlight anyway if you're used to it. It's no use going out in a street light environment and expecting to see when you step outside that but if there were no street lights you would see – the light would be sufficient, the natural light. I mean

people have been going round in the darkness for thousands of years quite without hurting themselves one bit.

*To take you back to the writing thing for a minute, I mean, you've done a lot of writing for here but you were mentioning the writing culture that has been maintained and built upon in Orkney, Shetland, The Faroes and so on, I suppose I'm still asking the question, why there and not here?*

I really can't explain that, I really don't know, but it seems to me to go back in time. If you look at this area here people came to this area in the nineteenth century and looked at its geology and looked at its natural history and researched it and wrote about it and some of the most, you know, illuminating books that exist in geology were written about this area, and yet local people never seemed to have got into that. The only exception might be that a guy in Skerry, I can't think of his name and this very instant, who wrote the first guide book to Caithness and Sutherland...It's about 1818, that sort of time. Yes, och it'll come back to me later on. I have a photocopied copy of it but it doesn't ever seem to have got into a tradition although if you look back at old newspapers, like say you had to look at The Northern Ensign or something like that then you'll find there's very lively correspondence from this area into the newspapers, although the newspapers were based in Wick and Thurso and maybe latterly in Golspie since 1900 but before that mostly Wick and Thurso, and if you go and look at these then there's all sorts of things, you know, about the death of new year in Strath Halladale and stuff like this...it goes on and on and on and, a whole lot of very interesting stuff there. So there was a lot of, there's clearly an ability to write. I mean, if you think about Donald Macleod, 'Gloomy Memories' – you're back in 1830's perhaps, and here's a guy who could have had very little formal education and yet he's able to write these quite well expressed, although extremely doleful accounts of everything that was going on, you know? So somewhere it's got lost along the way.

Maybe the outpouring of people from here would explain it, although that happened in, certainly in Shetland too. The population of Shetland peaked in I think 1830-ish, 1840 maybe at 36,000 and went down so that when, in the 1950's it was 17,000 and it's now back up again to 23,000 or something like that order. Here there's been a striking change in population within this century, Well not this century, the past century, in that we're now down to about 40% of the 1900 population in the parishes of Farr and Tongue and that's an astonishing transformation because it's taken place in well, what is really the lifetime of a person, almost. Like if you think about there's not many people who reach a hundred, but there was a woman from Bettyhill here who reached the age of a hundred two or three years ago, she's dead now. Now if you think in her life, when she was born, there were two and a half times as many people in this area as there are now, There would be maybe a hundred people, a hundred pupils in the school at Melness and another hundred in Tongue, a hundred in Skerry, maybe four in Bettyhill and so on along the coast as well as numerous side schools and so on, and now, you know you're scratching round the entire area to get a, to get a hundred children. That's just an amazing drop.

*And presumably that must have had its own impact on this sense you referred to earlier of, work, you know, go elsewhere to seek your fortune.*

Yes, I think so and people see that constant and the age structure changing simultaneously of course.

*Does it become almost unimaginable to live here and succeed?*

Yes. Perhaps, perhaps it does. Perhaps it is something like that that, that the only people that are seen as succeeding are those that move away and then they come back with their big cars or something, or, I don't know, or they write back from Canada or Australia or somewhere and

say how well they're doing ... of course this has happened all over the Highlands but I think maybe on the edges like this it's happened more and that might account for it, but I don't know. I, maybe there's something in the Gaelic people, in the Gael, Gaeldom ... I had this said somewhere maybe a quote from somebody. Yes, they defined a Highlander as a man who could do anything in the world and nothing at home, but I'm not saying that, I mean the people I've worked with, with Highlanders and I've been here among the Highlanders for a long, long time, they're perfectly good workers, but nevertheless the area is somehow going downhill and would be much further downhill were it not for the influx of incomers who, like myself, who see value in it and who choose to come here. That's difficult to understand, why ... it doesn't get home to the natives, I don't know.

*That do you think draws people to come here? What is that value that they're seeing and recognising?*

Well, I think that there is in places like this still a strong sense of community. For example I just came home from the funeral today a few minutes ago, in Skerray there, and there were people there at Davie Henderson's funeral from all over Caithness and Sutherland and there's many, many places where that doesn't happen. I mean if you go to a funeral in the city, then it's something that only a handful of people attend very often but here everybody, everybody is valued far more than they are, every member of the community is valued far more than they are in a bigger society so community still exists and you can still have like a village dance or a village event; you can have sales of work and fundraising things. They all are very, very well attended and well supported and I think that that doesn't exist once you get into bigger communities. I mean there's huge generosity in the people here, and in my experience throughout rural areas, which I'm sure maybe it would exist in bigger area... bigger places too if they had a means to express it but here you can have sales of work, you can have fundraising concerts, you can have all kinds of events and very large amounts of money are generated by these and the community continues to give and give and give for all kinds of causes and often for ones that have no conceivable benefit to the individual locally – it's not as if they're collecting for their own public hall or something like that although that too of course would be successful but it's given to – you know, if you held a, if you held a coffee evening for Somalia or something like that a lot of people would come and they would give money for that cause, and so on. So that's the sense of community that's one thing. There's the landscape which is very, very attractive and I think there's maybe a sense of peace and quiet in it all, although when you actually live in it you sometimes discover there's a lot of undercurrents in that, but I mean, I've lived in these undercurrents all my life so I know all about that but I think it's a, it's a great place to be. I know that since I came to Bettyhill I've never had a day of idleness, you know, I've had things to do every day that I've been here and new things to explore and do all the time and I think it's a terrific place to live, but not everybody shares that view. I mean, some people, I think it's maybe a better place for men than it is for women in away in that, although maybe that's a highly sexist thing to say....

*That's very interesting, because I've been asking about women in Mackay Country and stuff.*

I know that, well, when we came here my wife came from Bettyhill. She's a native person. She'd gone to Aberdeen to study computing and computer technology and became a computer operator and she was working as a computer operator with Aberdeen County Council when I, when I graduated, and then went on to do teacher training and then got a job here and when I got the job here she didn't like to say to me, oh I don't want to go, I don't want to go back, but it turns out after all this time that she didn't – she would rather have stayed in the city or somewhere more urban than this and wasn't really very happy to come back to Bettyhill although at the time because I was so excited about it all she didn't say. But if you're a man,

and you're in a job, then very often that's the way people in families move – the man gets a job and they move. Now I can come here and teach; it's an enjoyable sort of professional job, good money, long holidays (*laughing*) all kinds of things and it's what I want to do and it involves you in so many things ... but my wife, not being a teacher, although we have a good income and all that kind of thing, she doesn't have the same outlet for her energies and so on, and although she had several jobs while we've been here and has also brought up our child, she hasn't found it as fulfilling a place to be as I have and I think that that might be true for quite a lot of women, in that the man takes the lead and brings them here and then they have to scratch around for whatever job they can get. The jobs maybe not as good for women as they are for men, I don't know, but something along those lines, you see, you see what I mean?

*Yes, yes.*

Now the same would be if the wife was the main breadwinner and she got say a good job in the school or some other good job around here and the man was here kicking his heels in some dead end thing, that wouldn't work either, but in my experience it's mainly the women that prefer to go and indeed very often it's the women, the girls that leave, the girls are more likely to leave than the boys. Boys are more likely to stay on here, maybe it's because they, you know, they get to play with tractors and things like that I don't know. In a way, men maybe men but they're always wee boys at heart and the kind of things that people do around here might be more boyish things, I don't know – I'm probably digging an enormous hole for myself.....Women are different, I've discovered, yes.

*Well done Mr Johnston! That's very interesting, very interesting. It is.*

But that doesn't and I think also nowadays especially girls are more successful than boys, they're better educationally and academically and education is a good escape route from this kind of place. Mind you I suppose that's what I thought I was doing when I, when I went into it.

*Escaping your own small township to come to another one.*

Yes. I tell you, I do have a bit of few regrets about that too and I think that if I had gone back to Shetland rather than come here I would, I might have had opportunities there that I haven't had here, because there would be, there would be opportunities in say, writing and .... societies and things like that, and of course a network of people that I would know in a kind of semi academic world there whereas that network doesn't really exist here, you know ... but nevertheless I'm, I'm pleased that I am, I'm pleased that I came here and I've never had a dull moment.

*I suppose that could be a bit lonely sometimes then knowing that there's all that network of people.*

Not for me, I've never felt loneliness like that but I think that women are more likely to feel loneliness. I think that men are maybe more ... ready to engage with ... like more likely to focus on say a hobby or something like that than women are. Women need each other's company, they need to have company and they need to have conversation and that kind of thing whereas men have an ability to focus on tasks and stuff like that, invent little jobs for themselves to keep them happy (*laughter*)

*I'll quote that one for sure, I'm telling you! Now speaking of hobbies and interests although it's not entirely a hobby or an interest because it comes out of your university training anyway but you mentioned 19<sup>th</sup> century research, the geology and so on, and if you would it would be great for you to talk about that and, well, because to me it's a very – I don't have the depth of knowledge that you have, but it's certainly a very exciting period.*

Yes. It would also be true of course from the history point of view in that the, the kind of idea of history that's now developing is more the history from below, idea, whereas when I studied history at school, I didn't actually study geography in school separately, I took it up in my spare time towards the end of my school career, but I studied history, Higher history and I did history at university for a short time too, but the history of my youth was the history of the kings and queens and what they were up to, and the great power idea you know, when you looked at say imperial Britain and how it set about its task of colonising the world and so on, but today's history looks more at the effect of these currents and trends in history on the ordinary people and I think there's tremendous scope for research on that in this area, because the great event of this area, although that too is maybe belaboured too much is the – we're always hearing how there's going to be a second highland clearance because Dounreay is collapsing or something – it's just becoming nonsensical expression, but nevertheless that amazing transformation that took place in the highlands here in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was exemplified very much here in I would say two ways, one because the house of Sutherland kept such immaculate records and has now opened them to the rest of the world so you can now study the Sutherland papers, and also because there were a number of characters in this area who made an impact on the whole interpretation of clearance history. One was Donald Macleod, author of Gloomy Memories and there's scope for the research and cross-referencing of his writings against the Sutherland papers which some people have undertaken with considerable success, but also Patrick Sellar. Again the subject of much research and this is where something that was happening everywhere was written down and recorded and written about, not just here but also, I mean, in London, Paris, and wherever you want to go (*laughing*) ... and maybe to make ... to, to look at that period and fit it in to the history of the peasant throughout Europe if you like, because the peasantry throughout Europe were displaced from their traditional lands over a period of centuries and this was one of the most recent episodes in that, and if you were then to go on to say colonial Africa, look what happened in Kenya and in what's now Zimbabwe and in South Africa, then you'll see the same kind of thing happening The rich and powerful when it suits them taking the traditional pastures or the traditional arable from the ... the peasantry and using it for their own good and displaced people. And it's still happening and you know it's still going on within our own lifetime, so places that within context would be, you know, interesting.

*Yes, I referred to that in my PhD. I think it's very interesting because you also have the ... the whole historical thing where Highlands and Islands are seen as threat right up till 1746 really and then you get the emergence of the Highlanders as the faithful soldier ...and it was hand in hand and with definitions legal and ... legal and cultural in a sense of the powerful, pupils' cultural sense of natural resources and jurisprudence in terms of ownership and all that and of course the people who have experienced it at home on the bad side are probably always going to be the best at imposing it on someone else because you've picked it up because there's a cultural edge to it you can, people pick it up, I mean the story of empire has that from every country, so yes, it's a big, big subject.*

Yes but to come back to the kind of environmental side of it all, this is an unusual area. Maybe every area if you look at it closely enough is unusual. Certainly every area is unique, but I think that, that from the point of view of geology there are things that occurred over the aeons of time here that are reflected in other parts of the world but are exemplified here and easily seen in the landscape and it's been so well researched over such a long time that there's an enormous wealth of written information about it as well as the opportunity to just go around and see it so more interpretation of that would be good although that's coming on, I mean there's the Knockan Crag, is it, well that can't possibly be the right way to pronounce it.

## **Interview 2**



I'm just thinking, we're talking about these critical moments when schools shifted and changed in different ways, and maybe just having six, eight, a dozen photos that give a wee sense of these moments. Having a school that goes to sixth year is a big deal and this was done all these things was done completely without ceremony. There was never any shaking hands or anything like that – in fact it was with gritted teeth more like, most of these critical points And it's been a bit of a struggle, really, to get to where we are today, but it's certainly not one at which the points of change are celebrated. But that in itself is worth mentioning.

What I was thinking to do when I retire was to start a ... because I have literally thousands of photographs. Most of your people have used them for stuff that they've had in the papers and that kind of thing. Aye, what I was intending to do with the pictures now, every year I do a kind of PowerPoint for the Gala, and it shows in the village hall all the things that have been happening that year at Bettyhill so, I was thinking of making a gigantic PowerPoint of all the things back through time, because obviously I'm just doing that thing since I went digital. I've been doing this for twenty-five years before I went digital ...Just the school doing things.

*Just trying to check if there are any other particular aspects that we need to cover ... yeah, especially because, of course, you do have geography in your degree, and have always been strongly interested in geography and economy as well as geology. You've sort of touched on it already, but social and economic change in these decades. Since you started with how you ended up here, so, since you've been here, is there any particular observations you might want to make about that?*

Of the changes that have taken place, I think the main change that I've noticed is the change that I described earlier in the withdrawal of publicly-funded jobs in the area. But there's also been, I think, quite a bit of a decline in crofting. There's hardly any crofting done any more. Crofting here is different from crofting in Shetland, and the croft that I was brought up on – and it was my parents' – it wasn't quite their sole income, but it was the major element of their income – was quite large compared to the crofts here. I'm not sure what size it was, but we used to have eighteen breeding yews and up to six cattle.

There was developments going on in crofting in Shetland from early on in my life, a lot of things happened because in the place where I was born the first – I was seven or eight years old before the electricity came. We didn't get TV until 1964, when I was fourteen. I had actually – I tell that story quite a bit, but the year before the television came to Shetland, some well-off people bought televisions, because the television had already come to Orkney and, at the height of summer, because of some quirk in the atmosphere, then the signal would come over the horizon, and on a good night, if you had a TV, you could just see a picture. I know it was really awful, but one such person was the shopkeeper near my home. And I was down there one night and there was nobody in the shop except me, so I did buy some stuff – I can't remember what. And the guy said to me, 'Jim, have you ever seen TV?' And I said, 'No, I've never seen a TV.' 'Come with me.' He took me up to the house. He didn't take me in, but there was a kind of corner window in the sitting-room, and he said, 'If you look in there, you'll see the TV.' So I'm peering through the window, you know, eyes against the glass. And there, in the corner, was this TV. It wasn't switched on or anything, but I was so pleased that I had seen a TV, you know – I hadn't seen anything on it. But, you know – fantastic. And then the following year my mother took us all, the whole family, down to Aberdeen to visit her relatives there; people that stayed nearby to us until the 1930s when they moved to Aberdeen. And we went to visit them. And here was a TV. So we were watching TV and this programme came on called *Z-Cars*. First time we'd ever seen *Z-Cars*. And in that programme, the first one that I ever saw, there was a man attacked by others who were striking him with bicycle chains. I was utterly

appalled by this. I thought, right, if that's what TV's about, I don't want it. So, when it did come, I didn't watch it very much.

But I did succumb to it eventually, I'm afraid, but I think it was quite advantageous to me to be brought up without TV, because you had to read if you wanted to be – to expand your mind at all, or if you wanted even to pass the time. So it was quite good, actually, having no electricity, because that meant that the sky was completely dark, nobody could shade you out with fluorescent bloomin' street lights and so on in country areas, and you could go and see the sky; see the Northern Lights and you didn't have to watch all the drivel on TV. So there's a lot to be said for that kind of thing.

But the exciting things that happened were – one of the most exciting things in my life in Shetland was the day that the electricity came. Because people had been debating about this – they were getting the houses wired and the poles were going up, and all that kind of thing. And they were debating things like, you know, if you switch your light on and you haven't got a bulb in, will the electricity run out onto the floor?

But before the electricity came, then we had a radio, and this radio was powered by accumulators, which is an old-fashioned form of battery. And it was a wet battery, because there was acid in it, and electrodes in it, and, you know, it was very – you were given a very responsible job as a child, which was to carry the accumulators down to the van. A van came round every Friday, and every Friday we used to take a set of accumulators down – no, every *second* Friday we took a set of accumulators down to the van. They had a special place they put them in, and they took it back to Weisdale which was ten miles away where they had a generator, and they charged your accumulators for you. And, meanwhile, we had the other set going in the house, and that meant that the radio had to be rationed, because if you played the radio all the time, then the batteries would run down. And the old people wouldn't be able to listen to the nine o' clock news. So the day that the electricity was switched on we got a new radio, and we switched it on, and this green lightbulb lit up on the front of it, and it didn't fade away. And you could listen to as much radio as you liked, so we thought this was a real step forward.

Now, and the other thing was the coming of the water scheme. That was really exciting, because these old dragline excavators dug a ... you know, a path for the pipe through the middle of a very wet area, and of course we'd be down there watching and hoping they'd sink! It was all very exciting, and the tarring of the roads, that was another exciting thing in a young person's life. All these things happened in the '50s. So, yeah, but that wasn't what I set out to say. What was I saying?

I also liked when we went to church. My father was a lay preacher in the Methodist Church. My mother, her people had been Church of Scotland people, so we always went to practically every church. But when we went to the Church of Scotland – and you hardly ever went at night, but sometimes you did, like you maybe had a Harvest Festival at night in the church. And they had oil lamps, and the oil lamps were suspended from the roof with chains, and these chains, they could be lowered down, so now and again an ancient member of the congregation with the big beard, you know, and this golden sort of light, would stand up and lower the lamp down and trim the wick, or something like that. In the middle of the service, but I loved that, you know.

And it also ... it gave you this kind of ... I don't know, it seemed such a ... singing hymns in the darkness outside and the dim light of these lamps, and the colour of everything and these patriarchal people – it was really quite biblical. So, I missed that, too.

*We started off with how you ended up here,*

And that is part of the story of Shetland and Yeah, but the bit about the education there, and going away to school, that was really important to me. I really wanted to go away to school; I wanted to escape from the kind of crofting background. Now, I came back to it all again when I grew up, but as a child I was a very sickly child. And the whole crofting thing that – I couldn't really take part in it to the extent that other people did, because I was always so ill. And I kind of thought that if I'm going to do anything, I've got to get out of this and get education, I didn't find it at all difficult to leave home, but we did, at least on the mainland, where I was, we got back home every weekend.

But what I would like to say about it, having done that and thought about it since, is that in the time that I was in Lerwick – I was six years in Lerwick – in that time, and while I used to come home, whenever I got old enough then I managed to get jobs and they were always away from home. I always worked in the holidays and so on. And that whole thing took me away from my people. So that I don't have the kind of stories ... I can remember all the old people in my house, and it was full of them, and I remember them and I remember the stories, them telling stories and speaking between one another, but I was never there when I was grown-up enough to appreciate it. I went away, engaging in a completely different world, and that different world was not always a good one. In the hostel, there was a lot of bad treatment of pupils by one another within that – and I suffered from that myself. But it did make you – what it did do was that – and I think more so in Sutherland than even in Shetland, was it introduced people from different areas to one another, and created opportunity for friendships and so on that might go on all your life. And it was also – like, living together like that – there were fifty-five of us in the Janet Courtney Hostel – fifty-five boys in the Janet Courtney Hostel – it was quite a ... and most of it quite enjoyable, because there was a lot of crack going on. It also gave you opportunities to do things that I shouldn't speak about.

I wore the toes out of my winkle-pickers climbing down the drainpipes and stuff like that, and I got into a lot of trouble, actually, in the town. But it was a process of growing up separate from your parents and your family, and in a certainly very unsympathetic environment. You know, if you went to the housemaster of the Janet Courtney Hostel and told him you were ill, he immediately told you weren't; there was nothing wrong with you and to get on with it and maybe that's good for you, but I think there's a limit. And there was a lot of things – things that you'd get into that you'd never have got into if you'd been at home. And some of these things were undesirable things, you know, by my recollection. Anyway, in the end I got here, and I'm quite happy with it!

Well, I also felt that, for example, I have a brother who's five years younger than me – or is it six? Six years younger than me, yeah. And I went away to the hostel when I was thirteen. He was seven. And from then on, we kind of lived separate lives, you know. He arrived in the hostel himself when I was leaving. In fact, I think I might already have been kicked out of it! He arrived when I was about to leave or round about then. And meanwhile, in the hostel, I was in the same room in the hostel with – I was with – there were eleven rooms. They usually changed you around a bit every year – but you went to a different room every year, but you also often had different companions in the room. But I was in the same room in the hostel for, I think, five years, with one particular person. And then we went away to digs in Aberdeen; that was another three years. Eight years with this guy. And ... More than I ever was with my own brother. And I think, and on reflection, that was a bit strange. Mind you, I never see either of them now. Not that we're in any way unfriendly ... but I think men and boys, they just get on with it where you are ... you don't keep contact with people as much as women do.

*What was the food like?*

People always talk about the food – sometimes good, sometimes bad. I didn't mind the food; the food was OK, but I've always been pleased with food, you know ... I eat what I get. I think there wasn't really a lot of choice in the '50s, especially if you were in a kind of low-income family. You either ate what was put in front of you, or you would go hungry.

This is another story. I went to the – I had a pain in my belly one time and I went to the doctor, and he said to me – and he was an irascible Irishman – he said to me, 'Were you brought up in overcrowded and insanitary conditions?' I said, 'Certainly not!' But then I thought about it, and I was! You know, I was brought up in overcrowded and insanitary conditions because in our quite small croft there was my mother and father, my two sisters and me, and then my baby brother, all sleeping in one room. And upstairs there were different, but all the time, at least three aged relatives with a room each. And the house went – you went right out of our house into the byre. And at the back door there was the midden from the byre, because you couldn't barrow it all that far. And initially we didn't have a bath in, and when we did get a bath in we didn't get in it very often, you know. So I would say without a doubt that the – and then there were dogs and cats and hens; we had a – it was the time of the egg – the great hen boom, and we had a huge number of hens. If they didn't lay, then they died and we ate them, or they were killed and we ate them. And, you know, you were drinking milk straight from the cow and eggs that were of dubious cleanliness and, so, yeah, I was brought up in insanitary and overcrowded conditions. I don't ever remember being hungry at all.

That's another interesting thing I found when I came to Bettyhill, was that the words for some things were the same. For example, here they speak about 'sellacks', meaning the immature saithe ... And in Shetland they're called 'sillocks'. And then when they get a bit bigger they're called 'piltocks', and then they become called saithe. But we fished for them every summer, and they were abundant. You know, every time you went out you counted your catch in scores, so, 'How many did you get?' 'Oh, five score,' you know. And then you salted them; you gutted them and split them and salted them very briefly, and then hung them up on a line outside and dried them. And they wound up completely rock-hard – white, with the salt coming out of them. And in that form they were put in – we had, for some reason, white cotton bags that they went into – bags and bags of fish. So, and then you ate these in the winter. So, yeah, we had access to food. And mutton, we had mutton. Every time I see a sheep I salivate, you know! I like mutton, because I had it so much when I was a child, you know. And you usually had them with tatties; and some people just had them with tatties and butter and that was it, but for some reason my mother had white sauce, you know, white cornflour sauce, that kind of thing, and I still would like that, you know. If I could get salt fish now, I would be very pleased to eat it. That's probably why I have to go to hospital next week, you know. It's all the salt.

I liked kale too. Yeah, we used to plant ... on the croft, we planted 1,200 cabbage plants – kale plants, every year, and most of that was cut up as food for sheep. Not for sheep, but for the lambs. We had a separate building that we kept the lambs in every winter; they went into this building in the winter, and you fed them with this cut kale. My father and his – my mother's grand-uncle, they cut the kale for them every day, carried it up and tipped it out of these – into the lambs' feed, and they ate it. And then in the springtime they dug out the bottom and allowed them up down into the kaleyard, and dug it all over again using a traditional spade. But we were – our family was filmed once. I wasn't in it, but my mum and dad, my mother and my father were filmed digging in the kaleyard, and then this film was shown ... and we got to watch it, and it said, and here are two crofters tilling their humble plot! And we laughed and laughed, you know. We thought that our 'humble plot' wasn't such a humble plot, you know. And if my mother was living she'd still be laughing, because it was so hilarious, this condescending ... you know, them 'tilling their humble plot.'

*Well, Jim, thank you very much; that's brilliant.*

## **Hector Sutherland Rhigolter**

Obituary March 7<sup>th</sup>. 2005



IMAGE 80 HECTOR SUTHERLAND

Born at the lonely cottage at Rhigolter under Beinn Spionnaidh in 1932 and living and working for all his life in Durness Hector Sutherland died last Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup>. March at the Cambusavie unit in Golspie age 72. Hector was the last survivor of his siblings, a younger brother Donald and two sisters Ruby and Ina. He was an uncle and grand uncle. He was a bachelor and spent his life in crofting and agriculture. After leaving Rhigolter he moved with his parents to Hames Place in early 1970's where he lived for the rest of his life. Hector attended the side school at Rhigolter until his qualifying year in 1947 when the side school

closed. Hector and his brother were the first pupils to be transported by car to Durness Primary School where he joined the other young people in the qualifying year for a few months before moving to the Technical school in Golspie. He worked on Balnakeil Farm and for 25 years, was farm manager at Keoldale from where he retired in 1995. Hector had always taken an interest in village and community affairs. He was clerk of the grazings committee, treasurer of the Highland Gathering, one of the founder members that resurrected the games in 1970. He served for many years on the village hall committee. The funeral was at Church of Scotland Durness conducted by the Rev. Mann and after at Balnakeil Cemetery.

## **Lilian Mackay Kinlochbervie**

Lilian Mackay came from Kinlochbervie to Durness and talks about her childhood in Kinlochbervie. There's a documentary film made called 'The Crofters' and Lilian was in a little bit, her younger sister was in it too. Made in the 1940s.

Interviewer: Isobel MacPhail,

Interviewee: Lilian Mackay

Location: Mid Villa, Durine, Durness

*What I've been asking people to start with is just about their family, how their people came to be here, whether they're from the area or whether they moved here ... did some of them emigrate, you know, just that kind of thing.*

Well, I actually belong to Kinlochbervie. I came here in, what, 1959?

When I got married I came here, 1959. And, well, I've been here ever since. The kids went to school here and then to the High School, but they didn't have the do you call it, when I went, it's lodgings we were in when I went to school in Golspie.



IMAGE 81 LILIAN MACKAY KINLOCHBERVIE

I left school and I went to work in ... I didn't leave school, it was during the holidays – and I went to work in the Altnaharra Hotel. And my mother kept on saying, “You're going back to school,” and I said, “I am not!” So I stayed there. So I stayed there, and, well, I was down south for a while, and then came back. Well, of course, in them days there was only hotels and places like that to work in. That was all, there was nothing else, and if you wanted any – well, you had to go away to work. And I went away down south to work for this ... they were cousins of ... och, he's got a big house in Tongue the Dukes – Dunrobin. They were relations of theirs. And I went down there and I was with them for two years before

I came back home, and I thoroughly enjoyed it, because they were nice people to work for. And they just treated you like one of your – one of themselves. There was no nonsense with them at all. And then came back here and got married and came up here.

*And what kind of work did you have to do when you were down south?*

Well, it was in the ... in a big house, a manor house, it was called. And I did everything, more or less, everything, but, och, they were really, really good. And I made a friend down there – her mother came from the Black Isle and her father came from Aberdeen. And there was a fellow in a shop down there, a shoe shop – he was Irish – in the town itself. We were outside the town. In the town itself. And he always thought we were twins. And we used to go to the dances, into town, you know, at the weekends ... and if I missed the bus, you, know, like the bus the rest of them went on, they would run me in to the town. We always used to come back by taxi, a crowd of us, and whatnot. And one night, we were at a dance out there, and I met a chap up the road there, at this dance. And I said to my friend, I said, “Do you know,” I said, “I'm sure that fellow's from home,” and she was saying, “Go and speak to him then.” And I did, and it was him, that just lived up on top of the hill, there.

*Strange! And where was that?*

It was down in Rutland. And my brother came – when he was in the army, he came to visit me, at one time, and he stayed with my pal and that, but no, I really enjoyed it down there. She's married now, married to a policeman in London. And, well, I suppose the old people are all gone now. Probably if I went back there I wouldn't know anybody. But no, I thoroughly enjoyed it down there.

Then, my own family, they all went off different places to work when ... That boy's mother, he went to ... she went to Achvarasdale, and she was working in the old folks' home in Achvarasdale. The other daughter in Inverness, she's in the maternity unit in Raigmore. And the daughter that's in Yorkshire, she's a policewoman. She went in to the MP's in the army, and when she came out she just went into the ... she's over thirty years there, because she got

her medal for, you know, thirty years' service with ... another two or three years and she can retire if she wants, but I doubt it. I doubt she'll retire.

And the boy, well, he was at home most of the time, but he went to agricultural college and he was working on the farms – that's what he did. And the youngest one, in fact, she was working in Lochinver – the one that's in ... she was working in the Culag in Lochinver for a while. As I said, round here it's just the hotels and that's all the work that's in it. They're at Duartmore now.

*At Duartmore now, yes. When you went to Altnaharra for a ... supposedly a summer job, what was it like in Altnaharra then – that was going from Kinlochbervie to – well, you were in Golspie in the ...*

Yes, yes, going from – well, we had to go by bus to Lairg, and then by bus to ... from Lairg to Altnaharra. And there was very, very few houses there then. There's quite a lot in it now. And very, very few houses, but you never felt the time long, because there was – you were always working. I was more or less looking after the kids – there was two kids there – I was more or less looking after them and doing other things as well, different things as well. But there was ghillies and all that there then, so, I mean, there was quite a crowd, so you were never lonely. Never lonely. And then further up the road there was a lodge and it was Kimballs or something, the ones that was in that lodge, and all the menfolk from round about used to be working at either Altnaharra, at the hotel, or this lodge, and they had a big bothy of their own up there, you know. And we used to go up there at night and ... they were all from Melness, Tongue and, you know, round that places, and we never felt the time long. And then there was a dance here and a dance somewhere else – we'd hire a car and off we would all go to the dance. And come crawling in at all hours of the morning!

Oh, I thoroughly enjoyed my time in Altnaharra, although it was quiet. It was grand. But, oh, I wouldn't like to see that days coming back again, where ... you know, when you went off to school and you went into lodgings and that – no. No, I always remember going – of course, you'd have come off at the station and then you had to walk from the station to your lodgings. And I thought I was never going to reach there. And afterwards I thought, well, it's not very far! And I was sitting, sitting having my supper at night and I was thinking, oh, I wonder what they're having at home this kind of thing, you know, was going through your head, but then, after a while, once you got to know, you know, started the school and you got to know people and ... it was all bursaries then, you see, and at the end of each ... what do you call it, like, we didn't get home, like, from the summer till Christmas-time, and at the end, of course, the headmaster paid out all the bursaries and we had to pay it in too, to give it to the landlady and whatnot. And funnily enough, my landlady's daughter is ... I think it's a sister she is in the hospital in Wick, and my sister lives in Wick, and she's the sister's best friend!

*Isn't it strange?*

But then at home, of course, it was the usual. You had to work, when you're at home, cutting peats and planting potatoes and all the rest of it – looking after the horses, cows and sheep and whatnot. Did you ever see that film, 'The Crofters'?

*Not yet, but we've bought it for the project. I don't know if it's arrived yet, so ... Have you seen it?*

I've seen it. Well, the one I have, it's not the full ... it's not the full, it's just, it's just a tape, it's not the full thing. But I've seen it quite a few times – in fact I used to work in the canteen after I came here, in the school, and they had it up at the school, and I had to go in and say, you know, this is so-and-so and so-and-so, whatever. And I was saying to myself afterwards, I said, well, they won't know anybody except the boys that come here playing football with the

Durness ones. I said, that's all they'll know. And although I knew everybody that was in it, because it was all Kinlochbervie. And they came up and they stayed in the hotel, which was the Garbet Hotel then, and they did the film, and we were with them all the time, because they used to come up in the morning to my mother's and they'd be up at night when my mother was milking the cows, because they wanted the milk and my mother was giving them the milk, and oatcakes and things like that, and oh, they just loved it. Just loved it. And we went to all the wee places with them, when they ... We didn't go to the hill with them, when they were gathering the sheep! No, it's nice to look back, you know, on that kind of thing.

Aye. And then when we ... the springtime, we used to do our washing, and the ... of course it was all coming, the water was all coming from the well, and we had to go – and then one part of the year we ... just the springtime – we used to go down to this burn. And we were all like, all, the whole village was there. We'd a fire going and everything, and doing the blankets and the sheets and everything, and we were all tramping the sheets and all that kind of things. You know, down beside the burn and we took our food and everything with us.

And we used to ... it was the same when we were cutting the peats. We had – like, say, the whole lot of us went and we did so many peats, you know, one day, and then went on until everybody had their peats cut, and we'd be up there all day. And we used to have a big zinc bath and we used to take this up full of food and whatnot. Everybody took food up and we ate our food and everything up at the peats. We had to walk about a couple of miles or more before we would get to the peats, mind you, because there was nothing then but horses and carts and all the rest of it, but oh, it was great fun. Great fun. We thought it was, but I don't know what they would think of it today, mind you! I mean, they've been cutting peat since I came here, but not now. Because everybody's gas and electric and all the rest of it now, and there's no word about peats. So, oh, we thoroughly, thoroughly enjoyed it.

In fact, I was looking at one of that photos that they had in Kinlochbervie of the woman that lived – used to live next door to me in Kinlochbervie. And she was only – in fact, she was in her mother's arms ... and the two boys were in front. There was one boy missing, but there was the two boys in front of her and her mother and father, and they built a house next door to us, oh, when I would maybe be about four, five at that time. But we always used to go down to theirs because they lived down at the pier, which was the old pier. And then of course every year there used to be ... the big boat used to come in with the stuff that you ordered, like – if you ordered a ... one of the big square things of sugar and flour and oatmeal and all this kind of things, you see, and all this used to come in on the boat, and we used to go down for that and have a day out down there and ... But when I saw the photo, I thought, gosh, talk about bringing back memories!

And she was what ... she was ninety ... I don't know if it was ninety-two or ninety-three when she died. I think, and they were wanting her to sell her house and go and live in one of that houses that belongs to the place in Lochinver, and I knew fine she didn't want to go. So my sister – my daughter who lives in Thurso and her husband was up and they were down one day seeing her. And we went in and – you know Sylvia? She was in and she was wrapping up stuff and whatnot for her, and when I went in I knew Annie Jessie ... I knew she had been crying when I went in. And Wilma was saying to her, she says, “You don't have to go, it's your choice, and you make up your own mind. If you don't want to go, you don't want to go.” So the next Wednesday I was in Kinlochbervie and I met Sylvia – she's my niece, of course, Sylvia – she says, “What did you say to Annie Jessie?” I said, “We never said anything!” I said, “All Wilma said to her was if she didn't want to go she didn't have to go.” And she says, “She's no going!” “She's no going!” So her ... she was ill for a while and she died in the Cambusavie Unit in Golspie, and her niece is living in Golspie, and she had a nephew who lived away down south,



and he had cancer and he died, but he was the one, I think, that was getting everything. But, as I said, he died, and not – shortly after that his wife died, of the same thing.

And now it's the niece's daughter that has the house in Kinlochbervie. So they've been up and they've been doing bits and pieces to it, and whether they'll come to live there or not I don't know. But I would like to see one of them staying in it, because she has a few daughters, this one, so I would like to see one of them staying in that house, yes. But when I go down there now I look across and I see our own house, and it's my sister-in-law that's in it, and they're building a bit on it, and it doesn't look the same house at all. No, it doesn't. It is, very strange feeling, when you go down and you see ... and then I see – look at the other houses and I think of the people that used to be ... used to be in them, you know, and there's only one or two of them now that's still going.

Achriesgill's no so bad, because there's ones there like their sons have built houses and ... or houses that was – there was nobody in them, and this kind of thing. And there's quite a few – there's not so many people coming into it as what there is here. You know, so it's quite good. It's quite good. I think as far as I can make out there's only two empty houses as in it.

Just the two empty houses that's in it. There's somebody ... and they're all locals, that's in the houses, except one, and that was one of the ones that used to be at Rhiconich. There used to be two men there at Rhiconich, and this fellow, he's left and he's got this house. I think she does nursing, his wife – yes, because she was in, working in Migdale when my husband died. And I think now she does ... I haven't seen her here – I never see a nurse anyway, never see them. Nurse Katie Kay, she got married last Saturday, and she says, "I'm doing the over seventy-fives," she says. I says, "Well, what happens to the under seventy-fives?"

So, och, no, we thought it was the good old days, right enough, and, och, I thoroughly, I thoroughly enjoyed it, really, I really did. And, I mean, there was freedom and, you know, you did your own thing and you went to the dances and whatever, or if there was a film showing or ... you went to that.

*Where did the films show?*

Well that one that they did, they made, the first time they came up with it was shown in the old church away down at the pier – it was shown there. But other times it was in the hall. And – well, of course, we started off with the dances used to be in the school. And then when the hall was built the dances were there, but there's no hall in it now. In fact, there's a house there, now, where the hall used to be. Just on the other side of the school – just after you pass the school. And of course the school is a restaurant now.

I've been in it, because my son's engaged to the lass – the daughter that was in the ... her mother had the restaurant. But she just sold it so I've seen ... I was saying, "I spent many an hour in here," in the school. And they had some old photos too, on the wall. Now what she did with them when they went away, I don't know. She's living in Dingwall now.

But there was quite a lot of the pictures on the wall and of course when you go in like that ... and I didn't have my glasses with me and I couldn't see right ... I could make out some of them, because there's one in Kinlochbervie

It's just as you go in the door on the right-hand side. That woman I was talking about, Annie Jessie, she's in it – her age group is in that picture. But there's quite a few in the schoolhouse itself.

*And that's ... you went to school there, did you?*

At Inshegra Yes, yes, aye. You see, the – all the Kinlochbervie ones used to have to walk. To Inshegra, to the school. I mean, we didn't have far to go, from where we were, but all the Kinlochbervie ones, they all had to walk. See, there was no transport in them days.

*So you weren't in Kinlochbervie itself, were you?*

No, no. You know the first ... you know, after you pass Rhiconich, you know the first village you come to – that's where I stayed. In Achriesgill. Not far. But from the Kinlochbervie end it is much further. Oh, heavens, yes, they would have had two miles or some of them more to walk to school and walk home again. We used to have ... in the winter-time we used to get venison from the Duke. And the women just ... och, she was only, what, as far as from here to the house up there from the school, and she used to make soup and that for us, with the venison. We used to have that in the winter-time. Any other time, of course, it was, well, whatever we took ourselves to the school for our lunch, and we had our dried milk at eleven o'clock. The powder stuff you mixed up do you know, I loved it especially when I would come to the bottom! The lumps in the bottom, I used to love it!

In fact, out in our shed out there ... the tins, you used to get – were about this size, and they're full of nails and whatnot out there now. But I used to love that stuff, and a lot of us – well, sometimes we went home, because we didn't have far to go, us, but the Kinlochbervie ones of course, they had to take their piece and that with them.

*And who was the teacher then?*

The teacher was a Miss Morrison, Davina Morrison. David-ina. she lives in that house now, but she used to live, like, across the water, on the other side – that's where her mother and father ... had to go right through Achlyness and right along ... That's where Effie used to live, and when ... it was an auntie, you see, that had that house – the teacher that had the house, and she's living ... she lives in that house now, and her nephew is in the one across the water. It's mostly ... they have mostly sheep and things like that on it. More sheep than anybody else would have, because it's just the house on its own and they have all the ground and everything round it, but even the sheep are starting to get scarce now.

And the cows. I mean, they had cows, sheep and cows, and the horse ... And my uncle and my father, they had a horse, like, between them. Because everywhere – anybody, if they went off somewhere, you know, sometimes they used to have a day out and they'd go by bus somewhere, and I had the job of going and feeding all the horses. Kept me going, I'm telling you! It kept me going right enough!

*And what sort of difference do you see to your mother's daily life compared to your own and your own family today?*

Oh, it was hard work then. It was hard work then. Especially to have a big family – well, there was six of us. We had a big family. But there was sixteen in my father's family.

There was sixteen of them. And, I mean, Gail stays ... Gail lives in the house – well, that's where my father was born. Yes, that's the house, and there were sixteen of them in there. Where they put them all I don't know, but ... But, och, yes, it was hard work then. I mean, you had no light then, you had no water. You had to go to the well for the water, and then take it home and you had to boil it up if you were doing your washing, and you'd be outside with the big tub and the scrubbing board and going like this ... in fact, there's a bit of that in that film ... they took out this tub and – what a laugh – it was my sister, in fact, that was ... my younger sister, that was doing the washing. My mother and my brother, they was taking the water, and she was – my sister was going scrubbing like this, and my mother was saying, little did you know, she

says, you won't see it in the film, but with the tub being lying for so long, the tub was leaking, but you wouldn't see it, you wouldn't see it in the film at all!

They were just wanting more or less to show how things were done and that, you know, in the old days. And then of course you used to have the big range in the kitchen where you did all your cooking. There was no gas or anything like that. And then every Saturday, was take your paraffin in, and clean your globes for the lamps every day and all this kind of thing. Oh, it was hard work, it was hard work.

And then of course all the stuff they grew – your potatoes and your turnips and all the rest of it, and your hay and your corn and cutting it and – I would be there with the dog, because the mice used to be in the wee stacks, you know, before you made the big one, and I was there with the dog and I was saying (*whistles*) and the dog would be running into the thing and snapping away and killing the mice!

And then of course, on your back to take it up to the house to put it in the barn. It was all carried on your back. Well, all that kind of things is actually in the film.

And when they used to go gathering the sheep, you'd see them away up in the hills there, for gathering the sheep and taking them home, and they showed them at clipping time and dipping time, and all the rest of it, and ... But they weren't there at lambing time, no, they weren't. It was the clipping and the dipping. And, as I said, how many's left with that now?

*There won't be many people who know everybody in the film the way you do now?*

No, no, not a lot. Not a lot, no. Very few. And I knew – as I said, I knew every one of them, from one end of the district to the other, you know. But no, there's very few that would know them today, you know, if they saw the film today, and ... But, I mean, when we saw it first, well, not first, but when they had it up in the school as I said, they had the big reel. And, you see, all the ones who was taken off it was just certain bits that was shown on a video. You would need, really, to get the whole thing to see it properly.

*And who was it that actually made the film?*

Now, what was their names – they were from London. Ralph Keen was one fellow's name and Peter Hennessy was the other fellow's name. That's how I knew them, because as I said, they were always in the house.

*What brought them here?*

Well, I've no idea. I think they just thought, well, you know, we'll go somewhere and make a film of what it used to be, years ago. I mean, it was better then, a wee bit better then but, I mean, we were still going for the water and that then, when they made it, and that was 1940 ... was it '45? Or somewhere around that area. I think it must have been just before I went to ... away to school, to Golspie. I think that's when it was. Because I ... well, the bit that I have, I don't ... I'm only in one bit and that is going to school. And the teacher's standing at the gate ringing the bell and all this kind of thing. And I must have gone off to school after that, and I wasn't in so much of it.

But my younger sister, she was in it quite a bit, and you see them, you know, clipping and rolling the wool and all the rest of it – marking the sheep and ... and them dipping and the dogs flying around on top of the dykes!

Oh, it was good, right enough, you know, and, I mean, it's nice to have.

It's nice to have, you know, and you can look back on ... And, I mean, our ones have seen it quite often and they know now who's in the films – in the film, rather. And they know all about

it and who's in it and whatnot, and what we used to do and ... And, I mean, there was nothing much that you could do. I mean, we used to play houses – that was the most, what do you call it, thing for the girls.

Go from one house to the other, and you used to have your rock for a table and all your wee bits of china that you got, and made houses out of it, and that kind of thing. But there wasn't much else, really. Well, we weren't too bad because we had the shop beside us, and that was ... that woman that went to Lochinver, her ... their people that had the shop. I think it was just like walking across the road for us, to go to the shop. And when I think of the stuff we used to get then – how good it was compared to what you get today. Do you know, even the apples and, well, you would get lemonade and things like that and it tasted so different then to what it is – and the apples used to be lovely, red apples and juicy apples, and things like that. Butter used to come in a big, round kind of thing and they used to cut the butter. They had their clappers for the butter and they used to have to cut the cheese, of course, with the wires, and that kind of thing. But to me the food that we bought in the shop then is nothing ... what you get today doesn't compare at all. It was far better. Far better then. Far better tasting. Everything that we used to get. And then, of course, as I said, when the boat came in we all got our sugar and our flour and all the rest of it. It used to be in upstairs on the landing – not very good if you're fond of sugar!

*You helped yourself on the fly!*

You helped yourself, aye, that's it.

*And where did you say the boat came into?*

Into the pier at Loch Clash. Not the pier that's in it now, but the old one, It was a big day. Because everybody was out with their carts and their horses and getting their stuff off the boat and taking it home, and then ... well, it was all in bags, and it was emptied into the tea – the old tea-chests, as they used to call them – emptied into that to keep us going for quite a while. And, of course, you were always baking. Baking forever, forever. Scones and everything else, and you used to make your oatcakes and everything and put them in front of the fire, too – sort of dry them off after they were cooked – put them in the front of the fire. And then if they made what we used to call a bannock ... you had this round pot and ... with a handle on it and, well, it was a 'slourie' it was called in them days, and you hung it on this thing that came down the chimney. And then you took the peat, the red peat out of the fire and put it on the lid, on the top, and this cooked your bannock. The heat came from in below and on the top – that's the way they cooked their bannocks in them days, aye. It was the same with the soup. They used to hang the soup pot on the slourie. I remember my auntie, one time she was at home and I think it was at Sacrament time or something. And in them days, now, they used to walk from Ardmore to the church at Kinlochbervie and they used ... like, well, in fact there was a woman that died up there not long ago and she – her people all came to our house, at home, and they would have their cup of tea before they went to the church and then we used to have to walk to the church, walk back and have our dinner. And then they used to go to the late service, well, after, and then come in and when they got back would have their cup of tea before they walked back to Ardmore.

But my auntie this – and I don't know what she was thinking about but she – whether she was putting a peat on the fire and the lid was off the pot I don't know what happened. But the peat landed in the pot. And she had it out that quick there wasn't one bit in the pan! But that's what they used to do, the Ardmore ones, and maybe another family would go, you know, to another house, and this kind of thing. And this went on and always, always, it was – they used to come and they used to stay for ... sometimes they would stay the night and go, like, to church the

next day, or whatever, but especially on the Sunday, they all – they would be all there, the whole family would be all there.

And, of course, there was the two churches. There was the Free Church and the other church in it. And the minister was there for years and years. Old Mr MacAskill, they called him, he was there for years and years that I can remember. He was there – he was still there before I left Kinlochbervie. But, I mean, as I said, they're all gone now. The whole jing-bang has all gone and it was ...

*How many was in Ardmore then, of the families ...*

You know, there was quite a lot in Ardmore then. But there's no many in it now. There's no many in it now, no, no. There's not many in it now. This woman that lived up the road, the one ... she was related to us. She lived up the top there, she was the same age as me, '33, and she ... her husband, oh, he was a lazy so-and-so it was her that did everything and their house went on fire a few years ago. And they lost the husband's brother. He died in the fire. And they got into a house – it was some relations of theirs – on the other side, and they made up a good collection for them here, I can tell you, for them, and they got their house all ... another house built up there, and she did bed-and-breakfast in it. And work! And, you see, that's what they were used to in Ardmore.

And they worked – she worked and worked and worked. And they had sheep and he would take her, you know, in the car or whatever they had, to feed the sheep – he sat while she did the work. And he – she went into hospital, she had something to do with her heart, and she was going to go in for a by-pass. And he was taken off to hospital. And he was coming home on the Friday and she got a message from Aberdeen to say, there must have been a cancellation or they wouldn't have phoned otherwise – could she come in on the Friday for this. And she didn't go, because he was coming home from the hospital. That was on the Friday. And I was speaking to her down in the shop there on Tuesday and she was telling me all about, you know, that she was supposed to have gone on the Friday. The next morning she was dead. They had one man in – he came round with a van – AA Components or something – and he always stayed the night with them. And he was in and he said that they were sitting up blethering until about midnight, he said, and he says then, God, he says, I didn't know what to say in the morning, he said. John came through and he said, I think Chrissie's gone. He wondered why she never got up when the alarm went off, and this was her. This was her gone. And that's one of the ones that always used to come to the house at ... you know, walking from Ardmore to the church. The poor soul.

*So you both married and came up here?*

Aye, there were quite a few from Kinlochbervie... some of them aren't alive now, from Kinlochbervie that married up here – quite a lot. Funny, but its most of the menfolk that's gone. Some of the wives are still living – there's a wifie over on the other side – I think she belonged she's related to myself but ... a Jess Corbett, and she's 93 I think. And there's another one on this side of her from Kinlochbervie, and she's in her nineties. And another one up from her, but she's gone, so there was quite a few from Kinlochbervie that came up here.

*And did you all find it very different here compared to Kinlochbervie?*

Not really, not really, not really. Of course, you knew such a lot of people, because, I mean, when you're going to the dances and that, you're meeting everybody, you know, like from one end of the district to the other. In fact, there's a woman that used to live across the road there, she ... her father came from Ardmore, and her brother is still over there, he's 80, he's across the road there from me, he's 80. But she's been in Migdale since, oh, quite a while – she had Alzheimer's and whatnot, and we used to go down ... I used to go down with him to see her

and that, but now she doesn't ... she hasn't a clue who we are or anything like that. I mean, it's awful difficult when you can't make conversation, you know, with somebody like that. But she did bed-and-breakfast for years, this woman, across here. In fact, this year, there was a couple up from Lancashire and they were in seeing me because sometimes I used to give her a hand because she used to do dinners as well. And this couple, they were in their eighties, and they were up this year, and they were in and they said they were ... of course, they were always asking for Nellie and for where they used to stay. But she ... and she had ones came back year after year after year ... They ... of course, she was that good to them, she was too good to them, really. She was so funny when I was working in the canteen and I used to go over at night at dinner time, and if I wasn't working at the weekend and that I used to give her a hand at the weekend. And she knew ... and she used to make, oh, just beautiful lemon meringue pies.

And when I would come up sometimes, walking up the road and she'd be standing at the back door with this plate and a spoon. "Do you know what I have here?" she'd be shouting at me. "Yes," I said, "I know what you have!" There'd be me standing out at the gate lemon meringue pie and ... oh, she really was good. And, as I said, that couple came here and ... asking for her, and they said about going, you know, what would it be like. "Well", I said, "if I was you", I said, "I wouldn't go visiting. Remember her as what you used to remember her, when she was over there ..." I said, "because you won't like it at all," I said, "when you ... if you go to see her."

And there's different ones that have been up that used to come to her. Oh, she was great, right enough. But, as I said, the brother ... he was out in Australia for years, and then he came back and he built this house here. In fact, he got the land from Madge's husband. From Christie. And built that house across the road there. And, as I said, he's 80 so ... he's doing all right for himself.

*So he came back from Australia?*

He came back from Australia, he was in Australia for a long time and I think he did have girlfriend and I think she was diabetic and she died, so maybe that's why – how he came back. I don't know, but that's what I was thinking. It was himself that was telling me. So, of course, he had to take all her stuff ... his sister's stuff out of the house and dispose of it and whatnot, after she went to Migdale, but otherwise she's, you know, health-wise she's fine.

*You talked a wee minute ago about cooking years ago, when you put the peats on the lid and so on. Can you tell me a bit more about the sort of things people ate and the sort of things your mother cooked and that?*

Well, our breakfast as usual was porridge. Oatmeal porridge, it was made ... And, well, she always used to bake scones and soup, or course – broth was the main ... the main soup, and puddings, she would make different puddings. Cloutie dumplings, and I still make them. Cloutie dumplings and things like that. Now, my sister in Wick, she does a lot of cooking. Now, whether she picked it up off my mother or not but, I mean, you all have to do, when you've got kids and ... to keep them going, and I've seen it sometimes, maybe we would just have potatoes and milk. See, we had our cows and if there was nothing else we used to boil the potatoes and mix it up with milk or turnips and things like that, when there was nothing else. Because it's not often ... well, of course we always used to kill a sheep but them days, of course, they only went out for one for the pot. And the same with ... if they went, you know, for salmon or something. But that's one thing my father never did – he never went poaching for salmon – never. But if not, my uncle made up for it – Norman's father. And my father didn't need to go because we always got from him. And, you see, that burn that goes down – well, they call it the river, but it's not classed as a river; it's classed as a burn, you see – and all the

crofts, most of the crofts, the burn is running, so you could stand on your own land, you see, and fish into the ... what was the burn, supposed to be.

And, of course, the salmon, they was coming off it, and we never had to be without. We always had salmon. But when they went to the hill, they used to – there was just the fathers, two or three – maybe three or four would go, and they would go away up to the hill. Well, they would need two, because they already had to take it back on their backs and carry it back. But this night they were coming home and they took it so far, just to, say, above the road when you're coming up from Rhiconich and leave it, left it over the hill, kind of thing. And that night they were just after coming down onto the road and the police van came along. And he gave them all a lift home!

*And what was his name?*

Forbes, that was in it then. He knew where they were, but it didn't bother him. Didn't bother him, because he was good at it himself as anybody else! But he gave them all a lift home. And, see, they would go away in the morning before it was bright – you see, it was dark when they came home. So then when it was getting dark they went for the carcass and took it home and then each family got their share, so we had a good feed then!

We had a good feed then. But it was mostly just plain, you know, plain food. There was nothing fancy at all. Plenty different kinds of soup, but mainly broth, mainly broth, that we used to have. And oh, yes, it was good, right enough. And as I said, we used to have food at school and, if not, we used to come home at lunchtime and just have a piece or something, something like that.

But, mind you, there wasna much food in it in them days, because there was no ... now there's shops all over the place and whatnot, and we only had that one, that one that the Calders had, that was the ones next door to us. And there was another couple of shops down in Kinlochbervie, near the old pier, but they mostly sold, och, things like, if you were doing something, you know, nails and all that, mostly that kind of things, you know, things that you would need, really. That kind of things that they sold. But the Calders, they were the only ones that sold, you know, like sugar and everything. And the one when it came to Achriesgill, it was slightly bigger than the one they had in Kinlochbervie. As I said, they used to have the cheese, but they had everything, really, and, as I said, it tasted far better than the stuff that's in it the day.

*So, when did you come to Durness?*

I came in 1959.

*So, 1955 you were still in Kinlochbervie*

Well, in Achriesgill.

*I've been asking people if they remember Operation Snowdrop.*

Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!

*Can you tell me a bit about that?*

Operation Snowdrop, now that was ... who on earth was ... there were a baby born then. Oh, flipping ... she works in the shop now, down there. Lucy's sister, Anne. She was born then. She was born in the middle of Operation Snowdrop. Because I ... they lived then, it was between here and Tongue. Well, between here and Eriboll – you go round the loch. They lived ... and it was ... you couldn't see their house from the road, it was out of sight, where they

were. And she had to be taken – the mother had to be taken from the house – how they did it I don't know. And I think as far as I know she was taken aboard that ship ...

*The ship that came in, what did it do?*

It came in with stuff, I think. You know, like, what do you call it ... I wasn't living here then. I suppose, stuff for the shop, you know, and things like that, but then you see there was, what do you call it, used to come in ... a helicopter used to come in with bread and paraffin and things like that. They used to come in with that kind of things.

*And was it like that down in Kinlochbervie and Achriesgill?*

Oh aye, oh aye, the snow was just the same, but there was no boat that came in. The only boats that I saw was the big boat coming in there was a destroyer or two ... I don't know what you call them, but they were flat-bottom boats. Things – that would have been during the war, the start of the war, and they were in for – I don't know, I think they were waiting for mail, actually. And they came in and, of course, we just had to go out of the house and look out and we could see the boats down there.

And I remember this night, we ... my sister, younger sister and younger brother, went ... we were going off to bed and it was a lovely moonlit night and there was a wee breeze in it. And they must have come ashore and they must have come up to the pub – they must have gone down to Kinlochbervie then, you see, to the Garbet. They must have gone to the pub. So I don't know what got ... I remember, I always remember us sitting on our knees at the window upstairs – we were supposed to be in bed, mind you – sitting ... and we were seeing some of them passing. And what do you call it, – we were singing 'Shut the door, he's coming through the window'. 'Shut the door, he's coming through the window'. But I don't know what kind of boat they had for going out to the big boat, but the blinking thing capsized.

And probably our house was the only house with a light in it, because we were ... mother and father were never early bedders. And I don't know how many of them came to the house, soaking, soaking wet. So mother put a huge big peat fire on and she put them to bed in what we used to call in them days 'the room end' and there must have been, what, there was one ... I don't know was it four or five of them, but one of them was sitting on the chair at the fire. And she took their clothes and put them all round the peat fire and she put them to bed and some of them, they were top-to-tail, kind of thing, in the bedroom. And she had their clothes ... she stayed up and she had their clothes dried by the morning, and they went off in the morning. And they were back, it was the next day or the day after, with comics and goodness knows what all ...

To us, you know, then they went off. And then they were there for a few days and they would pop in and whatnot. And I remember the day ... you were talking about that teacher, the teacher that was there – her father, he was going, like, well, I suppose dementia or something that he had, I probably didn't know what it was in them days. He went missing, and there was no school, of course, because everybody was looking for ... even the boys on the boats and that, they were looking and all. And it's down at ... way down at the burn that they got him, and I'll always remember that, that's when they were in, and they were out looking for this man. Och, he was an old man, he was an old man right enough, and he died shortly after that, probably with the cold, because he had nothing ... it was just his slippers he had on, and something thrown over him, and that was all. And he must have got out on them, you see, during the night, and that was it. But no, that was my experience of the war, really, as you would say.

And they went off with all the horses, of course. Most of the horses were all taken off. Oh, it broke my heart when the horses went off. Oh, gosh, I missed the horses. Laddie – Laddie was the one my uncle and my father had – and I remember one day ... you know, when you go



down behind Gail's, and it's, well, it's sort of closed in with the fences and the fields and that, and the horses were out and I don't know what frightened the horses, but the chap down the road, Duncan, and myself, we were away down that road and the horses came pelting down the road and I thought, (*whispering*) "Oh, for God's sake!"

But I got up onto the bank or something. Duncan the horse literally flew over his head, our horse. If not – if it had gone into him, he would have been gone. I'll never forget it. It went, flew, right over his head rather than, you know, go into him. I suppose, well, they were that used to us, I suppose, that they wouldn't have done us any harm, if they could help it. I'll never forget that day. But that was us.

*What had got them so excited, the horses?*

I don't know. Something might have – might have been a dog, or something that chased them, or something like that, because the dogs were good at chasing horses in them days, I can tell you. Yeah. Our one got kicked and they just started taking fits after that.

*And did your mother knit for the family?*

Yes. Oh, aye.

*What sort of things did she knit?*

Oh, she knitted cardigans, jumpers, socks ... she used to knit wee skirts and the jumper to match. All that kind of things she knitted. Oh aye, we were always very ... she used to play the concertina and she only played at Hallowe'en. And when it was Hallowe'en, instead of ... we used to go round the houses, like, and say ... say we were next door, and we got sugar, and maybe the next door we got milk, and, you know, different things, and food, and all kinds ... and different ... every year you went to a different house. Once you had collected all your stuff, and you had your wee party, and mother used to be sitting playing the concertina. And she only played at Hallowe'en? She used to sing, mind you. She was a good Gaelic singer, aye, she used to sing, right enough.

*And did you dress up at Hallowe'en?*

Not really, not as they do – not as what they do today. Well, we'd have maybe old clothes of my mother's on, or something like that, but today, of course, they've got all faces and everything under the sun. No, we never, we never, we just, as I said, went from house to house.

*But you dressed up different from usual?*

Yes, different from usual. I would maybe have something long of my mother's on. Somebody else would maybe have a trouser of my father's or something like that, and you tried to cover your face and a big square over your head, that kind of thing, but, och, it was good fun, it was good fun, it was ...

*Did the adults dress up as well?*

No. Just the kids. No, no, the adults never went out, no. No, they never went out at all.

*Did people from Kinlochbervie and Durness go to the Sutherland Gathering in your day?*

Not really. In Glasgow. I've been to it. I've been to it since I came here, because the ... my cousin in Glasgow, he's a Gaelic singer, and in fact the fellow he used to sing with died not so long ago, Archie MacTaggart. They were Cameron MacKichan and Archie MacTaggart. They used to sing together. And his wife, well, his ex-wife now, she died, she used to do the Glasgow Islay Choir, the kids. And I think one of her daughters, the daughters now does the Gaelic for the choir. And I think Cameron himself did it as well, and ... but what do you call it, was it last year or the year before he sent me a tape ... what was it called ... 'Himself and Myself', or

something, it was called, and it was the last tape that they made. And it wasn't long after that when ... I think Archie was really, he was ill at the time, but they just did this last tape and they sent one up to my ... the rest of the family, like, my sisters and that and that was ... And we were down once, from here, went down on a bus from here, one time to the Glasgow Sutherland thing. Oh, and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

And it was so, what do you call it, last, about a month ago. The woman that we stayed with in Glasgow, they have a house up in Laid. Up there. And her husband's brother, he has a house up there as well, and they come up there quite often. Now, she was saying, "Now, you'll have to – you're going to stay with us when ...". And there was a bus of us. And how she managed us all I don't know, but she did. And she just died about a month or six weeks ago.

She took a ... she had to go in for a bypass or something and, of course, this MRSA ... Aye, so ... because her niece phoned up to tell me that she had died. Tragic.

Strange, all these bugs, that never used to be in it. You don't know now whether you want to go into hospital or not. I'm saying that, and I'm supposed to be going in to the clinic on Tuesday ... no, the 12th of November. Which was put off since April. Every month it's been ... a letter would come and say, "You're clinic's put off to such-and-such and such-and-such," so now it's the 12th of April. And then I had to go down to Golspie to get an abdomen scan. It was three weeks ago, or maybe less. And they discovered I'd gallstones as well as a hernia.

So, as the doctor was saying to me the other day, "When are you going to your clinic?" He says, "When are you going to your clinic now?" And I says, "Well," I said, "it's supposed to be the 12th of November, but maybe by the time what do you call it, it'll be the 12th of December." So he says, "I'll have to give you a letter to take down about the gallstones." He didn't say gallstones, he never said ... mind you, it was in the shop I was speaking to him, probably he didn't want to say, because the lassie in the hospital told me what it was, so I'll not know till I go down on the 12th what's going to happen.

*Now, did you hear people talking about Mackay Country and Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh when you were younger?*

Not really.

*When did you first start hearing that?*

It's probably when I came here.

You see, I was Ross before I married, and it's probably before I came here that I had what you call it, with Mackays. We had a, oh, what do you call that man that used to sing – write the Gaelic songs and sing them, from here? What on earth was he called? I know my father-in-law, well, he was before I came here, he won something at a MOD and it was this book of Gaelic songs that this fellow wrote.

Now, my cousin in Glasgow, he was wanting me to send that book but I said to him, "No," I said, "I'm not sending the book," I says, because I was frightened I would never get it back. And I never sent it to him. Rob Donn. He's ... it was ... as I said, it was my father-in-law that won it at a MOD, and there's one or two people had it, and it's now what do you call it, encased in ... like we used to do the school books, with the brown paper

Because it was getting that dilapidated, so I said, "Well, it's not going out any more!" Whatever they'll do with it after I'm gone, I don't know. I don't suppose any of them will be interested in that kind of thing. Well, you just never know. Because he was wanting ... well, when he comes up yet, he has a look at it and he'll what do you call it, some songs out of it, you know, so that they can sing at ... whatever. But that was the book, aye, Rob Donn. And I've another

one of Rabbie Burns. Because we always used to go to the Burns Supper and, ach, well, I used to sing myself, years ago, but not now ...

*What did you sing?*

It was mostly English songs. Any kind of things, anything that was popular at the time – not this pop stuff that's going now! The old kind of songs, you know. You know, Ae Fond Kiss and that kind of things, these things. My husband, he used to sing as well, he was a singer too. And I was saying to him, I remember, it was at Rhiconich we were, I don't know was it a wedding or what we were at. And we were singing in this – the two of us, like, together at whatever it was on, I just can't remember what it was at the time. And ever since then, my voice hasn't been the same. I think the ... I don't know what it was, the roof was too low or something, and he sang very high, too, as well, and my voice sort of hasn't been the same since then.

Aye, aye, whatever ... I mean, I've strained my vocal cords, or whatever, I don't know. But we used to sing quite a lot at, you know, at concerts down there or in Kinlochbervie or wherever, sometimes over in Melness. We used to go and sing. I remember whatshisname, Joseph Mackay, from Melness. We went over to sing at this what do you call it, at this concert that was on and ... what was the name of ... Donnie, this fellow Donnie Campbell, he used to be in Rispond but he died years and years ago, but he used to play at the – in fact he was playing when we got married. And he and his wife and Richard and I went to this thing and we called up to Joseph's house before we went up to the hall. I can't remember what we were singing. And Joseph said something: "Och, you'll give us a song before you go up." And of course, his wife used to play the piano. That was all right, we did the song right enough, and oh, seconds after that ... it was just near Christmas time because they had decorations up and whatnot. Seconds after that this what do you call it, came on and I looked at her and said, "That's us!" And he had, like, as if he went through there, there was like a wee room through there, and he had the mike ... there was a ... the decorations, you see, were up there, and he had the mike stuck up in there. And he went in and put the tape on, you see, and then he came back out! Used to tape us as well. He used to live in the Post Office up there but where all that tapes are now, goodness knows. It would be nice to hear them now, aye, aye. It would, if anybody can remember where they've put them.

That's right. We even sang the day we got married. My mother was singing too, and ...and what do you call it, Lil Skerricha, she was singing and ... quite a lot. We had a ... we got married in Rhiconich and they had a recorder in Rhiconich then. Probably it maybe was about the first one that was in it, and if anybody wanted their tapes they could have them. And this is what they did at Rhiconich. And we got the tape, and, well, we had a thing that we used to play them, but ...And we took bits of it off and put it on smaller tapes and that.

*Do you have any of them still?*

I have one, but I must ... if I could find where it is.

I have the original tape, but there's that many different tapes in it now, you know, like, since we got the recorder, that I don't know which ... I don't know if it was ever written on it, you know, which was which. So I'll have to ... I'll have to try and sort them out and see what's in it. My husband, he was always taping songs and ... always, always, always, if there was a song at all that he liked, he would be taping it.

*Well, I'll ask you a few more things and then I'll ... I think you may be in demand! I've been asking people about migration, about people leaving and also what brings people to the area. Do you have any thoughts about that?*

Well, there's a lot of my father's people went abroad. After the war. A lot of them went abroad.

*Where to?*

Mostly New Zealand, they went to. And I think Richard had relations in America somewhere but the ones in New Zealand, there's a quite a few of them been back, you know, back and fore, that lot. In fact, during the war, there was one of his nephews – he was in the RAF, and he was in the Battle of Britain thing. And he used to come up on leave when he was in this country, and he came over once, was it, or twice, since then. And he came in – I was ... where was I working at that time – in the tourist place. Not the one that's in it now, but a wooden thing ...in then time. And he came in, and a cousin of mine – in fact, the cousin's son lives in Achriesgill now. And ... but I knew him, although I wasn't all that old, you know, when I used to know him when he used to come up in the RAF.

And my cousin's daughter, she married an Australian – she must have been out there – and most of them, a lot of them came over for the wedding. The wedding was in Glasgow, and then they all came up to Achriesgill to see the relations in Achriesgill.

*Do you have any particular hopes and fears for the area and for the communities here, for the future?*

Well, hopes that there's not an awful lot of outsiders will come into the place because that would spoil it. Well, it depends – it depends, of course, gain, who they are. Because the ones that's at here now, I must say, there's no nonsense or, you know, all this kind of thing goes on, and that kind of thing goes on, with them now. But then if townies, you know, came from goodness knows where into the place, I don't think I would like that. Because the ones ... and some of them, I'm sure, could be easily led, I suppose, and different things. And, I mean, you can see it now – well, one boy in particular that used to live here and went away because he was never behaving himself, and he was just up lately and he did something – something happened to the door of the youth café they have down there. So, you see, that type of thing. Thank goodness he only comes up now and again. But it'll only lead to other ones doing it, if they're not sensible enough, that kind of thing.

*In what ways do you think living here is different or special compared to down south?*

God, I'd rather live up here than down south! I had my turn of being down south and that. Not but that I enjoyed it, but, I mean, it's changed a lot since then, even down south, you know, it's changed a lot since then, since I used to go. And up here, well, as you know yourself, everybody knows everybody else and everybody helps everybody else and all that kind of things. If a lot of town ones came in it wouldn't be the same. Mind you, it is happening though.

*What do you think brings people here, when they do move here?*

I suppose, peace and quiet, I suppose, I would say because it's mostly older people.

Thank you Lillian that was very informative and enlightening.

### **Lucy Mackay Durness**

Lucy Mackay talking about daily life on a croft. Her father was a shepherd on Eriboll and the family lived at Strathbeg. Later in the interview she talks about being a P.E Teacher for several schools and having to travel round them.

Interviewer: Isobel MacPhail, Issie

Interviewee: Lucy Mackay

We were both born out the Laid direction. Martin was born in Laid and I was born at Faoilin because my father was a shepherd at Eriboll. He belonged to Kinlochbervie, and my mother

belonged to Achfary, so when they got married they went to Eriboll. Now, Martin's people, I think, both belonged to Laid, so they've always been here.

*Your parents were shepherding at Eriboll? Do you recall things about that?*



IMAGE 82 MARTIN AND LUCY MACKAY DURNESS

Oh, aye, yeah. Yes we lived in the house where Iain Macleod lives now, and it's quite different because it's got a Sky dish and things like that. When we were there, there wasn't even electricity; we had just the gas lights. But, yeah, it was quite a nice childhood, it was nice freedom and plenty of room to play and there were six of us, so we had plenty of company as well, and we came to school on the school bus, which was driven by Jessie Mather, Iris' mother, or Tom, who was Iris' father's brother – he used to drive occasionally. And picked up lots of little people on the way ... and that's about it!

*What was daily life like for your father and mother in those days?*

Well, I never ever heard them complain. I think it was a case of, sort of, get up in the morning and attend to the animals and these sorts of things. My father always seemed to be away doing something, , to the sheep; gathering them here or gathering in other parts of the farm, , and then sometimes the other men at the farm would be working at his ... 'hirsel', I think you call them, so they very often were in for a meal. That was part of my mother's responsibility, to prepare meals for them if they were working at my father's sheep. I suppose, it was just sort of like today, it was just getting on with your job and providing food and ... and sitting down at night when it was all finished. I don't remember when we used to get home from school; I don't know what sort of time it would be, but it was just a case of tea and ... I think you remember

more about the dark evenings than the bright evenings – I seem to remember more about them, when you sat and played cards and other sorts of games, because we didn't have television. Did listen to the radio a lot, but ... it's a long time ago!

*Were there other house close?*

No, it's all on its own, I think it was about three miles from the farm, from Faoilinn to the farm at Eriboll, and it'll probably be around three miles round to Laid as well, but there was lots of coming and going – well, the post ... the post used to come out from Durness but then somewhere along the lines it came from the Altnaharra direction ... and the post at that time was Walter and John Clark have you come across them? Well, their brother used to be the post. He lived in Altnaharra and he ... so we saw him – I'm not absolutely sure that it was every day – I think earlier on it was maybe three times a week we got post, and then maybe it became every day – I'm not absolutely sure about that. So, anyway, you saw the post and Burr's van from Tongue came on a Wednesday, and there was a delivery van came on a Friday, but I think that was mainly probably delivering coal and things like that, which – we cut our own peats. Burr's van was the big day because it was the only day we ever got a sweetie.

And it was great if the shepherds happened to be there on a Wednesday, because we got extra sweeties. There was a lot of ... a lot of the shepherds were, kind of, single men – not a lot of them, but one or two of them were, so they had kind of adopted us and spoiled us, compared to then, there seems to be very few people up in Eriboll, now, in the farm cottages. Yeah, there just appears to be ... I think it's just the Clarks that actually own it. I don't know if there's anybody else living around the farm area. And then Iain Macleod lives down where we used to stay, and I think that appears to be all that's left working the farm.

*Who owned it?*

Elliotts, a branch of the Elliotts, the Elliotts that owned Balnakeil. It was another brother, I think, of the guy who owned Balnakeil at the time. It was Joe Elliott. But I think he died ... he died quite young, I think, and ... was it his wife had the farm for a while, I can't remember, but I think then they sold it on. But I don't remember who had it before the Clarks. I don't remember who owned Eriboll before the Clarks, but I think there was a gap between the Elliotts and the Clarks.

*And were your parents there all their working lives?*

They must have gone to Eriboll when they got married, and ... yes, I think, yeah, they retired to Laid and then they moved in next door to us. Yeah, they must have been there for a good long spell. It'd be about ... maybe twenty-five years, would it? And they were both quite well, not elderly, but, they were late on in life before they married – my father was forty-two when he married, so, yes, he'd ... he would have been – from the time they married, obviously they had a life before then – he used to work, he was a shepherd think that's where he met my mother. He was there – I suppose – I can't really remember where else he was, but he was mainly a shepherd. I do remember we used to get to help at clipping time, and roll the wool, but, we were supervised, and you'd dare not muck around, you did it absolutely properly, you rolled it properly as well.

*And what happened when you were all finished primary school?*

We all went to – well, initially we went to Dornoch Academy. It was a sixth-year school, and I think it was – I think most people from Durness used to actually go to Dornoch as opposed to Golspie.

I think it was the kind of traditional thing to – I don't know why, I've no idea why, but anyway, when I arrived in first year it was downgraded to a four-year school first of all, so then you

were shifted – I did the first two years in Dornoch and I was shifted to Golspie, so eventually – I think the rest of my sisters below me, I think they went straight to Golspie, so we were in the hostel there. And when we were there we stayed from term to term, and it was probably my younger sister – it was probably in her day when they started coming home at weekends.

*That must have been a huge change.*

It was a huge change, but ... well, it didn't bother any of us ... I know it did bother some people, but it wasn't ... I never quite understood the huge hue and cry that people made about it, because it didn't bother us at all. And there were, there were advantages in it. I mean, you made friendships that you couldn't have made otherwise. So, it did teach you to stand on your two feet. Paul was one of the last ones that went in fact, the year after him were the last ones. He didn't come back to Kinlochbervie at all. Some of them from the year below him did, but it didn't do him any harm either.

It's made a difference to these small communities because all of a sudden you've got teenagers in the communities, which you sort of didn't before so it's certainly changed in that way. But, I mean, a lot of children are going to be leaving this area anyway, so whether it's twelve you are or twenty, I don't know if it makes an awful lot of difference. The communities had to adjust to having teenagers here suddenly, that were never here before? I think the Youth Club, for one thing, has blossomed. They've had to change, they've – but, it seems to have grown and whatnot, because there's more than primary children. And I used to actually run the Youth Club when there was no High School in Kinlochbervie, and the kids, the older kids were only home at the weekends and some – a lot of them just wanted to be in their own homes, So, you didn't see an awful lot of some of them. The more sort of energetic ones were out and about, but a lot of them just wanted to be at home, which was understandable, so ..., so there's that. It has grown, and I would think it's sort of benefited things like the Badminton Club and the Football Club and that, for the same reasons. But I had sort of given up the Youth Club just about the time when the High School opened, so I can't really compare, but it just seems that, there's more sort of customers for the Youth Club, for want of a better word. Don't know what other kinds of changes ... well, certainly in Durness, I mean, the new hall came along, it was a must if you were going to have the kids, so ... so I suppose, yes, it has changed a bit. So there's a whole lot of extra voluntary work now, really, that's needed and that didn't used to be an issue at all. But I think the place has adapted to it. There's not an awful lot of young people, but there's a few.

When we finished school. Well, I went away to college, as did most of my sisters, to do something or other. And then three of us are back here, one's in Brora and one's in Inverness, so we're not far away from each other. When I came out of college I taught in Wick for two years, and then we got married and I came home, so I was a couple of years I wasn't ... I was working in the *Oasis* until this job was created.

*You were trained to do P.E.?*

It was actually quite funny, because I never really thought ... I thought, , I'd done my two years in Wick and I really didn't enjoy it, and I thought, och well, I can do without this. I came home and got the job in the *Oasis*, and Martin was working anyway so we were making ends meet, and I started working with the Youth Club then. And then all of a sudden – well, they were – it was a Gaelic teacher they tried to get, for years and years and years, and nothing became of it, so I think it was Mr Keith and Rhoda ... The two of them – I think the two of them were – and possibly Andy Marshall at Kinlochbervie – they wanted to go for a P.E. teacher then. So, that was it. 1985. And there was nobody – they couldn't compare me to anybody!

So I was one year doing all the schools – oh, God, there was eight of them then, there was Stoer and Drumbeg and Assynt and Unapool, and the four on this side. So the first year I was three days a week doing, and then the next year I went into Lochinver. Wilma Mackay had given up, so in Lochinver I could have been compared to Wilma! But I don't think – don't know how long she was there for. Anyway, so then there were nine schools for a wee while, for a long time. It was a lot of driving, a lot of driving. It was three-and-a-half days. But now it's just six schools that *are left, and three days – two schools a day.*

Do you need to do a different kind of P.E.?

You've got all the different ages, and you don't have gyms and so on, like ...a particular kind of challenge to ...

I'm trying to remember what it was like to start off with, but it was, it was quite different. I mean, now, I've adapted to it now, and I've forgotten, about what it was like to teach in gyms and things like that and I'd never had to walk children to the village hall before, but, you have to now so I've just adapted – I've forgotten what it, how much of a challenge it was to start off with, but, och, it was all good fun. And because, I was the first one and it was so new, I mean, it was just so popular.

I wouldn't have mattered what I'd done. But I do remember there was a P.E. adviser on the go and, ach, after about eight or ten years, I suppose, he decided he should come to this area, and I think he was totally flabbergasted. The day he came was my day to do Scourie, then Unapool, then Drumbeg, then Stoer – four. There was only, I mean, it was only one class in each and there was only sort of – I mean, even Scourie then only had nine or ten pupils, and it was one of the worst days that God ever threw at us. And he joined me in Stoer – sorry, that's a lie, in Scourie, first thing in the morning, and he would leave his car there.

Anyway, we would load up the car when I finished with the class in Scourie, and he would help me, and he chose to cart a ... just a crate of light skittles, light plastic skittles. Well, he went out the front door and the wind got the skittles. So his first job was to retrieve these skittles from down the road! While I laughed. Anyway, we headed off to Unapool then, and he'd left his jacket, silly man, left his jacket in his car. And he was in my car, so he had to ... I think he just had a shirt on him. Anyway, we went to Unapool, and it was still pouring rain. I don't remember anything drastic happening there. Then we set up on the Drumbeg road. Now, I'm not very sure what the matter with my car was, but lights kept coming on, flashing inside the car – there must have been a door not just quite shut right, but it was too wet to even try. And every car I met on the Drumbeg road that day I seemed to have to reverse for them. And we got to Drumbeg, that was fine, and we did our work there, and then on to Stoer, and I'm smiling the whole time, pretending, this was easy. I was exhausted!

We got to Stoer and we got through the day in Stoer, and then it came time to come home. And we were – before we got on to the main road, when we were coming the school road, somebody was off the road in a drain *and* he was extremely drunk, and we couldn't get past. And it was coming down in sheets, and there was no way I was getting out to help, and there was no way this poor man was, either, because he hadn't even a jacket! And this drunk man was shouting and swearing at us to get out of ... get off our fucking arses and get out and help! (Eventually somebody else came along that helped. So I don't know to this day who it was – I never came across this man again.)

Anyhow, we got past there and I drove ... and he must have left his car at Unapool ... Anyway, I dropped him off at his own car, and he said to me, "You're an absolute, marvel, woman!"

I came home, I was absolutely exhausted and soaked and frozen and it was one of the worst days ever, but he obviously thought it was something that happened all the time. He never, ever



came back again. So I've been left to my own devices, very much. Poor man, he'll be terrified in case he gets sent back here, ever. He's retired now, so ... He did actually, he did come back when Kinlochbervie High School opened, he came back to see if everything was all right there, but that was a wee bit more like what he's used to – one place, and there's a building, and ... it's warm and comfortable, and you didn't have to go outdoors.

*You have to use village halls quite a lot for the kids?*

Scourie village hall, Durness village hall, well, not in Lochinver now, it'll be the proper Leisure Centre.

*Well, you'll have more space to do things, you'll be able to do things on a sort of larger scale.*

Yes, it'll be quite different. Because it has helped, changing from the old village hall here to the new village hall, it's quite nice to be in a village – well, in the school in Kinlochbervie, that's fine, because it's for P.E. and there's nothing around that's not P.E., but when you go into the hall in Scourie the playgroup use it and it's an absolute danger avoiding playgroup things and keeping some of the kids out of the Wendy house which you don't have to ... In the wee school at Assynt, you had to teach in the classroom, and they put everything – as much away as possible – they clear everything away as much as possible, but anyway one day we were doing something with balls – playing a little game, it would have been a scaled-down basketball kind of affair, and we managed to knock over a bowl of tadpoles! We had forgotten to shift them, because they weren't there all the time, they were just there some of the time. So that was – because there was one poor little girl, she just broke her heart over these tadpoles. Didn't matter a hoot to me and it didn't matter a hoot to most of the older kids, but this little kid was very upset about these poor tadpoles. I think we salvaged most of them. There's a few incidents like that where you think, "Oh God, if only I had a gym!"

Well, the school in Kinlochbervie obviously opened and the hall here has been changed and now – well, the hall in Lochinver wasn't bad, only it was just, it was just, it was quite small for the size of the classes there, and occasionally you went in, sort of, the day after a dance or a party or something like that, and have to open the windows! It'd be reeling! And you're sticking to the floor.

*There's a lot of talk nowadays about people getting less fit generally and children in particular are a great concern. What are your thoughts about that in the north-west, in Mackay Country?*

I don't think the kids here are –, they go on about couch potatoes, but there's very few couch potatoes about here. I suppose, probably, because it's still quite safe to go out and about and play here. I suppose in towns and things like that you've got the problems of the dangers of traffic and the dangers of bad people, but here, no, there's not too many couch potatoes, and, a lot of the kids are active, out of school.

The biggest job I had was with cross-country running, which can be quite a pleasurable experience if done the right way. It wasn't a pleasurable experience the way it was done when I was at school, but ... and yet an awful lot of ... "Well, we did cross-country and we didn't like cross-country running," so, the kids don't like cross-country running, and that's ... it's a shame. That's a shame. But you've got to fight against that sometimes. And a lot of games have been adapted, like rugby, and we play rugby at school but it's not rugby that you see on the television – it's a child's version of it. And at the same time, parents – some parents cringe when they think their little darling is playing rugby, but it's not rugby like that! They're not allowed to tackle ... but, so ... actually rugby is one of the most fun games at primary school, and probably the least dangerous – it's just like a little chasing game, and the kids love it. So there's lots of problems like that, but ... no, I don't think the kids are ... in fact, they're probably as energetic as they were in my day, and did more, played more games and did more.

*And do you think Mackay Country is different from, southern Scotland and the more urban areas in that respect?*

Maybe. I don't know enough about other areas, really, I suppose, to compare them. And certainly, I mean, there are one or two couch potatoes, there always was and there always will be, because we're all different. And I suppose, yes, I suppose kids play more computer games, but at the same time there's also things like skateboards and better quality bikes than there were in our day, to play on. And there's also things like, I mean, well, did you ever hear of hill-walking when you were a child? We were never encouraged to go walking in the hills or anything like that, which ... all that sort of thing is. I mean, people come here for walking holidays, so, people ... the area has, sort of, progressed in that way. There are a lot of activities – outdoor activities that ... they're sold more nowadays than certainly when we were kids. Well, I suppose you didn't get things like land-yachting and ... I don't know all the correct names for these things, but there wasn't ... these are all just been developed, and jet-skiing and things like that. But that all helps the area and it's all a good area for that.

*The developments in sports and outdoor activities and what that means for the area.*

I suppose there's been ... technology has made it possible, like surfing. I know, recently I was coming by and there was people surfing on the beaches, you see a lot of outdoor sports on the beach. It could actually probably be developed a lot further. It'd probably take a bit of money, but it's quite nice to see so many people enjoying the beach instead of just lying in the sun, which you can't do a lot here – you can't lie on the beach a lot, but you can use it for a lot of things, a lot of water sports. I'm not into water myself, but, I like to see them canoeing and jet-skiing and, these little buggies that run along the beach on ... with a sail.

The reason I see that is because we're down at the golf course a lot. I'm not sure what we used to do before the golf course was there! It's just been a revelation! Is that the right word? I mean, the visitors that come from all over the place, just to play! So, it'll have helped the local economy and a lot of people are astounded at the quality of the course, in a wee or, in a remote place like this. I don't think they expect it to be a little pitch-and-putt thing but it's a proper course. 1988, it opened, so that's sixteen years. Common grazing ground it's on. It's Department of Agriculture, or whatever ... do they still call themselves the Department of Agriculture? It's the Keoldale Sheepstock Club, they lease the ground from the Department, although we now pay for the lease of this bit, and we share it during the lambing time, and the sheep go on sometimes in the winter, but that's all. we have members from Kinlochbervie, regular members that play regular, from Kinlochbervie, Scourie, Achfary, Tongue, so it benefits ... We did have one or two members from Lochinver, but I think they found it just a wee bit far for regular ... although we've two ladies, members from Stoer ... And now there's one in Ullapool, so we go hand-in-hand with Ullapool Golf Club. We've helped them and they've helped us, so we've got a good relationship with them. Because they're quite remote as well. It's quite a long way from any other golf courses – remote as in golf courses.

*Do you have matches and stuff between the clubs?*

Yeah, well, we have something most weekends, from, well, from about April to the end of September, most weekends we've got something on, whether it be a match with somebody or just a local competition. And in the winter, we play occasionally in the winter as well, but it's not so regular because of the weather, but, I mean, sometimes – well, you obviously can't play in the evening in the winter – it's dark by the time you finish work, so you can just really play at the weekends.

*Did all these people just suddenly learn golf?*

Yes, yes. There was very few people – half a dozen would have covered it – that had played golf before. I did, when I was in school in Golspie, you maybe swung a club. You never ever played because I don't think children were all that accepted at golf courses then – but no, Martin and I had never played golf until we started here. And there's been a tremendous improvement in the standard and, och, the whole outlook of it all. And, well, there we are, we go on golfing holidays now, which we would never have done before. And you realise the more you go away and see all these different golf course, the more you realise just how good a course we have here. Obviously, it's got disadvantages, like more wind than you would want, but it's very seldom unplayable, where a lot of courses are.

*Is there a football club?*

Yes, yes, there's a football league. The football league has been on the go since, oh, a long time. I don't know when it would have been started, but certainly Martin played in it, so it's a long time ago now. So it's still run on the same basis that, each little village has a team and they just play a summer league, and so the football is finished for the summer. But now, the footballers here still go into the hall once a week and play in there. And then in Kinlochbervie you've got the Astroturf pitch now ...at the school which they can use, the pitches are, most of the winter are just too wet to be playing on anyway, when the weather's not that great, but the Astroturf, when the weather's dry, is fine for playing.

*I meant to ask you about Martin's family as well, and their story.*

His father was a forestry worker, and there was a big family of them as well, so his family now are scattered all over. There's four of them here, and a sister in Ullapool and Elgin and Alness and a brother in Livingston, and so they're scattered all over the place. But they were Laid people, and I think that most of Martin's family, they would have gone away to – well, Martin went to the Tech in Golspie, and then came home, and he worked for Kenny MacRae for a long time, as a joiner, when he came out of school. That's twenty years now, anyway, since he ... since he joined the road squad. Oh, he was working with Morrison's for a wee while before then, and then it was just after Paul was born that he got this job with the road squad. Paul's twenty-three now, so it's over twenty years.

Yes, so Martin's father – his father was a forester – It was mostly at ... around the Achfary area. He travelled. Aye, he had a van and there must have been quite a few of them went from this area. He had a big van, I don't know how many it sat, but there must have been half-a-dozen of them, anyway. I suppose they were planting the trees, and all these trees that are being cut down now, I suppose that was them. But yeah, that's what I remember him doing. And they have had a croft – from a croft in Laid –they didn't have any animals on their croft. The neighbour – his neighbour on one side of him gave Martin a lamb. He did a job for him one time and he gave him a lamb as a repayment, and it – his flock grew into nine sheep, he had nine sheep when we got married! But I think he sold them to Jock Sutherland, I can't remember. We had no need for sheep, we'd had quite enough of sheep!

I don't think it was very good for keeping sheep on the croft, the crofts are all too bare. But there was somebody, there was somebody in most of the houses when we were kids, but a lot of them were kind of older, and there wasn't a lot of ... there wasn't a lot of young families. Well, there was Martin's family and there was another – I think there was just another one family. The rest seemed to be sort of older, not so much single people but there was ones on their own, they'd lost their partner or what. There wasn't a lot of young ones at all. Because even, even from what I remember, Martin's one of the youngest, so most of his older brothers and sisters had moved on, and it was the same with the family next door – most of them had moved on by the time I remember. So it was very ... it was a very sparse ...

My mother was a home-help for a couple of old guys that lived at Portnancon. There just seemed to be a lot these kind of old people that have died, although Donnie the roadman was on the go then, and I think it was his uncle that stayed with him, got married since and he's still on the go, though. He couldn't have been as old as we thought! I think they all kind of dressed the same, they all had the sort of plus-fours or tweeds or something, and flat caps and whatnot, so you couldn't distinguish between ages. They all seemed old, but no, Donnie's still on the go. I think he's the only one that's still on the go that was ... Donnie Morrison, his wife is Joyce. They actually got married after us. It was ... it was in the summertime they had their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. I think Joyce belongs to Inverness. Donnie will be ... I think he's in his eighties now, but he might ... yes, he might remember some good stories.

*There's been a lot of migration over the years, obviously, people going away, but there's people have come as well. What do you think draws them to here and ... I think there's people coming up not just to Durness but Laid as well, I think. What draws people to ... to come here, do you think?*

I have no idea! Well, I do have an idea, I suppose – it must be just the peaceful remoteness of it that some people just want that kind of life. I think some come and are completely disappointed by it all, because it's just too remote, if they've come and tried it out in the summertime, when there's tourists and things about and every where's open and ... then it's quite a different place in the winter. Although, I mean, these two holiday homes across the road there, they seem to have people most of the year round. There's always people there at Christmas and New Year, so they must just come to escape the rat race, I suppose. Yeah, I suppose some people just want quiet, peaceful life. And I think now, a lot of businesses can be done on the computer, sort of thing, so it is easier to still run a business and be here. I don't know, we're all different, we all like different things, so ...

*I've been asking people as well about women in Mackay Country, just how women's lives have changed or in what way – asking in what way they've changed today compared to in the past.*

I suppose it's the same as everywhere else. There's more people work – more women work nowadays, maybe because they have to but maybe because they want to, or maybe because they can. I think maybe they realise that they have more of a choice. I don't know – I think I always knew I was going to work – do something. So I think, even by the time I was a teenager and whatnot, you did have a choice. You didn't have to be the little lady at home. I never felt that I had been hard done by in any way, because I've always been able to make my own choices, so I don't feel I missed out on anything that ... , that I haven't missed out on anything that men have, that we haven't.

*Transport's helped a lot as well, hasn't it? Having cars means you can – not just women, but I mean, everyone.*

Yes, yes, that's right. Yeah, just about everybody no, not everybody, but just about everybody has their own transport and ... because, well, I suppose, really, because you have to. You can rely on the mail bus to a certain extent, but ... It's a very long ...

*Was there much Gaelic in the area when you were a child?*

A little bit, yeah, we did Gaelic at school. Not to any great extent. Another funny story!

We always used to go to the MOD, and there was a Gaelic conversation class, and myself and my sister and Martin's sister – the two of them were two years older than me, I was the baby of them – were in this Gaelic conversation competition. We were the only three. And we were taken into this little room one at a time, and asked questions, and I said nothing because I didn't understand anything! And I won the prize because they didn't say anything! So that just shows

how good our Gaelic was! I won this huge, big bird book, a book on birds. I think, actually, no, I think actually that was a prize from the school because I'd won this prize, but I had no delusions about how good my Gaelic was! I knew that if anybody could have spoken Gaelic they'd have won it, but I got this big ... I think it was presented by the estate owners at the time – they were Buxtons, I don't know whatever happened to the book – I think I gave it to my grandfather because it was of no interest to me when I was twelve – all these birds of the world! I think I gave it to my grandfather. We probably have it back somewhere in the family, but ... but it was, I mean, it was a huge book, it must have cost quite a bit. If it had only been about something that I was interested in. Mind you, some birds, when we were down in Shrewsbury, we saw a black-and-white bird. We were wondering what it was, because we're not ... you don't see them in this area, and I was saying, "Oh, if only I still had my bird book!"

Yeah. So, yes, there was – we did Gaelic at school. The head teacher when I was in school was a Lewis man, and he had Gaelic. I think that's – there wasn't a travelling Gaelic teacher, or anything like that. He spoke Gaelic, so we did that, but that was it. When we went to secondary school you could do Gaelic but it wasn't the 'in' thing then.

Yes, attitudes to lots of things – well, to Gaelic and Scottish dancing. We were an eejit, if you – and we all knew, we all knew how to Scottish dance because, well, it's Robbie Shepherd that does it now, but, or 'Take The Floor', but, that was on the radio on a Saturday night, even, many years ago. I can't remember now what it was called, but we always listened to the dance music and my mother taught us to dance, but only in the privacy of our own home. And in our age group it was frowned upon, but that's all different now. And some people, unfortunately, have missed out on learning all these dances because ... because it was frowned upon.

*Did people want to be modern, like everybody else?*

Everybody's different, so who are you supposed to be like? Be like yourselves.

*And I'm asking people as well about Mackay Country itself – how you would describe it and what makes it special?*

It's very pretty! I don't know what makes it special. I suppose it is a little bit different from ... but there are other parts of the country that are similar, but I suppose it's more remote than any of the other parts. I don't know!

*Were you taught about the history even through just people telling stories or anything like that, in the past, when you were a child, about Mackay Country or anything like that?*

No, no, Mackay Country was – well, that's just a new ... I had never heard of Mackay Country before, really. And no, there wasn't ... you would hear stories but, there was nothing formal about it, you sort of didn't feel obliged to remember any of it. Yes, there's lots of stories that I've heard, but no, I'm not sure that I was ever awfully interested in history as a child, so you did sort of tend to forget.

*How would you describe the place to someone who's never been here?*

There's lots of open spaces, there's mountains, not very many trees ... but you – I think you have to, you have to make your own entertainment more than ... , you've got to get up and make things happen. And because you've got to do that, I think that's why you get more of a sort of community spirit and friendliness, because you have to make that effort. I mean, yes, you can sit in your own home with your door shut and watch the telly all the time, but ... but I think,, because people have to make an effort to do things and to make things happen, it's more rewarding and everybody kind of knows each other and you get a lot more support when things go wrong.

I mean, you probably see that yourselves when somebody loses somebody, or what – everybody helps you out. So it's good in that respect. That's one thing, when we were down in Shrewsbury on our holidays, it's one thing you can't help avoiding. I mean, we were ... for a couple of days we stayed at this hotel – it was attached to two quality golf courses. And so ..., it was quite remote, it was sort of ten miles outside Shrewsbury, and there weren't very many houses about, and there was only a few people here and there, but you walked past people. There was nobody there but yourselves and somebody else and they walk with their heads down and don't talk, which you find very strange. You almost want to catch them and say, "HELLO!" which we take for granted. Everybody speaks to you – I mean, even when you pass tourists on the road, you speak to them, but that's not the done thing in other parts of the world. So, I suppose it's a friendlier, more open place, because everybody knows.

*Do you have any particular hopes and fears for the area, for the place?*

I don't know. I suppose you worry that there won't always be ... there won't always be work, but there's probably more opportunity than when I was a youngster, because tourism has developed and, , things like that, and because of things like the golf course. I mean, you didn't have somebody being the green – I mean, it's only one person but at least somebody's a greenkeeper now, and somebody does the catering, and things like that. And because – I suppose because the tourism has developed then, lots of people are doing B&Bs and the joiners and the builders have more work and, so that sort of thing keeps the village going. But you worry, when, when things like the fish farm ... but then, of course, it just started up out of nothing, when it's not going so well you sort of worry about ... but ... but there always seems to be something else comes along to replace it, so I'm not too worried. I suppose it would be different if Martin and I weren't both in sort of employment, and stable employment as well. I don't foresee losing my job and he doesn't foresee losing his. I suppose it would be different if we were in the situation where you weren't in stable employment.

*You are completely unique being the first primary P.E. teacher. Very few people have that kind of perspective and that kind of background to think about it the way you can.*

Well, I wonder why, I don't know why, because all my sisters are interested in sport and are outgoing and whatnot – maybe it's where we were brought up, all that wide open spaces and we had to play cricket and we played all these things, and ... Well, my mother and father were both active people as well. We played – we used to play tennis over the garden gate. We'd an old table in the ... in one of the barns, where we played table-tennis, and ... and my mother was very interested in shooting, things like ... I'm not, I'm not at all, I don't like guns, I would quite like never to ever see a gun but she was into all these sorts of things. So she encouraged us to be doing things.

And you listened to the radio, and, I mean, Rangers and Celtic were the only two teams you ever heard about, so half of us supported Celtic and half of us supported Rangers, to make it more interesting. And then all of a sudden you heard of teams like, maybe like Aberdeen, but you didn't really realise that Rangers and Celtic were further away than Aberdeen, and we should really be supporting our local team – we didn't know that, so ... , so, I mean, we still do, we still support Rangers and Celtic because we did when we were kids, and ... not the same way – I'm not worried now whether they win or lose ... because you realise it's not that important, but ... I don't know, if that was where it all started from or not. But all my sisters play golf and, well, we play badminton and play football! That was something you didn't – we didn't play football much as girls, that was frowned upon when we were ... because I remember when I went to college – and we played football a wee bittie when we could, but when I went to college some of them were aghast that I used to ... that I was interested in football and, and not things like lacrosse and netball and ...! But, anyway, that's changed and it's not totally

frowned upon now to like anything at all! There's not one game for girls and one for boys. Even when we went to Golspie, the boys played football and the girls played hockey, which was a bit of shame, really. I quite liked hockey – I still do – but the boys missed out on hockey and the girls missed out on football. But no, not nowadays, you have to treat them all the same and they all get the same. And here you have to, because there's so few numbers you can't have a team of boys and a team of girls. And in a lot of the schools you can't have a team! Unless it's a team of two!

*Does the badminton club here, do they play against different areas too?*

Well, no, not so much now because there's not ... it's too far to go. There's not the same amount of people, little clubs playing, as there were. And we've got such a good club, there's so many of us play and we've got the two courts, that we have super nights on our own. We don't need to travel the same way as we did. But, sort of ten years back, we had little leagues going around the county, and we went to Bettyhill and to Kinlochbervie and to Lochinver and to Lairg and to Bonar Bridge and Ardgay, and Golspie and Doll, and it's still, there's still quite a bit of badminton played around the Ardgay/Bonar Bridge area, but their halls are not as good as ours, now, so ... we've not got this great desire to go, travel. I think the leisure centre in Lochinver, that ... there'll be another revival in badminton across there, and we'll probably go across and play a bit with them, but ... it's quite interesting because we used to grumble about, oh, they would never come to Durness to do this and to do that, and when I think about it now, it's little wonder! The little hall we had, no wonder nobody wanted to come to play badminton in it! Because, we ... we've got our hall over there now and there's not the same need to go and play ... because we have – there's no outstanding badminton players so, we can all get together and get what we want out of it. I suppose if you were world-class you'd be a bit bored playing in the club across here and you might have to.

But all the kids play badminton. I shouldn't say all of them, but a lot of them do, and they play at primary school and then they can play by the time they become adults, and that's something that didn't used to happen, because kids ... you didn't play badminton. I mean, I think the first time I ever had a badminton racquet in my hand was in my sixth year in Golspie High School, when I had done all my academic things and I spent most of my year in the gym, because I was going on to P.E. college. So then I played badminton. But that ... it went on here, but, see, we were never here. I don't know whether, even if we were here, whether we'd have been allowed to play as teenagers, I can't remember whether ... just, there wouldn't have been teenagers around to play but there's been badminton here ... I think 1936, the badminton club was set up, and it appears to never have stopped ... since then. Maybe, sort of, during the war, it might have. But, I have the minutes from the old hall, a thick brown book, and it's quite interesting, reading that, because when they started at first it was Tilley lights. And how on earth you played badminton with Tilley lights I have no idea. That's sort of the gas lamps – they're not even gas lamps – but it was, I think, around the early fifties that Robbie's father, Dickie, had the Parkhill Hotel and he must have let the hall join on to his electricity supply, and they had electricity to play by for the first time.

The earliest badminton racquets I remember were kind of wooden things in presses, and they weighed a ton. I used to – my father's ones like that, I used to play with that to start with, before I got one of my own. But now they're as light as ... and you get feather shuttlecocks but you also get plastic that are a much cheaper alternative – they'll last for a couple of nights, a month more, the plastic ones, whereas a feather one'll only last a couple of games. So, there's been developments in badminton as well.

Obviously, the cost of things, when they were doing things up, and the costs are completely different, although, sort of thing, back to pounds, shillings and pence. , things were shillings

and pence but, anything you get done is nothing less than £50.00 nowadays. It's amazing. But even then, a lot of the quotes that they got for their work and things like that were from firms down the country – I don't know – I don't know were there not – I suppose the local firms have come on, I never really thought about it, but I suppose they have come on a long way as well, in this part of the world. Maybe there wasn't such firms available – I've never really thought about that. But certainly some of the quotes for doing this and that came from such-and-such in Glasgow, and, which was a long way. I don't know if they ever did the work, but, some of the quotes ...are from there. Well, it's here, it's in the loft somewhere, in the box of old hall things, because nowadays you do your minutes on the computer. There was some beautiful handwriting. And there was some hellish handwriting as well! Some that's barely you can hardly read it, it's so bad, but some of its beautiful handwriting. And even the ... I mean, the hall constitution, it's not a constitution like the golf club has a constitution and other halls; it's an old thing, title deed – it's almost like title deeds, a trust – I can't remember the correct name for it – but it's sort of between the Estate and the ... and it's all hereinafter and all that sort of ... and it's pages long.

Not sure I've ever read it properly from end to end, but oh, it's frustrating when you have to send ... when you're applying for something and you have to send the minutes. You've got to photocopy them. In fact, the original one is handwritten, but somebody, somebody along the lines must have done a typed version. Even the typed version is a bit bulky.

There was a lot of sort of ... I suppose, before the time of television, they got together for musical evenings and concerts and dances more often.

And I suppose, there was ... it was local people that were making the entertainment, rather than bands coming in like nowadays, and, these theatre companies and whatnot come in, but television has a lot to answer for. We noticed there was ... when the badminton club was going there was so many of us at one point when we were playing in these leagues – we'd actually got three teams playing in – there was three leagues and we had a team in each league because there was so many of us at one point playing, and then all of a sudden Sky TV came along and you got football on a Monday night, and we used to have badminton on a Monday and a Thursday and the – especially the men, the men dropped off. And there was still much more female-dominated and still is, there's much ... there's more females, and I think that that's the reason – it's because of the football on the telly. Because still – we now play on a Thursday night and the teenagers go from 7.00 to 8.00 and then the adults from 8.00 to 10.00, and we have a wee kind of individual league thing. You play with a different partner every week and you count your points for the whole season, and ... it's Rangers and Celtic that are sometimes in some of the European competitions, and they're on on a Thursday night, and the nights that they're playing such-and-such'll be missing and such-and-such'll be missing, and ...so you almost sit here hoping, oh, I hope Celtic and Rangers are knocked out of Europe so that they won't be playing and we'll get some, , decent games on a Thursday night! Because it's, it's a shame when the consistency is broken up. But, so, yes, the television has a lot to answer for things like that that are very dependent on numbers. The same as in Kinlochbervie, a lot of these clubs can't function because of the fishing, because the men are at the pier at night ... Working in the evenings and the ladies can't get out, and I don't know whether it's the same in Lochinver or not, or whether the piers operate as much now.

*Will I switch this off, now, Lucy?*

Gosh, I didn't realise it was still on!

*No, that was brilliant, though, brilliant.*



### **Mainland Britain's most north westerly Marathon**

Lucy Mackay, recognised nationally in 1997 as Sports Volunteer of the year, having been refused entry to the London Marathon because of a demand on places decided to run her own marathon from Scourie to Durness on the same day that the London event is taking place. Dedicated with a commitment to both coaching and developing sport Lucy ran to “Improve Sports Facilities in North West Sutherland” All the monies raised were split equally between two schemes already in the pipeline, Duress Village Hall and Lochinver Leisure Centre. As part of her training schedule Lucy ran on all her “school routes” thus involving the areas of the North West. At different points along the route Lucy was joined by people for short distances, Paul Mackay Lucy’s son ran from Laxford to Rhiconich, Kirsteen Keith ran from Rhiconich to beyond Gualin, and a few pupils from the schools where Lucy teaches ran along for support at intervals. Graham Bruce ran the final ten miles. Small groups had gathered along her final stretch entering Durness and she was given a police escort and a resounding welcome from a small group of supporters as she entered the Village Square.

### **Lil Mackenzie Kinlochbervie**

Lil Mackenzie was a teacher in Ardmore. She volunteered during the war going to London when she was 15 to help evacuate children who's houses had been bombed.

Interviewer: Gail Ross

Interviewee: Lil Mackenzie

Interview with Mrs Lil Mackenzie, Achriesgill, Kinlochbervie, on the 8<sup>th</sup>. of November 2004.

*How long have you lived here, Lil?*



IMAGE 83 LIL MACKENZIE KINLOCHBERVIE

Since I was born, more or less, apart from the war years I was away. I was away for four or five years then. I went away very young ...and came back just at the end of the war.

*And where did you go to during the war, then?*

Mainly in London ... it was through a family connection that I went down there, and then we ended up by taking children from bombed-out homes out of London to ... well, wherever it was, it ranged from Dorset to Northumberland and bits in between, anywhere that they could get homes for these children. It was a very difficult job, because of course naturally the children were ... most of them, and maybe all of them, had never left home before. They knew their homes had been flattened, their parents weren't with them, and it was really hard going, and I didn't have the experience then, but I learned the hard way. And then, later on, we had some adults that were bombed out, and had nothing left. It was difficult because you felt ... you thought, oh, for goodness sake, and you're wanting to lose your temper, and then you had to stop short and say, well, they have nothing, I still have a home to go to, but they have nothing to go back to. So ... it was ... perhaps it taught me a few things about myself that I didn't know before.

It was done through the auspices of the ... what would now be Department of Social Security or something. It wasn't called that then, but it was ... that was ... they footed the bill for the evacuees, but I don't remember what it was called. Because of the people that I went down to London with were very socially conscious, and they were following up what was happening. And then of course in newspapers they were asking for volunteers to do this, that and the other, and they got involved that way, and they got me involved as well. I would be fifteen when I left here. It was in a way, very hard going, and of course telephones were very, very few and far between then and ... there was no telephone in my home, you know, you couldn't get in touch quickly. And ... yes, it was tough going. There were times when you felt, oh, what am I doing here, I would rather be back home. But it just worked out in the end.

*That seems strange, too, because you'd have been very safe up here ... I'd imagine, during the war, and you'd have had plenty of food, as well, I'd have thought.*

Oh, yes, there was no scarcities of food up here at that time, because every householder was a crofter and they had their own, they had their own food. And you would have salmon, and illegally, probably, then. But never mind, they were there because rationing was pretty tight. Well, as the years went on it got even worse.

*So, did your folks up here send parcels down to London?*

No, I never asked them to. I didn't they didn't ... they weren't aware of just how difficult it was, and they weren't aware that you had to stand in queues, because I knew if I told my mother that she would say, oh, you'd better get back up here.

*So there was a part of you that actually did want to stay in London, then?*

Well, my age, I think, you know, that was sort of ... it was a lively sort of place even in wartime, and I think when you're young you take a chance and that's it. I wouldn't advise anyone to do it now, and when my daughter went down there I almost ... but she went with relatives.

*Fifteen's still quite young, isn't it?*

Well, it does when you look back on it. But at the time I think probably ... probably we grew ... we were, I don't know, we were different and we perhaps had more responsibility at fifteen ... than parents put on their children now, which is not a bad thing, really, because responsibility matures you ... it can also worry you.

*So you've lived here all of your life, and it's been a good place to stay, has it?*

On the whole, yes. I mean, the people here are the ... what I call the salt of the earth. I mean, you're amongst great people. The facilities avail – you know, that are available are not very

good, but at one ... up until the last, I suppose, up until television came along, people didn't rely on bought entertainment, if you see what I mean. They just relied on their own entertainment, and they met up in groups and ... I think the most natural thing in the world is for people to laugh, and it sort of sharpened your wits, and everybody had something to do and something to contribute. And was that in the ceilidh type of ... A lot of our time, if we were going anywhere, took ... was taken up by having to walk there! Because you didn't have any quick transport. Walk to – was it in the halls, then, or in the ... school, mainly, that was where these things would be. But you always found a venue of some kind to meet people.

There was a drama group going for many years, and it was very successful. The teacher in the school – the headmaster in the school at the time sort of took control over the running of it, but it was very good. And she – Annie Jessie herself was very good at that sort of thing, and so was her brother, Billy. So ... but you could always get a lot of people that were willing to take part and were amazingly good at what they were doing. You know, because somebody would – you would take a part and think, oh, God, why did I do this, I can't play the part of this or that ... but it was amazing and it went down very well. In fact, I think the last group we had, we had to run it for three successive nights, because ... fishing, as you know, was very busy then, and wives and husbands couldn't get out on the same night ... and there was a demand went, why don't you put it on for two nights, but I think we put it on for three. And it was well attended.

*And were you one of the players.*

In little bits, yeah.

*And were these sketches done by ... material done by the local people?*

No, it was done from books, but all changed round to suit local situations, you know. Basically it was written play by some well-known person, but it didn't end up that way. But you had to be careful that you didn't offend anybody, because you could do that quite innocently, just by saying something, but that was well – well and truly monitored before it went out.

*So, at fifteen you went away to London, came back after the war, and what was your life like after.*

I was – well, in those days there were small schools and I was teaching in Ardmore and Achlyness for a while. but that was up to Primary ... well, what is now Primary 7, I suppose, because it was then known as a 'qualifying' exam, and once they passed that they had to either leave school, which they did then at fourteen, or go on to further education.

*So, did you enjoy that job, then?*

Yes, it was, it was quite interesting. Frustrating at times, but I'm sure every teacher finds that!

*So, how many pupils would you have had then, in Ardmore?*

Only six, I think. Six pupils in Ardmore, and how many would you ... you taught in one school one ... for some ... time and then do the next ones. There wouldn't be more than eight or ten at the most. But then of course you had from entry at five right up till they left at fourteen, and you'd all the subjects to cover, so it sounds like a very nice and easy job, but it was very time-consuming by the time you covered each class with every subject. There were no languages to be taught – just as well, because I didn't – I couldn't have done it anyway. But that was the kind of schools they had then. They were very successful at the time, and quite good, but they wouldn't fit into today's curriculums at all.

I think the range that you have to teach is much wider now, and they've got to get a grip of everything that's going on before they go on to further education. But it's difficult to say

because you don't know them ... they might pick up everything else very quickly, but it's a totally different system now, anyway.

*It must have been quite difficult, though, as you say, to teach all the subjects as well as ... because you would have had P.E. ...*

Well, not very much P.E. ... I mean, no, it was mostly the reading, writing, geography, history, you know, that sort of thing. But by the time you took these ... and of course you had to teach them to write, and to ... everything when they started. Not like today's children; they seem to be able to write before they ever go to school, but there's much more encouragement for them to do that.

*And did you get any training before that, then?*

Not really. A sort of oral test by somebody from the Education Department, and that was it.

*So, was this a job you applied for, or did somebody come to you and ask you to ...*

I think I probably applied for it. I think I must have applied for it – I can't remember somebody coming and offering me it ...

*And these were called side-schools, weren't they?*

Side-schools, yes.

*And did you teachers in the side-schools, did you ever get together at any time?*

Not really, no. I mean, you may have got together occasionally, but not as far as teaching or the school was concerned. We were each on our own. Well, we were miles apart, for a start.

*And how did you get out to Ardmore?*

Walking. From Skerricha every day and sometimes it could be very, very ... if you're going there in a south-westerly gale, you'd be – well, I have been lifted off the road. There's one part of it that really gets the full blast of a south-westerly, and that's it. Mind you, you'd get back quicker, but ... you don't have to fight to come back! You've got to put brakes on then. Totally different. There's just no comparison whatsoever. They talk about the good old days, but I wouldn't say they were the good old days – they were just different old days.

*And what kind of material, books-wise and that did you sort of apply to places to get books?*

You had to, yes, you had to make up a list every year for what you thought you would need for the following year, and that was sent out during the summer holidays and that had to do – well, I don't know if you had to do with that, or you ... you wanted to make sure you didn't run out of material.

*And what about history and geography, did you have textbooks did they work from textbooks?*

We worked – yes, we had books, but some of it – by that time, you know, they'd get bits and pieces from ... not from the war that had just finished, but from the older people that had gone through the First World War, and there was bits you could slip in about that, but not a lot, because it wasn't really published properly by then.

*How would you describe Mackay Country?*

Oh, yes, it's a difficult one. Well, I'd start off by saying it is the friendliest place you'd want ... you know, as friendly as anywhere you would want to go. I know there's lots of rural areas that are equally friendly, but that's ... the people you're with are really good. Employment seems to be difficult now and, as you probably know, crofting and fishing are not very interesting, not ... the word I'm using ... a complete downturn, and it's not just there's a

temporary downturn, especially in crofting – it looks as though there'll be quite a different – crofters have to work differently as well, of course. And there are so many regulations attached to everything you do that it makes life difficult for people. And I don't see ... but there may well be ... how ... what ... how ... it's very difficult to do anything. You can't have anything manufactured here, it's too expensive to bring in raw material and then you've also ... if you had a finished article, that's expensive as well ... Transport. Because of the distances. And now of course on top of all that, the cost of running vehicles. So I really don't see ... with fish- to keep some – quite a number of people in employment. And even with modern technology, I don't see – but there's lots of people who probably see it differently – how you could ever think of getting full employment, especially when you get talking about youngsters that leave school, you know, upwards. I really don't see that that's going to improve unless something very dramatic would happen, and that would have to happen country-wide, not just locally.

*And is that because people really got to go away to get training?*

There are some of them who say that, oh, I want to go away and train and this and ... and then I'd like to come back here. But there's got to be something for them to come back to. One of the trainings that they could get is in the building trade. I mean, there's a shortage of every kind of tradesman and yet ... well, they would have to go away and learn basic training and go to college, but I'm sure if some of them did that there'd be a few would get full-time employment in the area, because if you need any tradesmen now you've got ... they've got to travel miles.

We're really in this part of the world looking for more joiners, plumbers, builders ... electricians ... But that wouldn't take care of very many. It would do ... it would be a few. There's a finite amount of work for people, but the ones that are good at it could make quite a good living out of it.

*And what about tourism – do you think that's a way forward?*

Well, I don't know. I suppose it is a way forward in many ways, but I think there's far too much emphasis put on tourism. It's OK and it does – it's a short season. Very short season. And although it's a good way to augment your income for, you know, over the year, but it's not going to keep you living for the rest of the year. It's sort of May till September and that's it. And if anybody ... I mean, any householder, any man could only get work from May till September, his family would be starving, whereas this is good as an extra but it's not ...

The climate, I suppose, is one thing that doesn't help our tourism. The fact that people can go to warmer climes reasonably cheaply now, and that seems to be getting cheaper all the time, and ... the roads we have don't encourage people to travel too far too often. That is one thing – that a roads improvement scheme right round the coast is desperately needed. But it only seems to come in two or three – in bits and pieces. You get a few hundred yards at a time and that's it at the moment. It'd take a long time with two hundred yards at a time! It'll take a long, long time! And of course a lot of the roads nationally are crumbling a bit, so the money that's available will go there, it won't come to rural areas, that's for sure.

*And would you be looking for double-track, is that instead of single-track?*

I think so, I think, you know, just the double-track, the same as we have up here, would ... and I think it might be safer as well. The number of people who drive up here now have never driven on a single-track road before – they don't even know what these passing-places are meant to do, and there are quite a lot of European people drive up here and they seem to get completely lost, and that could be an accident hazard. So, if you had just the twin-track road – one ... a lane going up, a road going each way, that I think would save quite a bit of ... well, not ... there aren't fatalities, but you can still get nasty accidents.

*So, it would help tourism and it would be safer?*

It would certainly help tourism, I think they would be more willing to come back again if the roads were ... if there was an improvement in the road service, because some ... quite a number of them say, oh, we love this part of the world, but I wish you had better roads. And I can't see air travel helping us very much, not here! No, but it would be wonderful! Helicopter to Inverness would be rather nice. We have a helipad, but then it's too expensive to get it to use a helicopter.

*To backtrack what year would they have closed, the side-schools?*

Ah, I think I was out of there ... I don't know. Andy Marshall could tell you that, because he came up here about that time. They were down at Oldshoremore, were they? Him and his wife in the late forties .....I don't know if there were still any in the early fifties. I just can't remember exactly.

*And then what happened, then? Was it ... was everybody sort of concentrated in one school then, or ...?*

Yes, well, by ... I think probably they were closing as the children in each school were getting to the stage of leaving, and there weren't ... you know, and there weren't any wee ones you're talking about very, very small communities, so there wouldn't be any younger ones coming up to go to school. And I think they closed them then. And they also put a bus on for distance travel, you know, for the children, away back, a number of years ago. Well, they'd have to. Children couldn't walk that distance.

*Was that sad for you, that that was closed?*

No, I had left it by then. I think I was married by that time, or ...because I know, because I lived at Skerricha for a while, and when Ismay was five, due to go to school, Billy was just less than three, under three, between two and three. And they said I wouldn't get school transport until the second child was five, but I could get a lodging allowance for the oldest child. Now, who on earth would put a child of five or just under it into lodgings, and who would take them anyway? I mean, it was a crazy system. But in the end we sort of fought it out and I eventually got the transport for her until Billy was old enough. And that was why we moved over here, to be nearer the school.

*So you had three children, was it?*

Four children.

*And what was – what work were you doing, was your husband doing?*

He was just away at that Hydro schemes or something. He was away a lot. And then, of course, as you well know, when the children at that age when they reached twelve years of age they had no choice. They couldn't stay here at school. And that caused an awful uproar in the place, really, because we had been fighting for a long time to get a school here so that – because every child is not capable of living away from home at twelve years of age.

They're far from it. And, in fact, I think to this day some of them have been ruined by having to go. And then there was a proposal they were going to put a secondary school at Rhiconich, and there was quite a lot of support for it, but the Education Committee didn't want it. They wanted all our children on the east coast to justify High Schools in Helmsdale, Brora, Golspie, Dornoch ... they needed our numbers. They didn't care much about the pupils. And some of them, some of the teachers in the schools agreed with us, but they hadn't got the authority to change things. That was one of the ... that was a very bad move, a very bad move indeed, for some, anyway. And then they lived in hostels, and if you're a normal child living at home till

you're twelve, it's very difficult to adjust to the discipline of a hostel. And I don't mean the discipline – behaviour discipline ...

The way they had to do everything, you know, it was ... it was very difficult for them. Because I was on one of these hostel committees for a while after I joined the Council, and although you didn't sympathise with the children when they told you what was wrong, you understood it only too well ... especially because your own had been, you know ... Through it.

*So, it was quite difficult, really, for some children to go off?*

It was extremely difficult. There were those – the brighter ones, they could handle it – they could cope. They were, you know, there's ... they would be homesick, they would want home ... and then, of course, when they first started this scheme, you weren't allowed – didn't matter you could be as rich as anybody – to take your children home for a weekend.

You only got the statutory holidays – that you couldn't just take them home on Friday and back to school – back on Sunday evening to the hostel for ... you just weren't allowed. You had no control over your own children. And that must have been pretty tough going, because there wasn't much for them to do on the east coast except, you know, wander around. They had games and they had probably things in their hostels but, you know, to think from four o'clock on Friday, 'I wish I was going home,' and they couldn't get. And they would just be ... you just weren't allowed to do it.

Until there was ... that went on for a long time until people sort of kicked over the traces and said, you know, it's our children, we'll decide what ... whether they should come home or not. Then they started a scheme by taking them home on a Friday, then taking them back on Monday morning from here to be in school in Golspie at nine o'clock, which was crazy. The children ... a lot of them were quite ill by the time they reached ... I mean, they were getting up ... some of them that had a distance to go to get to the bus were up at six in the morning. And then they changed that and decided to put them away back on a Sunday night. I think it was church pressure from some quarters that decided the Monday morning thing. You know, they didn't want – didn't think children should be travelling on Sunday. But then they didn't get that very right, because which is more harmful – travel on Sunday or be ill all day Monday, you know, that was the choice. But there must have been a lot of children – I mean, because if that was a new system and then suddenly, you know, you had your children at home and then all of a sudden all your teenagers were shipped off to the east coast ...

*Oh, yes, you would never see a teenager here at the weekend.*

There must have been a dearth of ... I don't know, youth and laughter and excitement and ... You would only ... you would see them during the school holidays, but at the weekend there was nobody except the statutory weekends when they were home, that was all. It was horrible.

*Do you think that affected ... I don't know, sort of, community or pulling together or ...*

I think it probably did. Bonding, or something.

You weren't very well, you know, you weren't properly aware of it at the time. It was a gradual thing that grew on the community. But looking back on it, I think it was a mistake, but there were some ... it was difficult to get parents to agree to become aggressive about it. You would get ... they would talk to you about it, and say, oh, yes, that's right, we ... you know, we ... but then try to get them in a group and publicly say what you ... oh, no, no, I'm not going to say that, or I'm not going to ... So it wasn't very easy. So they wouldn't really fight. And I'm sure some people would think it was a good system as well, I suppose being away all the time?

But then, when the children would come home at the holidays and you would then hear ... in fact, they didn't used to tell so much during holidays as after they left school, you realised just how unhappy they were. Well, that's hard for any parent to hear, that their children are unhappy. And especially when they're ... when it's in the past, and there's nothing you can do to make amends. No, I'm not saying every child was unhappy, certainly not, there were some quite happy, but the majority, I would say, were very unhappy about this system.

*When did you start to get involved in local politics?*

I think when I had my children, when you ... you get involved with different things, and ... I don't know. I joined the Council in, I think, seventy-three, seventy-four, there ... but I had been involved in local things long before then.

*You were very involved in the committees and some people said you should go on to become a local Councillor.*

Yes, I was asked by several people to do that, and eventually I did, and that was it. When you go in as a raw recruit, you don't find it very exciting, but you still want to hang on in ... and learn more about it. But you do learn very quickly, because the ... there was, that was an all-Sutherland Council we had then, and I found the people, all the members that were experienced members were very, very helpful. They really were, you could go to any of them. You talk about the east coast not wanting the west coast, but the ones on the east coast were just as helpful, and you could go to any of them at any time and ... if you were concerned about how a thing should be done or what to do. And I got a lot of co-operation from them, and that carried on all the years I was there – I had no problems with the different, east-west divide didn't enter into it at all.

*What kind of things did you tackle on the Council?*

Well, to start with, everything came under the Council. There was the education, health, the lot. And then in seventy ... just about two years or less than two years, they had a complete changeover and they ... a lot of the responsibilities were taken to the Highland Council in Inverness – like the big-spending committees like education and social work and ... and we had all the other things in Sutherland. It was ... it worked quite well, on the whole. In fact, I think it worked better than it's doing now, but ... Because you knew the officials that were there, you got to know them and it made life much easier. Well, at times, there were times when it wasn't all that easy but, you know, if it wasn't, you knew why. You could contact people any time. Even ... you could go as far as contacting somebody at the weekends when they were – when they weren't supposed to be working, and they were just as helpful then. No, it was a different set-up altogether. Now I have no idea who's ... does what.

*So, do you think it's the sort of, the way that government or local government is too big now, people aren't accountable and aren't responsible?*

I think it's much too big, because the Highland Council, with the best will in the world and however good the members are, they cannot properly cover an area this size. Each person will cover their own area, but the others don't ... there's some people in that, that go to ... in Inverness, for instance, they don't know where Kinlochbervie or Scourie or Durness are, or how difficult it is and how time-absorbing it is to get there. And that doesn't help very much. See, and when we had the split and we'd a ... then the officials were out here quite often, and they knew exactly what you had to put up with. I will admit that spring and summer they were more likely to come out than in the wintertime, but they never stalled about coming out in the wintertime. That was one of the difficult things, was that because you had to allow two hours before your meeting started to get there, and two hours when it finished to get back, and more if the roads were bad.



*So, how did it work, then? Did people have ideas about what you wanted to see in the area and for the area, and you fought for them in the Council, or did people come to you and say?*

Well, it worked both ways. In both ways. Of course, there was a representative in Inverness, Francis Keith, for the big-spending committees like education and roads and social work, that sort of thing, which started up. They did that. So there was two of us doing different things. From the same area. It was the same everywhere, it was very ... There were some that were, that had the dual thing, but we didn't, and he was one and I was the other.

The budgets weren't very big. I don't know that ... you see, there were a lot of schools and there still are, of course, needing a lot of money spent on them, and the hostels that the children stayed in at that time needed a lot of money spending on them. And the Scottish Office were not that co-operative about it. So there was as far as I know, anyway, as far as I can remember, the actual material for the schools, I don't think that was cut back. Not for a long time. But the infrastructure wasn't ... was being neglected, hence the money that's going to have to be spent on them now, before they fall apart. I think that was neglected quite a bit.

*So, what things did you cover, what things did you discuss?*

Housing, planning ... what else was there ... there was, well, there was social work, although the head office was in Inverness we had a sub-committee of social work. What ... oh, I'm forgetting now ... licensing board, health board ... well, the health board was a separate issue ... environmental health, you know. All these things came into it, and there were different ... and, of course, there were sub-committees of committees sometimes, to deal with ... well, mainly individual's problems. There were a whole host of committees.

*And how long were you a local Councillor?*

Until ninety-four or ninety-six, the last change came. Something like that. There's about nearly ten years since I finished on the Council. Twenty-three years. Imagine anybody being mad enough to be going up and down that road for twenty-three years! I think it just got a hold of you, and you didn't want to let go, or something.

*Well, you must get used to speaking out, though, because it's not – I'm sure it's not that easy to speak out because you must have had to fight for your kind of corner.*

Oh, well, you spoke out for what you really felt strongly about. Well, the same as, you know, like the Community Council, you've got to speak out sometimes. I think the speaking out was one thing. It's making sure that you have a grip of your audience that listen to you. And that is not the easiest thing. I've chaired a few committees and I ... you just get so long, and you get so many interruptions and then you're stopped and that's it, you don't interrupt again or you're out. Amazing the number of people who do interrupt. I never got used to that.

*So you had to chair these meetings as well, sometimes?*

I chaired some of them. Everybody ... the chairs went round most of the members, and you would have been invited to lots of things, if you were a local Councillor.

*Were you invited to anything that you can remember that was special?*

I was invited to quite a few things that I didn't go to, because I didn't believe in them but, yeah ... I was there, at the opening of the Raigmore Hospital – the existing one. There were several things like that, you got an invitation to the opening. Yeah, it was quite a social event, the opening of the Kylesku Bridge. Well, we made it that after the officials went away.

*And you'd have been at the opening of the Kinlochbervie High School?*

Yes.

*Prince Charles.*

Oh, yes, he was there. And the opening of the ... Seaforth House in Golspie. There was some other one too ... so, these things you would just ... you were asked to go to. He is ... Prince Charles was there that day, at Golspie. And it turned out a bitterly cold day and he was half an hour late, as well. Freezing, standing there! Yes, because it was one of these days, in the spring it must have been, you know, you had a lovely morning and oh, I don't want heavy clothes, and put on something light, you know, and oh ... He spoke to everybody He did down there too, at the opening of the school, he spoke to a lot of people. Yeah, I met him somewhere else, at ... oh, yes, something down in Easter Ross, in Tain, the opening of something there. I met Princess Alexandra there too, There was something else, what I can't remember now what it was, that he was there, and he said something about, 'Do you get tired of all these tourists coming up to your area?' I said, 'No, not really,' I said, 'people depend on it for their income. But what I do get a bit tired of, and frustrated about, is the objections by some people to handing ... to giving over land to widen the roads.' And I knew the Duke of Westminster was one of the worst of them. And, 'Oh, yes,' he said, 'but it would spoil it.' I said, 'It would spoil it for the few, but it would make life a lot easier for the many.' He just laughed, he says, 'I suppose you're right.'

*So you were talking to the high and mighty, then?*

Oh, the high and mighty. There was something else I was at in Edinburgh Princess Anne was there, but she seemed to be cold – not such a friendly person. But Princess Alexandra was wonderful. I think she comes up quite a lot to well, she used to, anyway, her husband's not keeping well, so she ... maybe they don't come up as often as she used to, but she was such a friendly person, you know.

*Was it a good place to be young in?*

Well, I suppose, looking back on it was, because you had security, you had a home, you had your own family with you and there were no fears, and you didn't have to wander away amongst a lot of people to survive. So I suppose it was, looking back on it. I was quite happy over there when I was young.

*And did you have a croft?*

Yes.

*Did you work at sheep?*

There was sheep and cattle and at one time a horse for a long time, as well. And pigs, or a pig, probably. Most householders owned at least two cows, some of them more; sheep, one pig or two pigs, and a lot of them had horses as well. But I don't think many of them had more than one horse, and then when they had to double up for ... they borrowed a neighbour's horse and they ... because you often see horses working in pairs, but they worked in pairs, but they weren't owned in pairs by the same person.

At that time there used to be a lot of travelling folk. We used to call them tinkers, but I don't know why ... but they're now, you're not supposed to they're known as travelling folk. And they used to sell horses. It was probably part of the ... they always had horses, of course, that was their transport, but they used to ... there was quite a lot of them, and they would buy horses, if somebody was ... decided they were going to give up keeping a horse, they would buy them. So I think a lot of it came from them. It's a horse we had, not a mare, so I can't remember having a young horse there, but there's bound to have been some that ... they were kept and grew up in the place.

*And did the travelling people ... did they do anything else when they were in the area?*

No, they used to sell tins and, you know, bits and pieces like that, but I don't think that they did anything. They used to beg or borrow hay and feed for the horses, and they were always wanting to get some food for themselves, but it was ... wasn't so difficult then because there was always surplus things like crowdie, butter, that kind of thing, and nobody bothered ... nobody worried about giving it away. They weren't depriving their own family of it.

*And whereabouts did they stay, the travelling people? Did they have a specific place?*

They had one specific place, just down on the other side of the Crudens, down below where Babbie used to live. There was a ... it was known as the 'Tinkers' Green'. They used to have their camp there. It was a nice, flat piece of ground and there was water nearby. And there was another one up at ... the Duke of Westminster, not the present one, but his granddad or whoever he was or whoever the Duke of Westminster was then, he had a place that was especially for the tinkers, and the Estate weren't allowed to do anything with it, or ... it had to be there so that they would put their tents up when they came along. And they had different places that they had ... but they were, I suppose, where they would get a piece of flat ground near water, I would imagine, would be the main thing. Because not only did they need water, but the animals they would have, the horses certainly would need water.

*And Irwin's shop – it wouldn't have been there then?*

Not the present one. It was on this side of where John Corbett's house is now, just round that corner there, but it's ... that was widened a bit and the whole place was demolished. ... There's a year written on Irwin's shop when it was built. The building that Irwin's shop is now was ... well, they used to call it the Poorhouse but if anybody was down-and-out, and anything happened to their homes or, you know, that, they ... that was always kept for people who had – well, your house could have gone on fire, anything could happen. But I don't know what ... I can't remember ... was it sixty-something, was it, that house – that shop was rebuilt? There is – I'm sure there's a date on it somewhere. But no, that was a ... but then there was a shop, you know, where Reg Rookes had his place ... One of the Cloustons from Kinlochbervie had a shop there.

They had three – they had one there, they had one at Kinlochbervie and they had one at Balchrack. They used to open certain days, or certain evenings, but they did have basics, basic groceries in these three shops, that meant that people could get certain supplies without having to walk all the way to Kinlochbervie. Well, Calders had a shop at Kinlochbervie as well, but they – well, for a long time they used to go round from door-to-door selling from a van. So did Irwin's father – he used to go round selling from a van, and he took stuff to people that could ... wouldn't have to walk very far.

*Who set up the Poorhouse?*

Oh, I have no idea. It was ... I mean, was that a sort of local ... it was always there that I can remember, for as long as I remember. There must have been – it sounds the sort of thing that maybe a church would do, or a ... but I don't know when it ... I mean, could you stay in that for any length of time, I think there were families there for a long time. And was it just a house, if you were in there you were ... you just lived there, and that was it.

*Could more than one family live there at one time, or was it just one family?*

Well, I don't remember of more than one family being there, in fact it's just one family I can think of that were there in my time, but I don't know what the origin of it was. I don't think there's anything in that book about it either, that book I got in the bookshop in Durness. I don't

think it goes that far back to tell – well, it does go far back but I don't think it tells you the history of that.

*And the Cloustons, I mean, is there any – have they got any living relatives now, in this part of the world?*

Not in this part of the world, because there were two brothers and a sister. Well, the sister seemed to live in the house, but both brothers, although they were married, neither of them had any family ...so there's none of them left. I think they were originally from Orkney. They must have been quite, enterprising if they've got three shops. Well, yes, I mean, the shops were small but they kept what people needed then, which ... I mean, there wasn't very much money around then, so people really bought basics, but the basics were there to get if you wanted them. And, of course, another thing they did sell was paraffin, which was very important, because there was no electricity here. The electricity was only what – fifty-five or sixty years ago? Before – prior to that, it was lamps, candles and suchlike. But they always sold paraffin, so that people – well, you'd have to have paraffin or you wouldn't have a light of any kind.

*And did you get bad snowstorms then, was the weather different then?*

Yes, I can remember quite a few really, really bad snowstorms. And they – well, they did last much longer because – not so much that perhaps there was more snow, but there was fewer p – fewer – there was no means of getting rid of it before snowploughs became so popular and so useful. But yes, there would be some nasty snowstorms.

*What do you think Mackay Country is like for people with mobility problems or disabilities of one sort or another?*

Well, I'm not quite sure, because there's ... I mean, there isn't any ... you mean, transport-wise, that type of thing, or in their homes?

Well, it certainly has a lot since my young days and since my mother was a young person, because in those days there were few, if any, jobs that women could have, and they had to work side-by-side with the menfolk to get ... all winter, and summer and spring, to get crops planted, to get crops lifted and everything, and they really did a lot of outdoor work. And even peat-cutting, everything there, the women ...

*So it was quite heavy work.*

Heavy, heavy work. And, as I say, there were no ... there was no jobs for women to go to. I mean, where I was brought up my mother did a ... she did a dinner-bed-and-breakfast place since the late thirties, but it was only a small house so she couldn't take very many people in. I think she was the first person to do that ...as a private, you know. There was the hotel, of course, but, I mean, now it's done quite a lot on a different scale, and people demand more. I mean, they don't go to bed-and-breakfast now the same as they used to because they expect – well, they expect sort of almost hotel facilities showers and that sort of thing. But certainly the life was very, very hard for these women, and, I mean, as you well know, that when the outside work was done during the day, they had to come in at night and feed the family and ...prepare things and very often mend clothes or wash clothes or iron clothes and ... when the menfolk were then finished for the day. So, yes, it was a very hard life for these women, very hard indeed. Most of them had quite big families, very big in fact, but ... I suppose as far as the children themselves were concerned, the older ones would look after the younger ones – that's the physical taking care of – but then all the other work that was involved with having children had to be done by the mother.

*And did women get together then?*

Well, I don't know that they did very much, because of distances. And time. Because time – I mean, for instance, from here people that lived down at, shall we say, Sheigra, well, you'd go down there in what, ten minutes, fifteen minutes – it was a whole world, wide world away ...and you just didn't get together. They probably met in the church or met ... something like that, but not ... they didn't get together as groups.

*And was church an important element up here?*

Yes, it was much, much more important then, and people used to walk – they used to walk from Ardmore to Kinlochbervie, to church. The McDonalds, they always did, and people did – well, if they went to church they had to walk or not go, that was it. But there was more, many, many more people go to church then that do now.

*And what do you think has changed – why has that changed, do you think?*

I think it's just the pattern of life right across the spectrum that's changed, you know, people's attitudes have changed, and I suppose television helped to change a lot as well. I don't think people are less caring or that, it's just that they don't feel that they want to go. It would take a very special person to attract them into the church. When I say special person, it would be either somebody – I don't know, it's difficult to say – but the church, I can't remember the church providing anything. Tea and sympathy, yes, but you can get that anywhere. I don't – I just do not recollect that, you know, there's this or that being put on for ...children by the church, I really don't. Well, they had women – they had a Women's Guild and something else, but that was only for the few because of the distance again.

*How do you see the role of women today?*

I suppose ...women are much more liberated, I suppose you would say, today. They're free to go out and work if they can get work, their children are probably cared for at school more because they don't have – you know, you know if your children go to school they're safe till they're due to come home again. They don't have to walk home in a snowstorm or they don't have to ... have to come home at lunchtime and that sort of thing.

And there's opportunities as well, especially provided in – particularly in the school, for where women can learn different skills, and that must help them, because they ... it would be a daunting prospect to have to leave an area like this to learn a skill ...and ... before you would earn anything, whereas now there's a lot of courses in the school that help them a lot, and I think that's one great advantage the school has brought to the area.

*Do you have any Gaelic, Lil?*

Quite a bit. It was one of these things that were happening in most homes. My parents spoke to each other in Gaelic and spoke to us in English. And we used to do what lots of children did then – we understood all they were saying, but we didn't answer back in Gaelic, so that they wouldn't know that we knew what they were saying! It was a sort of secret language, up to a point, but I know quite a lot of Gaelic, but I'm not a fluent Gaelic speaker because you get out of the habit of it. I mean, I know exactly what I want to say but, when it comes to saying it, I think, oh, have I got it the right way round, because Gaelic's a different language from ... well, the grammar is different, anyway. But I quite liked the little classes we had, six of us, or seven of us, going down to the school and we had this man from Kylesku, Roddy Macleod, coming along. But that suddenly stopped – they said there was no money. And I get so frustrated and so angry when you read in the papers about money – money is being set aside for different places for Gaelic – most of it goes to the Western Isles, where Gaelic is still quite strong. And they're quite right to keep it that way, but at least they should encourage ...other places. There were – there were two young – two schoolgirls who used to come to the classes, and they were

doing very well but, of course, there again, they lost the interest because the ... he just suddenly stopped going and we weren't even told that it was going it was disappointing.

*And they did mention a few people that still speak Gaelic, and obviously you'd be one of those people but, you know, could you get together with just a few people, like, not in the big sense of the Ceilidh Place where there was a dinner, but could you get together on a smaller scale?*

Well, this is what we tried and we were sort of successful when Roddy was coming here. He would sort of say, right, no English spoken today, you know, that kind of thing. But as all of them but me were probably learners to start with, they found it a little bit difficult to say anything because they had to stop and think of what they were saying, but if that had persevered, and had somebody ... an enthusiastic teacher, I think they would have ... we'd ... you'd soon have got half-a-dozen people together. Because if we had been successful, I mean, we could even now – there's plenty places in the Ceilidh House that three of us could sit in a corner and speak Gaelic – if there was people to speak it. But there's not many; there's one woman from Polin, she's a fluent Gaelic speaker. There's only about two fluent Gaelic speakers that come there. And they do speak to each other in Gaelic.

*What's your fears for the Mackay Country future?*

Oh, I don't know. I suppose, the loss of young ... loss of young people, really, because a community's not a community without the young, and the young cannot be a community if they have no work. So there is a vicious circle. And I think I would be very much in favour of them going away for two or three years, I mean, that I think they need to do that to widen their horizons, but if there was something that they could come back to, you would ... once you had your first tranche of people coming back going away and coming back you would have a sort of rolling programme type of thing. So, it's to get that start. But to get that start is very, very difficult, and I certainly couldn't come up with any solutions to it or, you know ... because everything ... everything you could even imagine would be financially out – out with – and I don't mean out with the local community – out with the Scottish Executive, because they're not going to spend much on areas like this. That would be ... that is one thing, but I certainly ... it is my fear, and ... that there will be less and less spent in rural communities to help them in any way. And I find that even that since Inverness became a city, money is not filtering through northwards the way it used to.

And oddly enough I was listening to a programme, oh, that one that comes on Thursday night after the news ... and there was a woman from Fort William – well, that was one of the things that came up, a woman from Fort William was talking on that. And she said they were seeing quite a difference in the money that was going into Fort William since Inverness became a city. I don't think the infrastructure of Inverness is big enough for a city, but that's ... it is a city, and that's it. So, having made a city of it, they're now going to have to spend a lot of money on it, and there's a finite amount of money that the Scottish Executive will get to spend on these things. So, I think we're going to lose out on that, really. I would have preferred that not to have happened.

*And what about your hopes for the future of Mackay Country?*

My hope is that there will be some entrepreneur from somewhere will come along with a viable project of some kind that'll employ a few people. My fears for the future is that we are not going to get it because of the money that would be involved, and there are some things which I wouldn't – that was suggested that I don't think could be feasible here anyway, but I still hope that common sense will prevail – well, in Brussels, I suppose, and that they will not let the harbour be used for something that is not reversible. Because I still think that there's plenty

fish in the sea, and I still think that fishing will return – not to the extent it did in the past, no, but enough to make for people to make a living out of. That is my hope.

*Well, thank you very much, Lil for all your insights!*

### **Christeen Macdonald Scourie**

Interview with Christeen Macdonald. Her father was a keeper on the Reay Forest Estate.

Interviewer: Cathy Wood

Interviewee: Christeen Macdonald

Location: Minch View, Scouriemore, Scourie

*Today is the 6<sup>th</sup> of December 2004 and we're speaking to Christeen MacDonald at her home, Minch View, Scouriemore.*

*Christeen, can you tell us about your family first?*

I was married to Harvey MacDonald and I have three children: Catherine-Ann, Alison and Neil.

*They're married in Scourie, aren't they?*

Neil is married in Scourie. He now has the croft because unfortunately his father died, and Catherine-Ann's in Kinlochbervie and Alison is a nurse in Aberdeen and she lives in Oldmeldrum.

*And where were you born, Christeen?*

I was born ... actually born in Inverness, as every baby in the north is, but my parents lived in Achriesgill when I was born, and then we moved to Badnabay on the Reay Forest Estate, and then we moved to Stack Lodge.

*Can you tell us your parents' names?*

Neil and Catherine Morrison.

*And where did you parents come from?*

They both came from Kinlochbervie – half the Morrisons and Macleods in Kinlochbervie are related to me!

*And what job did your father do?*

Dad was a keeper. He only had one job in his lifetime, from the time he was fourteen until he retired at sixty-five, was with the Duke of Westminster on the Reay Forest Estate.

*And what sort of things did he do?*

Well, he ghillied in the river in the summer-time, sorted paths, repaired paths in the winter-time and did stalking and whatnot.

*And did your mother work?*

Mother, after we went to Stack in 1951, Mother became cook/housekeeper at Stack Lodge.

*And what was your schooling?*

Varied. When ... away back in 1946 when I went to school first of all, I went to Achfary, and I went on the mailbus from Scourie with Alex Mackay, who was then the driver, and I sort of got picked up at half-past eight, and I didn't get home till the mails came back about five o'clock. Lairg was a long way away then, in 1946. The year of the big snow in 1947, I was – I don't think I was in school the whole winter! And then when Joyce, my second sister, the one

next to me, became five, there was side-school teachers, and we got a teacher for the two of us at Badnabay. And then Wilma became school age, and we still had a teacher. And when we moved to Stack in '51, we were ... went to school in Achfary, because there was over twenty children then in school in Achfary. And we went up and down on the forestry bus, because by that time the Duke had started the forestry, and there was a bus from Kinlochbervie, Scourie and Durness going to work in the forest every day. So they had the contract for taking us to school, so we travelled with the men on the bus every morning.

*So, you came down and sat on the mail box, I believe.*

We sat on the mail box at the end of the ... we'd to sit and wait for the buses, and whatever bus came along first, we got on. And then they put us home again at four o'clock, or half-past three, or whenever the school closed. And we had the school ... we were up at Loch More for a while, and then when the Duke built the hall in '53, it opened ... I was there a week before I came to school – before the summer holidays. It was open for the Coronation in 1953, the new hall in Achfary, and the school was in the hall. But before then, we were up in Loch More, in what was called the garage rooms, and Miss MacIntosh was our teacher.

*And did they have any special celebrations for the Coronation?*

Yes, the Coronation ... the Duke took all the people of the Estate that could go to London, down to London, to see the Coronation, and my mother and father were able to go, and an auntie came to stay with us, and I think we had a bonfire at the ... on the Friday night, when they came back from London, and we had a party in the hall. But it's a while ago; my memory's ...! (*Laughing*) My memory's a bit faded!

*So, you were saying, Christeen, that the ... which Duke was it who paid for them all to go out to the Coronation?*

The second Duke. Duchess Anne, that died last year's husband. He was Bendor, the second Duke of Westminster. And he ... there was the first Duke, was his grandfather. The second Duke was Bendor, who died in 1953 – he died on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July. I've always remembered the day he died. He died at Loch More. But rumour had it that when the train left Inverness with the Duke and his entourage, or whatever you call it, he ... the train was full of Westminsters, because he had everybody from up here that could go, from Kylestrome and Achfary, and people from Tain, because they had the Morangie Farm in Tain then, and when he travelled he travelled with a valet and butlers and cooks and ... people came from Chester up to Loch More for the summer. So he took everybody down, and they were ... they slept in the Davis Street offices. And they had ... which is the end of Davis Street and, was it ... it's on a corner, anyway. And they had balconies out of the windows of the offices – must have been French windows on the offices, because they went out the windows and sat, and they had a bird's eye view of the whole of the Coronation and the processions.

They had ... they must have gone off on a Monday, I think it was ... was the Coronation on a Tuesday or a Wednesday ... and they were home on the Thursday or the Friday. Dad went ... Dad always shaved with a cut-throat razor, and he thought he'd nothing to do but buy a new one in London, but he was a big Scotsman in a kilt, and they wouldn't sell him one, and he furious! Furious!

It was all at the expense of the Duke. He was quite a character. He was. I just, just remember him. In them days, when we were at Stack as children, when the Duke came we, of course, were supposed to go and play out of sight and not make a noise, and I remember one day we lit the fire and he'd perhaps go to fish for half-an-hour in the river then come in and go to bed, or something. I remember my mother lighting the fire and there was slabs, concrete slabs was in the front hall, and there was just coco-matting and a big mat at the door. I knew he was



coming, but Mam had sent me to see if the fire was okay. So as I was coming down this steps the door jammed, so I went and opened the door for him, and I turned and fled down the steps, and I can see him standing in the door – he was a big man, not unlike Nicholas Soames of the Tory ...Defence Minister.

Not as flabby fat as him, but tall, hefty, good-looking man. And I can remember him standing at the door, saying, “Don’t run, little girl, I won’t eat you!” And me running, fear of death, because the Duke might speak to me, you know! But it was in the days when they were more revered and more, you know, the men just stood all day waiting to go to the river, and if they didn’t go to the river they couldn’t do anything else because they were waiting for the Duke to come to go fishing.

*Was he considered to be a good landlord?*

Very good landlord, very good landlord, very good landlord.

*And looked after his people very well?*

And looked after ... aye, and I think the present Duke would be of the same calibre. Because he, the present Duke, is a son of a cousin of the first – the second Duke’s. The present Duke. Because the second Duke was married four times, and he only had family to his first wife. And he had two daughters, of which Lady Mary was one, and he’d a son that died with appendicitis when he was four, or something. And he married three times else, and no, he never had any more children. And when he married Duchess Anne, in 1947 I think it was, ’46 or ’47, he ...

Another thing about the Duke was, in 1947 my brother was born – Christie, at home in Badnabay – we were in Badnabay. And the Duke came down to see the baby, and was furious that the house had no hot water in it. We only had cold water in the house then. So, within a month, my mother and father had a bathroom. We had a toilet but we hadn’t got a bath, and within a ... he was absolutely furious when he discovered there was no bathroom in the house. That was 1947. And then we all ... then we got windmills for electricity.

We had ... so the noise of windmills, there’s nothing new. We used to ... we were in Stack, we had a windmill at Stack, and we had things like car batteries that charged up, and gave us lights. You wouldn’t get cooking, but you could get lights, and you got ... I think we had a radio. Because before then, it was the radios that had a wet battery and a dry battery. But nobody today will know what that was! I remember bursting a wet battery and getting very badly burnt with it. They were full of acid, and you had to send them away to get ... accumulators, were they called? You had to send them – they went to the garage in Lairg to get charged, and you had a dry battery and a wet battery, and there was terminals. And how it worked I don’t know, but ... now, I think there was ... the batteries were sitting on the window-sill, and I turned ... the radio was a huge big thing, you sort of turned it, when I was dusting, and we were always told, be careful with it, but it fell and broke. I remember getting ... my clothes was just – my skirt just fell off me, and saved, saved my – I had burns on my legs, but they’re gone now.

*So, you stayed at school in Achfary, then?*

I stayed in school in Achfary until I was twelve and then I came to Scourie, because Scourie was a secondary school then. And I was the eldest, and my father thought at twelve I was far too young to go away to school. So I came to school in Scourie and Hugh Macleod, who used to live in Arch Cottage, he came up and he picked up Barbara Falconer and there was a couple of children up Badnabay. Ian MacKenzie that lives in the village, he was in Badnabay then, ‘cause his parents were there. And he took us down to Scourie every day and took us back home at night. And Joyce, my other sister, went to ... came to Scourie as well, and Wilma – by the time Wilma was ... my other sister, who’s married in Kinlochbervie ... by the time she

was twelve Dad had got used to the idea of us fleeing the nest, so she ... her and my brother went to Golspie to school.

*What did you think about the school in Scourie, coming from Achfary? Were there many children there?*

There was probably – if I had the photograph – there's not so long since there's been a photograph on the back of the *Am Bratach*, of us all. There was twenty, or over thirty – thirty-five, I think, there was in school, altogether. And we had Mr MacLean and Miss Mackay and then MacLean retired and we got a Mr Macleod, and he had the big class. And there was a wee ... it was just, we went through the primary school to go to the big room, and it was nothing like today. There was just the three R's all the time, it was all your arithmetic and your sums and your geography and your ... One teacher did everything. We had no visiting teachers.

And the school in Scourie then was sep ... the boys did woodwork and we got cookery in the canteen, and Donald Mackay, who's better known as Skipper, his mother was the cookery teacher, and she came in one afternoon a week – that was our only visiting teacher – and the canteen wasn't attached to the school like what it is now. There was a wee path up and the toilets were away up the back – in part of the dyke, the toilet – and I'm sure the bit is still there. There's a sort of ... the dyke sort of goes out two feet and ... I don't know what you call that ... out two feet and round and in again, and there was a boys' toilet and a girls' toilet, but you got absolutely soaked if it was a stormy day. You went up the side. So you didn't go to the toilet very often if it was a wet day. And you had to go out to go into the canteen and up the steps.

I suppose, yes, there wasn't the expectations then that there is the day. You just went to school and you went home and you did your homework. And when we went home, before we got windmills in Stack, we used to have to ... my job was to fill all the paraffin lamps and put them in all the bedrooms in the lodge. All the Tilley lamps. So you went home and you just got on and helped our mother with her work. So we had a working childhood.

*And then you left school?*

I left school and I went for six months to Craibstone College in Aberdeen, and it was an agriculture ... we did poultry-keeping and dairy-keeping and milked cows and learnt how to kill hens and how to truss a hen and all the rest of it. There was no supermarkets then with those things, it was more 'in the raw'. Learned gardening and dairy work and housework and cookery. We did sort of thirteen weeks at everything – was it? Something like that. I was there for nine months. And then I left there.

Well, I came home and worked with my mother for the summer in the Lodge, 'cause at that time Stack Lodge was let to – fortnightly to guests. And it was let with a cook/housekeeper and a table-maid, so I became the table-maid and house-maid. And the big plan in my life then was to go and do a catering course in the 'Doe' school in Aberdeen, but I wasn't seventeen. So the Duchess decided that she'd give me a job for the winter as an in-between maid, down at Chester. So I left for Chester in the October I was sixteen, having only been to probably Inverness once in my life. And I got the big princely sum of two pound a week. After getting this big wage I never went to the 'Doe' school. I came back home and I ... the next year I just stayed with the Duchess and worked in Loch More, went to work in Loch More, and I was ... worked with her until I got married when I was twenty-two.

*And so, what was your job for the Duchess?*

To start with, I was what was called an in-between maid, and I sort of helped the cook and I helped the butler and I helped the house-maid and I was the skivvy, in other words. And

scrubbed the doorstep every morning at ... before seven in the morning, and cleaned the shoes and just did ... at everybody's beck and call. And you were supposed to get two half-days off a week, but if there was a dinner party every night, some days you didn't get your days off. If she went hunting and that, and you had to wait to ... in if they, if her girl who was housekeeper and the lady's maid then, if she was out, one of us had to be in, and ...

*So, it was long hours?*

Long hours, you sort of were up in the morning, scrubbing the doorsteps at seven and if there was a dinner party you were lucky if you were finished at eleven o'clock at night.

*And after that you became, actually, her personal maid?*

Yes. The other girl got married in '59, I think it was, and I got the job of being her lady's maid. So then I had to look after – wash, do all her washing, all her ironing, all her mending, buy all her clothes, and – well, not buy her clothes, you went out to – when you decided she needed new stockings, new tights, you went and bought them, and then she'd decide she might need ... and you bought all her make-up and that, you just went into the shops and, "Oh, Miss Morrison, what would you like today?" And you just signed your name at the bottom of the paper and they got paid.

You stamped all her letters and you just looked after – you did all her packing and just ... she'd a lot of skirts with pleats, so you had to stitch the pleats in every night and then take them out in the morning, and press the clothes and brush them. When she went away to London and that you had London clothes to get ready, and evening dresses and whatnot, and you put out her clothes – you laid out her clothes every night, as to what she – you thought she'd like to wear. And some days she'd change her clothes about four times as she went ... if she was up in the morning, she might just put on a skirt, and then she might go and get her hair done and she'd come back and she'd have ... be going somewhere in the afternoon so she might change into a frock, or she might be going out in the evening and she'd change into an evening dress, 'cause the Duchess got dressed for dinner every night.

*Even when she was on her own?*

Even when she was on her own, which might be rare, perhaps a Sunday night. You had to run her bath at half-past six and lay out her clothes, her clean clothes, and then you had to wash all the rest and get it ready for the next day. And then if she went hunting three or four days a week, by the time you cleaned the breeches, and they'd be ... you always knew she'd a good day hunting, because she came home covered in mud. And then you'd to brush ... scrape it off with a knife, the worst of it, and then leave it to dry, and then you'd to brush it and brush it and brush it till you got it clean. And the breeches were cream ones with leathers at the knees, and oh, they were murderous things to clean.

*So, you started off working for her up here, and then she took you everywhere with her?*

Yes. I – we used to travel over to Ireland most weekends, or during the week, 'cause she had a Jersey farm in Ireland. It was about eighteen miles north-west of Dublin, outside Maynooth, where the big Catholic college is, for the priests. And we'd go there for the weekends, and I used to travel with her there quite a lot. I'd been to London to her – with her. She went to South Africa, but she didn't take me 'cause I had to stay at home to look after the dogs. She was a bit disappointed, but when she came back it took me about a month to get her clothes clean! With all the red sand and dust that was in it. And ... but for that month we just spring-cleaned the house and had her niece here. And I looked after the dogs and took the dogs walks and that.

*So, how was the household organised in Achfary, then?*

Well, we were at Loch More then.

*What sort of size of staff was there?*

There was a cook and a kitchen-maid and about two or three in the house, and a butler and myself helping him at the table and looking after the Duchess's clothes, and every lady that came, they all got their clothes washed and baths run for them all. Away back in His Grace's time, he had a valet and the lady's maid did nothing but look after the Duchess, whereas by the time I came along the household was much smaller. It used to be that the housekeeper was always in charge of the girls. They were revered, and the butler or the head steward looked after all the rest of the household. You just ... there was a cellar and you just took up the ... we always kept a cellar-book. And you just stocked up the sideboard with drinks every day and these were the days when if the butler saw you taking a drink – I didn't drink; I must have been thirty before I started to drink – you weren't allowed a drink or anything.

*So, in the morning, it started off very early, obviously, because you were cleaning the steps before seven ...*

Yes, and then you had to black-lead the fires, the fires with big Adam grates with black-lead, and so you black-leaded the grate and put out the ashes every morning, and took in the coals and whatnot.

*And that would be all done before breakfast?*

Oh, that'd be all done before breakfast, yes, and then whoever was the Duchess's maid, well then, when you finished that, you went and you ... Her Grace, you gave her her glass of hot water and then you took up her breakfast trays. At Loch More, one of the things that used to sort of annoy us ... but probably 'annoy' is the wrong thing to say – you carried up breakfast trays to every lady. The men all came down for breakfast, but always the lady got breakfast in bed and then they got up and they got dressed and they went off to stalk. So we used to think they could come down for breakfast as they were fit to go stalking!

*She had a lot of guests?*

At Loch More, yes, yes. The same people came back year after year to fish or to stalk.

*Did any of them bring staff with them?*

No.

*So the staff that the Duchess had looked after everybody.*

*And the staff in the house, they got their – all their meals there too?*

Yes.

*So you didn't have to go home for your ...*

No, no, they got all their meals – got all their meals. The first time the Queen came to stay, I remember that very well. That was about '60 – 1962, I think it was. If the Queen stays, she's the first to leave the drawing-room to go and get dressed for dinner, and everyone's got to be back in the drawing-room before she's back, and dinner starts when dinner's supposed to start. So, dinner was eight o'clock, they were sitting at the table at eight, and we were cleared and tidied up by nine.

*Ah! She was quite disciplined, then.*

The Queen is very disciplined. Whereas, when the Duchess would be there on her own, you'd go and say dinner was served, and you might say that at eight o'clock, and you'd be lucky if

they're in by twenty past. I always thought the cook had a knack of keeping things hot, that I have never learnt. A great talent!

*Do you remember who the cook was?*

Yes, Florence Pickett. She ... oh, she's dead now. She worked there all her life and she was well in her seventies when she died.

*And did she travel as well?*

She travelled back-and-fore, yes. She started as a kitchen-maid in the Eaton Hall, which was the big Hall when the Duke was alive. And then when the Duchess was widowed, she moved to a smaller house and ... because, when I was in Chester the Eaton Hall was an officers cadet school.

The ... and then the Army left it, and ... because we used to have buses every twenty minutes into Chester. But most of the Hall – it was a huge place, and most of the Hall was given over to the Army probably during the war, and they only kept a wing of it, but then the Duchess moved out of that wing when she was widowed, to a lodge on the estate.

I was very honoured to be invited to the Duchess's funeral last year. And it was just like what ... I hadn't been back for forty years and it was just like putting the clock back. Everything was the same, but different, you know. Not ... well, yes, because when we drove into Eccleston I knew exactly where I was, and when we went up to the new Hall where the present Duke lives and that, there's bits of the old Hall still there, and I could remember what it was like. But I was ... felt quite honoured to be asked down last year.

*You must have been quite fond of the Duchess.*

I was, I was. It's ... it's a part of your life that, I suppose, if you don't ... it's all you did. And I have no qualms with working for somebody that's better-off than myself. As one old man used to say, you should never bite the hand that feeds you. And I was, yes, I was very fond of the Duchess, and I enjoyed my work. I saw things I probably would never have seen otherwise, and I wasn't talented to do anything else, and I ... so, it was the life ... I think, the work was very hard. You really didn't have, perhaps, a life of your own. I used to have boyfriends in Chester and lost umpteen of them because I was supposed to go to a dance with them and then instead of that I was off to Ireland. So, they didn't bother waiting till I came back. But, then, they weren't meant to wait for me, because I never met an Englishman to marry. So, I don't know if I would have liked my daughters to have done the same thing but then people have moved on. But I still think that is a good job, you know, in a sense.

There's a mutual respect. Another thing ... yes, the Duchess used to always come to see me every year and she actually left me a sum of money in her Will.

*So, she did have a continuing fondness for you? I suppose that in many ways it seems to other people very strange, the system here with the gentry, and ... but do you feel that the gentry actually like being up in the Highlands because they're treated as human beings, aren't they?*

Yes. I would say yes. I would ... think that they have a freedom that they don't get anywhere else. It's like all people that come up our way on holiday. They are amazed at the ... they can walk practically anywhere, more so if they don't have a dog, and the space. And I think while some people knock gentry and knock ... you'll always find some people that are ... either have inherited wealth, and if you really ... if the ones that really have inherited wealth, they know how to look ... they are custodians of the countryside. And I think they're always ... I still think they're ... we can't all be everything. We can't all have everything, and there's some that have it and some that don't. And if the ones that have it spread it about and employ ...

When the second Duke died, he was supposed to be paying nineteen-and-six in the pound of income tax. So, for every pound he had, if he was only left with sixpence ... I mean, they own a lot of London and that, but then it's just the way that things have been. And I don't – I'm not envious of them, because they mightn't have the contentment ... that you and I have.

*You said that you worked for the Duchess until you married, so you married who?*

I married Harvey MacDonald, who was born and brought up in Scourie, and he had worked on the Estate and he had worked on Public Works and he was working as a telephone operator when it was "Number, please", when ... away back in the '60s here. So we put in for a council house and we got married, but the week before we got married, we were told we weren't getting a council house. So, we were staying with my mother and father in Stack and I was going to work that summer with Mam in the Lodge anyway. And we were coming to a dance in Scourie – it was the first time the Wick Scottish Band had ever come to Scourie. So, we were coming down to this dance in Scourie when, as we were passing Altnasulaig, which is the houses just past Laxford on the Lairg road, Harvey said to me, "I hear the man's leaving there." I said, "Aye, how would you like to go and live there?" So, we went and pulled into a passing place – and we didn't go to the dance yet – and we sat and discussed the throes of him putting in for a job on the Estate. So, we turned round and he went back to see what my father thought. So, between the two of them they thought it was a good idea, so he phoned up on the Saturday morning to the Factor and we were in the job by Monday!

Actually, he got the job. He went up for an interview, which was just ... he said he probably would get the job. And he went up for the interview, and we were in the house – they did some alterations to the house for us and painted it – and we were there within three weeks. Well, I think Harvey – no, it must have been a month, because Harvey must have put in a month's notice to the telephones, to BT. And he was ... we were there till ... well, then I had Catherine-Ann and then I had two children born in Altnasulaig. To this day they keep saying to me, why did I do it, because they can't spell the place of their birth – Neil and Alison were both born there.

And we were there until we came to Scourie in '69, because my father-in-law had died and somebody was wanting the croft, and we decided that we might put up a house and we had to live in the croft, then, before we could have a house. So, there was a new Factor, and Harvey didn't ... in fact, him and the new Factor was having a difference of opinion, so we left, much to ... the Duchess wasn't very pleased, because she thought that when Mam and Dad retired, we'd have gone to Stack and Harvey would have become a keeper. But he ghillied, and he was forestry in the winter-time and ghillie in the summer-time on the loch and the river and hill.

So, we came to Scourie and lived in the old house, which had just cold water in it, and three children under five. And then we put our own house up after a year, and I started doing bed-and-breakfast. And Harvey got a job ... well, when he left the Estate he went to work on Public Works, 'cause the road was being widened into Scourie from Laxford, and then he got a job on the – for the council in 1971. He started on the council ... 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> of January, and we moved into our own house on Christmas Eve ... Christmas Eve '70. And I've done bed-and-breakfast ever since, and life's been very good to me. But Harvey, unfortunately, passed away ... Twelve years ago – thirteen years this January. He died suddenly of a heart attack, and it's just all ...

*But you had then the croft and the house to run with the bed-and-breakfast.*

Yes. I became the crofter and then Neil, my son, he had just got engaged before his father died and he was working – he's a mechanic to trade, and he was working, went to work in Ullapool for Urquhart's. So, after he was there, and they bought a house in Conon Bridge – Aileen's a teacher, his wife – and then he thought he'd come home and put up a house, so I put the croft

into his name and he's put up a house, and he had the garage in Kinlochbervie for a while – for five years; he took a lease on the garage there. But that ... was successful, he was too busy for one and not busy enough for two, and different things. He gave that up and then he went to work on the fish-farm, but now he's ... back being a mechanic, and he works for the Duke of Westminster, 'cause they've started a garage up, looking after their own vehicles and that, at Kylestrome. So he is now the fourth generation of my family to work for the Westminsters. My grandfather, my father, myself, Harvey, and now Neil. And Harvey's grandfather was coachman to the first Duke of Westminster – or his great-grandfather. So, it's history repeating itself. So, he goes now to work at Kylestrome.

*So, you do as well as your bed-and-breakfast, Christeen, a lot of voluntary work through the Church?*

Well, a little bit. I try ... the Church is the Church of Scotland that's here, and I'm actually the Treasurer of it, and I'm the Clerk to the Board, so I need – definitely need a dictionary. And if – I like to go and visit people that are not well, and just the usual things that does village life. Because if you don't ... if you don't put into village life, you get nothing out of it. And I go to visit people that's not well. And they all say when there's a funeral,

*Do you think the village is as ... has as much of a community spirit as it used to have?*

That's a very difficult question. Some ways I would say yes, and some ways I would say no, but then I'm now older, and I don't have children in school, and I'm not involved, really in much. I'm no longer on the Hall Committee, having done that for years, and you're not – you're more, when you're older you're more on the retired side of life. I go to the – I don't go the lunch clubs, but I go to the Christmas party and that, and I go to the crofters' thing.

The first year after my husband died – I kept the sheep for four or five years – I managed the lambing and Neil came home and did the gatherings and things I couldn't do. And then one night – one day he had to go back to Dingwall – they weren't terribly long married – and he went back after working all day. So, I sat here and I wondered would I sell – the idea came into my head that I should sell the sheep, because it was ... I didn't want him to be torn between looking after me and looking after his new wife. So, I phoned him up and said, "I think I'll sell the sheep." And he said, "Well, Mam, if you want to sell the sheep, you sell the sheep, and if I want them, I'll buy more." This was before he came to Scourie.

But what I'm trying to say – the first year I hadn't got the sheep, I was really, really lost. I thought I didn't belong to anything, because I'd no children in school; I was alone; I can live here and no hear anything that's happening in the village, because you haven't got a man coming in telling you what's happened in the world; you go down to the shop and you might be the only person in it nowadays. Years ago, when the bread and the milk and the papers came in on the mailbus, everybody went to the shop at three o'clock, and it ... you were, sort of, seeing people. So, now, if you don't make the effort to go and see somebody, you mightn't see them for weeks. That's one of the biggest changes here, I think. There's so many delivery things, and things come in at different times. I always go for my paper at two o'clock, because I never remember if it's in at ten o'clock in the morning or is it the day it's coming in at twelve o'clock. So, I always go nowadays at two o'clock. When everything came in on the postbus at three o'clock, everybody went to the shop about then and you saw everybody. But now you can go down the village and you'll no see anybody. And then we have ... the fish-farm has made a lot of employment and has brought some people to ... into the village, but if they don't come to church and they don't ... some of them don't shop in the village, they're not *in* the village, if that makes sense.

Your parents actually spoke Gaelic? But you don't?

No, but I learnt to understand it, because when ... in the days when we were children we were seen and not heard, and you can speak to a person or you speak at them, and ... or you speak round them. And we weren't encouraged to speak it, because in the days when my parents were in school, was when the ... when they ... they weren't allowed to speak Gaelic in the playground or anything, and everybody spoke Gaelic then. If my parents were alive they'd be in their nineties today, in their late nineties, in fact. So that, from that generation downwards, Gaelic was frowned on, and then you'll find very few people in their sixties speaking Gaelic, unless they come from a very Gaelic-speaking place. Kinlochbervie had a lot of Gaelic, but Scourie never had much Gaelic, but then my parents came from Kinlochbervie, but we didn't practise speaking it.

*What does Mackay Country mean to you, Christeen?*

I suppose it's the north ... I look at it as being the north area of the north of Scotland, where the Mackays were originally, on ... It's quite a ... it's a unique place, really. The north of Scotland is unique; there's nowhere else quite like it. If this project does anything, or ... it'll collect, perhaps, the history of the area and the history, perhaps, of peat-cutting and all that things that my grandchildren'll know nothing about 'cause now there's electricity and oil-fired central heating. And they think of quads – they don't know that a horse ... used to use horses in fields instead of tractors. It's ... the world has – even in my lifetime – our standard of living has changed immensely. When I think of what my granny's ... what it was like up here fifty, sixty years ago, to what it is now. We could be anywhere. So, if it saves something, that's probably worthwhile.

*And what are your hopes for this area – for your children and grandchildren's future, and your fears as well?*

What we'd all do to have a crystal ball. Hopes are that it doesn't change too much. Well, biggest hope is that it doesn't change too much, that everything just tootles on the same – I'm not really one for change. As long as there's employment; people like the Westminsters owning a good chunk of it, I really don't have much fears about it, as long as it stays the same and perhaps improves it in some way. And if people accept that it's the countryside, and put something into it and look after it. As the other man said, it's God's country. And ... just that we seem to have such a lot now that we didn't have.

*Yeah, we certainly do. Crofting has changed an awful lot since you started, Christeen, when people used to work more together. Do you feel that the way crofting is going nowadays is the right way?*

No, I don't think so, I think it was better when everybody went to the fank and you had a big day at the fank and you clipped and you dipped and you did everything all together.

Another thing, I think, the housing market here, where you get old houses where the father and mother has died and perhaps the son's away down working in England, or perhaps they're still here, some of them, that ... And they have sold the houses, and they have gone on the open market where some ... where our local people could never buy a house, because they're going for over a hundred thousand. That is my biggest worry, and that changes the place, the face of the place. It changes the heart. It takes the soul out of the village because they come in, they're ... sell a house down in the south and can buy, can put things away out of anybody else's range up here.

If you have a croft and you get a house up, like what Neil did, my son – I don't know what his house cost – we'll say seventy, eighty thousand – you still need to borrow a lot of money to do it and you pay it for a long time. But at least it's keeping young people in the place because, well, he came back and he's very fond of crofting, and he's fond of his sheep and all the rest



of it. And – but you need a job to subsidise the croft. What crofting was and what crofting is today is a vast difference. Away back, fifty, sixty years ago, probably they got a few lobsters and they put them to Billingsgate on a ... in hay, and if you worked with somebody that wasn't trustworthy they would say they were all dead when they reached ... So, I mean, it was a very, very hard living. But today's standard of living here is the same as everywhere else, and my biggest worry is that the bubble bursts.

And for the buyout of crofting townships, I can't ... while I can't see that – in some ways I can't see it working. I've always had the opinion that I'd had nothing against an Englishman owning a bit of Scotland, but I am much more reserved if we have a Dutchman or a Swiss man or a German owning bits of Scotland, because we are signing away our heritages. But owning a lot of land up here, you really need to have a lot of money behind you as well, not just have the purchase price. I think it's money to run it, and you've got to be a hands-on landlord. You've got to be seen in the place, you've got to work with the people to improve it, as custodians of it, because we're only here for a very short time and we don't leave it – we're taken away from it. And, I suppose, on a smaller scale it's like a crofter who works his croft, but he has to have a job so he has to bring money into the croft.

*Do you think this is a good place to grow old in?*

I hope so! I hope so. Yes, well, I sit and wonder what another ten or more years will do to me. I think I just hope and pray that the Lord will look after me in future as he did in the past. Because it's a very good place for children to be brought up the freedom they have, and the ... although you don't see so much children now playing outside, because they all have computers, which is ... whereas when my children were young you just ... they went outside and played outside all day. Even my grandchildren are in for their television programmes and their computers and all the rest of it.

Thank you very much, Christeen that was very kind of you.

### **Mary Mackay Aka Mairraig Melness & Freisgill**

Mary's husband took a shepherd's job in 1939 at Freisgill, so they lived there for 6 years. The interview covers their life there and afterwards.

Interviewer: Shona Munro  
Interviewee: Mary Mackay Aka Mairraig  
Date: 2/2/04  
Location: Midfield, Melness

*What reason did you have to go to Freisgill?*

Well, my husband had to go for a shepherd's job, so we went to Freisgill in 1939, just as the war broke out, that's when we went there. And I could tell you a lot about it, but I'll tell you how long I stayed there – I stayed there six years and Johnnie, my husband, did it for another two years, that's eight years altogether. So I thought we did very well. I had to leave for the bairns had to go to school, so I had to leave for that. I came down here. I had to leave it when Jessie was ... well, before she was born I had to leave it and come to Portvasgo and have her there, and I went back to Freisgill with her when she was only five weeks old. Walked all the way And Hughie, 'Fox', as we called him, the manager that was in Hope then, took her on his back in a haversack, big haversack, and her head was just coming out, just getting the fresh air, and she went all the way down to Freisgill. And it took us two whole hours to get into Freisgill.

*Where about is Freisgill?*

Well, it's, I don't know how many miles I would say it's from here, but crossing from here I went with Malcolm – your Father, as a boy, used to come with me for the night so that he would get to Freisgill for a – it was a holiday for them, to go to Freisgill even for a night. And I would bake and do things and then we would take him back between us, and it would take us two whole hours from here to go along to Achininver and then take the hills right across Achininver, took us two whole hours.

*That'd be hard going.*

It was hard going all right. And then they enjoyed themselves, and then the next week again or the following week I would have come down, or Robert Angus from Portvasgo, he used to go as well, but I wasn't taking two of them – one at a time, and they enjoyed it.

*So was the only means of access to Freisgill by foot?*

Well, oh, no, you could get cars were very few and far between then. We used to do it you could go up to Hope and then down to Inver, and there's a boat there, we'd a boat there, at Inver that would take you down all the way to Freisgill. It would take you, oh, yes, an hour-and-a-half, then if the weather wasn't very good, to go down from Inver. But it took us two hours from down across the hill opposite Laid, between the loch and the hill, and you had to cross two big burns, and that wasn't easy if there was a spate in the burn. You'd be wet anyway, whatever way you went.

*Were your children young when you moved there?*

I went with Alice, she was just two years when I went there, just two years of age, I could tell you a story about her too. I made a housie for her outside, you know, near the hen-house when we had a hen-house then ...but now she was getting tired of the housie and I was running in and out, doing bakings and back in to see how she was doing and I would call her in, but she wouldn't wait in, and I went out this time and Alice wasn't to be seen. That was my first scare. Looked all over and shouted on her and of course she was only a little over the two years and she had a red coatie on her – a red coat just something similar to what Dona has on her there, and I said I should see her anywhere about ... well, I was looking up the hill, you know, the sheep track, up, up, going up to the hill, I noticed this wee thing, like a red thing, this was her, Aye, aye. But by good luck I caught her before she ... of course, she wasn't walking very fast anyway. And I didn't know was it to half-kill her or was it to ... Anyway, we got her, and I had to watch her after that. But that was with Alice, at that time. But I enjoyed being in Freisgill, all the same, it was nice and the loch was beautiful down below, and we would see all the ships, boats and ships in the water, and it was very, very cheery, because new boats and all that was coming in.

*Did you find the remoteness lonely – did you find it lonely there?*

Not very much, do you know this, I was quite good like that. But the only time I was feeling lonely was when the snow, all the snow that came on us, we were six weeks we didn't see a post because the snow was that heavy and it lay down for long enough, and there's the post coming ... Anyway I did feel I wasn't seeing a post or getting mails by the post, that was the only ... there was no other way, but no phones and not ... no, nothing but that old gramophone. But anyway, I wasn't bad like that, lonely.

*Was your husband away for long length of time?*

Oh, yes, he was, he was terrible like that, he had to be out and he got everything sorted out before he would come in. Ach, yes, he would be hours and hours out, but he always came back.

*How did you get groceries in?*

Oh, well, the groceries had to be taken down by boat. You see, we had a boat there and we'd be taking it up as far as Inver and then walk from Inver up to Hope and meeting Burr's van there – we met Burr's van up at Hope on a ... I can't remember what day it was in the week, I think it was on a Wednesday. And we got all our groceries that way. And we had to do with that, but, of course when I went in there first of all, Burr gave me everything Gordon, poor Gordon, gave me everything I needed, for, say, to pay up as we went along. We only paid every three months or six months sometimes, but anyway, it was doing, and I could bake, I'd flour, oatmeal and everything – oatmeal, flour meal and everything, I could bake and we had butter, we got a pack of butter, you know, but one thing about the butter, it wouldn't keep too long. It would get rancid and that. But I had a cow, I got a cow from Aldie Macdonald, oh, my goodness, what a cow that was.

*So you would have fresh milk.*

Aye, and butter. I used to do the butter twice a day. You know, the cream that was on that milk, you could make a ... very near a pound of butter with one basin of cream, it was beautiful.

*How did you make the butter?*

Well, I was dealing with the butcher in Thurso, and there was a fellow 'Sinkie', the butcher – well, the driver, he was a butcher as well, we called him 'Sinkie', anyway, he brought me a wee glass churn. You could see the beautiful glass, just that would make two or three pounds of butter at a time, and a wheel on it and a handle on it, it was just a great thing to work. You could see when the butter was ready to ...and it was great, and I ... I remember when we had shepherds there at the marking and a lot of other things they were doing at Freisgill, I had to feed them twice a day, and there was about six of them anyway, if not more, there, I put a table out and I'm not bragging about it but I put a table out and there was one fellow, Nanna, there, a fellow called old Nanna, and he said, oh well, Marag, I don't know how you have butter on the table every time we come in – beautiful butter all marked out, you know, with the thing,

*So, did you get many visitors?*

Oh, well, no, not very often, but on an odd Saturday or Sunday was in Inver when we were in Freisgill the first while, and then Jessa Gow and Isie was in Hope, and Isie used to come walking down to Freisgill to see me, and they would make a ceilidh and have their tea and then walk back the same day, but that was ... there was no visitors except, like, the post on a ... just once a week we had the post. Hughie Munro, we called him.

*Oh, right. So, I'm going to ask you about the soldiers, you say.*

Oh, well, that was a time. That was ...but this morning Johnnie went off as usual, you know, about seven or eight o'clock, out to gather or to look for sheep, and of course I was up, but Jessie and Alice ... Jessie was only a baby then, and Alice was three years older than Jessie so they were sleeping in the room there and I was just moving about, getting things ready, when I heard this speaking ... I said to myself, speaking, there's nothing here to speak. And I went to the window and I saw this crowd coming up at the bottom of the park, at the bottom. And I said, is this Germans? Germans coming, you know, with the uniform on them. And of course I wouldn't know a German from a soldier with that things on them.

*No, you'd have got a right fright.*

And we had a fellow coming, Commander Ferguson, anyway, he was a Receiver of Wrecks, and he used to be in House, and he was a big, well-to-do fellow, but he used to come down very often instead of Hughie Munro because he was doing the shores anyway, coming down that way. And he used to come in and play with Alice, and he was always saying to me, now, Mary, if you will ... see anything that you don't like coming in, there might be a seaplane or

something coming in there, it might be the enemy, you never know, you have a small case ready with everything for you – for, well, for the wee one, and you can't take too much with you when you're walking, and when you see them just put Alice in front of yourself and go, off up that hill till you come round the hill and then make for Melness. Because they could be ... the enemy. And you know, he frightened me. Do you know, to Johnnie when he came home, oh, I don't want that man to be coming here, I said, it's making me nervous, the things he's saying to me.

Well, I'll give him a telling-off. No, don't say anything to him, but I don't like it, I was saying. But ach, I forgot all about that till we saw this crowd coming up. There'd be about, more than a dozen of them, soldiers, in it, and they were coming nearer and nearer and then came in on the last and I said, oh, my goodness, what am I going to do, I said, I thought, I'll just tell them, I'll just tell them you can do what you like with me as long as you leave the bairns till their father comes home, leave them, because they're young and ... and, this is what I was going to say to them because I didn't know but it was the Germans, what did I know. They came up and up and up to the house and this fellow came and he says, ah, I think we frightened you, did we? Oh, I said, you did frighten me, I said, who are you?

Oh, we're with ... we're British soldiers, we're just up round here because there's an aeroplane came down at Whiten Head and we're dismantling it just, we're all going up there to dismantle it and, I didn't know what all they said, but, oh, came off me. And oh, I said, that's fine, I said, oh, yes, I said, but what can I do for you? Well, we're just wondering if you could do the tea for us, get the tea up and make sandwiches for us. We have everything. No, I said, no, I'm sorry, I said, I can't, I've got two young bairns here and we have no water in, we have no water on, nothing in the house, I said, like that, we have to go over half a mile for water, with buckets.

But, I said, I could do it if there's any ... well, he said, we have a young boy here, he said, I'll leave him with you. Will that be all right? Oh, I said, yes, if he can get the water and I can easily boil the ... that big urns they had, you know. Anyway, och aye, that was a really ... but that was my scare, biggest scare. But I got used to them and they were two or three days dismantling that and taking it down to the boat and then they were taking it – their small boat out to the ship. But they were awfully nice. They lay outside in the – it was a summer's day and they lay all outside and had their tea out there and they had ... they'd everything with them, but I made the boy do the sandwiches, because that I was afraid that I would ... if anything went wrong, I was going to be blamed for it, but he went and put a quarter ... a quarter tea, that's the kind of tea we had in them days ...

You'd get it in quarters. He put the whole lot into the thing, and I was saying, well, you could add water, more water to it, but well, water wasn't easy to boil, when you hadn't got anything but the one fire. Oh, we had a job, but anyway, they were very nice and they were Alice got money from them and chocolates and ... then, the day they left us, they left all the stuff they had over, whatever, aye, but there was a few bits and pieces over, and they left that with me, and coal and kindlers and things, whatever, up at the house they left. So, that was that.

*So it turned out to be not so scary after all.*

Oh, be quiet, that was a scare, I'm telling you!

Well, yes, and that was my worst, and I ... Johnnie was off ... no, there's one other night that Johnnie went – he went to the clipping to Melness, and this – of course the mist came out very thick, and I was saying, how will he come home the night, with the mist and everything, but he never did come home, and I had the two of them upstairs ... well, I had my head out of the skylight, the skylight that's in it, and the dew, the mist, the dew was coming over my head and I sat on the bed – no, I stood on the bed and my head out of the skylight the whole night long.

I couldn't go to sleep, wondering if he did come and lost his way. But I was saying, well, the dog wouldn't leave him anyway. The dog won't leave his master, anyway, he'd be with him wherever he went.

And, but no, next day came, and I said, what am I going to do, I'll get my bag ready and I'll go off with the post, if he doesn't come I'm away with the post and take them home that way, because I'm not going to stay in Freisgill another night if he's ... and we know there's no way of getting to know whether he left or not, but he was going to come right enough, but Paul O'Brien that was in Melness Farm then, and he wouldn't allow him. Oh no, he said, Mary will go to bed with the bairns and she'll be sleeping with them and she'll be all right till morning, and you can go home then, but if you went home you might never reach ... you're not the first that got lost in the hills. So, he said, you'll stay here, and he was mad, that he didn't want to stay, but he had to. So, when he did – I was waiting for the post but he came round the hill before the post came, so I didn't know was it to row him or to what to him!

*About the cow?*

Oh aye, Aldie, well, an old cow of Aldie's was there, I don't know who had it, who was before us in Freisgill, and he never took the cow out of it, Aldie MacDonald. So the cow was lying in front of the house, an old, old, cow, and she was chewing her cud all night, and that helped me a lot, too, the cow being there. I felt I had something out there ... she was chewing her cud, lying in front of the house all night, and me gripping my ... but anyway, I can't tell you much more about the cow, because the cow went into a bog after that and two or three from Melness had to come up and take her out of the bog, and then buried her somewhere, I don't know where, that old cow. She was of no use anyway, but she was alive and, I mean as long as she was living you had a few odds and ends.

*Did you have a few ceilidhs in Freisgill?*

Yes, yes, Oh, one other night, I got a scare too, late, late, late at night a knock comes to the door. Knock to Freisgill was a thing that shouldn't be. And this was Hughie Fox. He got word from Paul that they would have to gather Freisgill in the morning and he knew fine he would have to come down to Freisgill to let Johnnie know that they were doing the gathering. And he was going to start from there as well then, when he came down, late, late at night he came down, and he had a big jar of syrup. You'd get syrup then, you know, for baking, you know, there was kind of ... I can't remember the name of the syrup that you'd get, it was lovely syrup. We used to use it for baking but ... and he was keeping the tin of syrup out to me in case ... because he knew fine I was going to give him a row for coming at that hour of night, but och! So, scare thinking it was something else, you know, a tramp could come round that way right enough, and make his way ... och, but anyway, we got over and I'm still here to tell all that stories.

*Still bright and breezy. And at my age! I'll be 95 in June, if I'm living. But ...*

Hens. We had over a dozen hens going there ourselves, and when we got there there was more than another dozen hens and a cockerel there. We had a cockerel as well going there, and Johnnie said, what on earth are we going to do with all this? And the man that was there was called ... and he was Alec MacLeod but they had a nickname for him – the Valet, they called him.

*Do you know why he was called that?*

I don't know why he was called that, the Valet, was he valeting for anybody or what, but he was a smart fellow, and he was from round about Lairg anyway. His wife was Mary, too, but he was Alec MacLeod and he used to come a lot if there was dances or anything on in Melness,

he used to come down to Achininver, leave his job and come down to Achininver and he would stay in – I don't know if it was in Donnie or where, but he used to stay in one of the houses there, and go to the dance or go to the concert. And he didn't care about his work. He didn't care about that, what was going to happen, but he got the sack over it. That was how we – Johnnie got the job after he put – and he was only a young man, with three or four of a family, but he must have got a few telling-off's before, I'm not saying any more.

He wouldn't take his hens out on no account, he said, I'm not taking them, keep them, do what you like with them, and do you know where he came to? An old house that was chalets. There was an old house there then, in my old days, and the house had a roof, a good roof on it. So that's where he came to with the bairns and his wife, because he had no house to go to. Somebody told him about this house in Midfield. So Johnnie went down this day and he said, come on, you'll have to come and take your hens. And he said, no, I'm not taking them. Well, if not, you'll have to have the cockerel, because our cockerel and your one and, do you know this, they'll be one of them killed, anyway. So Johnnie said, well, I'll do ... know what I'll do next week, if I can come down at the weekend, I'll kill the cockerel and I'll take it down here for you ... for your wife to cook for the bairns, because they need food. And he wouldn't take a thing for the hens, he wouldn't take a thing for the hens. So Johnnie said, I don't know, I can't ... I'll have to keep them. So we had hens there, Shona. Hens and eggs.

*You wouldn't go wrong with eggs.*

No, a lot of eggs was going up to Burr and we were getting a lot of things with eggs, and I was cooking with them and baking with them, I'm telling you we were all right ... Oh, we were all right off at Freisgill, with all the hens we had, and, do you know, they were lovely hens and, I mean, they were all laying,

*I'll leave it at that then, Mairraig.*

### **Sandra Munro Bettyhill**

Interview with Sandra Munro. Sandra grew up in the war years. Children had chores after school such as fetching the water from the well but everybody helped with the peats. Sandra went on to be a nurse.

Interviewer: Isobel MacPhail,  
Interviewee: Sandra Munro  
Date: 12/10/04  
Location: Home, Bettyhill

My father's family came originally from Armadale. I don't – I say originally but I don't know originally – the first date we have is 1745, but they may have come from other places in Sutherland, but being Mackay I guess it was Sutherland they came from and my mother's people came from Eilean nan Ron on one side ... and Loth and Gartymore in Helmsdale on the other side of her family, which were ... they were MacKenzies and Sutherlands. And we've been here a long time.

*You have a lot of stories of people in the past?*

Yes, there was a lot of stories. Maybe more general stories than family stories, if you know what I mean. There was always the ceilidhs – I think I was quite fortunate in the era I grew up in, but you only in retrospect know these things, you know ... because it was ... I was a child of the war years and the older people then, there was always the ceilidhs at night, people coming in and telling stories, and sometimes you were sent off to bed, but you could always creep back and they used to have those big tables with chenille tablecloths that reached the ground, so you crept in and you got under the tablecloth ... You weren't always supposed to hear the stories

that were being told, you know. It was quite good. But, they'd talk about fishing and even after the war there wasn't a lot of young men around, it was mostly the older people – the young men went off to the sea and off to the fishing, and ... as children you had to work hard, you know.

*Yes, what did you do?*

You had your chores to do, water from the well, helping with cleaning the lamps and taking in the peats and setting the peats up in the ... after they were cut in the springtime and the hay and all these things. And mostly it was quite good fun. You weren't always keen on doing it, you ... home from school and had to go to the well, which was, in our case, almost a quarter of a mile from the house, you know to fetch the water in, but it was just accepted, you had to do that. But you liked ... the peats was quite an event.

Going up to the peat, because people went in, families went together and neighbours went together so there was lots of children and people and you would have a picnic on the hill, which was quite an exciting thing to do. And I was looking back on it quite recently and I thought of something that was very strange, which I didn't think about at the time, because the women would take the picnic stuff and they would spread a beautiful tablecloth, maybe hand-embroidered or damask, if it was damask it was really quite precious, and this would be spread on the ground ...to put your picnic stuff on, and ...when I look back on that, why they did that I don't know. And another very exciting (*self-mockingly*) thing was tramping the blankets!

In the springtime, yeah. And they used to do that in Kirtomy in a community group as well. And they used to go down to the burn and you would have these big wooden tubs, and they would have big boiling pans for boiling the water, and you had the water out of the burn, for cold water, and the children got into the tubs and tramped the blankets, and that was great – big, soapy suds up to your bum, you know! Oh, that was great fun, and you were very annoyed if it happened without you, it was good. And meeting the small boats when they would come in, when the lobster boats would go out, and if you were very lucky you sometimes got out on them, and you had a wee trip out, and it would never happen today, it would be so unsafe to do such a thing, but we did lots of unsafe things! When you'd come home from school and you'd see the lobster boat coming in, and you just threw your bag over the dyke and you'd beat it down to the shore as fast as you could, because you'd get crabs, because they didn't keep the crabs in them days, they just tossed them aside when they came out of the creels, so you'd have a good feed of crabs and ...

*Do you have them for your tea, then?*

Oh, yes, uhuh, yeah. And you got a lot of fish, a lot of them went out with the, what did they call them, small lines I think, and there was always fish, and they'd salt it and they'd salt the herring and they'd salt the mutton and they'd salt the venison ...as well, there'd be big tubs of salt meat, so I don't know how we all managed to live so long after all that salt Yes, it was good, and rabbits, there was always men trapping or shooting rabbits. I love rabbit to this day. And you'd spend time ... coming up to Christmas they would kill lots of hens and you'd keep the old boilers and boil them for broth and the good hens would be sent away, they'd be sent to relatives in Glasgow, Edinburgh – I don't really know how they ever got there fresh, but they did, and there was egg-boxes, very, very strong cardboard egg-boxes, and you'd send those away. And they'd be all wrapped up and sealed with sealing-wax and sent down the road, and I just never ever found out or thought about it, of how these kept fresh. Because the post wouldn't have been so quick then as it is today. I remember my father telling me about sending hens in the post as well ... similar kind of wondering quite how it was done. Well, I don't know and I don't even know if there's anybody left to tell us how it was done now, you know!

*So, obviously between yourself and your mother's day there's been huge change, because you were talking about water and electricity ...*

Oh, yes, yeah. I remember saying to my mother, after I married and had a family, and I was visiting her one day and I said, oh, I have to go home, I've washing to do, and she says, oh, be quiet lassie, you never did a washing in your life! And when I thought about it, I hadn't, really. I do remember washing things with the old washing board, you'd rub, and ... och, you were only doing it for fun, sort of thing, but, I mean, my mother, as a young woman coming to Kirtomy and having myself, six years old; my sister, three years old; my brother, a baby; my granny and grandpa – they were both bedridden at the same time ... they weren't her parents, that was her in-laws, and my father away, at, at the end of the war, he wasn't demobbed until 1946, because he was in Rangoon, and how they did it I don't know, because, I mean, there was ... they were both incontinent, and there was ... and I have this ... I remember, that the washings ... the washings ... and mostly they were done outside on fires lit outside and these big zinc basins, you know. Wringing and rinsing all these things out and everything, and yet people still had time to sit and chat and visit and ceilidh and – you know. And nowadays we're going oh, I never saw so-and-so since a month or something because I haven't had the time, you know ...

*Yes, it is strange.*

It's like that now, I think probably with women going out to work and ... there's big changes. And then, children, as children coming home from school, if there was nobody in your own house, you just went to somebody else's house. And you got your tea or you got whatever and, nobody had to worry about that. Every house in the village was your house. Whereas today, in the village I was brought up in, not only do I not know half the people there, I haven't even clapped eyes on some of them – I haven't seen them at all, which is a bit sad. you do feel a bit ... quite sad because there's people that come from other parts and they come with their families, young families, and that's great, their kids are going to school so they come to things that are going on in the village and that, but there's an awful lot of people now that ... they're coming for a quiet life and they don't get involved in anything, and it does make it quite sad, really, to see this happening more and more, you know. You don't know who lives in this house, or even what their names are, you know. And I can't see ways of getting round it, which makes me feel sad, because if you have young people at least you can then integrate them into the community and ... they become part of it, and they grow up in it and that's fine. But with the present climate of houses being sold in the south for lots of money, people buying houses very quickly up here and young people needing homes, and there's nowhere, there's no longer the family home that's been passed on down through the generations, it's not in it now. And I guess we'll just have to put up with that sort of thing, but it is sad, really, this changing communities.

*It was Kirtomy that you were brought up in?*

I was. It was a good place to be brought up, you know.

*You mentioned your people were from Armadale*

Well, my grandmother's people, my paternal grandmother, her people came from Swordly. Now, I don't ... I haven't found out yet just exactly how they came to Kirtomy, but the Kirtomy home was hers, so obviously there was somebody. She was born in Kirtomy, but her people came from Swordly. And my grandfather – there was just my father – he was the youngest of the family, and his sister was twelve years older than him. There was a son in between who died of TB. And the family home in Armadale, which was called 'Colin's House' – Colin was my great-grandfather – was left to her. And the house that ... when my grandfather married,



he left Armadale and went to Kirtomy. He had actually been a policeman in Aberdeen ... which may have had something to do with ... his mother's side of the family came from Aberdeen – they were Scotts from that area. I don't know whether that's the case or not, but he was, for years, but then came back and was crofting and fishing in Kirtomy. And there was lots of ... even when I was young there was a lot of small boats in Kirtomy. And Kirtomy was quite fortunate in that during both wars they didn't lose a lot of young men. There was three in the last war, and they were all the same family – two brothers and a cousin, that were young men, but we grew up mostly with older people, older men, you know ... living in the villages then. And my father was, well, he was a whaler, he was whaling ... and then, he'd been in the Royal Navy, and then he was whaling in South Georgia for a number of years, and then he was in the war for six years and then he went back to the whaling and ... to make enough money to buy a fishing-boat ... and he became, in 1947 I think it was – he had his own fishing-boat then and he was ... until he retired in 1972, died in '73. And he was only sixty-five then.

*He must have had some stories of the whaling though?*

Yeah, he did, yeah, he had a lot of stories.

*An era that's very much gone, the whaling, really.*

Yes, yeah, it ... I had a cousin who went whaling, too, so he would have been about the last of the ones that went from Britain to whaling. He was with Salveson's.

*What did he tell you about it?*

I don't know, I'm not very good at remembering stories. I have a brother who's excellent at remembering stories, he's really, really good, but he's younger than me, but he's much better, and he went to sea with my father from the time he was fifteen until he joined the police force when he was nineteen, he went to sea with him, so he got a lot of stories, probably more than we did.

*With working with him as well, yes. And we were talking a minute ago about your mother's life with the parents-in-law and all the small children and all the washing, I mean, what can you tell me about what her daily life was like?*

Did she have a routine of certain things I mean, there was seasonal things but there was things that would have been ... I mean, the women in ... well, all through my growing-up years – the women did all the lifting of the peats, the, and there was two liftings – the first lifting, when you put them into smaller amounts, and then the next one, to bigger heaps, and the women did all that, even made the peat stacks, a lot of them, once the peats came home. The women did the potatoes – the planting, the lifting, the ... the men would maybe dig the pits and that when they'd come home from fishing and that, but women did a lot of work. I mean, that's, you know – when I talk about that now, I think, God, it sounds as if I was away in the Dark Ages, but it's not, it's not that long ago, really.

*It's not. It's only one generation.*

Yes, yeah. But there was always ... I mean, I remember ... I suppose we were left to our own devices quite a lot, as children, with things ... when you think how things are today, with children, because you'd go out, you're running on the hills, running wild on the hills, and you got hungry, you went home, you know? You went to somebody's home, and got something to eat, but people always knew ... there was certain things you didn't do, that you just were ... *knew* you'd be absolutely killed for if you ... like, you didn't go down to the rocks – you didn't go near to the sea rocks without an adult; you didn't go fishing in the sea – you'd go fishing in the burn with a rod, but not to the sea unless you had an adult with you. And these things you did keep to, but we did other things that we weren't supposed to do, like when the burn was in

spate you weren't supposed to go near the burn, but in Kirtomy there was ... where the ring fence came down, there was a bit crossed the burn, and we called it the water gate, and it was brilliant, because you got on to the water gate, and you walked across it and of course, when there was a spate in the burn it was moving all the time, and, I mean, this was just marvellous. You were so brave, and you were a commando, and you were ... everything! And, do when you look back on it you think one slip and you were away, and you were out to sea and you were seen no more, you know! But you did these things. And another ... the burn across the road in Kirtomy had a wonderful bridge. There was these iron girders below it, so you got hold of them by your fingertips and moved across just an inch at a time, and it was just such fun, you were just so brave.

*And was there quite a lot of kids about then?*

Yeah. Yes, there was. I mean, in my father's day there was ... phew, I don't know how many, they had huge amounts going to Kirtomy School, the Swordly kids came over and went to the school in Kirtomy. But there would have been ... Kirtomy Primary School closed the year after I started school. When did I start school ... 1945 would it have been? No, 1944 probably – I think it closed in '45 – and we had to come then to Bettyhill, but you got a car to come and it was ... oh, it would have been about ... I'm sure there was half-a-dozen, a dozen ... some of the children would have been away, at school in Dornoch, Golspie, Helmsdale, there was some even went to Helmsdale at that stage.

*So when they finished at Bettyhill they went to ...*

They went to ... some went to Thurso – my sister, Joan, she went to Thurso, to the Academy in Thurso. Most went to Golspie or Dornoch.

*Golspie was the Tech, was it?*

No, that was the High School.

*That was just for boys, though?*

The Tech was ... well, at first it was just for boys, for trades, and then in ... God, I'm no use with years, but the year Joan was sixteen, she was at school in Miller Academy in Thurso, but she went to the Tech. They were doing secretarial then for girls, and that was the ... Yes. It was an excellent, it really was, a very good ... good place to go for people that wanted apprenticeships.

Well, you were asking about what my mother did and how people coped and – well, there was five of us in the family altogether, I was the eldest – and there was a lot of people helping out, helping each other. And I can remember when things like measles and whooping-cough would go the rounds, and I remember my mother saying she had a whole year of illness, from the time that I would take the whooping-cough until it would go right through, the family, or measles, but there was always people, certain people in the village that came along to help, and they'd stay the night, and they would help people out. And my mother always went when somebody was having a baby. When there was a new baby going to be born, she always was the one that went and helped out with that, yeah.

*And were the babies would be born at home?*

They – we were all born at home, yeah, and all of mine and latter ones were all ... up until, well, almost until I had a family, actually, because I remember wanting my eldest child to be born at home, but ... and the doctor thought about it, but as it happened I had to go into hospital months beforehand, so it didn't happen, but, yeah, they were all born at home, and ... it's strange when you think about it because you knew. OK, right, that's it, you go next door. Oh

aye, the baby's coming, uhuh, so you went next door. And it just was part of life, and this was a new life coming, and then there was somebody would come and tell you you've got a new baby sister or baby brother – aye, oh great, that's fine, what're we going to do now, you know! (*Laughing*).

And it was the same with death, you know. It wasn't ... there was certain things that had to be observed when anybody died in the village. One was that the curtains got drawn and you didn't ... if you got out to play you did it very quietly, and on the day of the funeral you were – you had to go inside, you weren't allowed to be running about and ... but it's ... I don't know, I mean, now it seems to be things are a much bigger deal, and youngsters have to go and have this counselling, and I don't really understand it because I remember having a friend – she only came in the summertime. Her father was a ... I think he was a shepherd up at Drumbeg. And her aunt lived in Kirtomy, and she came for the holidays, and she was ages with me, and I can see her to this day, so clearly. She had blonde, curly, curly hair and her name was Marion, and she – I used to look forward to this so much, just having somebody new to play with. And then one day they told me Marion wouldn't be coming again because she had died, and she was about six at the time. And it was whooping-cough. And yes, you felt it was very sad, and it was ... but nobody, offered you ... that was it, you know. Well, she's not going to be coming to play again, and oh, it's awful, but it's life, if you know what I mean. And quite often we were taken to houses where somebody had died, an older person had died, and you were told about it and you were taken and you were, now, you'll just sit there quietly – but they would ask you if you wanted to go and see the remains, you know. And I was quite ... and I wouldn't call them ghoulish or something like that, but I was quite keen always to see somebody's remains, and I always thought death was quite nice.

Oh, oh, they're just sleeping, and they look kind of nice, you know. So you were part of it and it didn't seem to be such a big ... and they'd talk about things, like the stories of the drownings, men that had been drowned, that was ... one, in Kirtomy that very much stayed with us because it had been everybody we knew – every family had been hit by that particular drowning in, was it, 1910 I think it was – 1908 or 1910. And the men had gone to sea against the wishes of some of them, but they had decided that they were going to get – I think probably take creels in rather than put them out, because maybe the weather was going to turn, and one elderly man didn't go, and a young, fit man went in his place. His name was Johnny Pring – and Pring wasn't a by-name, it was his actual name, he was brought by an aunt in Kirtomy, he was just twenty-one, and the only single man.

And there was one of our neighbours, Mary, as they called her, her husband was drowned, and she was left with a young child, and they were related to my father, and there was another house where – there was three young widows left – each of them left with young children, and there was a woman who was the mother of two of those lads that were drowned, and you'd heard the story of how ... they actually watched the boat going down, I think which was the worst thing of the lot, because they could see them and the Kirtomy ... entrance to the Kirtomy harbour's a very bad one anyway, and they were trying to make for the entrance when she overturned, and for two hours after they lost sight of them they could see somebody still clinging to the hull of the boat, you know. So this was a story that was always talked about, and because you knew the people that were still alive, these women that had been widows and their families and ... you knew them so you were very much aware of that being something that was quite catastrophic in a small village, you know. And often wondered how people dealt with it, but they did, you know ... just got on with life.

*And did quite a lot of people go away to work, and come back?*

Oh yes, yeah. I mean, there was so few things you went ... women had so few things to go away to – it was domestic service, teaching, nursing, and that was almost about it, at the time. And most of them, the majority probably, went into domestic service, and some it was quite strange, because there was quite a few older women in the village who had been in domestic service in Edinburgh, mostly, and had worked maybe for professors or ... people of some standing. And they took on almost that mantle, honestly, it was quite strange, and they had very ... they spoke Gaelic, but they had very precise English accents, you know: “Well, I worked for so-and-so, so ...” And the mannerisms and afternoon tea set with the tablecloth and all the bits – everything was ... which was really nice, when you think about it. There was at least three of them in Kirtomy that had worked ... well, they would have been spinsters, you see, so they had worked all their lives for ... for people of some standing and ...

*Did you end up – what with people going away for seasonal work?*

Yeah, the fishermen, the men did, a lot of the men went – the herring fishing, that went off to the herring fishing, and that was quite good too in a way because when they came home they had a whole new life to talk about, sort of, and usually they first time they came home they'd all have gone to the pub, and you didn't often see drunk people in them days. Very seldom, and the times that you did it was so hilarious. Market day, when they would be taking the sheep, cattle, whatever, and they'd have a dram when they came home, and they were so funny. And at New Year, I mean, you might see somebody that you'd never see for a whole year touching drink, and they'd have a few drinks and they would have this side to them that you hadn't seen before. Maybe somebody very, very quiet going about the village, and here he was and he could sing those wonderful Gaelic songs ... it was funny.

So there was quite a few men went off, maybe more so after the war, there was men that had met women elsewhere and had had their families then away from the place, but the summertime was quite marvellous for us children, because everybody came home in the summertime – aunts and uncles and cousins from goodness knows where, and you'd be lying on mattresses on the landing and – there'd be that many people around and in the house, and it was great. But it must have been hard work!

Yeah, there was all sorts of things went on then, and you'd have wee ceilidhs here and there and ... but as the years go by I think more and more trying to remember things, and I can't, and there's nobody to tell me, of the stories that they'd be telling or even the songs. My father was a very good singer, he was an excellent singer, and he had a wealth of not just Gaelic songs but English songs that you never hear now.

And we were living in Inverness and I had said to my father one weekend when we were home, “Right, the next weekend I come up I'm going to bring a tape recorder, and you're going to do all those songs.” Never happened, because before that weekend came my father was dead, you know. So it never happened.

There was a lot of musical people around. Every village probably had ... Kirtomy had a distinction of its own, I believe that before the First World War every single house in Kirtomy had a piper. Everyone played the pipes. And at Hogmanay, on the stroke of midnight, each piper stepped outside his door and played the pipes. And there was a lot of musical – and apparently the Kirtomy people were quite renowned for their singing as well, they had a lot of good singers, I think because people did it all the time, you know what I mean, it was just natural to have ceilidhs and singing. My father used to sing – he was great with his hands, though he'd always been a seaman, all his days, he ... his great-grandfather had been a carpenter, and he had all the old tools – they're still there, actually – that he worked with, so he was ... his relaxation was to work with his hands, and he sang the whole time he did it. He

sang, and probably a lot of them did, you know. And the women used to sing in the hay-fields, too. And knitting. That was another thing that I remember quite clearly. Every house you went into. And it wasn't, see, like today, it's just probably a father and mother and children, but then there was a granny, and grandfather or maybe two grannies and grandfathers, or an old aunt or, there was always other people living in the house as well, of course, and they helped with the children too, the older people that so that would have relieved the pressure a bit, I suppose, as well. But there was always somebody sitting knitting, and they used to wear those belts, because they would do a lot of socks, socks and, the old fingerless gloves that they would make, knitting a lot of them, and they would stick the knitting needles, because they were double-ended, into the belt, and by could they go! it was just click click click click, so fast they would knit, and apparently a lot of them used to knit as they walked, if they were going down to the shore they knitted, and if they were going up the peat hill, walking up there they didn't go idle, they did their knitting as they went. My granny was great for knitting, but I've got to say I'm not ...

*You were saying about your mother, when there was a baby about to arrive, your mother went to the house. Was there doctors and midwives or was it just ...*

Oh, yeah, well there was the district nurse, who was a midwife as well, and that's another, sort of another story, the district nurse's story must be quite a fascinating one because you had one district nurse to cover a huge geographical area. Babies being born at home, people that had strokes and other illnesses didn't go to hospital, they were nursed at home, and very well, too, when all they needed was nursing care, really, you know. And I mean, even the district nurses that I remember, like Dorothy Mackay who was from Kirtomy and still lives in Kirtomy, and she was the district nurse in Kinlochbervie and she was in Melness and ... Watten, and then she did this area, and you could almost set the clock to them. And if they came in, like a new baby in the house, a mother – I think it was a fortnight then, was the lying-in period, which was long time – and the district nurse would take peats in or do a baking – “Righto, you need a scone, toot toot toot!” And there it was. And it was done, you know. But yeah, there was a district nurse, and the nurse would be there probably ... well, sometimes the nurse was there without the doctor being there, depending on where the doctor was, because they covered Halladale to Altnaharra in this area, one doctor, one nurse.

*That's a big area.*

Yeah, and with a lot more going on in the way of illness than there is today, because they just didn't go off to hospital.

*And you mentioned when there was a death in the village, I mean, was it the case that people didn't use undertakers the way they do now?*

No, there was no undertakers. The women, again, they dressed the remains. Usually two women, maybe a woman from ... of the family itself. I actually did that myself here, I dressed my mother's remains. She died on Christmas Day. In the house here, uhuh. We were having our dinner and the undertaker, luckily, he came, when I phoned he said, “I will be up,” and he could bring the coffin with him, but they didn't ... they don't do shrouds and things like that now. People kept shrouds in the houses in them days. They kept the linen – this was the ... there was a name for it which I've forgotten, but you might find somebody that'll be able to tell you of the linen that was kept for burial – that was kept specially for somebody that was going to die and, as I say, because there was so many older people in the homes in them days it was inevitable somebody was going to, and then that sheets were kept and a shroud in the house, always. And women dressed the remains,

*In the house?*

Yes.

The men carried the ... they used to do ... they had so many men, they walked in two rows, like single-file, if you know what I mean, and somebody walked in front who did the call for the changeover. Again, there was a Gaelic word they used which I don't remember – Malcolm would probably remember and they did a changeover, so that they were all ... because at one period, they walked from Kirtomy to Clachan here, for burials, they walked from Armadale to Clachan or Strathy, Armadale had the two, and they used to come in past the FBI – right in front of the FBI is a right of way to the cemetery, and apparently they wouldn't come across the bridge, because they had already crossed a bridge and there was some superstition about crossing water twice, I don't ... that this was the way they came across, so that ... and that bit still has to be left open, at the FBI there, because it's a right of way

*And did women go to the graveyard?*

No, no, not ever.

*It's a very recent thing, is it?*

Very recent. Well, my father died in '73, March of '73 and women were just beginning then, here anyway, there may have been other places round about where they were doing it, they were just beginning to go to the graveyard, but I remember my mother didn't want to. It wasn't done in her time so she didn't want to do it and my sisters went. I didn't, I stayed with her, but mostly the women stayed in the house and saw to the victuals for after the ... people came back.

*They went to the church, though, did they?*

They went to the ... they weren't ... there wasn't so many church services then. I don't know if there was any ... I don't remember any until not long before my father died.

*That's very interesting, that.*

And there are still those people ... I remember my father died in hospital, and he had lived for three weeks after having a stroke, so my mother had been in Wick all that time and most of the family, so it was decided that we couldn't go back to the house in Kirtomy, that he would be ... his remains would be taken to the church and the funeral would be from the church. And the number of people who were quite astounded that we would do that, oh, you should always be taken to your own home. Well, we knew it wouldn't have worried my father two hoots where he was taken to, but people were, you know ... Quite surprised.

*So, in the old days they would have had a service at the house ...*

they still have that here, they ... not everybody, and we didn't do it when my mother died, we didn't ... I don't actually care for it myself, this service the night before or a couple of nights before the burial, and my mother said they didn't do it in Tongue when she was young ... it was only when she moved to live down here that they did this, and it's a ... I don't myself see how people get any comfort from it, because it seems to be a great ordeal ...

I mean, we had a lot of people when my mother died and we kept her remains in the house here until the day of the funeral. A lot of people coming, and that was fine, it was quite good and it was almost even lightsome in a way, because you were talking about things that we did, and laughed and ... that was fine, and I didn't want to have a service here, I thought it was enough to have a church service, and ... but there are still a lot of people do it. And again, there's a name for oh, it's terrible isn't it, it's ... I know ... I know they say "the kisting", that's one word that they use, "kisting", which is just putting you in your coffin, really, isn't it?

*Why do you think that women have started going to the graveyard ...*

Oh, not only have they started going to the graveyard, they've now started taking cords and, being part of the, you know. I think it's just the whole change with the whole feminist thing, isn't it, really. And it's quite good, I think, yeah. I don't think that's a bad thing at all. But some people are still, "Oh, well, now, I don't think myself that that should be the way," but they can't give you a real reason why it shouldn't be, you know.

*You were mentioning about knitting – everybody knitting all the time, socks and so on. I was just thinking about clothes and where people got clothes ...*

Oh, right, J D Williams and Oxendales catalogues! They did, and J D Williams is still on the go, and that was a wonderful thing for us when we were children, because when the new book came in you got to cut out of the old book.

So you cut out, you had your family, you had your bedroom, your living-room and everything out of this ... furnishings you cut out, and kiddies, little babies, you cut it all out, and had a lovely time all winter doing this, playing with the old catalogue. And it was, it was ... there was ... this I can just vaguely remember – there was shoemakers in most villages, or in the bigger villages like Bettyhill and ... and there was tailors, so that you could get hand-made clothing and your shoes could always be fixed up by the shoemaker and ... And we used to get new shoes. Oh, that was a treat, so it was. But the shoes you got for wearing for going to school, they were a treat when you got them but then your father or some other mannie in the village got a hold of them and they knocked these segs into them, in the toes and the heels, and the only good thing that came out of that was that you got the sparks flying off the road as you walked along, you know!

Otherwise it was horrendous, having segs in your shoes, but it did mean they lasted you for another ... till you grew out of them, you know! And there was the Brora Mill – all the sheep, all the ... don't know where most of the fleeces went, but you always kept ... there was always two or three fleeces kept that was sent to Brora, to the mill in Brora, for making blankets. And I know for a fact that there are Brora blankets on the go to this day – they were as hard as ...!

I know there was one in Kirtomy, but knowing Magnus he probably got rid of it – that my mother had kept for putting below the sheet, above the mattress, between, sort of thing, but I wonder, it could still be there. I'll have a look, but there will be ... Brora wool didn't really make a nice blanket ...

And then shops in Thurso, like Fred Shearer's, had, oh, wonderful haberdashery counters, where it was just magic. You got everything, and there was the mannies that came round with the bicycles. There was one man they called Joe Galloway, and they used to sleep in the barns. There was always a barn that they knew to go to, and they would sleep there in the barns and they came round the houses, and they had massive baskets that they were carrying on this bicycles. There was a Joe Galloway and there was another man, was it Johnny Wrench? Wrench, anyway, but I'm not sure what his first name was. I remember Joe Galloway better. And they would have combs – of course women, the older women wore the combs in their hair, the hair up, and ribbons and lace and things for making things, pins and all sorts of bits and bobs that were just pure, pure magic.

And then there was a ... I think, I'm not sure if he was Indian or Pakistani, one of the first ones I remember coming round was Kushi Mohammed. Kushi lived in – I think it was near Watten – he lived in Caithness, anyway, and he was a huge man. He must have been about six foot two or more, and he came with a van, and he had marvellous, marvellous stuff. And he'd take cases of stuff into the house, and it would be strewn all over the place – knickers and petticoats and dresses – lovely things. And this was great, to get stuck into this. And then there was Ram – I

can't remember what Ram's other name was – Ram came with a bicycle, and he used to stay in Bettyhill for days on end, down at Naver, down at, you know Morris, Morris at Naver, Morris Mackay? Well, with his people, Ram stayed, and Ram had a bicycle and everybody around here knew Ram so well. He was such a funny man and he had less of a command of the English language than Kushi had, Kushi was a much more educated man, and of course he didn't know when he was swearing. And he came ... I remember one time he came to Kirtomy and he would open this case that he had, all strapped up on the bike, took the straps off and opened the case and my mother said, "I don't think I'm wanting anything today, Ram."

"You want something, surely? You want knickers?" And she – he held this knickers up and she said, "Och, I don't know if they would fit me."

"What! They'd fit you – you same arse as Ella – they fit Ella, they fit you!"

He was hilariously funny. I'm sure there's people that have great stories about Ram.

*Because all this shopping has changed so much.*

Oh, yes. Well, the butcher's van came, at one point, three times a week. And Lipton's, and the Co-op, they started after the war. Lipton's – there was a man in Armadale came during the war. I remember that in particular because it's not that long since he died, and he had come ... his folks had come from that derelict village now between Kirtomy and Armadale.

And he used to come with a van and there was certain things you all – like bread, and the women used to have – they weren't pillowcases but they were like big, white pillowcases – that's what the bread went into when you bought it. And you had a basket of eggs that you sold to the van, and then that was offset against your groceries that you – or messages, as we called them, that you got. But I remember him coming during the war because we used to see the searchlights from Orkney, you would see them at night criss-crossing, and I – I don't know why, but I know I was frightened of them. There was something about them that was quite scary, and I remember being at the van one night – he would stop usually in one particular place and the women from our side of the village all gathered there, you see – and this things – and he said – I started crying – "Oh, you'd better go below the van, that'll be the best place for you!"

And I'm trying to crawl under this van to get away from the searchlights! But after that it was Lipton's and the Co-op, both had vans, and then Mackay the butcher and Angus the butcher from Caithness, you know. And it was good, because they always had stories to tell of everything they heard, and it's quite strange, because even in today's climate with all this mobile phones and everything, things happen and you don't hear sometimes for weeks afterwards – you think, oh, I never heard that, you know – even somebody dying in Portskerra or somewhere, and it's over and done with before you hear about it, and yet in them days ... I suppose the postman, too, of course, was a great source of telling what was happening and going on.

They used to come – there was the Stewarts and the Williamsons and they weren't ... we weren't sort of made so fearful of them, they were quite admired. The Williamsons used to come for the pearl fishing, the freshwater pearl fishing. Very good-looking people, they were, and so were the Stewarts, and very clean, and the Stewarts would have beautifully-painted carts and everything. And then on the other side from Caithness we had the MacPhees. Now, they were a different breed in every way, they had ... they didn't speak Gaelic but they had a cant, you know ... but it wasn't the same as the cant that the other ... like the Stewarts had, they had different ... and they were very distinctive in their looks, very, very distinctive. And the Stewarts and the Williamsons never went round begging, not unless they had something in return, but the MacPhees did.



And they'd come and ... but you got to know them, and there was old Rachel, and she used to be bedecked in jewels. I'm sure they had a real Romany streak. I remember reading a book once by somebody called Rowena Farr, and she had done research into the MacPhees, and thought they came from ... they went right back to Egypt, to Egyptian times, and the name 'Veigh' and ... was attributed to them as well, the MacVeighs, and I only ... I read it when I was a child and I don't even know if it would be still in print, but it was very interesting. I think she lived with them for a while. And they were very humorous, they had a lot of humour in them, but they also had a scary bit about them, and we were always told never to go near their camps.

*The MacPhees, or all of them?*

The MacPhees. No, we weren't so bad with the Stewarts, we got quite friendly with some of the Stewarts and would play with the kids, but we weren't allowed to play with the MacPhees.

*That's interesting.*

We did, but we weren't allowed to! And they used to camp at Loch that lochie along the road there, on the opposite of the road from the loch there was where they made their camp in the summertime.

And they ... there was a lot of them very musical, too, and we used to go along to listen to the accordions and that, you know. And of course they knew when we went home, because you were stinking of the smoke of the fire that they would have! "Oh, you were with the tinks again!"

But, again, there's a sadness about that people going. you knew when they would come, and then one morning you came past and they were gone, and everything was gone with them as if they'd never been there, you know. But they – the MacPhees would come asking for peats and "Have you a lockie?" This was a word they used. "Have you a lockie a' tea, missus, or a lockie a' jam?"

And they had a funny, sing-song that was very peculiar to themselves, and you went to Thurso, or Wick, Halkirk, and you immediately spotted them, because they had this distinctive look-dark. Some of them were red, but most of them were very, very dark, with fairly heavy brows – women and men. And looked, and you would know, and their sing-song voice too, and very seldom now that you might just spot one and go "Oh, well, that's one of the 'Macphees'", they used to call them, you know. But they too seem to be fading away, somehow or other, you know. And it's quite sad.

And the Stewarts and the Williamsons, they ... They settled, kind of, and you don't see them now, it's ... But there was ... people did a lot ... this, Hamish Henderson did a lot of recording, do you remember that? That's right, yes. I don't remember it, no, I don't even remember even being around when it was done – I may have been away at the time.

*Yes. You said Joan went to Thurso ...*

Joan went to Thurso. Bettyhill had become a Junior Secondary just before that, and I didn't want to go away. I didn't see any point in it. I wanted to be a nurse, and you didn't need to go away for higher education, and there was a great argument about it all at home ... and, yes, I was going to stay at Bettyhill. And then when I was fifteen ... you got a Leaving Certificate if you stayed till you were sixteen, which I did, but I – again there was a big argument because I couldn't get into nursing until I was seventeen-and-a-half. I could do a year's probationary in Thurso, but that still left me with this year, you see, so it was a case of, "If you don't get something to do, you have to continue your education."

And there was no way I wanted to go away to school, so my mother decided I was going to go to Domestic Science college for that year, which I thought was going to be the most dreadful thing that anybody ... It was Craibstone, in ... it was 'Rural Domestic Economy'! Yes, that's what it was called. However, I discovered that there was one or two girls from Caithness, and a couple of girls that I'd gone to school with were going ... wanting to do the same thing. So we duly went off, every one of us, by train to Aberdeen, from Kinbrace, you know. We left Kinbrace station, Inverness, then Aberdeen, and it was wonderful. It was great. It was really, by today's standards, it would be quite strange, because come six o'clock at night you didn't get out. You could have one late pass a week if somebody came for you, to take you out, and that happened once or twice to us, we were quite lucky, we were taken to the King's Theatre and Hazledean Park and, things like that. But it was a fantastic year, which I loved very much and you learnt a lot. And it's almost, I would say, something that every girl should do regardless of what they're going to do in life, because you got everything. You got the whole housekeeping, cooking from scratch, dairy, bee-keeping, flower-arranging ... it was very intensive, but very good, yeah.

Dairy – the dairy you had to get up at five o'clock in the morning, and made cheese and butter and how to light a fire, even, I mean, that was one of the first things you did – you did so many weeks doing each thing for the first six months, and then the second six months you could specialise in something, you know. So it was excellent. And it was economics, too, I mean, you really were taught how to make good use of everything. And then I went – I did a year in Thurso as a probationer, which was tough going, but it was good, too, I mean, you worked hard, but then you didn't expect anything else. And then I went to Perth – Perth Royal Infirmary. And again, your first year, you were seventeen-and-a-half but you didn't get out at night, and you got one late pass a week and you had to tell the night superintendent when you came back, you know. "I'm back now, it's eleven o'clock, I'm in!" But it was good, too, yeah. I mean, I can't think of today's seventeen-and-a-half year-olds putting up with that!

And then I got married, yes. And I ... well, a year before I got married I was earning thirteen pounds something a month as a nurse, and Dounreay had started, and when I came home everybody was telling me about the good wages they were making at Dounreay, so I thought, right, I'll have a go at that, so I did. I worked in Dounreay for a year, got married, and then worked there another three years until Lorna was born. I worked ... for the first three years I was there I worked in the technology lab down by the big fast reactor, and I was the only girl with fourteen men.

*And what did you have to do there?*

I don't know, it was quite strange, because you had no end product. That was the only thing about it, that ... it was – the wages were great. I was very much, kind of, left to my own devices, and if I needed anything, I would just say to one of the men, well, I've got to go up and get some things for the Red Cross box or something, and go.

But you didn't know ... there was this rakes of counting machines and they were all counting up, and you had to take all this figures down, and write them all down and then you knew with everything – och, I can't even remember how it went now – worked out OK because at the end there was a figure and if it came out at this figure it was fine. If not, then you'd go back again and start – oh, it was all – but you didn't know where it was going, what it was doing, so I found that quite strange.

*Quite strange, yes, aye.*

Yeah. And then they got these Xerox printing machines, which were great, I loved that, that was fine, they did the printing with the Xerox. And then the year I got married I went – because

there was a lot of radioactive material in these counting machines, even, and they didn't want married women in case they got pregnant, to work on these, so I went to photography, and I worked in photography and I loved that, that was good.

*What did have to do with that?*

You were called a photo ... a photo ... what were we called – photo processor, and it was just, well, these machines that you ... and they had this particular machine – I can't remember what it was called – but you put the stuff into it. It was in something almost the size of a matchbox and it was a powdery substance and you had to put it in in a certain way to this machine, and then you flicked the machine back-and-fore and it printed out whatever was ... needed printed out, yeah, and then you could knock off a few thousand sheets or whatever you wanted of that.

And this other girl and I used to take turns at doing it. Sometimes you just had to do the cards for the pay, the pay cards, stamp them all out and do that, but this was a great girl, she was a terrible girl for laughing, she came from Wick. And the two of us were on this machine, you see, and it needed refilling, because the print would go dull, faint, if it wasn't refilled every so often. And she dropped it! Yeah, and the boss went ballistic! Apparently it cost thousands, this ... this, yeah, it cost a lot of money. So nobody wanted to touch it after that, it was terrible! But I can't say ... I liked the people I worked with in Dounreay, but I can't really say that I liked Dounreay, or working there, mainly because of this, that you didn't know what you were doing. I worked with a paper one day, just a foolscap sheet of paper, that had this ... and I had to run off this prints on it, and one of them was squint and I screwed it up, and I stuck it on the table and I didn't know where the waste-paper basket was, and I thought, och, I'll put it in ... and I stuck it in my pocket and this guy said, "Don't do that, in case you forget about that and you walk out and you're stopped at that ..." control out there," he said, "with that in your pocket you're in dead trouble."

And you had to sign, the secrets, Official Secrets Act and a policeman came from Edinburgh to interview you and go into your background and all this, so you didn't know what you were working with. And I didn't like that and I ... I prefer working with people anyway, you know. So it was ... but it was good money, at the time. But you had to give up when you became pregnant. You just didn't get back to work then, you had to leave.

*Yes. What do they do now, because you can't do that now, can you?*

Oh, you get to work as long as you like. When the baby's three days old, I think, you can go back to work if you want to! Looks like to me, anyway, yeah. I have my own feelings about that, I think it's ... some of the ills of the world are caused by women going to work too early. I think so. I think three ... at least three years old a child should be before ... Apart from the fact that the mother misses out such an awful lot with the child, I think the child misses out. But we didn't get the option, you just had to leave then, you know. I could have gone back years later, but I didn't fancy it anyway. A lot of people that were my age at that time that left with having families did go back to Dounreay. I don't think you would have got back, really – no, you wouldn't, you'd have to wait and re-apply all over again, you know. A job wasn't kept for you.

And there was ... when I started in Dounreay there was ... how many buses think it was four buses would leave Bettyhill every morning. And a shift bus, too, at least two shift buses, whatever shift the shift men were on, yeah.

*It must have been enormous.*

It was, it was enormous, yeah.

*It must have changed things in a big way to suddenly have that kind of opportunity.*

It must have changed. It certainly did hit the outlying places more, yeah. And the fact that at Dounreay apprenticeship they had a lot of youngsters – girls, boys – doing apprenticeships there, and you could leave school in Bettyhill, go straight into Dounreay – as a lot of them did – and come out with an apprenticeship that was renowned worldwide, you know. That was what hit the places hard, when that stopped.

*How long is it since that stopped, then?*

Oh, I couldn't say, really, I can't remember. But it's too long ago. They still have some, there's a trickle going even yet, mostly to Vulcan more than Dounreay itself, I don't know what's happening with the decommissioning; there probably is a lot more young people and they're doing courses at the college and there seems to be quite a few apprenticeships now, done at the college and through Dounreay, where they're doing it on a work-based thing. But nothing like what it was then.

*It must have been exciting to be able to get ... to know that there was all that work so close.*

Yes, yeah. Oh, yeah, it was totally different. I suppose, during the war there was quite a lot of people locally would have worked at Dounreay as an airstrip, there was quite a few then, but nothing like there was, I mean, it was a huge thing. Even the construction – I wasn't at home, I was in Perth while it was under construction, and you could see things when you were coming home, there was all those Nissen huts full of men working there, it was a huge thing, yeah.

*And do people that work there – because there's a positive but there's also the worry of just the whole nuclear thing – do people worry about that?*

I don't think so, no, I don't think – I think even today if you spoke to people that had worked there, there was no feeling that there was anything dangerous to be working with, it didn't ... It was experimental, but no, I think people were very, very glad of the jobs and the people that worked there all their lives and retired came out of it very, very well.

*It must have given a whole generation a great boost, really, to get that chance.*

Oh, yes, yeah. There was people that no longer *had* to leave, and go – you could stay if you wanted and even come back – people came back as well, people that had been trained in other places for things, and they'd come back, you know.

*Yeah, interesting. And then you went back to work, you went to the school.*

I went – well, we were living in Inverness. Malcolm was in the Merchant Navy – he did that, and then he went into construction work and he worked with R J MacLeod on roads to the west, mostly, and of course we had Lorna by then – she was a year old when he came out of the Merchant Navy – and then Foyers, which was a big Hydro scheme, was starting, so he was working there, so we lived in Inverness. And I went back to work; I went to work in the Royal Infirmary in Inverness, so I was ... 1970 ... so I was there until I was expecting Shona, and Malcolm had moved – Foyers was finished by then, so he had moved up to Flotta. So we – because we'd always had this house, you see, so we decided we'd come back home then, because it was just as easy for him coming home here, he would fly in to Wick and I used to pick him up there; fly into Dalcross and pick him up there, you know. So we came back then in 1975 that we came back, yeah.

And I don't ... I love living here. I still like the way of life. I still like the fact that most of our young people can be to the whole community, young and old, you know what I mean? There's no division of generations. You can go out, like, we were at a wedding there in the hall on Saturday night and there was people in their eighties right down to kiddies running around, and everybody could mix together, and I'm very gratified that all the young people that were there

– and we talked about it that night – some of them had come home from Glasgow, wherever, for the wedding, and all said how they always loved to come home because they knew everybody, and everybody could get together and you didn't feel that you were set apart because you were a teenager or an old-age pensioner, everybody's just together. So that does still exist, really. Sometimes you do feel a bit that, oh, we're losing it, but no, it's still there.

*And it's precious, isn't it?*

Very. Very, very precious, and I only realised it by talking to the younger people. I have to say that most of them ...are of the indigenous population, and you do get maybe ones that are ... take a bit longer to get round to knowing us. But we have our Feis movement. I found it very, very peculiar. But a lot of people don't think it's peculiar because they've never known anything else. Well, that's it. And I sometimes thought we might be losing it because our homes are now not, it's a mother and father are the oldest people in it; there's not another generation that's kind of bringing you up as well, you know. But no, I was really ... on Saturday night in particular, I mean, all ... most of that kids that came home or have been or are going to university and have seen life on another level, and yet they're still ... this is the best, you know.

*Anyway, I need to ask you about, we were talking about young people, but also growing old. Is it a good place to grow old as well?*

Good and bad things. It always has been, and it's still very good. As a matter of fact, at this present time I think it is probably the best in our country, and I mean the country almost as a whole, because I did quite a lot of fieldwork with the – going to other places, like, during the Dúthchas thing, even going to Norway and coming back, going there thinking, oh, they've got such a great country and everything's so good, and no it's not. they've got their ups and downs and they've got things – and one of the things that they haven't got – maybe now they have, because that was five years ago – not the care plans that we have for our elderly in this country, or anything like it. And I think this part of the country probably has the best.

And there's a down side to that that I've heard recently. Quite a few professional people that have come to live here have said quite openly, it's a great place, for the elderly, and we must get a place for Mother, or, so that they can be looked after. And it's going to be really difficult down the line because we still are an ageing population, and you're not going to get young people into the types of jobs that'll look after the elderly if you can't – I did that, after I ... my family got older and were in school. I worked for four years for the Tourist Board, which was quite good and then I started doing home help work. Sort of fell into it, by mistake – somebody asked me to fill in for them and that was it, you know. And I liked doing that work very, very much, and it was quite hard going. It wasn't a structured job in those days, somebody would just phone up and say, I've got to go to Thurso tomorrow, I wonder can you cover so-and-so for me. Right, yeah, I'll do it. The pay wasn't that great, and over the years that changed, and it became more or less a job, but it's a difficult job, especially for young people if they have no other source of income, because you can only have a couple of hours in the morning, because everybody wants to be up, sort of eight o'clock till ten, if they've got fires, if they need breakfast, bed – whatever they need doing is done within that period, and you might then get an hour at night for putting a couple of people back to bed, but then it's the same thing – it's only that certain period that's needed.

So you're not going to have a job that's going to give you a good weekly wage, although the hourly rate is a lot better, and quite a good hourly rate for the job, really. So, unless there's some way round getting people more hours ... because you have to have a great number of home helps, but each one of them are only doing three, maybe four hours at the most, in a day, you know. And if there's going to be more people needing home care, which is an excellent

thing, I'm all for the home care, really, but is there going to be young people to do it? It's ... and the powers that be tell us that things like Alzheimer's are going to be more prevalent and who's going to care for these people, you know?

But it is, and there's a lot of things ... a lot of old people and they're so fit and well that it's almost incredible sometimes, you think, oh, what! She's off to the bingo, she's fifty-seven, er, eighty-seven, eighty-nine! Yes, and they go to the pub and they have a drammie and they, and it's good, but ...

*And what about people with, I don't know, mobility difficulties, health difficulties, access – because people always talk about rural areas as can be difficult for that. Any thoughts on that?*

Yes, I'm sure there's areas and again we're quite well off in this area. We have a bus – The North Coast Association – from Help The Aged, and it has wheelchair access, and there's always somebody, a carer can go along. Both our care centres, Cala Sona and Sinclair Court have buses with wheelchair access. There's some people going daily, apart from the weekends, from here to Melvich for Lunch Clubs; we have a Lunch Club in the hall here; there's no problem for people with wheelchairs; the toilets have been done up – there's a lot been done, recently. And we've even had young disabled who have gone through the school system, the normal school system, and really had a lot of help to help them get to where they want to be, you know.

*Yes, aye. So, it's interesting because you were saying – say, like, when you were a child, or ... and when your mother was a young woman, you had everyone in one house taking care of people and next door, but it strikes me that it's still a very caring place, but the caring's done in a different way, maybe.*

Yes, I think so, yeah. And I think, and maybe rightly so, I think people do maybe not so much *want* to be paid for what they do as *need* to be, paid for it because there's not the same ... well, people are looking for more and we eat different foods to what we did, that costs more, a lot more, and everything is different. And people do need to be paid for what they do, but you won't ... you certainly won't get anything done. I mean, I've heard people like my own husband and people of his age group say things like, och, well, I had to do it myself because you can't get anybody to do anything nowadays, and it's almost what they mean is, you can't get anybody to do anything for nothing!

*Does that make him grumpy, then?*

Yeah, aye, it does, kind of, because then he goes on about, when I was a boy, when I was thirteen years old I'd cut a whole, God knows how many yards of peats in a morning, and you didn't expect to get anything from it but your meal, you got a good feed, that was enough to go on and, you know. There's always a wee mither that we can have about how things were and how they are, but ... I think just everything has to change, really, doesn't it?

*We were talking about working life and your nursing and Dounreay and all that, and how things have changed, there's not ... Do people feel there's not the same opportunities here as there was or do you think there are other or new opportunities?*

Oh, there are other and new opportunities, and I feel quite envious at times of the opportunities that there is for the young, especially in our own culture and, with language and the music in particular, but we've been very fortunate that we've been able to take up and do something about that.

There was a while when Bettyhill had its own pipe band and there was an upsurge in the music and we had a group of youngsters which ... they were extremely talented, and it just happened at the same time that the parents of these children were interested, in these things like music

and dancing and song, so we did for quite a few years have a lot to do with that, and we didn't ... at the time we didn't expect anything different, if you know what I mean. This was it, this was ... we were still here, we still had Gaelic and Highland dancing and music playing of all the traditional instruments and that, so you expected your children to ... And it took us, actually, a few years to realise that all of a sudden it was gone. That group of parents and children had moved on to other things, and oh, you'd have a concert and you'd think, well, who are we going to get? Who's going to do this and who's going to do that? Whereas before you could say, you even had to keep a kind of a rota for the children, because well, we'll have two of you dancing tonight, but the next do that's on, wherever, we'll have the next two dancing. We were so well off, if you like, and there must have been about ten years there that we were hard pushed and going into Caithness, if you wanted a Highland dancer, you had to go to Caithness to get them. If you wanted a fiddle player, you had to go to Caithness or Ross-shire or something!

We can't understand why it took us so long to ... and we talked, the few mothers that were left talked, about this and God, this is happening, and oh, aye, we'll have to do something about it. And it was almost like a prayer from heaven, because during the Dùthchas initiative thing there was £5,000 put on the table for the cultural group, which I was a member of, and there was quite a lot of us, there was about ten on that group, and that very night of the meeting we decided, tonight we decide what this money's going to go on. And Janette Mackay and myself we'd really like to put this towards music and the language and ... and there was no ... everybody went, yes, yes, that's it, right, we'll start our Feis movement, go for it! Made up the plan that very night and everything, you know. So that gave us a fantastic start, and we became almost victims of our own success!

The very first one we had was just, oh, we had about fifty children, you know We're still a little bit, er, we're very lucky, but again a little bit popped because we have to go to Caithness for all our tutors, but we have the best of tutors, we have wonderful tutors. And now we have – naturally, a lot of children dropped off, but we have a good core now, and we've got anything between, mostly twenty-five maybe up to thirty, thirty-five sometimes, children taking up instruments and some of them becoming extremely good at them, you know.

*That's fantastic.*

We've a year or two yet before we'll be airing them on the open market, (*laughing*) sort of thing, we've had a couple of concerts with the kids and they've been brilliant, yeah. And the children are so keen. Not just, I mean, this is another thing that's good because it's bringing in, dare I call them, outsiders, if you – you know.

Children that have not had that culture, but their parents are keen for them to do it and it's bringing them in and it's just lovely, it really is. I really feel so excited, always, about it, and it's hard work and we have to give them tea and Hob-Nobs and all that kind of things, but it's fun, too, you can make it such fun to have something like that, and it also, because we're affiliated to Feis that takes us out into the world. We're Feis Air An Oir, which is 'on the edge', and sometimes you feel very on the edge. You look at things they're doing in Wester Ross and East Sutherland, where they have the big Feis Chataibh, and they've been going for years and years, so you feel a wee bit like you're struggling because you're not getting all this out into the wider world with the kids you have, you know.

But two years ago, was it, we joined a Feis ceilidh in Dingwall, they were having a concert, so we took a group of our children and we had a lot of boys, and at that point they weren't proficient enough with musical instruments, but they all had great voices, so we took them as a choir down to Dingwall. And they were very, very nervous – these kids hadn't done anything

like this before and didn't know what was going to happen. We'd to spend all day there, because the Feis workers were going to be putting them through their paces, all the kids, for this, and the poor wee souls, when we walked away from them, looked quite forlorn, you know. But by the time we came back they didn't want to know us, And they were absolutely fantastic, and they saw what other children were doing – what they could aspire to, and could do, so ... So that's good, so ... but we need a bit more of that mixture, of going ... getting out, which of course means money again, but we need to get out there and show them that they can be as good as the best out there, you know.

*And you had to get instruments as well, didn't you?*

Yeah, we had to get instruments. We were quite well off for funding, for getting funding from different things, and Dounreay, they gave us funding for instruments, to buy instruments, so we're building up quite a good bank, because ... and we've also now got children that are ... have been long enough there that the parents can say, yes, they're keen, they'll buy their own fiddle, or their own accordion, which is part of the ... what it's all about, that children can try out two or three different instruments and parents don't have to buy a set of bagpipes and then find they don't need them, you know – that they can try all these things out. So we're not complete yet with our bank but we're getting there. We have a problem at the moment about space – where to put everything – that we'll have to work on.

*And you mentioned Gaelic – do you want to talk about Gaelic and the situation with Gaelic?*

I feel a bit guilty always speaking about Gaelic because, having been brought up in a Gaelic-speaking home and would still speak Gaelic to some people but not to everybody because ... You have more than you let on, I know this anyway!

I have quite a good lot of Gaelic. I do – I can read it fairly well, but just having done that on my own. But, I mean, my grandparents were all Gaelic speakers, my father and mother were Gaelic speakers, although both of them had a different attitude to Gaelic. My mother went to school in Tongue and could vividly remember the dreadful punishment that was meted out to children that were found speaking Gaelic in the playground. She had no English when she went to school. She went with a broken hip to Edinburgh Royal Infirmary when she was four years old – she was taken down there and she had no English at all, and went to school and this ... it was literally beaten out of them. Which made my mother very introverted, if you like, about speaking Gaelic. She would do it to my father or people round about, but if a Gaelic ... anybody that she perceived to be a Gaelic scholar or, would really speak proper Gaelic, she wouldn't do it at all.

And my father had the attitude, was, there's no way they're going to make me lose my Gaelic language, and he would – his first greeting to everybody was in Gaelic. If you were a Chinaman, he'd greet you in Gaelic that was his attitude to it. And I remember him saying to my husband once, not long after we got married, somebody – my father was a Freemason of kind, he didn't go to many meetings as far as I can remember, but he was in the Freemasons, and somebody had been persuading Malcolm to go into the Freemasons. And he said to my father, ach, I don't know, I don't know if I should or not, and my father said, boy, he said, you have something in your head there and in your tongue, he says, that you don't need to go and do anything. You've a good Gaelic tongue in your head and it'll take you anywhere! And it's true, because both of them had said, my father was in the Navy, he was all over the world, you always met somebody that could speak Gaelic. And even the fact that you said to somebody, I can speak Gaelic, opened doors for you, and got you to places. But, ach, it was so strange because even people younger than me – my next-door neighbour, he was brought up beside me in Kirtomy and that family spoke Gaelic all the time. I mean, the grandfather never spoke English. My grandfather



never spoke English to us, never. And yet I know that I remember a lot more than ... Hamish reckons he remembers nothing, you know! "Oh, I don't remember anything!"

And I'll say something to him and then, "Oh yes, aye, I do!" But then maybe I've gone to MOD s and things so I've maybe kept it up a bit more, but I still feel guilty that I didn't do it with my own children. I didn't, and neither did Malcolm. I don't know why – it's almost like a blockage in your brain, really, to speak to your children in Gaelic – I don't know what it is. Because when I left, in Kirtomy they spoke Gaelic. In Bettyhill they didn't. Today they would have said it's not cool, to do that. So when you came to school in Bettyhill, oh, there was something funny about you because you spoke Gaelic. So, when you went home, they still spoke to you in Gaelic, you met the mannies and the wifies on the road and you answered them in English, and that became the norm – answering in English.

*Yes, that's interesting.*

And it's strange. I can't ... some people would say, oh, was it because there was such a surge of incomers to – but no, that wasn't the case, it was something within ourselves that ...

*Like you said, was it this thing of it not being cool, as you would put in teenage-speak today?*

Probably, yes it was something like that, and it took me years to realise that it was so foolish to be like that, and yet I couldn't – oh, I want – both my younger children, they both took Gaelic at school and liked it, and loved it, and then we had this thing of course because it was north coast Gaelic it wasn't right. If it wasn't Lewis Gaelic it wasn't right and the Lewis ones think the Uist Gaelic's not right, it's interesting. Well, it's not, it's sad. I mean, we certainly have a lot different words but it's no different than somebody in Peterhead speaking to somebody in Ayrshire, you know.

*Exactly. Exactly.*

But it's just so difficult to get your head round it when you've thought that way for years, you know. But, no, I think there's quite a good upsurge in it now, and schools are paying a bit more attention. It won't die. It'll be a different Gaelic here, it'll not be the Gaelic of my childhood that's already been talked here. There's things I might say to some of these kids that are learning Gaelic that they wouldn't know what the words meant, that we have lost, probably.

*The local Gaelic.*

Even between Melness and Kirtomy there was a difference. And Durness. And they would laugh at the way people pronounced certain things in Durness and, there was always that. But it's not going to be in it anymore and that, but as long as it's in it at all

*You were mentioning your work with Feis Air an Oir. Have you other voluntary commitments?*

Ooh, yes!

*Yes, I know that, that's why I'm asking! About a million!*

Well, I can't remember sometimes!

I can't remember inasmuch as I landed at the wrong meeting one night, and couldn't think what on earth ... it took me ages to think, oh, this is not the right meeting I'm at! That one must be next week!

I've cut a few out. Well, I'm the Chair of Feis Air an Oir, and I'm the Chair now of the Pipe Band, although the Pipe Band's in a bit of a void at the moment, but we're hoping for it to come up from the ashes again, and I'm the Secretary of the local Lifeboat, and ... what else ... oh, the Community Council, yeah, and then we have a project going on which has come to a bit of a stop at the moment, but we hope to resurrect shortly. Well, we called it the Bettyhill ...

what was it ... Bettyhill Action Group, but as that came out at BAG ... we decided to change it and I can't remember what it's called now!

But we're in the process of buying an old building and have plans for it, which ... I'll probably be on a Zimmer by the time it all takes place, but it will take place, yes and I'm a director on the new Council for Voluntary Action Group. Yes. I'm retired now, though, so everybody thinks I've plenty time to do things, you know.

*I was meaning to ask you about place names.*

Well, we spent years believing the story that it was called Bettyhill after Duchess Elizabeth. Couldn't quite think why anybody would call her Betty, you know! But I think the story of it being something to do with an old woman ... I don't know when it became Bettyhill, but it was 'the grey bog'.

*So nobody knows ... when it became Bettyhill?*

Not really, no, no. People will tell you it was something to do with an old woman that lived on that hill where the hotel is, but I don't know why, I mean, obviously if they were calling it after an old woman there must have been a good reason, but there's a lot of places around here, and I would love to know the reason they're called ... Over where the ... on Naver Sands, at the mouth of the river, there's the old hut circles there, but at one point that was called 'Margaret's Village'. But what connection it had, or who Margaret was, nobody seems to know, and then there's of course Jim Johnston's place names are excellent, he did an excellent ... But there again, there was things people could argue about, but there's names that we used, say, in Kirtomy, for particular ... we used every day, you know. You were going ... if you were walking, which people did, you walked to church, you walked over for the shop, you walked for the mails on a Saturday – if not, you didn't get them till Monday afternoon – things like that. So you would go ... there was this head – well, it's ... they reckon it was a headland, it's now just a part of the road, which would be 'the headland in the middle'. I don't know why, because it's not really a headland, if you know what I mean, but now, if I said to somebody living in Kirtomy today, oh, coming round where? You know!

They go – I said to somebody recently, oh, we were going up the Brae. Where's that? You know. Now that's just the brae rising from the mill at Swordly that goes up ... because there's a waterfall over in the ...

*A wee waterfall.*

And people don't know any more, they're not calling them these names, you know. That hill opposite us over there, that's 'the old men', but I don't know why it was called that, but there's very few people would call it ... probably my age group would be the last that'll call these things by these names. Even up the road, the old peat road which is an area people had lived in at one time, and then the dump was there up until a few years ago, and there was a place up there they called The Pulpit. And I only found out – I mean, we would say, oh, yeah, we're going past, you go past the pulpit and go – but you never thought when you're young, to ask why it was called that, but a mannie – very knowledgeable man, Robert Mackay, he – I asked him one day – we were sitting talking about old things – why was that called The Pulpit? And he said, in the time of the Covenanters, that was one of the – they had to do their preaching in the open air, and there was a stone there that they were preaching from to the people, and it was called The Pulpit, yeah. Quite simple explanations, but ... It's so sad that when you're young you don't think of all the things that are going to be lost, you know.

*Aye. What does Kirtomy mean?*

Well, nobody knew ... it was quite often talked about when I was young. Of course, some people spelt it 'Kirk', K-I-R-K, because there'd been an old church there, but nobody knew why or where or what, and I got – I was still going to school at the time, I was an avid reader, and still am, I mean, a lot of people were then. There was always books in houses, you know. I mean, our house was full of books. I read things like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Little Women*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, before I left primary school. You were just picking up books and reading them, and every house you went into and ... there was some of them used to hide things on me, when I went in, because it didn't matter what it was – *The Christian Herald* or *The People's Friend* that was lying there – I picked it up and they'd see me coming and hide everything. But I loved reading, and there was a woman in Portskerra and she gave me a book – now I was ... it was the first year that I was in the secondary school, because I'd gone home with her grandchild, and this book – oh, if only I could remember the name of it! It was quite a large book and it was all about Sutherland, as far as I can remember it was Sutherland – I don't know whether it was particularly this part of Sutherland, but there was place names in it. And a lot of the old, the Norse names. And Kirtomy was down as 'the small hazel wood'.

Now, you could meet a lot of people and they would say to you, that can't have been, there's no hazel wood in Kirtomy, but there is. And it's right below the road, as you go in over the grid, which used to be a gate across there, over there, and there's the school, the old school, well, it used to be a school – and it's very steep down to it; the brae drops away down to the burn quite steeply – that's where we used to get – at Hallowe'en we used to go and gather the hazel nuts and they would ripen there. So that – but I have never been able to think or know what that book was. And I know that when she died, I know the books were all got rid of – as a matter of fact, some of them were burnt, yeah. Oh, that gives me the creeps when that happens. And I wish I knew it – well, because there was a poem in it that I would love to have got as well, and I only remember a little bit of ... Was certainly place names, and that was the Kirtomy one, so I think that's what Kirtomy must have meant.

*That's very interesting, because I've often wondered ... And Swordly, what's that come from?*

Don't know. Because it's another one ... Dale, of course, dale was a Norse ... Yes, Sword, sward ... you don't ... you don't really know how it was even pronounced, really.

*No, no. Now, I should ask you about ... we've been ... one last thing and then I thought I'd ask you about Mackay – because we're talking locally, but I'll ask you about, sort of, Mackay Country, the bigger thing, in a wee minute. I was just going to ask you about migration as well – the ... I mean, we've talked about why people had to leave for various reasons, but what do you think pulls people here – back to return or to move here?*

People had to leave for various reasons – sometimes they wanted to, of course ... Yes, yeah, I think, even at a certain stage in your life you have to leave, you know what I mean, it's just one of these things, there's another big world out there and you want to get a shot at it, but I think a lot of people once ... maybe once people have their own families ... I know quite a lot of people that would have liked to have come back, once they'd settled down and had a family of their own, and perceived it as a good place to bring a family up in, good education, good – you know.

But it's not been easy for people to come back, really. But we have a few young people staying around now, with young families, that have been able to ... and some of them, I believe, have come ... they're ... rather than stay in Thurso, people that have come because of the decommissioning are looking for property even as far out as Tongue ..... they'd be quite happy to ... to be in. But I think local people always have a yern to come back, don't they, for your roots. Even if you – even those that have gone to Canada and ... my own – I have a niece in

Toronto and she's one of triplets, and two of them went out there. Mhairi went out to Toronto and loved it; found it a very good place to live and work, in particular – maybe work even more than live. It was much easier to achieve what you wanted to. And she went out as a nanny, and ended up having a degree and working for Air Canada, you know. And then her sister, Margaret, went out. Margaret didn't like it at all when she went out there first, and the strange thing is, Mhairi left, oh, about three months before she was due to get her naturalisation, or whatever they call it out there, and came home and married a policeman here. Because he had gone out there with my brother on holiday and they had met. But Margaret's still out there. She's still ... but she still gets homesick, desperately. And she tries to come home every year. She has an excellent job, again, through qualifications she did out there, and found it much easier to work and study and get qualifications than it would have been here. There wasn't the same struggle, and people were keener for you to succeed, is what they said, that it was ... you got more help in getting there. So she works for one of Canada's top plastic surgeons. But would love to come home, and finds it very difficult to settle every time she goes back.

Another family that left Strathnaver a good few years ago, they'd two sons, they went to ... oh, mercy on me, it's gone from me. One of the prairie ... Montana, I think – er, no, that's America – they went to Canada. Er, oh, where was it – Alberta. It's a place that has very severe winters; I think it is Alberta they went to. Bought a farm out there and really struggled, but, the boys, they like it, and they like the life. But they're near Winnipeg, I mean, that's their biggest, city there. And ... but still feel this tug, that ... for home, you know.

*What do you think draws people to come to Mackay Country?*

A lot of people have come – they come here on holiday in the summertime. I mean, that has happened to loads of people that I've known over the years. And they think it's just absolutely wonderful. And if you're having a good summer – and it is, I mean, it is – if they come with children and ... they just think it's absolutely brilliant and they do everything in their power to get back here. Times it works, times it doesn't, you know. And it doesn't mostly because, not so much now, but before it didn't because the children reach a certain age when they have to go, one way or another, to go on with their education or jobs or whatever, and they don't – if the children have to leave they want to leave. That has happened a lot in the past. It may not – I'm not sure now, it may not happen so much now ... Because you've got the High School, you've got a good college in Thurso, and, although there again there's still a problem with transport, for people going to college in Thurso. But ... hopefully it'll ... But there are people who have the idea that it's El Dorado, in a way, for living, when they come on holiday. I mean, there's people came on holiday here over forty years ago and – as children – who are just desperate to come here now, they want to live here. But they know the whole process of the place, they know that the winters can be ... That's what puts people off sometimes, although the winters are not anything like what they used to be, are they?

And that's another thing that's quite sad. I don't know round your way but here is the neglect of the ... any agricultural land that's in it. I mean, Kirtomy, I feel quite sad. I find it quite tatty nowadays. The braes are full of bracken, reeds, you know. All that has changed and it's ... looks, makes a different look. I mean, everybody that comes to Kirtomy oh, what a lovely valley, oh, so lovely, and I think, well, it used to be! It makes the whole landscape look totally different ... the lack of cultivation. I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing, I just don't know.

*How you would describe Mackay Country, what makes it special, its history ... and the other bit of that is what your hopes and fears for the future of Mackay Country would be, so that's two kind of two ...*

Well, I mean, I have to say the most kitsch thing of the lot – it's my country! That makes it special for me! And I have a lot of hopes for it. I have far more hopes than fear. And this project in itself is a hope for it, isn't it, it's people doing something and it's involving young people and it's involving communities and I think maybe there's a few people still have a wee bit difficulty trying to get their head round it, but it's going to get there and it's going to put us on the map and it's going to make a lot more people, worldwide, think, "Oh! Mackay Country!" And once they know about it, well, they're going to feel the same way about it as I do, aren't they!

*Good answer! Very good answer. Great, well, that's ... unless there's any other things you want to add about Mackay Country itself ...*

I can't think – I can't think, off the top of my head, at all. There are – there's swings and roundabouts, but there always is. there's things like the downturn in fishing and inshore fishing, even, you think, OK, there's a lot of quite young fellows have boats and that around, and they're trying to make a living out of lobsters and everything, and then you get boats coming from as far away as Orkney, huge boats that are winging through the water there at great miles an hour, and it's just not going to be enough for everybody, you know. I mean, when my father retired, quite reluctantly in 1973, was it '72 he retired, because he died in '73, and he said ... he was probably one of the most well-known fishers around, this areas and in the whole of the north, actually, and he said then, "It's the beginning of the end." "They're starting this pair trawlers," and he said, "The greed will finish it." And I'm afraid they can say what they like, but it has. there's that sort of thing, the traditional things like fishing may not survive and it's something, well, I can't work on, but anything I can work on to keep it going, I will!

*One thing that I wondered if you'd come across ... like, I'm sure, to you and to many people phrases like, "Province of Strathnaver" and "Mackay Country" are an every – it's an everyday ...but not everybody nowadays seems to realise that.*

No, no they don't. And, I mean, they do, there's a lot of people, and even the children going to the school today think Strathnaver is Strathnaver – that valley and river, that's all that encompasses Strathnaver. And the Mackay Country doesn't mean much to them as such, they're not – they don't know that there's a sense of clan, and it doesn't matter where you came from in the world if your name was Mackay, your roots have bound to have been here, the same as MacLeods in Assynt and, Ross-shire, the Munros. All that things. And it's quite unique, now, isn't it? Although they still do it, I think, in some Eastern European countries, maybe, they still have these clans. I mean, it's not that it's a clan system – that's long gone, but it's a place.

*Yes, aye. What do you think we need to do to make people more aware?*

Now, that's quite a difficult one.

*Just thought I'd sneak that in at the end.*

I'm not sure. I think just probably the things that are being done. I think that the produce is another thing that's great. I mean, look at the – it's given Orkney, I mean, OK, everybody knows about Orkney and people have war memories of Orkney, archaeology memories of Orkney, but I think the one thing that's set Orkney really going is this, their produce is ... uhuh. So I think that might be a good thing to ... I didn't get to the meeting, by the way, the last meeting that was in it ... a bit at a time. Well as, I always think as well as you get one bit done, well, maybe it's just me, but I can always see all the other things to do. Yeah. I think – because in a way I think we're inclined ... I know we did that with the Duthchas thing, and it actually took a long time. I felt for a while that there was nobody but me was struggling with

this Dùthchas thing, but then discovered that everybody was, you know. And then all of a sudden it all did click into place, and I think this'll be something similar.

*Brilliant. Right, we'll wrap it up there.*

### **Sandy Murray Strathalladale**

Interviewer: Isobel MacPhail,  
Interviewee: Sandy Murray  
Date: 13/10/04  
Location: Achiemhor, Strath Halladale



IMAGE 84 SANDY MURRAY STRATHALLADALE

Sandy's parents had the post office/shop at Strathalladale and a croft. Sandy has his own croft and talks of the changes to agriculture since he started.

*Could maybe start with you talking about your people and where they came from and how they ended up in Strathhalladale.*

On the Murray side of the family, came to Strathhalladale from the top end of Kildonan strath, where they were evicted in the Clearances. Mother and father and seven children, and the mother and father and six children went on to emigrate to Nova Scotia, and one child stayed at home because he had fallen in love with a shepherd's daughter from Forsinain, Strathhalladale, which was a Mackay, and that's where we, the Murrays, have come from. That was five generations ago.

And they've been in Strathhalladale ever since. My mother's side came from Lochinver. She was born and brought up in Lochinver, went off to do her training as a nurse and district nurse and was posted to Melvich where she said that she was only going to stay for one year because it was the back of beyond ... Compared to Brackloch, and ended up staying here, and met my father on a very coarse winter night when she had to go to deliver a baby in Forsinard, and felt that the road was so bad, in the war when there was no light, not allowed to use headlights, and stopped at the local post office to see if she could get further directions, and my father, being the young loon there, said, "I'll just come with you." That was the start ... That was the start of a romance. So they had the shop in Strathhalladale, which sold everything in them days, and also had the post office, where there was only the one telephone, and all messages went through the post office. Then there was a ... just after I was born there was a telephone box put up outside, and ... but it was still the one line so they had to change it over for anybody to phone from the box outside.

I was born in that house, in Dalhalvaig, with a sister and two brothers. We had no electricity or no toilets when I was born, and that's just this generation, so it's gone quite a long way since

then. Since then the shop has closed down, the post office has closed down, the school has gone from the strath, so there's been major changes over the last fifty ...

*Which building was the shop and post office?*

It was the little building on the end of the house at Dalhalvaig. Two mile from where I'm living now. Where I live now is in what was an uncle on my granny's side, my father's uncle, was in this house here, I took over that crofts. So, I don't suppose I'll move out of Strathhalladale now.

*When did the shop and post office close, and the school?*

God, I can't remember the years. It was in the ... be the mid-seventies that the school closed. The post office was slightly after that, it became unviable because there wasn't so many people in the strath, and they weren't ... the people that were in the strath, the incomers tended not to use the local post office, they got their pensions paid straight to the banks, and their TV licences when they were in Thurso, and ... and it was ironic that when it did close the people that complained most were the people that didn't use it.

*That's often the way in those places.*

The school numbers just went down over the years as well, it's the same all over the Highlands, I suppose.

*Let's skip back a moment to that went to Nova Scotia. Do you have any?*

Not really. There was some ... I've never been in Nova Scotia, I've been in Canada a couple of times and we've got a lot of relations in Canada on my mother's side, that we've kept up with and we know and we visited, but ... They're in British Columbia, on the other side. But we have never really followed up the ancestry on the Murray side of it, although there was a man came back looking for his ancestors, from Montana, and he had – his granny was a Murray, and he was a big banking merchant in Montana. And he had been in the Highlands three times looking for his ancestors, but always going to the wrong place, because he was looking at Croick in Ardgar rather than Croick in Halladale.

*You can see how that mistake could happen, yeah.*

And my cousins are still in contact with him. I would like to follow it up further, I would like to find out, but, because there's bound to be more ancestors there than there is relations here. There is a cemetery in Nova Scotia that's called the Murray Cemetery, and my cousin went to look at it and about 85% of the stones in it were Murrays, so there could be a lot of them there.

I think the older you get, the more you want to look into things like that. When you're young, you never think of it, and it's only now I'm starting to maybe want to follow it up a bit. But I don't know why, if you look at it historically, nearly everybody that was burnt out of their homes in the top end of Kildonan strath went south – Helmsdale and Portgower – and went away from there, where ours came north, and we don't know why that was. The mid-section in Strathhalladale was never evicted – you can see where at both ends it was, but not in the centre section, and that's where we are.

*So the centre section stretches from where to where?*

It would be to Trantlemore. The holding that I have at the north end, there was twenty-six families living there before the Clearances, a church and a mill, and you can still see the ruins of all the houses. That actually was ... eventually became part of Bighouse Estates in the Sutherland Estates, then after the first war, was divided back into holdings, land holdings, and the holding was actually the formation of a sheepstock club, the sheepstock club stopped in the

mid-eighties and it was apportioned then. So, that's really what is making my crofts viable, it's because I've got two very large apportionments in that area.

*The shop, post office and so on, in the old days, well, I remember you talking another time about ... you mentioned water and electricity, it might be good to talk about what life was like before that, when you were a child and also we talked before about when everyone had the house cow, and all that kind of thing.*

Yeah, we had ... when I came home from school we had to milk the cows. We had four Jersey cows that we milked ... my mother milked every day, made the butter and crowdie off the night milking, and delivered the morning milking round the strath, which I used to do on the push-bike, after school, or ... I'd to go round every day. And you just took the little churn that you put it in – each household had two and you took one back with you for the next day. And the cows rotated – we were always milking three in full milk and one that was dry for a short period, and rotated, but then regulations stopped that, you weren't allowed to do things like that.

When I went off to college, I came back home from college with a milking-machine, which was advertised in the Press & Journal in Alford, and I was in a college in Aberdeen, so I went and looked at it, and I actually took it home on the train. Sounds daft, nowadays, but it cost too much to put it up as a carriage item, so I had to take it as luggage and put it in the guard's van myself, and shift it at Inverness, with pipes and clusters but it certainly made life a lot easier for my mother and myself, but I went on during the milking for quite a while after I did come back home to work on the crofts, and it was a routine, it was an income. The shop was going then, so a lot of people came round the place, although it was in the, probably the mid-fifties and early sixties that the shop actually sort of wound down, because more people had transport then, more people went away. The shop, it ended up that the shop was really only selling frozen foods in the end, and quite a lot was ... when the school was going right next door, there was a ... quite a lot of sweeties and ice-creams and things sold to bairns, but ... it did sell everything.

And when ... before I went to school, there was a toilet in the school and we used to always go a walk across the road to the school toilet – we had no toilet in the house at all. We had a spring that had water running into the scullery and out of the tap that was left running 24 hours a day, because it would clog up if it wasn't, so it was ... there was a lot of changes. It was just before I went to school that the electricity came round the strath, 1953. And it was ... the local estate granted the Hydro – it might not have been the Hydro then – granted them free way of leave to put their poles right up through the strath so now I probably regret that because the poles run right up through the middle of the valley and you've got them in the middle of little wee arable bits, you've got a pole in the middle of it. If they had followed the fences or followed the hill it would have been a lot easier.

*That must have made a big difference, the electricity, for ... especially the women of a house, with ... or with the children as well, with not having lamps to clean and trim and ...*

Well, I don't really remember having to do anything with lamps or candles or anything. I don't really remember having to do a lot with horses. I have worked behind a horse, but only for the novelty factor. My father was the first to get a tractor in 1946, an old ... David Brown, with metal wheels, and he got it in 1946 and it was second-hand, and he sold it in 1952 and bought a new one at the Glasgow Fair, at the show. My father did a lot of contracting in that days. There's ... at one stage he said that he ploughed everything from Armadale to Forsinard when he got the tractor, and all the old men complained that they'd never seen stones in the field before, but when the tractor ploughed it pulled all the stones up, because obviously it was ploughing at a slightly deeper ...



*And you went to ... was it Aberdeen you went to college in?*

I went to college in Aberdeen and did a one-year agricultural course.

My father was a great sportsman. He used to go round a lot of the Highland Games, competing. And there's one story, when the Dornoch Games fell on the same day as the Forsinard Sale, and my grandfather didn't want him to go. This was in 1932 or 33, and there was a big argument about whether he should go, but he sorted the lambs for the sale and went off on his motorbike to the Dornoch Games, and when he came home from the Dornoch Games at night, he had more in prize money than my grandfather had got at the sale for his lambs, so he always told that story. He was a goalkeeper, he played in goals for Wick Academy, and Celtic tried to sign him ... when, after Celtic played Wick Academy in the Scottish Qualifying Cup, but he didn't go. If he had gone I might not have been here today!

*The lamb sales have changed a lot recently, have they not?*

Well, we don't have a mart at Forsinard now, it got ... the foot and mouth stopped it for a couple of years, and then the landowners changed and it was demolished, which we're still really worried and concerned about, because it'll never come back now. And there's not the same atmosphere when you go to sell your lambs now,, we sell them in Thurso at what is supposed to be a Forsinard sale, but it isn't really, it's a section of another sale, and there's no atmosphere, there's no pub, you can't have a dram!

*Dingwall has that problem, too.*

Aye, and if you did have a dram you couldn't drive home, anyway. In the old days, it was a real social outing, and my father always came home drunk from Forsinard Sale! And ended up in the river one night, with the van. He had a tup coming home in the back of the van, it was an ex-post van, a Morris Minor, with the old canvas section in the roof. And he met a car, went off the road, and the van tipped over, rolled into the river, and the sheep got out – the roof went out of it and the sheep went out – landing on its wheels in the river, and he drove it out along the river bed and out onto the bank and back down and home – I don't think realising that anything had happened! Then wondering where the tup was in the morning! I had to go and get that the next day, to find ... I think there was two tups in it.

*So, people must have felt it hard, the market stance going ... an end of an era.*

Very aggrieved that it ... what actually had happened without any consultation or anything, just discovered that it had been flattened and ... if it hadn't been, you know, there might have been a possibility of re-erecting community sales or something along that lines, but now that it's gone I think we just have to accept it. But it's the same – there's very few remote sales now, there's ... you don't see any, no Bettyhill Sale or Dunbeath Sale or Helmsdale Sale or Rogart Sale or ... they're all ... little sale. But the sale – sheep sale in this area used to be at Melvich, there was a sheep stance at Melvich – and it was the Halladale crofters that started the sale at Forsinard, and it was very good at that time because it was next to the railhead and all the sheep went away by rail.

*When would that have been, it started?*

Oh, it was before my day. It would have started – Forsinard Sale I think would have started in the Twenties, 1921 or 22 – I think that's ... the records show that that's when the bit of ground was given to the community, and the ... I can't remember the sheep going off by rail, but it was ... there's records that show, on the strath, of other communities writing to the strath crofters to ask permission to sell the lambs at Forsinard, and they were granted, and then it expanded. In its heyday, it would have been selling twelve-and-a-half, thirteen thousand lambs at Forsinard, which is probably nearly as many as is being sold at Lairg now.

*Yes. Aye, a lot of changes. What do you feel about seeing the stock come off the ground all over Mackay Country, and ...*

I think it's depressing. There needs to be stock there. Traditional crofting is livestock and I think the stock need to be there for the management of the ground. I know that there's certain conservationists are saying we're living in a wilderness and they're wanting to try and maintain it and create it as a wilderness, but it's ... the crofting and the stock that actually made it the way that it is, and I think that any major changes will have quite serious implications on the vegetation on the hills and the flowers, because if there was no deer or sheep or cattle there then it may inevitably end up with bracken and whin, you know, gorse and ... so it's ... I think it might turn round, you know, there's ... everything goes in cycles. The support and the whole agriculture is changing at the moment and it's a very uncertain period just now as well; got to wait to see how it actually pans out.

*In your lifetime, what changes have you seen in the way crofting agriculture operates?*

I think machinery brought the biggest change, because the capabilities of what machines can do now ... When I built a silage pit on the strath, just after my father died, people thought I was mad, building a silage pit, it's not the way, piling wet stuff, and the old crofters thought I was mad, but now with wrapped bales and the change in climate and the shorter day, shorter dry period, I would say, I think that's the way that it's actually gone. It's hard to think that there was a contractor on the strath, Tommy Mackay – no, Tommy Ross – at the end of the strath, that was actually baling everything on the strath with a small Ferguson tractor and a little baler, square bale. Now, there's probably four big balers, round balers, on the strath, and we're still rushing to try and get our crops secured, so the climate change seems to be slow and maybe unnoticeable as we get older, or not more recognisable, but the long hot summers were there when I was young. So the change in the climate and the change in the machinery I think is the major ... our cattle were all tied in byres and you fed them individually. We let them out every day for water, cleaned the byre out and put them in every night. Now it's a system of self-locking cattle yokes and you put enough food in front of them to last three or four days, you lock them in – at least I lock mine in – for the concentrates and scrape them out with the machine – tractor and scrape out – and then unlock them and close the door and go away to do another part-time job to actually make the thing survive!

*Yes, yes. Fewer people handling more.*

Yeah. Well, my father had half the stock that I have, and he had a man helping him, albeit he did have the post office and the shop, but there was always a man on the place as well, and my mother did all the milking. Now, I've got twice the stock and I've got to have a part-time job to actually make a decent standard of living.

*And one of the things that's noticeable, I suppose, at this end of Mackay Country, and in the strath, the strath is a good example, is that you have kept using the in-bye ground in a way that not everywhere, particularly further west has managed to do. Why do you think that is?*

I think we're better quality of ground on the east side of Sutherland here. It's ... there's the tradition of being in the valley, having your common grazings adjacent to your croft and running out a ... every crofter access to the common grazing from the boundary of their croft. The ability to create apportionments right next to your croft, which work well within the management. It's different in that it's not a resettlement of people being crammed into a community that had to make crofts out of what was there – this, the valleys – Strathnaver is the same although Strathnaver was evicted and then resettled – it's the same in that it's got the fertile ground in the valley and ... it's sad to see there's not as much cropping going on now, though, it's all grass and reseeded direct into grass, although Strathhalladale might change. We

stopped – at least, I stopped growing oats and barley and swedes because it was cheaper to buy it from Caithness Farms, and the problem with the deer coming in before harvest ... doing damage to it, was quite strong. Now that the whole of the valley is deer-fenced, it might be worthwhile going back to doing ... putting in some oats and stuff, do a rotation. But when I'm working elsewhere, it's just the time is not there.

*Can you say a bit about your off-croft work?*

I work for Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise as a crofting development officer. I've always done off-croft work or tried to, to subsidise the crofting income. When I was younger, I did a lot of fencing contracting, sheep-shearing and then bought a machine and did drainage work and things like that. I tried quad-biking for the tourists, I tried a fish-farm and hatchery where I was hatching brown trout and re-stocking lochs. All of them have struggled. And then I got a pen-pushing job in 1990 that is home-based flexitime, doing 19 hours a week, and it works in excellent with the croft. It couldn't be a better way of working. There's down-sides to it, that although you're only working 19 hours of work you're on call 24/7, and people do realise that they're more apt to get you in at 7 in the morning or 11 at night, but I don't mind, because the other ... the benefits are that if it's a good day, you can just get up and walk out and go and do your hay – you're not tied to the desk. And I enjoy what I do, because it's giving advice and help to other people, and I feel because I've got the practical experience that other people realise that the advice that you're giving is from the heart as well, not just from the book.

The classic one was when CASE asked me to do advice on crofter forestry. I thought the best way to gain experience and knowledge was to plant some forestry myself, so I immediately went and planted 30 hectares of trees, and then went into Christmas tree production, and I think the pitfalls in actually going through the process learnt me more than I could by actually trying to read books and find out what to tell other people.

*The Christmas trees, that's a long-term harvest, eh?*

Aye, it's eight years ago that I started planting Christmas trees, and I was planting two hectare a year, which is 10,000 to 12,000 trees a year I was planting. We're just now starting to get into the harvesting and it's desperately looking for markets; I haven't got a lot of markets set up. I would like to try and get a regular market because the trees are there, but it's a struggle to get into the market. We got our fingers burnt in the first year that we sold the trees and never got paid for them, other than our deposit ...

Terrible.

I'm still trying to get that out of the man. But I think within the next two to three years we will get into the market and that's ... you know, we'll start reaping the benefits.

*Yes. And can you maybe say a bit as well about the Croft Entrance Scheme as part of your work, because that's very much of the present day, because of the issues that people face today in the crofting communities.*

The Crofting Entrance Scheme is a scheme that's operated by Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise in partnership with the Crofters' Commission and funded by Highlands and Islands Enterprise. It's a very low-budget scheme and in our area we aim to get five to seven young entrants per year in. It's been operating since 1993 and we've had 92 young entrants in Caithness and Sutherland area. It's more a social-economic scheme rather than an agricultural scheme, because its aim is to try and keep the people in the area or get young people to come back into the area, rather than major agricultural production. And if we can get a young couple with a family into a croft where they can get access assistance for housing and keep children in the school and use the local shops, then the scheme is seen to be a success. That's about it!

*We're talking, I suppose, about population and population change and we started with how the Murrays had come here in the first place. Have you seen a lot of people leaving, say, after school or whatever, or coming back as return migrants, or people coming here for the first time?*

There's quite a lot of first ... new people coming into our area because of Dounreay, because of the access to work, and that pushes house prices and things in the area up, which is ... makes it very inaccessible for young people to get cheap, affordable housing in this area. We do see a drift of people going away from the area – young people do actually go away from the area. There's ... I think every area has cycles of each generation goes round and you've got quite a lot of young people and then maybe another decade there's less young people in the area, but you always see people moving away. And once they do move away, they tend not to come back. Our own family, there's four of us in the family and there's two of us – Ross, my younger brother and myself both have crofts in the strath. My other brother, Donnie, he didn't move far away, he's still in the Mackay Country, he's in Strathy, and he runs a joinery business from there. My sister moved to college in Aberdeen and has never come back, but she's married and raised a family and her son has now come back into Melvich, as he's got a job in Dounreay. But that's second generation, and he doesn't feel like he belongs here, he feels like he belongs in Aberdeen.

*That's interesting.*

And I would think that if he did get work down there, he would go down there. He moved in with my mother before she died, in Melvich, when he got the job, three years ago, in Dounreay, an engineer, and he is quite happy, but he goes back down to Aberdeen very regularly, every second weekend. Mainly because he supports the Aberdeen football team and he's got to go for the home games.

*That's a hard path to follow!*

But I don't think my sister would ever have any intention of coming back – although she's back on holidays regularly. But I would like to think that the next generation would like to stay. My brother's got three of a family, and they're still – two of them are working and one's still at school, and I would like to think that they would want to stay in the strath.

*What sort of opportunities do you think there are for them, in the future?*

Well, I think the remote areas are bound to have more opportunities with modern technology. There's certainly ... I know I'm working from home and we can easily now transport electronically. I was working yesterday on a spreadsheet and it was e-mailed back and forward three times for changes in the space of a couple of hours, which is ... you know, that type of technology now, I think will mean that to be working in a remote area is going to be much easier and much more enjoyable.

I think there'll be certainly ... may be opportunities will open up with technology as well. Things that we might not be thinking of. I certainly don't think that the last generation could have ever foreseen what's actually happening now. When television came to Strathhalladale there was an old lady that used to keep the television covered because she thought that they were seeing her and she used to dress before she would put it on at night, because she was sure that that man in the television was seeing her. We still have our own television system in Strathhalladale, because when they did away with the old 405 systems we couldn't get television in the strath, so we put up a system where we picked it up on top of the hill and transmitted it down the valley through licence and got a grant from the HIBD, and since then there was a new mast put up in Melvich, but all the houses in Strathhalladale can't get it from

Melvich. If the Halladale system wasn't working, I wouldn't have television here, but ... that's been going since nearly 30 years.

*That's interesting.*

But even my mother couldn't understand, when I was sending a fax, how the bit of paper went down the line! It's quite strange when you think of, you know, the technology changing. But it is, it's ... if there's as many changes in the next fifty years as there has been in the last fifty years, you just wonder where it'll be.

*Can you imagine what it might be, or do you have hopes for what it might be?*

I hope ... I would like to hope that life would slow down a bit. The last generation lived life at a much slower pace and I think because they didn't know what they hadn't got, they enjoyed life. The ceilidhs that used to be in our house when I was a bairn, you know, were – especially on Saturday night – nearly everybody came to the post office for their pension on a Saturday night and they would end up in the kitchen, so there was, you know, there was great ceilidhs in the house. That disappeared with television. Now, I would like to think that things like that, the pace of life may slow down a bit, or should slow down a bit, for the next generation, because I imagine it as if you're ... it's a big hill and you've come to the top of it and you're going to go back down the other side. Because if it does keep increasing, you know, there's not enough time in the day to do what we've got to do now. And the social aspects seem to have slowed down.

But for the ... looking into the future, we thought that things that were in science fiction comics, of going to space and things like that were, you know, we thought as kids that that would never happen, but it did happen. You look at science fiction today, what's imaginary in films might be happening in the future. It would be staggering if it did. If Dr Who could go into his box and come out somewhere else, or you could just be transported. But you're seeing things, even in the household, where there's labour-saving things that are maybe in the future when you walk into the room and the light and the heat will come on when you go in and then when you walk out again it'll switch off, and you'll be saving energy, instead of coming home at night and seeing that every light in your house is on, and every door open!

Or you'll be coming up the road and you'll be telephoning your house to switch the kettle on or the oven on, and when you arrive in the tea's ready. That's things that we may be laughing I was giving a presentation on crofting to the students from Flensburg University that were over, and they were looking at renewable energy, and we got into a discussion, quite similar what we thought of would be the future and the future power, and I made a suggestion that is totally ludicrous but then you never know but it might actually happen, the power – the main source of power for the whole world is the sun, so what's to say that we can't harness that power in space and transmit it down to Earth in a radio wave rather than ... if you thought mobile phones ... thirty years ago if you thought you were walking around and you could contact anybody in the world or transport pictures round, people would have laughed at you. What's to say that there's not going to be a space station up there gathering power and just e-mailing it down to Earth?

They started laughing at me, but ... You never know.

*You don't, you don't, do you? It's practically unimaginable.*

It is. But then, sometimes the simplest things are the most sensible.

There's a story about a guy in Bettyhill ... I can't remember what his name was, but they were at the peats in Bettyhill and they bogged – you might have heard this one before? And they went – they sent him off, he was a wee bittie, eccentric sort of chap, but as sharp as a nail. And

they sent him off to get the rope from the other bank, which was about two or three hundred yards away. And he came back with the end of the rope over his shoulder, and the rest of it dragging along in the peats and the gutters, and ... and somebody says to him, "Aye, John, what are you doing dragging that rope along behind you?" And he turned and he said, "Well, have you ever tried pushing it?"

*We were talking about what draws people to migrate into the area, people who've ... who don't have a connection, perhaps, or not a family connection, and you mentioned Dounreay. Has Dounreay ... what sort of impact has Dounreay had on the area?*

I would say it's had a major impact on this area. It's ... there was at one stage we had 26 people from Strathhalladale going to Dounreay to work. It's not quite as many at the moment, but maybe not far off it. So it's taken a tremendous amount of wealth into the community, and quite a lot of that wealth was re-invested in crofting as well, but it has also taken people into the community and I think without it, Halladale would have been a much poorer place, because the people that had gone away wouldn't be replaced. There's no empty houses in Strathhalladale. There's ... I would say that there's probably more than 50% of the population of Halladale now are non-native people. But there is actually people that – families that have come in near the beginning of the Dounreay creation and they're now second-generation people in Strathhalladale, so although we don't call them locals, they probably call themselves locals! I think you've got to be here for seven or eight generations before you become a local!

*Are there any other reasons that people come into the area?*

We've seen – there's a couple of families that have come in through the RSPB taking over the estate at Forsinard and the reserve, but it's a sort of two-edged sword because the families that were there as shepherds have gone, so although it's taking new people, new type of people in, completely new aspects and thought of land use, it's still keeping people in the area.

*Do you have any ... oh, I know what I have to ask, about voluntary work that people are involved in!*

No, I'm not, (laughing) I'm not on any voluntary group! I seem to be the type of person that gets cornered into doing things that I think I shouldn't be doing and I'm wanting to stop doing.

*I know the feeling.*

I have given up a couple, but in the area here I'm the local assessor for the Crofters' Commission; I'm the grazings clerk for Halladale Grazings; I'm the grazings chairman; I'm on the Hall Committee; I'm on the TV Committee; I'm on the local Community Council; I'm chairman of Far North Training which at the moment is run down and we're thinking of closing; I'm chairman of North Sutherland Community Forestry Trust, which is a very active group in the area, and actually covers exactly what the Mackay Country area is, is our – maybe we should be actually saying that now – we were just looking at – the Trust were just looking at registering interest in community landownership ... at the moment, and we've discovered that our Articles and Memorandum does not define the area the way that it's got to be defined; it's got to be defined in postcode area, but maybe we should be defining it in Mackay Country area! We represent that area. I'm chairman of the North Sutherland Amateur Football Association as well, which I don't do an awful lot with, but ... North West Cattle Producers' Association ... I'm bound to forget one or two! I was chairman of Caithness Sheep Health Association – well, I still am, but it's not a very active group now, either, it's more ... there's far less accredited sheep in Caithness, and I'm on the Environmental Land Use Committee for the Farmers' Union, and I'm on the Crofting Foundation, and I could go on and on and on ... I still get time to do a wee bit fishing and shooting as well!

The estate imported them, they've got partridge cages and they take them in young and feed them up and then release them, just for shoots. So, I think they had 200 brace, one shoot they had. They've got something like fifteen or twenty shoots a year, but they're going to stop it, they say, it's not paying them. So they've paid a keeper off and they're going to stop the partridge. So they've got three of the shoots are on my croft ground, they've got one of the partridge pens on my ground, but the other two shoots, they drive over onto my croft.

There's a lot of changes there, as well, in our local estate, since I started crofting I've had five different landlords. My father had two different landlords prior to that, so there have been seven – the estate has changed hands seven times in a hundred years. The landlords we have at the moment are not bad landlords. I think – I really shouldn't say this, but – I think that community landownership in this area wouldn't work because there's conflict of interest between people. In some places I would back it wholeheartedly, but I think that in our own glen here that if you've got a good landlord and you're getting on well with the landlord, then that's as good a situation. I think I might go for buying my own crofts once land reform goes through. The main reason I haven't is ... I've never wanted to or thought of buying my own crofts is that I feel the crofting structure is a tenanting structure and it's all aimed that way and I feel that if I do buy it I then really am not a crofter, I'd be a landowner of crofts. And although I could work it just the same, make the same money out of it, I'd probably lose out ...

*Yes, seven landowners in a hundred years, you were talking about.*

Yeah, it's changed hands quite regularly. And it was split up and the river was sold separately to the land and the farm of the estate was sold separately and, you know, at one stage there was asset-stripping of the estate, but now, although the same people own the land and the river, it's in two different businesses, two different companies, and there's five people own the river and two of them own the land.

*You were saying about – you might buy your crofts, but we were talking about the crofting system, what it means, and so on – it would be quite interesting to talk about that.*

I always think that the crofting system, you know, it's a heritable system. Crofting rights within the crofter is very well protected. The crofting regulations protect you there. I think maybe more so protecting than if you're a non-crofter, you know, tenant. You've got a lot more protection than the tenant farmer, or ... and I think that ... I always maintain that the structure – I like the structure and if it stays the way it is then there's no reason to go and buy a croft. But then, with land reform, everything's going to be changing. All your grants and things, everything's going to be changing; agriculture support is changing, so it may be far more beneficial to go on and buy the actual crofts.

A lot would depend in my situation whether I could buy my apportionments or not, because a lot of the ground I operate is – the crofts are very small but the apportionment on the common grazing is very large – it gives you the capacity of keeping the stock you can keep.

*We were talking about voluntary work ... do you have any thoughts about Gaelic in Mackay Country and in the strath?*

Not a big Gaelic supporter. My mother spoke a bit of Gaelic. Her parents in Lochinver both spoke fluent Gaelic, but never spoke it in the house. My father never spoke Gaelic. I won a prize at school for Gaelic, now could probably hardly say more than two words. So I'm not a great supporter of Gaelic. I think it needs to be maintained – I would hate to see it disappearing. I was sitting listening to the MOD last night, and the Gaelic singing – but I only understand odd words here and there, so I could never converse in it or certainly couldn't read or write it.

*Why do you think it's declined the way it has here?*

I think, incomers. It was never ... I don't suppose this corner was ever major Gaelic-speaking.

*Because you're so close to Caithness?*

Yeah. I don't think it was ... I've never ever heard of it as being, you know, being a major Gaelic-speaking area. It's always been the odd few. Although maybe when you go on to the coast a bit more, Portskerra, certainly, there was quite a bit of Gaelic spoken in Portskerra.

There's a story in Portskerra that the ... there's four local oldish men – and this is when I used to go to the pub in Melvich, and Melvich pub was thriving – and the four of them, Hod and Chanter and they all had nicknames – they were playing dominoes in the pub one day and this darkie came in, a black man. And had a drink at the bar, got a pint and he was drinking, and they started talking about him in Gaelic, and wondering where he came from and all the rest of it. He finished his pint and he went off out and as he walked out the door he turned round to them and he says, “This black bastard's from Stornoway!” Which was quite true! And he says they were just, they couldn't speak for ... But he never said anything else, he just walked off out and away he went, you know. He was obviously listening to everything they were saying about him, and not saying a word.

But Melvich, the Gaelic culture was stronger when I was young in Melvich than it ever was in Halladale, but I don't know, if you go round and you're looking at the Gaelic names on the road-signs and things like that, I never even try to understand them or read them or ... I have a hard enough...

*I've been asking people about women in Mackay Country*

Not enough!

*Good answer, Mr Murray, good answer!*

*How women's lives have changed, say, from your mother's day to now, not just in the home and work, but in the community itself – did you have any thoughts ...*

Well, my mother was very much involved in the community because she was the district nurse before she married and raised the family, and she was still thought of as the district nurse, and she went back to district nursing after my father died. And the doctor used to actually leave piles of pills with mother – in them days it was M&D's, which was the predecessor to aspirin, I think, and people used to come to her if there was anything wrong, so it was ... And being in the shop as well, we were very much involved in the community all the time. She was very much involved in the croft in the cows and the milking and things, but my mother never did an awful lot out on the land.

Now, my partner, Debbie, is very much involved in the croft as well, she's out helping all the time although she's got a full-time job as well, so I think there was a tradition where it went through a phase that the women were the crofters and the men were off working, and that may be more noticeable on the coasts where the men were at sea and things, than in Strathhalladale, and I think you can still see that influence along the coast where there's quite a lot of the women are the crofters. But I always thought that the women role would get easier when they got washing-machines and dishwashers and steam irons and all that, but I don't think it has!

*So, what sort of work does Debbie help with?*

Well, if I'm away, she'll feed the cows and scrape the byre in the winter-time; she'll give us a hand to take in the bales and ... certainly does a lot when you're in the sheep-pens and sorting sheep and things when you need two people. Last year, she was at the cutting and dragging of the Christmas trees, and wrapping them, so she'll muck in doing anything that needs to be done.



*And what's her job?*

She works now in Dounreay, in the canteen.

She's a canteen assistant. She was 18 years in Melvich Hotel, but at 12 years doing the back shift, as it were, when she was working from half-past five until midnight, six nights a week, she just really got fed up of that and wanted a better social life, so now she's on a eight o' clock till quarter past four in Dounreay.

*Well, Mackay Country itself, we mentioned it, but I've been asking people how ... see, some people are very familiar with the phrase 'Mackay Country', it means something to them. Others, it possibly doesn't. So I've been asking, you know, what it means to them.*

Aye, it means a bit to me in the fact that it was traditionally a Mackay stronghold in the clan days, albeit it that latterly it's the Sutherland Estates that ended up with it, and I was just looking at a book the other day that was produced in 19, oh, when would it be, 10, 12, when the Sutherland Estates went to sell all their holdings in this area, and then the war broke out and they got split up after the war, and it's a copy of a thing that I managed to get a hold of. But that was long after the clan days. And Murray, I always think of the Murray clan and the Murrays are the only clan that are still allowed to have an army in Scotland.

*The Blair Atholl ones? Aye, aye.*

So I can claim that wee bit of fame.

But I think the true Mackay Country actually went a bit further east; it took in Reay and things like that, although it's ... the defined area is the north-west, the north parishes here. And it's encouraging to see that the people that are backing it and supporting it and doing a lot of work into it are not actually Mackays! And I think it will actually establish a good label – I think that's something that will be able to be established out of it. Everything now needs to be labelled. As long as we don't go back to the Mackays wanting to take it over.

*Good point, good point. It's meant to be about inclusion of everybody that's in the communities in Mackay Country.*

*So what would your hopes and fears be for the communities of Mackay Country and Mackay Country itself?*

I think one fear is that the whole area is going to get covered in windmills!

I wouldn't like to see that happening. Certainly, I'm a supporter of renewable energy, but there's not enough joined-up thinking going into where they're going and what's happening, and I would hate to see the whole area being spoiled. There's talk of us going for the World Heritage Site, the peatlands, the flow country. Now there's probably a vast area of what we're calling the Mackay Country is peatlands.

So I could see maybe that coming as being another labelling, another benefit, as long as it doesn't bring more restrictions. We're seeing an awful lot of it is actually under conservation designations now, and that has brought restrictions on the way we actually croft within it. So I wouldn't like to see that being bigger pressures or bigger restrictions, although we're told that if it would ever become a World Heritage Site that it wouldn't bring any more restrictions. And they say that the only thing that might stop it is the amount of trees that's in it, the plantings that's in it. I don't know – I'm still planting trees! I've got a hundred hectares of trees, now, on the crofts. I would like to think that all the communities that's in it – I think there's eleven separate communities, defined communities, that are in the area, and I'd like to think that they could all survive as individual communities, and have their own thing about them, that they weren't going to just be all amalgamated into the one label, the one Mackay Country. So there

is a lot of individuality there. But I think that our main aim and our main targets is to keep the population. It's got to have people in it to be a sustainable community, and you can take as many tourists into it, you can have a wilderness with nobody in it and have tourists passing through it, and people from the south might be thinking that it's a sustainable area, but there's not a community then.

*Is there anything in particular that makes the Mackay Country stand out? What makes it special?*

Stuck on the top end of Scotland.

I think the people make it special. I think you're bound to say that, that there's ... and the scenery, in some ways. You can go anywhere in the world, and I've been all over – not that ... I haven't been right round the world yet, but I've been pretty near it, and everywhere I go I still think when I come home that I'm in the best place. We went on holiday one time to Vermont – well, we went into Boston and went up and into Canada, round the Great Lakes and back down by Niagara Falls, but we were going through Vermont and Vermont is supposed to be, in the Fall as they call it, it's the best place in the world to see the changing colours of the landscape and the trees and stuff. And myself and Alistair Fraser went and motored right up through it. And we came back home into Glasgow and got in the car and came back up through Perthshire and back home and we thought, "It's exactly the same colour scheme, you know, there's no difference."

We were on a safari in South Africa, and we seen all the wild animals, the lions and the tigers and ... we seen crocodiles, and I don't know what all we seen, monkeys and everything, but then, when you come home and you go to the hill to gather the sheep, and you can see adders and you can see deer and you can see sheep and you can see Highland cattle and you can see buzzards and falcons, peregrine falcons and, you know, golden eagle, you may even see an osprey out on our hill ... what's the difference? It's just a different animal in a different country. The only difference was when we did go shopping in Singapore and came back to Thurso, there was a wee bit difference! Just a wee bit of difference. And there was slightly more water coming over the Niagara Falls than there was coming down the Halladale River, but ...

*Brilliant, that's great, Sandy. Really good. Any other things you want to add, or bring up, or highlight?*

I think the beauty of going away on holiday is coming home as well, I always think that. I hate ... I far rather going away for two short holidays a year than for one that's too long. Och, I don't think so. I think it's good that all this research is being done into the Mackay Country, and I think if it's archived and put together properly that it's going to be something that's going to be very accessible, and I think with modern technology and websites and things, that it's going to be accessible for people that have gone away, and it might bring them back, even to visit.

Aye, aye, that's a good point. Are there particular things, do you think, people want out of the research? The reason I ask is, at the moment we've only got a year, but obviously we're trying to do a three-year plan. I mean, there's so much, and you have to focus in, and that's very hard. Very hard, it'll be, it must be a very difficult job to prioritise the things that are there. But I think you need to prioritise on the older generation and a wee bit of the history, because once that's forgotten, you can't get it back. The modern day stuff, my generation's stuff, hopefully there will be people here that can update that for another thirty, well, I'd hope we might get another twenty-five or thirty years yet!

Joe or Joey ... Nonie is in Strathy, and Nonie would be a good person to

Poor Nonie, he'll ... Nonie was in the war, in a prisoner-of-war camp in Japan, and I don't think he'll talk to anybody about it. Mother used to talk about when he came home from the war, she says, she never saw anybody that was such a skeleton and still living, you know, he was home from the war and he was just ... she says there was no flesh, it was just bones and skin, and she didn't think that he would survive. She was nursing him and that, when he came home from the wars, she was the district nurse. But he doesn't talk about it.

My uncle was ... went off from here to the war. Well, he went, he was actually had to do training as a banker, and he was in London when he joined up, so he was in the London Scottish, and he came out as a major. He just died two years ago at 94, my father's brother. But he used to ... I used to pop in to see him when I was down at meetings and things, just to have a blether. And he used to always say, "Oh, I like when you come in," he says, "I take a dram every night," he says, "but when somebody comes in I get two or three!"

But he used to talk a lot about the stories, but he – his stories were, you know, he never had the – what you would call the suffering that a lot of the other ones But he said and he remembers that – he used to say that he remembered his first German that he killed in the war, and he said that it was "either him or me." And he says, when he shot him, and he came over the wall that he was in behind to get him, and he said ... he can never forget that, he says, the way he felt sick and when he looked down on him, he says, "He was exactly the same ... he was the same age as me." He was a blond, young guy, you know, and he says, "I was nearly starting crying," but he said, "I just had to get on with it."

*Yeah. And what was his name?*

Alec Murray. Aye, he was the banker in Thurso for years, he came back to Thurso after being away in the bank in London.

My mother's family in Brackloch, which is away out of the Mackay Country area, they were one of the few families that – I think six of them went of them And their father, my grandfather, he went to the First World War and came home. It was quite amazing. You know, in Lochinver an awful lot of families went off and only half of them came back.

## Lotte Glob

Many artists have lived and worked at Durness and Mackay Country in many media. Some take up residence others come for commissions, for the creative sentiment the inspiration of the landscape or a host of other artistic motives.

Lotte Glob born in 1944 a Danish ceramic artist moved to Balnakeil Craft Village in the mid-1960's working and living for over thirty years in Balnakeil Craft Village. When Lotte arrived at Balnakeil the buildings were no more than bare concrete shells owned by the council and let for a very small rent to artists and craft workers and has seen many changes with numerous people coming and going for one reason or another.



IMAGE 85 CERAMIC ARTIST LOTTE GLOB

Lotte always wanted to be a potter and has now reached international recognition for her work. The unique style and natural interpretation has given acclaim from many quarters of the art world. Walking through this vast wilderness of Mackay Country for days often sleeping on top of mountains to find a place for a sculpture is an experience full of endless sources of inspiration and inevitably leads to new ideas in her work.

In 1999 she took ownership of a 16 acre croft in Laid, nineteen miles east of Durness, and has been working on her lifetime aspiration to create a landscape of art working with the environment and installing sculptures into a surrounding that depicts the inspiration that has led to their formation. Lotte's expanding vision included developing a new studio and home on Loch Eriboll. "*I am allergic to walls and doors. I want the outside to come inside*" she explained. This led to the design of a unique home to meet those criteria and Lotte's home does indeed "*let the outside in*" and her studio, for the most part, has no walls. Her unique timber house, by architect Gokay Deveci, received the 2004 Royal Incorporation of Architects in

Scotland (RIAS) award for the best building in Scotland. Visitors are welcome to wander around the croft, down to the shore of Loch Eriboll, where there are sculptures and ceramic installations hidden and fitted into the environment, sculptures that emerge through the long grass, heather and flowers, running across the hill, hiding behind rock and heather or bowing to the sky.

Lotte's artistic talent was recognized early and by the age of 15 she began to study with Gutte Eriksen in Denmark. At 18 she spent a year studying with Knud Jensen. At 20 she was working in potteries in Ireland and Scotland, the next year returning to Denmark to open her own workshop. By 1965, at age 21, she had already exhibited her work internationally.

Lotte's work became more and more successful and her business vision at midlife expanded to include gallery displays and commissioned works. Her inspiration has always been water and mountains. Since childhood she has lived by the sea, always out walking, pocketing stones along the way, captivated by the tides. Spending weeks at a time out of doors, on the lochs, in the mountains, often bringing back rocks to fire in her kiln, the 1300 C white heat causing alterations similar to the landscape's volcanic origins.

With success came the ability to give back to the environment which had provided both inspiration and raw materials for her art. Lotte's 1980s project was the Ultimate Rock Garden, putting her art back into the geology of the landscape. She determinedly carried ceramic sculptures into the hills and placed them on rocky outcrops around the Highlands. During this process she kept photo journals and carefully recorded the adventures to share with her followers. These pictures have since been compiled into books and many gorgeous images are posted on her website for all to see.

Lotte is a risk-taker, taking risks during the firing process of melting rocks, glass, clay, and sediment to transformation, to beauty not seen in their previous state. Lotte has also taken an occasional unintended risk. In her *Floating Stones* journal entry of Monday 15 January 2001, she described hiking on a "fantastic day" blue sky and frozen snow-covered bog and hills,

*...happy and in delight of being alive until Anders and I noticed some strange holes in the snow disappearing deep down — realizing we were walking on a huge overhang of cornices — with fear and trepidation we quietly but quickly crept back inland to safety — a little shaken...."*

*Floating Stones, 15 January 2001.*

Her art is expressed in sculptures, ceramic books, large dishes, bowls, tiles, wall panels and fountains. She has produced photo journals of her travels and art installations.

Her work is now displayed in museums in Denmark, Scotland, and in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. A documentary has been made on her life and work. The Danish National Television Company spent six days trailing her on treks into the mountains. Sorgen Ryge Petersen a well-respected Danish television journalist, travels the world making documentaries about the life styles and undertakings of people involved and absorbed in nature and the arts. This programme is about Lotte's work in relation to the environment in the north of Scotland. Her recognitions are part of an ambitious scheme to make for permanent display The Ultimate Rock Garden. The individual projects have created achievements that have been acknowledged installations in their own right with highly appraised exhibitions. Pot spots, Floating Stones, Transformations and Ceramic Books are the main presentations. The documentary programme was first screened on prime time Danish Television around Christmas followed by showings in all the Scandinavian countries and Germany. The film crew from Denmark that spent three days with Lotte Glob of the Far North Pottery has two programmes scheduled to be shown

consecutively on national Danish Television. Lotte has been asked to assist in translating the programmes into English for UK screening.

Lotte's work has an identity with nature, a belonging with nature, whether in a small garden or in a vast landscape or just between plants in a window box. Lotte spends many of her days hiking in the mountains, gathering materials for her work. Her sculptures are a metamorphosis of the raw materials she brings from the hills. She heats them up, to the molten state they would have been before they hardened on earth, and then remoulds them into other-worldly shapes: round, weather-beaten rocks of browns, blues and greens; stones which float or fly, and unknown, yet strangely familiar creatures or plants. They are symbols of nature's enduring ability to change and adapt.

They are usually to be found on exhibition outdoors in her sculpture croft. Lotte says *"My sculpture garden at Loch Eriboll was born ten thousand million years ago, for the past 36 years it has been lying dormant and uncared for, I became part of the 16 acres croft in spring 1999, and it is now beginning to evolve, slowly growing"*.

Lotte has an exceptionally outstanding CV with many unique accomplishments. In 2011 she held a stimulating exhibition, 'The Erratic's at the Mackintosh Museum Galsgow School of Art. An erratic rock is a large boulder which has been transported by a glacier, coming to rest on rock of a different nature. Lotte's work for this exhibition was taken from its outdoor location in her 'sculpture croft' in Laid Sutherland, to the Mackintosh Museum, where it came to rest on works made by Glasgow artist Nick Evans and a performance by Glasgow artist Ruth Barker. Her works on show in the Mackintosh Museum, ranged from the 1960s to present day,

*Book of the Land. Earth, air, fire and water.*

*The spirit of the highland landscape is gathered on long walks, brought back to be fused in the kiln under high heat, transformed into sculptured books, challenge our perception of the book – viewed as artefact from the future or fossilised tomes from a distant past – the intangible and ephemeral.*

## **Hamish Campbell, Durness**

### **Talks to Fiona Burnett December 2008 for Am Bratach No. 206**



IMAGE 86 HAMISH CAMPBELL, DURNESS

Shepherding is in his blood. Perhaps not surprising given that his great great grandfather was the first shepherd at Arnaboll, Hope, where his father and grandmother were born. He has sold his hardy breed of Lairg type North Country Cheviot tups as far south as Cornwall and as far north as Shetland. With fifty-four years of shepherding under his belt, Hamish Campbell, head shepherd of Balnakeil, Durness, says: "It's not fashionable nowadays." Hamish has spent his entire working life around

Cheviot sheep with the exception of two years' National Service in Cyprus, today working for the same family that he started with as a boy.

Turning the clock back to when he first started at Eriboll, in 1954, as a lad of sixteen, Hamish, born at Hope to Gaelic speaking parents John and Ruby, has seen many changes in the farming community over the years. “The biggest change is that all the squads are halved or even down to a third,” said Hamish. “There were eight shepherds in Eriboll when I started and there was a cattleman. Gradually as the income from the sheep goes down, the shepherds are going down. There’s less of you. You don’t spend as much time on the hill as you once did. You’re always working at something here or there. The people or the scarcity of people is the biggest difference. No doubt about that. There was a community in Eriboll then. There was a handyman at the lodge. It was no bother to have a ceilidh because there was plenty of people about!”

Eriboll, at that time, was owned by the redoubtable Jock Elliot, a Borders sheep farmer and practising stockman. Head shepherd was Hugh Mackay (“Hughie Fox”). According to Hamish, “Hugh liked the job done right. He was a very particular man. Very interested in his job. But much more relaxed if you went down to ceilidh and he took out his accordion! Dancing in the kitchen at Eriboll! Poor Ian [MacLeod] would have a job dancing now. There’s nobody else there!”

Hamish lived at Strathbeg, a fair distance from the roadside, where everything had to be carried in and out. No mean feat after a hard day’s work. “I had a very good landlady, Mrs Ross. She fed me well and looked after me well,” said Hamish. Talking of his former employer, Hamish remarked: “I enjoyed working for old Elliot. He gave me quite a bit of education regarding sheep. I certainly picked up a fair bit at that age, at an impressionable age. Oh aye, he had good patience for loons.” Hamish found he was encouraged to have a go at every opportunity whereas with Hugh, who was extremely particular, “you had to be about forty before you got to do anything much!”

One memory has stuck with Hamish throughout his many years of shepherding. “I remember after a day’s clipping at Eriboll. It would be about six o’ clock at night. I was going off with a cut of them that had been clipped, back to Cashel Dhu. Then I was to walk home to Strathbeg across the hills. And my sheep were in a park at the head of Loch Eriboll and old Jock Elliot’s parting words to me were, “Dinnae be late in the morning so as to take the sheep down to Eriboll.” Well it would take me three hours to get to Cashel Dhu. So I was there at nine o’clock at night. Take me an hour and a half to walk back to Strathbeg. And then I was at Eriboll at six in the morning! ‘Dinnae be late!’ Aye, there wasn’t enough time for breakfast right enough! But that was it. You just kept going.”

After Eriboll, Hamish shepherded for five years at Ribigill, Ben Loyal, and has fond memories of those days where he found the yowes to be “really good sheep. That was put down to the late Captain John Elliot. It was him that built up the stock to such a high standard.” The Elliots had a rent on Ribigill at the time. “I liked Strathbeg too. Clambering about on the rocks. The sparks flying off the rocks from the tackety boots! Young and fit and well fed. What more could you want?”

A move to Hope in 1965 gave him a new interest and it wasn’t long before he met Margaret Mair, daughter of the keeper. The couple have been married for forty years and have three daughters, Grace, Ruth and Patricia. Grace has followed in her father’s footsteps and is part-time shepherd on the estate.

Hamish later spent twenty-one years as farm manager at Altnaharra before going to Balnakeil in 1994. Having first worked for Jock Elliot, Hamish now works for his grandson, Andrew Elliot, son of the late Tom Elliot on Balnakeil Estate where there are fifty head of pure Aberdeen Angus cattle and nearly 3,000 sheep.

Over the years Hamish has certainly done his fair share of walking in all weathers. One can only imagine the sheer stamina and fitness required to hold down such a job. When transport started taking livestock down to the parks in Lairg Hamish said, "In those days the lorries were smaller and they might be carting out of Eriboll over three days whereas great artics come in today and take away six hundred or seven hundred lambs."

Has Hamish any tips on how to select a good piece of lamb from the butchers? Confessing that he eats mutton instead of lamb Hamish said, "It needs a good cover on it, plenty of gigot."

Do the thousands of tourists who stroll across Balnakeil every year ever present problems? "Ninety-nine per cent of them are no bother but there's 1% that's bloody stupid. You'll see them walking up to the cows and calves with their dogs running loose. Then they start chasing the dog and the next thing is the bairn going to rescue the dog. There's others that leave gates open and there are bright sparks that shut gates that you leave open.

Being so close to nature, one can imagine the wonderful sights while wading the hill. One day while walking with shepherd Sandy at Rhigolter, Hamish said, "It was that clear that you could actually see the houses on Harris. It was a great light altogether. That was the year there was an eclipse."

Hobbies in the past have included football and badminton. "It's a few years since I did either," said Hamish. And as a young lad at Strathbeg he was partial to a bit of fishing and shooting.

I view an impressive photograph of several tups accompanied by Hamish and Andrew Elliot at one of the Lairg sales a few years ago and ask if it takes lots of preparation to get them looking so good. "I suppose in one way it does. It takes years of breeding to get them looking the way you want. Everybody has their own style of sheep. I like a good square sheep and it takes a wee while to breed them like that. You do give them a trim and you wash their faces the day before but you don't put any artificial colouring on it or anything. And you don't overfeed them." Looking back at the photograph Hamish adds with a soft chuckle, "Aye, even the shepherds look kind of tidy there! And that didn't take long either!"

### **Ewen Robertson<sup>13</sup>**

Ewen Robertson was remembered by the local people of Melness because of his poetical works as well as his character and position. His most remembered poems were concerning the highland clearances but unfortunately after his death most of his work was destroyed but some of his poems were passed down by word of mouth and set to music and sung at celebrations and highland gatherings. Some months ago a radio programme was made from the village of Melness concerning the life and culture of the inhabitants both past and present this included a poem by Robertson sung by Joseph McKay of Talmine a popular Gaelic singer which describes the frustrations Robertson felt at the injustices done to the people. He also took part in the politics and represented the people at the Napier Commission in 1884 during those meetings he held forth at length on the subject of the clearances. In those days the people spoke Gaelic and very little English and could not always understand the rules that were laid down to them. Of a religious nature they implicitly believed what the ministers told them and followed them with a blind faith while in turn the ministers installed into them the idea that their sufferings were all part of a great plan which was to lead them later to the glories of a greater Kingdom. At that time we had evictions famine and separations through war which was the least of their troubles. The men folk believed in the right to defend their country. Ewen Robertson had his own personal tragedy. a girl he planned to marry was drowned at the Borgie River on the eve of their wedding. She was a local girl and had been visiting some friends while on her way

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<sup>13</sup> This is information submitted by Christine Mackay in 1987 to a government sponsored project.



home a storm had arisen and while crossing a swing bridge was swept into the river and drowned. Ewan Robertson never recovered from the tragedy although he still wrote his poems they gradually increased in bitterness. He turned to drink for a solace and one night while returning to Tongue just past the Ribigill a snowstorm arose and he perished. a monument is erected at the very spot he was found dead and the inscription reads

Ewen Robertson 1842 to 1895  
Bard of the clearances died at this place  
N'AIT NAN CAORACH  
BITHIDH TWATH  
CRODH\_LAOICH AIR AIRGH'N  
AIT DAMH RWADH  
In place of the sheep there will be people  
cattle at the shieling in place of stags.

### **Georgina Hansen<sup>14</sup>**

This is about people who left Melness to live another parts. Such as Georgina Hansen who was born in Talmine her mother was a Mackay she married an Englishman and his father Georgina's grandfather was Joseph Alaysius Hansom who invented what they referred to as a safety carriage and was later to be named after him the Hansom cab. It is 153 years since he registered the patent. Soon the one horse cabs with one driver sitting high up at the back where to become a familiar sight as they rattled along the cobbled streets of London. At one time there was 700 of them in the city much referred to in the Sherlock Home series. Although the cabs were used principally by the people who could not afford carriages of their own and preferred this mode of transport to the public horse drawn carriages at least one used the handsome cab Edward Prince of Wales later Edward the 7th. The Hanson continued to be a popular mode of transport right up to the advent of the petrol driven taxicab. In the meantime Hansom had sold this patent for 10,000 pounds, money which in fact he never saw.

The company who bought the patent rights got into financial difficulty and Hansom was called in to try to sort matters out for this service he was paid 300 pound the only financial reward he ever received.

To return to his earlier career he was born in York in 1803 the son of a joiner and in his youth was apprenticed to his father however showing great aptitude for design and construction he was later an apprentice to a York architect Mr. Phillips and then went into partnership with a Mr. Edward Welch and together they specialized in ecology classical architecture together in 1831 when handsome was only 27 they won an open competition for a design to the Birmingham town hall. Unfortunately it took 15 years to build and various financial problems arose in that time, bringing about the bankruptcy of the two partners. Indeed it seemed for a while that many of Hansom's projects were to run into difficulties however he worked hard to overcome these various setbacks and gradually built himself at the enviable reputation as an architect particularly in his native Yorkshire indeed his fame spread ultimately to South America where some of his buildings were exhibited.

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<sup>14</sup> This is information submitted by Christine Mackay in 1987 to a government sponsored project.

## Lennon Connection & Memorial

From the age of nine to the age of sixteen, the most famous Beatle, the late John Lennon, shared his boyhood holidays with cousins at Sangomore in Durness. The house on the croft where John Lennon spent his boyhood holidays has now been demolished and a new building is on the site. Stan Parkes, John's older cousin's stepfather's family owned the croft in Durness where the family would spend the summer. John would travel by bus and spend three weeks at the croft. John loved his holiday here and played with the local kids. Until recently there were people living in Durness, who remember playing with the young John Lennon, when he visited on holiday.



IMAGE 87 THE OLD CROFTHOUSE JOHN LENNON VISITED AS A BOY.

Stan Parkes spent eleven even years in Durness in the 1980's when he inherited the family croft. *“John used to talk frequently about his holidays in Durness and fellow Beatle Paul McCartney is reputed to have got the idea about the farmhouse on Mull listening. When the Durness Estate came on the market in the 1970's the advertisement was sent to John in New York but by the time it arrived the estate had been sold.”*

Stan drove a minibus excursion operated by Balnakeil Craft Village Community Cooperative for several summers and was very popular with the tourists retelling stories of this childhood adventures with John. Stan was working as a tourist information officer in Durness when he received a telephone call, telling him his cousin John had been killed in New York.

Durness was an area that greatly inspired Lennon returning with his son Julian, wife Yoko Ono, and her daughter Kyoko in 1969. On this occasion the family were involved in a car accident near Tongue and John was taken to the Lawson Memorial Hospital in Golspie where he received seventeen stitches.

<sup>15</sup>*Beatle John Lennon, on his arrival back in London, paid a unique compliment to the medical care he had received while at the Lawson Memorial Hospital in Golspie. “If you're going to have a car crash,” he told reporters, “try to arrange for it to happen in the Highlands. The*

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<sup>15</sup> From the Northern Times July 11 1969

*hospital there was just great.” John and his Japanese wife, Yoko, and five-year—old daughter Kyoko, left the Lawson Memorial Hospital, Golspie, last Sunday morning in grand style when they were lifted from the hospital grounds by chartered helicopter. They were heading for home in London after having spent five days in hospital, following injuries they received when their car left the road near Tongue the previous Tuesday. John sustained facial injuries requiring 17 stitches and Yoko had 14 stitches in her forehead. They stopped only to shake hands and thank Mr David Milne, the surgeon who had attended them during their stay.*

*Little Kyoko, carried by Apple director Peter Brown and wearing tartan bonnet and waistcoat, seemed in fine spirits and waved her kilted dolly to the nursing staff and teenagers there to see them off. Asked if he would like to return to the Highlands, John said he would certainly come back. “I used to come up here as a young lad, and I like the place.”*



IMAGE 88 STAN PARKES

December 12, 1980

“Beatles star John Lennon, gunned down by a deranged assassin in a New York street on Monday, used to love the peace and solitude of his aunt’s croft at Sangomore, Dumess. As a teenager, long before he became world famous as a pop star, he roamed the hills and combed the beaches at Balnakeil and Sango Sands. He used to take a sketch book and draw the croft houses and seascapes, before returning to Mrs Mimi Parkes’ holiday house to paint in his impressions of the area.” His cousin, 47-year-old Stan Parkes of Sangomore, said on Tuesday, only hours after John Lennon’s death was announced: “He was actually going to come back soon to see the family and pay us a visit. He was so happy here. He had so much freedom and leisure time no one bothered him at all, he could just wander around to his heart’s content.” Stan Parkes’ mother and John Lennon’s mother were sisters from Liverpool. When Mr Parkes’

father died, his mother remarried a dental surgeon, Mr Robert Sutherland of Edinburgh, whose family home was in Dumess. Mr Parkes' mother died in 1976, only eight months after his stepfather. Though their home had been in Edinburgh, they regularly visited Durness throughout the years, and it was during this period that John Lennon used to holiday with them. It was while on a visit to his aunt in 1969, with his second wife Yoko Ono and his young son Julian by his first marriage that the Beatle was in a serious accident.

Many Durness people telephoned or called at Mr and Mrs Parkes' home this week to express their sympathy to them on the tragic death of John Lennon. Many of them remembered him as a youngster on holiday in the village. Stan Parkes described him as a great character, always full of fun. "People are inclined to think of him as being caustic. He could be very acute and to the point, and always spoke his mind." Mr Parkes said that he and other members of the family had always been worried about John Lennon living in New York. Said his cousin: "We considered that he could have chosen to live anywhere in the world, rather than in that violent city. But he didn't see there was any danger — he was quite happy there."

In August 2002 the Durness Gardeners landscaped the area around the village hall. This was carried out with the television program Beechgrove Garden and broadcast on the 22 August 2002. Part of the garden was dedicated as a memorial to John Lennon, the only permanent commemorative to John Lennon in Scotland in the form of an honouring garden and Stan was in Durness for the occasion. The event was given much media coverage TV, radio and press and there were articles on the World Wide Web. The memorial is a set of three standing stones, created by local craftsman Neil Fuller, which feature lyrics from the song In My Life (There are places I remember) on the Rubber Soul album. Attending with Stan Parkes, was another of Lennon's cousins David who visited Durness with John on numerous occasions. Stan Parkes moved to Largs (a town on the Firth of Clyde in North Ayrshire, Scotland, about 33 miles (53 km) from Glasgow) after leaving Durness on health grounds in the late 1980's. He was featured in the programme:

*"This memorial from the people of Durness, and of course Beechgrove Garden, is great. John would be thrilled with this tribute and I know it would have meant more to him than any fancy statue in a hotel or whatever in Liverpool. He really loved Durness and he would love this tribute."*

### **John Lennon Northern Lights Festival**

Durness was host to a remarkable event. The three main days of the first Northern Lights Festival provided performances of the highest quality. Throughout the village several shows took place providing a range of artistic presentations in a variety of fields. Poetry, painting and photographic exhibitions, book reading, children's entertainment, street entertainment including a magician, stilt walkers, clowns, plays were performed, light projections on the beach, music of all descriptions and people wandering around enjoying the sights and activity on offer from venues as diverse as Smoo Cave, Durness primary School, Sango Sands Oasis and Loch Croispol Bookshop to name a few. Amongst the famous and acknowledged experts in their field were local specialist Jim Johnston who gave an open air talk on the stars above Durness accompanied by projections displayed on the historic Balnakeil House, Graham Bruce told stories of village ghosts and myths. Many groups were playing a diverse selection of music in the Sango Sands Oasis amongst them a popular young group from Stornoway "Face the West". On Saturday afternoon this band gave an open air show and for two hours they had the area of Sangomore rocking and reeling.

The main ticket events were all held in the village hall and this venue was packed to capacity for some of the highest quality acts. On Friday night the Festival was started in the music sphere

by Ceilidh performer Fergie MacDonald and Fergie and his band played a selection of well recognised tunes that got the festival off in a true highland tradition. Fergie closed his selection with a tune he had specifically written for the occasion and titled “Durness” Fergie was asked by Julia Bard, John Lennon’s sister and Donnie Munro, singer from the popular band Runrig, independently if they may write lyrics for the tune. Both have been given copies and it is possible that there will be two different song versions one in Gaelic the other in English.

The excellent performance of the duo Nizlopi followed. They can best be described as of comprising of Luke Concanon and John Parke. Luke handles the heartfelt lyrics, the endlessly soulful vocals, on his beloved guitar, while JP sets jaws-dropping with his masterful double-bass playing, his breath taking human beat-boxing, and a little extra guitar playing. Together these two young men created a genre defying sound all of their own with a huge following around the UK and spreading across the world. The performance poet John Cooper Clarke was on stage for an hour and gave a selection of performance poetry in his own unique manor. For those present this was a once in a lifetime experience captivating the audience in his stand-up-oriented affair with his wit and humour. King Creosote closed the first night with their own distinctive and sublime Scottish songs.

The ticketed events on Saturday were started with an interview by Steve Turner, one of the top Beatles experts, of Julia Baird John Lennon’s sister and David Birch John’s cousin. Taking the place of the advertised Eclipse Strings was a Canadian singer Alison Crowe. This singer songwriter had the audience in wonder and admiration. Along with her own excellent compositions she performed songs by Joni Mitchell and the Beatles. Words cannot describe the atmosphere and appreciation she created in the hall as the audience was transported to places unknown. Not only a wonderful singer this lady moved among the crowd enjoying all the other acts and with her sparkling personality did not fail to impress all those she contacted with. The finally on Saturday was a Beatle Prom from Sir Peter Maxwell Davis Master of the Queen's Music, who presented a world premiere of a Beatles Prom with the Royal Academy of Music. Sir Peter also made a rare public performance of his playing.

The final night at the village hall was a spectacular as the preceding times. Julie Fowlis opened the evening with her band providing some quality Gaelic signing. Julie gave a polished performance to a packed hall. The energetic Blazing Fiddles followed with a selection of tunes that had the hall moving with vibrant energy. The final act was one of legendary outstanding ability. Donnie Munro captivated the audience with his personal touch and informal repertoire. He performed new and old, well recognised songs and had the audience singing along. The last song in the encore was “Nowhere Man” a Lennon and McCartney composition appropriate to close the first Durness Northern Lights John Lennon Festival.

Not all the artists were performing at the main ticketed events in the village hall and although all were admired John Lennon’s first group the Quarrymen were in popular demand. They performed at two locations during the weekend but their appearance in Smoo Cave was one of a transformation as they described it from “Cavern to Cave” and this they agreed would have been an agreeable shift for John.

This is just a summary of what happened in Durness that weekend and for those that were there it will be a memorable time. Something or someone beyond all the controllable factors must have wished this to succeed for since Friday Durness had more consecutive days of sunny weather than can be remembered! Those visiting for the first time were astounded by the scenery and beauty (also reminding local people of the splendour in which they live) and this without doubt contributed to the wonderful experience that was created during the Festival weekend. To make such an event happen, furthermore a resounding success requires a dedicated team of people. Firstly the extended Lennon Family who has connections with

Durness since before there was any famous Beatle in their family gave a blessing and support to the occasion. North Highland Tourism Forum, after consulting with the Durness Community commissioned a festival director Mike Merritt based in Lewis and assisted with Carol Miller seconded for two days a week from Dounray, and they must be congratulated for the professional and well organised event. Supported by an army of local volunteers this event was nothing short of incredible.

**John Lennon Northern Lights Festival Durness – 28<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> September 2007**



IMAGE 89 THE QUARRYMEN JOHN LENNON’S FIRST BAND IN SMOO CAVE

**Programme**

**Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> September**

Start Time	Finish Time	Event	Detail	Venue
1900	2200	An evening of highland poetry writing and music	Buffet Supper Included. Separate Ticket Event. £5	Loch Croispol Book Shop

**Friday 28<sup>th</sup> September**

Start Time	Finish time	Event	Detail	Venue
1000	1800	Mike McCartney’s Photographic Show Exhibition	Special Exhibition of Live 8	Loch Croispol Book Shop
1100	1700	Sculpture Croft	Spread over several acres and taking nearly a decade to	Lotte Glob’s House, Laid

			achieve, the internationally acclaimed amazing sculptures.	
1500	1700	David Boyd & Monique Sliedrecht Art Exhibition Opens	Two of the north's most outstanding artists	School
1545		Peter Howson Art Exhibition Opens for the weekend	Scotland's greatest painter depicts Lennon. A joint exhibition with Frank McFadden, the best new talent in years.	Loch Croispol Book shop
1700	1815	John Lennon Plaque Unveiling	John's family & friends mark where he spent many happy times in Durness	Croft House, Sango More
1930	2030	Nizlopi	Main ticket event	Village Hall (main hall)
2050	2140	Mr. Hudson & The Library	Main ticket event	Village Hall (main hall)
2200	2300	John Cooper Clark	Main ticket event	Village Hall (main hall)
2300	Late	Open Mic Night	The festival club, open to all musicians. Come and enjoy the craic	Smoo Hotel
2330	0030	King Creosote	Main Ticket Event	Village Hall (main hall)
2330	0030	Sky watch with Jim Johnston	Local astronomer with unique open air talk on the stars above Durness accompanied by projections displayed on historic house	Balnakeil House

### Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> September

Start Time	Finish Time	Event	Detail	Venue
0800	1730	Dog Trials	Durness Open Sheepdog Trials. Presentation of Lennon Trophy at 1715hrs.	Keodale
0915	1015	Breakfast Stories with Donnie O'Rourke & Kevin MacNeil	Song, poetry & story telling from two of Scotland's greatest writers	Loch Croispol Book shop
1000	1030	Mr. Boom	The well-known TV children's entertainer	Village Hall (main hall)
1000	1700	Beatles Exhibition	Rare and previously unseen memorabilia of the Fab Four in Scotland	School
1000	1800	Mike McCartney's	Special Exhibition of Live 8	Loch Croispol Book Shop

		Photographic Exhibition		
1000	1800	Peter Howson Art Exhibition	Scotland's greatest painter depicts Lennon. A joint exhibition with Frank McFadden, the best new talent in years.	Loch Croispol Book shop
1030	1100	Nizlopi & Alistair McIntosh	The pop duo rap with one of the most influential writers in Scotland	Smoo Cave
1100	1230	Boogie Band	Bang on Boogie, one man band – big sound	Village Square & various locations
1100	1300	Face The West	The amazing young Celtic folk band	Tourist Info Centre
1100	1700	Sculpture Croft	Spread over several acres and taking nearly a decade to achieve, the internationally acclaimed amazing sculptures.	Lotte Glob's, Laid
1115	1215	Steve Turner Beatles Talk	One of the top Beatles experts and Bono's biographer, public talk	Village Hall (main hall)
1230	1330	Kevin MacNeil & Willie Campbell	Former Astrid guitarist collaborates with Scotland's brightest young poet	Smoo Cave
1300	1330	Derek Yeaman Talk	Film writer tells of the day John and Yoko crashed their car at Tongue	School
1345	1415	Mr Boom	TV kids entertainer in the cave	Smoo Cave
1400	1440	Rachel Mayfield	Outstanding rock and Jazz singer	Sango Sands Oasis
1400	1500	Julia Baird, Stan Parkes & David Birch	John's sister and cousins talk about John. Main ticket event	Village Hall (main hall)
1500	1630	Boogie Band	Bang on Boogie – one man band – big sound	Village Square & Various locations
1510	1550	Tom Brookes	Top singer all the way from Liverpool	Sango Sands Oasis
1530	1630	Steve Turner	This time Steve reads from his children's poetry	Loch Croispol Bookshop
1600	1630	Meet The Quarrymen	Meet John's original band	School
1620	1700	The Boy Who Trapped the Sun	Great new singing talent from Lewis, tipped for the top	Sango Sands Oasis
1700	1745	Mr Boom	Final show in the Cave	Smoo Cave



1700	1800	Alistair McIntosh	The writer who inspired Thom Yorke among others	Loch Croispol Bookshop
1730	1810	The Quarrymen	John's original band	Sango Sands Oasis
1840	1925	The Injuns	The hottest band from Skye	Sango Sands Oasis
1900	2000	Carol Ann Duffy	Main ticket event	Village Hall (main hall)
2000	2045	Popup	One of the best bands of 2007-NME	Sango Sands Oasis
2030	2110	Eclipse Strings	Main ticket event	Village Hall (main hall)
2100	2200	Purple Melon	One of the "best and good looking bands around"	Sango Sands Oasis
2130	2230	Sir Peter Maxwell Davies Beatles Prom	Main ticket event	Village Hall (main hall)
2230	2330	Rushmore	Fresh from supporting Simply Red and James Morrison	Sango Sands Oasis
2230	late	Open Mic night	The festival club, open to all musicians, come and enjoy the craic	Smoo Cave Hotel
2300	0200	Rave in the cave	Inverness's Motion night club comes to the cave. With amazing light projections with by Gavin Lockhart. Numbers strictly limited to 150	Smoo Cave
0000	0200	Lucy in the Sky	One of Europe's top Beatles tribute bands all the way from Germany	Sango Sands Oasis

### Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> September

Time From	Time To	Event	Detail	Venue
0945	1030	Film – The Walk	Murray Watts' story of the path to freedom	Village Hall (small hall)
1000	1700	Beatles Exhibition	Rare and previously unseen memorabilia of the Fab Four in Scotland	School
1000	1800	Mike McCartney's photographic exhibition	Special Exhibition of Live 8	Loch Croispol Book Shop
1000	1800	Peter Howson Art Exhibition	Scotland's greatest painter depicts Lennon. A joint exhibition with Frank	Loch Croispol Book shop

			McFadden, the best new talent in years.	
1045	1145	Graham Bruce Story Telling	Tales of village ghosts and folklore.	Balnakeil Church
1100	1200	Film – Bringing Home The War	Tim Bleasdale’s stunning, controversial debut about 9/11	Village Hall (small hall)
1100	1230	Magic – Professional slight of hand artist and human salamander	10 minutes of magic – everywhere! Last UK performance before Las Vegas	Various locations
1100	1330	Michael Horovitz	Hear the legendary Beat poet at Britain’s remote lighthouse. Price includes ferry, minibus and packed lunch. Tickets £15 – only 28 places. Book at the Book Shop	Cape Wrath
1100	1700	Sculpture Croft	Spread over several acres and taking nearly a decade to achieve, the internationally acclaimed amazing sculptures.	Lotte Glob, Laid
1200	1300	Geoff Baker	MAIN TICKET EVENT. Paul McCartney’s ex publicist tells of John and Paul’s relationship	Village Hall (main hall)
1230	1330	Ken McNab, Beatles in Scotland	Scotland’s foremost Beatles expert	School
1300	1340	Todd Gordon Band	Scotland’s top jazzier with special guests	Sango Sands Oasis
1300	1700	Clown & Juggler	Street entertainers various locations	Village Square
1300	1700	Boogie Band	Bang on Boogie. One man band – big sound.	Village square & various
1400	1430	Julia Baird Book signing	Book signing	Loch Croispol Bookshop
1410	1450	Rachel Mayfield	This time Rachel turns her voice to jazz	Sango Sands Oasis
1520	1600	Joe Stilgoe	Top jazz vocalist from London	Sango Sands Oasis
1530	1700	Magic – Professional slight of hand artist and	10 minutes of Magic –he’s back again!	Various locations

		human salamander		
1600	1630	The Quarry Men	The rockers swap the cavern for the cave	Smoo Cave
1600	1700	Michael Russell	Environment minister talks about his books including the Lennon inspired Next Big Thing	Loch Croispol Book shop
1630	1710	Allison Crowe	One of Canada's best singers with special Lennon inspired performance	Sango Sands Oasis
1700	1730	Play	TV actor Andrew Harrison with the one man play about the life of John Muir	Smoo Cave
1740	1825	Eclipse Strings	Some of the best string players in the country show they can rock too	Sango Sands Oasis
1900	1945	Blue Ridge	Durness supergroup rocks the house	Sango Sands Oasis
1900	2000	Julie Fowlis	Main ticket event	Village Hall (main hall)
2000	0100	Projections on Sango Bay	Gavin Lockhart's fantastic light show on John's favourite beach	Sango Bay
2015	2100	Foxface	Top Glasgow folk rock trio	Sango Sands Oasis
2030	2145	Blazin Fiddles	Main Ticket Event	Village Hall (main hall)
2130	2215	Face the West	Outstanding Celtic folk rock band	Sango Sands Oasis
2215	2330	Donnie Munro	Main Ticket Event	Village hall (main hall)
2245	2345	Our Lunar Activities	Top rockers close the show in the Oasis	Sango Sands Oasis
2300	late	Open Mic Night	The festival club, open to all musicians. Come and enjoy the craic	Smoo Hotel

Some of Britain's greatest artists travelled to the highland village to pay homage to John Lennon in what was one of the most extraordinary festivals ever to be staged in the country. The John Lennon Northern Lights three-day festival was endorsed by and attended by several members of the ex-Beatle's family including his sister Julia Baird.

*"John really loved Durness and would be very pleased that his influence was being celebrated with this festival," said Ms Baird. "I am delighted to be involved in what is a high quality event which has taste and respect at its core. We are all looking forward very much to coming again to a place that meant so much to my brother."*

Message from Stan Parkes, John's oldest surviving relative who shared his holidays with his cousin in Durness.

*"John would be both delighted and surprised that he had inspired such a great festival in a part of the world he loved," said Mr Parkes. "John was more than a musician – he loved painting, drawing and writing in Durness and that is also well reflected in the festival's arts. Few places meant more to John than Durness. It was often when he was at his happiest."*

A memorial commemorating Lennon's links with Durness was unveiled by Mr Parkes during The John Lennon Northern Lights Festival. The memorial is on the side of the croft house where John spent some of his childhood holidays.

Message from Cynthia and Julian Lennon

*Sorry we can't be with you. We wish you every success with the first John Lennon Northern Lights Festival!*

Message from Sir George Martin

*"The spectacular Northern Highlands have been an inspiration to many over the years. I have always enjoyed my trips to the area and know that friends of mine have done likewise. Although I am unable to attend the festival, I wish you all a great deal success.*

Message from Yoko Ono Lennon

*We did have had an unfortunate accident in Durness. However I have a very sweet memory of Durness for having made the trip there with John who strongly wished to share his childhood memory of Scotland with me, and had even decided at the time that he would drive the car himself, to make the trip a very private one. I would most certainly love to lend my cooperation to this splendid venture to bring the World's attention to Scotland, the most beautiful and magical Country, with John's name, his memory and a lovely one of mine, as well."*

A Message from the Lennon Family

John Lennon Festival

*We realise what a tremendous effort all the Villagers of Durness put in behind the scenes to make things be such a wonderful three day event. We do appreciate what hard work went in to it being such a wonderful event and thank everyone concerned.*

*Stan, Julia and David*

Festival Awards

John Lennon Northern Lights Festival 2007 was nominated in two categories, Best New Festival competing with another 15 and 13 in the Fan friendly awards. Announcement made at an event in London on Tuesday 6th November the John Lennon Northern Lights festival was awarded the UK's best new festival award.

*Yoko said in an email to the organisers "I'm so happy that the festival has proved to be such a success and that you won the award for Best New Festival, especially in the face of so much competition. I have friends in Scotland who always tell me when people are writing nice things about John, and I'd like to thank the villagers of Durness and the people of Scotland for the warmth they have shown and the love and respect they have given to John's memory Please enjoy the ceilidh on Friday. I think dancing is a great way to celebrate both the success of your venture and also to remember such a great artistic and humanitarian spirit as John. With love, Yoko Ono Lennon."*

Stan kept in touch with the people of Durness after leaving sending copies of notes from John. "I am forbidden from ever publishing or even making anything public about John as I am under threat of legal action from Yoko Ono who has all the rights of anything to do with John or his name" he said. Sadly Stan Parkes died aged 82 in 2016.

## Stories

### Plate

In October 2003 I received an e mail from Rhona Dickinson.

“I have been trying to find out more information for you but it is slow going as my father is quite elderly and everything takes time.



IMAGE 90 A PLATE WITH A MYSTERY

My great grandfather Alexander Murray came north to Durness from the Invershin area near Lairg bringing with him a number of families during the clearances in Sutherland. He was apparently a clergyman of some sort. Many of the families sailed for foreign climes and about 16 families I am told settled in Durness with small holdings.

I have the plate that was presented to my great grandmother and I have taken some photographs of it. It is a round scalloped engraved silver plate with feet about 12 inches in diameter.”

The inscription reads

THIS PIECE OF PLATE WAS PRESENTED TO MRS MURRAY IN  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE AFFECTIONATE REMEMBRANCE IN WHICH SHE  
IS HELD BY ATTCHED FRIENDS IN DURNESS 23RD OF MAY 1874.

I have been unable to find any further information regarding this. No school or church records seem to exist.

### **Eminent Natives of the Parish**

General Hugh Mackay the inventor of the fixed-bayonet, whose father was a branch of the Reay family and resided some time in Borley and thereafter at Scourie (Scowrie) in Edderachillis who distinguished himself in the Civil Wars in the reign of King Charles I.

The MacDonald Collection of Piping music was published by the son of elder Murdo MacDonald, an influential minister of Durness. Joseph MacDonald was the first musician to commit bagpipe music successfully to paper. This brother Patrick published the collection in Argyll in the 1760's. Although known as the Argyll Collection, much of the music was inspired by the province of Strathnaver and many of the tunes have a direct link to Durness.

There is a local story that James Munro, 5th President of the United States of America (1817-1825), was of Durness ancestry, and that the mother of famous philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie was born in the Durness area.



IMAGE 91 AVRO ANSON T20 TRAINER LAY ON THE SANDY BEACH AT BALNAKEIL AFTER CRASH LANDING IN 1952.

### **Crash Landing**

An Avro Anson T20 Trainer lay on the sandy beach at Balnakeil after crash landing in 1952. Willie Morrison writes I remember well the Anson that made an emergency landing on Balnakeil Beach, after running out of fuel while on a training flight from either RAF Kinloss, or Dalcross, now Inverness Airport, which was reopened as an emergency aircrew training base during the Korean War. It was the first aeroplane I actually touched.

## **Bodach Bh'aicle. The man with the bicycle<sup>16</sup>**

The year was 1916. The First World War was into its second year and along with the lonely shores of the North Coast of Sutherland many had been the stories of mysterious figures coming to spy out our countryside prospecting for a possible invasion. But the most mysterious of them all was the appearance of Bodach Bh'aicle the man with the bicycle. Which left most of the lasting impression on the people's minds, and a mystery which remains unsolved to this day.

I will relate this story as passed on by our parents. Mr. Munro the ferryman answered the call of duty as usual when he saw the flag being hoisted to the point across the stretch of water which at that time separated Tongue from Melness. This was the signal used to indicate that someone wanted to be rowed across the Kyle rather than making the tiresome journey round the Kyle. On arriving at the point Mr. Munro was surprised to find not the usual crofter returning from a trip to Tongue, not a soldier home on leave, but a well-dressed gentleman in civilian clothes complete with hat and raincoat and that is side a bicycle, there were not many bikes around at that time, which held an unusual looking headlamp.

When they crossed to Melness Mr. Munro with customary hospitality of the Highlander felt in spite of the alien feeling this man inspired in him he offered him some refreshment. The stranger accepted his invitation willingly but seemed reluctant to disclose information about himself and for some peculiar reason kept his hat well down over his face. However on finishing his meal he graciously thanked his host asked for directions to the village and inquired particularly about the whereabouts of the local post office from which he wanted to dispatch some letters. He then told Mr. Munro that he would be obliged to him if he could ferry him back to Tongue. But Mr. Munro waited in vain the worthy gentleman never reappeared at the ferry. Bodach Bh'aicle rode his bicycle down the miles to the post office posted his letters and then continued to the far end of the district. By this time night was falling and although his journey through the village had been duly observed and his strange appearance noted by the villagers no one saw him arrive at his destination.

The story of Bodach Bh'aicle might have ended there but for the most astonishing incident that occurred. The following day two boys were ferreting for rabbits when to their amazement their ferret came up with a large packet containing a substantial amount of pound notes. Rushing home in great jubilation to tell their parents a further surprise almost tripped them up, an abandoned bicycle. The news set the whole village agog. The ferryman story of the man with the bicycle was told over and over again and it was carefully noted there was no trace of the unusual looking headlamp. What was the answer? Was it possible that an enemy picked up this strange man from the Port of Vasco nearby? What his appearance and disappearance connected with the sinking of the *Hampshire* in the Pentland Firth on that very night? The mystery has never been solved and leaves us intrigued to this day.

## **Gregor's House**

When my sisters and I were young we used to help my father when he had to take the sheep to the hill especially after the lambing in the springtime. We had to go as far as the other side of Ben Hutig down to Freisgill which was quite a long way from our house in Talmine. On the way back we used to sit and eat our sandwiches and my father would start to tell us stories. The one we liked best was about a ruined house which was on the way to Freisgill the one my father referred to as Gregor's House. At one time a man called Gregor lived there with his family, we

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<sup>16</sup> The following in this section is information submitted by Christine Mackay in 1987 to a government sponsored project.

can only assume that he worked as a shepherd for the farmer at Melness. My father told us that when he was a young lad he used to pass there with his father who told him this story.

James McKay lived at West Strathan he knew Gregor and used to visit him as a young man when he took his sheep over Ben Hutig. Years past Gregor died, the house was deserted and fell into disrepair. James's got married and had a family of his own. One day while the crofters were gathering their sheep for the clipping James went to give his neighbour a hand and while they were on their way home he said to his friend that he would like to go and have a look round Gregor's old house where he spent many happy hours as a young man. His friend replied you go and have a look and I'll just round up this sheep and jokingly added but just watch out in case Gregor comes through the wall while you're in there. At that James walked down to the old house and carried on gathering the sheep. After a while there was no sign of James returning so his friend lost patience and began to whistle still there was no response so he went down to the old house and found James lying on the floor semiconscious, all he could do was point to the door and kept on repeating Gregor come through there. Luckily with a few crofters near at hand they were able to take James home to West Strathan and put him to bed where he lay in a semi coma for days. His family were deeply distressed and had feared that he might never recover but gradually the strength returned and he lived for many years after that but he never again took his sheep to the old pastures at Ben Hutig and he never mentioned what happened that day in Gregor's House. This is a true story Gregor was a grand uncle of my mothers, the ruins of the house are still there but no one since has heard seen any ghosts in or around the place.

### **Christmas Past**

Christmas was spent very quietly in the Highlands it was a festival more for women and especially the children who had their holidays and their Christmas party to look forward to. Life went on much as usual, there was no public holidays, the women folk enjoyed exchanging simple gifts with their families and friends their houses modestly decorated with cards and bunches of holly on the picture frames, mistletoe was not in or on the pictures in those days so it was unheard of. The real big event was the Christmas party for which teachers and parents worked hard during the year and it was their credit that the children lacked for nothing and that everything was well up to today's standards. Parents accompanied their children when possible, enjoyed their tea and cakes listened to the carols but above all showed the children's joy in the magic of Santa and his presence. With Christmas over the man came into their own. Women accepted this as the men's due after their hard work all year and although not always wholeheartedly looking forward to the event they worked hard to make it a success. It was after all a chance for neighbours to meet and share a song perhaps or a blether

Preparations began after Christmas there was usually a sheep and sometimes a pig fattened up for the occasion the sheep's blood was reserved for black puddings. The day before New Year was spent in preparations, baking, cooking and cleaning. New Year's Eve the mutton was roasted the children made their ginger wine. New Year's Day began with the traditional breakfast which was consisted of freshly made black puddings bacon and egg nothing ever tasted as good as the homemade black puddings then after dinner the men of the house, after dressing in Sunday best took their bottle of whisky and set out to pay their respects to friends. One glass was used for the company, the first drink offered to the lady of the house who accepted it along with the good wishes which accompanied it she then put the glass to her lips and handed it back whereupon it was passed around the gentleman who drank it with goodwill, there was no need for water or lemonade as the whisky was drank neat in the small glasses and it downed with relish and as the evening wore on the men gathered round shared a joke sang a Gallic song and talked of all times and how their fathers spent new year etcetera. The woman



still went quietly about their duties it was the tradition once the dinner was over for the table to be cleared and after washing up the table was laid in the parlour with plates of cold meat and ham and baking fruitcake shortbread black bun dishes were washed and replaced on the table as the company celebrations went on until after midnight but next day men were at their work as usual. The woman cleared up their cottages, the word hangover was not recognised in the Gallic language.

### **Seimas Na Hari**

In the old days in Melness and surrounding districts it was necessary for the crofters to go to Bettyhill to sell their animals. The market was called Feill Farr (For Sale) and the old people had many stories about their adventures walking there to sell their animals. There was one in particular called Seumas and Senoid who had an old cow to sell. The poor animal was long past her best but the old people were loath to part with her. now they were not able to work the croft and decided Bronnag would have to go so Seumas dressed in his best bowler hat moleskin coat and railway scarf the young fry of the district were alerted and eventually Bronnag had a rope around her neck and was on the road led by Seumas preceded by a group of willing lads and lassies with their reach the ferry where after a few mistakes Seumas and Bronnag were disembarked at Tongue Pier.

From there they had to walk the many miles to Bettyhill. Seumas when he eventually made it to Bettyhill was late on arrival so that by that time the buyers having made their sale were having a refreshment and didn't look too kindly to Bronnag lean and hungry frame.

However Seumas fell in with some tinkers of the Stewart clan and one of them had a few drams and was impressed with Seumas's story that Bronnag was in calf and parted with three pounds. So the deal was made but Seumas relieved at getting rid of the old cow and with a little money in his pocket decided to get drunk with the tinkers. One of them Alistair Stewart was well known as a fighting man made a few insulting remarks about Seumas cow whereupon he took umbrage and challenged the tinker. A fight broke out and poor Seumas got the worst of it and there was more drams more arguments ensued with the result that it was three days before Seumas arrived back in Melness. In the meantime Senoid was waiting patiently at home for two nights she sat up while the neighbours wrapped in black shrouds kept her company and pondered on the fate of Seumas and Bronnag. The third night she decided to go to bed and in the early hours she heard a stramash at the door Seumas had returned no Bronnag and no money he had managed to hang on to 6 pennies to pay his fare on the ferry boat. The neighbors know found out what had transpired between the two on his arrival but next day Seumas was busy relating his cronies with the story of how he had thrashed big Alastair Stewart the tinker.

### **Folklore**

Robbie and Betty were neighbours from Melness Betty was an old maid Robbie had been married but his wife died and they had no family. Robbie was good to Betty helping her with odd jobs about the house and she in return would invite him in to share a meal with her. Their friendship blossomed over the years. Betty had an old aunt and Kirkcaldy who used to send her fruit parcels occasionally and New Year a bottle of Sherry and a tin of shortbread arrived without fail.

In these days people did not have much to put in a parcel to send but that problem was solved by killing a hen and plucking it and posting it so that there was a general massacre among the poultry about Christmas then the post would arrive with the parcels of shortbread etcetera. the parcels from their friends were eagerly looked forward to. However Betty seemed to be getting more than her share of parcels because neighbours who were noisy and used to speculate about the couple was said to be having sounds of mirth at times and if they happen to drop in there

was empty glasses around. Betty always said very quietly it was just what was left over from the Kirkcaldy bottle which soon became a kind of joke in the neighbourhood. People were apt to say to each other if there was a dram going "*och it is only a drop left in the Kirkcaldy bottle.*" Most jokes and highland villages are very often about drams or ministers.

Another joke concerning Betty was her box bed, her dwelling house consisted of a kitchen and bedroom the bed was boxed in and a wide shelf put above it where she used to keep her little nick knacks, hats and fur boots etcetera and maybe a drop of whisky would be lying there at times. Everybody knew about Betty's shelf because at one time Robbie was surprised by somebody as he came out of the bedroom and he very quickly explained that he was only helping repairing Betty's shelf and nobody would doubt that as Betty was very prim and proper and very genteel in her ways.

They were a popular couple although there was a question about their relationship and sometimes insisted a snide remark would be passed. However eventually poor Betty passed away and who was more fitting to sit up with the remains than her neighbour Robbie. Robbie's companion was a younger man called Murdo, he was very kind and willing to help people especially older people but he was well known for his tricks and people used to be wary of him in a certain extent. He and Robbie had to sit through the long night passing the time and having a quiet dram and a smoke, naturally they spoke about the deceased. "Do you think she had any money?" Murdo inquired, "Well" said Robbie, "she could have done I think her aunt Kirkcaldy left her a bit", "well where do you think she would keep it" quizzed Murdo. Robbie pointed to the shelf above her. "Well let's have a look" said Murdo. Robbie, well used to the contents of the shelf decided to explore. In the meantime Murdo who had been present when the old lady had been laid out noticed that the women who were attending the remains had difficulty in closing one eye so while Robbie closing one. While Robbie was rummaging Murdo pulled down the sheet and shouted "for God's sake Robbie she's watching you" Robbie looked down at his old friend staring up with one accusing eye and nearly collapsed on top of her. Murdo thereupon went outside and got a small stone in which he placed upon the eye closing it then drew up the sheet and left Betty in peace the contents on the shelf were not interfered the remainder of that night.

### **Scourie gets T.V.**

#### **An article from the Press and Journal in August 1964**

In August 1964 the enterprise of the inhabitants in a remote highland village has brought by TV to their lonely Glen. People of Scourie with a population of about 100 working with picks and shovels in their spare time had built a do it yourself receiving station a high mast on a hill top and a mile of underground pipeline. They had defeated the high mountain barriers that previously made television reception for them just a dream. It all started with a club headed by two housewives. The 13 members each paid 13 pound for materials and then local postman, barman, forester and others got down to the task of laying on piped television. They cut a route through rocks and heather for the pipeline and erected the mast high on a hill. Electric boosters were attached to the pipe which has separate branches leading to each home with a TV set. The club has their own volunteer inspection team two villagers who make regular cheques to ensure that pipe and mast are in good condition. Each member pays 7 shillings and sixpence a year for maintenance said the village postmaster Mr. John MC feel club members worked for four weeks. It was tough work with pick and shovel. Most of the ground was rocky. A GPO engineer working nearby supervised the technical work. We received BBC One and we are all delighted. Television has made an immense impression on our small community. We are not pirate. We are licenced and registered as a privately owned receiving station. The system is connected to a hydroelectric mean and fitted with metres. Other districts will be given proper TV through

commercial companies but as far as I know we are the only ones to achieve it on our own. Said the GP official in Edinburgh it is an amazing bit of initiative I've never heard of this happening before.

### **Old Style Christmas Parties**

In 1900 the first mention of a Christmas party appeared in the Scourie school log book. January the 5th on Friday the school had to be prepared for a Christmas tree entertainment and in consequence no school was kept. New Year old style was still kept here till about 1908. During the years of the first war the party took the form of a concert with the pupils doing their party pieces. Mrs Munro remembers that she always got a new dress from Davidson's in Lairg for the occasion. The children got tea and buns and were given an apple and an orange to take home with them. In the 1930s the parties were still much the same. Mrs Fowler recalls that Mr. Fraser the head teacher always played the piano at the party. The late Mr. John Matheson and the late Mr Hugh MacLeod provided the music for the parties in Fanagmore School. The children got apples oranges sweets and buns remembers John Angus MacLeod. In 1936 the school party and one proposed by the whole committee were combined and Mrs McFarlane diluted gifts for the seven children aged from three to five years.

### **Old Time Weddings in Scourie**

Wedding receptions were usually held in the bride's home with a dance in the hall or library to follow, sometimes in this school. Music for dancing was usually a local piper and someone else to play the boxie. At the brides home a fire was built outside for cooking the meal and it was quite usual to use the big pot that was used for heating the water for the weekly washing to roast the meet in. There was always broth and trifle as well as the roast meat and no doubt there would have been plenty of drams too. Mrs Johan Munro remembers that the late Alec Mackenzie and Neil McLeod took the bride to the church in a thaelon for the first wedding that she attended.

Rice was used instead of confetti and on one occasion a lady got so excited that she threw the bowl as well as the rice fortunately no one was hurt. Hugh Mackay who is still a schoolboy when he first attended a wedding the ceremony took place in the church and then the guests walked in couples from there to the shieling for the reception. It was a very stormy day but what he remembers most is the fact that he was coupled with an old lady and had to sit with her at the reception.

## Fishing, Durness Lochs and Shooting

Fishing has always been an important source of food and money. Inshore lobster, crab, scallop and prawn shellfish are activities carried out by a few of the crofters to supplement their incomes. There are one or two small fishing vessels harbored at Rispond and some catches are landed and transported south. There is no large-scale commercial fishing from Durness but some people are employed at the harbour and fishing fleets from Kinlochbervie from time to time. Mackerel, herring, and halibut are the most common. Salmon are caught wild usually for immediate consumption and one or two local spots are known for easy poaching. The common Winkle (*Littorina littorea*) is occasionally harvested for selling for consumption. It is widely distributed on most of the local rocky shores attached to rocks and weeds. The high and pointed shell is usually dark greyish black.

This area has many celebrated fishing lochs especially those on limestone which are ideal for trout fishing. There is also some salmon and sea fishing. The local proprietors control fresh water angling on the inshore lochs and permits can be obtained. Fly-fishing only is allowed and the trout fishing is of a very high standard. The four Durness limestone lochs located on the north coast of Scotland, in the county of Sutherland which vary greatly in their character and size of trout and is the place to go for challenging trout angling in gin clear limestone waters. The lochs produce wild brown trout of unmatched quality. The limestone lochs of the



IMAGE 92 BANK AND BOAT FISHING ON THE LIMESTONE LOCHS LOCH CROISPOL

Durness peninsula are world famous with unique brown trout renowned for their size and fighting characteristics. They are found in any of the four limestone lochs. With water crystal clear and an abundant natural food supply each loch has unique features offering a different challenge. They vary in their look and feel but all share similar characteristics: an alkaline

limestone source; crystal clear water; generally shallow with a few deep holes; prolific insect life; challenging and often difficult fishing with superb quality wild brown trout. This area has a famous name in the trout angling world. A geological treasure from the angling perception resulted in a large area of limestone being exposed around Durness consequently the waters around the area are alkaline, a rich and fertile environment where trout grow fit and large. Durness is uniquely special in that the lochs sit out on a semi peninsular of limestone surrounded by peat and gneiss studded hills. The area can be a bleak corner of mainland Britain and Durness is a wild and windy place but offers the most exquisite turquoise blue waters. The lochs here, Borralie, Caladail, Lanlish and Croispol are classic challenging waters; anglers need dexterity here for success. The call of these lochs is powerful and gripping with anglers returning to them every year in their quest. The trout are smooth, extremely well fed (the caddis alone can be 2 inches long never mind the shrimps and snails!), and they grow to excellent average weights of 1.5lb and are caught as big as 5lb plus. The season runs from April to September the fishing is controlled by the Keoldale Sheepstock Club. The rights for part of the Loch Croispol, owned by the Church of Scotland are renewed to the highest offer bi-annually.

### **Loch Croispol**



IMAGE 93 LOCH CROISPOL

Loch Croispol is nearly one kilometre long and supplied by subterranean streams through the limestone rocks. Loch Croispol is the site of old mines the entrances to which are flooded. Over to the right of the loch there are triangular shaped standing stones. Loch Croispol offers sheltered fishing from either boat or bank. This is a small loch, less than 700m long covering 11.55 ha (28.5 acres) and lying at an elevation of only 14m above sea level. Of the four lochs, this contains the smallest fish, but still averaging a respectable 1 lb. Loch Croispol is close to the sea, situated below the Balnakeil Craft Village. It offers free-rising smaller fish of between half and three quarters of a pound. This is a good place for beginners and in a beautiful setting. Boat fishing is definitely best. This loch is approached from the road leading to Balnakeil Bay. The water is very clear and the weed on the bottom can be clearly seen from a boat with the

bolt holes of the trout dotted here and there. It is a very demanding loch to fish. Croispol is the most prolific of the Durness limestone lochs.

### **Loch Borralie**



IMAGE 94 LOCH BORRALIE

Loch Borralie, lies in the middle of the peninsula, is about three kilometres long just over a kilometre wide and has a small island two hundred metres long in the middle of the loch separated from the east bank by a narrow channel. Loch Borralie is a crystal clear limestone loch with lots of wild flowers and wildlife to see. Boat and bank fishing available for brown trout and Arctic char. Loch Borralie is the largest of the lochs, with a surface area of approximately 39.24 ha (97 acres). The loch lies at an altitude of 17m. Loch Borralie is 250 yards from the back of the Cape Wrath Lodge with steep shelves down to 150 feet. It contains huge ferox trout and char in its depths which are rarely caught on the fly. Borralie fishes best during the day and in good weather. Trout average about 1 lb and respond to traditional dry fly patterns.

### **Loch Lanlish**

Loch Lanlish, sited in Durness golf course is a relatively small body of water. Loch Lanlish is approached from the car park at Balnakeil with a short walk of about 10 minutes. Loch Lanlish is the smallest of the limestone lochs. A severe loch, commonly fished at night with a big fish reputation, averaging over 3 lbs, and up to 8lbs, with fish to 14lb having been caught but more likely to frustrate than reward as they are virtually impossible to catch. Strong leaders, huge amounts of luck and patience are the key ingredients. The wind in this corner of Scotland can be very strong and this loch with its open aspect can be difficult to fish, but it is worth the effort when you hook up to a fighting source of power that will take skill to land. Although Lanlish produces huge fish, only a few are caught each year.



IMAGE 96 LOCH LANLISH

### **Loch Caladail**



IMAGE 95 LOCH CALADAIL

Loch Caladail (Loch Cealla-dail) is a brown trout loch, formed in the 1920's and is shallow with clear water with boat and bank fishing available. A good size loch of 25 ha (62 acres) lying at an altitude of 36m largely shallow at between 1.5 to 3m in depth. The loch has excellent

trout averaging over 2 lbs, with a few fish of over 4 lbs caught each year. Best fishing is in the late evening and through the night in the summer months. The best results come from single dry fly imitations of sedge and midge pupa.

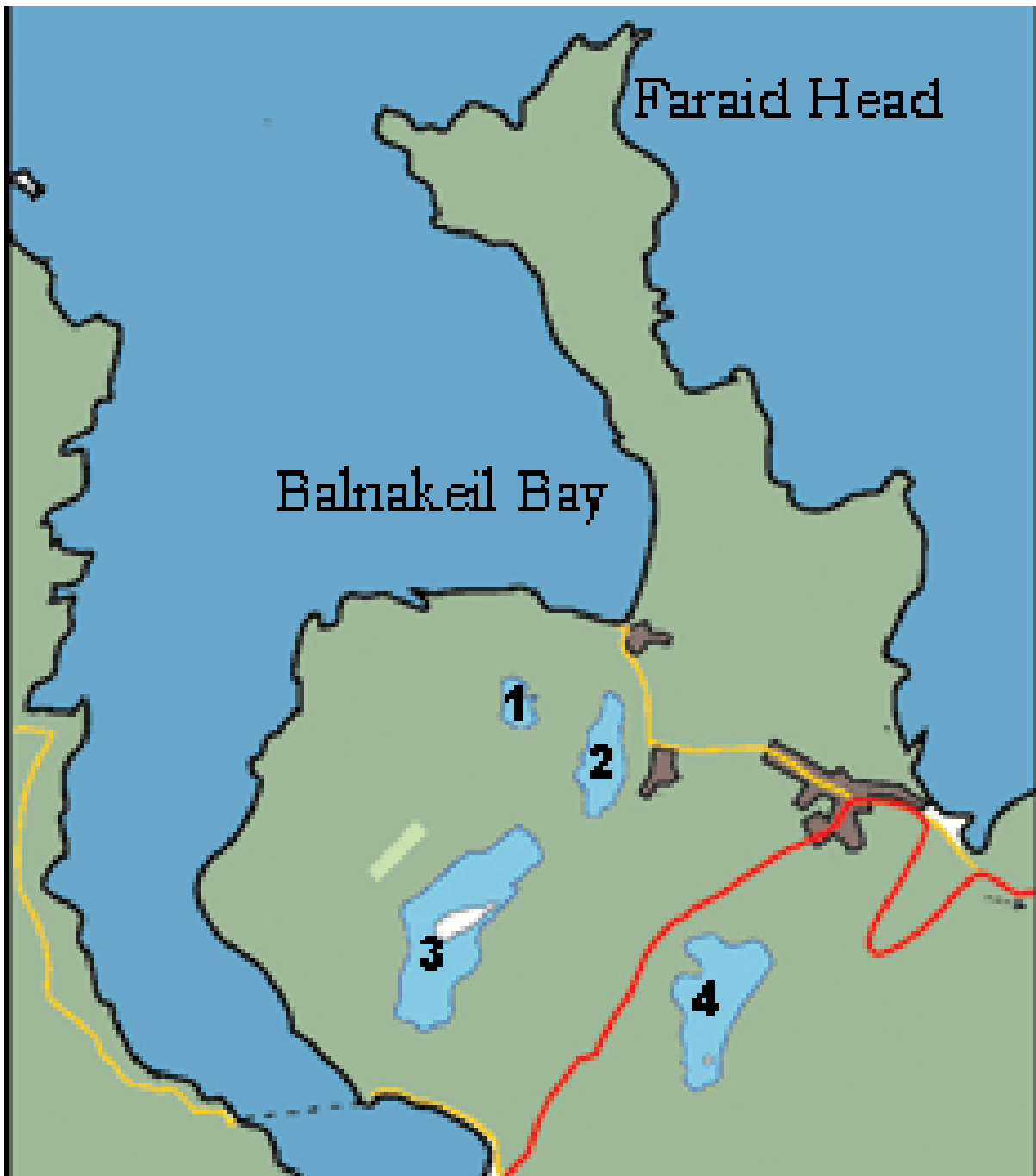


IMAGE 97 SITES OF THE FISHING LOCHS 1 LANLISH, 2 CROISPOL, 3 BORRALIE, 4 CALADAIL

The first edition of the one inch Ordnance survey map (revised to 1896) of the area fails to show Loch Caladail. This is because at that time efforts were taking place to drain the loch for farming land. A ditch, which is quite clearly observed today, can be seen running into the loch and a wall forming a dam has been constructed. This was the result of efforts before 1847 that were only partially successful in preventing the spot remaining as a water store. It was at that time a marsh about one third of its present size.



The Gilmours that used to reside in Smoo Lodge had the loch dammed. This loch also shows an example of a Crannog. A man-made island, a prehistoric structure with uncertainty in assigning to a given period but approximate dating is from the latter stage of the Bronze Age to about one thousand BC. Crannogs were usually used for defence, protection and security or used as a place of refuge. This loch is the only site in the north where Marl, a kind of whitewash could be collected.

Loch Caladail and Loch Meadaidh from which Allt Smoo rises and runs about three kilometres to the Smoo Cave where it empties are the largest local lochs. An angling competition usually only entered by local people was held each year in about July or August on Loch Meadaidh. (Not a limestone Loch) An event founded within the Gala.

## Shooting



IMAGE 98 FROM DURNESS PICTURE ARCHIVE SHOOTING PARTY

Shooting is a sport often associated with fishing and the area has long been popular for deer stalking and game bird shooting. This is still a common practice on the estates during the recognised season.

Rabbit culling by shooting is less of a sport due to the high numbers but is occasionally performed. Clay pigeon shoots were regular local events, approximately four or five a year but in recent years has lacked participation. The Gualin Lodge annual event which used to be held in December attended by invitation only, was held in high regard attracting over fifty guns. The funds raised distributed to local causes within the parish. On occasions clay pidgin shoots have been arranged between the visiting military and local enthusiasts.

## Communication, Connection, Roads and Transport

Communication for the largest part of Mackay Country history has been oral transmission. The stories and experiences of people brought up in an oral tradition were written out of traditional histories. Over the years a few people with great foresight have challenged this through recording and publishing stories and experiences from all sorts of people who are important tradition bearers in Scotland. In 2007 Mackay Country Community Trust continued this practice and created a project *Summer in the Straths* and in 2017 celebration of renowned Gaelic bard Rob Donn detailed elsewhere in this publication highlighting the “Scottish nomads” and their role in communication. Scottish Gaelic song, poems and stories have been carried through oral transmission for many centuries reflecting the power of indigenous peoples to preserve cultural heritage from generation to generation without recourse to a written code.

### Oral Tradition

The Highlands of Scotland has a rich store of oral tradition. Storytelling, passed down through the generations by way of oral transmission. Types of tales which are represented are: Celtic and International (Wonder Tales), historical stories and supernatural tales and legends. Tales regarding place name lore, local characters, animals along with jokes and anecdotes, though not so prestigious, were also popular.

Some of the stories, are remnants of very old traditions. Often these have international resonance, and in particular show strong connections. These older stories were preserved orally by the learned orders of bards and seanachaidhs (oral historians) who, in the Middle Ages, wrote some of their material down on parchment. These same stories were still being recorded orally in the Highlands by field workers as late as the 1970s. The storytelling tradition, as music, genealogy and so on, was preserved by specific families. These traditions survived longer in travelling families. However, with the decline of Gaelic, storytellers and the very society that nurtured them, storytelling has become more or less restricted to the swapping of jokes and anecdotes.

### Publications

Since 1899 the newspaper Northern Times and weekly journal for Sutherland and the North has been in print. This newspaper is published by Scottish Provincial Press Ltd in Golspie, Sutherland, Scotland. It was digitised and is available on the British Newspaper Archive. A local column for all the villages of the area is served by local correspondents. I am unaware when this started but Lucy Mackay took over from George Mackenzie and there is a record of Durness weekly news submitted by Lucy from 1980 until 1994. There is a section in this publication about Lucy but her main interest is sport and there is coverage of many aspects and competitions in the reports along with celebrations and obituaries, community council and school reports. From 1998 to 2018 I submitted regular articles for the column. The Northern Times known locally as “*The Raggie*” is a popular newspaper with a readership three times larger than the sales as families send their copies to others not living in the area.

Scattered among the articles in this book are reports from the Northern Times relevant to the sections.

### The first Radio in Scourie<sup>17</sup>

Mr. George Ross of the hotel bought the first radio to Scourie about 1928. To enable as many people as possible to hear this great new marvel he set it up in the local hall. One end of the aerial wire was attached to the top of a tall pole beside the hall and the height of the wire could

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<sup>17</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

be adjusted by means of a pulley. One man recalls that while the people were inside listening to the radio some youngsters kept adjusting the height of the wire and of course doing nothing to improve the reception which at best could not have been very good as people remember one lady remarking “I paid half a crown to get in and all I heard was bud boo”.

After the public heard the radio in the hall Mr. Ross took it to the hotel. It was about this time that the hotel had the first petrol pump installed. This pump had a great big bright round light on top and when Mr. Elliott a relative of the Ross family came to hear the radio he saw the new pump and said “by Geordie be this the marvelous new wireless? Some people also recall that when the radio was in the hall some boys stood with their ears against the aerial pole to hear the radio that way!

### **Am Bratach**

North West Sutherland Council for Community Action began publishing Am Bratach in November 1991 and closed with its last publication 2019, with trustee Donald MacLeod telling the Northern Times the decision had been a “reluctant” one. The magazine was solvent and its financial position at the time of closure had been satisfactory.

### **Television**

It was not until 1986 Durness had watchable television. The erection of a relay mast at the highest point overlooking Sangomore Headland gave a signal to practically the whole village with the necessity in the lower regions of a high site for their aerial. In 1998, the mast was renewed and provision was made for mobile phone reception to the area.

### **Digital**

In 1999 I registered durness.org and set up a Durness website in collaboration with the community council. This carried information about Durness and was mainly aimed at visitors. As many B&B's, Durness groups and businesses started to create their own sites the Durness site started to carry more local studies information and became a depository for archiving information and material accumulated about Durness. In 2020 a web site by Durness Development Group was created. Around 2020 a dedicated Durness Facebook page was started and carries considerable conversation rhetoric and momentary information. Many villages have started social media pages and local activities and social commentary carrying all kinds of news and adverts. This appears to be replacing updating of community web sites.

### **Broadband**

In February 2008 after a weekend where the service of broadband was unavailable several people complained that the options of service providers were very limited due to the poor exchange that Durness residents have to contend with. When BT service is unreliable customers were not able to switch to an alternative provider. BT are selling a broadband service which is capped at 512K and which in performance terms is a substantially different product to the 8Megabyte service which residents as close as Kinlochbervie enjoy at the same price. In real terms BT have achieved a virtual monopoly in this area

The restrictive nature of the service means that services such as BBCi and other on-demand and streaming services were not available to Durness residents. This is a double whammy for residents in an area with poor quality analogue terrestrial TV reception, and no digital terrestrial service at all for either radio or TV. The lack of availability of a reliable broadband service at reasonable bandwidth was affecting businesses in the area and will hinder further inward investment.

## Telephone

The first automatic telephone exchange was erected at Rockville opposite the Primary School in 1935. In 1955, there were four telephone kiosks and thirty five private subscribers in the parish. In 2008 there were 138 private subscribers in the parish.

In 1989, the last button telephone on the British mainland was replaced by an upgraded system. This remote roadside kiosk twenty one kilometres from Tongue on the A838 was Durness 299 and the last to operate through an old style radio transmission system. It could not be converted previously, as cables had to be laid as part of the modernisation scheme. Other operations of the same were phased out in the rest of the country some thirty years earlier. The last button phone box on mainland Britain was at Kempy.

Exchange upgrade. 28<sup>th</sup> December 2009

*Announcement has been made from the Scottish Government that rural Scotland is to benefit from improved access to broadband. BT has already started work on upgrading 71 telephone exchanges. The first upgrades will be complete from March 2010.*

Durness Exchange 18<sup>th</sup> January 2010

*Following the announcement from the Scottish Government that rural Scotland is to benefit from improved access to broadband the Durness upgrade will take the exchange to 'full platform ADSL' meaning that there should be a much wider choice of ISP and access speeds up to 8Mbps dependent upon distance from the exchange. This should also address the reported capacity issue for new broadband customers. The upgrade of the Durness exchange is due to go live on the 8th September, 2010.*

In 2001 mobile phone reception was becoming available in patches with limited and poor reception by 2015 coverage was near perfect.

## Telephones in Scourie<sup>18</sup>

From at least before the first war there was a telegram service to the post office in the villages messages came by Morse code. The postmaster William McDonald son of Kenneth McDonald the blacksmith wrote out the war news and stuck the notice on the post office window. However local people seemed to know when to expect the news and they gathered outside and the actually knew the news before the notice was posted on the window much to the annoyance of the postmaster

Telephone lines as such first came about 1935 to 1936 to the telephone exchange which was in a private house in the village belonging to Miss Flora Mackay. The first phone was in the post office and there was also a line to the doctor and to bad comments by then a private house belonging to Colonel Cuthbert's. The exchange was moved from that house to part of the post office building in the village where it remained until about 30 years ago when the first purpose built building was erected in park terrace. In 1971 that exchange became obsolete and the present building just south of Scourie came into use.

## Roads

A network of military roads, sometimes called General Wade's Military Roads, was constructed in the Scottish Highlands during the middle part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as part of an attempt by the British Government to bring order to a part of the country which had risen up in the Jacobite rebellion of 1715.

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<sup>18</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

About half a mile before Guilin heading south under the cover of Ffarmheall, is a well at the roadside. It incorporates an iron trough with a plaque which reads

*“1883. As a mark of gratitude and respect to the inhabitants of Durness and Eddrachillis for their hospitality while projecting this road. This inscription is placed over this well by their humble servant, Peter Lawson, surveyor.”*



IMAGE 99 UNDER THE COVER OF FARRMHEALL, IS A WELL AT THE ROADSIDE.

Opposite the well can be seen the remote house at Rhigolter where a shepherd, working for Balnakeil Farm, and his family live nestled in the shadow of Beinn Spionnaidh.

Between 1810 and 1830 over six hundred kilometres of roads were constructed in Sutherland. In 1833, the nearest post office was at Bonar Bridge about one hundred and thirteen kilometres away until Tongue opened. Mail left Durness by runner on a Monday and Thursday where it met the mail coming from Golspie. It arrived back in Durness on a Tuesday and Friday. A runner was someone who walked with the mailbag. Once a month a carrier, probably a horse and cart, went to Tain.

The Rural Transport Report of 1919 contains a graphic account of the difficulties and discomforts with a journey by the then route from Durness to Lairg, a distance of eighty seven kilometres and costing sixteen shillings (about eighty pence.) *“The first twenty miles are traversed in a horse drawn waggonette in which passengers are surrounded by mailbags, boxes of live lobsters, live calves tied in sacks, personal luggage etc. At Rhiconich, an addition of the same sort is received from Kinlochbervie. At Laxford, everything is transferred to the waiting mail carriage which has arrived from Scourie. At this stage not everything accumulated can be taken and many a valuable consignment is lost or delayed. The mail wagon proceeds at an*

*average speed of eight miles per hour. The mail coach was pulled by two horses and although it was an open carriage, there was a hood that was pulled over in bad weather.”*

In August 1954, a road traffic census was taken in Durness, only one horse passed the checkpoint during the whole week under observation. Fifty years previous every crofter had a horse some had two.

Sutherland Transport and Trading Company employed, for over sixty years, the Mather family from Durness who were responsible for the driving of the daily bus from Durness to Lairg and back. The closest rail centre about one hundred and ten kilometres away. In 1988, Michael was made redundant after twenty seven years and for thirty three years before him, his father had driven the route. Rapsons of Brora then took over the route. In about 1991, the post buses were introduced removing subsidies and providing the service. Today (1999) all the year round two post buses leave Durness six days a week. Both have their destination in Lairg; one goes via Altnaharra the other through Kinlochbervie and Scourie. In 1995, a coach service from Inverness to Durness was started as a pilot from May to September, arriving in Durness at about two p.m. This service has become established and offers coach trips around the North West. A daily bus from late June to September operates from Thurso to Durness and return.



IMAGE 100 THE ROAD AT ACHRIESGILL 1944 MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

Until her death in 2010 Iris Mackay ne Mather had a mini bus hire service, the contract to convene the children to primary school each day (her mother before her ran this provision) and the Cape Wrath mini bus service. In March 2000 the local dial a bus service being developed by Iris was reported to be working well and gaining in popularity and use. There are some requirements that call for further development particularly the transport for college youths returning home from the various Scottish cities at weekends.

In 2011 the Far North Bus services was started and from that The Durness Bus Ltd. a small company running scheduled services across the far North of Scotland, with routes running between Durness and Lairg, Inverness, Thurso and Lochinver.

The winter snow clearing and gritting is excellent. The Highland Council road crew are four local men and have an admirable system of keeping the roads in, out and around the parish open under almost all conditions.

In 1989 the car park at the Tourist Information centre was enlarged and tarred. This had been a gravel area, first dug out when the campsite opened. The road at the foot of the Caa was altered to make the junction safer.

## **Drove Roads**

Before the arrival of organised road building drove roads were used to transport cattle between remote locations.

Before 1807 there were no roads or bridges in the county. Durness was mainly served from the sea but a network of tracks and paths for horses and carts were in use between the many townships within the parish and around the county. Travellers and peddlers would have encountered many hazardous water crossings on route to the far North West.

There is clear evidence of well-defined tracks at distinct parts around the territory, which have been heavily used at some time in the past. These tracks are more than just paths and show usage over a long period. The indication is of their use before the disparate estates taking ownership. It is apparent the tracks connected and led from the diverse settlements to arable land away from the dwellings into the sheltered and usable ground in the mountains and straths. These are known as drove roads for cattle and sheep and became well-used routes. None of these roads are shown on early maps indicating they were in and out of use before the 1800s. Locations where peat has been cut and stock grazed have accessible tracts and have been maintained. At the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, roads started to be made by the Duke of Sutherland, until then most of the communication, supplies and transport was by sea.

In ARB Haldane's "The Drove roads of Scotland" a map shows the main routes from, Georgemas, Bighouse, Eddrachillis and Assynt converging on the Kyle of Sutherland. This misses out all the small routes from the northern townships throughout Mackay Country. William Roy's military map drawn up in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century can provide clues to the drove routes in Mackay Country. The drove routes would have followed the river valley's inland crossing into the next valley by a suitable pass until they were able to join the main drove route to Inverness and beyond.

Drove routes from the north coast most likely followed the paths described below<sup>19</sup>

A cattle drive from Farr and Kirtomy would be gathering cattle at every township on its way south. They could have been joined by cattle from Skerray that had been driven across the Torrisdale sands to Invernaver. The route they took from there would be down Strathnaver to Altnaharra through Strath Vagastie over the Crask and on to Lairg, crossing over the narrows of the Kyle of Sutherland near Bonar Bridge.

The route from Bighouse, as it was in the 18 century was from the Strath Halladale valley down through the Strath of Kildonan to join the main east coast drove route. The people from the watershed of the River's Halladale and Helmsdale would have followed this route. Some drives

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<sup>19</sup> By Robert Mackay of Strathy.

from the Reay area may also have crossed over the hills near Drumholiston to join the drives down Strath Halladale.

The drive from Strathy Mains would have been south through the valley picking up a few cattle from each settlement. I think they would have gone west from Loch Strathy over towards Skail in Strathnaver and join the drive there. They were possibly joined by those from the Armadale area as well.

The people from the Tongue area (Skullomie to Achiniver) would have driven there cattle down by Loch Loyal joining with the Strath Naver drive at Altnaharra.

Loch Hope cattle would be driven through Strath More collecting more cattle as it passed through to Altnaharra.



IMAGE 101 DURNESS POST GIG DRIVEN BY ROBBIE MORRISON AT RHICONICH HOTEL CIRCA 1906 MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

The drive from Durness and the township of the time in the parish possibly went up Strath Dionard into Strath More and on to Altnaharra. Any drives from the south of Durness would have joined the droves leaving Eddrachillis.<sup>20</sup> There doesn't seem to have been any drove roads as such in the area. Cattle from Durness, Kinlochbervie and Scourie were gathered together on the flat grassland beside the river Laxford. From there they more or less followed the line of the existing road to Lairg and on towards Bonner Bridge and the South.

### **Bealach-na-h-Imrich the valley of the flitting.<sup>21</sup>**

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<sup>20</sup> This is information submitted to a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

<sup>21</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987



Mr Ainslie Thompson states that in his opinion this is where cattle were gathered together and kept ready for the drove, the position being ideal for this purpose. In this case the flitting would refer to the movement of cattle rather than people and their belongings.

### **Sutherland Roads**

From Caithness & Sutherland \*H F Campbell 1920\*

Before 1807 there were no roads in Sutherland and only one bridge, at Brora. A horse track ran from the Meikle Ferry along the coast, and other tracks linked Strathnaver and Assynt with ferries at Portinlick and Bonar. There were no wheeled vehicles in the county. Access to the county from the south of Scotland was mostly by sea.

On the mainland the county could be reached by Meikle Ferry (G. Port a' Choltair), Bonar Ferry (G. Am Bhannath) and Portinlick (G. Portna-Lice). Cattle for the Falkirk trysts and other market swam across at these ferries, there was a belief that if an animal took readily to the water it would fetch a good price at market.

Thurso road that runs through Sutherland was completed in 1812-13 as was Bonar Bridge over the Kyle. Some 400 miles of road were built in the next 20 years, as follows: Bonar to Scourie and Durness by Lairg Lochinver by Oykell Bridge and Inchnadamph, Helmsdale to Melvich by Forsinard, Melvich to Durness by Bettyhill and Tongue, Bonar to the Mound by Loch Buidhe, Lairg to Rogart and from Rogart to Brora by Sciberscross, Scourie by the Kylesku ferry to the Lochinver road at Skiag Bridge.

These roads were very adequate for the needs of the time and of great benefit in making the county accessible. A mail coach between Tain and Thurso started in 1819.

The roads proved unsuitable for the great increase in motor traffic and much work was done to strengthen them. The amount spent on the roads increased fourfold between 1900 and 1915 and is now £12,000 per annum.

Since 1910, the Road Board has made grants to the county but even with these, the funds available are insufficient to fully maintain the roads.

Although the coming of railways helped the eastern part of the county, the west and north had to depend on horse drawn transport for mails and passengers until the coming of motorised transport. There is now a service from Lairg station to Scourie and Tongue, and along the north coast from Thurso.

## Kylesku Ferry<sup>22</sup>

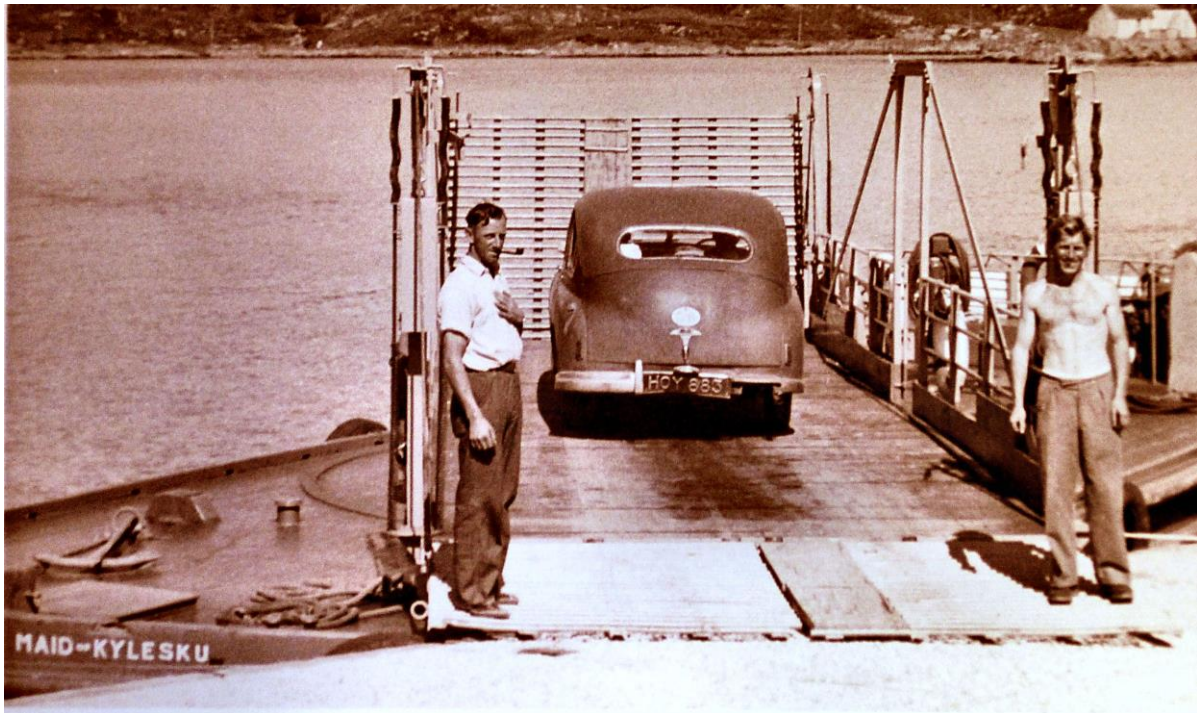


IMAGE 102 KYLESKU FERRY CIRCA LATE 1950S FROM DURNESS ARCHIVE

Before roads were constructed about 1830 travel was by horse or on foot and the ferry consisted of a rowing boat. Cattle and horses had to swim across the waters of Kylesku. This ferry is mentioned in both the statistical reports. By the latter part of the 19th century a *six sared cobble* was used. Horses and carts could be transported by building a platform of turf in the centre section of the boat. From the turn of the century to the beginning of World War One the ferry was operated by the Duke of Sutherland. A cable operated steel barge was used and four men were needed to operate the hand winch. On a calm day that could take about an hour to cross but there were only one or two crossings per day. During the war the service reverted to a rowing boat. However after the war a vessel capable of carrying motor vehicles came into regular use. Operators in this period were the Automobile Association who ran a small motor ferry capable of carrying one car and later Mr Fulmar-Sankey who used the two car turntable boat which was eventually commandeered by the Navy early in World War Two once again the ferry became a rowing boat. From the end of the war until it was taken over by the Sutherland County Council in 1848 Mr Vestey operated a vehicle ferry in the summer with a passenger only launched in the winter.

The council ran the free service using a variety of turntable boats and in 1975 they ordered a new roll on roll off ferry the maid of Glencoul capable of carrying both cars and full-sized commercial vehicles. Laterally only locals could cross for a nominal yearly fee all others Peter fear according to the size of the vehicle and the number of passengers et cetera, but since the opening of the Kylesku Bridge in August 1984 by Her Majesty the Queen travel is again free.

## Slaqhi Road <sup>23</sup>

The first road from Kylestrome to Laxford passed through Scourie village. What is now the main road was just a track for access to the crofts. In 1886 William Matheson road contractor

<sup>22</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

<sup>23</sup> This is information submitted to a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

was paid 15 shillings for the upkeep of the road from the school to the library where the showing classes were held. Six years later this was increased to 1 pound annually and Mr Matheson continued in his job until the parish council took over the upkeep of the roads in 1902. Soon after the end of World War One the road was formed from the crossroads to the school. Mr. John McKenzie recalls he was one of the men employed carting loads of stones from the shore to the foundation of the single track Rd. This route was reconstructed by Alexander Sutherland from Golspie limited in 1973 to 1974

The house adjacent to the Scourie village hall is known as Slaqhi house and the road as Slaqhi. The crossroads is where the main road in Scourie crosses over the road from the village to the hotel.

### **The Road Men of Scourie<sup>24</sup>**

In 1902 the local or parish council became responsible for the upkeep of the roads in the area. They employed road contractors to do this. Each contractor looked after a section of the gravel track which was all the roads where then. John Macleod, John McKenzie Kenneth Mathieson had the contracts for the sections between Laxford and Kylesku. Each contractor employed one or two men and they had to break stones pick gravel and patch up the potholes. Once a year stones and gravel were spread over the worst parts of the road sprayed with water and then rolled. A water cart travelled from place to place with the road roller and extra main with carts were employed to cart the stones and gravel from when it had been stockpiled by the contractors and their main. Eventually the council employed men have stonebreakers. At last of these were the Featherstone brothers from Newcastle. This spent most of the summer months in the area up until about 1960. In the 1920s the contractors became known as section men and after all the roads were tarred in the 1950s they've came one scored of road men employed by the County Council. The wheel tracks of the road between Scourie and Laxford had been tarred in the mid-1930s.

### **A letter published by Willie Morrison 11 April 2009**

*Around 30 miles of the A838 road in North West Sutherland, between Rhiconich, near Kinlochbervie, and Kempie, on the east side of Loch Eriboll, together with other stretches of the A836 east of Tongue, remain single-lane standard, despite being a significant part of one of Scotland's 12 major tourist routes, the Ullapool, John o' Groats route. It runs through Durness, Britain's most north-westerly mainland village, a popular tourist destination which includes the Smoo Cave, the Craft Village, a large caravan park and the junction leading to the Kyle of Durness ferry for Cape Wrath.*

*The last major improvements to the A838 road between Gualin, north of Rhiconich, and Kempie, from a gravel to a tarmac surface, were completed in late 1939, just as World War II was starting. A small part between Rhiconich and Gualin Lodge was re-engineered over 50 years ago, still only to narrow single-lane standard.*

*The absence of a modern road leads in summer to the same sort of frustration formerly encountered on the A830, when timid caravanserais of caravans, motor homes and other tourist traffic, wind their way slowly for miles around the corner of North West Sutherland, frequently holding up faster traffic, despite notices advising them to use passing places to allow speedier vehicles past.*

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<sup>24</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

*This important tourist link, which brings considerable economic benefit to Scotland's remotest mainland corner, has been all but forgotten by the Westminster Government, the Scottish Government, and also it seems by the Inverness-centric Highland Council.*

*The folk in North West Sutherland pay the same rates of income tax, council tax and road tax as those in the rest of Britain, and indeed rather more in fuel tax. Surely they deserve a similar deal to those in Mallaig and the rest of Scotland.*

At different intervals, there have been rumours about the investigations and extensions of the rail tract from Lairg to the north west of Sutherland. In 1910, an article appeared in the Scotsman outlining a strong case for support of such a line.

## Transport



IMAGE 103 FARE SIGN FOR THE MAIL COACH FROM MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

Mackay Country lies in the Sutherland County which has no large towns. The peaceful village of Lairg is beautifully nestled on the southern shores of Loch Shin and became the important hub. Having four roads which meet in the village, it used to be known as "The Crossroads of the North". The roads leading out from Lairg to the north of Scotland travel through glens, past many crofting settlements and offer rugged and romantic landscapes surrounded by an array of native wildlife. The train station opened in 1868 and highlighted Lairg as a distribution centre for all of Sutherland. Because roads converged from all around the north Lairg became a place of economic importance to the area. Movement of people, goods, produce and royal mail all

passed through Lairg. In 1894 were the beginnings of what became the largest single day lamb sales in Europe a one of a kind event with over 40000 sheep bought and sold.

From about 1820 after Thomas Telfer was commissioned for constructing the single span bridges required mail carts departed Lairg for Altnaharra and on to Tongue. At Altnaharra after 20 miles there was a change house for the refreshments of travellers and to rest or change the horses before the next 17 miles to Tongue destination the Tongue Hotel.

Those whose target was Durness could leave the coach at Altnaharra and walk 17 miles through Strath More to the head of Loch Hope where at Cashel Dhu there was available light refreshments at a shepherd's house and Strath More River was crossed by a small ferry. And making way to the Eriboll church from here a travel guide states "carriages continue along the road and proceed all the way round the head of the loch" The Helium- Portnancon ferry crossed the loch but there was still a long walk.

There was an alternative route to Durness from Lairg via Scourie. Daily leaving Lairg around 6.30am changing coaches were sited at Overscaig and Achfary reaching Laxford 37 miles north Scourie which lies about 7 miles west and south of Durness. The road section from Lairg to Laxford was built as a destitution road between 1850 and 1851 to provide employment after the potato famine. This was an established drive road for cattle being driven south.

Coasting vessels, first sail and then steamships, used to call around the small village ports arriving with supplies every four to six months, and were an extremely popular event.

The horse and coach gradually took on a more regular basis in the Victorian and Edwardian days, with services running to the central railhead of Lairg and back out to the west and north villages of Lochinver, Scourie, Kinlochbervie, Durness, Melness and Bettyhill. Coaching Inns sprang up at strategic points on each route, many of which are still there but now rely upon tourism for their customers. These horse-services developed into motor transport serving these villages in the form of wagonettes and charabancs around 1906. Inlets from the sea, such as Kylesku on the west, were gradually broached by vehicle ferries saving long hours of circumnavigating, though these ferries stopped operating at dusk.

The railhead of Lairg was the hub from which the goods went out daily, and the main business that grew to prominence during the 1900's was the Sutherland Transport & Trading Company of Lairg having practically bought over the smaller operators. Sutherland Transport had a fleet of seven heavy trucks on long-distance work, this grew to 21 trucks by about the 1970s.

### **Sutherland Transport and Trading Co. Ltd**

From 1880 transport infrastructure was improving and the supply of provision by sea to rural remote coastal townships was becoming less important. Mackay Country was becoming more accessible. A transport company was started in Lairg and developed. In 1878 Messrs Gray and Murray formed a partnership to carry passengers and mail by horse and coach to Lochinver, Scourie and Tongue. At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the name was Coaching Company, and soon after Sutherland Motor Traffic co ltd. In 1905 the first motor vehicle on the mail routes arrived, a Daimler Wagonette, and introduced a fleet of private cars by 1910. In 1920 the name was changed to Sutherland Transport and Trading Co. Ltd. A commercial fleet had been established of about 10-12 open wagonettes. In 1951 the Duke of Westminster's estates acquired the company employing around 100 people. The company was dissolved in 1994. Postbuses took over the carrying of people and mail.

Northern Times November 14, 1907

*Sutherland Motor Company. This company was started in May 1905, for the purpose of carrying mails and passengers and doing general traffic in the County of Sutherland between Lairg upon the east coast, and Tongue, Scourie and Lochinver, on the north and west coasts. The subscribed capital, which was nearly all found in the County, amounted to £4455, and in the two and a half years during which the Company have done business, there has been a very marked advance both in comfort and in the time of travelling from the railway at Lairg on the east coast to the north and west coasts. Recently, negotiations were entered into between the Company and Mr. William Wallace, hotelkeeper, Lairg, which have resulted in Mr. Wallace taking over the business of the Company. Under the arrangement with Mr. Wallace, the shareholders get their subscribed capital plus six per cent, and the affairs of the Company will now be finally wound up. On Tuesday last Mr. Wallace entered formally on possession of the plant, and the routes named are now being worked by him. Mr. Wallace has been the pioneer in the north of Traffic Motors. About six years ago, he introduced the first motor car to his establishment at Lairg, and now, including the eight cars he has taken over from the Company, he has twelve cars available for traffic purposes. It may be confidently taken that, with Mr Wallace's well known public spirit, and under his able management, every reasonable facility and comfort will be afforded to the travelling public on the routes from Lairg to the north and west coasts of the County.*

### **Means of Communication from Statistical Account 1845**

The Rev. William Findlater, Minister.

Thurso is the nearest market-town, 65 miles distant. There are no villages, the population all residing in hamlets along the shores, containing from 4 to 5 to 20 families. The means of

communication have been much improved during the last three years, by the liberality of the late Duke of Sutherland. Formerly, the post-office was at Bonar Bridge, a distance of 62 miles, to which there was a runner sent once a-week at the sole expense of a few subscribers. There is now a post-office twice a-week to Tongue. The days of dispatch are Monday and Thursday; of arrival, Tuesday and Friday, to suit the Golspie mail, which crosses the interior to Tongue every Monday and Thursday. There is a weekly runner to Scourie. There is also a monthly carrier to Tain; but almost all imports and exports are by sea. The roads are, 1st, a road from the Kyle of Durness to Cape Wrath, executed by the Light-house Commissioners in 1828, 11 miles in length; 2d, from Eriboll by Strathmore, till its junction with the Tongue road to the south, 19 miles; 3d, the main line leading from west to east, -34 miles round by Loch Eriboll, or, by crossing the ferry, 24 miles. With the exception of 12 miles, commenced ten years ago by statute-labour, these roads were completed by the late Duke of Sutherland, and have completely opened up the country to new sources of industry, and the gratification of the traveller, and the speculations of the capitalist. There is an excellent bridge over the Dionard, and a chain-boat over the Hope.

The harbours are, Loch Eriboll, Rispond, and Port Our, at the termination of the Cape Wrath road, and Smoo; the last only for boats. At Rispond, there is a basin and pier, and rings fastened to the rocks in the bay; but this is not reckoned very safe in north-east gales and spring tides. Loch Eriboll, in the bay, where there is a church, is reckoned a very safe anchorage. A slip for boats has been also made at Clashearnach, three miles east of the cape, where the light-house yacht lands the oil and necessaries for the light-house; but is seldom attempted in stormy weather with northerly winds.

### **Mail Services in Scourie<sup>25</sup>**

Towards the end of the 18th century some local people paid for a runner to go the 22 miles through the hills to Tongue with letters once a fortnight. This seems to have been the first regular post communication with the outside world there was a weekly communication between tongue and Thurso.

By 1840 there was a post office and Savings Bank in Scourie and a twice weekly mail gig going to Golspie, the total amount invested in the Savings Bank was £443.9.9d, and it was said that operations were very limited. Local mail was either carried by people on unshod ponies or by boat from one community to another.

According to Mr Evander McIvor mail came twice weekly from acid in 1845. About 1870 the Sutherland Coaching Company got the contract of taking mail from Scourie to Laird. Mail from Durness and Kinlochbervie was taken to meet up with this carriage mail gig at Laxford. A building which served both as a stable for the Durness horses and living accommodation for the stable boy was built at Laxford. Hugh and Donald Mackay of Scourie were both stable boys there. When Hugh left to go to South Africa to fight in the Boer War his brother Donald looked after the horses and he needed to stand on a box to enable him to reach up to harness the horses. Mr Angus Mackenzie was one of the men who drove the mail gig from Scourie. The carriage driver changed horses at Achfary, Overscaig and Lairg.

Mr Hugh MacLeod who later became a shopkeeper in Scourie drove the carriage round about the turn of the century. About 1908 to 1910 motorised vehicles replaced the horse drawn gages. Mr Archibald Moffett is thought to have been the first driver and he was followed by Mr Ronald McClelland. Mr Alex Mackay drove the mail car for a number of years up until the start of the Second World War and while he was on active service Donald Munro and Robert McLeod

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<sup>25</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

were the drivers. After the war Alex Mackay returned to his old job but after a time Donald Mackay became the driver. When he died Angus Mackenzie grandson of Angus Mackenzie the male gig driver drove the male bus until the scary bus was withdrawn at the end of August 1971.

Male buses carry good passenger's main livestock and lobsters as well as the royal meal. During the time of the horse drawn male gigs a man from Caithness started a passenger only service but he remained in business for only a short time period he changed his horses only once between Scourie and layered and built a stable there beside Allt nan Albannach which is still known as the stables.

### **The Balkan Telegram Service<sup>26</sup>**

Before the post office was opened at fondle there was a telephone in a small shade near the school at Fanagmore. Two or three times daily Captain MacAskill and latterly his daughter Miss Mary MacAskill telephoned from there to the post office at scourie and if there was any messages telegrams for the Balkans they delivered them.

About 1920 the man who delivered the mail on foot from Scourie to Duartbeg was paid 7 shilling's a week. Duartbeg is over 6 miles from Scourie.

### **Proposal of Railway Services to the North West areas of Sutherland<sup>27</sup>**

The last few years there have been constant rumours of the closure of the existing north railway line that runs from Inverness to Wick and Thurso. As the readers will be aware, several railway stations in the Highland area were closed in the Dr. Beaching era. Since then, under successive Governments, rumours have continued to flow regarding further closures or indeed the main line itself. The factors for the closures are that the north line is inconvenient to run and maintain and the argument for the line to remain is a social one.

In view of the foregoing, it will perhaps be of interest to the readers to know that almost eighty years ago proposals were afoot to have a railway service running to the remote northwest areas of Sutherland. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1910, an article appeared in the Scotsman which read as follows:—

*It may seem incredible to many that at the beginning of the year 1910 that should exist in the extreme northwest mainland of Scotland — the native country of James Watt a very large area containing centres of population who are resident at no less a distance of sixty miles or more from the nearest railway station of Lairg. Yet such is the case in North West Sutherlandshire and that such a condition should prevail at the present time is surely a gross anomaly. Various schemes have been mouthed on more than one occasion having for their object the extension of railway facilities in Sutherland, however, nothing has yet been accomplished. The construction of a light railway along the north coast of Sutherland, or a system of light railways radiating from Lairg to the north and west coasts of Sutherland is imperatively required and the railways would prove of inestimable advantage x to the population and would also become involved in the important question of an efficient coastal defence.*

*It is good to know that Locheil, the Unionist (Tory) candidate for Sutherland at the next election has expressed himself as being strongly in favour of the extension of railway communications to the north and west of the county and in considering the great services rendered by his late father, Ewan Of Locheil in the promoting of the west Highland railways, the elections of*

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<sup>26</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

<sup>27</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

*Sutherland who have the future welfare of the county at heart would be surely well advised in the supporting of Locheil's candidature by every legitimate means in their power.*

*Anybody who is connected with the County must be aware of the wretchedly defective conditions of the main roads especially those to the north and west of the County. These roads were for the most part badly engineered at the outset, they are dangerously narrow, twisted and rough and frequently pass over morass. They are thus apparently quite incapable of any permanent improvements and money expended on futile attempts to improve them is, and always will be, money practically thrown away.*

*Owing to the present poor conditions of these roads, the motor mail service which at present acts as a feeble apology for railway communications to the north and west, gives travellers an idea of what a continuous 'switch-back journey means to tired muscles, and there is no such thing as a comfortable means of travel throughout the whole north and west of the County. The only salvation in this respect for the early north west of Sutherland is the extension of railway communications and that alone. There are several good routes to the north and west that light railways might take and these routes are, for the most part comparatively level and would present few, if any engineering difficulties. As to the use of such light railways for aiding coastal defence purposes, opinions may differ. We understand that it was the first Duke of Wellington who first conceived the idea of a main line of railway around the whole coast as an aid to coast defence. This wise plan has now in the course of time and mostly by private enterprise been practically accomplished with probably the singular exception of the coastline of the extreme northwest corner of Scotland. One might, at first sight, think it would be quite inconceivable that an enemy would select the extreme northwest coast of Sutherlandshire as a suitable place to gain access to the mainland of the country, on account of distances from the enemies objectives transport difficulties, the question of provisions for troops etc., however in these days of the quicker movements of armed forces, with concentrated provisions, the use of aerial power the possibility is not one which should be overlooked. The extreme northwest coast of Scotland presents at present the weakest point with respect to coastal defences and should, for example, a German invading force select it for a landing operation it is unlikely that a handful of territorials however brave and willing they might be would be able to offer any much opposition to the advance south of the well-equipped and highly trained armies of the Kaiser.*

*The idea would seem quite ridiculous, yet it seems quite sufficient to the present Radical Government (Liberal) who all along have acted so apathetically in respect of the strengthening of our Navy and our means of coastal defence.*

*Along the north and west coast of Sutherland are a number of deep narrow lochs running inland from the sea. These lochs form really fine natural harbours and would make admirable and convenient landing places for any well-armed and well-provisioned foreign expeditionary force, who sought to invade this country and who might be able to elude a British Fleet in the North Sea or the North Atlantic. In this connection, it may be also mentioned that the inhabitants of the northwest of Sutherland had a splendid view of a large fleet of German battleships which passed along the northwest coast on a fine morning last July, while quite recently it was reported that a German war vessel paid a quiet visit to Loch Eriboll near Durness on the north coast, where no doubt, she would have been engaged in taking some possible useful observations for the future.*

It will have been noted by the reader that the person who subscribed to the article was obviously a 'true blue' Tory who was all for private enterprise and against the Liberal Government of the day. As history unfolded in the following years no further progress was made regarding the advent of railway communications to the North and West of the County and eventually the idea



died a natural death. Possibly the writer of the article would have been an interested party if the scheme had gone ahead, because as it was pointed out by the writer the original railways were all funded by private enterprise, hence the support of the would-be Tory candidate of the day. Locheil, whose father had been heavily involved in the original West Highland line.

The original thinking of a railway communication system emanating from Lairg to the villages of the north and west of Sutherland was no doubt clouded by the inferior roads which were prevalent at the time in this area, plus the fact that motor transport was still in its infancy, however, it would never have been economically viable in such a vast and remote area and so in the end clearer thinking, by the persons who would have had to fund the project won tie day. As the years rolled on and with the advent of two world wars, considerable improvements were made to the existing roads and although even to-day further improvements are required to cope with the ever increasing traffic there is quite an adequate road system serving 'the north west area.

The other point of contention made by the writer in the 1910 article was mention of German sea activity in the area if a war was to take place, this certainly proved to be correct, as in both world wars there was considerable activity by German shipping in the area although no known actual landings took place as the writer had forecast.

In conclusion, I should like to point out that as mentioned in my opening paragraph of the uncertainty of the future of the existing, present day north line owing mainly to economic factors it does not require much imagination to conjecture just how long a railway system to the northwest would have lasted.

## Burrs of Tongue

As part of Museums & Galleries “Show Scotland Weekend”, 1-3 May 2010, Strathnaver Museum held an exhibition in the village of Tongue to mark the culmination of the collection of material by interview and donation to bring the story of the business of ‘Messrs Peter Burr’s of Tongue’ to the public.



With Compliments from

*Messrs. Peter Burr*

Grocers, General Merchants, Haulage Contractors and Coal Merchants

IMAGE 104 FROM THE STRATHNAVER MUSEUM BURRS PROJECT

The present Spar Shop in the village of Tongue is now simply a grocer’s but in Burr’s day it was a vast business catering for every need. The research was undertaken to highlight the incredible contribution made by ‘Burrs’ to the local community and beyond. Bear in mind as you read that Burr’s operated, for the most part, in a time when few households had their own transport or phone, telecommunications were limited and electricity a distant dream. The services provided by Burr’s were of paramount importance to the local community as many depended on Burr’s for provisions of all kinds as well as for mobility.

People living in remote areas welcomed ‘the van’ as a social contact point; a blether with Gordon brought them up to date with the local news and gossip!

At times of hardship these services were exceptional, as in the severe winter of 1955 when Burr’s men walked to Loyal, 8 miles from Tongue, through very deep snow, with boxes of essential supplies and then trudged all the way back again. Others used their initiative to

commandeer a boat to keep the Melness shop and community supplied they too had a long walk home. On another occasion a Melness woman who was unwell fancied a taste of salt herring. Although Gordon had none on his van and didn't finish his round till 7pm he made sure that the herring arrived that night, along with some Golden Wonder tatties.

The only regular entertainment available came by wireless and Burr's would make sure your batteries were charged! On a Saturday you could have a taste of the high life by taking the "Picture Bus" to Thurso. You could also have a trip to Inverness when the Circus came to town.

Old folks' parties, as they would then be called, were held in the tea-rooms. The Burr family attended local dances and ceilidhs. Gordon provided entertainment at fancy dress dances with a series of outlandish and sometimes, shameless outfits! Picture him as a mannequin or a bunny girl. Tot was always willing to do her part by singing at a concert. She and Gordon brought Jimmy Shand, the popular accordionist, to Tongue. Tot sang in the church choir and she and Gordon were stalwart supporters of the local church.

Mrs. Burr was a founder member of Strathnaver Museum and Burr's till, which she donated to the museum, is one of our most popular exhibits. It is still in good working order and rings up the pounds and pennies daily while the museum is open.

Burr's of Tongue General Stores and Merchants began in the early 1900's when Robert Garden from Orkney set up the business in North Sutherland. Garden's first store on the mainland was in Bettyhill with a second store in Skerray which housed a bakery.



IMAGE 105 FROM STRATHNAVER MUSEUM BURRS PROJECT

In 1909 the business was relocated to Tongue where it became the central store on the mainland. Robert Garden had eight daughters and two sons. The eldest son was Robert Garden Jnr who was born in Kirkwall in 1874. He became a grocer in Glasgow but moved to Tongue after his marriage. In Tongue, Garden Jnr managed the store and also built a beautiful house, "Dunvarrich". He introduced motor transport to north Scotland. Not only did he own the first car in Tongue but also, by 1904, he was running a lorry service. In 1908 he was awarded the first motor-rail service between Tongue and Lairg.

Peter Burr, who had been managing one of Garden Snr's shops in Orkney, was married to Isabella Robertson of Moneymusk, Aberdeenshire. The couple had lived there initially, they then moved with Isabella's brother, Gordon Robertson, to St. Margaret's Hope in Orkney to run the shop there. As their families grew the business became too small to support them all. Furthermore Isabella suffered badly from seasickness. In May 1913, she and Peter decided to buy Garden's shop in Tongue so she would not have to suffer so many sea voyages between Orkney and the mainland. Thus the family moved to Tongue to manage the shop and also bought Garden Jnr's homestead "Dunvarrich. Peter Burr purchased the store in 1932 and worked there until he retired in 1939 when his two sons Gordon and Leslie bought him out. Gordon later took full charge and ran the business with his wife, Tot, for many years. Peter and Anne moved to Tain and named their house "Dunvarrich"



IMAGE 106 FROM STRATHNAVER MUSEUM BURRS PROJECT

Burrs ran a bus and van delivery service which covered a large geographical distance with regular van runs to Durness, Laid, Strathnaver, Altnaharra, Melness, Bettyhill, Melvich, Strathy and Thurso. Burr also stocked a smaller shop in Melness. Their own bakehouse where bread was baked, sliced and wrapped in Burrs own distinctive wrapping paper. "Burr's bread freshly baked every day" The bakehouse supplied the tea-rooms and shop with bread, rolls and cakes. Lorries frequently travelled south to collect flour for the bakehouse, 2 tons at a time.

Work, for the bakers, began at 2am and late-returning lorry drivers were glad to share the warmth of the bakehouse and sample the goods. Yeast came from a distillery every week.

Bakers waited until the yeast had risen and fallen twice before they made the dough. The bread boards were 5ft long and were filled with loaves. Once loaded the boards were carried on their heads to the back store. Cookies were steamed in a big wooden cupboard to make the dough more pliant. The baker had books filled with bread recipes.

Bread was baked in the bakehouse, as were brown and white rolls and caraway biscuits thick with seeds. Loaves were baked in lots of twelve, four loaves wide. A single loaf was called a half loaf and 2 half loaves made a quarter, not exactly what we are taught in school where 2 quarters make a half! Each loaf had to weigh 2lb 12 oz and Robbie would break off a chunk if a loaf was overweight. Large scrapers were used to clean the dough off the table which was made of a special hard wood. You could see the fire as sometimes, doors were left open to regulate the temperature. Sometimes the bakers stayed in Dunvarrich. When the bread cutting machine came the bread had to be cooled before being cut and wrapped in Burr's distinctive wrappers which were purple and green with a picture of Ben Loyal on them. There was a very busy tea room catering for employees, locals and visitors including regular bus parties.

Gordon Burr did not rest on his laurels and was always keen to keep up with the latest trends. Burr's shop in Tongue was one of the first shops in the north to become 'self-service'. The Burr family continued the tradition of working within the business until the 1980's when the business was sold to a family from the Borders who kept the iconic name of Peter Burr Stores. At the end of 2019 the property was sold to Danish tycoon Anders Holch Povlsen.

Burr's bought their buses from Don O'Brien and ran a bus to Thurso every day except Sunday. An extra bus was run on a Tuesday for the sheep sales. The Picture Bus left Tongue at 1 o'clock in the afternoon and left Thurso at 10.30 pm after the film show had ended.

Burr's was contracted to take the mail from Tongue to Thurso and pupils to and from Farr School. They owned three buses, one as a spare. The "Luxury Coach", with comfortable upholstered seats, was the pride of the fleet. It was hired out for school trips, shopping trips as far away as Glasgow, trips to Inverness when the circus came to town and transported guests to and from weddings. Sadly it ended its life as a farm storage unit. Early buses had a driver and a conductor. They carried passengers, of course, but were also well filled with newspapers, egg cases, bread, all Burr's goods, such as eggs and on occasion even live hens from Orkney! The bus took laundry to and from Thurso Laundry and whisky & beer for the hotels. The conductor delivered all the way home. Newspapers were thrown out for customers to collect. Milk, vegetables, potatoes, parcels of all kinds and passengers were dropped off as required! The bus took eels from Major Blackett, Borgie to be put on the first train from Thurso to Billingsgate, also salmon from Naver and Strathy Fisheries and rabbits galore. The bus also had to stop at all letterboxes and Post Offices on its morning run to collect the day's mail.

Burrs had a garage which was fully occupied maintaining their own fleet of vehicles. They also had stores of agricultural supplies, coal and fuel. Burrs had eighteen or nineteen vehicles which were maintained at Burrs garage, originally built for Burr's private use. All vehicles were the same make and a spare engine was kept that would fit all of them. Garage staff often had to work till two or three in the morning to make sure vehicles were fit for the road the next day. There was no VAT but you had to pay purchase tax at different levels 10%, 15% 20% and 25% so working out garage bills was a difficult task. Although the garage was sold to a private owner it continued to maintain Burrs vehicles.

Burrs had five or six lorries used for haulage, stock carrying and occasionally for flitting. They were very small then, 15cwt/1 torque approximately, much smaller than present day vehicles and much less comfortable. Stock lorries could only carry 30 or 40 sheep. A lorry was driven regularly to Inverness for supplies. Lorries travelled frequently to Glasgow, Greenock,

Aberdeen and Edinburgh for loads. Sometimes drivers were sent out with little warning to drive to Grimsby via Lochinver for a delivery of fish; they got a wary welcome back from their wives who had to wash their clothes! Drivers had to head south quite often to pick up flour, two tons at a time, for the bakehouse. One driver took a flitting from Lairg to the Rhonda Valley in Wales. On the return journey he took a load of Atora Suet from Manchester to Glasgow. The load home was hay from Stirling. From Strathnaver it continued to Altnaharra and back to Tongue. This made the driver very late and rarely home before midnight. Eventually two vans were put on, one to cover Tongue and Altnaharra and the other to go round Strathnaver. Customers from Loyal and Lettermore could now use the van as it arrived at a much more convenient time.

The van carried everything but coal. Paraffin was kept outside the van. The man who worked with paraffin became known as "paraffin Willie". Sometimes goods, such as eggs, were accepted as part payment for orders and were later sold to other customers. Coal was loaded on to lorries at Lairg station, weighed at Burrs and delivered by lorry to customers. More recently coal was picked up at Wick.

Lorries took sheep from roundabout to the sales at Forsinard and Lairg. After the Second World War the Government encouraged everyone to produce more food so the lorries had to have stock boxes to deal with the increase in stock going to auction marts so all of Burr's boxes would be out on sales day. A lot of stock was later shifted to Carlisle and Aberdeen. An empty stockside lorry with a tarpaulin over the top has on occasion has been used as an impromptu dance hall!

Gordon was the main driver. He always kept a well-used pencil behind his right ear and usually wore a navy beret with a leather band. When all the groceries were on the counter he would add up very quickly, no calculator required. Burr's vans provided an essential service for people on outings as cars were few and petrol scarce.

### **Memories of Burr's in Brief**

Messrs Peter Burr boasted of being Baker, Grocer and General Merchant but, in fact, was much more. Indeed Burr's was the Internet of its day, only quicker: order today, delivery tomorrow guaranteed!

- *"That order could be anything from cot to coffin, from food to footwear, from sweets to suites to suits!"*
- *"Burr's bakery supplied fresh bread, rolls and cakes for customers and for the tearooms attached to the shop."*
- *"If you slipped on a too well polished floor you could blame Burr's!"*
- *"If you wanted to sweet-talk your partner you would head to Burr's for chocolates!"*
- *"Coal fires and tilley lamps burned brightly, thanks to Burr's."*
- *"If your fire burned too brightly the Fire Brigade, stocked entirely by Burr's men, would extinguish it for you!"*
- *"Burr's was the main employer for Tongue and its immediate surrounds."*
- *"Animals were fed and fenced by Burr's."*
- *"Burr's garage kept your car wheels turning and its own business moving smoothly."*

- *“Burr’s petrol pumps provided fuel for your car. They also fueled Burr’s hire cars, buses, vans, haulage and stock-sided lorries.”*
- *“Burr’s vans supplied outlying villages and remote households.”*
- *“If you decided you’d had enough of Tongue Burr’s would flit you to your new home wherever that might be!”*
- *“Burr’s unique system of payment ensured that its customers lived well, frequently in times of great hardship, without the pressures of obligation.”*
- *“At Burr’s the customer was always right and service was second to none.”*

*“If you see it, we have it.  
If we don’t have it, we’ll get it.  
If we can’t get it, you’ve had it!  
Pennies “mak poonds”*

### **Memories of Burr’s Mary Henderson**

Davie stayed with Eric Macleod, baker, in Loyal Terrace, Tongue, then went to stay with Donnie and Mary Mackay, Rosewood. He began work with Burr’s as a conductor on the Tongue to Thurso mail bus. He also drove the Picture Bus on a Saturday. The Picture Bus left Tongue at 10 o’clock in the afternoon and left Thurso at 10.30 pm. He also drove Wedding Buses etc. When Davie and I got married in Skerray Church the reception was held in Tongue Hall, catered for by Burr’s. That was in November, 1953. Davie’s wage at that time was six pounds a week.

Davie had a lot of work with the mail. In those days mail bags were large and very full. I’ve seen sixteen parcel bags brought in to Skerray Post Office at one time and that was the way at all the Post Offices from Tongue to Thurso. On the route were Janetstown, Shebster, Reay, Melvich, Strathy, Armadale, Bettyhill and Skerray. In the morning, six days a week, he had to collect mail from Skerray Post Office, then empty Post Office letter boxes at Borgie, Skerray and Naver, collect mail from Bettyhill Post Office and empty letterboxes at Kirtomy and Armadale, collect mail from Armadale Post Office and Strathy Post Office, empty the letterbox at Strathy Church, continue to pick up the mail from Melvich Post Office and then empty half of the letterboxes in Melvich before calling at Reay Post Office and shop. The letterbox at Reay is a Victorian one and it’s still there. From Reay he drove to the letterboxes at Achvarasdale and Shebster, on to Janetstown Post Office and letterbox and finally, he emptied the mailbox at the Dunbar Hospital. He began work at 7.20 am and finished at 6 o’clock in the afternoon, or later on a Saturday. In the winter it was often 11pm before he got home.

He filled up the bus with newspapers, egg cases, bread, all Burr’s goods, such as eggs from Orkney and on occasion, even live hens from Orkney! He took laundry to and from Thurso Laundry and whisky & beer for the hotels. He delivered all the way home. Newspapers were thrown out for customers to collect. Milk, vegetables, potatoes, parcels of all kinds and passengers were dropped off as required. There were no fridges or deep freezes then. The bus took eels from Major Blackett, Borgie to be put on the first train from Thurso to Billingsgate, also salmon from Naver and Strathy Fisheries and rabbits galore. He also collected messages for people along the route. He had to go to Scrabster or Thurso Harbour for fish parcels for the hotels on the way home. He took hampers to and from the John O’Groat Laundry, parcels from the chemist and the vet. I could go on and on!

On a Friday night the men who worked on the boats at Scrabster often came on the bus with a good dram in them. One time there was a minister on the bus and the fishermen thought they

would play up to the minister. Thinking he had no Gaelic they tried to make a fool of him going to Achvarasdale to see the elderly and they talked about the minister and the Baillie. He let them carry on talking but when he got off the bus he wished them a good night and a safe journey in Gaelic! The fishermen didn't say a word for the rest of the journey! What a shock they got!

If there was a dance on Davie had to get anything anyone wanted in Thurso. One lady from Armadale asked him to get her a bra. When the assistant in Fred Shearer's asked him what size he said, "About your own size", and it was a perfect fit!

Big Willie, Skerray, Hughie Reid, Tongue and George Mackenzie, Skerray were all drivers, along with Willie Henderson who went on as one man when Davie was made redundant. Peter Munro used to be a conductor on the buses, too.

The buses were taken over by O'Brien's and then by Highland and Burr's lost the contract for everything.

Once Davie saved the bus going up the Carvag, [above the bridge at Portskerra]. He had a board with all his milk stops on it and he used it to put some pebbles or stones under the wheels of the bus to stop it going off the road. Another time he stopped at the Naver letterbox and the bus slid into the fields beside Geordie Hamish's house. Often Davie had to shovel snow off the road to get the mails and passengers into Thurso. There were no snowploughs then. When Dounreay started what a difference it made as PFR Dounreay put on their own snowplough up as far as Bettyhill Post Office to get their men to work. It was a great relief for the mail bus drivers as many a time the snow fence above Kirtomy was filled. Often the mail came in too late but I helped my dad who was postmaster to get the mail to the public, sometimes as late as 11 o'clock at night. You'll not get service like that now. Davie's working life was hard but the public appreciated the service he provided for them and he took great pleasure doing so much for everybody.

## **Burrs 2020**

In line for a transformation to create a community complex. January 28, 2020.

Now home to the community's Spar store and filling station, the rest of the historic buildings now lie in a derelict condition.

In an effort to restore the area back to its former glory, developer Ben Loyal Ltd for Wildland Ltd, owned by Danish tycoon Anders Holch Povlsen, have outlined aspirations to transform the 'village' into a vibrant destination for locals and visitors alike, whilst maintaining its historic character.

Stated within the full planning application, lodged to the Highland Council, the developers outline plans to meet a growing demand for facilities following an influx of tourists venturing to the north, whilst offering "new and diverse" functions to complement the existing businesses in Tongue. They said: "The proposal is for the renewal of an existing commercial site with business, services, community, tourist, retail, accommodation, and food and drink facilities. The proposals will return previously lost services to the community and a level of expansion appropriate for the growth of local tourism in the Highlands area." If approved, the project will consist of a range of amenities including a restaurant, bakehouse, stonecutters, shop, events space, accommodation for both staff and visitors, new fuel pumps and a microbrewery.

Developers pledge to retain and restore several buildings on the site including the Bakehouse, the Stonecutter's shed and Dunvarich House, which will form as the focal point for the development, alongside the construction of several new buildings. A spokesman for Wildland said: "These plans remain at a very early stage. We look forward to progressing these plans in due course."



Councilor Linda Munro welcomed the proposals saying: “Burrs Grocery Store and Delivery Vans were an institution in their own right. Tales of generations of staff, local characters, and customers are the stuff of legends. I wish the proposed new development every success and welcome the jobs and new services the development will bring to our area. I am particularly heartened by the commitment of the developer to work with established businesses across the area to develop new services and not as far as possible displace established businesses already here. There is plenty room for development and no need for displacement.”

## Military Connections

From ancient times people from this part of the world have frequently been employed in the armed forces. Local connections personal and general are maintained. The presence of military activity, which has a long history and is responsible for many disused brick buildings scattered around, brings locally welcomed civilian employment. There is a live bombing range used by all branches of the services that has been present here since before the Second World War. The Cape Wrath Weapons Range was commissioned as long ago as February 1933. Comprising much of the land towards the Cape and neighbouring Garvie Island, this is the largest live bombing range in Europe. It is the only one in Europe where live 1000 pound bombs may be dropped, and is crucial to the final training of fighter pilots in gaining the experience before being asked to perform in a battle situation.

In 1932 Cape Wrath was leased from the family of its current owner, Andrew Elliot, for a bombing range, the only ship-to-shore facility on mainland Britain. It is controlled by the Royal Navy, though the RAF and NATO forces target the islands of An Garbh-eilean and Na Glas Leacan. In the early 1930s, the military acquired a comparatively small area of the northern part of the Parph for training purposes and for more than seventy years served as a practise area for bombing and offshore gunnery. It was this role that caused the widespread pop marking of the landscape with shell holes and bomb craters, and several specific target areas are identifiable. Over the course of its existence, additional land has been purchased and leasing arrangements made as the range has been enlarged to meet the changing demands on it. Change in status has seen the range assume the role of an all services training area, now known as the Cape Wrath Training Centre.

There are four distinct ranges in the Cape Wrath sector.

1. The Naval Gunfire Support Range covering the whole of the land of Cape Wrath and is used for naval guns to practice shore bombardment. This range is usually used between four and eight times a year.
2. The Garvie Island Bombing Range is the only one in Europe where live one thousand -pound bombs may be dropped. When this range is active for live bombing the Naval Gunfire Support range is also activated because of the safety circle for live bombs includes part of the mainland. This range is the most used of all the ranges but it may only be used up to fourteen days in any month. Aircraft come from all over Europe to this range. The attack profiles bring the aircraft onto the range seaward at low and medium levels providing realistic training for ground and air crews and the random testing of production bombs in a controlled environment. It takes four years training for a combat ready pilot to drop one thousand pound bombs on Garvie.
3. Close Air Support Range uses target plots on the mainland close to the shore and live bombing is not allowed. It is normally used three or four times a year for air to ground cannon and rocket firing and inert bombing.
4. The Torpedo Range is an entirely off shore activity and the land is not affected.

The MOD owns approximately two thousand four hundred and ninety hectares. They also own twenty point seven four nine hectares of headland within which is located the Range Control Tower facilities on Faraid Head. Administrated by the Office of the Flag Officer for Scotland, Northern England and Northern Ireland, HM Naval Base Clyde, Faslane, Helensburgh. The use of the Range from July 1996 to July 1997 was sixty six days (Garvie) and sixteen days of Naval Gunfire. There must be no more than two hundred bombs and four hundred rockets released in any two month period. The range has been used continuously since February 1933.

Field guns and artillery have been tested here although nowadays the use is mainly aerial and naval bombardment training and practice. Large combined military exercises are held throughout the year, usually in February and October.

The very highest priority is accorded to range safety and extensive checks are carried out to ensure both land and sea areas are clear before any firing or bombing commences. These checks are controlled from the observation position at Faraid Head.



IMAGE 107 VIDETTE HUT SENTRY POINT MANNED DURING RANGE ACTIVITY

The videttes sited on the cape side range road are manned during military use of the range, by civilians nowadays. Originally armed military personnel were stationed at the videttes. When the range is in use the videttes are in radio and telephone contact with Faraid Head Range Control, visible from this point away over the water to the east. Faraid Head controls all activity on the Cape Wrath Bombardment Range, on the ground, at sea and in the air. Civilian contracts have been contracted at local level but starting from April this year QINETIQ will be responsible for the infrastructure maintenance on the range. The Community Council have been informed that the civil employment locally will remain the same with four people employed locally. These employees attended boat handling courses and arranging to have a separate access to Cape Wrath over the Kyle of Durness from the current arrangements with local contractors to allow artillery from Faraid Head and troops to be transported independently.

All possible measures are taken to keep interference with the normal everyday activities of people living and working in the area to a minimum and the ranges are only activated on days when noise and vibrations are estimated below certain levels. These levels were ascertained with seismic, geological and noise reverberation level research commissions and with meteorological reports on the day predictions are made as to the likely disturbance. There are

few stories of serious problems although at irregular times in the past there have been complaints about unacceptable intrusion, disturbance and damage. The forming of a liaison group and creation of agreed procedures is an ongoing process of the community and MOD establishing working relationships. A free telephone line to the control is operative when the range is active and complaints have to be made directly. Damage from any military activity to buildings is recorded and inspected and compensation deals made individually. Should noise and vibrations be unacceptable there are four local people with authority to demand the activity is immediately halted.

Perched at the east end of Balnakeil beach on the most northerly point of Faraid Head is a small building for the Air Traffic Control for Cape Wrath and Garvie Island Ranges. Fortunately most activity takes place out with the main tourist season and visitors are often unaware when the range is active. The range control facility built in the 1950s on Faraid Head currently comprises a fenced compound, some nine ha in size which contains a number of buildings a helicopter landing pad and a large area of hard standing. The principal building is the range control tower which stands on the highest part of the peninsula and is a converted type 80 modular building, originally built as part of the radar station established in the mid-1950s. (See Story of the Faraid Head Military Installation under Faraid Head)

In the last thirty years three occasions have arisen causing major adverse concern. A helicopter crash into the side of a hill above Loch Croispol around 1979. In approximately 1976, a bomb exploded outside the range and caused shrapnel to be a danger, with the hitting of a local woman while collecting winkles on the Kyle of Durness. She was treated on a naval ship for minor injuries and received a couple of hundred pound compensation. In 1993, aircraft were fourteen kilometres off course and confused Am Balg in Sandwood Bay with Garvie and dropped two one thousand pound bombs. Hill walkers reported the incident and notwithstanding the episode happened half a mile off shore and no one was hurt. It was very frightening for people in the area. This matter took five years to come to the attention of journalists and became television and newspaper news although discussed at the Liaison Group meeting in 1994. The Royal Navy who have command of the Cape Wrath and Garvie Island Range are eager to maintain good relations with the people of Durness and the importance of this range is regularly expressed.

### **MOD Liaison Group**

This group was set up to liaise with the MOD to discuss range activities with the community.

The meetings between the Durness Community and Defence Training Estates are held two or three times a year to address issues of concern and maintain a working relationship between the residents of Durness and the MOD. The Cape Wrath Training area of Cape Wrath is a most valuable resource to the military allowing the maintenance of the skills needed to carry out the tasks which may be called upon to perform in the war zones British and NATO troop are involved in order to maintain their operational capability.

A report recorded in the Northern Times of a MOD Liaison Meeting on the 17<sup>th</sup>. May 1999 gives an indication to the topics discussed.

*The twelfth meeting of the Durness Community and the Flag Officer for Scotland and Northern Ireland was held in Durness Primary School last Thursday. The last encounter was in November 1993 and anxiety was expressed about the amount of time that had elapsed since a meeting was held. After introductions from representatives of all the services and residents of Durness the chairman from the Royal Navy Commander David Balston presided over an agenda covering all the aspects that had been foremost of concern.*

*Two matters arising from 1993 were dealt with first, a Ship's visit is still outstanding and although there is a lot of obligation and demand on battle ships, with strategic difficulties involved, pressure will continue from the Navy to have a local call. The Commanding Officer of RAF Tain will approach RAF Lossiemoth to orchestrate a school visit similar to the occasion in 1994. The conservation scheme is continuing and proving a success and worthwhile activity, the report is to be made more widely available.*

*The MOD is now the owners of the land on Cape Wrath and questions were asked about the intentions for further use and the motives for the procurement. The purchase was made because The Elliot family was intent on selling and the MOD had first option. The acquisition was decided upon to ensure that the land would continue to be able to be used as a range. New landlords could have been hostile to the military and caused unacceptable restrictions. All the present rules will continue to apply and there is no programme or planned intensified use. Accompanied with a concern of disruption to the Cape Bus Tours there is to be a review of the closed periods with a possible alteration with planning consent of the summer use. There is to be a central point of contact with the most up to date times of activity that can be called to ensure minimum disruption to the tourists and services.*

*The noise level flying review was discussed at some length. There was no doubt that the incidents that occurred last year were a culmination of factors and these have all been resolved. The Community Council will review the trusted representatives and enlist a further person returning the number to four. There is great concern that the system for reporting high noise and vibration levels works efficiently and the meteorological readings for calculating the interference levels are to be made more accurate with improved computer software that will be available from the end of the summer.*

*Structural damage compensation is through the recognised procedure to the MOD Land Agents. Assessments will be made on individual claims. There is no set procedure for arbitration but if individuals feel they are not being dealt with fairly independent assessors can be employed. There was a debate about the fairness of the system but until the method is put to the test there can be no method of resolving the current system.*

*The MOD sympathise with the requests of the Community wishing a Disturbance Compensation Fund administrated by the Community Council and financed with annual payments but are unable to direct public funds into such an application. Councillor Keith put forward an effective and forcible case for disturbance compensation and emphasised that should future development be applied for through planning channels they would, as any other developer is expected, to remunerate the local community. If there is concern about damage to community structures as dykes and the like then the owner or tenants of the structures should employ the structural damage compensation route.*

*There is to be involvement locally in exercise planning meetings and no more than one year should elapse before the next Liaison Meeting.*

In 2005 ten sailors from HMS Sutherland spent nearly two days in Durness carrying out jobs that were beneficial to the community. While the ship was at Invergordon a work party from the "Durness Mess" came north. The sailors helped with several maintenance jobs around the community house in Bard Terrace. They cleared the guttering and painted much of the outside woodwork. Supervised by Graham Bruce the lads helped with some work at the school and church.

On several occasions military personnel have offered their services to help with various community projects, working on the hall garden, painting the HOOD stones with the primary school, painting the community house, building a helicopter pad at Lerinbeg, providing signage

for Cape Wrath. Receptions have been held in the hall for service personnel at various times for various occasions.

### **Bombing Range and Trusted Agents**

A minute of a liaison group meeting 5/3/2001

*Councillor Keith and the Ministry of Defence had a vigorous disagreement about alleged accusations of hostility to military use of the Cape Wrath Bombing Range. A meeting had been proposed between Durness Community Council and the range's Naval Operations Officers Commander Bertie Armstrong and Lutenant Commander Lorne Robertson to discuss the system of appointing and clarifying the terms of reference of Trusted Agents. Trusted agents are members of the community with the ability to have attack profiles altered to reduce noise and vibrations or ultimately stop bombing activity on the range if noise and interference levels become highly intrusive and intolerable. They are a central point for any member of the community to contact and inform if they are being troubled by the range activity. If in the opinion of the agent the report is valid or they receive a large number of reports they can call the dedicated secret hotline and give direct instructions to cease bombing. This does not prevent any member of the public independently complaining or reporting dissatisfaction. The procedure has worked well for over ten years when four representative members of the community were empowered with this authority. This practice became active after Salford University carried out a detailed study of noise prediction and using computer simulation with weather forecasting the noise levels could be ascertained. If the predictions were above a certain calculation the activity would not be started. This has been the case on many occasions. At the time of appointment of trusted agents no terms of reference were written down and recorded about the appointment or recommendation of Trusted Agents. It was an agreement at an open Liaison group meeting of the MOD and residents of Durness.*

*During the intervening years one of the positions of Trusted Agents became vacant and at Liaison Group meeting nearly two years ago it was decided that the community Council should put forward a responsible member of the community to fill the position. Councillor Keith was nominated by the Community Council. This has brought the unspecified reference regarding the responsibilities and exact procedure to the attention of the MOD and they believe that people empowered with this authority, that could be ultimately costing tax payers vast amounts of money, should be specific in its remit with a well-documented policy.*

*Recently Councillor Keith was portrayed in the press as being concerned about the destruction of birds on the Clo Mor cliffs at Cape Wrath by bombing activity. He was highlighting an anxiety with Scottish Natural Heritage, giving a presentation to the Highland Council, for designating the locality as a Special Protection Area for Birds in the vicinity of a military range. The MOD were concerned that Trusted agents must be trusted from both sides and this new initiative to put in writing what is being achieved and expected from Trusted Agents was not aimed to be problematic and difficult. The naval representatives responsible for the administration of the Cape Wrath and Garvie Island Bombing range is to draft a document to include their expectations for submission to the Community Council for discussion. This was agreed by all present but it is to be kept as simple and coherent as possible.*

*The MOD, who now own the land at Cape Wrath, and deny any current plans for future development are greatly concerned about being a good neighbour to the community and looking for ways to work in partnership. The Community Council expressed their support should development of the range be of a benefit to the community. The meeting ended good-humouredly with several other topics of community interest being discussed including the permission probably being available if a local group applies for fishing rights on the Cape side*

*lochs, a possible help with dykes being rebuilt within an agreed scheme if a training element is present, a ship visit in the not too distant future to Loch Eriboll and the long promised wildlife video for display in the Tourist information centre. A damage complaint from a local resident will be sent to the land agent for further investigation. This procedure is established and members of the community that have damage caused from range activity have to individually contact the MOD.*

Joint Warrior is a UK-led war exercise that takes place in spring and autumn each year. The Royal Navy, Royal Air Force and British Army are joined by forces from 13 other nations, including Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Turkey, Japan, UAE and the US. Taking place over two weeks, Joint Warrior includes airborne assaults, amphibious landings, evacuations and live-fire exercises. The exercise runs through a range of scenarios, including crisis and conflict situations that could be realistically encountered in operations, such as territory disputes, terrorist activity and piracy. This massive multinational war exercise involves warships, aircraft, marines and troops from UK, NATO and allied forces. The exercise doesn't only allow participating units to hone their specialist roles within a larger war-style setting – it also helps foster vital links between the UK, NATO and other allied militaries.

The aim is to provide a complex environment in which the participants can train together, honing tactics and skills in preparation for deployment as a Combined Joint Task Force. The scenario for each Joint Warrior is designed to reflect contemporary political tensions, such as the war on terror and the threat posed by ISIS and to simulate the hostilities that might result from them. The ultimate aim is to assure maximum preparedness in the face of any threat. The range is used at various times by all the NATO allied forces, principally for aircraft bombing exercises but also occasionally for ship to shore shelling and combined exercises using ground troops.

### **Garvie Island Durness Community Liaison Group Meeting**

*Following the recent Joint Military Company exercise that has been taking place the annual liaison meeting gave an opportunity for the Durness residents to air their concerns regarding the disturbance that occurred on two days of the exercise. The complaints reached such a level on the Saturday afternoon with phone calls being made direct to Whitehall when satisfaction was not being obtained locally. Exercises were curtailed on the subsequent days and bombing cancelled.*

*The annual meeting was chaired by Commander Bertie Armstrong of the Royal Navy, the branch of the armed forces who administrate and are responsible for the range. Representatives from Strike Command, Royal Air Force, Land defence Unit Ministry of Defence and the recently appointed Range Officer, Captain David Halpern from the 51 Highland Brigade. The community was represented by the Community Council, Highland Councillor Keith, Chairman of Keoldale Stock club and Local enterprise chairman Jack Watson with a large contingent turnout of members of the public. This was an open meeting for any member of the public and ample opportunity was given for grievances to be aired. The forum is there to listen and report on the community concerns and attempt to establish policies and procedures for the grievances and concerns regarding the military to be dealt with. It is also a forum to ensure agreed practices are working and maintained.*

*The recent exercise was described as public relations disaster. From the community not receiving adequate notice and the complaints through the recognised procedure were not being given the importance they deserved. Trusted Agent Dottie Mackay of the Parkhill Hotel informed the meeting that noise and vibration levels had reached a level that had caused many*

*members of the community to contact her and when she communicated with the Range Control she was not afforded the regard that the trusted agent holds. In all the years that Dottie has been involved with the military activities this was in her recollection the most unacceptable situation. This was echoed by many independent members and representatives of the community and a lively discussion with opportunity to have the concerns expressed led to the conclusion and summed up by Mrs. Dottie Mackay that the public were not getting the liaison they deserve that was at one time common courtesy. She enforced the mood that was taken on aboard by the military and MOD personnel that there must never be a recurrence of the recent circumstances, the military did not react quickly enough on this occasion and there must be more liaisons.*



IMAGE 108 DURNESS MOD MEETING REPRESENTATION FROM ALL THE ARMED FORCES AND COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES.

*The system of the trusted agents is still currently under review. The procedures will remain as they are at present while the MOD prepares a new proposal with suitable terms of reference. Currently Johnny Morison, Sangobeg, Dottie Mackay Durine, and Iris Mackay Sangomore should have the authority to cease the bombing if noise levels become intolerable in the community. The range was in use forty two days in the last year and there were occasions when activity was cancelled because of predicted high noise and vibration levels and totally closed during the worries of a local introduction of Foot and Mouth.*

*The military are addressing this public relations breakdown and a Range Officer have been appointed. A little disappointment was expressed that this officer Captain Halpern will not be taking up residence in Durness but will be living in Dornoch visiting the range three times a week and being present during exercises.*

*The Garvie Island Bombing ranges are unique. As well as naval and army gunfire it is the only area where live 1000 bombs can be dropped. This is essential in the training of fighter pilots and the community pressed the point that it should therefore be offered more in the terms of interpretation and compensation. There is the feeling that the community is losing in many respects. The promised weather station that was understood to give local confirmation to meteorological readings that are used to predict noise and interference levels was located in Kinlochbervie. Durness missed out on three terminals around the village and a part time job. The arrangements were initiated when the Cape Wrath Lighthouse was automated and*



*Stanford University carried out a study. After pressure from the MOD the Met office were given a temporary site with the understanding that a permanent site would be established. The met office have now made various excuses and moved out of Durness with the MOD taking no responsibility.*

*The discussion was directed toward the relevance of the local meteorological readings and the suggestion of an independent check for acoustic levels and seismology could be commissioned. The local enterprise company and the highland Council could perhaps organise this over a period. It was suggested that some kind of independent or community check on the readings that are put to a model to determine levels prior to exercises would be appreciated in the community. This would remove any doubt that the circumstances were being stretched.*

*Notice boards with information about the Cape Ranges were to be produced. There was disquiet that now the offer has been reduced to an explanation of military uses. It was understood that the interpretation would include all the wildlife and natural environmental interests of the Range and immediate area. Donald Mitchell Highland Council Countryside Ranger, RAF Tain and the Community Council are to agree a format for the text. The RAF will have the notice prepared and the panels will then become the responsibility of the Community Council. More precise times and detailed explanations of future exercises were requested and the arrangements will be reviewed. Captain Halpern will attend Community Council meetings and give as much detailed information as possible.*

*Councillor Keith's suggestion of a community fund administered by the community council was being given strong community support and although the military and MOD personnel present are unable to make decisions on such issues they were interested to discuss the implications and hear the outline details of this proposal. The MOD states that £140,000 annually is spent on civilian contractors in the wider community but were understanding to the fact that the excursion to Cape Wrath is an important economical pull to the village. If this is closed then the community suffers. There is no compensation currently available for any business loss and this is the basis of the proposal for a fund. It was questioned whether more damage was being made to the local tourist industry than what was at present being put in. Although the option of exercises occurring in June must remain an option there could be negotiations for more use outside the short tourist season. Currently there is an agreement that the range is inactive during July and August.*

*Mr. Watson said, "If the MOD wishes to continue to operate the range with community co-operation then this area of compensation to the community and business must be explored as the compensation to building damage has been arranged with the Defence Estates on an individual basis. Although the military have been utilising the area for over seventy years acceptance levels and the disturbance the activity creates has changed. The MOD must be prepared to look at unique circumstances for an important and unique range."*

*Operational needs of the country and the arrangements that they involve are for central government and this must be taken forward to ministers through the MP. For the liaison representatives they agreed to take a positive report to their seniors. A community fund would be for politicians to initiate. Since the meeting Councillor Keith has written to the newly elected MP John Thurso outlining the basis of such a fund and suggesting a figure of £100000 annually to the community. In a letter to the MP he writes "In return the community would undertake to relieve the MOD of the responsibility to meet all routine claims for compensation for damage to property. This community administered fund would also be used to help compensate tourism operators for their losses caused by military activities as well as acting as a development fund for augmenting local facilities." He has requested that this suggestion be taken up with the minister Dr. Lewis Moonie on behalf of the community.*

*The meeting was conducted in an orderly and fair fashion although a large body of the public left the meeting after their complaints were no longer being discussed. It is a recognition of the community that they wish to work with the military and the necessity for training activities in the community is well understood and there is not a move to stop their presence. The meeting discussed other issues including a possible ships' visit. HMS Sutherland is due to be coming north and Councillor Keith and Commander Armstrong will make approaches about the ship coming to Sutherland.*

*The MOD have at previous meetings indicated that now they own the range area on Cape Wrath they would be prepared to enter discussions with a constituted community group about the fishing rights on the lochs. Two approaches have been made and they are currently undergoing an examination phase regarding the sporting rights, which compliments their environmental policies.*

*Naval representatives introduced the environmental case for The Garvie Island Bombing range being advantageous to the bird breeding colonies. A concept difficult to comprehend but because the area is restricted for access and the area is monitored regularly and the surveys show that there is very little evidence of disturbance. A popular misconception is that the cliffs of the Clo Mor are bombarded when shelling takes place, this is not the case and the target areas are sites clearly visible from Faraid Head.*

*The Laid Grazing Committee were given time to raise several points. They were alarmed by the damage to prawn lines in Loch Eriboll and Commander Armstrong informed them of the compensation that was available and the route to take. He was anxious that they should be kept abreast of the Loch Eriboll activities with the notice to mariners widely distributed. The Laid committee have been corresponding with the MOD and minister about quarries at the roadside that were used to supply gravel for a road built to Faraid Head over fifty years ago. The Committee want these restored or converted to remove the eyesore on their doorstep. They have managed to receive information that the ministry was likely responsible for hiring contractors but are unwilling to take any further action. The liaison meeting was also discussing a works list that could be carried out by military when they were in the area and if this has a training element it could be approved. The Laid Grazing were informed that if they worked with the Community Council in identifying specific tasks that fitted the remit they might be able to have some of the sites improved. A request was made about considering Loch Eriboll as a no low fly area similar to what the Laid Grazing committee believed the Kyle of Tongue to be. This was met with surprise as the RAF knew nothing of this and believed the Grazing committee had been misinformed. The Durness area including Laid was protected from low flying because the area was a live bombing range and although the disturbance at the recent exercise was excessive if the area was not designated as a range with the strict conditions more low flying would be likely. There is an incident under official enquiry from the recent exercise involving American jets from USS Enterprise and low flying.*

*Reiterating the importance of a pre exercise briefing for the community it might prevent incidents of helicopters scarring sheep and landing in unauthorised fields. It was pointed out that the planning of these exercises is carried out far from the area and with only reference to maps it would be beneficial to have a more local consultation. The meeting was informed of the noise being heard as far as Orkney and Caithness.*

*There was no ruling out of any increase use of the range but since the MOD purchased the ground from the Elliot's of Balnakeil there has been no plans to increase the use. If there were to be the community could be confident that they would be involved in the plans. It was requested that Keoldale be kept informed and specifically involved as they have the only easy access and would require ensuring farm practices met with any plans.*

*The Chairman stressed the importance of the cape ranges to the training of personnel and national security with the emphasis that the military needs to practice and the community needs to be taken into account. "There is no alternative to the Garvie Island ranges and another location is out of the question. Many matters of importance have been discussed and the next meeting should be in six months' time and not left for another year. The MOD wishes to be good neighbours with the community and we are willing to ensure the concerns are redirected to the appropriate channels. The liaison must be improved and trying to make amends after the event does not undo the damage done. The need to practice will have to be taken in concert with people living near the range."*

*Lt Commander Lorane Robertson the officer of the Royal Navy who has been in charge of the range is leaving his current posting and taking up a position of UN monitor in Sierre Leone.*

### **MOD Presentation 18<sup>th</sup> July 2005**

Around 20 people gathered last Monday to hear about the Cape Wrath Range from the military aspect. Community Council chairperson Mary Mackay welcomed all present and introduced range officer Captain David Halpin and Staff Operations Officer (Surface and Air) to the Flag Officer for Scotland, Northern England and Northern Ireland. Lieutenant Commander Stewart Bankier.

The talk started with a background to put the Cape Wrath Range in perspective. Started in 1993 with naval gunnery, it progressed to fleet training, introduced aircraft and most recently within the last two years army. Its main purpose is joint warfare training and joint coordinated firings involving more than one of the services. The range is active 140 days in the year with agreed closed periods during lambing, the main tourist season and bird breeding times. Several methods of notification of range activity are now in place, the distributed notices, a web site that will be formally launched in the next month, telephone information line and community liaison meetings. With the input of the community council it is anticipated that the format of the twice yearly Liaison meeting could be adapted to be more useful for MOD and community contact. Lt Commander Bankier is anxious to discover who, why, when and how people will use these notification processes and have the information tailored to suit the enquirer's requirements and will be working on this to refine the messages distributed. After a great deal of co coordinating there will now be a three month warning notification for all military activity that closes the road to Cape Wrath lighthouse. This will still cause difficulties for the mini bus operator who has enquires and potential bookings for nearly a year in advance and has claimed loss of business due to closing of the road. Lt Cmdr. Bankier was sympathetic but unable to give any longer notice.

Lt Cmdr. Bankier explained, with the aid of a map, his duties included a large sea area of Scotland of which Cape Wrath, albeit a very important part is a small section of his responsibility for ship movements and manoeuvres.

Most changes that are current and planned for the range are tied in with the requirements of Health and Safety connected to the land reform act and the right to roam. The MOD have to abide by the all the legal requirements including signage, flags around the range when active and inspection. There has to be detailed planning of the range administrations and by individual ships, troops and services that use the range. They have to respond to the legislation that allows public access and this must be safe. To accomplish this infrastructure of the range has been updated. Four new jobs are to be provided. This new manpower will be to erect flags for warning systems when firing is in operation. These will be in addition to the Range Officer, the Range Warden, vidette sentries, vehicle suppliers, safety boats and road clearing. These posts are offered on civilian contracts. New equipment will be provided, quad bikes all-terrain

vehicles, there has been an improvement to buildings on MOD land the radio systems can now cover all of the range from Faraid Head and is in contact with all military establishments.

Cape Wrath Range development is all hinged on what the military are planning on for the future of all ranges in Britain. From April 2007 a new organisation Defence Training Estate DTE will oversee all the responsibilities at Cape Wrath and this will mean a “Change of Management” that Lt Bankier could not expand on. He was unable to confirm or deny that he would still be involved or his office at FOSNNI would still be concerned as he just did not know.

The MOD is currently looking at about a further fifty acres of land at Cape Wrath that presently belongs to the Northern Lighthouse Board. This small strip of land would give the MOD possession of practically all of Cape Wrath and caused some concern in the Durness Community. The MOD wish to own the land to allow training further to the west. The advantages would be that “Safety Traces” during firing would be improved. Lt Commander Bankier emphasised that this was still being looked at for feasibility. The area holds grade A listed buildings and costs may not warrant the purchase. Another advantage would be that firings could be moved away from the village reducing noise levels. They have had the District Valuer at Cape Wrath and should they be able to make the purchase a building could be renovated for an interpretive visitor centre. Discussion moved on to Weapon Templates that could be increased with this piece of land and the area of firing which caused some community concern from people present for bird, land and sea mammals. Lt Commander Bankier stressed that there was a lot to consider and several stages of planning and consultation before this could happen and was giving the community as much information as he has.

Buildings are being upgraded within the current developments and work is starting at Inshore. This will become a bothy for troops and may be able to be used by the mountain bothy association. This was one point the military representatives were to take to their appropriate people. Clarification was given about Kervaig. There was some misunderstanding about ownership but this bothy is owned by the MOD and has been since they purchased the land at Cape Wrath a few years ago. It is “on loan” to the Mountains Bothy Association.

It is hoped by the MOD that early plans to improve the helicopter landing site at Faraid Head will be possible. The small pad, currently adjacent to the tower, does not serve existing requirements and if the large desolated area within the boundary fence could be cleared and made suitable this would restore a site on Faraid and improve helicopter facilities. Comment was raised about the flying and hovering of helicopters over houses in the village and this will be looked into.

There could also be research carried out into rerouting the access to Faraid Head avoiding vehicles having to be driven along Balnakeil Beach.

Road Improvements around the range on Cape Side are being considered to ensure the perimeter, for flag erecting is possible, and efficient.

When discussions between the military and Defence Estates were taking place regarding improvements to the building at Faraid Head it was suggested that to secure a power and water supply would be very expensive and an alternative may be to seek an admin HQ in the village. Possible alternatives have yet to be found but an area of a current building about the size of a port a cabin or a new build are under consideration. This would have to accommodate about twenty people contributing to the control of activity while the range is active but would not be for living quarters.

Recently access to Faraid Head MOD land, which allows access to the best views of the sea cliffs and bird life on the point, has been denied. Gates have been locked, fences erected and keep out signs have been established. This apparently is due to the threat of injury to personnel

from potential bombers. The representatives agreed to that when the premises are not in use this threat does not exist for personnel and would look into allowing the access to be reinstated. When the presentation was advertised locally persons were invited to attend and or submit questions through the chair of the community council. Cmdr. Bankier was asked about recent Admiralty charts dated February 2005 that showed two new areas of military activity, training at Loch Eriboll and one at Eilean Hoan. Cmdr. Bankier offered to check this out as he had no immediate knowledge of alterations.

“There is always a difficulty in making such a presentation when actual detailed plans are not available and what are currently ideas raise more questions than answers.” Lt Commander Bankier said “I can’t guarantee there won’t be more activity at Cape Wrath. This range offers opportunities but limited. The three multinational exercises each year will continue as will joint firings, littoral manoeuvres, fighting training just off the coast, and joint rapid reaction force task groups training. There is no easy solution to work military training and community concerns but while I am in the post I will operate an open and approachable liaison”.

Councillor Keith believed that there “is a wind of change and this more open approach from the MOD is first time that there has been an open and clear discussion. There is room for the community and the MOD to work together.”

### **Conservation**

Conservation will play a more important role in future activities. All the proposed developments whether still in the discussion or planning stages will have to be approved through several conservation levels. The MOD has its own conservation policy that has to be adhered to, much of the Cape Wrath range is on sites of SSSI, the Defence Estates, a branch of the MOD, is re constituting the Cape Wrath Conservation group which needs to become more robust with better defined terms of reference, this will include a local input and better involvement of agencies, Highland Council, SHN, RSPB. Operation Auk that has been an annual event concerned with bird watching and counting will be looking at becoming involved in many more issues.

The MOD has an ongoing conservation programme with the aim of monitoring the effect of bombing on the seabirds. Cape Wrath Conservation Group has recently held its sixth Annual Meeting. (July 1997) The aim is to pursue a positive conservation policy, not by getting involved in active conservation management, but by establishing exactly what needs protecting on the site, deciding on a suitable conservation management plan and liaison with the bodies responsible for site management. Ministry of Defence policy states groups of this kind should be established in areas, which are subject to national and international conservation legislation. Cape Wrath contains a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and a Special Protection Area for Birds (SPA) under the European Directive “Birds Directive” and it is vital the MOD are seen to be managing the sector correctly from a wildlife aspect. The Naval Bombardment Range of Cape Wrath and Faraid Head has accordingly a Conservation Management Plan 1996 – 2001.

The use of the location as a live firing range has a mixed effect on the ecology, as military use will almost invariably result in damage. The damage can be inshore shell holes that quickly become colonised by small aquatic life, plants and animals diversifying the habitats in the longer term. There are characteristic factors identified, influencing management including detailed effects of the general marine environment, ownership of the land, visitors and access to the sector. During tugging and lambing seasons, the use of the range is kept to a minimum and for long periods each year there is a total ban on all live firing to coincide with particularly delicate natural cycles. Since 1932, intensive bombardment has not appreciably affected the

colonies. Undoubtedly live firing cause damage and the death of some wildlife. Despite the clear inference that such activity does not deplete the quantity or variety of wildlife it will always remain a reason for adverse criticism from those who do not wish the Armed Forces to train onshore.

The Conservation Group is closely linked to a Wildlife Study Group that conducts a week long annual expedition to the site during the breeding season between May and August called Operation Auk, supplemented by periodic visits throughout the year. Ministry of Defence Policy states groups of this kind should be established in areas, which are subject to national and international conservation legislation. The first Operation Auk took place in 1993, however since 1988, Cape Wrath SSSI has been involved in investigations into the effects of the MOD's bombing activities on nesting seabirds, gathering of site information and bird ringing studies and since 1985 an annual survey by MOD personnel and associated civilians has been carried out at Cape Wrath. There are about twenty volunteers taking part in the Operation AUK from all the branches of the forces and civilians.

**September 11<sup>th</sup>. 2001**



IMAGE 109 GRAHAM BRUCE THE CAPTAIN OF HMS EXETER AND KENNY MACRAE

There had been notification that HMS Exeter was in the area and had a few hours that could be used to welcome visitors from the local community. Three members of Durness Community Council chairman Kenny MacRae, Jock Sutherland, Jack MacPherson, David Ingles the local policeman, Graham Bruce from Durness Primary School, Ronnie Lansley and Yvonne Davidson correspondents for the Northern Times from Durness and Kinlochbervie made the party complete.

After a knuckle-riding voyage in a small rib from the harbour at Kinlochbervie and what appeared a precarious climb to the ship the party were warmly greeted on board HMS Exeter. The plan was to give the visitors a three four hour trip out into the Minch and be aboard the ship while several manoeuvres were demonstrated. The tour began with a slide presentation and after about five minutes was interrupted as the ship was put on full alert with orders to make way to the mid-Atlantic to give air defence after the news of the catastrophic events in America. The ship at this point was eight miles out and action began all around. The visit was cut short and the visitors returned to shore as soon as the distance for the rib to travel was reached at about a mile and a half from shore. The appointment was an experience the party will remember for a long time. The captain and the crew could not have been more accommodating and were full of apologies. Some of the crew were emotionally disturbed as the news was breaking and on the deck many were in tears as they spoke into mobile phones. A quick presentation was made to the Community Council Chairman and head teacher of fired shells from the ship as a memento. This was an instance when the group were reminded of the importance of the Cape Wrath Range to the Armed Forces in defence of democracy.

### **Protestors March 2000**

A report from the Northern Times

*For the first time in its long existence peace protestors visited the Garvie Island and Cape Wrath Bombing Range. Last Friday, on the last day of the American Naval bombardment, five activists arrived early in the morning from Glasgow at Durness and made the mile and a half walk in atrocious weather along Balnakeil Beach to Faraid Head and into the Range Control Building. Three of the protestors, Ian Tompson a strong SNP supporter and Faslane peace-camper, Brian Quail, joint Scottish secretary of CND and Janet Cameron of SNP and CND entered the building and removed the red warning flag and attempted to raise the Scottish Saltier before being stopped by military personnel.*

*The objectors were in Durness following the recent publicity about activity relating to American Marines. The announcement that the Americans have to move to Cape Wrath because they have been banned from live bombings on a naval training ground in Puerto Rico with a subsequent civilian death from "friendly fire" brought attention to the protestors. They declared that Scotland was being substituted as a colony of the USA and they were here representing various organisations to draw attention to the existence of the range and detrimental issues that arose from the facility.*

*The seasoned protestors were treated with respectful hospitality from the Commanding officer and were slightly disappointed that they were not arrested. They were convinced that activity in the north west of Scotland had a direct link to military activities in Iraq and the Gulf "with the military personnel on site unsure of what their actions led to and were only instruments of the killing system". There was evidence, they assured, but failed to elaborate upon, of depleted uranium explosives being used at this and other locations.*

*Lieutenant Commander Lauren Robertson from HM Naval Base Clyde declined to become involved in an argument about the ethical and moral principles but was definite in his testimony that there was no divergent use of the Range. The NATO allies had used the facility on many occasions and he had given a full, accurate and satisfying account at the recent meeting of the Community Council of Durness. The activities on Cape Wrath were line with the military actions needed in defence of the realm and conducted with the licensing agreements of the elected politicians and defence policies. He affirmed that there was no breach to security and the arrival of the protestors did not influence the security profile.*

*The intruders were invited to watch the naval gunfire from the comfort of the control tower but declined the offer. They left of their own bidding taking the offer of transport back along the beach to their colleagues, Stephen Allcroft a fellow Faslane peace-camper and Billy Wolf former leader of the SNP from 1969- 79, waiting at Balnakeil.*

*The protestors said they were "very unhappy about foreign military bombing Scotland" and this was "the most interesting and most bizarre protest they had been on, being quite a pleasant skirmish but the struggle would go on."*

*The USS Cape St. George, one of the three American ships using the Cape Wrath Range, was diverted immediately after its exercise to Mozambique to assist in the rescue and support in the flood disaster. On Friday night the American ships in the area were diverted to a search and rescue mission after the coastguard was alerted to an emergency radio beacon. The signal turned out to be from a source not requiring help but all activity was ceased and the priority became the response for help.*



IMAGE 110 HMS SUTHERLAND SAILORS HELPING AT THE HALL GARDEN JULY 2002

In recent years the military have been involved in providing helpful labour to several community projects.

In October 2005 Sailors from HMS Sutherland painted and carried out repairs on the community house in Bard Terrace.

In July 2004 102 (Clyde) Field Squadron (Air Support) (Volunteers) Constructed a helipad for civilian use, air ambulance and coastguards at Lerinbeg.

On several occasions but particularly during the visit from Beechgrove garden service personnel played a major role in the work on the Village Hall Garden.

There has been a few visit's to HMS Sutherland.

Clay pidgin shoots are occasionally organised between military and local people.



## Wartime in Durness<sup>28</sup>

At the outbreak of war in 1939, Durness had no mains electricity, no adequate mains water or sewage. There was only a small number of wireless sets and people relied on the daily newspaper delivery at about five p.m. to keep abreast with developments in the `outside world`. Christie Macpherson and Miss Elliot ran a canteen for the RAF from the Durine church, open during the afternoon and early evening.

Towards the end of 1939, Air Ministry officials and surveyors arrived in Durness and land at Sangomore, Lerinbeg and Smoo was requisitioned. A worker's camp was built at Smoo and the construction of an RAF camp at Sango. These developments were the direct result of the advance in wartime technology and the realisation by the government that radar was to play a vital role in the defence of the realm. Durness had been selected to cover a belt from the Butt of Lewis to the Orkneys. A combined Chain Home and Chain Home Low site was found on the headland of Lerinbeg. Chain Home was the title given to the radar defence established in Britain in the years and days that led to the Battle of Britain in 1940. Chain Home along with Chain Home Low provided Fighter Command with its early warning system so that fighter pilots could get airborne as early as was possible to combat incoming Luftwaffe aircraft.



IMAGE 111 ARIEL MASTS ON LERINBEG DURING WW2 DURNESS ARCHIVE

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<sup>28</sup> Based on an article in the Northern Times written by Bernard Hames published in 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2004. How War Left Its mark on one of Scotland's most far flung Communities

Large aerial masts were erected, the most visible sign to the villagers as operations were carried out in secret. People of the district were now aware the war was on their doorstep. Wick had been bombed and a number of merchant ships had been sunk off Cape Wrath causing bodies to be washed ashore. A considerable number of local men had been called for National Service. Work continued on the construction, at Lerinbeg, a number of masts some one hundred and ten metres high appeared, underground communications centres and accommodation with storage units were built. By the end of 1940, about four hundred RAF personnel were in camp at Churchend Sango. They were for the most part radio operators and technicians. They had their own military transport and their garage still stands close to the front of the church at Sangomore used today by Iris and Donny Mackay for servicing the minibuses for travelling to Cape Wrath in the summer. A cookhouse, which the ruins of still stand, a dispensary, eight dormitory blocks, four of which have been converted into accommodation and are used today, rations supply store and a recreation centre were built. This was open to the locals and one of the biggest booms to the local people was the showing of films three or four times weekly. The work of the RAF was top secret and it was a long time before it was known Durness was the hub of a radar installation. The army moved into Smoo Lodge as the headquarters. The adjacent office blocks, now the youth hostel, were erected in 1941. The station offices were opposite Smoo Lodge now Caberfeidh ('the deer's antlers'). A number of other buildings in the area also date from this period. As the station expanded, a number of Nissan type huts sprang up to provide temporary accommodation, most no longer exist. Sango appears to have been unique for a mainland station in that no WAAF personnel were ever posted there. The wooden and steel pylons that were erected for communication transmissions and radar were blown down in a storm in 1952/53.

Soldiers were engaged in commando training in the valleys and hills around the village. Loch Eriboll was used as a safe haven for Royal Navy vessels to shelter and occasionally crews would come ashore at Laid and many a time RAF transport would be used to convey crews to a dance in Durness. To balance numbers, WAAF's were transported in from camps in Caithness. Camouflage buildings at Lerinbeg were used as shelter when planes crossed overhead. The sea areas from Cape Wrath to the Pentland Firth and the naval anchorage at Scapa Flo were extremely busy traffic lanes. Many German U-boats were around, constantly harassing shipping in this area and had sunk a number of ships.

The men too old to go to war joined the Home Guard. They were charged with patrolling the village and the coastline to keep a look out for enemy landings and U Boats which used the bays and inlets around the coast to surface and re-charge batteries. The Home Guard received regular training every week from the army personnel stationed in Durness. They were given uniforms rifles and live ammunition. As well as night time duties, they played a large part in military exercises receiving no payment. They patrolled in pairs at night after a day's work on the croft covering the whole village and the surrounding area.

There was constant rumours of the presence of German spies. There is no secure local knowledge of any spies ever being apprehended. Evidence does suggest a presence in the Cape Wrath area. Radio transmitters of German origin were found in a remote part and handed over to military authorities. The popular belief at the time was German agents had been landed by submarine or parachuted in, their object to transmit their findings to U boats in the vicinity. Another factor to support the spy scare is that there were reports from shepherds of occasionally observing strangers who quickly made themselves scarce. Articles of clothing and remnants of food were found at various locations. It was believed locally that German spies worked the area for short periods of time.

Even in this parish when there was no mains electricity the blackout was strictly adhered to. The military installations had an electrical supply. The majority of houses were lit with Tilley lamps or Aladdin oil lamps and were subject to black out regulations. Wooden shutters and thick curtain material were required. The police constables nightly duty was to enforce the regulations by patrolling the village in order to ensure no light could be seen. Food rationing had an effect but it was not a critical factor in Durness. People were moderately self-sufficient. There was always plenty milk, butter and cowdrie, a kind of cheese, eggs, fish, mutton and home baking. Sugar, jam, sweets, tea, coffee, petrol, cigarettes and whisky were officially rationed. Enterprising locals carried on a profitable and mutually agreeable trading scheme with military personnel. Clothing, footwear, and household items were usually only available with coupons. There were two general merchant shops and a visiting butchers van from



IMAGE 112 DURNESS BOY SCOUTS FORMED BY A CORPORAL MCFADFAN OF RAF SANGO DURING THE LAST WAR. HE WAS A NEW ZEALANDER. BACK ROW WR MARLAY (BALVOLICH) DAVID MORRISON, (THE FERRY), DAVID CAMPBELL (BRIVARD), BILLY MORRISON (LERIN), BERNARD HAMES (SANGO), RULAND MARL

Dornoch and a grocer from Lairg once a week. There were a few problems for drinkers in those times. The only licensed bar was the small public bar of the Cape Wrath Hotel and with the influx of construction workers and service personnel, could not cope. The RAF did have a licensed canteen at Sango. There was an acute shortage of whisky and a scarcity of glasses. Glass being required for the war effort. Being resourceful patrons took their own receptacle, usually a jam jar.

Domestic and social life continued. Many local men were away on national service and others were engaged on war work. The crofting continued. A common practice was people congregating in the house that had a radio to listen to the news and latest on the war fronts. The school continued with windows taped up and children carrying gas masks. The social life in the village was very active during the mid-war period. There were weekly dances alternately in the village hall and RAF camp. Four films were shown every week, weekly whist drives, concerts and shows. In the summer football matches were arranged between locals and

services, attracting teams from along the north. Most service members in Durness became part of the community. A New Zealand airman introduced Boy Scouts to Durness during the war but this organisation ceased after the departure of the soldier. There were numerous wartime romances in the village some of them extended to marriage. The servicemen either fell totally for the area and loved the life or hated it. Most accepted they were at the back of beyond and got used to it. Some rebelled and deliberately caused their arrest to be sent for service punishment, usually drafted overseas. The only hotel in Durness at that time was the Cape Wrath which like many other highland hotels at the time was well known as a fishing Hotel. It was patronised every year by wealthy people from the south known locally as "The Toffs". The hotel had only one small public bar as it had up till the closing of the establishment and with the influx of construction workers and military personnel it could not cope with the demand. There was two main problems for drinkers in those days. First there was an acute shortage of whisky and there was no replacements for broken glasses or tumblers. However people were always resourceful and those going to the hotel for a drink took their own jam jar.

For the first time, there was full employment. Ministry contracts for construction and continuing projects brought people from the villages around to Durness for well-paid work. With the end of the war in 1945, the influx of military disappeared leaving behind landmarks, buildings and pylons, of their stay. During the next ten years, many of the buildings were dismantled but crofters made use of wartime buildings as hay stores and tractor sheds. The relics of some and the improvement to others can be seen to this day. To the local population war seemed to end as quickly as it started. Local men returned to victory celebrations. Collections were made and ex-servicemen treated to functions of dinner and dances in the village hall. A few did not return having paid the supreme sacrifice. The war memorial originally in the cemetery and moved to the village square around 1990 remembers these men. The Durness minister The Reverend John MacDougal chaplain with the Seaforth Highlanders, was killed in France in 1944. A plaque hangs in the Sangomore church in remembrance. Durness also inherited electricity, mains sewage system and links with service personnel who often return to their wartime haunts. An article in the March 21<sup>st</sup>. 1998 issue of the Northern Times recalls memories of RAF personnel stranded in a blizzard in 1945. The Village Hall fund and the youth Club have benefited from donations from people stationed here during the war.

## Lerinbeg Sango Radar Station<sup>29</sup>



IMAGE 113 DISUSED BUILDING FROM RAF SANGO ON LERINBEG

During the Second World War the area at Lerinbeg and Sango was used for top secret training activities. A number of buildings exist from military use in the 1940's and 50's, Churchend, Lerinbeg and Smoo. This area of Lerinbeg Headland, Lerinbeg, which means; the small half of a point, became the home of what was in 1940 a highly secret and technologically advanced military establishment. In the first year of the Second World War the inhabitants of the area had no access to certain localities for over 15 years. It was called RAF Sango and was a radar station. The story of the radio war the success of which proved vital to the RAF mastery in The Battle of Britain and subsequent operations involving fighter bomber commands is not widely known. This radar station was an installation part of a chain of new radar sessions around the coast of Great Britain referred to as Air Ministry experimental stations. Along with defence of the country in detecting any incoming air raids they were to guide the British air crew's home. This area became the home of what was in 1940 a highly secret and technologically advanced military establishment. Durness was an important link in the coastal radar defences and later for early warning of a nuclear attack.

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<sup>29</sup> From Radio Wave Over The Waves. The Story of RAF Sango 1940 – 1946 Tony Wintringham 2004



IMAGE 114 DISUSED BUILDING FROM RAF SANGO ON LERINBEG

The developments around the area were the direct result of the advance in wartime technology. Durness had been selected to cover an area from the Butt of Lewis to the Orkneys. Although now derelict with only ruins after demolition in 1957.

The area is accessible and can make an interesting walk. Entering the site the first small building on the right was the guardhouse. Passing the second building, of unknown purpose, the next small building housed transformer equipment. Behind it is a small low, slightly sloping concrete block, with ironwork on one face, one of the inner anchor blocks for the steel guy ropes which supported one of the four 325 feet steel masts which in turn supported the Marconi Aerial arrays for the Chain Home Radar. On the other side of the track, can be seen three concrete blocks in an exact straight line. The first block was the base of one of the masts, on which was mounted the large steel sphere on which the mast sat, to act as a 'universal joint', allowing the mast to sway in the wind. Immediately to the right is a large concrete block, which was the counterweight for the suspension of the aerial array (this weighs about 3½ tons!). On the opposite side of the mast base can be seen the base of the winch used to adjust the height of the balance weight. Looking over the wall from this point, the foundations of the WAAF accommodation which was never completed can be seen in the adjacent field. Groups of small concrete blocks which were the foundations for the switching and feeding equipment. The blast wall which surrounded the hut containing the transmitting and receiving equipment for the radar, the foundations for the aerial array can be found, an air-raid shelter, facing the sea. a small hut and a very distinctive 'Maltese cross' foundation, the base of an IFF tower supporting its distinctive 8 bay rotating aerial array the octagonal concrete structure This was the site of an anti-aircraft gun. Four low concrete bases were the foundations of the steel masts supporting aerials for the GEE transmitter.



IMAGE 115 DISUSED BUILDING FROM RAF SANGO ON LERINBEG

### **Royal Air Force Station Sango by David Nicholls**

Former Leading Aircraftsman.

One blustery day in the spring of 1951 I found myself standing outside a collection of huts in the far North of Scotland near Durness. This was RAF Sango, a place I had only heard of a few days ago. I'd had a tiring journey. By slow steam train from HQ No 1 Ground Radar Servicing Squadron at Grangemouth to Lairg. The final 60 odd miles was over a single track road in a single decker bus driven by a friendly soul called Jimmy. No-one in sight as I stood there surrounded by my luggage and RAF kit. The bus reversed into the side road and as I stood there I could have sworn a young schoolboy who had been on board was driving it away. (I found out later that I wasn't seeing things, the bus driver's son did get a chance to drive the empty bus).

The wind howled through the 360 foot high steel radar aerials which dominated the skyline for miles around. The sea lashed angrily at the rocky coast line and the wind tugged at my RAF greatcoat as I made my way to the nearest of the wooden huts. I was greeted by a friendly Flight Sergeant with the words, "You must be the new driver, have you eaten anything on your journey yet? After a welcome meal I was taken to my new quarters across the road and down a steep bank. I met the rest of my comrades and settled in to life at the northernmost radar station on the mainland of Britain.

There were about fourteen of us. Several RAF policemen (with dogs), cooks, a few radar technicians, an engine fitter, two general hands and a mechanic/driver, me. The radar which had provided vital service during the world war was no longer operational but on a 'care and maintenance' basis until a decision would be made about its future.

Some old wartime radar stations around the Scottish coast were being hurriedly converted to modern equipment to detect missile launches and hostile aircraft. The Iron Curtain was in place and the Russians threatened the West. Rumour had it that RAF Sango was to be upgraded and

modernised too but the effort was concentrated on the east coast. Sango carried on with us quietly guarding the site with its tall steel and wooden towers. A couple of diesel generator engines were kept going to keep the radar gear warm and dry in the brick buildings. My duties were to keep our sturdy Bedford truck in good order and to drive daily to Durness with the cook to buy groceries.

The main shop in the village was on the corner of the T junction of the road from Rhiconich with Balnakeil to the left and RAF Sango to the right. This shop sold just about everything needed by the local householders in that remote village. The other shop in the village was on the road towards Sango. A small shop run by a wonderful old man called George. He had a soft spot for us RAF men and when we called to buy foodstuffs from him there was always a welcome and a cup of tea from the kettle he kept simmering on a large iron peat burning stove. He was full of surprises. One day I called in to his shop and found two other customers there. They were French girls staying at the Youth Hostel which was then in a large house near the bend in 'The Loop' road. George was charming them and chatting away in fluent French. Asked later where he had learned to speak the language he replied, "Och, I was in France with the Army in the Great War". He wouldn't tell us more about his war service, perhaps it was too painful for him. George was a character I will always remember with affection and respect.

Sometimes I had to drive to Kinlochbervie with the cook to buy fish straight from the seine netters as they unloaded in the evening. These boats brought in tons of herring daily which was loaded into trucks taking the fish south. We had an excellent cook at the camp and he made good use of that fresh fish. I learned a little of the hard life of these fishermen. Put to sea in the early hours of the morning, a day's hard labour out in the Atlantic before returning to port in the evening. In really violent stormy conditions the boats stayed in the loch and even sometimes could be seen moored as far inland as Rhiconich. Most weeks I had to drive to Lairg to pick up supplies and beer for the little bar we had on the RAF station. The only licensed premises where a drink could be enjoyed was the Cape Wrath Hotel, too far away for us so our bar was well used. I came to know that narrow road alongside Loch Shin, Loch More through Rhiconich and Laxford Bridge well.

As summer arrived I explored the country around the camp. Just across the road from our living quarters was Smoo Cave. Though well known in those days it had no tourist signs or wooden walkway as it has now. There were far fewer houses to be seen then and many of them were crofts with their flocks of sheep grazing on the heather hills towards the seashore. In fair weather parties of us would walk across the heather towards the higher hills taking a packed lunch and returning tired out from the fresh air and exercise.

After a while I took a few days home leave and returned on my motorbike riding all the way from my parent's home on the south coast. Now I was able to explore further. The wide sandy beach of Balnakeil was one of my favourite spots and I rode around Loch Eriboll sometimes seeing large ships sheltering in its deep water.

One incident that enlivened our lives in that summer was the arrival of an Anson aircraft on the beach at Balnakeil. It had been on a training flight with a number of trainee navigators on board and they had lost their way. (Too many cooks spoiling the broth perhaps). The fuel state became critical and the pilot made a forced landing on Balnakeil beach. It was a skilful wheels-up landing only damaging the tips of the propellers. As the nearest RAF station we at Sango had to find overnight accommodation for the crew and place a guard on the aircraft. Next day transport arrived to take our visitors away and a recovery party came to dismantle the plane and take it back to its base. We heard later that it was flying again a couple of months later.



There was tragedy too in my stay at RAF Sango. One of the RAF policemen had a motorbike and was involved in an accident in which a local man died. I do not remember his name or much of the details of the event but there was a traditional funeral and a small party of RAF attended as a sign of respect. I remember that the cortege walked to Balnakeil cemetery with the mourners acting as pall bearers in turn for the length of the last journey.

Life continued at RAF Sango, a pleasant backwater of the Air Force. No parades, no drill or any of the less enjoyable happenings of normal RAF life. We just carried on doing our job and enjoying the splendid scenery of the North of Scotland. I looked forward to finishing my National Service in this pleasant place. However fate had a different plan in store for me.

One morning in a rush to get one of our number into the village to catch the bus to Lairg for home leave I took a short cut down the narrow unmade track to avoid driving round the 'loop'. As I turned the corner I saw to my horror an Austin Seven hauling itself up the steep hill towards me with no room to pass. I braked, the truck skidded, caught one wheel on the left side bank, flipped over onto its side and slid downhill coming to rest only inches from the long drop to seaward. Somehow it had missed the small car much to the relief of the gentleman driving it. After making sure that there were no injuries my passenger gathered up his luggage and jogged towards Durness to catch the bus. The news of the accident soon reached the RAF station and I walked back there, shaken but glad to be alive. The next day a replacement driver and truck arrived and I returned to our H Q at Grangemouth in disgrace to face a Court of Inquiry and such punishment as the RAF decided to award me. So ended my time at this remote outpost. I vowed to return someday but over fifty years were to pass before I got the chance.

This year, 2008, I had a scary brush with the 'old man with the scythe'. As I lay in my hospital bed recovering I determined to do some of the things I had been meaning to do when I had the time. High on that list was a return trip to Durness and some other places in Scotland where I had spent some five years of my young life. So in August I loaded up my motor caravan, filled the tank with diesel and drove northwards. I tried to use the same route that I used on my motorbike all those years ago but the roads have changed a lot since then. No motorways and fewer bypass roads in the 1950s. After Lairg the road has not altered much. Still a single track with passing places though the passing places now have a little diamond shaped sign to remind drivers to pull in safely. Passing Loch Shin the memories flooded back and I knew what to expect around each bend in the road. Durness was a surprise. No general shop on the corner any more but a Spar supermarket on the other side of the road. George's shop was still there but much extended. Gone was the peat stove but the friendliness of the people was the same.

A Tourist Information hall, and many more houses that I remembered. Best of all for me was a superb camping and caravan site with breath-taking views of the coastline. I quickly booked in, plugged in to the electricity and set up home for a few days. Unloading my bike from its rack on the motorhome I cycled round the loop. From Sango Sands caravan site I could see the hill where the radar towers had stood. Now only concrete plinths show where these monster constructions reared up into the sky. Walking over the fields I found the ruins of the building where we stored our petrol and diesel and the engine sheds. Walking further from the 'Technical Site' I came to the 'Domestic Site'. Our old Mess Hall and HQ building is now a seafood restaurant. Our living quarters are the Youth Hostel. The warden was interested to hear that the Hostel had originally housed a party of RAF men and kindly gave me a tour of the buildings. Nostalgic to stand in the same room that had been my home in 1951. Down at Smoo Cave I saw the wooden walkways and the boat tour of the interior, none of which were there in my time. New to me too were the Community Centre and the John Lennon plaque. I visited the scene of my accident on the steep short cut to Durness village. The once rough track is now a metalled highway. (I'm sure if it had been before I wouldn't have skidded disastrously). I cycled

over to Balnakeil and took a photograph standing in the same position as I did to picture the stranded Anson aircraft all those years ago. Then a visit to the Craft Village, surely a must for any visitor, and bought some presents for my nearest and dearest back home.

All too soon it was time for me to start the long drive back to Sussex. I'm glad I returned. Durness may have changed but the Highland scenery is still breath-taking and the friendliness of the people is the same. I shall come again next year.

## The Napier Commission

The Napier Commission, officially the *Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Condition of Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands* was a royal commission and public inquiry. The commission was appointed in 1883, with Francis Napier, 10<sup>th</sup>. Lord Napier, as its chairman. The evidence gathered by the Napier Commission captures in English (in many cases, in translation from Gaelic) the voice of a people and their grievances. It gives us direct testimony of the profound issues affecting ordinary people of the Highlands and Islands at the end of the nineteenth century. This Commission marked the start of a century of land reform legislation and is a resource of near-unique importance.

The Commission was a response to crofter and cottar agitation in the Highlands of Scotland. The agitation was about excessively high rents, lack of security of tenure and deprivation of de facto rights of access to land. The Commission was authorised to examine, require the production of documents, and make whatever visits or inspections they found necessary. They set to work at once and took evidence from hundreds of people all over the Highlands and Islands. They interpreted their mandate in the broadest possible sense and conducted their hearings in a very fair and helpful manner. Witnesses were encouraged to speak frankly and the Commission sought and obtained assurances from the landowners' representatives that the witnesses would not be subjected to intimidation or discrimination.

About three years after the Commission's appointment the Crofters' Holdings (Scotland) Act, 1886 would be on the statute book. The Act was not based on the recommendations of the Commission, but the process by which the Commission collected evidence, and the Commission's report, did foster and inform the public. Publication of the report did bring some calm to the situation in the Highlands.

The Napier Commission held its sessions in Caithness and Sutherland in the summer and autumn of 1883.

Within Mackay Country Bettyhill, Sutherland, 24 and 25 July 1883

Witnesses - 24 July

Rev James Cumming, Free Church Minister, Melness  
Donald Macleod, Crofter's son, Achintighalavin, West Strathan  
William Mackenzie, Crofter's son, Trantlemore, Strath Halladale  
Adam Gunn, Crofter's son, Strathy West  
Angus Mackay, Cottar, Strathy Point  
John Mackay, Crofter, Melvich  
Hector Munro, Crofter, Scullomie, Tongue  
Rev John Ross Macneill, Free Church Minister, Tongue

Witnesses - 25 July

Peter Mckay, Crofter, Strath tongue  
Rev Thomson Mackay, Parish Minister, Tongue  
Rev John Stuart Mackay, Free Church Minister, Alt-na-harra, Strathnaver  
Angus Mackay, Crofter's son, Cattlefield, Farr  
Rev Donald Mackenzie, Free Church Minister, Farr  
Hew Morrison, Schoolmaster, Brechin, Forfarshire  
Ewan Robertson, Crofter's son and carpenter, Tongue Village  
John Mackay, Contractor, Hereford,  
Alexander Machardy, Ground Officer, Farr  
Mrs Ann Murray, Widow, Cattlefield  
James Murray, Labourer, Cattlefield

Kinlochbervie, Sutherland, 26 July 1883

Witnesses

Alexander Morrison, Crofter, Sangobeg

Rev James Ross, Free Church Minister, Durness

Donald Mackay, Laid, Port-na-Con

Angus Macaskill, Crofter, Tarbert

Alexander Ross, Foindale, Scourie

Colin Morison, Merchant, Old Shore More

John Ross, Crofter, Achresgil

William Hugh Mackay, Tailor, Insheigra

Rev Duncan Finlayson, Free Church Minister, Kinlochbervie

Evander Mciver, Factor for the Duke of Sutherland, Scourie

The following are transcripts of individual witnesses<sup>30</sup>.

**Extract from a witness**

Kinlochbervie, Sutherland, 26 July 1883 - Donald Mackay Laid, Port-na-Con (60)—examined.  
Sheriff Nicolson.

What has been your business in life?

I was a fisherman in Nova Scotia, a teacher in Rogart, Sutherland, and in Argyle shire, and I have been a landed proprietor and sheep-run holder in New Zealand. I am at present residing at Laid, Loch Eriboll.

Have you been elected a delegate?

I have. At two public meetings recently held I was unanimously elected by all the crofters of the hamlet of Laid.

What statement have you to make on behalf of these people?

Well, I have studied to the best of my ability medicine as a private person. I made myself a good deal acquainted with the order and practice of hydropathic treatment, and have got intimately acquainted with the actual condition of the people in that way, so that I can tell the Commission the actual state and kind of land they occupy. If I may be allowed to say a few words before I am examined, I should like to say that I have no personal grievance. With regard to the factor, I have to say for him that if no good result is to accrue from my presence here, it will in a way be attributed to the factor, for if it were not for his generosity of heart and private liberality to me, I would not be here. With regard to what the people complain of, I have to say that this crofting hamlet of Laid is the most recently formed of all the settlements, in consequence of the evictions previous to 1835, the year when I first left the parish. Laid then was of so little account that there were only some kelp-workers' huts on the shore, that any person could reside in and do what he liked, without let or hindrance. The mountain slope rises from the water side, and the hamlet has a frontage of nearly two or three miles on the slope. The road runs parallel with the sea to the village, and the houses are between the road and the sea. The formation of the surface of the mountain is quartzite rock, and above this there is a cairn of the same material, which is chemically the same as flint, and a thin skin of peat over

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<sup>30</sup> Taken from Volume two. The five volumes were originally digitised and hosted by West Highland College UHI.

this, with the cairn protruding, so that there are only patches here and there between the protruding cairn which can be at all tilled. In dry weather this is traversed by currents of air in the fissures, and when the soil is dry and pulverises, this communicates with the cairn above; and in winter or spring the rain falls upon the whole mountain slope and runs down, because there are no depressions in the rock to store it, and it comes through this cairn and wells up through the cultivated soil, so that the tilled land becomes flooded, and it washes away the soil. In dry weather the soil is simply peat dust, which becomes, if there is a length of drought, as dry as chaff and nearly as light, and part is blown away with the winds. The general result is, that since the place was settled in 1835 many of the plots first brought under cultivation have disappeared; and with regard to the remaining plots, some half or more, the same process is going on, and in another generation or so the crofts will have to be left, because there will be no soil. There is a mountain torrent at the little hamlet, and there is a delta of gravel and quartzite sand of some three acres, where this stream enters the sea. The sand and gravel are not drifted away, so that this site, to any person of ordinary powers of observation and the least humanity, would be seen to be absolutely unfit for occupation. It was like penal servitude to put people to cultivate such a place.

Where were the people brought from to that place, and why?

The first man that was put there by eviction was from the sheep farm of Eriboll. He was sent there before the place was laid out. There was a fine green spot at the head of Loch Eriboll, where he had a small croft, and he was evicted, and settled where this stream is. He was a man who had served his country; he was a piper in the army, and was over in Ireland. He was a most inoffensive kind of man, and he was the first who was removed and settled there; and he died there. When I left the place for America, I and my father went to see him on his death-bed.

How many more were sent with him?

The last formed sheep farm was Rispond, and my maternal grandmother was evicted from Rispond, and had to settle here at Laid. Several other parties from Rispond sheep farm also settled there.

How many families are there now altogether?

There are altogether twenty-three families, but one of these, although in the same community, is the family of a keeper who has a croft.

Are some of them cottars, or are they all crofters?

There are nineteen crofts, and one is a cottar, who has a small spot near the boundary, and pays no rent; and I think there are two sub-crofters.

What rent do they generally pay?

The rents range, I think, from £ 1 to £ 1, 15s.

Are there none higher than that?

No.

What amount of stock are they able to keep?

There are twenty-nine cows in the hamlet, I believe, and eleven stirks, making the whole number forty, which is nearly two beasts per family. There are, as far as I could ascertain, about 121 sheep, or five and a quarter per family. There is a population, taking an average, of a little over five to each family.

Are there any of them able to make a living out of the land?

No, certainly not.

How long does the produce of their land support them generally?

Since the potato failure it does not support them at all. The main benefit which they get from the corn produce in their crofts is to winter their beasts, and it is not sufficient for that; they have always every year to buy fodder for their cattle—to import it. One thing further that I should tell about the place is, that it is imperfectly sheltered; it is an even plane, which tells greatly against it. It is situated on the mountain slope, and there is no shelter from one end to the other. There is abundant shelter on the sheep farms about, but not at Laid.

What means of living have the people?

The only other means taken advantage of to get money by the most of the population is whelk gathering. These they commence to gather about the new year, and they continue to gather them until they commence the crop cultivation in spring. Engaged in this work, in the most inclement season of the year, are women and half-clothed children, which tells most dreadfully against the constitutions of the children.

Are there no fish?

Yes, generally in Loch Eriboll there are fish which can be used for domestic purposes, but there is no market, and there is a great deal of decay in the families of a great many of them for some time now, from the active members going away. Many of them, although the fish are there, cannot get the benefit of them.

Is there no cod or ling fishing?

Not in the loch. They enter occasionally, but the principal fish caught are haddock and flounder, and at the mouth of the loch, at Rispond, cod and ling are abundant.

Do none of the inhabitants regularly prosecute that fishing?

No

Or herring fishing?

The herring fishing is very poor in Loch Eriboll; some years there may be a few, but ordinarily they are not there.

Do none of the men go to the east coast fishing?

All those who are able are prosecuting, winter and spring, the lobster fishing.

Is it good lobster fishing?

Yes, it is as good as any here, but, as has been mentioned already, there is a great difficulty in getting lobsters in time for the market. They have to cart them sixty miles to Lairg.

What have you to suggest for the improvement of the condition of the people—is it possible for them to get a comfortable subsistence out of that place?

Not so far as I can

Is there any land which, if added to their present crofts, would make them more comfortable?

No there is no land. The big sheep farms of Rispond, on the one side, and Eriboll on the other, would in my opinion accommodate more than the present population of the parishes; but there is no other way of providing for them. There is a fertile limestone island; the peculiarity of this place is that there are various formations of limestone, gneiss and micaceous schist; and in this peculiar place there is not a particle of light soil but it goes away.

Why was the place called Port-na-con?

Port of Dogs—There is a tradition that there was a fight between a dog and Fingal.

Perhaps it was thought fit only for dogs to inhabit?

That would be a very good construction, because it is not fit.

Mr. Fraser-Mackintosh.

For human beings?

It is not. The marriageable young people are about equal in number, but I consider, especially the females, from delicacy of constitution and disease, very few are fit to rear healthy offspring. There is a number of young men, who have good constitutions, hardy and able. There are two families side by side, in which there are six young men who have been marriageable for the last ten years, and they have seen that the most misery is where there are large families. I think it is miserable that during youth these young men should not have sufficient subsistence, and I have been speaking to them, as I have been on intimate terms with them since I came, and they told me what deterred them from marrying was the misery they would entail upon their offspring. I think it is a deplorable state of things, that young men who are industrious and prudent and of good constitution, should be deterred from marrying from these considerations. I was born in Strathmore.

The Chairman.

At what period was Strathmore cleared?

Just before I was born. I was removed when I was at the breast to Strathbeg, at the head of Loch Eriboll, and I resided there until I was twelve years of age, when my father removed to Nova Scotia. I have been residing at Laid for ten years.

You consider there is a good deal of land in Strathmore capable of cultivation?

Of profitable cultivation; and I am confident there is not half nor a third of the pasture growing in it that was growing in my young days. It is reverting to a state of nature—heather, ling and moss.

Which side of the strath was the more populous—the side on which the road is or the other?

The east side was the more populous.

It was not so good a strath for cultivation as Strathnaver?

I think it is about the best sheltered spot I know in the country. The soil is good on the floor of the strath, and the pasture is good; but it is very much smaller than Strathnaver.

When was it cleared —about what year was it all done at once or gradually?

I am not able to answer that question just now, because it was cleared when my father left, or before that.

Is it in the Reay country?

Yes, it is in the parish from which I am delegated.

Was it cleared before it was purchased by the Sutherland family or after?

I am not able positively to say, but my impression is that it was cleared before the Sutherland family got the estate.

Do you think there are many of the people in your poor settlement here who would be glad to be transported into Strathmore, and who would be able to form crofts?

Undoubtedly, if they could get crofts there upon terms that they could settle upon. But in my hamlet the people are so poor that they have no means to settle unless they get accommodation.

How many of these poor people in the place you speak of have got friends abroad or in Scotland who would be able to assist them?

I am not aware. I know a few have friends in Australia. I know a widow who has a son in Australia who sends his mother assistance.

You have been in Nova Scotia; is there any land there still available near the coast for the purpose of a settlement for emigrants from this country?

Oh! Yes.

Is land there still cheap?

I believe it is.

Do you think Nova Scotia a colony well adapted for settlement from here?

Yes, I think so; but I think Australia and New Zealand are more eligible.

Is the voyage there not much more expensive?

It is.

Would the people find more facilities for fishing and practicing their natural industries in Nova Scotia?

I don't know, because along the coast in Nova Scotia fishing is one of the principal industries, and the strip of land along the coast is nearly all bought up and occupied by the fishermen. Those who are to settle now must go back into the interior, and live by farming.

Do you think the fishing population on the coast of Nova Scotia happier and more prosperous than the corresponding class of people here?

There is no comparison between them.

Would you advise your countrymen, unless they got land, to emigrate and settle abroad?

My view of that question is this—I can say that both in North America and New Zealand, I have seen the same class of men working the same as the crofter class here, and because they were certain of the fruits of the labour and industry which they expended upon the soil, they made their places like a gentleman's house; they had the orchards and gardens and fields in such a state. They had there this great inducement to persevering industry which the people here don't understand that they want, because they never had the advantage of it. I look upon them as eagles reared in a cage, who don't know what they could do if they were free. My view as to emigration is that we should not force the people to go, nor prevent those who are willing, but put them under just and free conditions, so that they might be equally well off here.

Professor Mackinnon.

Do you think it would be advisable to have a pier at Rispond?

I think so; I think it would be in the interest of everybody. There would be no opposition to it, and I think it would be a great advantage to the whole place. There is a mine of wealth in the sea there, if it could be made available, and it never can be made available until there is a sufficient pier made at Rispond.

Is the place suitable?



It is the most suitable we have. The expense might be very considerable, but it would be a permanent boon to the place.

It would open up the place?

—It would, and would enable men to live by fishing, who have no means of living now.

They would be able to send fish to the market, which they are not able to do now?

Yes.

I suppose your meaning with regard to emigration is that the young eagle should fly towards Strathmore rather than Nova Scotia?

Let it fly where it likes.

But you think that would be the best way to start matters?

Yes.

And then after that place was peopled, let them search for other places: is that what you mean?

Yes. My own view is that it would be better for the colonies if the people were to emigrate there, and no doubt, in present circumstances, it would be better for the people; but I think it would be better for this country if the people had these natural inducements. At present whatever a man does in improving his lot, even as a workman, the Duke is heir to it, and this is demoralizing, because the people can never acquire industrious habits and the spirit for industry which they would have if they were differently situated.

I suppose the place where they are just now is so bad that it would not be worth giving it to them, even with certainty of tenure?

No. Perhaps two or three persons could live there by the cattle run, but there are twenty-three just now.

Mr. Fraser-Mackintosh.

When were you last in Strathmore?

Last summer.

Do you know how high up the glen people were once living?

They were living up as far as the shooting cottages at the head of the main stream. It then branches into several rivers at the new forest.

Where two or three large streams meet at Gobnanuisgeich?

Yes.

There were actually families living there?

Yes.

All the year?

Yes.

It was not a small shieling merely?

No.

And were living from there all the way down?

Yes; on the slopes of Loch Hope below, there were some settlements; but there is a great deal of land which is the debris of mica schist and micaceous flagstones, which could be tilled profitably.

Have you any idea how many souls, when the place was fully occupied, there would be from the ferry up to the place at the meeting of the waters?

I have no data from which I could answer that question.

Would there be several hundred souls, not families?

I think there would be 200 at any rate.

You have travelled over the world and seen a good deal, and studied many things. We saw an old tower there; can you tell us very briefly what it once was?

I don't know; it is a prehistoric ruin. There are several similar ruins there. There are some even in the top of high hills, and it would be a puzzle to know why human beings resided in such exposed situations.

What story have the people themselves about this tower? It is called Dornadilla Tower?

There is one story that the stones were taken from a very long distance, but I can give no story about it, which would give any satisfactory explanation. There are others nearer where I live now, the remains of old ruins, which I have explored, and I find that those who had these strongholds lived upon shell fish and animals of the chase. I have got the teeth of very large graminivorous animals, as large as horses and cows, and I sent some of them to the late Professor of Natural History in Aberdeen, but although he knew they were the teeth of graminivorous animals, he could not make out the species. I think they may have been teeth of the Irish elk.

But you don't know anything about this tower in Strathmore?

No.

## Crofting

Crofting is a land tenure system of small scale food producers unique to the Scottish Highlands and Islands. It provides tenants with security provided they pay their rent, live on or near their croft and work the land, designed to protect the indigenous people from exploitation by landlords in the 19th Century,

Few crofts come onto the market, whether tenancies or owner-occupancies. The consent of the Crofting Commission is required in any change of tenancy, whether by assignation by a tenant or by the re-letting of a vacant croft. A new owner-occupier is likewise liable to be subjected to scrutiny. The Commission will take into account local crofting demand and interests, and whether the proposed person intends to live on the croft and work it, and make a contribution to the local crofting community.

Many crofts are on estates such as Durness is. The rent paid by the tenant crofter, except in fairly rare circumstances, is only for the bare land of the croft, for the house and agricultural buildings, roads and fences are provided by the crofter himself. Since 1976 it has become more common for a crofter to acquire title to his croft, thus becoming an owner-occupier. The average size of a croft is around 5 hectares, but some are only 0.5 ha while a few extend to more than 50 ha of land, often with a share in hill grazing which is held in common with other crofters in a township.

Grazing committees are set up with certain management responsibilities regarding the common grazings. They are appointed into office by the crofters who share in the common grazings and have responsibility to make and submit grazings regulations to the Commission for approval. Each common grazings has its own grazings regulations which are administered by the grazings committee.

In 2008 there were 55 Crofts in Durness but only 8 active crofters 6 in Balvolich, 14 Durine, 9 Lerin, 7 Sangobeg, 16 Sangomore and 3 Smoo. There is very little if any agriculture carried out on Durness crofts. Sheep are the core of the crofters work.

Crofters 7<sup>th</sup>. November 2005.



IMAGE 116 DURNESS CROFTERS AT THE FANKS AT LERINBEG

The Durness crofters have been moving into the world of technology. A new mobile dipping unit was in use for the first time at the sheep dipping last week. As the crofters put their sheep through one of the annual routine procedures they were assessing the pros and cons of the latest agricultural machine to ensure that all the legislative requirements of recent directives are met. The practicalities were being examined and techniques in the process refined. First conclusions appeared to show a consensus of approval.

### **Crofting in the Past**

In the 1820's and 1830's the old townships; which were self-supporting, growing all their own food, making their own clothes, furniture and houses, with their runrigs and lazy beds were being replaced. A way of life since at least the 14th century was being superseded. The dwellings and conditions had altered very little. Most of the old runs of arable land were divided into separate holdings, crofts and farms we see today. Crofting was seen as a convenient and profitable means of disposing of a population displaced to make way for the large sheep grazers. As a labour force in their schemes to make vast profits, the crofters were of vital importance to the landlords. Crofting townships had a nucleus of arable land made up of several separate small holdings surrounded by a track of hill pasture known as the outrun of rough grazings and held in common by all the township tenants. The new system of landholding that replaced the runrigs was no more efficient agriculturally merely more profitable to the landlords.

The houses were made of stone with thatched roofs tied down with rope weighted with stones. The inside was dark and dreary although quite warm. The walls were often bare stone sometimes covered with clay and whitewashed. The windows were very small holes in the wall on the inside, let in very little light, and only very occasionally glazed. The door was a plank of wood sometimes with sacks pulled back. The floor was hard packed earth, at times covered with sand, cobbles or flagstones.

The house would not contain much furniture. Wood was not readily available and would be expensive to attain. There would be a bed like a large wardrobe with a mattress inside stuffed with chaff, the waste material after oats and barley had been threshed, often forming a partition between living rooms. Chairs and stools were made from wood or improvised from planks, stones and peat and they were always low to the ground. Cupboards, kists or dressers were for storing food, clothes and blankets. Often the animals shared the house with the people. Sometimes there was a low partition between. People seem to have enjoyed a close association with nature, probably too close for our present ideas of comfort.

The territory was able to provide for those who were willing to fish, hunt, keep animals and till the land. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was an abundance of milk, fresh cream, cheese, game, poultry, fresh and salt-water fish, mutton and beef, oatcakes and bannocks. Potatoes became the staple food of the common people shifting oatmeal to second place. In the 1840s when the crop failed, starvation encroached on uncounted crofts. It was only in the century of the clearances when starvation became familiar.

A typical day's food would consist of a breakfast, dinner, supper, and dependent on the time of year and availability of produce. Bread and milk or brose, raw oatmeal moistened with water and milk. Potatoes, gruel, milk and kale thickened with oatmeal, brochan, a regular drink like gruel which was considered a good remedy for coughs and colds, was the staple diet for most of the time. Other foods eaten would include nettle soup, herrings, whitefish, and shellfish including lobsters, crabs and oysters. Seaweed collected from the beaches. The bread would be bannocks of oatmeal and dairy products would be made. At the slaughtering of an animal every part would be put to a use and as much as possible preserved. Women would be the keepers of

the home and hearth, attend to the dairy work and the production of cloth. Conveying manure, attending potatoes and carrying creels on her back and at the same time engaged in spinning with the distaff and spindle.

### **Crofting Latterly**

There can be little doubt Durness has survived because of the determination of crofting families to continue to earn a living from the harsh conditions they have had to endure from working formidable land. Durness crofts stand on limestone that breaks down into easily workable soil. Working a mere five acres of land on which he alone can afford to use the scant stock of manure, growing oats, potatoes and hay for winter feed for a cow has rapidly vanished as a life style.



IMAGE 117 THE LAST INTACT COTTER'S HOUSE BELIEVED TO BE IN SUTHERLAND IS SITUATED OPPOSITE THE HEALTH CENTRE

The peasant farmer farming, as was the case of the ancestors of the crofters of Durness, is being replaced with employment in some other sphere and sheep grazing on the hill pastures. The only help the crofter would have was a cotter who in return for labour would receive a very small portion of rough land. He would have to clear and cultivate and erect some living shelter that would be smaller and less elaborate than the crofters. The last intact cotter's house believed to be in Sutherland is situated opposite the health centre. This small building has been reroofed with modern material and is in a good state of repair.

Elderly people who recall their younger days remember large families living in very small accommodation always with musical instruments, fiddle, and bagpipes, accordion and even if there were not always proficient at playing were never averse to using for merrymaking. The changes, which have occurred in living memory, are dramatic and difficult to list but the way of life in Durness has certainly altered. In the early 1900s thatch in this area was replaced by twice dipped galvanised corrugated iron as roofing and was highly prized.

One of the other tasks recalled by the then young girls of the area was the washing of blankets. There was a limited water supply near the house and this was carried out at the burn running through Sangomore. The soft burn water was ideal for the task. Two or three girls from the

neighbourhood would band together to wash the blankets. The story is related as this happened once a year. A large cauldron type pot would be filled with burn water and heated on open fires. The blankets were stamped on in earthenware tubs. Soft brown soap bought in tins for the purpose was used. A wringer was stored in a small wooden hut behind the dyke nearby to wring out the sodden blankets that were hung on trees to dry. At that time, apparently there were many more trees around that area. There was a laundry nearby at the old Durness Hotel that stood in the centre green but this was purely for use by the hotel.

The Grazing Committee look after the distribution of income from the sale of sheep and the common grazing on the Estate land of Durness owned by Vibel, a Dutch consortium of foreign businesses with a Scottish agent holding the mineral rights. For many years, it was found very difficult to contact this company and verify ownership of land. Vibel are a perfect example of absentee landowners. They have hindered improvements for many local developments. There are stories of their unwillingness to collect rents. The tenants putting the monies into saving accounts should they appear and claim rent. After seven years of fruitless endeavours to contact the owners, the Durine road was eventually placed under a compulsory purchase so that it could be widened. There was a similar occurrence at the quarry at Lerinmore. This situation has changed in recent years. There is a contact for the mineral owner and he has rights to act on the estates interests and management with solicitors in Edinburgh.

Some crofters are diversifying and seeking new ways of making the land productive and incentives are available for various schemes. There are one or two crofts producing crops and keeping livestock cattle but the reality of making a living from the land is becoming less attractive to the crofting families. Peat cutting has become less of a regular annual event in recent times, as most of the houses are oil and calor gas centrally heated. Crofts very occasionally come for sale more often a croft house after decrofting will be sold if there is no family to inherit. Crofters today are in the main hard working and do not solely rely on earning a living from their land. Their houses are spacious and comfortable most with modern equipment and facilities.

### **A Crofters Year.**

The fast disappearing diary of a typical crofter. This text accompanied a visual display in Durness Tourist information Centre and worth recalling.

#### **January**

A dark start to the year. By mid-January, a slight lengthening of the day is welcome and weather permitting this is the time for checking the fences and cleaning blocked dams. In the shelter of the barns all the implements are inspected and repaired, saving valuable time later in the year. Stalled cattle are fed their ration of hay and silage or turnips and a constant watch must be kept on the sheep.

#### **February**

This is often the month of wild storms. Bad weather can turn everyday tasks into hard labour. Wheels get stuck in the mud and snow. Loads of fodder must be carried out and water must be thawed for thirsty cows. Some ewes start to make their way off the hill and back to the croft for an extra feeding of precious hay. Wild animals also feel hunger of winter and an eye must be kept on marauders desperate for a bite of chicken.

#### **March**

Brighter spring days are greeted by occasional snowstorms. A watch is kept for the arrival of early lambs. Their worst enemy is the driving rain. The ewes are gathered in off the hill and those carrying lambs are kept on the croft. They are fed hay supplements to build them up for

lambing. If the month is dry and fair then the ploughing can get well ahead and the garden ground can be turned.

### **April**

Often a hard time with much to be done and spring reluctant to appear. Manuring and ploughing are done between the storms and early crops planted. Lambing is in full swing. The casualties among the ewes will mean a hectic life for all the family, as they will have to bottle feed the orphan lambs. Constant checking the ewes to ensure they are not in difficulty with lambing involves long hard days for up to six whole weeks.

### **May**

All the lambs must be marked with the crofters' identification and dosed against disease. With lambing nearly over, time can now be taken out to cut the peat. A family may burn fifteen thousand peats in a winter but working hard a strong man can cut one thousand peats a day. The blocks are stacked and left to dry until later in the summer. Any calves will now be due and some anxious nights will be spent in the byre. Turnip may be planted now.

### **June**

In June with the crops growing in the ground and the lambing over for another year the house can be made comfortable for summer visitors. Bed and Breakfast on a croft with friendly hosts and good food can be a very attractive proposition. On some crofts, visitors are encouraged to help the family with the light work during their stay. About this time of year, the sheep are gathered for their summer clipping.



IMAGE 118 CLIPPING SHEEP

### **July**

Always an anxious month as the success of the all-important hay yield depends on the weather. With modern day machinery crop can be handled quickly but still needs to be gathered dry.

Good weather is also needed for the other mid-summer jobs, the clipping of the sheep. This is a communal task, with neighbours helping each other with the shearing, the packing of the fleeces, and the remarking of the sheep.

### **August**

With the sheep clipped and the hay gathered and the other crops still growing there is time for a day out at the distant agricultural shows. It is now time to sell the hill lambs at the Lairg sales. Prices are always keenly watched. Allowing a couple of days of drying wind the peats can be brought from the hill on tractor loads and stacked beside the house.

### **September**

Another anxious month as a weather watch is kept for the harvesting of any cereals, possibly oats or barley. A crop laid low by driving wind and rain at this stage can mean great loss. Once again, machinery speeds things up but a dry spell is still needed. Sheep that were not dipped earlier get their dooking now along with the well grown lambs. Visitors continue to keep the family busy around the house.

### **October**

Mid-month are the tatty holidays when the schools close for two weeks. The potato is no longer such an important crop and while in the past these two weeks would have been used to harvest potatoes, most families now take their annual holidays at this time. By the end of the month turnip may be ready for lifting either daily to add to the succulence of the cows' diet or to be stored for feeding for sheep or cows in to late spring when rations are short.

### **November**

This month is the turn of the hill calves to go to market. Like the lambs, they should be fresh from a summer weaning and grazing and ready for feed which a small croft cannot provide. Sheep are gathered off the hill and checked. Ewes are put in the paddock with the tups and some ewe lambs are sent away for over wintering on better ground, returning to the croft in early spring.

### **December**

With onset of winter the ewes will be put back out to the hill. All battening down, fixing loose slates, repairing roads and checking gates and fencing must be completed by now. Daylight hours are very short giving good reason for working indoors at repairs. This is the time for ceilidhs, local gatherings in houses and halls with the biggest ceilidh of all Hogmanay!

Today the crofter's year is more around the annual requirements of keeping Cheviot Sheep.

### **Extracts from an interview with John Campbell**

Brivard, crofter Durness

*My father was born and brought up on this croft, and my mother lived on the other side of the village and, as the minister said to me once when I was a child – he was asking me about my parents, he'd be testing my IQ, I've no doubt – and I told him, and he said, "Your mother was a traitor, then." She was a MacDonald and my father was a Campbell. That's a long time ago. She was considerably younger than my father, actually. She was 91 when she died. My father died at 85, about, oh, over 40 years ago. But they were born, well, where the cowshed is now, that was where the house was. It was a thatched house in these days, and then they built the original Brivard on this site. My father and his brother, they immigrated to South Africa. They already had an uncle out there who was doing very well for himself, so my mother and the other brother was left down in the house down there, and they, when they had made enough*



money, sent it back home to them to build Brivard on this site here, and that's where it was until it was burnt by a fire in 1989. And we built this one on exactly the same site.

What was the place like in your childhood?

I don't know how you'd describe it. Well, every croft had their own cow and their horse and they cultivated the land and you had your own milk and potatoes and vegetables and you had your own butter and cheese, naturally, when you had milk and cows. Most crofts would have two cows. Some would only have one. And nearly every croft had a horse and they used to share the horses.

Work was very scarce. The best-off ones would have been, I would have thought, the fishermen, and there was no fishermen on this side of the village, not so many as there was on the other side. There was only, what, one boat, I would say, or maybe two at the most in our village here. And the rest, they just depended on God knows what, but they seemed to survive anyway, just a case of casual labouring.

There was no school meals you went to school every day and you came home for your lunch. If you couldn't come home for your lunch you just took a piece in your schoolbag. Of course, I had no distance – I was only two minutes down the field and I was in school.

There would be one sheep butchered, that was Christmas-time, some people had a pig – not very many. We used to have a pig quite often, especially after we got a little older, but some would have pigs and it was slaughtered and cured by salting it. Nothing but salt, that was the only way. It was pretty rough, but, mind you, it never did us any harm.

Turnips and carrots and cabbage were the veg grown and if there was a bit of meat, there was always a big pot of broth, especially on Sunday. And rice puddings and whatnot.

I just helped on the croft and helped to cut the peats and things like that. Four would go to one man's peats today and another man's the next day, and ... Some places where there were maybe two grown-ups in the household, they would do their own peats, you know but where there would be only one in the household, they would get together and if there was any old people that weren't able to cut peat, they would cut the peats for them. That was in the late thirties, I'm talking about now. When I started working in 1938, well, that was the end of the crofting for me anyway. I went to farm work then. I was driving a pair of horse. And then war broke out and of course labour was scarce and we just carried on with that. Normally I wouldn't have a pair of horse when I would be seventeen but, I mean, there was nobody else to do it. Clydesdales worked at Balnakeil I was there for ten years

The daily routine in those days you went out to plough in the morning and then when the ploughing was finished you sowed the seeds and planted the potatoes and sowed the turnips and ... If it be a big field there'd be twelve acre of turnips, to feed the cattle and the tups. And twenty, thirty acres of corn. There was eight of us at the farm, for a start, and there would be seven shepherds on the hill on top of that. There's three men today. So there was seven shepherds were living out. If you come down the hill from the top of Gualin now you'll see one still at the foot of the mountain. It's still occupied. Rhigolter. That's the only shepherd's house that's occupied now. There was three on the Cape side, there's no sheep on the Cape side now – all a bombing range, the ones on the Cape side called Daill and Kearvaig. There was one man in Daill and two in Kearvaig. There was one in Sarsgrum, one in Carbreck, two in Rhigolter in these days, and three on the Cape side one at the farm that looked after the rams and the sheep down there. Plus the manager, a cattleman, myself and my mate and a trapper the manager was from Dalkeith. He died there just last year, and he was ninety-something when he died. He was there for a long, long time – a man called John Baillie. The cattleman was from the west side, I think. The Elliott's, being Border people, they took people up from

*the Borders with them, and the ploughman that was there when I went there, he was from round about the Melrose area or Galashiels area. He was there for two or three years. And the shepherds, well, the most of them were ... Rhigolter was all local, apart from there might be a young fellow come in. Carbreck was local. Sarsgrum wasn't – they were incomers too. The last man that was in Sarsgrum, he was a west-coaster. And Kervaig was all local, but not Daill – Daill would have a different man from time to time, when they changed round, you know.*

*There was the house cows, as they used to call them. In the big house, they had – there was two cows for the big house, and the manager had his cow and the ploughman, he would be supplied with milk by from the big house cows. The cattleman lived in the big house and his wife was the housekeeper. The Elliots only lived there when they came up from the Borders. She catered for them then. And Miss Elliott herself, she used to come up and spend the whole summer at Balnakeil.*

*I left to work on a little estate in the village and, ach, it was never a success, and I left that and I went back to the farm. They wanted me back. I went back and I stayed for a year. Things didn't work out and then I went to Mace – well, it wasn't Mace then, it was R Mackay & Sons, and I was there for thirty-seven years.*

*Well, we always did – well, we didn't always do coal, but eventually we started doing coal, and they still do coal. We did a lot of feeding stuff – hay and straw and all that sort of stuff, which they don't do now, but that's about the only difference. And we had cattle floats, which they don't have now. We had two cattle floats, but when Dickie died they cut out the lorries and, well, they've got one little thing and that's all they use now. I mean, nowadays everything is packaged, but originally it would have come in in big bulk. The sugar came in two-hundredweight bags and the ... well, I can't remember if tea ever came in bulk, but I remember the sugar coming in bulk all right, and the flour came in bolls and half-bolls. And then they started getting ... the first one I can remember was called 'The Winner', and they was made by a firm in Glasgow called William Brock's. That was the first pre-packed flour that I can remember coming. It would be in half-stone baggies, I would think, roughly roundabout that the butter, it came in blocks and the cheese came in blocks, too. It had all to be packed at home.*

*Do you remember when the electricity and mains water came? Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes. We had mains water for a long, long time before many places had it.*

*There was a proprietor here that ... he wanted the water too. I think he stayed in the hotel, when he came – the old hotel where the garden is now. I think that's where he stayed, and he wanted water to be on tap when he came up, and he put in the first water supply. And there was a row of pumps up the street there – there was one, two, three, and the hotel had it. We didn't get it until quite late on, because we were that high – it didn't have the pressure. Next door had it quite early. Next door would have had it when I was a youngster, and that's not yesterday. And the Parkhill would have had it – it's Mackay's it's called now. And I can't remember how far down the other way it went. But there was a tap at the top of the hill at Sango there, I can remember that much. And then when they sold the estate and when Buxton bought it, he improved on the water scheme. And he took it right over as far as Lerin, and put a tank in there. That's where the ... not the heathery bit. You see the first green hillie there?*

*In May 1989 John's brother Donald known as Dolan died in the house fire that destroyed the original Brivard House.*

## **Sheep Carnage**

24<sup>th</sup>. April 2006

The sheep keeping fraternity and the people of Durness are utterly appalled by the discovery of such carnage on the common grazing land adjacent to Port na Con on the Rispond Estate east of the village. As reported in last week's Northern Times. In a gully on a remote hillside there are carcasses and skeletal remains strewn over a wide area with several smaller deposits around. The marshy centre of the pit contains uncountable remains of animal slaughter.

The circumstances leading up to the discovery unfolded during the annual gathering bringing the flocks together for lambing. A local crofter stumbled across what appeared to be an unnatural situation of dead animals and on further investigation revealed the dumping grounds of massacred sheep. It was obvious that the animals were not all killed at the site but brought by various means.

The police were immediately notified and criminal investigations are still underway. Using metal detectors the area was closely examined and a number of bullets were found. Veterinary officers on site diagnosed that several shots were fired into the animals mostly abdominal causing painful and drawn out deaths. Samples were taken for further tests. The community now abounds with stories of sheep disappearing over a long period of time without satisfactory explanation and the police are taking lengthy statements from anyone who has seen or heard anything that may have a connection to the crime.

Shepherding in such a large area and with the many large sheep farms and small crofters involved diminutive numbers of sheep are always unaccounted for at gathering times. Some dead are understandable and never found and the accumulation over a long period can be reasoned as natural losses. There is concern but positive hope that there is no more dumping grounds for dead animals and the culprits have kept their serial killing to this one locality. Crofters meantime are keeping a vigilant watch and scouring the mountainsides for signs of any further unnatural remains.

## Peat



IMAGE 119 FROM STRATHNAVER MUSEUMS ARCHIVE

The most important thing in the house was the fire called the central hearth, giving heat and light. Situated either in the middle of the room, of a one roomed dwelling, or in the middle of the house, keeping the whole building warm. There was no proper chimney. There might have been a hole in the roof, not being directly above the fire as rain would have extinguished it or the smoke had to find its way through the thatch. The fire was kept on, all the time, to keep the thatch dry or it would get water logged and heavy and the roof could collapse. The house was therefore very smoky but peat smoke tends to rise easily and leave a fairly clean air near the ground. At night the fire was `smoored` - given a few small damp peats and dusts to smoulder overnight and fanned into flame the following morning. Smoothing in most households was of great significance and is reflected in the prayers accompanying the act.

The fire was used for cooking and baking. The cooking pot was hung over the fire on an iron chain called a slabriadh; which had to be bought from the local blacksmith, who made them; and depending on the wealth of the family was the thickness of the chain. Hooks at altered levels allowed the cooking pot or girdle for baking to be at different distances from the heat. The chain led to mysterious beliefs, sometimes the children were not allowed to touch it as it was associated with powers of evil, but if a bit of fir wood was stuck into its links this would prevent the fairies entering, as in more than one tale they were meant to have done.

Peat smoke has become synonymous with crofting. The peat bog for the most part being a source of supply of fuel. Without peat, there would be nothing to burn. Peat cutting was an



IMAGE 120 CROFTERS JOCK SUTHERLAND, ALISTAIR SUTHERLAND AND DANNY MACKAY

important part of the year, the springtime social occasion. Townships shared in the cutting of the peats for all the families and particularly for people who were aged and infirm. One of the tasks involved in croft life was the peat cutting. This was a major outing and considered being a highlight of the year. At the time peat cutting was a necessity, families were larger than today and there was no shortage of labour. The whole family would pile onto the horse and cart well stocked up with provisions for tea when they arrived at the peat run. On arrival a fire would be built and tea brewed with fresh burn water on the smoky open fire and the tea stirred with a heather twig. It was said there was no better tea to be had. The aftertastes of those warm pleasurable memories of the peat cutting linger on with those who experienced the occasions.

The tusk, (tarskiel), the flatter, (cubbhlar), and the rutting spade (spudg riachidh) were used to score a line off the edge of the peat and cut into the soft peat and lever the brick loose. A good peat cutter could cut up to one thousand peats a day. It was then passed to another pair of hands and stacked carefully to allow the air to pass through the peat stack. Acquiring good burning peat requires an immense amount of labour. Each peat is handled at least twice after cutting and before being taken back to the croft and stacked. Commonly the stacks that were built were works of art, their shape reflecting old designs of houses and stacked to protect the dry peats from rain and water reabsorption. A household fully dependent on peat for fuel used about fifteen thousand to eighteen thousand peats per year. Peat is found in contrasting varieties. The best type of peat is non-fibrous with the colour of dark chocolate. It burns slowly with very little flame but emits a great heat and leaves a fine dust like ash. Until quite recently the construction and maintenance of peat roads was an important issue in this area.

## Peat Cutting<sup>31</sup>



IMAGE 121 PEAT STACKS WHAT USED TO BE A COMMON SITE

The cutting of peats was more than a task to provide the family's winter fuel it is also a tradition. The method of which varies from place to place. In Tongue the peats are cut up on Craggy Hill, Colonel Moncrieff's ground or over behind the local refuge dump on Sutherland Estates land. The old Duke of Sutherland promised that local crofters could always cut their peat on his land, no permission required. However Colonel Moncrieff is not of that opinion and prefers to be asked before a new bank is opened. Nowadays although practically all the villagers cut peat a very small percentage are in fact crofters. Crofters pay a small annual fee for hill usage.

The usual procedure when requiring a peat bank is to approach the local representative of the Crofters Commission. However in some cases banks are handed over by the previous user or if a bank has not been cut for two years it is open to anyone who wants it, a sort of stake your claim procedure. Once you've acquired a peat bank the first stage is to have it turfed, the top layer of Heather and roots removed. The traditional method for this was using a "flatten spade". The flatten spade is rather awkward to use the brunt of the work falls on the hips and legs. I am assured it is as much technique and not as strength that's required to operate it. The area required is sectioned by a "roller spade" then cut from below with the flatten spade and lastly dragged off in blocks with a "hawk". After this preliminary work has been completed the peat is ready to cut.

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<sup>31</sup> This is information submitted by Terri Mc.Intyre researching Tongue in 1987 to a government sponsored project.

Stage one can take a couple of days if it's done by hand whereas if you are fortunate enough to have someone who can use an old fashioned horse drawn plough adapted to a tractor then the process can be over in a few hours. It is best not to wait too long between stages one and two as the longer the top of the peat is exposed to the air the tougher it is when cutting. Stage two requires two people, one cutting and one to throw the peats out of the bank. The cutter operates the “tusk” or knife which is extremely sharp cutting as much as 10 peats across depending on the amount of turf removed.

Throwing out the peats is back breaking work. Some people build what is known as a “bar” on the edge of the bank leaving less peat to throw out onto the bank to dry. The straighter and closer together the peaks are throwing the easier the next stage of lifting is. Lifting takes place usually about two weeks after cutting, depending on weather. The first lifting involves stacking the peats in clumps of five to help them dry. They must be stacked so the top edge of the peat is the same age that was originally the top of the bank. Again after about two weeks second lifting can be done and then the peats are made into larger stacks. Finally they are ready to be taken home and stacked for the last time at the house. The whole procedure takes from as early as April through until as late as September. The time factor varies as the whole process is dependent on the weather, which in this area is erratic. There are also different types of peat, very black peat, fibrous peat, brown peats are a few examples. Some dry quicker than others and are more brittle some require as little handling as possible others are fibrous and tough taking longer to dry out. The individual cutter makes allowances for his own peats as he gets to know his banks better and better each year.

## **Peat Stories**

### **From The Peatland Study 2006**

#### **Bogging the Tractor**

*“Sometimes the simplest things are the most sensible. There’s a story about a guy in Bettyhill ... I can’t remember what his name was, but they were at the peats in Bettyhill and they bogged. And they sent him off.... he was a wee bittie ... an eccentric sort of chap, but as sharp as a nail. So they sent him off to get the rope from the other [peat] bank, which was about two or three hundred yards away. And he came back with the end of the rope over his shoulder, and the rest of it dragging along in the peats and the gutters ... and somebody says to him, “Aye, John, what are you doing dragging that rope along behind you?” And he turned and he said, “Well, have you ever tried pushing it?”*

Sandy Murray Strath Halladale

#### **Essential Equipment for Going to the Peats**

Janette Mackay Strathy

*“I remember going up to the peats, you know, we used to go. My mother would be putting one or two in the pram and walking away up onto the hill there, taking a picnic. We loved it, to have a picnic ... making a wee fire on the hill and boiling the kettle. You know, when I think of the work they had! Even doing that, going off with a pram with half-a-dozen bairns, and taking all this food with you and making a fire, and having to do the peats as well!*

*A great thing would be, my father, he would always have to have a pail with oatmeal in it and the water, and that was supposed to be the drink, that did you. It’s always that wee pail, like what the tinkers would make, you know, the wee tin pail, and a lid on it, and he would have oatmeal in the bottom of it. Had to have the oatmeal, and then the cold water, and he was away with that to the hill, and that was what they drank on the hills. It’s supposed to be good.”*

Sandra Munro Bettyhill

*“Going up to the peats, families went together and neighbours went together so there was lots of children and people and you would have a picnic on the hill, which was quite an exciting thing to do. I was looking back on it quite recently and I thought of something that was very strange, which I didn’t think about at the time, because the women would take the picnic stuff and they would spread a beautiful tablecloth, maybe hand-embroidered or damask. If it was damask it was really quite precious, and this would be spread on the ground ... to put your picnic stuff on.*

*There are those who say, oh, when I was a boy, when I was thirteen years old ... I’d cut a whole, God knows how many yards of peats in a morning, and you didn’t expect to get anything from it but your meal, you know, you got a good feed, that was enough to go on. There’s always a wee mither that we can have about how things were and how they are, but ... I think just everything has to change, really, doesn’t it?”*

### **Childhood Memories of Peat cutting**



IMAGE 122 A DAY THE PEATS AN IMAGE FROM MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

Interview by Catriona MacLeod with Marsiali Macleod

*“I wonder, Marsaili, if you could tell me something about your early memories of the peatlands?”*

*Well my earliest memories were of my father telling me about the peatlands, because for many years I never actually went there myself – of my early years. My first awareness of them was my father gathering the sheep and coming back with stories from the hill. So it was a bit of another world, a mystery to me for many years but both my sister and I recall the stories from Bothan Uisge Beatha, the Whisky Bothy mountains, which I don’t think are in any folklore or any true mythical legend but my father used to make up stories about the Whisky Bothy giants that lived at the Whisky Bothy Mountain. In addition to distilling their whisky, he would regale tales of how he had seen evidence of the Whisky Bothy Giants and their bloomers hanging on*



*the line, etc. So to me they always had a mystical, magical appeal but really my first experience of the peatlands would have been going out to cut the peats. Like many crofting families it was a regular summer activity and there are both good and bad memories of the peats.*

*The good memories are that it was very much a collective endeavour, a day – generally a social occasion for families and for friends to go and do the peats. I suppose the earliest memories are – we didn't, in our younger years, me and my sister, we didn't actually really contribute to industrious activity, rather we played around the peats. And this involved, for example, discovering big pools full of tadpoles, which was amazing for us. And I recall how we bottled some of these tadpoles and took them home from the peat – this was great! And of course also we saw loads of frogs – or maybe they were toads actually- so that was a great thing. I also remember all the caterpillars, furry caterpillars, and we would play with them and pick them up and what not and perhaps count them while the men and our mother were working with the peats. I recall that it was usually the men folk who would cut the peat but our mother would always be throwing the peats from the bank. And in later years we of course would do that too at the sort of first cutting of the peats.*

*I also remember, especially in those earlier days they were very hot days and you would sometimes be caught in the blistering heat in the peat and there would be a very distinctive smell from the peats. It was a good smell, a warm smell and of course there was always the knowledge that you were going to be taking these peats home and to build the best fire in the world, because nothing would make a fire like the peats. And then of course then again, the smell of the burning peats.*

*On the negative side I remember that there was no place worse to be when the midges were bad than on the peats. So the early memories of the peats were both the hot, sunny days full of fun and laughter, your picnic and working with the peats. On the other hand there was more the damp days working at the peat when really, it was nearly insufferable trying to work in the midges. Then of course you would go back out to the peats and stack them etc. So that was probably my first experience of the peat land.”*

### **Helping each other**

Interview by Catriona MacLeod with Angela Mackay

*“I remember years ago, they helped one another and to a certain extent it's still the same – they only went poaching if it was one for the pot. A stag or anything like that, they'd share it amongst each other and the widow or the poor person in a family would get it first. It was the same with the herring. Every house had salt herring in a barrel and they shared it. It was the same with the peats. Indeed I didn't care for it too much at times but it was nice too because it was like a family outing and you'd be meeting all the family there and they would have a sing song as they were going on. They'd have a bonfire to boil the kettle and the eggs were put in the kettle and they were cooked first and then you got your tea. But the tea was just black – oh, it was dreadful. It was as strong, it was like a navvies and I don't think I could even look at strong tea to this day! But it was a good social outing.*

*We all had our own jobs to do. The whole family went and lifted, we never got to cut them or that but we had to stack them and when the time came to take them home in the horse and cart you'd make a big... everybody was there, it was good – you would hear them humming and singing to pass the day. The families were there, you'd get the crack when they were having their tea.*



IMAGE 123 AN IMAGE FROM MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

*Not everybody had a tractor but there was one man here, Billy Mackay, and it was fantastic and so much quicker. It made a tremendous difference but in a way the social part was gone because it was done so much quicker.*

*We never had the machine, it was always done by the men in the family. I still miss the peat fire, I don't think there is anything quite like the smell of the peat fire, it was lovely.*

*The peat bank went with the house or the croft, it's not a right to have that. It's up to the estate whether you get them or not. It's not a right for a crofter to get them, it's just a good will thing.*

*We went up to Sithean Mòr, and we had our peats up there. Some of them cut away up the Mòine but we had ours up the Sithean Mòr and you could walk to it quite easily. I don't suppose they were such good peats but they did us fine. My father cut out the back of the house.*

*It wasn't always the men that cut the peats, I've seen women cutting them too. I had one go at cutting them but I think I was up to waist! One go was enough.*

*Some of the younger women, I remember Maisie and Boyce always cut them together. But with us – Iain Findlay's father cut with my father and then he went and cut with us, you know. He would have his dinner in our house that night and when my father went there he would have his dinner. When it came to lifting all the families went.*

*I can remember horse and cart and in fact I remember them taking them on their – they had big, big baskets – women and men took them, some of them down. There was paths up, but it was mostly horse and cart. Even so, if they would have the horse and cart they would still take them on their backs.*

*I remember there was a wifie in Achininver – Johann her name was, she was six foot, strong like a man. And they would always say to us, ‘Come on or you’ll never be like Johann’ We were trying!*

*It was the same with planting tatties or anything, all the neighbours came – lifting them or planting them.”*

### **Sammy’s Peats – Strathnaver**

Interview with Donald MacLeod by Catriona MacLeod

*“Well there was a man in Strathnaver, an old man, a great character called Sammy Mackenzie, who lived at number 17 Syre. He went into a great fever every year when it was peat cutting time. He tended to cut his peats or always cut his peats alone. Yes, I’m sure he always cut them alone. And he cut them well out Dalvina Brae. In fact out past Lonigill Bridge, I think – no, I think that’s wrong. Anyway, out this road very far. He didn’t have a tractor, he didn’t have a car but he had a very neighbourly post man whom he used to ride out to Kinbrace with regularly when he was a road man. This postman, who shall be nameless, who drove a landrover, it was the landrover that was used as a post bus at that time. When there weren’t any passengers he would take a load of Sammy’s peats home day by day until they were all home. I’m sure it would have been disapproved of by the post office, but they never knew.*

### **An Extract from Saint and Seer**

About Donald Sutherland born in Durine, Durness, Sutherland, in 1811 by Rev. Alexander Macrae.

“I have only a piece of meat," she said, "which I have been keeping for the peat- casting day, and if I use it now I'll have nothing left for that," she explained. “Cook what is in your hand today, and you will get meat from Russia for your peat-cutting," was his remark, which was to her equal to a command. “Oh, that's you and your way," she said, as she felt there was nothing for her but to obey.

(To some readers a word of explanation may be helpful. In those days the butcher's van did not come to the door daily. The people killed and cured their own meat about Christmas, and so catered it through the spring that they could have a bit of meat on special occasions till they could get mutton in summer. Meat was not a daily article of diet.)

The peat casting day about which Mrs. Sutherland was so anxious was one of those instances of co-operation by which the people solved their economic problems and added great charm to their social life. The peat- casting was one of the events of the year. It occurred usually in the latter end of May, for if the peats were cut early frost might destroy them before they were hard enough to resist it; and if the cutting took place later the season might be too wet to get them dried. The end of May and the beginning of June was a time of general social pleasure. The peat-cutting was a most popular institution.

Every household needed fuel, but few of them could afford to pay the labour of peat-casting. In each house there would be one or two who could give a day's labour at the work, which had to be done in haste. Each household fixed a day, and five or six, or as many as twelve couples, according to the amount of fuel required for the household, were selected for the day. The men stood on the bank, and, with a peat-knife specially made for the purpose, but differently made in different parts of the country, cut the soft moss, while the women caught each peat as it was cut and cast it out on the heather or bent, side by side, where they lay till they became dry enough to be lifted on end. There was an art both in the cutting and the casting which many workers developed with high pride. There was a rivalry as to who would cut best or cast best throughout the day's work.

In the evening, after a supper of varying courses, a ceilidh and dance ended a day of much social happiness and labour of love. We do not need, therefore, to be surprised at Mrs. Sutherland's unwillingness to use the beef she had been preserving for such a happy social function.

## **Using the Peats**

### **Burning Peats**

It is said that the burning of peat or 'turf' was introduced on 900 A.D.:

<sup>32</sup> *"Einar Torf, third Jarl of Orkney and Caithness, was named Torf, or Turf, because he first introduced the practise of burning turf in these counties."*

### **Building Homes and Steadings**

Peat was traditionally used for both roofs and walls. In the distant past wood was available for building but during more recent human history it had become a scare resource. This is a description from Caithness:

*"The walls were a mixture of stone and turf ("feall"), put together with artless irregularity. Usually the lower layer was of stone – undressed, of course, and the rest was finished in turf. Rough, natural tree-limbs formed couplings, jointed by notches or wooden pegs: these generally ran down to the ground and were clamped by the walls, the whaleback roof being formed by branches thrown across the couples, covered by divots scooped out of a peaty surface, and thatched with heather. The roof was held down by heather ropes, having heavy stones attached to them and hanging free of the walls."*

In many places in Sutherland a particular kind of grass or reed was used for thatching. Latterly in Caithness straw was used for thatch. Before the days of the cruisie lamp the peat fire provided the principal source of light inside the house.

### **Heating Water for Laundry**

Janette Mackay Strathy<sup>33</sup>

*"Bairns don't believe this, you know. But that was true, you had to carry in the water and then you had to heat it. I mean, they used to wash the blankets and big washing on a day out there at the side up on the hill there. You'd have a fire outside and the big black pot, heating the water. Big zinc bath, and putting the water in and we used to love tramping the blankets, it was a special day, tramping and feeling the water on your feet, you know, and then rinsing. But it was a lot of work."*

*There wasn't even a washing line as we call it. The washing went on the whins. I remember, I was telling the bairns this just recently, and they were just looking at me as if I was making it up, you know, och, you know, listen to her. But we used to put it out on the whins, and so the pricks of the whins held the washing. And if you were wanting something bleached up, say, like a cloth or a towel, it was left for a few days out on the whins, and, you know, there was none of this washing-machines and tumble-driers and things. There was a lot of work; where there was a lot of children, but we didn't have so much clothes, this is the thing."*

*You had your school clothes, and when you came home you changed and put on any old clothes you could find, whereas nowadays they're putting on different clothes every day, and wanting*

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<sup>32</sup> p122 in J. Horne (ed) 1907 The Country of Caithness Wick

<sup>33</sup> From a full interview with Janette Mackay detailed elsewhere

*a clean t-shirt maybe twice a day, or whatever. We just didn't have that. You had your school clothes, which was handed down, likely, if you were third in the family like I was ..... so that there wouldn't be so much washing in it, but it was certainly not easy to do, because of the carting of the water."*

### **Whisky in Caithness**

This story is told about Garrywhin in Wick but also about a location near Rangag Broch: p199 in D. Omand (ed) 1989 *The New Caithness Book* North of Scotland Press, Wick

*"A man and his son who lived near Garrywhin fort earned their living by making and selling unique brands of whisky and ale. As they had no arable land to grow barley people puzzled as to how they obtained the necessary raw material for making their eagerly-sought beverages, which appeared to have an exquisite heathery flavour. Tradition had it that they stored their ingredients in a cave whose entrance was known only to them. Eventually, public curiosity and jealousy of their success led to a group of people deciding to compel father or son to betray their commercial secrets. To their questioning the old man replied: "If I tell you, my son will kill me, but if you kill my son, I'll think the matter over." They did so and then the old man said: "Now kill me." They did and so the secret of making heather whisky and heather ale died with them."*

### **George Fraser of Broubster: King o' the Caithness Smugglers**

This story is in the *New Caithness Book* and is quoted from D. Mackay 1965 *This Was My Glen*, Wick.

*"There were many active smugglers and poachers in Caithness but few could hold a candle to George Fraser, who lived in the Broubster area. He constantly kept the excisemen on their toes as he operated (at least for a period) eleven illicit stills. No far from George's but and ben lay the mission church in Shurrery, empty since the Rev. Finlay Cook left the established church with his flock in the Disruption of 1843. The abandoned church proved an ideal place for his 'barley bree'. More than once he took the excisemen to the church door, hinting that contraband alcohol was nearby, but they never ventured into the church.*

*On another occasion, having accepted a £5 'bribe' he informed the zealous officers where the malt for whisky-making was hidden. On disintegrating a peat stack they found some musty barley (long abandoned as it was useless for distilling), which they triumphantly dispatched into the burn. Hounded one day by a guager (exciseman) Fraser hastened over the hill and waded into Loch Tormaid where he deposited his incriminating still."*

### **Making Whisky – Memories from Tongue**

Peter Burr Tongue

*"I think it was finished about 1902 or 1904, or 1906 maybe and I remember the old house when it was standing there and there was a ditch ran along above the houses, above the house, and it was always kept clean and very big. The bairns thought they were doing very well when they could jump across it and I remember fishing in that with a pole made of a birch twig and a line and a hook that my uncle had made for me when I was supposed to be fishing in the burn. Well, you couldn't ... there was nothing in the ditch.*

*When I was throwing the hook back behind me, it caught in the thatch of what had been the old house and it was turned into a barn then. But the old house was divided in two. The top end of it was a barn and byre already and the cows lived in that end and the people lived in the other end. But, it caught in the thatch and I was roaring and crying and my uncle came out and said what's wrong. Och, he said, I'll get it and I can remember him reaching up and plucking the*

*hook out of the thatch, so it couldn't have been high. And, of course, it is said or was said at the time, that this end of the house, the money for building this end of the house came from the whisky. The still in the wood which was making whisky in commercial proportions, I would say from the size of the half the vat that is in Tongue gardens. The place where it was used is still there and they make out it was the money that was coming from the whisky that built this half of the house. Whether that's true or not, I don't know.*

*But they got caught, didn't they? I suppose that's why it ended up in the gardens? He got caught. He was the last feller caught in this area caught by the excisemen. It was unusual to make whisky in the quantities he was making it, because that drum would be ...it would be 40 gallon anyway. Well, if that's only half of it, it means it must have been 80 gallon and the whisky was made in such a quantity that it was being taken down here and put in a barrel. An oak barrel and the brass tap for that whisky barrel, I have it. And it's as good as new.*

*Oh, he probably did it from the time he came here more or less. I would say he would have been doing it a good while. But, I don't know what year he was caught, but I must find out because the top of the worm and the top of the still is in the museum in Edinburgh and one of my cousins had been to see it, Henry ... had gone to see it. But, he said to me it didn't make a date but he could find out when that was when he was actually caught. He got off with it. I think it was about the end of that thing and I think he was very old, too. He was ... I don't know, but ... they make out that he went up there and got very drunk himself and that's how they caught him. But that's an odd thing to do in that situation."*

### **Whisky Distillation in Melness<sup>34</sup>**

Tales were often related about the illegal distilling of whisky in the old days particularly among the highland crofters for as much as they enjoyed the whistle Bertha as it was known in the Gallic language they were not prepared to pay the heavy duty tax that was demanded by the government.

To distill the whisky they used a long coil of copper tubing in which the spirit vapors were compressed this was referred to as the whisky worm and had to be carefully concealed from police and excise men who were apt to raid their homes if they suspected anything. The crofters used to grow the barley in their crofts and malted it on their barn floors in those days they had shelings in the hills where they were watched over their sheep and cows while they grazed and there in old huts they distilled the whisky and this practice was referred to as "Shebeen".

There was a man in Melness who owned a shop and also kept a Shebeen which was convenient for his customers as they were in more able to slip half a bottle in with their groceries all which was very discreetly done but on occasions men used to go there late at night to enjoy a ceilidh and a few drams. Some of them did not wish to be recognised going out so late to their so-called Tavern so they used to resort to disguise. The grocer who was nicknamed Webb originally belonged to Melness and his wife was a native of Inverness they had spent some time abroad when they decided to come and live in Talmine where they set up a small grocery business. Webb was a very hardworking kindly man liked and respected by his friends but some locals no doubt jealous of his success concocted several unsavory stories about him. One of these stories was about a felonious he was supposed to have committed while he was overseas and he was now haunted by, at this point I would like to say they had absolutely no proof of this but villagers thrive on such tales and at the time ghost stories were high on the list of their entertainment, so the word got around that the grocer was haunted by a man riding a

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<sup>34</sup> This is information submitted by Christine Mackay in 1987 to a government sponsored project.

white horse and that horse's hooves could be heard around the house at midnight and sometimes on a moonlit night a black hatted man could be seen approaching the house.

Not all of the local men believed the stories and some were prepared to turn them to their own advantage disguising themselves gave more colour to the strange stories concerning happenings at the grocery shop. One frosty night shortly before New Year two young men set off bent on having a fly dram before the end of the old year. As it was bitterly cold wet and roads were icy so they decided to wear a pair of old socks over their shoes to prevent them from slipping. They were nearing the house when they heard the sound of heavy footsteps behind them and glancing round they could make out a small light wavering black horse along the road and startled by this they decided to make themselves scarce. Just before the main entrance to the house there were steps leading up to a gate so they crowded down, one behind the other with down and bent head scarcely above no more not knowing who or what was approaching them or whatever it was. Soon the footsteps came nearer and nearer and louder and louder on the frosty road by this time hardly able to breathe a sheer panic was taking over. Suddenly the footsteps halted and the light disappeared without lifting their heads they were aware of a flickering light, next moment they heard a yell of anguish and the footsteps galloping back to the road they stayed riveted to the spot but after a while cold and deeply shaken they decided to venture back home. pondering over the night's happening and willing to believe they had seen a ghost but while the cry of terror that sounded almost human the lads did not sleep much that night but next morning in the light of the day things seemed different and they concluded that some of the local boys knew what they were up to and decided to give them a fright. By the time the New Year celebrations were over that almost forgot the incident until they heard a story about how the excise man became laid up in bed. it seems that on the same night the excise man had to their surprise intended to raid the grocer but as he neared the shops leading up to the back door he heard heavy breathing as he turned to investigate he saw what he thought first was the same dark animal sitting by the steps but then he noticed a man's head covered in black but what made the man's blood freezing his veins in the flickering light which he glanced down at the back shadows and saw a pair of cloven hooves. With a yell of anguish the excise man turned and speed back up the road from whence he had come. he never fully recovered from his experience and always remained convinced the devil but one good thing which came out of it and which delighted Webb and the grocer the excise man never troubled him again.

### **Making and Using Whisky**

Interview with Mary Beith by Isobel MacPhail,

*“Of course, illicit distilling of whisky was quite a trade and a lot of it was made in Sutherland and a certain amount obviously drunk here, but it was sold in Caithness and elsewhere. And there's a still, or was a still, in a hill in Strathnaver. If you're looking north from Rimsdale, it's the next hill. And the thing is, you look for where there's running water – they always needed running water.*

*There's a lovely story of Ben Armine. I'm not sure how you pronounce that – Ben Armine – which is sort of the Caithness/Sutherland border. And that was a really hot area for illicit distilling. And there's a lovely story of these people there getting a tip-off that the excisemen were on their way.*

*So they devised a plan of getting away with the whisky. And the excisemen come into view of the area and they see five or six men running – I don't know if I have all the details right, but they're running up a hill, and they have wee barrels strapped to their backs, and they're making their way up this hill. And the excisemen gave chase. And when they eventually get hold of*

*them, the barrels are empty. And it was a decoy! Why it – the officials hadn't twigged that these men couldn't have run nearly so fast with full barrels strapped to their backs I don't know.*

*Another interesting aspect of this is the plant – the vetch plant, which is known as tufted vetch, in Gaelic. And there is a lochan or small loch in that particular area that I've just mentioned. Now, there's an old mill at Skerray, at Lamigoe. And ... where Gavin Lockhart has his croft, and he's been restoring the mill. And I was fascinated to see that, round about this area, where the mill is, masses and masses of plants, and they were used for flavouring whisky, as well as for flavouring beer. And, of course, the miller was usually the man who on the side line did the ... did the whisky, because he had the barley etc., and the water, and all the raw materials and facilities for doing it, so ...*

*The process of distilling whisky would have probably died out in – by the mid-twentieth century at the latest, because in terms of income, you know, bought whisky was getting cheaper, despite the tax on it.*

*IM: Maybe you could say a bit about how whisky was used in the past, because people treated whisky differently.*

*MB: People treated it differently and before the licensing laws came in, I think it was ... you know, when people were given licences to distil, it was about 1819, 1820 when whisky had to be pure and only made from malted barley, blah, blah, blah. But in former times all sorts of things were put into it, including the tuber of this particular vetch, which tastes a bit like liquorice and was supposed to be put in because it didn't make you drunk. Believe that if you want to!*

*And whisky was used for a number of diseases as well, and illnesses, and in some it would have worked. It was used for toothache ... it was used for virtually everything. There's an old Gaelic manuscript which is a sort of, you know, a hymn of praise to whisky. But, of course, in those days, it was probably stronger and people didn't drink so much of it.*

*The reason whisky came in, because, I think it was James IV put a ban on the importing of French wines and brandies, which were ... the wines tended to be drunk more, certainly by the better-off people. And then whisky came in, in its glory. It was said, "The Lord preserve me from the illness that whisky will not cure"! A very popular cure. Rum, of course, was also popular, especially among the people in the seafaring areas.*

*I'm trying to think of ... I mean, whisky was used for ... you name it, it was used for. I remember an elderly woman in Melness, she belonged to Melness, who is no longer with us, who was known as Merron Lucy: Marion MacLeod. And she told me that when she was a little girl – she was about twelve or so – she had very bad quinsy – tonsillitis. And there was nothing, nothing, nothing, the doctor couldn't do anything for her. Her mother was desperate for her to go to the wedding that was planned by a neighbour. She was wanting to go, but she couldn't go, you know, she felt awful. She may have been a little bit older, she may have been fourteen, I don't just remember.*

*And then they called on a local healing woman to see what she could suggest. And the woman asked for a cup and a bottle of whisky, and she poured this – half a cup, I mean, not as big as our mugs now but, you know, a teacup – half full of whisky, and got Merron to down it in one go. Well, Merron said, what a shock! I mean, this is child. A shock to the system, and oh! She thought it was going to kill her, because of the pain in the throat. She said, within half an hour she was better. And she went to the wedding the next day and was dancing and quite happy.*



*Now, in this mediaeval manuscript, which I think was – came from Mull, the doctor is writing about the use of whisky in curing quinsy. So, there you go – you’ve got several hundred years between that.*

*And the other bane of our life, of course, tobacco. There’s another elderly woman – Merron was about ninety-five when she died; she must have been a little over ninety when she told me that story, so that would be going back some. Now, there’s a woman here, still alive and very bright, in Midfield, in Melness – Mary Mackay, born Mary Gunn.*

*IM: Is that Mairag?*

*MB: Mairag.*

*IM: Yes.*

*MB: And when she was a little girl, she cut her hand very badly. She was down playing, you know, and got it cut on iron, or something, I don’t know. And, of course, there were no phones, there was no causeway across the Kyle, it was going to take quite a while (a) to get to the doctor’s, and (b) for the doctor to come round, so what could she do, the mother, to stem this awful bleeding? So somebody said, ooh, send for a tobacco leaf from Hector Pope. Hector Pope lived in the small cottages, I suppose fishermen’s cottages, down by the shore at Talmine. So she did, and the tobacco leaf was put across Mairag’s palm and held tightly, and it did stem the bleeding. And when the doctor came he said, what have you done? And Mairag’s mother told him, and he said, you couldn’t have done better.*

*It stopped the bleeding. So, you know, tobacco – not all bad! And the reason Hector Pope had the tobacco was, this was the First World War, Mairag was about seven or eight years old, and of course it was difficult to get cigarettes and things and – not sure whether he did it in the Second World War as well; it’s possible – but he grew tobacco, cured it himself and sold it around locally to be smoked.”*

### **Black John and the Kirtomy Still**

Interview with Neil Mackay (Duke) by Shona Munro

*So, what they did, the day that the Excise men was to come to Kirtomy, they got all this worm and the equipment, got in a boat and went out to sea with it. So the Excise men, they wanted a boat now to go after the ones with the still. And nobody would give them a boat, because they were all in on, making the whisky. But I think it was for home consumption, like, they weren’t selling it. But then when darkness came, the ones with the still went into Swordly there somewhere and they hid the still. So they went away empty-handed.*

*But now, the village next door, Armadale, that man was caught, actually. Maybe you’ve heard of the name Black John; Well, it was just after the First World War that he was caught. But what he used to do, he used to say to them, well, the menfolk: “Right, boys, peat cutting tomorrow.” And then, when they came back from the hill ... he never – he didn’t go to cut peats. He was making the whisky, the Black John he told me. He gave me the recipe myself, actually, for making the whisky.*

*So he thought, I’ll pay them in whisky. Never paid them in money. Paid them – and the whisky was red raw. You can imagine – out of the still; it was ... And it was putting the men stone mad. They were going home and they were playing up the devil with their wives, and ... There was actually one man there ... he’d be – wait till I see now – he’d be the Cooks’ grandfather, would be. Hugh Cook’s grandfather. He fell on his back on the burn and he couldn’t get out. He couldn’t get out of it. Nearly drowned, with the whisky. Then when it came to hay cutting, the*

same again. In fact, any jobs that Black John had wanted to be done, he said, “Right, men, tomorrow” – or whatever day ... But what happened then – it was the womenfolk reported him.

SM: Ah.

NM: They used to go home and play the devil up at home, like, you know, with the womenfolk. Going stone mad with the ... warm whisky, you can imagine! (Laughs). So, what happened then – the Customs and Excise moved in. And I think he got fined. That was just after the First World War. He got fined £90.00, then.

SM: A lot of money.

NM: Lot of money then, mind you. But he had the worm – they never got the worm, so ... I think he got time, too, but I don't think he got a long sentence, but that was him, and £90.00.”

Sithbin: Whisky from Peaty Water

## **Memories from Melness**

### **Interview with Angela Mackay by Catriona Macleod**

*“Well the water from this house came from a well and the water must have been pretty good and the old house there at the back was the Sithbin and this building was built on to it. The peat water – that's what flavoured it. The last I remember was in Talmine. (Lachie's dad) But I think it went wrong at the time, they were terribly ill afterwards, I think they didn't wait long enough! But it was back and fore. Before that, yes, I can remember. There was one just out there – they were also selling it in the house here. And when they were doing the house up, a wall was taken down and when they were sorting it up and taking the plaster away they got all the old wee measures. So they put them back in the wall. We have one or two and we're hoping we'll find them as we're doing the house up now!*

*There was one man, he was working here and when he finished it was two and sixpence he was to get (in wages) because of all the whisky that he'd drank!*

*There was a man who used to come up here and I think he must have taken a turn or something because he had drunk that much and he drowned just down the bottom there.”*

### **Peat as Protection**

#### **Interview with Mary Beith**

*“If a woman was in labour – and this goes way back, and it may not pertain to this area; it certainly happened out in the Western Isles – a burning peat would be carried by the midwife, sun-wise, round the bed to ward off evil spirits. It was a sort of double insurance. The woman would keep an iron – piece of iron of some sort – under the bed and also a Bible, so that, you know, if one wasn't true the other one worked.*

IM: So, what was the purpose of the iron?

MB: Well, in England and in the south of Scotland it was “touch wood”. But in the Highlands and in the Islands it was “cold iron” that people touched. And especially among people who were at sea. I think that may have gone back to very, very early times when iron was something special, because the blacksmith was a special person.

### **Peat as a Beauty Treatment**

#### **Interview with Angela Mackay by Catriona Macleod**

*“Peat on face.*

*Before we would go to a dance or ceilidh, we would put it on our faces like a face mask, put it on our hair as a conditioner, leave it on for a wee while and rinse it off or wash it off – great! Marilyn Munroe and these ones didn't have a look in!*

**So who told you about that then?**

*It was things that was handed down from mother to daughter. We used to get coal from the fire to whiten our teeth and – soot of the coal, our teeth going to dances then would be just smiling at everyone! But it did – the peat and the mud certainly did.*

**If you left it on for longer would it have a better effect?**

*Yes, oh aye, certainly. In some Scandinavian countries they leave it in for maybe a year, it would be filthy.*

*No, but they would for a little while and then wash it off. It used to be very good, you felt good anyway. Ponds didn't have a look in!*

**Electricity from Peat in Caithness**

Interview with Sandra Munro by Shona Munro

*“At one time, in 1954, the Hydro-Electric Board had an experimental peat-burning station at between Scots Calder and Aultnabreac, in Caithness.*

*And they were going to generate power from peat – this was the idea. And a man who called himself ‘Castlegreen’ – he was actually the rector of Miller Academy in Thurso – wrote a poem about it in the Caithness dialect. They closed the peat-burning station in 1960, so obviously it wasn't going to work for the purposes they thought. There was also a poem about it closing down. It's quite humorous ..... but it's very long as well! Yeah, a good poem. And they're better said by somebody that's ... better at the Caithness dialect than I am.”*

**Bogwood**

Hugh Millar Remarks circa 1870 on a building in Sutherland

P 412 in H. Millar 1870 Leading Articles on Various Subjects William P. Nimmo, Edinburgh

*“We found one of the old man's sons engaged, during our one visit, in building an outhouse, after the primitive fashion of the Highlands, and during our other visit in constructing a plough. The two main cupples of the building he made of huge trees, dug out of a neighbouring morass; they resembled somewhat the beams of a sloop reversed. The stones he carried from the outfield heath on a sledge; the interstices in the walks he caulked with moss; the roof he covered with sods.”*

**Bog Wood Uses in Kirtomy**

Interview with Neil Mackay (Duke) by Shona Munro

*“With the peat cutting, you would come across old trunks of trees. They reckon there was a big fire over the north. I don't know where it came from or where it spread, but there was no fire engines in them days. There was no fire service of any kind. So when the trees caught, it went all over the north. Now, you're digging in for peats, and you come across the roots. Half as long as this house. And the roots in peat moss, they never rot. Quite whole. They used to use them for handles for peat tools and all that. Like ... come ... like, the frosty weather, you'd see a mark like that on the moss. And mark that mark on the moss.*

SM: A long, straight mark.

*M: That was it. And then when it came all clear, you dug that up. That was a root that showed it up on the moss, on the frost. But it's quite sound, that wood. Quite sound, aye. They used it for peat tools and whatnot.*

*SM: Peat tools.*

*NM: That's right. Handy for repairing boats, too, they used to ... There's a place there, you know, way over in Kirtomy there, they say you can hardly cut a peat with roots, you know. And you break a bit off now, and it's quite whole. There must be about two, three hundred years of that was all on fire. Mmhmm. It must have been – well – it must have been impossible to put the fire out because there was no such thing as a fire engine. No.”*

### **Clearing Bogwood to Create a Croft**

Peter Burr Tongue

*“My grandfather, he took in this croft. There was no croft as such as the way it is now, here then. There was this house or the old house, rather, and the other house where that hydro is there just about 60 yards from the front of the house. There was another two houses over the far side of the croft where the stackyard eventually came to be and I think that was all the houses that was in it. But, there was four or five families here then. They all had a little patch of ground, you know for tatties and maybe a handful of corn and that, but then they gradually all disappeared out of it. My grandfather took in all that ground and he took in more ground. He took in the patch above the house there, nearly bankrupted him. He drained it and took all the ... it was full of, what do you call it? Bogwood, you know?, The remains of old fir trees and they were enormous great big trees. They would have been there since the last ice age. And they came out of the ground and they were enormous lumps of things they dragged out with three horses and, to tell you the truth, there's bits of them there yet. Never got them all out ... and my grandfather died in 1923 or thereabouts, and there's still bits, little bits there. They're very good for watching for lizards, you go and sit on them.”*



IMAGE 124 AN IMAGE FROM MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

There was many igneous ways of transporting peats home.



IMAGE 125 ANDREW MACKAY IN SIDECAR WITH WALTER CLARKE, TAKING HOME THE PEATS. DURNES PICTURE ARCHIVE

## **Farming**

Balnakeil, Keoldale and Eriboll farms, each with an expanse approximating to thirty thousand acres with small crofts interspersed occupy the tracts of fertile land. Rispond Estate being the other major land holders to a smaller degree. Each has developed differently and individually operated and managed.

Farm Event 26<sup>th</sup>. May 2003

Keoldale and Balnakeil farms are to host Highlands and Islands Sheep Health Association's annual meeting this year in June. Sheep farmers from all over the country are in for a rare treat where sheep are bred with a real depth of character. Renowned for their hardiness, consistency and versatility as well as longevity were the sheep regularly walk miles to reach the rocky hill grazings. Keoldale has sheep running on 30000 acres and Balnakeil 12500. The two farms work closely together sharing shepherds for gatherings. Balnakeil is a northern outpost for Borders Framer Andrew Elliot with farm manager Hamish Campbell working with two full time and one part time shepherds. Keoldale has 43 shareholders a sheep stock club set up by local people in the 1920's and run by manager Jock Sutherland and a staff of three. A committee of five oversees Keoldale. Stock at Keoldale comprises of 2700 ewes and gimmers with 680 ewe hoggs wintered at home and another 240 sent down each October to Nairnshire a link that has been unbroken for over 40 years. There are around 145 tups on Keoldale, 45-50 used on the farm and the remainder hired out to local crofters.

Health status is a key feature to retaining good sales from remote flocks and both Keoldale and Balnakeil joined HISHA when it started. Both flocks are also farm assured.

### **High Nature Value Farming**

Durness is an area of high quality natural environment and diverse historical background with a variety of life and a richness of nature. Farming on fertile areas has been an occupation for centuries. Large areas of this site are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest and working closely with Scottish Natural Heritage for several years, RSPB Scotland has been working with the two farms and various crofters in the area to promote the continuation of best practice management for corncrakes, other important wildlife, and soil health. Durness, is the last mainland UK location where corncrakes have an unbroken breeding record. They require a mosaic of habitats with long vegetation for breeding and benefit from the High Nature Value Farming (HNVF) practices of low-intensity cropping, grassland production and stock-rearing in the area. Other species to benefit, include twite and the rare great yellow bumblebee, which find food in the abundance of wildflowers which these traditional extensive farming practices encourage. In addition, the rare Scottish primrose can be found next to mountain avens where the coastal grassland strip meets the limestone extrusions. The low-intensity High Nature Value crofting and farming systems of Durness support a range of species which are rare or endangered in the UK. Retaining these farming systems and the wildlife they support requires collaboration between crofting groups, farmers, conservation organisations, and statutory bodies. The challenge is to match the needs of the habitats on the site with the resources and requirements of land managers. The largest project has secured funding for environmental benefits over 108 square kilometres of land. This not only covers corncrake habitat but the management of nationally important habitats such as dryas heath, species-rich grasslands, sand dune communities, peatland, and valley mires.

Current work is focused on enhancing habitats in agri-environment agreements beyond option requirements. They are concentrating on the creation of early/late cover and improving associated grassland habitats to favour corncrake and the great-yellow bumblebee. On grasslands, they have undertaken soil analysis and facilitated bulk purchase, delivery and

application of seed and inorganic nutrients. They have invested in machinery to improve grassland, re-locate early cover species and the application of organic manures. They are monitoring habitat change and calling male corncrakes and keeping records of great yellow bumblebees and other important species. They have facilitated joint best practice demonstration events on site and promoted HNPF nationally in the press.

The project Durness corncrake and great yellow bumblebee recovery area has created additional employment, helped retain 2.5 local jobs. Numbers of corncrakes have been maintained to date in Durness at around ten calling males. Both calling males and broods have been observed in the newly created habitats which continue to improve and expand in area whilst sightings of great yellow bumblebee have also increased. Corncrakes have re-appeared in sites adjacent to the Durness recovery area after several years of absence.

### **Sheep Farming**

Individual crofters, sheep club and farming are dependent on sheep for employment and livelihoods. While the grazing associated with pre-clearance villages was undoubtedly of some considerable extent, it did include a variety of grazing animals, deer, cattle, sheep, goats and horses. There was a dramatic change in land management in the 1840's and disastrous sociological effects. Whereas previously sheep and cattle were kept for the local market, the introduction of long faced voracious Cheviot sheep meant an export of mutton and wool. These hardy sheep graze on the wet moorlands. Over a period of fifty years numbers kept increasing and since have remained approximately the same. The annual cycle of tugging, dipping, clipping, gathering, and marketing are activities regulating much of the traditional life styles and economics. The annual sheep sales in August have been held in Lairg since 1894 and being the largest one-day sales in Europe attract a lot of sheep, about thirty thousand. The sheep are transported from Durness in large transporters but within living memory the sheep used to be herded to Lairg and generous stories of this event are occasionally related from the old shepherds. The largest drive was in 1935 when it took a full week to shepherd eight hundred and four lambs. The last drive took place in August 1948. Walking for miles a day seeing to sheep and sleeping overnight in bothies is nearly events of history. Today shepherds can get vehicles to the most isolated parts, travel to and from and move the flocks on four and three wheeled bikes, delivering hay and foodstuffs. A common site is a shepherd, a dog and a bale of hay on a motor bike off to attend to sheep.

### **Sheep Drive to Lairg**

In November 2005 Dr. George Sanderson videoed a conversation with John Ballie about the sheep drive to Lairg and working at Balnakeil Farm.

The sheep drive from Eriboll to Lairg would be 1930. I had come up to the lambing from one of the farms in the south I had lambed the year before. My father had met with an accident and I gave up the job I was doing and I took over from my father and took on the lambing after he got better. The pay was not very big then I can assure you. You were lucky if you got £3 a week at the lambing then in those days.

I had been lambing for Mr. Elliot in the south and he came to the house where my father was staying and said he would take me north to do the lambing at Balnakeil and I came north in 1930 and he got me back again for the clipping. One of the shepherds got ill and he asked if I would go on the road driving to Lairg. The late Mr. John Elliott gave me his collie dog. I did not have a dog with me and that was my first turn.

The first stop we had over 600 lambs in front of us we stopped at Mr. MacKay's at Strath More Lodge stayed the night there with him the we moved on to an old cottage further up and stayed



IMAGE 126 JOHN BALLIE

ensuring you did not knock the sheep about too much. You dare not. The way to drive them was steady and they were improving as they were going on. That's what Mr. Elliot used to say, the weight they put on to the time they were sold. When I was there in 1930 the top lambs would be making 10/6, 12/6 and 8/6 each. Small lambs sold for a shilling. I couldn't believe it.

At first we used to stop at Cashel Dhu the shepherds cottage there across the river then I stayed with Mr and Mrs Mackay, at the first lodge up Strath More. I carried on from there to the top of the hill and rested there, the roadman's cottage. We had a rest period at Mudale that was the longest drive from the top of the hill to Mudale, next night at Altnaharra. Some nights we got little sleep because of the midges, at the shepherds cottage at Crask we got a cup of tea. Staying the night at Crask with Mrs. Murray. Next night at Dalchork with Mr. Macpherson. They were all very kind to us. We finished up at Lairg and got a lift home from Mr. Mackay from Tongue in a small lorry.

there the night that used to be an old roadman's cottage. On night I was staying there it came an awful night of rain, we were lying outside, the roadmen were in the house, we had to lie on a sheet on the ground and the water woke us at about 3 o'clock in the morning our back was getting wet, the late Douglas Scot and myself, on the go that time. We carried on from there to a place called Mudale, which belongs to Altnaharra Estate. We got food there and stayed the night then carried on to Altnaharra Hotel and stayed the night there. The next stop was called the Crask the Crask Inn, we spend two nights there if we were too quick just stayed the night there and the next stop was at the shepherds cottage on Dalchork Estate, we might depends how we got on and from there to the Lairg Sale.

The sheep just fed themselves on the road we just walked at a slow space and let them feed all along the road. You just kept a steady pace. The skill would be



One night in 1935 I was at the second sale myself and I got the Tongue mail bus to Altnaharra and walked from Altnaharra to Cashel Dhu through the night to the shepherd's cottage on Eriboll Estate. In 1936 I had been at the lamb sale and I was just home a day when I got orders to go with the next lot to Lairg station to load them to go to Mr. Elliot's farm at Galashiels. I was very, very tired when I got back I can assure you. I had a day and a half's rest and I was pretty fatigued when I got home.



IMAGE 127 LAIRG SHEEP DROVING C 1950 MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

There were 8 shepherds working at Balnakeil at that time, and there are only four now. There's no ploughman there or cattlemen.

*Did you have much to do with the horses?*

Yes in fact when the second world war broke out we had a chap in the reserves he was only at Balnakeil two months when he was called back up and I ploughed all the years of the war myself. Two of the staff were taken away to the army one came back and one was killed that was Johnny Campbell. The other fellow came back but not to Balnakeil because his wife had gone south with children, I had to plough and use the horses myself over and above managing the estate. Three horses one pair and an odd horse. I knew the make of plough and how to set it my father used one in the south of Scotland. A judge came up to see the ploughing and asked who taught me to plough I said my father and he said if I was in a ploughing a competition I would be hard to beat I had the plough working accurately. I was at a ploughing match when I was 14 years of age and got a first prize in Midlothian.

The marriage wage when I came north was little over £60 per year, but in those days a £1 would buy you a lot a pound was worth something but not now. As farm manager at Balnakeil managing 32000 acre estate my wage was £86 a year.

## **Extracts From Sheep Farming In Sutherland in the Eighteenth Century by Dr. Malcolm Bangor-Jones.**

*The introduction of commercial sheep farming to Sutherland has been associated with the Sutherland clearances of the early nineteenth century. Sheep formed part of the livestock on most Highland farms in the eighteenth century, but that in economic terms sheep were nowhere near as significant as cattle. While numbers might vary from farm to farm, the keeping of sheep extended from the largest landowner to the smallest tenant.*

*The earliest phase of the history of sheep farming in Sutherland, apparently beginning in the 1730s and 1740s. It was in the last quarter of the century, however, that commercial sheep farming became firmly established in Sutherland. Sheep farming took off in the 1790s and by the end of the century there were about ten major sheep flocks in Sutherland. The Reay Estate, which for most of the eighteenth century included the modern parishes of Tongue, Durness and Eddrachillis, was second only to the Sutherland estate in extent, it was, though, a purely highland estate, with none of the richer arable land found in eastern Sutherland. George Mackay, Lord Reay had been educated on the continent, and when he came of age in 1699, took possession of an estate with a heavy burden of debt. It was not until the 1720s that he was able to invest in improvements. Despite living on the north coast of Sutherland, he developed an active interest in agricultural matters. He was a leading member and correspondent of the premier agricultural society in Scotland, the Society of Improvers, and was latterly its President.*

*The parish of Durness included particularly fine grazings on the peninsula of Faraid Head, and were also not far from the 'sheep rooms' of the Parph on the largely uninhabited expanse between the Kyle of Durness and Cape Wrath. Documents relating to the sale of Lord Reay's livestock after his death in 1748 suggest that his experiments had included the introduction of new breeds of sheep.*

*When Lord Reay had died, his eldest son, Donald, had been subjected to a restrictive trust, controlled by his younger half-brothers. Donald Lord Reay was able to take possession of the two Mains farms which he held until his death. While initially circumscribed by the family trust, his son George was able to take possession of the estate, including the Mains farms. George Lord Reay appears to have inherited his grandfather's interest in estate improvements.*

*In 1767, the naturalist James Robertson, noted that, while there were few sheep in the north, 2500 were kept by Lord Reay and they 'had succeeded so well, that he intended to bring from the south 5000 more'. Part of Faraid Head was enclosed 'for the purpose of receiving my Lord Rae's newly weaned lambs'.*

*In April, Lord Reay's grieve at Balnakeil warned that the shepherd on the Parph had been ill and the sheep may have suffered, especially with the storms. Provender was short and many sheep had died in the second half of March, especially the hogs.*

*Lord Reay was succeeded by his mentally incapable younger brother Hugh and the estate was managed by various tutors and factors until his death in 1797. Balnakeil, including its sheep flock, was let in 1770 to Colonel Hugh Mackay. He was the eldest son of an estate factor and tacksman had prospered in Jamaica, and had returned to become a substantial farmer. In 1779, with the Colonel's lease near to expiry, Balnakeil was advertised for letting. Particular attention was drawn to the quality of the black cattle reared on the grazings attached to the farm. However, mention was also made of a large tract of very good pasture grounds for sheep in the neighbourhood ... fit for stocking of two thousand sheep and upwards, which was available for letting, The stocking of sheep on these grounds were originally from Tweeddale; and, from the superior quality of the pasture, are now raised to a size superior to the run of*

*Tweeddale sheep. In 1776 The Mains of Balnakeil was let to Roderick MacLeod from Skye. His possessions included various grazings and also the Faraid Head, but not the Parph. MacLeod's son-in-law, Donald Forbes tacksman of Ribigill, near Tongue, succeeded after his death. The Parph, now a separate possession, continued to be devoted to sheep. In 1789 the Sheep Rooms at Cape Wrath were recorded as being let from year to year to James Anderson, manager for the merchant partnership at the fishing station of Rispond, and tacksman of Keoldale. It is possible that Anderson was mainly interested in providing meat for the crews of herring busses. By 1797 the Parph was held by Colonel Mackay of Bighouse.*

*It would be wrong to associate the introduction of sheep farming in Sutherland solely with the Clearances of the early nineteenth century. If landlords were tempted by the prospects of increased rents from sheep, they had to face the fact that the native inhabitants would have to be removed. Sheep and people were incompatible.*

## **Keoldale Farm**

Keoldale farm is one of the most extensive sheep farms in Scotland. After the First World War it was compulsorily purchased by the government and let to crofter tenants in an attempt to put



IMAGE 128 KEOLDALE FARM ON THE SHORE OF THE KYLE OF DURNESS

right the notorious Highland Clearances when people were forcibly removed from their land to make way for sheep farming. Keoldale Farm is on 30000 acres of hill ground running from Sandwood Bay to the Kyle of Durness. The area of Keoldale farm incorporates a convoluted coast line consisting of miles of sandy beaches intermingled with rocky headlands soaring up to 218 meters at the Clo Mor Cliffs. Cape Wrath has a site of Special Scientific Interest and a Special protection area for birds. The shepherds at Keoldale also have the Ministry of Defence to contend with.

The hill at Keoldale is divided into four hirsels, Glasbeinn, Outlan, Achimore and Strathshinnery out towards Sandwood bay with approx. 12 acres per ewe. It takes two weeks to gather sharing a man from neighbouring Balnakeil. Keoldale differs from most Scottish hill farms in that once the sheep are gathered, driving Ewes and lambs out after marking time May the shepherds and their dogs drive sheep over the Kyle of Durness back to their summer grazing. On occasions this requires the seep to swim. The timing has to be just right and can only be achieved when the tide is going out.

The Sheepstock Club was formed in March 1922 to assume tenancy of the estate with forty two of the Durness crofters receiving shares at a purchase price of one hundred and fifty pounds as an extension to their holdings and they entered into possession of the farm in May 1923. Preference went to crofters who had served in the First World War. Some of the ex- servicemen used their compensation for service to pay for the share, others paid a deposit and bought the remainder from moderate early dividends. They took over the sheep stock of slightly more than five thousand sheep, at a valuation of twenty six thousand pounds. The crofters raised three thousand pounds and the Board of Agriculture granted them a loan of twenty three thousand pounds to be paid by ten annual instalments with interest of five percent. In 1932, the government had to come to the rescue of all sheep stock clubs in Scotland and a moratorium was granted as far as the interest charges were concerned. The endeavour dwindled until wool and mutton prices climbed after the Second World War. In 1948, the debt was paid off in full and dividends are paid annually to each individual holder. In 1997, dividends of £550 were paid but in 1998, prices were poor and there was no dividend.

In 1946 advantage was taken of the Hill Farming Scheme to improve the farm buildings, shepherds houses, hill drainage, and fences. This sheep stock is recognised as one of the best hill sheep stocks in the country holding a leading place at the annual sales of lambs and cast ewes at Lairg. In 1955 Keoldale had a complete tractor outfit and practically did all the ploughing and cultivation of the crofts in Durness. The charges for hire being fifteen shillings an hour. In late 1998, the crofters were set to take control of Keoldale's twenty seven thousand acres as one of the largest community land takeovers seen in the north. A trust had been formed chosen from members of the sheep stock club to manage the takeover and the running of the Estate. Scottish Offices Agricultural and Fisheries Department were handing the Estate with no charge to the trust that will continue to lease it to the sheep stock club. They will assume control of the estate including the sporting rights and land leased to Durness Golf Club. There is a request from the government department that surplus generated should be used for the benefit of the community as a whole.

The Board of Agriculture had acquired both Keoldale and Eriboll Farms after the conclusion of the First World War but Eriboll was sold to a large sheep farmer who got the stock for a fraction of the price the crofters were paying for Keoldale. Questions were raised in Parliament; the Board of Agriculture was made the scapegoat and wound up, their functions being taken over by the Department of Agriculture.

In late 1997 a meeting of the shareholders, attended by about twenty five, discussed the possibility of taking into possession the land owned by the Scottish Office. At this meeting a motion was raised to have only shareholders with a crofting interest in the parish remaining members, as some now who hold shares have no other interests in Durness. Shares have remained at forty three, some being transferred and sold with crofts, others being retained when the croft has moved out of the family ownership. Cattle were introduced in 2003 for the first time in twenty years to help the ground and boost income.

#### **Notes from Manager Jock Sutherland 2002.**

Two Shepherds full time: Alistair Sutherland and Stephen Mackinnon: part time: Janet Roberts

- There is 2,700 ewes and gimmers,
- 680 hogs (ewe) kept yearly for stock,
- 145 stock tups kept for use on farm and hiring out to local crofters in Kinlochbervie, Durness, and Scourie amongst a few other places.

No female sheep are purchased, just rams from top flocks of an average size. They must have good skins to keep the water off their back, clean white hair with no black spots on their heads or legs. Sheep are not fed on the hill.



IMAGE 129 JOCK SUTHERLAND, STEVEN MCKINNON AND ALISTAIR SUTHERLAND THE FULLTIME SHEPHERDS AT KEOLDALE IN 2000

Keoldale joined the HISHA health scheme from its inception and has encountered no problems.

- All female sheep to be used for future breeding are tested for scrapies.
- All the tups have been scarpie tested and have shown excellent results.
- Midi Visna test on a pick of the stoll tups and all the results were clear.
- They are farm assured.

The Ministry of Defence own land adjacent to Keoldale that is used as a bombing range and sheep sometimes strays on to the range. This does not prevent Keoldale Farm being very environmentally aware and much of the ground is SSSI and under the review of SNH. The RSPB work closely in connection with the unique corncrake population and there are areas fenced for birds.

This winter of 2002-2003 has been one of the best known. The sheep are looking good and healthy and the lambing ewes were very strong, producing big lambs. The weather has been very good. Tight skinned sheep are easily kept healthy and make good mothers. They survive well on good scenery and not a feedbag! Sheep have to be hardy as well as healthy to live in the hills.

Cash ewes sold for £50 in 2002 at Lairg, the main sale for ewes/ weathers/ ewe lambs. They went to Mr. Whitford St. Johns Kirk Biggar. The previous year the cash weathers to Mr. Jeff Bell in Cumbria for restocking his farm along with ewe lambs from Keoldale and the north after the foot and mouth epidemic. In the past a price of £60 has been obtained.

- Dingwall sales are for the late lambs and ewes where Keoldale have good returns.
- Lambs sold fat in February fetch £55 from the slaughterhouse in Dornoch.
- The top tup price paid for a Keoldale Farm tup was in 2002. £4000 was paid for a 3 sheep tup and a second sale matched the previous farm record of £1800.
- The top price paid by the farm for a purchase was £2300 to Kitiradwell Estate. Buy the best and you get the best most times if the quality is there.

In April 2003 a new herd of Sim X Heifers with Lim & Sim calves at foot and Shorthorn cross cows were purchased to start a new herd. The last time cows were on the farm was around twenty years ago. It is anticipated that this will bring improvements to their ground. A pedigree Shorthorn Bull from Kocknagail in March came. Calves have to be easily calved and hardy to stand the weather.



IMAGE 130 KEOLDALE FARM WORKERS 1930-31 DURNESS ARCHIVE

Crofter, enthusiastic and highly rewarded champion sheepdog trailer and shepherd Jock Sutherland from Durness has been selected to judge North Country Cheviot Hill sheep at 178th Royal Highland Show held at Ingilston on the 21-24 June 2018. Jock has worked with North Country Cheviot sheep since he left school working at Balnakeil Farm, manager at Keoldale farm and currently at Eriboll and Rhigolter. Jock says he is flattered to have been asked. “High calibre and experienced judges are always of utmost importance and this year is no exception” says spoke person for the Show. Jock is the third person from Durness to judge at the show. Hamish Campbell and Angus Ballie have also judged in the past.

#### July 2003 Keoldale Sheep

A tragic accident resulted in the loss of 150 sheep from Keoldale Farm last weekend. The sheep were stranded below the tide level on the Kyle of Durness and were caught and drowned by the incoming tide. It was suspected that the animals were trying to shelter and strayed to unfamiliar ground and could not find the return route.

In the year 2000 I filmed a DVD about a year on keodale Farm. While writing the film requires a final edit and narrative.

## Balnakeil Farm



IMAGE 131 BALNAKEIL FARM, HOUSE AND MILL

Balnakeil farm is a hill farm with some fields. The farm leas was taken over by John Elliot and his eldest brother Thomas in 1908 from Mr. Gilmour of Rosehall. The farm and land was bought by John Elliot in 1918. In 1936 John Elliot died and his four sons inherited Balnakeil farm. The second son also John took over the general management. Thomas Elliot died in 1951 and the other 3 brother partners bought his share. The second John Elliot died in 1960, his share inherited by his son John Elliot the third.. John Elliot third second son David had part of his share. Of the other three partners Walter died in 1975, his widow inheriting his share. Andrew died in 1986 and his share went to John Elliot's nephew Andrew, son of his brother Thomas.

As far as ascertained Andrew and David, cousins, and current owners have split the farm and run the separate parts individually. Andrew is hands on visiting regularly from his borders farm and David employs a local manager.

View from a HNV Farmer

Andrew Elliot at Balnakeil Farm, Durness, High Nature Value Farming

The Elliot family has farmed at Balnakeil Farm since 1908. The current owner, Andrew Elliot, is a full time, hands on farmer who also manages two other farms on the borders. He has managed the farm at Balnakeil as a traditional livestock unit for the past 21 years, employing 1.5 full-time employees to work the 1500ha. Andrew keeps a herd of 45 Aberdeen Angus cows and 600 North Country Cheviots ewes. The sheep are sold at market, whilst the cattle taken to the home farm on the borders to finish. The agricultural area around Durness is witnessing change, a loss of traditional rotations, reversion to natural scrub succession on some areas of ungrazed hill ground and threats of afforestation as an alternative land use. These changes can impact on the biodiversity in the area. Therefore the long term viability for farming and rural

communities in this area must depend on receiving adequate support to ensure these low intensity farming systems can continue.

Farming practices at Balnakeil have changed very little over the last 21 years, maintaining a fodder break crop of turnips on the 'in bye' land, and the hill ground and machair providing important summer grazing and out wintering land, and Andrew doesn't intend to change them. Typically 60% of the farm's annual income comes from Single Farm Payment, LFASS, Rural Priorities and Land Managers Options (agrienvironment schemes) "On a good year the farm may break even however any reduction in support packages would greatly impact Balnakeil for the worse."

Balnakeil Farm is recognised internationally for the variety and quality of habitats and geological features it supports. The owner, Andrew Elliot is highly regarded for his North Country Cheviots and easy calving Aberdeen Angus, but what most people don't realise is that it's Andrew's low-intensity farming practices that have fostered an impressive amount biodiversity, and that his farm actually provides a home to some of rarest species of plants, animals and insects in the country. Balnakeil Farm supports priority habitats like dune grasslands and limestone pavements, with coastal grasslands which grade into heathland communities on the Balnakeil headland. Mountain avens (*Dryas octopetala*) occur amongst the limestone outcrops. This rare upland community at Durness provides one of the best examples of *Dryas* heath in Britain. The farm is also rich in birdlife throughout the year, in particular many scarce or declining species such as corncrake, twite and barnacle geese that come to roost and feed on its natural and improved grasslands. Even puffins and otters come to forage and breed at Balnakeil Bay.

Balnakeil Farm suffers from poor local infrastructure leaving it isolated from markets. The farm's size and coastal location also means that Andrew Elliot faces a challenging climate and hard, labour intensive work that is not attractive to the next generation farmers or tenants. The lack of profit to re-invest in capital projects makes it that much more difficult for Andrew to continue with traditional farming practices and maintain the infrastructure that is vital to support the important habitats and biodiversity that exist at Balnakeil. Maintaining a quality environment rich in wildlife is important to Andrew as it underpins his farm business diversification, sharing the farm experience with others though his holiday cottages lets.

Andrew is motivated by the pleasure of knowing he can produce high quality livestock and has the utmost respect for the traditional skills and values that are required to do so: "*I am concerned there is a skills shortage in the industry in this country. Stockmen's sons stopped following in the father's footsteps in the 80s, and now there are too many folk who are divorced from the land.*"

Moving towards greater self-sufficiency in terms of food production is what Andrew thinks each country should aim towards to maintain their core primary industry. He also feels there should be tougher consequences for non-compliance, more encouragement to invest in infrastructure (particularly for tenants), and an improvement in funding schemes. As Andrew concludes:

*"Investing in and supporting less favoured areas would be the single most important thing the Scottish Government could do to support rural communities. At Balnakeil, there is a good balance between agricultural production and the environment. It's a High Nature Value farm that definitely has a future, but it is essential that this is recognised in a more tangible form."*

The farm was considered to be one of the most productive in the Highlands and was one of the first to be improved in the very early 19th century. The substantial stone dykes surrounding the



fields date from this time. It is a prominent sheep farm today. A fire destroyed one of stone the outbuildings in the 1980's.

Kevin J. O'Reilly and Ashley Crockford write<sup>35</sup>

*"Balnakeil Farm. The driveway also acts as the entrance to Balnakeil Farm, largely hidden behind the stone wall to the right. The existing farm is only a small remnant of a much larger one which has a dramatic history.*

*From Medieval times onwards there was always a flourishing farm at Balnakeil. In 1789 it was leased to Roderick Macleod, originally from the Isle of Skye. Following standard Highland practice, parts of the farm land were sublet to the local people. Living in on-site cottages, they kept cattle and raised crops on their own ground; at the same time, most of them worked part-time for Macleod on the main farm. After Macleod's death his widow took on the lease and ran the farm until 1797, when ownership of the entire estate passed to the seventh Lord Reay. Within three years Mrs. Macleod and her tenants were evicted and Lord Reay leased Balnakeil to a commercial sheep farmer, John Dunlop, who paid him a much higher rent. At about the same time Keoldale Farm (on the land immediately to the west) was leased to a sheep farmer named Clarke.*

*During next twenty years Lord Reay turned over more and more of his estate to incoming sheep farmers, removing the existing tenants and making a large financial gain in each case. His behavior seems unforgivable; but he was no worse than the generality of clan chiefs, who perpetrated similar evictions of their own people in all parts of the Highlands. Referred to ever*



IMAGE 132 BALNAKEIL SHEPHERDS 1960's. DURNESS ARCHIVE TODAY 2 SHEPHERDS ARE EMPLOYED ON THE FARM.

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<sup>35</sup> What to see around Durness Local History, Archaeology, Geology

*since as the Highland Clearances, these events left a legacy of bitterness which has survived right down to Modern times."*

### **Balnakeil Mill**

The mill, used for grinding oats, was built in the early 19th century and last used as such about 1912. Do not enter the upper floor which is accessible but unsafe. The water wheel, long gone, was obviously sited in the prominent trench alongside the road, at the south end of the building. On the opposite side of the road you can identify the stone-lined channel (or leet) through which the water was fed. It runs north alongside a fence, passes beneath the road and then splits into two branches. One turns left towards the mill wheel; the other continues northwards to the separate wheel pit at the far end of Balnakeil House.

### **Description**



IMAGE 133 DISUSED MILL AT BALNAKEIL

2-storey, rectangular-plan, gabled former water-powered grain mill situated on sloping site with man-made embankment to 1st-floor entrance at rear. Roughly coursed rubble with sandstone dressings. Long and short quoins and window margins. Principle elevation to NE with central door and window to right. Entrance doorway with piended roof breaking eaves to rear (SW) elevation. Irregular fenestration to gables; opening for water wheel shaft at lower ground floor to SW gable; small opening above right and further central opening at 1st floor. Ashlar-coped skewes. Graded grey Scottish slate. Flue aperture in ridge to N for kiln.

Balnakeil mill is a rare surviving example of an early 19th century water powered threshing mill with kiln retaining much of its former context as well as a considerable amount of interior fabric. The building is located to the immediate south of Balnakeil House and, along with the remains of the Durness Old Parish Church and Burial Ground contributes greatly to the wider landscape setting of the group as a whole.

The survival of its associated lade and its relation to the nearby listed Balnakeil House provide further interest. The corn mill was powered by water from Loch Croispol which is situated to the south of the mill. A sluice at the northern tip of the loch controlled the water from the loch into the mill lade. The lade runs along the east of the mill and a further sluice to the south fed water into the wheel pit. The high breast-shot water wheel was attached to the south elevation. The water from the wheel pit ran into an underground tail race to meet the stream which runs to the west of the mill. The lade continues from the mill towards Balnakeil House where the water drove a second water wheel. This wheel powered a threshing mill rope drive, the remains of which are situated about 100m east of the wheel. The mill was last used at sometime between 1911 and 1914, at which time it was principally used for grinding meal.

Balnakeil sits on limestone rock, giving rise to highly fertile soil, unusual in the North West Highlands. A mill on the site is shown on Timothy Pont's map of 1590-1600. However, the present building was constructed c.1830 following the acquisition of the Reay Estate from Lord MacKay by the Duke of Sutherland.

### **Balnakeil Wheel Pit**

"Pass through the small gate leading to the beach and turn right to reach the wheel pit. This consists of a stone rectangle oriented east-west and divided into two parts. The deeper south compartment clearly housed the water wheel; one of the two iron trunnions which carried the axle is still in place. The shallower compartment on the north side now contains an infill of blown sand, which obscures a pair of large iron pulleys.

In summer these are further obscured by vegetation, but you should be able to find them lying roughly in line with the horizontal iron strut which crosses the adjoining south compartment. Note the size and shape of the pulleys, then walk a few yards upslope and look across the top of the gate beside Balnakeil House. About seventy yards away, projecting up from a low stone building, you should see a vertical iron post topped by a short horizontal axle; this carries two pulleys which are identical to those in the wheel pit.

The wheel pit was constructed to provide power for threshing machinery in the farmyard. The rotary action of the wheel was transmitted by rope belts carried on the pulleys. Given the distance involved, one must presume that several pulley posts were originally set up in a line running eastwards from the pit. After the machinery fell into disuse they were either taken down or simply collapsed, but luckily one still survives to tell the tale."

### **Eriboll Farm**

From the end of Loch Eriboll to the west side of the parish are the Eriboll Estates. Eriboll Farm is the main activity. The interior of the area is steeped with highland history and a location of remarkable beauty.

Before the First World War the Department of Ministry of Agriculture, purchased Eriboll Farm from the Sutherland Estates, the family Clarks that were the tenant farmers were known for not cleaning people of the land. Once the family became elderly and died there, there was nobody to inherit the tenancy and they were told, that the intention was that the farm would be broken up for servicemen after the First World War. The Ministry of Agriculture offered to service men returning to crofts after the war but they had to buy it with all the material matter and every animal had to go with it. They couldn't afford it. The MP fought really hard to try and get the farm secured for the servicemen but what actually happened in the end was the Elliott's, the same family at Balnakeil ended up with the farm at a lower price than the servicemen had been offered it. The country lost a lot of money. Keoldale was the same idea but the crofter got loan help to make the purchase.

From Hansards parliamentary records

ERIBOLL ESTATE (SALE).

HC Deb 16 November 1926 vol. 199 cc1663-51663

§15. Mr. JOHNSTON asked the Secretary of State for Scotland whether the estate of Eriboll, in Sutherlandshire, acquired by the Scottish Board of Agriculture for the settlement of ex-service men on the land as smallholders, has been privately sold to a sheep farmer; if he will state the price received for the 1664 estate and the sheep stock, and say whether the sheep stock was sold at a Martinmas valuation; and if he will lay upon the table the report of the arbiter upon this transaction?

§17. Mr. NEIL MACLEAN asked the Secretary of State for Scotland if the sum of £10,000, for which the estate of Eriboll was sold, includes the amount paid for the sheep upon the farm; and, if not, whether he can state the price paid for the sheep when the estate was bought by the Government and the amount received when they were sold?

§Sir J. GILMOUR The reply to the first part of the question by the hon. Member for Dundee is in the affirmative. The price received for the estate of Eriboll is £10,000. The price paid for the sheep stock when the Board of Agriculture took entry to the farm at Whit-Sunday, 1921, was £43,295 6s. 1d. The price to be paid by the purchaser for the sheep stock, which is additional to the amount paid for the estate, has not yet been determined. The valuation of the sheep stock is taking place as at Martinmas, 1926. The award by the arbiter has not yet been made. I do not anticipate that the arbiter will make any report beyond the statement of values which will constitute his award.

§Mr. JOHNSTON May I ask whether the right hon. Gentleman is aware of any objections or adverse criticisms which have been made on this sale of sheep stock?

§Sir J. GILMOUR I am aware of certain adverse views which have been expressed, but they were fully considered when this arrangement was made.

§Mr. JOHNSTON Arising out of the original answer, may I ask if this is part of the right hon. Gentleman's policy of forbidding ex-service men to be settled on the soil?

§Sir J. GILMOUR No, Sir. There has been no such effort on my part. Quite the contrary.

§Sir A. SINCLAIR Is it not the case that this sheep stock is being sold to a private and wealthy purchaser at terms far less favourable to the public than have been offered to the ex-service men, 1665 for whom this estate was bought; whether, if the report of the arbitrator is not yet available, the right hon. Gentleman will lay on the Table the Minute of Reference to the arbitrator, so that we can see on what terms this valuation is being settled; and why I have had no reply to a question which I addressed to him as long as six weeks ago?

§Sir J. GILMOUR With regard to the first question, as far as the terms are concerned, I think the hon. and gallant Member had better wait until he sees the terms of the award. As to the second supplementary, I am perfectly willing to answer any questions when this transaction has been completed.

Eriboll Estate (Sale)

Volume 200: debated on Tuesday 30 November 1926

Eriboll Estate (Sale)

Major Sir ARCHIBALD SINCLAIR

asked the Secretary of State for Scotland whether he has yet received the Report of the arbiter for the sheep-stock valuations at Eriboll, and whether he will place in the Library, for the information of hon. Members interested, copies of the missives of sale under which the Board of Agriculture purchased the estate and farm of Eriboll and copies of the missives of sale under which the Board sold the estate and farm of Eriboll?

The LORD ADVOCATE

The reply to the first part of the question is in the negative. As regards the second part, my right hon. Friend does not consider it necessary to take the course suggested. He has already undertaken to give the hon. and gallant Member the result of the arbiter's award when it has been made.

Sir A. SINCLAIR

Surely, if this House is responsible for the administration of this estate, we have a right to know the terms upon which the transaction has been concluded? Further, why has the arbiter not reported before now in view of the fact that he made his valuation on 14th October—more than six weeks ago? Why is there all this concealment and delay?

The LORD ADVOCATE

I am not aware that there has been any concealment at all. Of course my right hon. Friend would be answerable to this House for sanctioning the sale, and he has already stated that as soon as the transaction was completed, he would be prepared to answer any questions upon it. That was his answer to a supplementary question on 16th November last.

Sir A. SINCLAIR

Yes, the right hon. Gentleman said he would answer any questions, but cannot we have the actual terms of the transaction upon which we can put questions? There is no use putting questions if nobody has the facts.

Eriboll Estate (Sale) 1926 Deb 07 December 1926 vol 200 cc1886-8

Major Sir ARCHIBALD SINCLAIR

asked the Secretary of State for Scotland whether, before the estate of Eriboll was sold, offers were made to the existing holders on the estate to purchase their holdings; and what steps he has taken, or proposes to take, to safeguard them in the possession of their holdings and glazing rights?

Sir J. GILMOUR

The answer to the first part of the question is in the negative. The holders settled by the Board of Agriculture have the protection afforded by the Small Landholders (Scotland) Acts, 1886–1919, and I do not consider that there is any necessity for further action on my part.

Sir A. SINCLAIR

Is it not in accordance with the policy of the Government to offer these holdings to the sitting tenants in the first place when an estate is for sale?

Sir J. GILMOUR

Every case is considered on its merits.

Mr. EVERARD

Would it not be entirely contrary to the policy of the Liberal party that the sitting tenant should have the option of buying the holding?

Sir A. SINCLAIR

Asked the Secretary of State for Scotland in what respects the conditions under which Eriboll and the sheep stock have been sold differ from those under which they were offered at public auction; and whether any attempt was made to obtain competitive offers on the revised basis accepted by the present purchaser?

Sir J. GILMOUR

The terms of sale to the present purchaser differ from those offered when the estate was exposed for sale by auction in respect that special agreement was made, after negotiation, with regard to various matters, namely. the price of transfer of the five-year-old ewes, the sale of the "Shotts" by the Board, the number of tups to be taken over and the charge on the estate in connection with the transfer of the Church property. As regards the last part of the question, negotiations were entered into with the present purchaser after the auction had proved abortive, and the terms agreed in these negotiations were not made the subject of competitive offers.

Sir A. SINCLAIR

If the whole basis of the transactions was to be revised, surely competitive bids could have been sought from other quarters?

Sir J. GILMOUR

The estate was put up for public auction on two separate occasions.

Sir A. SINCLAIR

It was not put up on the basis of a Martinmas valuation, with permission to reduce largely the sheep stock.

Mr. N. MACLEAN

Is the House to understand that after this estate had been offered for sale and failed to get a bidder the right hon. Gentleman then revised the conditions of sale, and sold it to a private individual without advertising the new conditions?

Sir J. GILMOUR

The facts are that this estate was offered for public auction on two separate occasions, and no bidder came forward. Subsequently a private offer was made, and after being considered on its merits this offer was accepted.

Sir A. SINCLAIR

Surely, if a private offer was made at all, should it not have been made to the smallholders in the first place, for the benefit of whom this estate was acquired?

Mr. SPEAKER

We cannot argue this point now.

### **Current Ownership Wildlands**

Mr Povlsen bought the Eriboll estate from the late James Clark son of famous Conservative politician Alan Clark in 2016.

With his wife Anne, 43, they have formed a '200-year vision' for their estates, which involves rewilding the land. Mr Povlsen and wife Anne Storm Pedersen wrote that the project will take longer than a lifetime to complete and so would be carried on by their children after they died. As the holdings have grown and our common vision for the work becomes ever clearer, we have

incorporated the entirety of the project into a venture we call Wildland. At Wildland we believe in nature's own capacity to restore itself. The custodian of a number of estates which allows Wildland to affect positive environmental change on a landscape scale. From the twin peaks of Ben Loyal to the deep, deep waters of Loch Eriboll, Wildland Sutherland comprises Ben Loyal, Braesgill, Hope, Eriboll, Polla, Kinloch and Strath More. The land we look after in the north presents a unique opportunity to conserve some pretty special habitats, including world-class marine environments.

### Eriboll & Polla

Including one of the Highlands' most dramatic deep water lochs, Wildland's vision for Eriboll is likely to lead to it becoming a jewel in the crown of this project. A beautiful house in an established yet derelict garden setting, vernacular steadings that could lend themselves to artistic, craft or other uses, the Church already under renovation, the extraordinary tombolo of Ard Neakie, the renovated Fouhlin Cottage and a couple more with potential comprise the built heritage. Integrating farming with conservation is underway and the exciting Polla spate river rounds off this wonderful place.

### Rispond

The Rispod Estate is a sizeable concern but divided by the township of Laid that belongs to the Durness Estate. Rispod Farm extends along the Eriboll shore to Portnancon about six and a half kilometres. This has been a region well populated on the fertile areas. The ruins of many houses reported to have been burned down can still be seen.



IMAGE 134 RISPOND LODGE

Rispond is a sheltered inlet on the inhospitable coast. A group of buildings earliest of these is early to mid-18th century, a three-storey crow stepped store with a wind vane supporting a salmon. Rispond was mainly developed after 1787 by the kelp and fishing partnership of Thomas and James Arbuthnot, Peterhead, who constructed harbour houses for the manager and ship master, coopers sheds, salt cellar, sail loft, net room and store houses. The harbour was developed in 1818. One of the rooms of the principal house contained the (salmon) fish house. Rispond has always afforded a safe anchorage and was an important landing place for supplies until the road network was improved during the 19th century.

An eighteenth century fishing station and clearance village described in 1807 by John Henderson "a well sheltered creek on the west side of Loch Eriboll where Mr. Anderson, the tacksman has made a good dwelling house, a salmon boiling house a shed for casks and has made a pier to accommodate vessels of sixty or seventy tons on the site of rocks which he has blown up. Around him he has placed fourteen families of fishermen who have cultivated with the cascrom all the hollows between the rugged rocks in the vicinity. The buildings have little changed. The little harbour was built when the herring and salmon fishery was first developed in the 19<sup>th</sup>. Century.

There was a shop at Rispond many years ago that used to sell groceries, boots and shoes, clothing, pots and pans, dishes, saws, hammers, lamps, nails and all manner of tools for use on the surrounding crofts. The goods were brought from Orkney on a small ship called "The Cormorant".

Around 1996, a fire destroyed one of the main buildings.

On October the 28th 1263, King Harco and his fleet of Viking long ships anchored in the calm of Loch Eriboll at Rispond after fleeing from the battle of Largs and surviving a storm as they rounded Cape Wrath. Not anticipating any danger eleven men came ashore and sometime later cries were heard and shipmates came to their aid. The local inhabitants had attacked them and slaughtered them and the locals fled when the reinforcements were spotted. Nine Vikings were found dead and two mortally wounded.

Almost all the buildings around Rispond Harbour were built in 1788, including the jetty. There have been very few external alterations over the last 200 years, so Rispond looks very similar to the day it was completed.

The harbour was once very busy, mainly with wool exports to the Low Countries. The walled garden has black soil thought to be ballast from empty ships from Holland coming to collect the wool. Salt herring was processed at the harbour and it is believed that the first herring to be exported from Scotland to Russia left Rispond and was shipped to St Petersburg. Later it appears that salmon was netted in Loch Eriboll and bottled here for the London market.

During the Second World War Rispond was occupied by the RAF who maintained a look-out for the naval convoys converging in Loch Eriboll. After the war it was bought by Sir Reginald Rootes of the Rootes Group Cars fame and was used as a holiday retreat until 1986.

The harbour at Rispond is private and the owner is considered to be the Harbour Master. Crofters at Durness do have a right of access to the jetty for their fishing boats. In practice only one crofter has used the jetty in recent years. The buildings surrounding the harbour have now been adapted to high end holiday accommodation.

Rispond Estate extends to around 211 acres and includes the main house or lodge, a cottage and three outbuildings including two historic properties, The Fish House and The Byre. The estate also has its own natural harbour, a small island, two walled gardens and a paddock area to the rear of the buildings. recently purchased the estate planed invest significantly in the



restoration, conversion and refurbishment of the buildings with the intention to occupy the lodge and offer three further buildings as holiday letting properties. The buildings are all Grade B listed and of very high quality and significant historic importance.

The Fish House is set over three floors, whilst The Byre is a stone barn conversion. Both stand detached on the Rispond Lodge Estate, which is accessed via a short lane from the A838 2 miles outside Durness at Ceannabeinne. The Fish House is a listed building that has been restored to an exceptionally high standard whilst retaining many of its original and unique features. Part of the building was originally used to store the nets and fishing material at the height of the herring boom. Wooden beams, solid oak flooring and a large feature wood burner provide a traditional feel with a contemporary ambience. The main living area is on the first floor and runs the length of the house. There are four bedrooms as well as a second living room.

The Byre has an open-plan living room and dining area, with feature wood burner. There is a bright, well-equipped kitchen at the rear, and two large double en-suite bedrooms. A spiral staircase leads up to the first floor second living room, which has a steeply coombed ceiling and spans the length of the cottage. The Byre is a stone barn conversion.

## **Fish Farming**



IMAGE 135 FISH FARM IN LOCH ERIBOLL

The first salmon fish farm in Durness opened in 1986 by Rispond Estate proprietor, Charles Marsham and a Finnish partner, Bergen Seafood the Norwegian parent company came in as Mr. Marsham's partner in 1988. Charles Marsham sold his interest in 1993 and bought the concern over in 1994 when the Bergen Seafood put the fish farm for sale. The farm hatchery is at Polla (River of small pools) whilst the main sites are in Loch Eriboll. In early 1998 the salt

water component that includes the sea cage salmon operation in Loch Eriboll was sold to Aquascot.

### **Scourie Fish Farm<sup>36</sup>**



IMAGE 136 HATCHERY AT GEISGILL FISH FARM. IMAGE DONATED AT PHOTOVOICE EVENTS DURING BACK TO THE FUTURE PROJECT.

In 1976 Joseph Johnson and sons limited started fish farming in the area and made their headquarters at the storehouse Badcall which was the headquarters of the salmon fishing more than one 100 years ago. Joseph Johnson started the business in Montrose about the year 1835. Later in the 19th century he was joined in partnership by his sons and his grandsons incorporated the firm as Joseph Johnson and sons limited in 1905. Originally the main activity of the farm had been catching and selling wild salmon throughout the United Kingdom and Europe but they added fish farming as well. This side of the business expanded rapidly employing 42 people in the Scourie area with additional labour during the summer. There were two hatcheries at Gusgill and Duartmore, two fish water cages sites at Loch-nam-brac and loch Gobhioch again and four marine sites at Badcall Bay, Calva, Fondle and Fanagmore. In some ways it can be said that Joseph Johnson and sons limited have changed Scourie. Formerly a crofting community is now a village full of employment and the influx of new families has helped to increase the school role by about 25%.

Loch Duart Ltd. have owned the fish farm since 1999.

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<sup>36</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

## Education and Schooling

To the Scots, education is extremely important, and they start sending their children to school at five years of age. At twelve, Scottish youngsters generally graduate from primary to secondary schools, where they must continue until they are sixteen. Higher education may be pursued at universities and dozens of other specialized institutions.

The Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK) was established in 1709 to spread the Protestant Religion and to help stamp out Roman Catholicism and Gaelic. The Society concentrated on the Highlands and Islands to promote education and eradicate religious superstition. Local heritors (landowners) supplied a school room and schoolmaster's house while the SSPCK provided a teacher. Until 1767, teaching in Gaelic and Latin was forbidden but by the late 1760's, the Society began printing Gaelic language bibles. By 1826, the Society had one hundred and thirty four schools and was also involved in missionary work in North America and India.

The history of Loch Croispol schoolhouse, (A project described elsewhere) which was built by the SPCK to provide education for local children, gives us a fascinating insight into education and society in the Highlands in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The school was built on church land in 1766 by the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge and supported by the Presbytery of Tongue and the Rev. Murdoch MacDonald of Tongue.

Today there are two secondary schools and six primary schools in Mackay Country.

### Durness Primary School



IMAGE 137 DURNESS PRIMARY SCHOOL

The primary school is a central part of the village. A school with a long history is held in high regard in the community. There have been sixteen different head teachers since 1869. The two teacher school; with remedial assistance when needed; visiting specialists in music, gymnastics and art is sited in the Durine and has a fluctuating role. In December 2016 eleven pupils attended. The school picture from 1996 shows twenty seven children.

Parts of the building date from 1840 when the Church of Scotland provided funds for the construction of a new school shortly after the shift in population from the Balnakeil domain. The adjoining schoolhouse has unusual chimneys typical of Sutherland Estate buildings of the 1860s. Rebuilt in 1911 with accommodation for one hundred and sixteen but had a role of about eighty children, and to 1939 was a primary and secondary establishment. In 1939, children of secondary age were then schooled on the east coast away from home. In 1943, it was further reduced to a one-teacher school for two years.

Using stones from the ruined Durness Hotel in the foundations in 1958 it was considerably extended in an abortive attempt to provide junior secondary education. Two extra classrooms that were to be used for junior secondary education as the school expanded and grew to meet the changing needs of education were provided. The primary department remained the only education in Durness. This left ample accommodation for a two teacher school with three classrooms and a large multi-purpose room as well as an extensive playground and a playing field. Electric lighting was installed in 1957 followed by central heating and indoor toilets in 1959. Before this, peats brought in by the children heated the school. The school has had internal alterations over the years. In 1998 with all the expected increase in activity and lack of room, architects drew up plans for a development to the interior of the primary school. The present small staff room has had to be utilised for various purposes including office and learning support. Recently the school has become involved in the Early Intervention scheme and extra personnel are to be recruited with more frequent visits from visiting staff, a secretary and class room assistance is employed part time. A teacher for the deaf and an increase in playgroup activities are some of the demands being made on school space. The new office will be created from existing cupboards being joined together by removing internal walls. The art cupboard, cleaner's cupboard and kitchen stores in the location around the GP room and present staff room will provide an office similar in size to the staff room. The present staff room is to be fitted with proper facilities. This is viewed as a definite improvement and will partially alleviate the pressing needs.

The car park was enlarged and the gate moved to the division between the school car park and the school house garden. There has been considerable amount of work to the development of a school garden and the senior classes are kept involved in the upkeep. On two occasions the children have visited the Far North Pottery and made ceramic tiles on the theme of nature. These are permanently displayed at the school at the entrance in a plaque and on the walls. An annual sale of work organised by the Parent Teachers Association raises about five hundred pounds. This ceased about 2009.

In 1990, Durness Primary School participated as one of sixty schools nationwide in a "Dig Where You Stand Scheme". The scheme set out to accomplish central aims. One was to create a greater awareness of their immediate surroundings and the people living there. Social unrest where the struggles between the common people and the wealthy powerful landowners leading to the clearances and the reaction to them provided the main stimulus for the project undertaken at Durness. The starting point was the Durness riots of 1841, which occurred when ten fishing and crofting families were evicted from the local township of Ceannabeinne so that the land could be given over to sheep farming. The violent local incident, which a local newspaper had recently misreported, led the children into a detailed examination of the lifestyle of the crofters caught up in the riots and a comparison with that of their descendants nearly one hundred and fifty years later in 1990. A lasting result, is fabric wall hangings recording specific periods in the area's history showing life and events in 1841, 1908 when the Durness Inn was burned down, and 1990. These highly commended hangings have been on display at various exhibitions throughout the country and appear on the front cover of the "Dig Where You Stand"

book by Jonathon Croall. Postcards are sold of the hangings and proceeds go to the school. Until 2019 they were on permanent display at the Tourist Information Centre.

In 1993, a photographic darkroom was furnished with prize money from a national photographic magazine competition for schools. Practical Photography requested photographs from children to demonstrate their understanding of light. A series of pictures taken in Smoo Cave at night with flash guns and torches which produced images obtaining second equal and one thousand pounds worth of darkroom equipment was the prize.

In early 1994, a grant was secured from Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise for an environmental improvement scheme and three hundred native trees were planted in the school grounds. This was part of a Growing up with Trees project started with the Scottish Native Woodlands Campaign in 1992 and continued for three years. In early 1998 the senior class started an enterprise project and launched a company called "Durness Primary School Trees" with the objective of establishing a small scale profit making venture supplying sapling trees. Over one hundred pounds was raised.

The school had no uniform but in 1993, sweatshirts were introduced without any genuine commitment to be worn daily but as uniform clothing, which could be used if the school was on outings. In April 1998 the Parent Teachers Association backed the suggestion of a more formal but casual uniform being introduced. A directive was agreed of shirts with a Durness Primary and a puffin logo, black shoes, trousers or skirts was adopted as daily wear.

In 1995, the schoolhouse was sold to the head teacher. Before this, the house was a component of the employment of the head teacher occupied while they held the post.

For the first time in seventeen years that Graham Bruce has been head teacher at Durness Primary the school was closed last Monday 26<sup>th</sup> February 2001 because of the weather conditions. From 8am the area was hit with blizzard conditions that made driving conditions near impossible. School children were informed before opening time that there would be no lessons. Although the Education Authority cancelled all transport on Tuesday the primary school was open with parents making arrangements for their children. For the two days there were no pupils from Durness attending Kinlochbervie High.

In April 2001 over 200 native trees were planted in and around the school grounds. The planting programme with Countryside Ranger and the primary school children is was made possible with a grant from Scottish Natural Heritage.

### **Durness Schools<sup>37</sup>**

The first school in Durness was built by the Church of Scotland in the early 18th century as the parish school. It stood below the Balnakeil manse beside Loch Croispol. It was made of rough stone and thatch and had a lot of windows and crow—step gabling. The ruins of the school can still be seen. \_

When the Balnakeil area was cleared of its population to make way for Balnakeil and Keoldale farms, a "General Assembly" (of the Church of Scotland) school was built about 1830 in Durine which was now the centre of population. The dining room of the present school is part of this building.

In the 1830's Durness had four schools: Balnakeil, Durine and two subscription schools. The subscription schools were usually only open during the winter and each subject was paid for. In 1843 the Free Church of Scotland opened a school in Sangomore beside their church (the

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<sup>37</sup> From an essay paper written by pupil Elspeth Anderson and corrected by Graham Bruce

present parish church). It appears to have closed in 1875 when the last recording was made in the Durine Public School register one child transferring to the senior department at Durine.

In 1908 Durine School was rebuilt to provide four classrooms in the main building and a domestic science room and science lab in a separate building. A full four year secondary education was possibly until the late 1930's. After this time pupils had to go to Dornoch Academy or Golspie Technical School, although it was possible to stay in Durness until the leaving age, 14, until the early 1956's. After this all secondary education was in Golspie or Dornoch.

In such a remote area it was difficult for children to get to school. Attached to Durine School were a number of side schools. These took three different forms. Sometimes they were permanent buildings, often no more than a wooden hut such as that on the Capeside. There was a large wooden hut on wheels which could be taken to a remote shepherd's cottage like Rhigolter when there were children there then taken elsewhere if they moved. For the remotest spots like Strathbeg with no road a teacher went and lived with the family. Often the teachers in these schools were poorly qualified and were usually a young lady in her mid-teens who had done fairly well at school. The only other proper school in Durness was Laid which at the beginning of the century had up to ten side—schools attached to it. This put some strain on the Laid head teacher as she had to visit all the side schools regularly! With the declining population Laid itself became a side school of Durine, initially closing in 1955. At this time Durine school became known as Durness Primary School.

In 1958 the school was rebuilt and extended in anticipation of Families coming to the Early Warning Station at Balnakeil, which never happened, despite being built. The school now has two classrooms, a general purpose room, a staff room, a kitchen and a dining room (which can also be used as a gym) and toilets. ‘

The headmaster, Mr Bruce, takes classes 5 — 7 (12 children) and the infant teacher, Mrs MacRae takes classes 1 — 4 (15 children). On Monday afternoon Mrs. Bruce comes in to give Mr. Bruce some management time. On Monday morning Mrs Mitchell the art teacher comes in. On Tuesday we have the Gaelic teacher, Mr MacLeod. On Wednesday there are two teachers. Mrs Mackay does P.E. and Mr. Wregg does chanter (bagpipes). Every second Friday Mrs. Young comes for the day to do music. Our school day is from 9.25am to 3.30 pm. and we have breaks at 10.45am to 11.05am and lunch at 12.30 to 1.30pm. The school has a large playground. In it is our school garden where we grow flowers and vegetables. We are also starting a tree nursery. Across the road is a large playing field with play equipment. There is no school uniform. School dinners, which are very good, are cooked in the school. All the pupils have lunch in school. We really have four terms to the year, which starts in mid-August. There is a two week break in October, two weeks at Christmas and Easter and six weeks at summer starting at the end of June.

At Christmas there is a big party in the Village Hall and the school children act out a play. Hallowe'en we have a party. On the last day of school before the summer holidays we have an end of term concert, where all the children sing songs and one child out of classes 5-7 gets a prize for working hardest all year. All the P. 7's get a pocket dictionary and a bible to take with them when they go to secondary school. Secondary school is either Dornoch Academy or Golspie High School. Both are about 110 km away. To go there you get the school bus down on Sunday night and stay in hostels until Friday, when after school you come home. There are plans to build a-secondary school at Kinlochbervie, about 25 km away from Durness. A campaign for a west Sutherland secondary has been going on for at least 30 years. If the present plans happen a four year school should open in 1995.

## Head Teacher 1984-2010

In 2010 after twenty six years as head teacher of Durness Primary School Graham Bruce resigned his post. Graham arrived in Durness in 1984 with four and a half years teaching experience from Inverbervie Primary School near Montrose. Born and brought up in Dundee Graham and his wife Jill, also a teacher, made Durness their home bringing up their son David. All his time at Durness two teacher school Graham was a teaching head with the senior class primaries 4 -7 schooling two generations of Durness children, children with parents he also taught! *“The advantage of working and living in a small community is the knowledge of the pupils and family personally”* said Graham.

Many changes in education have happened over the years the biggest being the responsibility for management and administration and for many years without clerical assistance or management time while still teaching a full curriculum to around an average of fifteen children of different ages, abilities and levels. As the years went on one and a half days' time was committed to management, with teaching assistance, the volume of which has increased enormously. There have been huge differences in the curriculum and broadening in areas of the social responsibility to teachers. Many teaching initiatives have come and gone some good and some not so good but Graham always tried to involve parents and the wider community in the school ensuring the children received an all-round education with acute awareness of the environment. The primary school, through Graham, has been central to many activities and projects in the community and his experiences has ensured the wider school community of the feeder primaries to Kinlochbervie High have maintained a close relationship to offset any disadvantages of schools with small numbers.

Graham has many interests and in 2009 he took advantage of the conditions in his contract to take a year's sabbatical. For a year he actively pursued these interests, volunteering in community local history projects, archaeology, being an extra in a film, gardening at the community hall garden, following his own family history and local genealogy, an active member of the local church to name a few while working on a major project in Aberdeenshire with “Scotland's Rural Past”. The ambitions of working on further local research and of his home area with writing the findings has shown that a year is not long enough to accomplish the many ideas.

*“The year went too quick”* said Graham *“I always had the idea that I would do something different when I was older and now I am older! A sabbatical gave me an opportunity to reflect on where my life was going and the immense pressures currently on a teaching head have changed the job considerably and this is the right time make that change. When I arrived in Durness the late Brian Wood then Divisional Education Officer told me Durness needed a teacher that would stay for a few years and give the pupils and community stability as for the previous fifteen years teachers had come for relatively short periods. I feel I've carried out this request met a lot of people, made many friends and had some wonderful experiences. I am enormously proud of what pupils have gone on to achieve”*

Some of the extracurricular activities Graham has introduced and established at the school always encouraging parental involvement, School Garden, Halloween, Burns Supper, HOOD, Village beach clean-up, Tile making, Book Day, Mini highland games 2007, Comic relief to name a few.

With a very enthusiastic and energetic head teacher every year the upper school children were taken on an excursion for a few days. This was either a city visit or a camping expedition to some remote part.

## Arnaboll, an Outdoor Experience

For many years Durness Primary School has held an annual camping trip within the parish of Durness. This took the senior children to a number of wild and remote locations, however with an increasing emphasis on Health and Safety, it was felt that a more permanent set up was required. In 1996, with agreement from Eriboll Estate, the school took over a derelict shepherd's cottage at Arnaboll on the shores of Loch Hope in the eastern district of the parish. A disused post clearance period shepherd's house. Around this site are remarkable remains of a long established township. A primitive example of a mill is distinguishable. An ancient walled cemetery is falling into neglect. At a mile or so off the main road it is a remote location, but accessible by a four wheeled drive vehicle. Positioned beside the loch it is the quintessential Highland location with native woodland, a burn, the hill rising behind and a large open field. The view over the loch towards Ben Hope is spectacular and the area abounds in wildlife. Added to this is an ancient graveyard, the remains of a township abandoned in 1820, a Neolithic chambered tomb and an Iron Age round cairn. An exciting and inspirational location!



IMAGE 138 DURNESS PRIMARY SCHOOL SENIOR PUPILS AT ARNABOLL 2007

The house required a great deal of work, but with parents, pupils, staff and friends of the school putting in a time and effort, it has gradually become an ideal base for outdoor activities. From the initial cleaning out of years of accumulated sheep's dirt and rubbish, realising the windows and replacing slipped slates the work has recently included the building of a toilet block and the installation of water as well as renewing part of the barn roof. From being a place of an annual camping trip, several visits are made each year including a winter weekend when a small group of children stay in the house and cook and bake all the food from raw ingredients! This has developed into an important part of the education of the children of Durness, giving them an outdoor experience few can match, all thanks to the dedication and support of the school staff and the wider community.



## Earlier Education



IMAGE 139 LAID SCHOOL HOUSE NOW A HOLIDAY HOME

The previous school stood on the shores of Loch Croispol below the former Balnakeil Manse and the now ruined building dates from 1768. This too was a replacement building for an even earlier school, for the first recorded educational establishment was opened in 1712. Early records show (1834) there were four schools in the parish, one Parochial, one Assembly and two Subscription. Following the Disruption of the Kirk a decision given in the Court of Session identified the work of the Assembly School with the Church of Scotland (the established church) and the Free Church set up their own school near the present church in Sangomore. This building was demolished in approximately 1970. People who were children at the time recall playing in the school with slates and chalks as a derelict building. Two church schools continued in existence until the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872 became law when they merged into the Scots system. Ceannabeinne, now a holiday cottage was built in 1828, again as a replacement for a school established in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and, to serve the eastern part of the parish, a school was opened at Eriboll about 1780. Gradually with the decline of population and the shifts in settlement caused by the notorious clearances in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and economic plight in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all education in the parish became centred on the Durine School.

Arrangements were being made in 1955 to close the school in Laid and bring the three children attending there to the Durine School. In 1959 the school in Laid was closed. At one time this school had forty pupils. The small gable school and schoolhouse was built in 1894 of local rubble, reddish-tooled dressing and tall chimney stacks.

The Education (Scotland) Act 1872 made elementary education compulsory for the first time for children aged 5 to 13 years of age in Scotland and established the government as being

responsible for its delivery. School Boards were created in each rural parish to implement this aim. Parents were required to pay fees and could select from a basic or more advanced curriculum according to what they might be able to pay. In 1890 elementary schooling in Scotland became free. In rural Sutherland the task of creating access to elementary education for all children was extremely difficult since the population was so scattered. Particular schools from amongst those already in existence were selected by each board to be the designated District Schools. These key schools delivered elementary education, oversaw educational attainment in the growing number of side schools and provided the classic ‘parish’ school liberal education for a smaller number of pupils aiming to sit the University entrance exams.

In 1959 The Sutherland County Council Education Committee initiated a new approach to junior secondary education in North West Sutherland by opening hostels in Dornoch, East Sutherland. Their aim was to enable pupils to attend one of two secondary schools in Dornoch or Golspie. This was a system of state run boarding schools in effect. Pupils from most of the county lived too far away to travel. They boarded during term time and got home in the school holidays. All of the public schools in the five parishes in question at this point were changed into primary schools. Until that point at least one school in each parish was designated to have a ‘secondary’ department.

In the 1990s local secondary schools were created and equipped in west coast locations and the hostel based system was discontinued. This represented a huge change in the way of life for villages and townships which had seen all the children leave at 12 years old for generation after generation. Most of those children never returned to live at home. Since 1995 the children leaving the primary school attend the then currently most modern school in Europe, Kinlochbervie High School. For over forty years the people of Durness have been struggling with bureaucracy to have their children's education completed in the vicinity where they live. Families were split up when children of secondary age travelled to Golspie on the east coast to hostels to attend Golspie High. Latterly the children were returned home at weekends but for many years had been away from home all term then monthly visits home for the weekend.

Northern Times July 10, 1959

Education Set-up in North-West ‘We Resign in Protest’

*The Scottish Education Department have agreed to Scourie and Durness schools being reduced to primary status, which means that children in these areas, when they reach the age of 12, must go for their education to Golspie or Dornoch. That was reported to Sutherland Education Committee at Brora last week by Mr J McLellan, Director of Education. There was a surprise for those of the committee who had not read that morning's newspapers when they were told by Major R Donaldson that Eddrachillis the and Durness education district sub-committee had resigned en bloc ten days before in protest at parent body's refusal to consider providing proper junior secondary education in the area.*

*Major Donaldson explained that at a meeting ten days previously the sub-committee agreed to resign en bloc because that was the only way in which feelings; they were “considerably dissatisfied with the attitude of the education authority in taking this Action in reducing all these schools. That is only one of their grouses. From what I gather most of the complaints are justified.*

*“Now they are really seriously concerned and feel that very much of the depopulation in that area could be attributed directly to the children going to the east coast. We must all admit that that can seriously happen.*

*“So far as the change in schools is concerned, I feel myself you could alleviate a lot of the trouble if you could produce a secondary school near Rhiconich. I see you smiling, Mr*

*Chairman, perhaps you have pre- knowledge. I understand this subject has been mooted before. I am merely putting the case to you as it has been explained to me.”*

### **Free Church Schools<sup>38</sup>**

Free Church schools set up after the disruption were always well attended. Fees were paid quarterly and attendance was voluntarily. Men and women away from home at the fishing etc came home in the winter and tried to improve their education by attending school. Fully grown bearded men were not an unusual sight among the youngsters in the classroom. Before there were schools as such groups of parents presumably the gentry of the time formed clubs and employed a teacher who travelled round the area staying for a week at the home of each club member tutoring children until all the members' homes had been visited.

#### **School Stories.**

The janitor at Durness was paid two pound a quarter anum and worked for ten years attending the fires three times a day. He cleaned the school on a Sunday. When a rise of one pound was denied he quit the job. In 1954 at the start of the summer term, a canteen was opened serving school lunch. The first meal was tomato soup and is recollected as being full of seeds. *Unknown source*

#### **Durness Primary School 1951**

My class room teacher was Mrs Macdougall, Head teacher was Miss Mackay. Mrs Macdougall was a good teacher but she had her “Pets” and I was not one of them. Miss Mackay was a fair no nonsense person as far as I remember. School meals were good. Neen from Laid was the cook and Chrissie Munro was the assistant, but we got a bottle milk to drink which I did not care for.

The School Buildings was two class rooms and a dining room with the kitchen on the end.

I do not remember playing much football in Durness School. More rounder's and hockey

We had to walk to School from Balnakeil Farm there being five children from the farm going to School, the Craft Village did not exist then. Building work was just starting for an RAF base. *Unknown source*

*My Granny Fanny Mackay attended Eriboll side school at the same time as George Mackay. She and her brothers and sisters walked barefoot to school in the summer and wore boots in the winter. The school was heated by a pot-bellied stove round which the children hung their wet socks to dry. To get to school they had to pass a small lochan which was called the Leeches Loch by the parents to keep the children from playing in it. On the way to school my Granny's brother used to jump over the wall to lift a turnip from the field, wipe the earth off, cut it in to portions with his penknife and share it out with the other children to eat at playtime. Frances Gunn Tongue*

### **Kinlochbervie High School**

HRH the Prince of Wales officially opened Kinlochbervie High School on 22<sup>nd</sup>. September 1995. The twenty five pupils started in S1 and S2 a month earlier. There had never been a secondary school in the area before as previously pupils had travelled to the east coast and boarded in the hostels at Golspie. The school is in the process of adding another year group of pupils each year and this year will accommodate pupils from S1 to S6. The school will grow and subsequent intakes will make Kinlochbervie High a one hundred pupil full six year school. In December 1999 the roll is 90. Kinlochbervie High School is a purpose built secondary school

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<sup>38</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

comprising classrooms and practical rooms to provide a quality education for all of its pupils. Subject departments are well equipped with a full range of teaching materials. The location is ideal for a range of outdoor activities including hill walking and water sports. A floodlit all weather playing surface and a well-equipped fitness room is available for pupil and community use. The school is well known for its use of a wide range of information technology to ensure that pupils are equipped to deal with the workplace of today. Located within the building is an area for the use of the Community Education Service and an area for the use the North West Training Centre. A wide range of evening classes are available.

For over 40 years parents of NW Sutherland had been campaign for secondary education within daily travelling distance. There was sporadic lobbying as children were reaching the secondary



IMAGE 140 KINLOCHBERVIE PRIMARY AND HIGH SCHOOLS SITED CLOSE TO THE VILLAGE HALL IN MANSE ROAD

school age from parents to the education authorities and discussions around where the school should be. Rhiconich was suggested at some time but parents always wanted the school in their own locality. In 1986 Highland Councilor Frances Keith held meetings in Kinlochbervie, Scourie and Durness and advised parents that they must agree on a location for a secondary school and suggested this should be Kinlochbervie, the most central village to the feeder primaries. A group from these communities should be established to maintain ongoing constant pressure on the Highland Council. He would support this and work with the group to establish a secondary school.

KLB High has four feeder primary schools.

### **Kinlochbervie Primary School**

<sup>39</sup>*Our school building was built in 1971 and refurbished in 1997. The interior of the school comprises of three designated classrooms, a general purpose room, learning support room, staff room and office. The modern gymnasium and canteen in the adjacent High School is available for our use also. It is ideal for the needs of our modern curriculum.*

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<sup>39</sup> Kinlochbervie Primary School website

## Scourie Primary School

<sup>40</sup>*There are 34 pupils in our primary school. We have 2 teachers, Mrs Muir and Mrs Warwick. Mrs Howard is our Learning Support Auxiliary. On Friday Mrs Warwick does management time and Mrs Smith teaches us until lunchtime. We have a playground at the front with lots of new games that Miss Mowat painted for us and we have grass at the back. We have two classrooms, a canteen, toilets, an office and storerooms. The school was built in 1866 and was then a primary and a secondary school.*

<sup>41</sup>The present school at Scourie was built in 1866. previous schools were at Badcall, Cardhu, beside the free church and the and the building later used as and still known as the library now an annex to the public hall which continued to be used as a female sewing school for some years after 1872. When the Scottish Education Act 1872 was passed then newly constituted school board for the parish of Eddrachillis resolved to adopt the parochial school at Scourie and the parliamentary school at Badcall in Inchard and to pay the teachers the salaries they are to receive. School fees were fixed as follows

One shilling per quarter from the age of five to seven years.

One shilling and six pence per quarter from the age of seven to nine years.

Two shillings per quarter from the age of 9 to 11 years.

Two shillings and six pence per quarter from the age of 11 to 13 years.

Three shillings for all above 13 years of age.

All fees were to be paid in advance to be collected by the teachers of each school who would remit them with an account to the treasurer. The fees produced from each school to be returned to the teacher at the terms of Martinmas and Whitsunday in addition to his salary. From the 1st of January 1875 however fees were reduced to the uniform sum of 1 shilling per quarter for all ages and later in 1889 grants were given for the relief of school fees. The staff at this time was Alexander Cowie master "a man of good attainments", Kenneth Mackenzie pupil teacher, third year and Miss Janet Pope sewing mistress. In 1874 Mr. Cowie's salary was fixed at £90 per year plus one pound for cleaning the school with one quarter of the amount which he may earn or produce from the government as results. The government grant for Scourie for that year was £31. 18 shillings 4 pence for the master and £17. 18 shillings and 4 pence for the pupil teacher.

Miss Janet Pope asked for and received an increase of £1 nearly in our salary of £5 per annum and the board agreed to pay this on the understanding that the inspector reported favourably on the progress of her pupils. Attendance was irregular and the school board appointed Mr Evander MacIver chairman and the rev. D. McCauley members to cooperate with an assist the officer Mr Alex Mackay in seeing the children attended school regularly. They further authorised these gentlemen to go to the schools at stated periods to examine the school registers timetables and log books and make the necessary entries therein.

In 1875 when the fees were reduced the board provided fifty copy books for each school in the parish and left it to the discretion of the teachers to give them too such as they are satisfied cannot afford to provide them otherwise. Miss Jessie Pope resigned assuming mistress in 1876 and Miss Betsy McDonald was appointed. Later in respect of the excellent report by the inspector on a domestic industry and sewing class the board "to mark their approval of the teachers exertion resolved to add £1 to miss Betsy McDonald's salary to commence and Martinmas first not until 1889 was ten shillings allowed annually for sewing materials. A spring holiday was first given in 1876 the school board recognising that at this session of the year

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<sup>40</sup> Scourie Primary School website

<sup>41</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

many parents keep their children at home to assist with fieldwork recommended that there should be a vacation of two weeks the same to be deducted from the autumn holidays. The school will therefore be closed for a fortnight. Each child brought a peat to school daily for the fire but the spring and summer of 1877 were exceptionally wet and peats were scarce. In January 1878 when the Rev. D. Macaulay visited the school he found on this as on former occasions the school room very imperfectly heated, a number of the children barefoot and no fire in the room. In March the school board ordered coles at £1 per tonne.

In 1881 circular 49 from the Scottish Education Department was considered an extract from the minutes of this meeting reads this: "The board unanimously of the opinion that in every parish there should be at least one teacher qualified to give instruction in the higher study subjects and that in this parish it should be at Scourie and the clerk is instructed to send a copy of this minute to the secretary of the Education Department".

At a later meeting the clerk was instructed to send a copy of the following minute to the Scottish Education Department:

"with reference to your circular from the Scottish education department dated 20th of April last relative to the promotion of the higher branches of education in public and stated schools this board are of the opinion attend extensive island parishes such as Eddrachillis with a scattered population and such are the majority of the parishes in the county of Sutherland there is only one mode of accomplishing the object in view which is the establishment of one or two high class schools in a central position to its pupils could be sent from the various schools throughout the county who are anxious for higher education and the public schools in the rural parishes could provide."

In 1884 the school received graduated writing sheets and a new map of Scotland £1 five shillings and three pence and the clerk of the board was instructed to fix the desks and provide pen grooves. The same year Mr. Curry requested an enclosure for the house and school to protect him from horses and cattle, ten years previously His Majesty inspector Mr Harper had recommended the school premises should be enclosed by a stone wall. The board agreed director stone wall and line 136 yards four feet in height to cope to be fixed with lane and to be handled inside and out and it have two small iron gates. The clerk was instructed to receive offers for same. Two years later the building of the wall by George Mathieson says Stewart had two shillings and sixpence per yard wwas postponed owing to additional outlay that year by the board. Ten years when later Mr Cowie retired there was still no wall.

In 1886 the board accepted the offer of Mr William Matheson road contractor to keep in repair the road leading to Scourie School and also the sewing school at a sum of 15 shillings for that year and 12 shillings annually thereafter. Six years later this was raised to £1 annually. He continued this job until the parish council took over the upkeep of the roads in 1902. In 1886 a new set of reading books was ordered and later a second set, Collins improved readers and also Collins history and geography books for all standards.

New seats and desks were provided made by Mr. John Morrison joiner to replace the old ones which according to her Majesty's Inspectorate were positively the worst in the county. Prizes were given for the first time in 1888 to the best scholars and those who had made the best attendance period two years later the board decided to allocate a sum of money not exceeding £5 for the parish of a school picnic as an inducement to better attendance and those children only would be permitted to be present whose attendance throughout the year and entitled the school to earn a grant on their behalf. The selection of the children was to be left to the teachers. Irregular attendance was common. At bad weather children from outlying districts like Badcall but at this time there is no road could not attend. Help was needed at home at spring harvest

work and these times attendance suffered. But not least for epidemics of scarlet fever, flu, mumps, diphtheria and measles. In 1892 an epidemic of scarlet fever and influenza caused the school to be closed for six weeks and was only opened with summer weather. An extract from the inspectors report continues these facts apart the appearance made by the children was very good.

The difficulty of language hardly exists at Scourie and the consequences is a more readily comprehensions of the questions put by a stranger were Gaelic his universally spoken. Three circulars are mentioned in this year one from the department as to leaving certificates then 1892 one from The Trust for Education in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland as to bursaries and one about Savings Banks. A communication from the secretary of The Edinburgh Decimal Coinage Association was laid before the board and read.

The first evening class in cookery was held in the school for four weeks in 1893. In 1894 Mr Cowie “in consequence of old age and infirmity and feeling he was no longer able to do justice to school” decided to retire. The board in view of his long and faithful service agreed to give him a retirement allowance of £60 a year and to recommend the department to give him a pension. The board agreed to fix a salary of the new teacher had £60 a year plus one pound for cleaning the school and to give him the benefit of the whole of the government grant that he might earn by results of examination, a house and the option of a lot of land at reasonable terms. Mr George Sutherland certified from public school Caithness was appointed. The following year Miss Betsy McDonald resigned and Mrs Sutherland became sewing mistress in her place. Unfortunately the garments in which the children had wrought during the year were all removed by the late sowing mistress. Mrs Sutherland salary was increased from £7 to £10 per annum.

New Year old style was held in the district then on one of two days holiday were given for that about the middle of January this practise continued up until at least 1908.

Some extracts from the log book

On February the first the school was closed because of the funeral of Mrs Evander McIver Scourie house.

19th of July 1895. No school and Thursday as a school as attending school were entertained to a picnic loch Laxford. Attendance in Wednesday 100%.

21st of May 1897. No school master engaged at planting his potatoes.

25th of June 1897. Thursday was given as a holiday in honour of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee scholars were entertained to a picnic.

22nd of December 1899. The sewing mistress was absent today. She had gone to Lairg to say goodbye to her brother who had been ordered to join his regiment the Seaforth Highlanders in the Transvaal.

2nd of February 1900. Thursday afternoon was observed as a holiday in honour of the relief of Lady Smith.

A year after he was appointed an 1895 Mr Sutherland wrote to the school board requiring school buildings be enclosed with a stone wall.

1905 plans went ahead in accordance with recommendations of Her Majesty's Inspectorate to erect a classroom and Scourie capable of accommodating 25 to 30 children. the new classroom was built but many a complaint was recorded in the log book for more than half a century until it ceased to be used in 1961 it is now being demolished and a new classroom is being built in its place.

Mrs Allen retired in 1988. Miss Rhoda Mackay from Kinlochbervie was appointed to replace her.

In 1971 plans went ahead to modernise the school and school house. The corrugated iron classroom built in 1906 now unfit for use was demolished and a new classroom cloakroom and staff room are being built.

Subjects mentioned in the log books and inspectors reports from 1874, reading, writing, arithmetic, dictation, grammar, spelling, history, geography, Latin and domestic industry. In 1891 map drawing, English, 1896 drill, singing, composition, poetry, 1901 drawing, 1902 navigation, mathematics, 1903 dumbbells for drill, 1905 French, Gaelic. 1909 science.

On the 25th of June 1897 the school pupils were entertained to a picnic to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria. Five years later on 20th of June 1902 children from Fanagmore School joined the children of Scourie School for sports and a picnic to celebrate the coronation of Edward the 7th. The games were supervised by Duncan McIvor and money prizes were presented by Mrs McDonald recalled that each of us got a mug and I made over 3 shillings that day.

### **School Meals**

Many years ago the Westminster state delivered venison to every household as a gift. They also gave venison to provide soup for school children who couldn't go home at lunchtime during the winter months. In Scourie School the suit was made by Mrs Fraser the head teacher's wife. John Mackenzie remembers that they got their soup in enamel bowls and that each bowl had a number stamped on it.

Mrs Catherine McLeod was the first cook in the school canteen built in 1950. In 1966 Mrs Margaret Munro took over the job and she was succeeded by Mrs Nan Flett. She is due to retire at Easter 1988 and her daughter Mrs Diane Corbett will become the new cook.

Mrs Milne the wife of the head teacher made the soup for the children attending Fanagmore School. Mrs Margaret Mackay succeeded Mrs Milne and Mrs Mackenzie daughter-in-law Mrs Lettie Mackay took over from her. Mrs Eva MacAskill provided meals from our own kitchen from when school meals were introduced to all schools up until the time that Fanagmore School was closed.

### **Fanagmore School<sup>42</sup>**

The site of the first school at Fanagmore which served Tarbet Fanagmore and Fondle is known as *Blar-tigh-n-Scol*. When the school fell into disrepair scholars moved to a house near *Loch Nam Brock*. This was *Tigh-scol-Loisge* destroyed by fire and another move was made to a room in the White House at the shore which has been built for the salmon fishers. In 1874 Mr George Sutherland was the teacher appointed and paid by the Ladies Highland Association of Edinburgh who were responsible for Fanagmore School until the new school was built by the Eddrachillis school board in 1899.

One of the recommendations made by His Majesty Inspectorate Mr Harper after a visit to the parish of Eddrachillis in 1874 was that an infant and girl school should be built on a site midway between Tarbet and Fondle but the school board replied as their only six families having between them eleven children between the ages of five and 13 years they were unwilling to tax the parish with the expense of school premises and a teacher.

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<sup>42</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987



1880 Miss Rainy secretary of the Ladies Highland Association requested that Fanagmore be placed under a section of the Scotch code which provided that in a district more than four miles from any school and in which less than 15 scholars can be assembled they may be taught by a teacher approved by H.M.I., and working under the supervision of the nearest school board school. The school board agreed to this and requested Mr Cowle Scourie to supervise the school. From then until 1899 Fanagmore children presented themselves at Scourie School for inspection by H.M.I. making a journey by sea. The first inspectors report in 1880 recorded in this Scourie School log book records “Fanagmore sub school made good appearance”.

Mr Sutherland resigned in 1881 and was followed by Mr. James Macintosh who left in 1884. Mr. Hugh Maclellan taught from 1884 – 1890, Mr. Roderick Frazer 1890- 1892, Mr. Alex Macdonald 1892-1895 and Mr. Alan Mackillop 1895-1897. Mr Evander MacLeod of Tarbet wrote “...my first day at school was very austere- no boots no English and my only consolation was that the teacher was an excellent Gaelic speaker, Alan Mackillop from the Western Isles”. Mr McCulloch who immigrated to Australia was followed by Mr Willie Morrison, Achriesgill 1897 to 1900, also a Gallic speaker who later became tramway superintendent in Glasgow.

In 1899 the parents of Tarbet, Fanagmore and Fondle complained about school accommodation. The school board sent a member Mr Rodrick Finlayson of the Scourie Hotel to look into the complaints. He reported the room was not in a fit and proper condition being too small for the number of pupils the floor being flagged, the chimney smoking and no proper seats or convenience of any kind for teaching. At this time the house was occupied by Mr Lachlan Ross and his family and school was held in “the room”. The original plan by the board had been to alter the White House which the proprietor the Duke of Sutherland had handed over to the school board with any necessary ground joining on and a feu charter, to include a classroom for twenty four and by the addition of a porch in front with a separate entry for the dwelling house make it suitable for the teacher to live in at a cost of £120. In the meantime however Mr. McLean factor wrote to the board that as due notice has not been given to Mr Lachlan Ross and that he could find no other house the proprietor would not like to turn him out with his large family and less some other place was perceived for him.

The education department however did not approve of the plans and went of the opinion a new school should be built fresh plans were drawn up by Mr Bissett architect of Golspie for a new school for thirty children beside the dwelling house which were approved. In the meantime school was held on alternate weeks at Angus McKenzie’s house in Tarbet and then Angus Falkner’s house in Foindle there being no children of school age in Fanagmore more at this time.

In 1899 the new school house was built by Mr Peter White of Scourie at a total cost of £214.15 shillings including desks, in three months. The house was renovated for use as a school house by Mr Aird joiner of Scourie at a cost of £68. Mr Angus MacLeod of Tarbet now of Stornoway remembers the opening ceremony. Mr McDonald Mackenzie Tarbet was working at a boat by the shore and called him up to open the school. This he did he turned the key and opened the door and shouted “her are we” all followed and shouted throwing their caps in the air and waving so a new era in our education had begun.

He continues “there is no road or even a footpath from Tarbet to Fanagmore in those days and we had to walk through the hill each carrying a peat to keep the school fire burning. In summer we were barefooted and peat bogs we took in her stride. In winter we had to wear boots and keep to the harder ground. At this time the “floating shops” came from Orkney to loch Laxford (Fanagmore) and Mr Evander MacLeod Tarbet remembers them well. “We frequented them very often and if we would sing a song they gave us sweets and clay pipes for our fathers”. Of

the coronation of King Edward the 7<sup>th</sup>. he says we went to school for games and each of us got our mug. I made over 3 shillings that day. Money had value in those days.”

A certified teacher Miss Jemima Grant was appointed in 1900. She left in 1903 and was succeeded by Mr Robert Gillis 1903 to 1905 with Mrs Gillis to teach sewing. Mrs Gillis was later appointed assistant teacher to allow Mr Giles to devote more time to the supplementary classes. A very good teacher the board resolved to get from a very satisfactory testimonial for his two year service. The aforementioned Angus MacLeod and Donald MacRae went to Sutherland Technical School from Fanagmore during this time in 1904. Mr Henry Platt who succeeded Mr. Gillis in 1905 retired in 1910 with a pension of £50 a year from the board. He had previously been head master at Oldshore School. Mr Collin junior who had been assistant teacher at Oldshore was next appointed and remained until 1919 when he left to attend art class in Glasgow. County and parish bursaries were competed for and the school had a good record of success, many pupils continuing their education at Scourie School, Golspie High School and the Sutherland Technical School. The inspectors report for 1913 to 1914 says the instruction in this school is excellent in both its divisions. It is proposed inconsequence to recommend an addition to the normal rate of grant. In 1916 this school is handled with admirable skill and the condition of the instruction at all points reflects high credit on the teacher.

Miss Sutherland followed Mr. Junior from 1919 to 1921. Miss Ross 1921 to 1922, Mrs Thompson who was next appointed left in 1926 to be followed by Mr George Milne who retired in 1932. On his last day at the school on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. of September 1932 his 60th birthday he notes in the log book, “Since October 1926 pupils of the school have gained bursaries in the county bursary competition. In October 1926 the number on the roll was eight, it is now 7, the maximum enrolment for same being 12.”

Miss Alexina Matheson was appointed in 1932 and when she left in 1940 the school was reduced to the status of a side school and again came under the supervision of Scourie head teacher. During the war years there was a succession of teachers who stayed for varying periods. Miss Mary MacAskill a former pupil was appointed in 1945 and remained until she retired in 1964. The role which had reached a peak of thirty two about 1911 had fallen to seven in 1932 rose to thirteen in the 1950s to 1960. But was now reduced to six. Fanagmore School was closed and the pupils transferred to Scourie. The school house which Mr Gaskell did not occupy having her own house had been sold some years previously. When school meals were first served on the 14<sup>th</sup> of March 1956 Mrs. MacAskill was appointed cook and prepared the meals in her own kitchen. This arrangement continued and till the school was closed. The school was bought by the Church of Scotland and services are held on alternate Sunday evenings.

Robert Mackay author of the *Book of Mackay* taught in the school near the church in Badcall in 1783.

### **Oldshoremore School**

To begin with the children of Ardmore school did not qualify for a school so the parents built their own school with their own money. The people were all said to have belonged to the Free Church so this must have been after the disruption of 1843. The Free Church Ladies Highland Association sent students to teach at Ardmore during the summer.

The first school erected in Oldshore was built by the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge. The church school at Badcall Inchar was built in 1846 at a total cost of £315 .17 shillings and 6d and consisted of a classroom and a room and kitchen for a dwelling house for the teacher. The teachers were in 1846 Mr John Cameron, 1847 Mr John Jack, 1849 Mr Alex MacKellar.

### **Kinlochbervie First School**

Mr Samuel grant taught at the first school built on the shore of Badcall Inchard while some of the pupils walked to school others were conveyed by boat from Achlyness and Rhimhichie. When the road to Kinlochbervie was made a new school was built. The old school was converted into a store room by covering the walls and floor with tin foil. The building was then used to store large quantities of meal taken by ship from Caithness.

### **Achfary Primary School**

The school was housed in part of the Village Hall and was renovated to include a new office, staff room. On Thursday 15 December 2016, The Highland Council resolved to discontinue the provision of education at Achfary Primary School, which has been mothballed since the summer of 2012, re-assigning the school's catchment area to that of Scourie Primary School.

### **Farr Secondary School<sup>43</sup>**

Farr High School is located in the village of Bettyhill and serves the local parishes of Melvich, Farr, Altnaharra and Tongue. Our school catchment area is vast, covering 531 square miles. Opened in May 1964, Farr is a non-denominational secondary school with a current role of around 90 pupils. There are many challenges and opportunities attached to living in such a remote and rural location, which we feel make our school very special. We are proud of our location and take advantage of the opportunities it offers wherever possible. Farr is part of the North Coast Campus which was formed in 2017 and brings together the High School and our three local primary schools under one management structure. While part of the campus, Farr High School continues to maintain its own unique identity and is a core part of the local community.

Farr High School has a range of partners, whose input into school life is greatly valued. These range from the Pupil Support Worker to our Music Tutors and local STEM Ambassadors. Some of our partnerships within the wider community allow us opportunities to deliver areas of the curriculum and wider skills for Learning, Life and Work. Curricular areas that have benefited from these links in the past include are Skills for Work Courses in Rural Skills, Enterprise and Employability and Early Education. Some former pupils have been inspired through their contact with our partners in the community to go on and study courses in the fields of agriculture, game keeping or childcare after leaving school.

Delight at prospect of new classrooms for Farr High School after existing buildings condemned, By Philip Murray Published 10 June 2021.

*Two of Farr High School's existing Modular classroom buildings have been condemned, including the hut which used to house its music department, which has been off limits since September due to mold on the walls as well as problems with damp affecting the floor, and instruments and equipment.*

*The loss of access to the building, and use of less suitable sites elsewhere in the school grounds, sparked concerns – and even prompted discussion at meetings of Bettyhill, Strathnaver and Altnaharra Community Council. But those frustrations may finally be nearing their end, after Highland Council submitted plans for two replacement modular buildings within the school grounds.*

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<sup>43</sup> From the school websites

*Jim Johnston, who as well as being a member of the community council is also the school's former head teacher, was among those to voice the earlier concerns. And he is delighted that action is finally being taken.*

*He said: "Bettyhill, Strathnaver and Altnaharra Community Council was pleased to hear at their May meeting last week that an application had been lodged for the erection of a double demountable unit at Farr High School to replace the one which was found defective some considerable time ago.*

*"We hope that building work will soon be under way and that the replacement accommodation will be fully fit for purpose."*

*Under the new plans, two existing modular units, immediately to the north of the main school building, will be demolished, and two replacements will be erected – one immediately to the south of the main building and the other next to another MOD ular building to the east. Each of the new buildings would cover an area of roughly 162 square metres. One would contain two general classrooms, as well as toilet facilities, foyer, and storage room.*

*While the other would feature another general classroom, as well as a dedicated music room with access to three dedicated performance rooms. This building would also include a meeting room, as well as toilets, foyer, and storage space.*

*The schools' current head teacher, Katherine Wood, has praised parents and the council for their support while a solution was sought.*

*She said: "We are delighted that we will soon have new classrooms at our school and are very grateful to our parents and to Highland Council for their help and support in securing these for us.*

*"Our children and staff are very much looking forwards to having the space and facilities that we so badly need."*

#### **Farr School Board Minute, 16th May 1876<sup>44</sup>**

A petition from the Shepherds on Skelpick Farm was laid before the Board praying the Board to make some provision for having their children educated as the distance from the Farr Parish School was, they consider, too great, the Board having talked this matter over now resolve to postpone this decision until a future meeting, as the question is one of considerable difficulty, and at the same time important in both an educational and pecuniary aspect.

Note from researcher: By 1878 The Farr School Board have improved access to elementary schooling in the parish to a considerable degree by building new schoolhouses in Strathy and Kirtomy and such. There had been much discussion about the fact that the first attempt at a larger school in Kirtomy Schoolhouse was a wooden building. There is persistent mention in the Minutes of this leaking and being, in general, rather unsatisfactory. For a time the Board try to improve the lot of the scholars in the Strath of Naver area through having summer schooling at a specific school and providing an itinerant teacher for the winter months. This teacher went house to house, staying with families because the weather and the short days made it impossible for the children to walk the required distances to school.

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<sup>44</sup> From research during Moving Times and Telling Tales project.

## **Farr School Board Minute, 2nd October 1878<sup>45</sup>**

Mr. Purves considers that if the wooden house presently in use at Kirtomy was cut in two it might be suitable for Skelpick and Rhifail children if fitted up on the march of the two farms while the other half could be put up to suit the Grubeg & other children between Grubeg & Skail etc. The Board are unanimous in considering this the best arrangement under existing circumstances and resolve upon carrying it out as soon as the wooden house is available.

Suffice to say that this is not the end of the saga of getting schooling into this or any other of the remotes straths and glens. By April 1879 'Board resolve to build a small schoolhouse at Scail for Rhifail, Scail, Inchlampie and Syre. Similar at Dalhalvaig for Dalharold (?), Achness and Grubeg. Little schoolhouse at Altnaharra can continue to serve that district. Can accommodate 15 children at each of these locations – considered sufficient.'

## **Farr Primary School<sup>46</sup>**

Farr Primary School and Nursery comprises one pre-school nursery class and two primary classes. We have one P1–3 class and one Primary 4–7 class. Pupils and staff have access to the school gymnasium, lunch hall, music room, an ICT suite, an extensive playing field, all-weather pitch, trim trail and school garden, all of which are extremely valuable resources which help aid and support the teaching and learning for pupils. The primary school shares a campus with Farr High School. We have a good relationship with Farr High School which enhances opportunities, knowledge and resources for all staff and pupils. Children who join our nursery at 3 years of age complete their primary education and transfer smoothly to their secondary education.

## **Melvich Primary School**

Melvich Primary School and Early Learning Centre comprises of three classrooms: Early Level Class, First Level Class and Second Level Class. Pupils and staff have access to the school hall, dining area and Rainbow Room (an additional general purpose learning room). We work hard to ensure there is a good transition for nursery pupils into primary, between lower and upper primary and for pupils in the upper primary who are moving onto Melvich High School, which is the secondary school our pupils will attend. The staff at Melvich Primary School work hard to provide a happy and safe environment for our pupils. It is the aim of the school to meet not only the children's educational needs but also their social and emotional needs. Our staff provide a motivating and stimulating curriculum which provides pupils with the skills and knowledge they need to become responsible citizens of the future. All pupils are expected to work hard, respect each other, the staff and the school environment. We have a positive discipline policy which was produced by staff, pupils and with the agreement of parents. We enjoy a very positive partnership between home, school and the wider community and the school is well supported by an active Parent Council. There are currently 31 pupils in P1-7 with a further 8 pupils in the Nursery. The school has three teaching staff, one PSA, two Early Years Practitioners and a Nursery Support Worker. Campus Melvich is part of the North Coast 3-18 Campus, along with Tongue and Farr Primary Schools and Farr Secondary School. As such, pupils are able to access a range of experiences and receive specialist teaching input from a number of specialist staff. We are currently working on developing our campus vision and identity. While part of the campus, Melvich Primary School continues to maintain its own unique identity and is a core part of the local community

## **Tongue Primary School**

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<sup>45</sup> From research during Moving Times and Telling Tales project.

<sup>46</sup> From the school websites

Tongue Primary School comprises two primary classes. We currently have one P1-2 class & one Primary 3–5 class. At present we have no pupils in P6 or P7. Pupils and staff have access to the school hall/lunch hall, our multi-purpose ‘middle room’, extensive grounds and Tongue village hall, all of which are extremely valuable resources which help aid and support the teaching and learning for pupils.

### Campus

Tongue Primary is part of the North Coast 3-18 Campus, along with Farr and Melvich Primary Schools and Farr Secondary School. As such, pupils are able to access a range of experiences and receive teaching input from a number of specialist staff. We continue to work on developing our cluster vision and identity. While part of the cluster, Tongue Primary School continues to maintain its own unique identity and it is a core part of the local community.

Primary Schools – source The Highland Council 2008 - 09

Session 2008 - 2009	TOTAL Roll figure							TOTAL
	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	
Achfary	0	0	0	0	2	1	2	5
Altnaharra	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	3
Durness	6	4	2	4	3	1	5	25
Farr, Suth	3	0	3	4	5	5	6	26
Kinlochbervie	5	5	3	3	5	7	6	34
Melvich	1	6	1	4	3	2	3	20
Scourie	5	4	6	2	3	1	1	22
Tongue	4	4	3	2	4	5	6	28

## Side Schools in Mackay Country

From the Moving Times Project

The Highland Archive Centre has provided invaluable support and access to School Board Minutes, County Council records and school log books. The National Library of Scotland holds The Sutherland Estate papers which are an importance source for the history of Sutherland Technical School.

At their meeting of 7th November 1873, Farr School Board discussed this and set their fees:

*“Fees – The Board having taken into consideration the matter of school fees as adopted by them at their meeting of 5th June last, are of the opinion they are struck too low, and they hereby agree to cancel that part of their minute and substitute the following rates: 1. For simple Elementary branches of Reading, Writing & Arithmetic 1/6 per quarter 2. For Elementary branches with Rudimentary Grammar, History & Geography 3/- per quarter 3. For the foregoing with Mathematics, Latin & other higher branches 4/- per quarter – all payable quarterly in advance.”*

In 1890, elementary schooling in Scotland became free. In rural Mackay Country the task of creating access to elementary education for all children was extremely difficult since the population was so scattered. Particular schools from amongst those already in existence were selected by each Board to be the designated Public Schools. These key schools delivered elementary education, oversaw educational attainment in the growing number of side schools and provided the classic ‘parish’ school liberal education for a smaller number of pupils aiming to sit the University entrance exams. Side schools already existed in some places but more of them were needed to provide elementary education in the really remote straths and glens for shepherds’ families.

Often staffed by pupil teachers or unqualified staff who are overseen by qualified staff in the main school, side schools were used when there were a number of children in a remote part. These were usually wooden and corrugated iron huts. There have been side schools at Cape Wrath, Laid and in the 1940s at Rhigolter for the children of the shepherd living at Carbreck and Rhigolter. In the winter months in the early years of this provision in areas like Strath Naver and Altnaharra an itinerant teacher went from house to house, boarding with each family for a few days since it was impossible for children to walk the long distances to school in the short winter days in bad weather conditions.

There are comparatively few records of these simple, temporary places of education, partly because paper was regarded as a luxury and children's work was undertaken on slates, erased by the end of the school-day. The Mackay Country project Moving Times looked at schooling in Mackay Country and some of the following is extracted from the work carried out. In the unpublished book Research Matters from the project Dr. Issie McPhail details further information gathered from interviews.

## Achiemore



IMAGE 141 SIDE SCHOOL AT ACHIEMORE CAPE WRATH BEFORE CLOSURE CIRCA 1940

The side school at Cape Wrath was in a very isolated area, a wee tin shack it was on Dail brae. Around 1935 there were ten children at the school which was situated at Achiemore. The children had to go over to Durness to sit their exams and for their Christmas Party. It was said at the time that the school was the most isolated on the mainland of Great Britain. This small school served the households on the ‘Cape side’ across the Kyle of Durness from Keoldale. Several shepherding families

lived there. If you have made the journey to Cape Wrath you will have passed Achiemore on your way there. The school closed in 1947.

This Side School operated under the auspices of the school in Durness, educating a handful of pre-twelve year olds from lighthouse, signal station and farming families. The foundations of the old Side school, may be identified next to the first military guard post. After 1947 children were educated in Durness through the week; they returned across the Kyle at weekends. The Achiemore Side School was outlived by a second at Kearvaig, which itself was closed in 1950.

## Achlyness



IMAGE 142 SIDE SCHOOL AT ACHLYNESS

This school still stands and was used as a community building in living memory. This building, made of corrugated metal, was once a side school at Achlyness. Achlyness is a crofting township stretched out at the head of Loch Inchard near Rhiconich in Sutherland. In 1940 there were 6 pupils on the school roll.

The following extract is from the Am Baile schools competition in 2003. It was written by a pupil, Ruarigh, of Kinlochbervie Primary School.



*“Once or twice a year a teacher from one of the larger schools in the area (Oldshore or Inshegra) came to look at the children's work. All of the school work was done on slates with chalk. Only the best work was written out on paper which was seen as a luxury. So when the teachers came round, there could not be much work to look at. There was no transport to the side schools and the children never really met children from other Side Schools. The pupils also had to carry peat to school each day to keep the fire going in the classroom. When local roads improved, transport to schools was easier. The arrival of electric power in 1955 and improved transport led to the Side Schools closing. Achlyness Side School today is still in reasonable condition. There can't be many Side Schools left in Sutherland. Being close to the main road, I think Archlyness Side School would make a good museum of Education.”*

Extracts from the Log Book

- 1<sup>st</sup>. April 1939. Reopened today but no children attended. Terribly stormy weather. Rain has been entering by windows and ceiling with result that floor and desks are ‘soaking’.
- 17<sup>th</sup>. September 1939 School closed – ‘Sale Day’.
- 4<sup>th</sup>. October 1939. Weekly attendance 98%. Fires have been lit this week and the stove, blackboard and windows have been repaired.
- 18<sup>th</sup>. October 1939. Slates, pencils and rubbers have arrived from Messrs. R. M. Cameron.
- 14<sup>th</sup>. April 1941. Children were today inoculated against diphtheria by Dr. Hunter.
- 26<sup>th</sup>. November 1941. Average weekly attendance 73.3%. Cocoa and sugar supplied for all pupils from today by Education Authority.
- 26<sup>th</sup>. February 1941. Only three pupils present today as there is no fire, all the coal being now finished. Temp 38 degrees.

Extract from an interview during Moving Times project

*“People from New Zealand and from Canada and from different places who come to the door asking if I know anything about it, and they want to take pictures of it, because their descendants, their people, went to school there. I think, before that, somebody said to me that there used to be a school away over between Rhivichie and Achlyness, but I haven't been able to find any proof of that. But I have been told that there was one, run by a church. I think it would have been just a building, but I haven't actually found the building.”*

*“It was used as a house after it was a school. I think the school closed – it said the log-book was from 1920 to 1950... but I didn't get past 1944. And it says the school was closed from January 14<sup>th</sup> to April 20<sup>th</sup>. 1944, and then the April 25<sup>th</sup>. These schools were used almost like a village hall as well, for each little community.”*

## **Ardmore**

Observations from an interview

This is the archive records at Ardmore – four pupils absent due to relative's death – and Wilhelmina Campbell is the teacher. It's all changes – Jessie Corbett, then the Millers – and I think there's a photograph of that lady to do with something else in the archives. But this one – it's taken in 1945 and then, you see, December – ‘the children are attending a treat in Achlyness.’ Now, they must have had a joint Christmas party in Ardmore.

There was one bit when they were trying to improve the road to Ardmore. And there must have been something in a newspaper because the councilors were there and a photographer was there to take the photograph of this one boy and the schoolteacher. And I think – I'm not sure I remember whether it would be – I know that Kenny MacLeod, who lived in Oldshoremore, his brother had the Rhiconich Hotel, Johnnie MacLeod had the Rhiconich Hotel now Kenny was,

he was a local councilor. So he may have been the councilor who was there? There was a poem written, and it said something about, 'At last we'll see a road to Ardmore'. This poem, about the road to Ardmore, and it's about the Councilor and the work that he had done to try and get this road out to Ardmore.



IMAGE 143 ARDMORE SIDE SCHOOL

#### Ardmore School Log Book – extracts

- 8<sup>th</sup>. September 1938. Mr. Brannen, Architect, called at the school after hours yesterday evening and looked at the spot where they propose the new school to be erected.
- 31<sup>st</sup>. October 1938. The work on the new school has commenced today.
- 2<sup>nd</sup>. December 1938. The attendance is 80% this week. We are now in the new building but it has not been quite finished yet.
- 5<sup>th</sup>. January 1939. School roll is 8.
- 5<sup>th</sup>. September 1939. Owing to the international situation all schools have orders to close for a week. Note from researcher when it reopened a week later the attendance was down to 33.3% compared to 85% as normal. It went back up by end of month.
- 17<sup>th</sup>. October 1939. Finished duty in this school today. J. Corbett.

Note from researcher – Replaced by A. Millar who then gets leave to get married and is replaced for 3 days by his sister Edina Millar. A. Millar was replaced by Margaret MacLeod 11<sup>th</sup>. March 1940. She was replaced by Minnie MacDonald 9<sup>th</sup>. Jan 1941.

- 7<sup>th</sup>. January 1941. I have been absent three days this week on account of a severe snow storm. I set off for school every day but was forced to give up the attempt on each occasion.

- 25<sup>th</sup>. April 1941. On 23<sup>rd</sup>. last I killed an adder or serpent on my way home from school. The next day I learned that none had been seen in the district for many years, and none of the pupils had ever seen one. Consequently I brought it into school to preserve it in methylated spirits.
- 15<sup>th</sup>. September 1941. School closes tomorrow on account of the annual sale. Miss MacKenzie (Winnie) attends school daily to learn the routine of the work with a view to carrying on after Oct 15<sup>th</sup> as teacher.

The first regular school was opened in Oldshore by the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge. A Church or Assembly School was subsequently erected on the shore at Badcall Inchard. When the road from Rhiconich to Oldshore was constructed, a new school was erected at the roadside, which was meant to serve the whole district from Achlyness to Kinlochbervie. It consisted of one large class-room and a room and kitchen for a dwelling house. A large garden was laid out and walled round for the use of the teacher. That was in 1846.

The people of the parish were always anxious to give their children the benefits of such education as they could get at that time. The Achrisgill School by the riverside was transferred to Inshegra, where a school and dwelling house were built on the site on which the present school stands. When the Scotch Education Act came into force, the Free Church handed over all her schools throughout the country as a gift to the nation.

## Hope

When this Side School was created the estate insisted that it should be out of sight of the Lodge. The late Joseph Mackay, Melness, taught in this school in Strath More. Charlie Mackay attended school there at that time. By 1948 the school roll has suddenly dropped to just two pupils and was at one point closed all together but reopened again after a time. The school log indicates how volatile the school roll can be in this kind of location.

Extracts from the School Log Book

- 7<sup>th</sup>. March 1927. Class has first signs of epidemic “whooping cough”. Nurse Petter visited Arnaboll. Dr. Irvine after examining Morrison’s & Gunn’s reported whooping cough, first stages. Gave line to effect six pupils unfit to attend school. I wired Mr. Petter, Durness & Dr Macrae, the School Med Officer.
- 18<sup>th</sup>. March 1927. Leave of absence granted till April 4<sup>th</sup> owing to poor attendance and presence of cough as certified by local doctor on examination. Attendance only two.
- 8<sup>th</sup>. April 1927. School reopened. Attendance still 20%. Others not fit to attend. I disinfected school by sulphur fuming and let Clerk S.MC know of affairs. I filled in Qualifying Exam Papers for candidates.
- 24<sup>th</sup>. June 1927. Euphemia Gunn admitted to school in infant dept. 5 yrs. Two pupils now in Infants. Number of pupils in school now thirteen; seven boys, six girls. Accommodation compressed.
- 22<sup>nd</sup>. July 1927. I gave Exam to seniors and juniors in all subjects for report cards. Eight attendances. No. of openings = 384 Possible No = 400 - 9x = 400 - 18 = 382. One boy Hugh Mackay was offered a Sutherland Technical School Scholarship – but does not accept.
- July 22<sup>nd</sup>. – Sept 19th: Summer Vacation.
- 30<sup>th</sup>. September 1927. HMIS Report on Hope Side School to hand. He expresses himself in the following words. “The roll in this school now amounts to thirteen and the Authority has done well in placing a trained teacher in charge. The work seems to be progressing satisfactorily.”

- 25<sup>th</sup>. May 1928. This week attendance was 90%. The school was closed Thursday 24<sup>th</sup>. May for Empire Day. The total number of pupils = 8. Two pupils, Hugh Mackay (Jun) and Margaret A. Mackay left the school on Friday 25<sup>th</sup>. As parents are leaving the district, they are transferred to Melness P.S.
- 7<sup>th</sup>. July 1928. I noticed decision of Education Authority with regard to Side Schools with certified teacher. Head teachers of Public Schools not now supposed to examine side school where a certified teacher is appointed.
- 5<sup>th</sup>. October 1928. Two pupils absent this week for hay making. I revised elementary arithmetic with the qualifying.
- 12<sup>th</sup>. October 1928. One new pupil admitted Jessie Gow aged 5 years. I gave only very easy work for first week e.g. Counting beads and work with sticks, plasticine etc. This week school closed Thursday and Friday for potato lifting. School reopened Oct 15<sup>th</sup>. Eight pupils present.
- 26<sup>th</sup>. October 1928. I started class with needlework. I gave the boys simple tacking, hemming stitch, on a white seam. To the girls I gave a handkerchief, to highers a whole garment e.g. sewing bag. Nightdress base.
- 28<sup>th</sup>. January 1929. This week's attendance was broken by the absence of youngest pupil. With the help of the children we cleaned the school chimney as stove had been giving trouble. The weather continued frosty with snow showers. I gave more practice in arithmetic to all classes.

### Skelpick



IMAGE 144 SKELPICK SIDE SCHOOL

The story of how this school came about is a fascinating one. It gives us very particular insight into how families in the Naver area gradually and very actively asserted their right to access to elementary education for their children in the wake of the 1872 Education Act.

On account of ‘the Crofters Wars’ – a struggle over land rights – the 1880’s are known as an historic period in the Highlands when ordinary people were increasingly well informed about the law, their rights, the fight for the right to vote for the many to whom it was still denied and new means of organising and mounting rural protest. In the example of Skelpick Side School what we see is that same awareness a decade earlier amongst the shepherd families on the Skelpick Farm and Estate. The new elected School Boards were made up of the ministers from the Free Church and the Church of Scotland alongside the landlord, or more usually, his representative The Factor for Sutherland Estates and others of a similar social position in possession or rental of the large farms and estates in the area. It is therefore no small matter, as an employee in tied housing, to repeatedly petition the Farr School Board for a school house and teacher as the Skelpick Shepherds did. In due course they also petitioned The Scotch Education Department, in Whitehall, London – who then also wrote to the Farr School Board enquiring after an account of the state of play. This of course is a good way to apply further pressure and attention to the School Board locally since they are accountable for their delivery and part of their funds to The Scotch Education Department.

Actual delivery of schooling in Skelpick was carried out, over the generations, in a variety of premises, including the tack Room at The Farm at one point. The side school which we can see there today ran on into the 1940s. Margaret Mackay, who is pictured in front of it, attended this school. Here we provide a few quotes from The Farr School Board Minute Book indicating a little about the progress they were making on improving school provision in the parish in their early years – and giving an insight into how the Skelpick shepherds began to assert their rights.

### **Eriboll**

There was some sort of wooden building at Eriboll somewhere between Eriboll church and Kempie. There may at different times been different sites and again rooms in houses used. The vestry in Eriboll church was as used as a school. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century a place now known as Kempy bay (Camas an Dun) there is house foundations which can be seen and records show a school master living there.



IMAGE 145 ERIBOLL SIDE SCHOOL CIRCA 1903 (ABOVE KEMPY) FROM STRATHNAVER MUSEUM

July 1883 - Rev James Ross Free Church Minister, Durness

*There is a side school to Loch Eriboll, which is taught by a pupil teacher from Durness School. He is three months on this side of the Loch, and three months on the other.*

**Northern Times November 7, 1907**

*Through the kindness and benevolence of the Strathnaver Fairy Circle, this school was quite en fete on the 25<sup>th</sup>. October, the anniversary of the Battle of Balaclava. Ample provision was made by the local caterer to carry out the wishes of the Fairies, with the result that the children were entertained to a sumptuous treat. Mrs Clarke, Eriboll House, graced by her presence and in a neat little speech delighted the children by emphasising upon the goodness of Fairies in general but on the Strathnaver ones in particular. She also handed the prizes to the successful winners who gave in essays last year. Other local ladies, Mrs Mackay, Cottage; Mrs Clarke, Kempy; Miss Mackay and Miss Clarke, kindly assisted in making the entertainment as enjoyable as possible. Amid cheer after cheer for the Fairies, the children came away in the greatest of glee and will for long cherish warm recollections of the good Fairies. The people of Eriboll extend to Mr Mead Sutherland their warm appreciation for his kindness.*

**Education Melness and Tongue<sup>47</sup>**



IMAGE 146 MELNESS SCHOOL, CIRCA 1910 IMAGE FROM STRATHNAVER MUSEUM

Apart from the main schools the outskirts of the village had what was known as side schools. In Tongue there was a side school at Poole, Lettemore, Loyal and also Ribigill. The necessities for a side school was occasioned when the families of shepherds game keepers and people in outlying places became school age. Facilities were not available for the transportation of children in those days so the only alternative was to build a shed and fit it out as a school. The teacher was uncertified and in the case of Poole side school travelled to and from school by

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<sup>47</sup> This is information submitted by Christine Mackay in 1987 to a government sponsored project.

mail bus, the teacher cycled to Ribigill side school from Tongue. in Melness the earliest school mentioned was at lower Talmine part of the site and building was used in later years as a barn and is now a garage towards the latter half of the last century the oldest part of the old Melness school was used both as a church and school it was eventually extended and used solely as a school before the extension the all free church the ruins are close to the present Church of Scotland was used as a school when there was difficulty in accommodating some classes. Prior to the Second World War there were four side schools attached to Melness school; Dhenue, Hope, Kinbol and Strathmore. During the war a large number of side schools were closed and transport arranged to attend the central school, the alternative was to give lodgings allowance to enable them to attend school. during the early years of the century there were well over 100 pupils attending Melness school but the effects of the two world wars and most of all depopulation as a result of unemployment the numbers dropped dramatically until in 1973 with one teacher and the Kyle of Tongue crossing and new schools built in Tongue it was decided to close the Melness school and transport the pupils to Tongue. This was done and has been very successful. during the days of the qualifying class and later the 11 plus pupils who were capable of taking an academic course had to leave home at the early age of 11 or 12 and go to lodgings and Golspie to continue their studies at Golspie secondary school. a bursary was given to each people who qualified but it only made a small proportion of the expenses involved there were no midterm or weekend visits home with the result that parents in the north and West saw very little of their children from the age of 11 onwards except at holiday times and if they progressed favorably and went on to university they grew into men and women without having had a parent's guidance during adolescence also in gospel was the Sutherland Technical College which accommodated around 60 pupils and was run on boarding school lines

In later years the school was built Dornoch and hostels to accommodate the pupils from the north and West. Dornoch Academy was expected to be the principal school for the county however after much controversy it was decided to have Golspie high school built with a hostel accommodation. The rigid discipline of the 30s forties and 50s so far as allowing pupils home was concerned had been relaxed and pupils could enjoy their weekends at home. a sequence of events took place in the Tongue and Farr area which enabled students who normally would have to go to Golspie to continue their education with the completion of Farr secondary school which enabled pupils to go home every night. The two main factors which made this possible was the upgrading of Farr School to four year secondary and from the Melness point of view the Kyle Bridge came into its own again by shortening the journey making it possible and practicable to transport the children morning and night to and from Bettyhill.

#### **Side School Teacher of the Early 1940s<sup>48</sup>**

Mrs Angus Mackenzie who was aside school teacher at Glendhu recalls leaving Badcall at 5:30 AM Monday morning to cycle to Kylestrome and then along the footpath to Glendhu to open the school, a bedroom in the house by 9:00 AM. She recalls and some places you could not cycle so there you had to push your bike. Mrs McKenzie lived as one of the family and weather permitting she returned to her home for one night midweek. The head teacher from Scourie visited Glendhu and all other side schools periodically to inspect the work and sometimes was accompanied by a school inspector.

The following sites schools have been associated with Scourie School: Achfary, Stack, Altauryrue, Lochmore, Kinloch, Badnabay, Fanagmore, Duartbeg, Kylestrome, Glendhu and Glencoul.

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<sup>48</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

About 80 years ago a lady Miss Mielina Matheson who had gained a certificate of merit from Scourie School taught at the side school at Kinloch walking there on Monday morning, 18 miles, and home again on the Friday. It is believed that she had never been as far as Lairg or seen the Kylesku ferry.



## Balnakeil



IMAGE 147 BALNAKEIL

Balnakeil, Bailenacille, Balnakill; various connotations all signify with the church, from the Gaelic `Baile na cille` Village or Place of the Church, settlement of the church, church town or ground of the church. Balnakeil's first appearance in the documentary record is between 1223 and 1245, when Gilbert, Bishop of Caithness, assigned it the task of supplying light and incense for the cathedral church at Dornoch (Carter 1886, 25). The Bishop of Caithness had his summer residence at Balnakeil through the medieval period and also is thought to have owned Castle Varrich on the Kyle of Tongue (Bangor-Jones 2000, 37), said to have been used as a stopover while he was in transit to Balnakeil. He used the limestone-based grasslands surrounding Durness as summer grazing for his flocks. A description of the Reay estate by a valuator, dated 1797, stated that

*“Durness is a dry pretty spot; the soil sandy, well peopled for its extent. It lies upon a bed of limestone which is here found in the greatest abundance. It is considered the best grass and pasture ground in the north of Scotland, and it was of old the bishop of Caithness shieling or pasture farm” (quoted in MacKay 1906, 36). The bishops house is presumably the Castle of Durinas referred to by Sir Robert Gordon in 1630 as having stood on the site. It was allegedly demolished in 1725 for the construction of Balnakeil House, although the existing structure may have medieval elements. At that time, the presence of a massive wall, demolished for the new building, was noted; it was thought to be the remains of an old monastery (Macfarlane 1906). The church appears to have retained ownership of a significant proportion of Durness Parish until the Reformation. After the Reformation, church lands in Durness passed to the earls of Sutherland, and the Mackays were confirmed as their feudal vassals.”*

Until the improvements in agriculture that led to the clearances Balnakeil was the main township of the parish.

## Balnakeil Church



IMAGE 148 BALNAKEIL CHURCH

Sited at the western end of Balnakeil Bay is the ruins of an old church. The remains of a post-Reformation parish church and burial ground, which served the parish of Durness. This parish included Eddrachillis and Tongue parishes until 1724. The monument was originally scheduled in 1938. Founded in 722 by St. Maelrubha, the present building dates from 1619 built on the site of the early mediaeval building. It was extended in 1690 and remodelled in the 1720's. Within the church is the grave of a notorious villain Donald MacMhurchaidh or MacLeod, who died in 1623. In the graveyard can be seen several interesting 18th and 19th gravestones. The most notable monument is that to Rob Donn, who was a great Gaelic poet of the 18th century.

The old church stands on the site of one of the first Christian establishments and one of the oldest Culdee settlements in Sutherland. Culdees were missionaries from Iona. A definite place of worship since the 12th century for there is records in the Vatican archives that proves the church contributed to the third crusade in 1190. It is also on record that the church of Balnakeil was responsible for supplying oil and incense to Dornoch Cathedral from 1222 to 1245 during the episcopate of Saint Gilbert, Bishop Gilbert de Moravia. (Primary source for this information is allusive but is stated in many resources.)

It is likely that a Celtic church existed on this site for hundreds of years before Saint Gilbert. Tradition relates the ruins of the present church go back to 1619 when it was built on the ruins of an earlier one. In turn, possibly on an even earlier cell of Saint Maelrubha, the Red Priest as early as the 8th century. Saint Maelrubha of Applecross travelled north after evangelising most of Sutherland from Lairg. It is evident that the church at Balnakeil is very ancient and the three great persuasions, the Celtic, Roman Catholic and Protestant religions must have worshiped

there. It remained in use until about 1814. The medieval references to a church at Durness together with the east, west alignment of the main body of the church suggests that the floor plan, and perhaps much of the fabric of the church, dates to the medieval period. It has been reported that a possible former, circular enclosing bank of the churchyard is visible on aerial photographs. However, the identification of this feature has not been confirmed.

The church is a T-plan with a gabled belfry on the east gable. The remains stand to the wall-head with intact crow-stepped gables. The walls are of rubble masonry being 0.8m thick and averaging 2.5 meters in height. Externally, the nave measures about 14 meters by 6 meters and the aisle about 8 meters by 6 meters. The doorway through the east gable has a moulded surround and a gallery door above. The entrance to the north aisle has moulded jambs and worn date (16...) on lintel. The aisle is lit by a 4-light window with a central mullion dividing 2 small pointed headed windows, the space between the two pointed headed lights has been left solid.

The aisle was added in 1692. The church is L shaped and small. The nave measures seven metres by four point five metres and could not have accommodated more than a hundred of a congregation. When the church was obedient to the Roman Catholic authority, the High Altar was placed under the arched window at the east end of the chancel.

An ancient stone font used to lie in the chancel called the font of the Red Priest and it is considered that this was the font used by Maelrubha to baptise his Pictish converts. The font disappeared without trace around 1984. The bell tower is on the south east corner of the building and was probably erected when the church was reconstructed in 1619. A sundial on the belfry casts quite an accurate shadow. In mid-1998 a report was made to Historic Scotland regarding a noticeable leaning of this wall into the church.

Beside the tomb of Domhnall MacMhurchaidh inside the church lies a hollowed stone that was split in two. Local folklore states that Maelrubha's famous divining pearl was supposed to have rested on the stone. Anyone who could retain possession of the pearl for twenty four hours could have any wish desired. There were many who took the pearl but it was always back in the bowl before sunrise the following morning. The tale describes that the priests from Balnakeil ran a lucrative business with the pearl. They would sell it to merchants and sailors who were passing, certain in the knowledge that it would be back in the bowl the same day. One story tells of an Irish captain whose ship was anchored in Balnakeil Bay, met the priests and when told about the mystical pearl being brought from Ireland by Maelrubha was convinced of its magical properties. He had the pearl encased in a golden circlet from which it could not escape. The next morning the stone in Balnakeil Church was found lying split in two! Actually, the stone bowl was a knocking stone which was used to grind corn.

The walled cemetery is the present burial ground where ancestors for respective generations with families currently residing in Durness are laid to rest. The wall is kept in a good state of repair and periodic renovation work has been carried out. The most recent substantial repairs around 1980. At the entrance to the cemetery, the pillars at the gate bear the date 1857. There are a number of interesting 18th and 19th century gravestones. The most prominent is the large stone to the Anderson's of Keoldale. Around 1980, an extension was added to the cemetery.

In 1938, a report was made on recommendations for the preservation of Balnakeil Church. The building was reported to be roofless though at that time a lean to roof in the south west corner protected plants belonging to the County Council. The doors and windows opening in the south wall were built up and the whole building partly overgrown with ivy. Urgent treatment of the general condition of the building was recommended. The ivy to be carefully removed from the masonry. All the fractures were to be cleaned out and consolidated. The loose and overgrown stones forming the wall tops to be re-bedded and growth removed. The upper surfaces to be

pointed with lime and mortar and an additional waterproofing compound. The voids in the masonry were to be cleaned and grouted. The north gable was considered to be dangerous, all the crow-steps had been removed and the settings were loose. These were carefully secured in position so as not to disturb the original arrangement. To prevent further collapse and deterioration urgent work was estimated to cost fifty pounds. Additional recommendations included removal of the lean to for greater access and the cleaning of all debris from the floor area to expose the stone slabs. Clear out all decayed mortar, re-point and consolidate. Remove the stone infilling from the two windows and doors in the south wall. It was also suggested that the modern pointing on the east gable and belfry be removed and re pointed with lime mortar, as it was unsightly. The west gable also needed to be re-pointed and consolidated with the added suggestion that the three entrances be fitted with simple wrought iron gates. The cost of this additional work was estimated to be one hundred and fifty pounds. Around 1983 there was renovation work carried out on the steps descending into the church from the main doorway and the addition of a handrail.

An interesting story is related about the last bell that hung in the Balnakeil church north belfry. A brigantine, the Anna, carrying a cargo of timber from Russia came into Balnakeil Bay sheltering from a Pharaoh storm and was stranded at spring tides. As the weather was deteriorating, the master was anxious to get away so the local women dug a channel in the sand through which the vessel was floated to deeper waters. The master presented the ship's bell as a token of gratitude for assistance to the women of Durness. The bell was subsequently transferred to another church built in Durine and is in Durness to the present day. The bell does not bare the same name as the ship as the bell was transferred from the Ship William to the Anna.

### **War Memorial**



IMAGE 149 DURNESS WAR MEMORIAL IN BALNAKEIL CEMETERY PRIOR TO MOVING TO THE VILLAGE SQUARE

The Community Council explored the prospect of restoring and relocating the war memorial from Balnakeil cemetery. Proposals were established to have the monument sited in a more central and prominent situation on the square in the village green. The maintenance and upkeep have been forsaken in recent years and finance was available for war memorials to be renovated and positioned where remembrance of those that gave their lives can be evident. The names of thirty-five men who were killed in both world wars are inscribed on a Celtic cross erected by the people of Durness in memory of their noble dead.

After eighty years in Balnakeil Cemetery the district war memorial stood in the churchyard until 1999 when moved to the village square. This provided the focus for the first amnesty day memorial service in the village for many years. On Thursday the 11<sup>th</sup> at just before 11am. Chairman of the Community Council Kenny MacRae started the short ceremony followed by Graham Bruce, session clerk to the Church of Scotland for the parish of Durness, conducting a prayer and leading the congregation in the two minutes silence. Three wreaths were laid. On behalf

of the British Legion Danny Mackay placed the first, representing the community, Jack McPherson the only ex-serviceman serving on the community council, and Sergeant Andy Walker from RAF Tain air traffic controller at Faraid Head on behalf of the services. Piper James Mather played a lament for the fallen of two world wars. A large turnout from all sections of the community including the coastguards and children from the primary school attended. The Celtic cross monument was greatly admired in its new situation and many commented on the hard work and time consuming endeavour made by Francis Keith in cleaning the lettering. There has been a memorial service each year at the monument since.

### **Domhnall MacMhurchaidh**

An engaging fireside tale about the tomb built into the niche on the south wall of Balnakeil Church is said to be the last resting-place of a famous local villain, Donald MacMurdo, known as Domhnall MacMhurchaidh. He raided all and anyone from his den at Helium, on the east side of Eriboll and was responsible for at least eighteen murders. He paid Uisdean Dubh MacKay the second Lord of Reay who was rebuilding the church in 1619 one thousand pounds on condition he was buried in a specially built vault in the church to prevent his enemies from interfering with his remains.

Donald MacMhurchaidh was the Rob Roy of Sutherland. It was to secure his friendship that Hugh Mackay granted him possession of the lands of Westmoin. In those days it was necessary to carry out many plots which would not bear strict investigation, and for such purposes Donald could always be relied upon by his master. He had a very easy conscience, great personal strength, and was a man of unlimited resources. Fact and legend are so mixed in regard to his career that it is impossible now to sift the false from the true; and innumerable stories circulate round his name. In a recess in the wall of the old church at Balnakeil, his stone coffin may yet be seen.

It would appear that he had a presentiment that those whom he had wronged when in life would wreak their vengeance upon his remains, and it was to prevent this that he gave 1000 merks to the Master of Reay, when building the Church, for the purpose of securing within it the right of sepulchre.

This man had two sons, men of giant physique and both with hearts as black as his own. One occasion is related about an encounter with the minister of Durness Alexander Munro. Mr. Munro was detained for some time on pastoral duty in the eastern district of his parish being the guest of Sir Donald Mackay, afterwards the first Lord Reay, whose daughter his son was later to marry. When he left for home his host insisted that in view of the nature of the wildness of the times he should be accompanied by an armed attendant. Coming to the banks of the River Hope the minister deemed this to be a suitable opportunity to wrestle with the soul of Donald MacLeod. The villain was believed to be ending his earthly journey and it might be that before he went to his grave he could be brought to a sense of his sins and need of a saviour and of genuine repentance of faith. At least the minister thought he could but try. When he came to the old mans' cottage he turned in at the door and started to tackle him. Donald however far from proving a subject of grace took deadly offence at being spoken to by the minister in this way and but for the presence of the armed guard from Tongue the worthy minister from Durness might have been Donald's nineteenth victim.

Shortly afterwards the two sons who had been absent at the time of the call returned to their father's house. They were then charged to follow the minister immediately and not to show face again without the heart of the man who so gravely insulted their father. The sons went off in pursuit but as they neared the minister, they were challenged by the armed escort. The story continues that now the sons fearing their father's wrath killed a sheep and removed the heart,

that they pretended to be that of the ministers. The old villain is said to have viewed the heart for some time and said he always knew that Munro's were cowards but never until then knew they had hearts of sheep.

Tradition has it that after some deed of violence more repulsive than previous he became so taunted and enraged by a prediction that his own remains would be thrown into a pit covered with sods and trampled upon by the lowest of god's creatures. To avoid such a fate Donald offered to build the side of the church at his own expense if he were allowed to make a vault in the recess for his own coffin. As already mentioned concerning the church the true fact of the tomb is disputed but is a source of fascination.



IMAGE 150 TOMB OF DOMHNULL MACMHURCHAI DH BALNAKEIL CHURCH

"Donald MacMhurchaidh here lies low  
Was ill to his friend, and worse to his foe  
True to his master in prosperity and woe. DMMC 1623"

Each alternate quarter has an upright hand, a ship in sail, a stag's head and a fish. There is apparently scant evidence to prove this tale. It is thought the south wall was built long before the 1619 restoration. It would appear that the villain's body might have been moved into the wall by the minister of the time, the Rev. Alexander Munro, after his grave in the churchyard had been desecrated by his enemies. Story has it that many of his victims received a much less quiet and dignified burial than he did. He is reputed to have flung them down the sinkhole through which the Alt Smoo plunges into Smoo Caves' second chamber. There are various interpretations and theories about this villain. Periodically the stories are retold in the local press. In October 1998, the Northern Times carried an article and letters to the editor were printed in the preceding editions. The stone in the church reads the name as McMurchey and the debate is not so much about the actions of the man but about his name.

In November 1998 Dr. Malcom Bangor Jones wrote in a letter to the Northern Times *“However spelt and spelling did not matter a great deal in these days this is taken to be a poor rendering of Gaelic Mac Mhurchaidh meaning MacMurdoch or MacMurdo...(His full patronymic was Donald son of Murdo son of big John.) In trying to gain a measure of the man we firstly have to be very careful before we accept a tale no matter how entertaining as fact.*

### **The Canton of Hull**

Within the old cemetery there is a massed grave of the victims of the “Canton”, an emigrant ship which sank with the loss of all lives off Faraid Head in 1849. There is nothing to mark this site. The only commemoration known was a tribute during Joanne B Kaar’s arts residency in 2005. There is no record of their burials other than what is in the newspaper reports.

From the Internet

*“22. 8.1847 “CANTON”, Hull barque, for America in ballast. Totally wrecked on Farout Head. All hands lost. Storm as occurred on 9/8/06 with strong northerly winds caught unaware and not prepared for severe weather in August”*

*The Loss of the Canton of Hull., The following particulars relating to catastrophe have been extracted from letters received by the owners at Hull, sent by Mr. J. Anderson, Lloyd’s agent at Respond, Loch Eriboll, and others at Durness. They show that the ship had no emigrants on board. They went out with her several passengers, of whom we have only been able to ascertain the names of two, viz, Mr: and Mrs. Moses Jordan, from Beeford, near Holderness; they it seems, were going; to Join their parents in New Brunswick, who had proceeded there in the same vessel about four years ago. The storm is described to have been the most awful character, and its equal has not been experienced on the northern coast for a number of years. It commenced soon after midnight of Saturday, the 21st nit, and raged terrifically the whole of the following day and night, causing the greatest devastation amongst the shipping. Of fine many vessels which were driven on shore, was her Majesty’s surveying ship Mastiff, Captain Beechey, near Kirkwall Bay, and a barque, which afterwards proved to be the ill-fated vessel In question was seen of Durness soon after eight o’ clock on Sunday morning.*

*She was first discovered some distance off apparently attempting to run into that place since for shelter. Snell, however, was imposable in the sea that was then raging, the gala; which was from the N.N.E., scattering everything before it and stirring up the ocean with terrible commotion. Many who were congregated on the shore too well anticipated the frightful catastrophe that awaited the vessel and all on board, yet, at that moment, it was beyond human power to apprise the unhappy creatures of their perilous position. The part of the coast for which she was fast driving was near the headland to the west of Durness wholly inaccessible for the rocks running to an altitude of 600 feet. For some time the crew could be observed in the rigging evidently with a view, of obtaining assistance from the shore but as previously mentioned was utterly impracticable. At length tempest hurled the ill-fated barque against the rocks with fearful force, and in a few seconds she was to be seen a total wreck, the raging surf sweeping her fragments in every direction along the headland.*

*The distressing circumstances attending the wreck produced the deepest sensation, and the report of her being an emigrant ship tended much to agitate and excite the public feeling. The magistrates of the place, with Mr. Anderson and most of most of the influential parties in the neighborhood, proceeded to the spot, but it sometime ere an attempt could be made in consequence of the violent state of the weather. On reaching the place where she had been cast on the rocks, scarcely of vestige of the wreck could be seen. The ship papers being found, enabled the authorities to ascertain the name of the unfortunate ship and her owners, who were forthwith apprised of her fate. Every soul having perished, it was mere conjecture as to the*

*number lost. Twenty bodies were picked up, one being that of a female; and from the circumstance of a seamen having a reticule round his arm, and a quantity of ladies wearing apparel washed up on the rocks, it was thought that she was laden with emigrants, and hence arose the painful reports that appeared to that effect. As decently as possible the bodies were collected and conveyed to Durness and on the following day were interred in the parish churchyard.*

*Since the above was written, we have got a correct list of those, with the exception of one or two who perished.*

- *Mr. Moses Jordan and his wife Sarah Jordan, natives of Beeford in Holderness,*
- *John Peter Tong, commander belonged to Hull, left a widow and five children,*
- *Asher Predgen first officer a native of Hull left a widow and eight children,*
- *John Ross of Hull, seaman, married and several children:*
- *Joseph Shakesby, carpenter lived at Hull; left a widow and four children,*
- *William Jones cook of Liverpool left a widow and family,*
- *George Hawkins Biwington sailmaker of Woodmansey, near Beverly, left a widow and seven children,*
- *Charles Richness, of Hull, able seaman,*
- *Francis Clarke, able seaman left a widow and child at Hull*
- *William Darley seaman of Hull,*
- *Robert Johnson, seaman of Hull*
- *Richard Wallis seaman of Hull*
- *George Smith seaman Chatham:*
- *Tomas Tonge seaman of Stockith,*
- *James Silcock seaman of Hull*
- *John Rottery seaman of Aberdeen*
- *James Drewary, William Ward and George Cape apprentice's natives of Hull.*

*It may be some consolation to the relatives of the sufferers to know the following from a letter written by one of the authorities who witnessed the sad occurrence:, From the nature of the place where she drove amongst innumerable outlying rocks no art of man were such at hand that could have possible rendered any assistance on saving any human being on board.*

**Mrs. Jenny Mackay, nee MacDonald, and Donald MacDonald wrote this account in December 1968.**

“At seven am on the twelfth of August 1849 women were herding cows at the back of Lerin. It was a flat calm day and there were innumerable midges. Two sailing ships were sighted, coming from the direction of Orkney. One was a three mast baroque ‘Canton’ an emigrant ship the other is not known. The Canton passed so close inshore that the women with the cows could hear the voices of people speaking on deck. By eleven a northerly gale had sprung up of such severity that the women could not keep their shawls on.

The unknown ship passed safely round the Faraid, but the Canton missed stays and was driven on to the rocks near Clach Mhor na Faraid with the loss of everyone on board. Neil Mackay’s grandfather was herding cows near the Durine cross roads and heard the crash as she struck. The only creature to survive was a black pig, which swam ashore. A relation of Robb the Dyker, known as Dreely (Oystercatcher) from his habit of beachcombing saw the pig appear out of the waves and took it to be the devil. It survived for some time at Balnakeil Farm.

Two men from the parish of Durness were on board the Canton. It is presumed they were taken on board in Thurso at Scrabster, as there was not time from her first sighting to her loss, for her to have picked them up in Loch Eriboll. One of the men was a son of Anna Mather and Lachan



Ross, and Grieve at Eriboll Farm who was going out to join his two elder brothers in Texas. He was identified (by his father) by the unmistakable wide gap in his front teeth. The brothers in Texas had been very poor when they arrived and joined the army. They then bought land in Texas and oil was discovered.

The bodies, which were recovered, were buried in the north east corner of the graveyard at Balnakeil, where a mound can be seen – unmarked. The captain’s wife had exceptionally beautiful long hair, which floated round her body as she was washed ashore.



IMAGE 151 THE BOTHY IN THE SAND ON FARAID HEAD

Donald’s great-grandfather was an elder of the church. On the Sunday morning, a cask of brandy was washed ashore at Balnakeil. He said to his companion “May God forgive me, but lift it on to my back” There was also a good deal of money washed ashore – triangular paper money (Clydesdale Bank). George Mackay the weaver was seen by a visitor to have money spread out all over the floor, drying in the heat of the fire.

The chains and anchors of the Canton can still be seen at low water in what is still known as Canton’s Pool. The Indian teak from the deck house was used for many years as a lambing bothy at the Faraid, and is still (1968) in good condition with small sliding windows.”

The bothy referred to is now absent from view pictured above in 1998. The sand dunes on Faraid Head are in constant motion and it is feasible to assume the hut is now buried under the sand or deteriorated and blown away in strong winds.

## Balnakeil House

About one 100 metres from Balnakeil Church stands the imposing mansion of Balnakeil House. Perched on top of an outcrop of rock at the southern end of Balnakeil Bay the Tigh MOR or Big House has witnessed many changes. The present house, which dates from 1744 is built on



IMAGE 152 BALNAKEIL HOUSE

the site of a monastery that served the church of Balnakeil. Balnakeil House was a seat of the Clan Mackay and was, until the late 18th century the home of the Master of Reay, the chief's eldest son. Although it dates from 1744, portions, such as the wall facing the church, are older. It was originally a monastic site founded by the Celtic saint, Maelrubha about 720AD.

There are references to imply that a substantial building was on this site in the 12<sup>th</sup> century as the summer residence of the Bishop of Caithness. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the house belonged to the chiefs of the Clan Mackay. It was probably a fortified manor house corresponding roughly to the size of the present house. The chief of Mackay who later became Lord Reay had his principal house in Tongue but at least part of the year was spent in Durness holding criminal courts in the house at Balnakeil. The condemned were hanged at the nearby Loch Croispol, the Loch of the Gallows. The hanging tree or gallows was in one of the fields bordering the loch. The last person to be hanged in the area in the late 18<sup>th</sup>. Century was a man from Strath More found guilty of murder.

Balnakeil House was built by the Mackay chiefs as a family mansion on the site of an earlier building which had at one time been the summer palace of the medieval Bishops of Caithness. There is little by way of contemporary documentation on the building itself but plenty of stories about the place and its inhabitants. The first occupant of the rebuilt mansion, Donald, son of the third Lord Reay was, according to poet Rob Donn, "*the apex of society and entertainment, of the men of poetry and of music*".

In 1740, the minister in the nearby manse, the Rev Murdo Macdonald, wrote in his diary that he couldn't concentrate on composing his Sunday sermons for all the merrymaking going on at the house on Saturday evenings!

Ian Grimble wrote in "The world of Rob Donn" "*Second in magnificence to the seat of the chief at Tongue stood his mansion in the far west. This ancient manor farm had been inhabited by the second Lord Reay while Tongue House was being rebuilt, and it was used besides as a hunting lodge for expeditions to the Reay Forest, as a granary the chief's western estates, and as the residence of his heir.*" According to Dr Grimble, Balnakeil was built by the second Lord Reay who was educated in Denmark while his father was fighting with his clan regiment in the Thirty Years' War, "*and it may not be fanciful to see in its architecture the influence of the Danish manor-farm*".

Another story related by Ian Grimble tells how the wife of a Mackay chief, a Sutherland by birth, helped save Kenneth Sutherland, an army deserter who had fled to Durness during or shortly after the 1745 rebellion. A detachment of troops caught up with him at Balnakeil.

*"Whether by accident or design, Kenneth Sutherland did not choose one of the doors leading to the ground-floor premises when he bolted through the garden and across the court. He chose the entrance which took him to these narrow stairs. At the head of them can still be seen the little closet beside the panelled reception room into which Lady Reay pushed her clansman in his extremity. She then welcomed his pursuers as they tumbled up the stairs, ushering them into the great room beyond Kenneth's hiding place. She ordered drink for them; she summoned the women who were working about the premises and improvised a dance."*

*"There was a lady beside the threshold standing there, alert, formidable. I don't know the pass he went out by, on my life but between the woman's legs, without bonnet or weapons, very near the fissure where he was born, There he made his escape."* The double entente got lost in the translation, apparently. "*Lady Reay's resourcefulness in smuggling the deserter to safety down that narrow staircase beneath a woman's skirts was not the only theme she provided for Rob Donn,*" Dr Grimble commented.

Balnakeil House was listed in 1971 by Historic Scotland as a category "A" building, which makes it of national importance, placing it in the top seven-and-a-half per cent of listed buildings. The description reads:

*"1744. Two storey and attic, symmetrical U-plan house; four centre bays, projecting outer wings with 3-bay inner faces to small paved court; two first floor and small attic windows only in south facing outer gabled wings. All harled, with polished ashlar margins and dressings."*

The interior is a mixture of original features and nineteenth century alterations and decoration (wood panelling etc.). The walled garden is dated 1863.

Works on the House started in late 2009, following lengthy discussions with Historic Scotland. Now fully restored it has been sympathetically refurbished to provide a unique and luxurious experience.

From the early 1800's Balnakeil was occupied by the sheep farm tenant, beginning with John Dunlop. The last occupants were the previous farm manager and his family, the Andersons. Balnakeil House laid empty for several years.

Melness-based author the late Mary Beith has written: "*At Balnakeil House in Durness, John, Lord of Mackay, held sway over what the historian Edward Cowan has called "an almost aggressively traditional household". When the then Lord Lovat visited John Mackay in 1669 there was hawking, hunting, sea fishing, archery, wrestling, feasting, music and dancing. Among other household retainers, Mackay had a piper, a harpist and an amadan (Gaelic: fool*

*or jester). When he left, Lovat was showered with gifts a sheltie, guns, longbows, an antique sword, a pair of deerhounds, a silk plaid and a doublet and trows."*

The east front encloses on three sides a courtyard paved in Caithness flagstone and has a very regular pattern of doors and windows. The main door is in the south west corner. The adjacent door on the south side of the courtyard may have been for servant access. The corresponding doors in the North West corners may have been more for architectural reasons than practicality as the door on the main hall is blocked up with a cupboard on the inside. The door on the north side may have been for access to the laundry on the ground floor of the north wing, although it does have an external door in the north wall.

To the south on the green can be seen the raised sector where there was a tennis court. To the east beside Balnakeil Farm is the walled garden dated 1863.

The farm steading incorporated the earliest improved farm buildings in the North West; in 1801, there were slate roofed barn and byre beside the heather thatched on byre, a cruck-framed barn, stables and poultry house. In 1995 much of these buildings were destroyed by fire and new barns have been erected. A disused 19<sup>th</sup>. Century corn mill served by a millstream diverted from the burn flowing out of Loch Croispol is currently becoming ruinous. Late 19<sup>th</sup>. Century technology harnessed power from this lade to serve farm buildings. This old mill is a listed monument.

A ruined Wheel House downstream from the mill once housed a wheel and endless wire rope and pulley wheels running up to the steading to move threshing machinery and other agricultural implements. The only known detached wheelhouse of its type in the Highlands. Balnakeil Farm is noted for the fine dry stane dykes enclosing the fields.

In 2010 the historic building once again was undergoing considerable renovations. The house now belongs to the Elliot family and although has been out of use for the last ten years they are converting the property with refurbishment of the A-listed, Historic Balnakeil House and the beach bothy for residential holiday let usage. The work is being undertaken by O Brien construction will take about 10 months and is expected to be of a very high standard similar to the facilities now being offered at the previous Cape Wrath Hotel.

Fire at Balnakeil 13<sup>th</sup>. September 2010

Last Thursday night at around 11pm fire-fighters were called to the big House at Balnakeil currently undergoing major renovations and upgrades. Local sources state that a halogen lamp was left switched on by a workman and this caused a fire to start high in the building. Flames were seen by the neighbour and fire services alerted.

The present house, which dates from 1744 was completely rebuilt in the Georgian style and outwardly remains the same today. The interior had hallmarks of Victorian improvements.

For most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the house appears to have adopted the role of a shooting lodge. Around 1900 brothers Thomas and John Elliot, borders sheep farmers bought Balnakeil estate. Since then the house and farm have been inherited by members of the family. John Elliot's (3<sup>rd</sup>) aunt Miss E.M.Elliot lived in Balnakeil House for several years, there are stories of her involvement in the Durness Community particularly during the war yaers, until she died in 1954. Other members of the family have apparently stayed in the mansion from time to time but no records exists. In 1998 the house was occupied by the fram manager Peter Anderson, his wife and three children.

A fire destroyed one of stone the outbuildings in the 1980's but this fire seems to have been confined to a small area and quickly extinguished. Work on the renovations continues.

## **A Brief Description of the Interior of Balnakeil House Prior To Renovation**

Entering the house by the main door, a stone staircase rises immediately in front. To the left is a door leading to a small cellar under the stair that may have been a fuel store, although this room does have a small window in the north wall. Continuing to the left a door accesses to the south wing. The first room may have been intended as an estate office, also able to be entered by a door in the south wall of the courtyard rather than the main door. This room has a very small room of it in the north wall. Next to this is the scullery with its sink and built in cupboard, paved with flagstones as in the corridor. The largest room is the kitchen, again with flagstones. The dumb waiter was installed in the late 1930's. The door in the south wall leads to a substantial porch. This porch may be a 19th century addition, particularly as it spoils the symmetry of the house. It is possible that the kitchen was transferred from the laundry room when this was built on.

From the entrance hall to the right, a corridor runs along the east front. The first room is small with cupboards and was for housekeeping purposes but may have doubled as a boot room. The next room is a bedroom with a typical 19th century cast iron fireplace. Beside this is a bathroom, probably created by taking away part of the adjacent bedroom. Another bedroom follows, again with a cast iron fireplace. This room is unusual by the fact that it has a step up from the corridor. This may have something to do with the underlying structure of the original building, much of which would appear to be incorporated in this part of the present building. The first door in the north wing is to the cellar. Down a steep flight of steps can be found the remnants of a wine rack. Beside the door is the back stairs, of much worn stone, giving access to the other floors. At the end of the corridor is the laundry taking up most of the north wing. This large room is below the level of the main floor. It has a large fireplace with a 19th century heating stove, no longer used. In the north wall is an external door giving access to the washing green. Beside this door is a small door opening into a deep wall cupboard. It would appear to be built into the thickness of the wall and suggests a considerable measure of wall between the laundry and the cellar. The laundry was probably the original kitchen.

The main stone stair leads to a spacious and well-lit landing. Off this are two principal rooms, a bedroom and wooden stairs to the attic. The wooden arches on the stair well show Victorian influences. In the north wing is the dining room. Here two windows in the north wing have been blocked up internally; they appear as normal on the outside. The fireplace is 20th century. The layouts of the floorboards suggest there may have been substantial alterations to this part of the house since 1744. The bedroom, like the room below, has a small room in the west wall. This room was used as an office in Miss Elliot's time earlier in the 20th century. On the left between the landing and the drawing room is the china cupboard. Around 1745, an army deserter being chased by a detachment of troops was supposedly hidden here by Lady Reay. The affair was noted in stanza by Rob Donn.

The drawing room has three windows in the east wall and one in the north and bares all the hallmarks of Victorian improvements. Miss Elliot altered the fireplace. This room is known as the blue room presumably because of its decor at some time in the past. The resident ghost "the green lady" is said to be seen or felt in this part of the house.

Beyond the drawing room is a small corridor off which are the black room and the landing of the back stair. The black room is the only room in the house to retain its 18th century appearance and it is panelled in pine. Local legend has it the panelling came from a wreck in Balnakeil Bay, but as it is very similar to panelling found elsewhere in Scotland at this time it is probably imported pine from Russia. It may however have been saved from the original house. On the wall next to the dining room can be seen some hinges suggesting the panels could be opened thus creating one large room. One hinge is broken and had been replaced with

a leather strap. At the other side of the landing is a bedroom that was occupied by the late Miss Elliot. It has a wash hand basin and its decor is in the style of the 1920's.

On the turn of the back stairs between the ground and first floors is a bathroom. The attic consists of a series of small rooms most of which would have been for servants and storage. However the room in the north wing at the head of the back stairs must have been intended as a guest bedroom at some point as it has a bell pull. The room in the North West corner is fitted out as a linen room with cupboards and shelves. On the outside of the north wall there is a door giving access to a small cellar. Beside this is a large water tank that was used to store water from the roof before there was a piped supply. There is also a large cheese press situated here. A secret panel is supposed to exist which connects with a tunnel direct to the church. Miss Elliot had work carried out to search for such a connection and newer cement can be seen in the laundry where the floor was excavated but no secure evidence of a tunnel can be found today. There is stories of tunnels dug by the monks and explored by local people in times past with vague tales about escapes and visits to nuns. The tunnel is described with rungs on the walls where prisoners were jailed and splitting in two, one path leading to the church the other out to sea. The panelled room is also storied to house the secret panel covering the tunnel. Studies have thought it more probable that any entrance here was to latrines when that half of the house was a Bishop's palace.

### **Balnakeil House Project**

An ambitious project was being envisaged in 2000 when an American approached Kinlochbervie high school about a possible acquisition of Balnakeil House.

In November 2000 a large number of people attended the North West Sutherland Council for Community Action Annual General Meeting along with pupils from Kinlochbervie High School and heard the guest speaker Dr Gary Mackay of New Highlanders of Inverness (HONI). He spoke about possible uses for the Balnakeil House and the progress of the project so far.

The domain name ***balnakeilhouse.com*** has been registered for Balnakeil Project use. This is in readiness for the ambitious endeavour of creating a virtual one-stop shop for expertise in all necessary aspects of business. The confines of the ideas for the building are only limited by imagination. It was thought that the name Balnakeil House would be a valuable trading name and the name *balnakeilhouse.com* already had some worth due to the publicity generated here and in America. Balnakeil House is being portrayed in the American prospective as the last house on the road on top of the Scottish Mainland, "*there is no more road, it ends at Balnakeil House*"

Virtual tourism and e commerce would play a significant role in the Balnakeil Project. Another domain name ***kinlochbervie.com*** has been registered and donated for the use of Kinlochbervie High School Pupils. This project is being developed for the generations of the future.

A Company Limited by Guarantee called "Mackay Country" has been established in order to be a single body to deal with outside agencies including Planning Historic Scotland etc, negotiation of sale, lottery and grant applications. Michael Thornton is the registered director and Donald Macleod as the company secretary. It was declared that this company name could easily be changed if it was thought to be too exclusive but it had to be set up quickly. A suggestion for the final name was Balnakeil Trust.

The next steps would be inviting people to become involved who had the various skills needed to deliver the Balnakeil Project. It is hoped that the people implicated would be from various communities in the North West and it is imperative the geographical spread has representation. Events have moved rapidly since the Durness meeting when a steering group involving Durness Community Council was introduced. People are being kept informed and invited to take part

in the discussions by joining the e-mail ring. There is presently to be a central web site for information on current activities that can be accessed by anyone with an interest. During the presentation and throughout the question session all the speakers were fully supportive of the entire concept and stressed the importance and commitment to ensuring this project was successful. Melness community has offered the Balnakeil Project land for free with complete community support if the purchase of Balnakeil House did not go ahead and if the Balnakeil Project wanted to go for a green site option. Durness Community Council, being situated in the heart of the Reay Country covering the entire area between Melvich and Scourie and home of the Clan Mackay has also earmarked an alternative piece of land. This idea had caught the imagination of the people of Durness and its success in Durness is seen as advantageous to the entire locality. Garry Mackay has contacted the Countess of Sutherland and detailed the project. She said she "...is keenly interested in Balnakeil..." and has asked to be kept in formed.

The surveyor is expected to carry out a survey on the state of the house and a valuation imminently and there should be some indication soon regarding the amount of money needed to be raised.

The possibility of two scholarships to American Universities for Kinlochbervie and Farr Pupils is being investigated in America by HONI. One of the terms of the scholarship would be that the student would have to return to the NW for a time and pass on some skills. It is hoped that Balnakeil House would also house a PhD research student in residence.

A Balnakeil House Logo Competition has been launched at aimed at the schoolchildren in Scotland and America although Garry Mackay was keen to keep the two sections of the project distinctly definable for dealing with the relevant matters for the present.

Dr Gary Mackay of New Highlanders of Inverness (HONI) was interviewed by Ian Anderson on his radio Scotland show on Tuesday afternoon. Garry was referring to the time when his ancestors departed from the area of Durness and this was around the time of the life of Rob Donn. After a resume of the project to date and the discussing the accumulating support being generated on both sides of the Atlantic Ian Anderson was asking about the traditional music of the area and the ways that the project could encourage and develop the young of the community to maintain the magnificent musical culture.

### **22<sup>nd</sup> January 2001**

Recent communications from the directors of the company formed to deal with the acquisition of Balnakeil house revealed that an initial meeting has taken place in Edinburgh with a member of the Elliot Family concerning the acquisition of Balnakeil House. Both sides have outlined their position and at present is some distance apart. However there is room for further negotiation and another meeting will take place.

### **Darien Visit 2<sup>nd</sup>. April 2001**

Ishbell Macdonald was the parent visitor to Darien with children of Kinlochbervie High School. The first of the educational links has given slightly different but enthusiastic view of the possibilities of endeavouring to establish a close link with the community of Darien the second oldest planned city in Georgia. Scottish Highlanders leaving from Durness settled there in 1736. Separated by miles and time two communities share very similar problems, fears and aspirations.

Ishbell writes

"My initial reaction on being asked to visit Darien, Mackintosh Country Georgia, with a small group from Kinlochbervie High school was one of curiosity and I must admit ignorance. I really had no idea what to expect of Georgia at all. I vaguely imagined cotton plantations, rednecks

and a sort of nondescript freeway sprawl. The town of Darien on the southern coast of Georgia, is a pretty assortment of pastel painted clapboard houses amongst high live oak trees, set back from the pier where at the moment the shrimp boats are tied up for the season.

The town is fringed by swamps haunted by alligators, pelicans, egrets, and manatees. The people of Darien are rightly proud of their history and there are two monuments to two Sutherland settlers, who left from Balnakeil Bay in 1736 to help defend the British enclave against the Spanish,

We were given a wonderful welcome and after several appearances on radio and television the three school pupils Isla McLeod, Josh Talbot and Richard McKay were accorded celebrity status.

We found people to be incredibly warm, open and straightforward and anxious to know about our remote part of the Highlands. One of our days was spent at the annual Scottish Heritage Days Festival which offered a great opportunity to meet and talk to a wide cross section of people. There were questions about the foot and mouth outbreak of course, but also a lot of sympathy and understanding of the problems for both farmers and the tourist industry and relief when it was explained that the Highlands were completely disease free. A party of twenty adults are planning a trip to Durness this summer and this hopefully will be the first of many.

For us it was interesting to hear about their hopes and fears for their own small town. Shrimp fishing the mainstay of the economy is on the decline and a reliance on tourism is for them an unwelcome prospect. They fear the invasion of developers who would their unspoiled stretch of coastline into the kind of concrete high-rise apartment and shopping mall that much of Florida is to the south.

Darien really is the sort of town where people spend evenings in a rocking chair on the front step greeting the neighbours as they pass while kids race about on bikes and go fishing down at the pier. Some stereotypes are fine!

They see their future in building small community projects and hope to buy "A shantilly" an ex-plantation owner's house which will serve as a cultural and small business centre and a gateway to the outside world. This is the kind of mirror image of what could potentially happen in or area with the possible purchase of Balnakeil House.

During our short stay in Georgia I feel that we made many friends and invaluable links with a community very different from our own and yet with surprising similarities. A bridge has been created across the Atlantic, which can now be strengthened and built upon.

Thanks go to Garry MacKay for generosity sponsoring the trip, Michael Thornton for all his hard work in organising and Isla, Richard and Josh for their good company."

14/5/2001

The council were informed of the recent meeting of the company directors for the group discussing the possibilities of purchasing Balnakeil House. The negotiations are still in progress and another property is being considered. Green field sites around the northwest, three in Durness, have been offered to build a new facility if the Balnakeil House purchase is unavailable. Mention was made of a local stone from Darien in the United States being shipped over to Durness to be erected at Balnakeil with the names of the emigrants inscribed. The community council are keen to see links established and are looking forward to the visit of Darien representatives visiting the Church and attending the Games in July.



In March 1997 Andrew Elliot of Balnakeil Estate which owns Balnakeil House made a clear statement that Balnakeil House was not for sale. The project ceased to exist and no further information was received from Garry Mackay.

### **Historic Mansion to be restored**

David Jardine Ambratach April 2005, No. 162

*Balnakeil House, Durness, has confirmed to Am Bratach that the leaking roof of the historic Mackay mansion will be repaired this summer, writes David Jardine. He has also disclosed that he plans to bring the unoccupied A-listed building back into use.*

*“A use will be found for Balnakeil House within eighteen months even if I have to sell it”  
Andrew Elliot*

*Slates have been falling off the building for several years, but during the severe storm in January more extensive damage was caused, particularly to the seaward side, exposing the sarking timbers. “It’s like someone going bald,” was how one man described it.*

*“The owner has been contacted with a view to getting repair work done,” Highland Council’s conservation architect John Duncan, said. “We have our eyes on the building. If the owner fails to get the work done we have powers under the Town and Country Planning Act of 1972. We can serve either an Urgent Works Notice — for emergency work only — or a repairs notice.*

*“Under a repairs notice, the owner has two months to carry out the work. If he fails to do so, the council can start compulsory purchase proceedings. Local authorities are reluctant to use compulsory purchase powers; they’re a last resort,” Mr Duncan explained. “Highland Council would only go down that route if there was a restoring purchaser waiting in the wings.*

*“Lying empty with slates off it’s at risk of wood rot, in particular dry rot which can go right through an unoccupied building. We are aware of the historic importance of Balnakeil House. It’s category A and therefore of national importance. There’s a good chance that finance such as national lottery funding would be available to restore it. The house is a significant part of the local history, there’s no question.”*

*Speaking from his Borders farm, Blackhaugh, near Galashiels, “poor, struggling hill farmer” Andrew Elliot confirmed that repairs to the roof will be carried out this summer by a local contractor. “I hope to make some progress on Balnakeil House this year. In the twelve or thirteen years I’ve been running the farm up there [Balnakeil], the house has been fairly low down my list of priorities in making the farm work. Now that we have secured the jobs for the three guys who work the farm, I can attend to the house.*

*“It doesn’t lend itself to being split but I’m looking at it. There has got to be a use for the house in Modern times. I hope to do the exterior this summer. That’s the initial step. A use will be found for it within eighteen months, even if I have to sell it. A lot of people have looked at the house but, when they do their sums, they’re put off. I have never received an offer in the time I’ve been there.”*

*Mr Elliot said there had been some interest a few years ago (see May 2000 Bratach) from Mackay Country Limited, a group with American links (not to be confused with the Durness Development Group’s Mackay project).*

*“Historic Scotland sees nothing of particular interest in the interior of the house; a lot of it was changed during the nineteenth century,” he added. “It’s very difficult to see a viable long-term use without splitting it into two or three.”*

*A spokesman for Historic Scotland commented: "Architecture is three dimensional. Generally, when a building is listed it does cover the exterior and the interior but every plan is different. Mr Elliot would have to apply for planning permission to the local authority and the council would contact Historic Scotland. There's not a hard and fast rule about interior alterations. Everything is assessed on its merits.*

*"Historic Scotland believe it important to bring these buildings into use wherever possible," she added.*

*Said to have been completed in 1744, Balnakeil House was built by John, the second Lord Reay and chief of Mackay. According to the historian, Ian Grimble, it may not be fanciful to see in the building's design the influence of the Danish manor-farm. John had been educated at Sorø Academy in Denmark while his father, Donald, was fighting with his clan regiment in the Thirty Years War. The house's historical and architectural importance is reflected in its A-list status, putting it in the top 8% of listed buildings in the country.*

*The house has been unoccupied for about ten or more years, since a previous farm manager's family moved out, and has been placed on their Buildings at Risk Register by the Scottish Civic Trust. It is a large 2-storey U-shaped house with the main frontage facing south-east and set back between two projecting wings. The front of the building has a regular arrangement of windows and a pair of matching "minister's" doors while the rear, seaward side is irregular. It is slated and harled with ashlar stonework around windows and doors.*

*The interior, according to the civic trust, "retains its original stone staircase, moulded and lugged door-pieces, fielded panelling, and moulded chimney-pieces. The vaulted cellars are possibly incorporated from the medieval summer palace of the Bishops of Caithness".*

*Perhaps surprisingly, in view of their interest in preserving the heritage of Clan Mackay, Durness Development Group has no interest in getting ownership or occupation of the building. Company secretary Ronnie Lansley told Am Bratach late last week: "There has never been a consideration of it at all. There are no moves here to do anything about acquiring it".*

## Balnakeil Craft Village

*The Air Ministry are erecting buildings to house personnel engaged on a scheme, the construction of a radar station which is reported to be the most modern in the country.*<sup>49</sup>

*The camp at Balnakeil consisted of the following buildings: guardhouse, armoury, fire tender shed, dog compound, main stores, inflammable stores, MT (Motor transport) shed, MT workshop, petrol pump facility, AMW office and store, station headquarters, post office, airman's mess and rations store, airman's institute and NAAFI staff quarters, airman's quarters, airwomen's quarters, officers mess and quarters, sergeant's mess and quarters, sick quarters and a substation.*<sup>50</sup>

Balnakeil Craft Village lies about one mile west of Durness, within sight of Balnakeil Bay with its historic house and church. This collection of unusual buildings was built in the mid 1950's as a Ministry of Defence as a barracks for an early warning station in the event of nuclear attack. However, it was never commissioned, and in 1963, the camp born of Cold War fear in the 50's, began its rebirth as a 60's cradle of creativity.

Originally, the County Council acquired the buildings from the Air Ministry for a sum reputed to be £1000 with the intention of establishing small scale industrial units. However, not enough interest was shown in this, and an imaginative development officer of Sutherland District Council Mr. Fasham suggested its conversion to a Craft Village.



IMAGE 153 PAUL BROWN IMAGE FROM YVETTE BROWNS ARCHIVE

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<sup>49</sup> An account from 1955. Originally by Wm. Morley Hames Vice Convenor of Sutherland

<sup>50</sup> Subterranea Britannica, Faraid Head Rotor Radar Station. Written by Nick Catford on 10 June 2004.

Paul Brown head of the pottery department at Leeds College of Art, where he taught for 10 years, and his wife Yvette also a potter and artist visited the Sutherland area on many holidays and bought a croft, Ardmore Rhiconich its only access being to cross Loch Inchar. In 1961 they became friendly with Mr. Fasham the county Development Officer and discussed the concept of a Craft Village to attract experienced crafts persons and talented young people by offering the buildings at very low rent which they could convert into living accommodation, studios and workshops. In 1963, Paul and Yvette left Leeds to take a leading part in developing the craft village and rented army prefabricated buildings which were in a very poor state of repair. Paul and Yvette set about the daunting task to restore and refurbish them, turning the main building into a fourteen-bedroom hotel, The Far North Hotel, on a very tiny budget. Paul made all the furniture, which at that time was uncompromisingly modern. They also opened a coffee house at the entrance to the village. A coffee shop, pottery and the first commercial transport to Cape Wrath were instigated by founder members, Paul and Yvette Brown.

Hugh and Molly Powel who were friends with the Browns, Hugh and Paul working together at Leeds, joined them in the venture of the Craft Village. Initially the Old Manse was rented to the Powell's and Browns. Hugh Powell and Molly bought the Old Manse next to the village from the MoD and lived there for many years until Hugh's death in 2017. Molly died a few years previously. Hugh Powel never intended to be part of the craft village. Paul left Balnakeil around 1975 but Yvette remained until she sold the hotel around 1985 when she moved to Talmine. There was unrest between the Browns and Powell's and Hugh maintains a different story of the beginning of Balnakeil Craft Village giving himself the credit. Riddle, a silversmith and teacher Rena Mackenzie and her husband Murdo who had been shepherd on the Cape Side, and local man Kay Mackay who had been a fisherman and the Browns all were the first tenants. Browns spent the first years renovating and clearing developing a pottery and a coffee shop in the guard house at the gate starting the hotel around 1969 after requests to supply individual rooms for visitors on ornithology holiday excursions. Clearing sheep muck and other debris was the first jobs any new tenant had to tackle.

Advertisements were placed in national newspapers offering the buildings for minimal rent to those who had skills and viable business plans. The Far North Project, as it was known, attracted applicants from all over Britain, and eventually pioneer residents made their way north to embark on a new experiment in living. Public notices were adverting the leasing of buildings at an initial rental of £5 annually.<sup>51</sup>

The buildings were empty concrete shells with no plumbing or electricity. No water supply, water pumped from an old iron tank to storage units on the roof towers, electricity installations had all been stripped out, some had no glazing and were barely habitable. The conversion of the bleak and deserted barracks into homes and workshops was daunting. During the early years there was also help from the International Voluntary Service who erected electricity poles and ran power cables. The county councillor, Mr. Christie Campbell, offered a great deal of support to the early settlers. These first inhabitants not only had to make comfortable homes for their families, but also seek out sources of supply, organise reliable deliveries and produce work with no guarantee of an immediate income. By 1966 the craft village was identifiable as such.

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<sup>51</sup> The information contained in the paragraphs above were taken from interviews and scarp book archives with Yvette Brown.

Over the next few years, many new residents arrived, bringing with them children who greatly boosted the school roll in Durness Primary School. It was not until around 1970 that any kind of association was formed. Meetings were held to discuss such things as advertising and the improvement of the common ground. Eventually, tenants began pressing the County Council for a chance to buy their buildings, and in 1980 Highland Regional Council offered to sell the



IMAGE 154 AN IMAGE FROM ABOUT 1980

properties to the sitting tenants, and the residents took up the offer to buy. There were at that time sixteen independently owned businesses. This made Balnakeil Craft Village not only the first establishment of its kind in Britain, but also the only one to be owned by its residents, and this situation continues to the present day. In the early eighties, Balnakeil Craft Village Community Co Operative was formed under a Highlands and Islands Development Board and Highland Craft Point initiative. This was a social development project to provide facilities and services to residents and visitors. The co-operative ran a visitor centre with exhibition and coffee shop, ground maintenance scheme and a regular commercial bus service to Ullapool and Tongue. The community cooperative was an ambitious project, and although it ran successfully for several years, was eventually wound up in late 1986.

The Craft Village today is a thriving place. Although the population is smaller and the demographic has changed, with no school age children at present, the Village is home to around twenty six permanent and several more seasonal residents. The opportunities which brought those early settlers to Balnakeil in the 1960s and seventies, still exist. The Village offers a unique way of life to people with initiative and imagination.

At first sight, Balnakeil Craft Village can seem a forbidding place. The ex-military buildings do not lend themselves easily to being prettified and require constant maintenance. However, a closer look rewards the visitor with many quirky details including decorative tiles around

doorways and set into pavements, and sculptural pieces by ceramicist Lotte Glob and woodworker Alan Herman, both early residents. The many trees which were planted in the early days, have now reached maturity, and soften the harsh lines of the ex-military buildings. There are also flourishing gardens with vegetables and fruit trees.

### **Back of Beyond:**

#### **Balnakeil is Far Out by journalist Peter Ross. Sunday, 25<sup>th</sup>. August 2013. Unknown Publication.**

Balnakeil is far out in every sense, and 50 years since the Cold War listening post became a craft village, life here is in many ways as forbidding – and enthralling – as ever for its ageing population.

Go north. Follow that magnetic arrow six hours out of the Central Belt, far from the crowd of maddies, and carry on until you almost run out of land; then, at Durness, take a left, crest the brow of a rise, and you're there – Balnakeil Craft Village, the most north-westerly community in Britain, laid out below you in all its turreted whitewashed strangeness. This is what you have come to see. “As you come over the top coast road,” says Anita Wilson, one of around 40 residents, recalling the first time she ever saw her future home, “there's nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. It was November, and although it was beautiful there was still nothing there. Then you come round and you hit Ceannabeinne beach and Durness and Balnakeil, and it either really appeals to you, or you think, ‘I'll never come here again in my life.’ Well, I just kept coming back. I'd always been around artists and musicians, and I didn't have a nine-to-five attitude, so it just seemed like an awesome sort of place. It's a more natural way of being.”

Balnakeil Craft Village is 50 years old this year, probably. None who live there would quite swear to the anniversary, though neither would they deny it entirely. Out on the frayed edge of mainland Britain is a place where notions of time, too, have become tattered. No one seems able to remember the exact date of anything. Changing seasons, tides, the bloom of the wild poppies, the boom of the bombing exercises at Cape Wrath which take place each February and September – these are the temporal markers that count around here.

The “village” is like no village you will have ever seen; a cluster of around 30 bunker-like concrete buildings, single-story, flat-roofed, each with a large rectangular water-tower pointing accusingly at an overcast sky. Some are decorated with fishing buoys, artfully hung, and bright murals of flowers and sunbursts, but there is no denying the utilitarian shape of the homes themselves. They are blunt, brutalist, built in 1954 by the Ministry of Defence to house and cater for the staff of a planned military radar station which was being constructed on the nearby promontory, Faraid Head. These were barracks, mess rooms, a medical bay, a canteen. But then something happened. Local legend has it that the Russians shaved a couple of minutes off the time it would take for a nuclear missile to travel to the UK, meaning that any early warnings from Sutherland would not be quite early enough. The station became obsolete, and in the late 1950s, the buildings at Balnakeil were abandoned to the locals and the elements. Windows and fittings were broken, birds nested, and the salty wind scoured each breeze-block shell.

“Oh, it was an eyesore,” says Hugh Powell, an 84-year-old sculptor who lives, with his wife Molly, in the old manse next to the village. “It was getting smashed up and people were stealing the lead. Nobody knew what to do with it.” Powell, in 1963, was head of industrial design at Leeds College of Art. At Easter, he drove up to Sutherland, for the first time, in a Volkswagen caravanette, carrying a load of drainpipes for a friend's septic tank. Unloading these at the side of Loch Laxford, a little boat pulled up alongside, containing within it two worthies from Sutherland County Council. They were on their way to Balnakeil to discuss what could be done

to prevent it from falling into further ruin. Powell, who knew that many of his students would love to work in a place like this, suggested that it be converted into a community for artists and crafts-people. And that was that. Powell bought the manse; the money was used by the council to purchase the rest of the buildings from the MoD, and adverts were placed in the newspapers calling for tenants. Rent was set at £5 a year, for which you got your freezing concrete bunker, without electricity or running water, and found yourself living in what is, arguably, the most wondrous landscape in the whole of these isles. This was known as The Far North Project. It drew dreamers, wild-schemers, the unorthodox and idealistic. The first person to move in was Hector Riddell, a silversmith from Turriff, followed in short order by a worm-farmer.

“When we first came there were just three or four others and the buildings were totally vandalised,” recalls Lotte Glob, a Danish artist who now lives nearby in a croft overlooking Loch Eriboll. She and her husband, Dave Illingworth, were among the early settlers. “We came on July 24, 1968, at three in the morning, with two babies, a dog, a small-electric kiln, a potter’s wheel, a ton of clay and five pounds in our pocket. There was a huge military exercise going on, with helicopters flying overhead. We had a lot of choice of buildings because so many were empty. Windows were broken, doors were broken, the toilet was ripped out and you could look straight into the sewer. There was no power. All the copper pipe was pulled out. So we got the building at the top which was the old hospital. We found one room with a door and a window where we settled down with the kids. They were two-and-a-half and six months old. We didn’t have electrics for three months and I had to wash nappies in the stream. It was tough, but I was only 24, so.”

You’ve got to love that “so”. It speaks to a certain devil-may-care, last-roll-of-the-fluffy-dice attitude among those who came to Balnakeil then, and to an extent among those who still come today. It takes just ten minutes to walk around the village, which is picturesque in a rough, bohemian sort of way. Early in the day, you see more cats than people. A line of bright washing is strung between two drainpipes, a wagtail perches on a rusty mangle, the wind howls like God blowing across the neck of a bottle.

It is the height of summer yet the weather is poor. The oystercatchers have the beach to themselves. A woman hanging out clothes explains that up here every item, even unto the humblest sock, requires several pegs to hold it in place. Most of the craft village is, these days, residential, with interior decor ranging from chintzy suburban to shabby freak-pad. You never quite know whether you are walking into the set of Abigail’s Party or Withnail And I. There are, however, still a number of businesses here, among them a bakery, a busy boatyard and the most remote bookshop in mainland Britain. You can buy chocolates, paintings and crafty knick-knacks from the people who made them by hand. You can get your trumpet fixed. There is even a masonic lodge, with carved square and compasses on the door, in the old helicopter fuel store; odd, one might think, but then where better for freemasons to practise their craft than in a craft village?

Arguably, though, the most precious commodity in Balnakeil are the people themselves. You get all sorts and then some. Philipp Tanzer, 35, has moved from Dresden to become the village’s newest resident. He plans to open a hairdressing salon and massage parlour. A one-time holder of the title German Mr Leather, he has had notable success as an actor in gay pornographic films. His *annus mirabilis*, 2009, saw him win best duo sex-scene, best three-way sex scene and best actor at the Grabby Awards. He performs under the name Logan McCree, a homage to his love for Scotland, his love for the comic-book character Wolverine and his love for God (McCree being derived from the Gaelic for “son of the King”). His body is covered in tattoos, including the Archangel Michael on his chest. He has been coming to Scotland on holiday for many years, wild camping with a friend from his time in the military. “I feel at

home here,” he says. “It just feels very familiar.” He has built his home and business premises on his own, mostly, and although it looks striking now, with a wolfskin on one wall and stuffed birds of prey glaring down from various perches, it has been a struggle. For the first week of construction he slept in the car, then – during a storm – built a shed and subsequently slept in there with his dog, Ares, a husky-shepherd cross. “Then a hurricane blew off parts of my roof and it rained for weeks. There is still a lot of humidity in my house and my floor is warped.” He remains without electricity and water, lost 15 kilos during the build, and seems exhausted. Yet he is determined to finish what he has started. He has had what sounds like a turbulent life, one of those people with too much past, his mother having been murdered when he was 16, and it must be hoped that he is able to find peace and a future in Balnakeil. Certainly, the locals seem untroubled by the way he has earned a living. “Oh, the porn star?” says John Morrison, the ferryman, when asked about Tanzer. “Aye, he’s good craic.”

Morrison, in his sixties, is the only Sutherland native living in the village, this being a place which tends to attract its recruits from among city-dwellers keen to leave the rat-race far, far behind. No one calls him Mr Morrison, much less John. He is known as Carbreck after the old cottage where he was brought up and which his late mother is reputed to haunt – in company with a spectral wildcat. Carbreck has been the ferryman for many a year, taking folk back and forth across the Kyle of Durness, a crossing of only a few minutes, though tricky with treacherous sandbanks, which gives access to the wilderness of Cape Wrath. He has bright blue eyes and a weather beaten face full of character and mischief. He keeps a bottle of 20-year-old Macallan under the seat of his boat against the hope that one fine night he might catch a decent fish and feel the need to toast his success with an equally decent whisky. Between May and September, the tourist season, he makes eight to ten crossings each day, seven days a week, there being, as he puts it, “No God in Durness in the summertime”. He has raised his family in the craft village and has been, in his time, a lorry driver, ghillie and stalker of deer. He is also much in demand as an accordionist. Yet ferryman seems to have been his calling, just as his father’s vocation was shepherd – the last shepherd on Cape Wrath. “Thirty years, aye,” says Carbreck, “and I’ve never regretted it at all.”

It takes a certain sort of person to make a go of things here. Not everyone can thole ultima thule. There was a documentary made about the craft village in 1974, one of those now unintentionally hilarious BBC jobs in which a sub-Alan Whicker in polo neck and moustache headed north to marvel urbanely at the hippy kids who were, in every sense, totally far out. “You know,” he says at the start, peering over the steering wheel of his Land Rover at the snowy single-track, “this might be the loneliest road in Europe... If you started at the toe of Italy and drove right up to the north-west of the Common Market, this is where you’d end, at a place called Durness, and there’s nothing between you and the Arctic then but miles and miles of sea.”

Of the villagers interviewed in the documentary, only one remains resident. Liz Harvey, almost four decades on, is still recognisable as the rather melancholy young woman with a curtain of hair who had moved from London. Today, she smokes a hand-rolled fag at her work-bench, which is covered in obscure leather-working tools, as she recalls what brought her here. It was the late 1960s and she was managing to find some work making clothes for Carnaby Street, but it wasn’t easy to earn a living as a craftsperson then. So she and her husband were looking for a new start.

“Pete was much more adventurous than me,” she says. “I have to be dragged along. But we made an appointment and came up and were interviewed by a local councillor. Pete brought his big transistor radio to see if we could get a decent signal for Radio 3 and John Peel. If we hadn’t, we wouldn’t have stayed.” But they did.



The marriage ended in the mid-1970s and Liz left Balnakeil for a year, returning to her family in Oxford, but for reasons that she finds, at this distance, difficult to explain, she came back and made her life here. It was something to do with space and time to think. The aloneness seemed necessary. So now she lives with the radio and roll-ups, at 125 feet above sea level, with purple geraniums around the door.

Summer brings tourists and income to Balnakeil (Durness receives in excess of 20,000 visitors annually) but the dying year brings slow time, darkness, the cold and sometimes loneliness. “In the winter very often people meet for coffee on Sunday mornings because it increases the conversation level for the week,” says Anita Wilson of CastOff Crafts, whose constant companion is her spaniel, Wee Shuggy. “You might go for a couple of weeks without talking to anybody.” It isn’t silent, though. The south-westerly wind makes window panes sing and bulge.

Interpersonal relationships, in such circumstances, can become intense. “People don’t hide behind facades in a setting like this,” says Undine Downie, known as Charlie, a German woman who has lived in the village since 1988. “People feel free to open up and say what’s happening in their lives. People share their emotions more freely and feel safe to do that. “It goes beyond borrowing a cup of sugar. I think it is because it is so remote that we are so intimate. It’s got the downside that you don’t have a great deal of private life. If you want a private life, move into the city or become an arsehole that nobody will talk to. Those are the options.”

The 50th anniversary, according to some, is a pivotal moment for Balnakeil. There are about half the number of craft business there were during the late 1970s, most residents are middle-aged to elderly, and there are no children living there now. A looming demographic crisis? It is difficult for newcomers to set up home in the village; the Thatcherite right-to-buy scheme meant that the buildings passed into private ownership. They have, in many cases, increased in value enormously and come up for sale only rarely. You could not now arrive in the middle of the night with a fiver and a ton of clay and start to build a new life. The Durness Development Group, in a project called Far North Revisited, hope to raise funds to buy a village property and rent it at an affordable price to an artist or crafts person. A consultancy firm has also been hired to look at how to make the village more attractive to visitors.

“This is a crunch point where the craft village will either pick itself up and grow, or lose its identity and become just a collection of buildings that are holiday homes, places that people live, and one or two remaining businesses,” says Kevin Arrowsmith of the Durness Development Group. “I would hate to see it all fall apart.”

Indeed. This area of Sutherland has a troubled history of occupation and land ownership. In the 1840s, crofters were evicted from a number of local townships as part of the Clearances, to make way for sheep. Recently, the Scottish Government backed a community buy-out of land around the lighthouse at Cape Wrath. It is possible to see the story of the craft village in this socio-political context and against the backdrop of a longer human history of people who value these wild places and choose to live their lives amid such emptiness. For the military, Balnakeil was a front-line in the Cold War; for the people who live here now it remains frontier territory, a place of essentials and extremes. “There is the land and the sky,” says Liz Harvey, “and you are sort of between the two.”

### **An article written around 1987 author unknown.**

#### The Military

In 1954, the old manse and surrounding lands formerly owned by the church were commandeered by the military. It was about the time of the first sputnik in space and an early

station and supporting barracks were called for in the area. The old manse was immediately divided into two flats and after the fitting of an extra bathroom became officer's quarters.

The camp consisted of rectangular cells of breeze block and concrete. The building consisted of a fire station, later to become a leather workshop, a prison and guardhouse in the near future to serve many a welcoming and reviving cup of tea rather than any disciplinary sentence. The reception block was to become a guest house, the hospital taken over by potters the NAAFI, the homes and workshops of three individuals and many barracks, cold and forbidding homes away from homes. By the time of its completion however, the technology involved was obsolete. At one end of the camp was, being constructed the other was being dismantled. The military decided to abandon the site and it was eventually in 1963 taken over by the council, though at least two of the buildings continued to be used for many years as a fuel store for their helicopters and as a barracks for all three of the armed forces' men.

The council takes over

In 1963 the Community council, looking into the proposal to take over and improve the buildings of the abandoned early warning station, appeared on the site for inspection, accompanied by their wives, and decided, along with many others that day that the project would be too costly. A member of the council proposed offering the buildings at minimum rent and leaving the inhabitants to carry out any improvements needed. They aimed to attract experienced craftworkers and so bring people and employment to the area. The improvements needed for even basic living standards were enormous. With the added pressure to build workshops, studios and organise supplies and deliveries for their crafts, the task must have seemed daunting. The basic, flat-roofed breeze block and concrete shelters were damp and inhospitable. No electricity and little or no plumbing and glazing existed. There were a variety of water and toilet facilities available, ranging from a simple tap into one building, to up to half a dozen, toilets in the other. Some of the buildings possessed a bath or shower, others not. Yet within the year a number crafts people had moved into the village.

Hector Riddle, a silversmith who also taught are in and around the area, Mr. Wyllie a Painter, Yvonne and Paul Brown, potters. Mrs. Carrington, weaver, Mr. and Mrs. Keith who made very fine show. Also present were tie Lionhams who started a worm farm and the Mackays who ran a guest house. Mrs. Mackay's art was mending the lobster creels and fishing nets along with his equally fine skill at spinning a tail. The University of Glasgow also gained possession of two buildings for their archaeological studies in the area.

The council at this time did not consider it economically viable to connect the village to the main electrical supply and so the International Voluntary Service (I.V.S.) stepped in to give their aid. The council rents on the buildings were £5 a year. The tenants had to be resident all year round, and if they left, any improvements they had made to the buildings, had to remain. The Duchess of Westminster arrived to donate some shrubs and trees, of which a few have survived as windbreaks to this day. The I.V.S. had arrived to do their work in two double decker buses, and as they departed so too did Hector Riddle, his workshop and house taken over by Miss Mackay in 1966. Balnakeil in the 60's! There was never a dull moment. All action and laughs.

The Browns' had branched out by this time and had taken over and started to run the 'Far North Hotel' as well as their cafe. Furnished in the beginning with old bus seats and tiled tables. They asked the Illingworth's Dave and Lotte Glob to take over the pottery, which they did very successfully, Lotte exhibiting her work in Edinburgh, London and in her home country Denmark, in the years to come. The BBC arrived to make a documentary of the village and its inhabitants, and many eager journalists came in search of stories, but only a few left satisfied.

The Brown's hotel business was thriving and in conjunction with "Highland Tours", Paul Brown started to run bus excursions to Cape Wrath. A driver was employed, but though many expected this venture to become a regular service, it was not viable to the time, and remained mainly for the guests local girls were employed to help in the at the hotel and cafe.

In Mrs. Carrington's workshop, many groups of tourists bore witness, as she stopped her work to re-enact the old croft women spinning in her house. Her collection of old looms and spinning wheels from all ages showed the history of her croft in all languages, though she enjoyed speaking about her work greatly and often held impromptu lectures to those who visited. She had hoped to start a school, with much encouragement from Francis Keith, local councillor and craft village resident, who was anxious that work to brought to the area for the women. Unfortunately the women were happy to work only seasonally and Mrs. Carrington's school of weaving did not take off.

Many more crafts people had come to live in the village. When Mr. Wyllie had left, his building was taken over by Lynn and Russell Percey. Lynn painted and Russell set up a photographic studio, producing cards for the tourists of local wildlife and places of interest, and also producing tie-dyed silk. There was also Christopher and Jenny Stride. Jenny had a successful business making designer skirts. Eventually employing many local women to help with sewing. Christopher helped run the Cape Wrath bus. Alan Hermann had arrived doing woodwork. The Parrots were helping to run Mrs. Brown's coffee shop while Mick and Sally were helping in their pottery.

Liz and Pete Harvey McInnes were creating leatherwork. Ian Laidlaw was making wooden toys, instruments and furniture while Margaret Laidlaw painted and sewed finishing-s for the toys. Sylvia and Pete Lang were thriving on their successful Balnakeil Sheep Skin business. The Powell's had taken over the Manse as bed and breakfast accommodation. Brian and Maureen Kerr had a shop selling pressed flowers and skincraft. Jean and Dave Grey had come from Northumberland to create their iron sculptures. Dave also made medieval style instruments and played the mandolin in the local band. Reena and Murdo were also in the residence, Reena knitting and Murdo who was a shepherd, helped to scythe the grass as no one else could master the art. Alan Dawson who worked with metal was there and many others who stayed only a short time. Andy who painted trays, Nicola who helped at the far North Hotel, her Polish friend who ran boat trips. Sue and Ian Gunn doing leatherwork. Jake who made instruments,' as well as John another woodworker.

At the end of each 'season' there would be a celebration party, everyone brought a plate of something along with them to add to the festivities.

At this time the Army were very much in evidence. As well as a fuelling depot for their helicopters, all three of the forces used one of the buildings as a base. The craftworkers objected to the presence of armed men around their homes and workplaces. The troops were eventually persuaded to camp in the field opposite the village, and the building became the meeting hall for the Saturday Youth Club, run by Lotte Glob and also the Durness Youth Club.

By 1973 more new faces had arrived. Noel Bose was weaving, her daughter Jill doing tapestry, her son Oron started a boatyard, initially mending boats for the ferryman and 'Northern Lights.'

Dave Marshall, a woodworker, who it is claimed ran an old car off chicken droppings and his wife Russell who taught at the school in Durness had moved into the building vacated by Jan and Dave Young who had previously made clothes and marquetry. Jan and Dave also turned their home into a bird sanctuary rescuing any injured or weary birds.

Social gatherings were frequent and ceilidhs the norm, especially at Christmas. There were many musicians in the village who formed a band which played regularly in Durness Hall

usually to a large enthusiastic audience. 'The Crafties' were made up of Alan Dawson, who played guitar, Dave Illingworth on t-chest bass, Maureen Kerr on vocals, Connie Bose of fiddle and Dave Grey on mouth organ, tin whistle and mandolin.

The villagers often held informal meetings to discuss their problems and give support to each other. These gatherings tended to be more sociable than anything else. The Community council (Francis Keith, Christie Campbell, Grieve, and Donald) however set up a craft village committee comprising of Oran Bose, Dave Grey and Russell Percy. This committee was responsible for voicing the needs of the villagers, and maintaining the common grounds, though funding for external maintenance to the buildings and labour costs were met by the Community Council. The committee was also responsible for the vetting of new crafts people wishing to live and work in the village. A sample of their work or plan to be approved by the committee before they could enter the village. The H.I.D.B. (Highlands and Islands Development Board) were helping individual businesses financially, but tended to leave them to their own devices. Most of the businesses were run on a very easy basis, not commercially orientated or sophisticated.

Many felt pressured to leave from the strain of living in damp and uncomfortable houses or because of opportunities arising from outside, but most departures seem to have come from the availability of schooling for older children. The only secondary school was at Golspie. This involved the children being away from home for the week, returning only at weekends. The Durness locals seemed resolved to this, as their parents had to endure it. But many felt it better to move nearer the school, others ventured southward feeling they could receive a better education there, though Golspie is one of the best secondary schools in the north of Scotland, excellently equipped to sixth to approximately 15~20 pupils in each class. Many attempts were made to gain more local secondary schooling, but failed due to economic reasons, 'the recession' and because an alternative school had been recently built at Ullapool, Unfortunately, due to lack of resources this was not as well equipped as Golspie and still involved long distances and separation.

The Craft village children fitted in easily, through primary school, to being locals but many later left for the bright lights, bustle and opportunities of the big cities.

The sale of council properties to tenants in 1980, under Thatcher's Conservative government, brought a welcome relief to those who lived and worked in the village. It gave them the security and incentive to improve their buildings, as any previous improvements had to be left on departure, without any compensation. It also brought another tide of new faces and businesses to the village. At this point in its history the village had acquired a cow, two calves, and a goat kept by Chas and Les who had initially dived for clams at Loch Eriboll, but when their children were born Les made jewellery while Chad and Joy Fraser-Hall, now ran the coffee shop, supplying fresh crab to their numerous customers. On one occasion an indignant lady, customer demanded that the crab paste sandwich before her be taken away and fresh crab meat, as offered on the menu be given. Chad returned minutes later with two heals of bread, a writhing, live crab between them. After a brief scream the lady was silenced, and ate her crab paste sandwich without further complaint. While Chad 'terrorised' his amused customers with his own style of service. Oran Base had purchased the old worm farm when it folded and was involved in building boats, full time. He built the ketch which took John Ridgeway around the world, and many other smaller vessels.

Balnakeil Craft village was the first establishment of its kind in Britain, and the only one owned by its residents. In 1982, with the help of the H.I.D.B. who bought the buildings and rented them to the villagers, with the option in the future to buy the group of properties, the villagers were able to set and open the visitors' centre. This held a lounge where videos were shown, a

coffee shop, run by the villagers and an exhibition room where their work was displayed along with a history of the site and area and those who presently lived there. The H.I.D.B. also arranged visiting lecturers from the Arts Council to give talks and show their work. Topics included calligraphy and pottery. Craftpoint also gave financial help to some of the businesses, though they proved to be more intrusive in how the business handled this aid, than the H.I.D.B. Craftpoint organised courses for the craftspeople on selling techniques and generally pushed them towards a more commercial approach to their crafts. The pressure was on to open regular hours hide their washing lines and animals and clean up the image of the craft village.

The village had always been given a name for being full of drop out hippies and gypsies. Many of the tourists were aware this was not the case, but quite appreciated the 'lived in' look and relaxed atmosphere of the village. Some of the craftspeople, however, were glad for the opportunity to try and step out of their previous image.

With the aid of Paul Reid, book-binder, who had come to the village, with his wife Anne who wove tapestries, the clean-up operation began. In 1983, Reid helped to set up the Balnakeil Craft Village Community Co-operative Limited. This was not meant to represent the village as a whole, but was set up as a separate business within the village to provide office facilities and services to the residents businesses, and visitors. It took over the running of the visitors centre and coffee shop provided both social and office facilities, co-ordinated publicity for the village in the form of a brochure distributed 'and revised yearly, all around tin country. It also undertook the maintenance of the common grounds.

Through the co-op and regular meetings projects were raised. With more enthusiasm and grant aid than careful planning, not all of them worked. The bus service to Thurso and Inverness etc. proved unreliable and within the year was in financial difficulty, similarly the office equipment proved to be a financial burden rather than an aid. But they also had their successes. The set up of the visitors' centre and coffee shop most prominent along with their 'cleanup' campaign.

In 1984 the 'local' monthly magazine "The Village Voice" appeared edited by Ishbel Macdonald and produced by Laura Wright, it carried articles on local news, alternative forms of energy and technology, environmental problems and how to help advertisements for fund raising or charities on an international level as well as a local. It advertised videos available at the centre, items for sale, news of the Crèche and other activities for the children along with poems, stories and articles written by the villagers themselves. It aimed to raise ideas. Starting a wholefoods, and kept everyone abreast of things with a potted version of the Co-op management committee meeting minutes. Although only four issues were released there is hope for more in the future.

Many people have come and gone in the craft village some staying only briefly others since the 60's and 70's.

Time has seen the coming and going of many, Paul and Anne Reid, Ian Laidlaw's woodwork, Deirdre Minoguels knitwear, Christine and Alistair, Yvonne Brown,' the sculptures of Dave Gray and the Dawsons, the Peresys, the Marshalls, Young's are more, but in their places have come new people Anne and Innis Mitchell, knitwear and woodturning, Cathy and Alf who are involved in marquetry, Harry and Maureen Munro, lapidary, stone and horn crafts, Jane Goulden and her rag dolls. Iris with her enamelled works, Judith Israel, tapestries. Ishbel and Ludo who has cultivated an organic garden, Ronnie and Gwen who produce candles, children's clothes and toys. Anne Walker who does patchwork and appliqué and embroidery, her son Ken who has an incredible collection of drywoods (unfortunately not on show to the public) Grahame Jones, a painter and the Weatherheads who have taken over Far North Hotel.

The long standing residents Miss Mackay, Lotte Glob, Dave Illingworth, Alan Herman, Noel Bose, Liz Harvey McInnes, Hugh and Molly Powell. Chad and Joy Fraser-Hall, have remained to see the newest villagers arrive in 1987. Barbara and John 'Carbreek' Morrison with their children who intend to set up a hairdressing salon. Joe who sews and knits. Regis the Frenchman, and the proposed new crab factory where Oron once built his boats, which would employ a number of people.

Due to financial pressure the Co-op management committee resigned last year. The interim Co-op management Committee consisting of Ian Campbell - former coffee shop manager, Ishbel Macdonald and Ronnie Lansley will gather a full co-operative general meeting on the 12th March 1987 to decide whether to continue or disband the co-op; since the H.I.D.B. received an offer for the property used as the Visitors' Centre, the villagers (who are members) must vote either to purchase the buildings or not in which case the Co-op as it stands must fold. But first they must elect another two members to the management committee. Despite this rather sombre episode, the atmosphere enthusiasm for living and working in the Craft village, continues and will continue with each new villager who settle regardless of Co-operatives, governments or any other external bodies.

### **A personal prospective.**

#### **June 1997**

Many articles and reports have been written about Balnakeil Craft Village for many reasons and by many authors. Some have lived and worked here for some time and written of their interpretation and experiences, some have visited and written objectively on some aspect of interest or curiosity, some have used the concept as a subject for dissertation and some have recorded for tourist magazines. Each feature has presented an image at some stage of its progress. This composition is produced as an experience from being part of a developing community, one of the first of its kind in Britain and knowing that Balnakeil stimulates attention from people encountering the circumstances. A varying account from every inhabitant can be relayed and to this end perhaps the complexity, intricacy and uniqueness of Balnakeil can be appreciated.

Balnakeil Craft Community was not initiated from members and not of a popular idea of community; living under one roof in a spacious house or multi roomed building with loads of outbuildings and pulling and sharing resources, experiencing self discovery and processes of open communications. Communal living is practised rather than attainment of living to a model.

The district where the site was constructed is in itself a close association established by generations of family history with structures and parish traditions and a population size where every person is known. People came from various walks of life and parts of the world to live and work in Balnakeil Craft Village and their thoughts and expectations were not always the same as those indigenous and native. There are abundant reasons why Balnakeil Craft Village came about and differing views to the purpose. The sequence of events which led to the appearance of the site and the sequence of events that give the peoples history are not clear cut although generalisations have been accepted and become established as the continuing account. From advertising in 1964 the response was enthusiastic and was known as the Far North Project. The buildings were to provide working and living accommodation for craft workers and their families who through their own commitment would create a new community to pursue their own enterprise in an unrivalled environment The buildings were bare concrete shells with no plumbing or electricity, some with no glazing and were barely habitable, architectural recognised in their layout - flat roofs and water towers. A range of empirical visionaries came

north to from the first Craft Village in Great Britain, A village where craftsmen and women in community drew upon the enchantment of their surroundings to create new formations, new ideas, new products.



IMAGE 155 THE OLDEST IMAGE I CAN FIND OF BALNAKEIL, FROM YVETTE BROWNS SCRAPBOOK ARCHIVE.

The first fifteen years were under the jurisdiction of the Highland Council and people wishing to rent buildings were interviewed for their acceptability and ability to produce for sale items of craftwork. There were no discussions with residents after moving in regarding further elements. In 1980 the village was sold to the sitting tenants and the individual freehold units are all independently owned and operated. Anyone can buy their way into the village and numerous people for varied reasons have come and gone at differing stages of their lives. The lifestyle is the fantasy of many but very few are willing to sacrifice anything to experience the life. About twelve to fifteen crafts appear to be the average at any one time working at different levels with different commitments, ambitions and aspirations and crafts of every persuasion have been functioning. Not all the populate have employed themselves in crafts; self-sufficiency, riding school, hotel, coffee shop, guest house, worm factory, boat building have all been enterprises operating in the Craft Village. Developing a business or at least working for oneself to earn an income has been almost essential for the inhabitants and has from the Highland Council stance been seen as a locality for individuals to make a business start. Generally the business have succeeded and moved on or failed and moved on or remained single proprietor operations. It is not difficult to earn a living from tourism as there is a large number of people who visit the craft village and are willing to buy. The contrast of commercial features, personal factors and visitor attractions are closely interlinked with the individual commitments and objectives. The preference of priorities is dependent on the agreement of the ensemble and has been contended and unresolved to any great degree. Three people have been residing at Balnakeil for over twenty five years and although all arrived with partners now live

themselves. The longest resident is the Danish Ceramic Artist Lotte Glob and in her own right Lotte has recognition for her works far out with Balnakeil. Approximately 200 people have lived in Balnakeil Craft Village. People have various motives for leaving and until 1994 children of secondary school age had to hostel away from home to attend school 100 miles away returning home only at weekends. This was found to be unacceptable to many young families who originally moved to the way of life to have closer family relationships. There are presently 20 households of 28 adults, 22 children, 17 individual crafts, a boat building yard, and proprietor of the Cape Wrath Coffee bar, Proprietor of the Cape Wrath Ferry, a boat designer and the hostel of Aberystwyth University. Children have flourished in this setting and many safe childhoods have been experienced. For the first time there are no expectant mothers and preschool children. Presently there are two units for sale.

There is no doubt about the human interest story that can be generated from such a place attracting and offering life styles slightly different from the generally accepted as normal. A concept on the verges of conventional society bounded and restricted by the same laws, rules and regulations, but where the social norms of acceptance and expectations are conditions the individuals have imposed themselves at the various stages of progression. The interactions of the individuals are at various levels and individuality seems an undeclared acceptance. The relationships of the residents establishing a community development in an unknown situation is an ever changing circumstance. The community idea has led to the relationships being very much individual personal bonds with a central essence of a whole which holds together as an entire entity. Coming from a technical background in the Veterinary and Biological Sciences and the first to purchase a property on the open market without the vetting procedure I have been a permanent resident since 1981 brought up two children in this atmosphere of acceptance and understanding and earned a living from hand made crafts. At first sight Balnakeil Craft Village can look an ominous, unfriendly, formidable place, a gloomy assembly of concrete buildings that is H.M. Forces contribution to architecture. The site was commandeered for construction of an intended early warning radar station and supporting barracks. In 1954 it was obsolete before it was complete and abandoned, all but the use of two units. The X military structures do not lend themselves to being prettified. Each building has a plot of ground and the remainder of the land is owned in common by 22 property owners. Some of the buildings have been further divided internally and split for sale since the original sales in 1980. The dwellings are all at various standards of refurbishment but most are weatherproof, insulated and centrally heated making comfortable homes and working environments. As the years have progressed and alterations and upgrades have transpired to the properties their value has increased and no longer can the enthusiastic craft worker with no finance use the village as a starting point, people now have to invest in a purchase and not necessarily be dependent on earning a living from craftwork. The village does lend itself to diversity and the benefit of community maturity could be attained from this.

In 1982 to provide a focal point for the village a Visitors Centre was opened, designed and furnished by the residents housing a permanent exhibition of craftwork from the village, a history of the Craft Village, a lounge and coffee shop. In 1983 Balnakeil Craft Village Community Co-operative was formed, a social development project which involved grant assistance from development agencies, to provide facilities and services to residents, craft workers, independent business and visitors and produce employment. A coherent aspiration from a loose collection of people involved or interested in living collectively sharing views, feelings and experiences without selfish intentions; being economically reliable was the basic philosophy underlying all the discussions. The population of the Craft Village at that time was 48 (33 adults and 15 children) in 20 households. 37 shares were issued to 26 shareholders and by October 1986 79 shares had been issued to 36 shareholders. The response to the Community



Cooperative was mixed from the residents, hostility to total commitment. The Community Cooperative was wound up in late 1986 and can be summarised as producing a clash of ideologies. Most of the people actively involved in that episode no longer reside in Balnakeil. There are no commonly owned operations and no umbrella arrangements formally occasionally informally, no meetings or gatherings of all the inhabitants, although small groups occasionally get together for activities of common interest or concern, people working together cooperatively on business ventures, producing coordinated craftwork products and shop sharing.

Balnakeil located in the wild and beautiful area of Cape Wrath, Sutherland is the most North Westerly point on the mainland of Britain taking its name from the Gaelic word meaning place or village of the church. Sited on the tourist route of the Highlands attracting many visitors a wild place, rugged, a harshness with long winters, uncompromising yet possessed of a beauty and a sense of time lessens that makes it utterly compelling. It must be the most scenic and remote area of mainland Britain, magnificent mountains, stunning seascapes, beautiful beaches and friendly people. Life moves at a more slower and traditional pace with close connection to the conditions of the environment. The natural world may be studied in different ways and classification and categorising of ecological concepts of nature emphasis the complex interactions between man and nature. Ecologically, the term community is a tangible but very complex concept involving all the living organisms and systems of the ecosystem implying relationships and in popular use is a term coined for human groups with a common interest; socially, sharing responsibilities making group decisions and behaving cooperatively which to achieve in most sections of our society requires opting for an alternative to familiar, customary life styles. In the context humans have created a supraorganic culture, Balnakeil, being a conscious idea for amelioration on countless conditions, could be regarded as a modern experiment in Human Social Evolution. Human Ecology is highly specialised for significant results, but many recognised writers acknowledge the importance of instigating autecological studies of our own species and synecological information on urban ecosystems. There is plenty potential for individuals and the population to develop and improve but this is the recognizing of how the individual identifies improvement and development. Balnakeil has progressed in a natural sense and has prevailed as a succession of transitional situations with an underlying resistance, producing a definite betterment of living conditions and standards of living as the entity advanced. The relevant solitude and assemblage of like minded people engaging in a variety of skills gives a very diffuse collective atmosphere. Balnakeil possesses an ongoing originality, a creative and varied life story and a place of different aims, interpretations and values to different people having a recognition and consideration of a safe preserved location.

#### **Article from the Residents – 2014.**

The Craft Village buildings, once cold draughty barracks, are being continually upgraded by their owners, with double glazing and central heating now the norm. Occasionally, buildings become available for sale, bringing new residents with different skills and interests into the community. The Village has no particular guiding ethos or principle, but people with imagination and energy are always welcome.

Currently, there is a diverse range of residents. Businesses include two studio galleries selling paintings and prints, a ceramic and textile artist, a mosaic artist, a boat builder, an enamel artist, a woodwind instrument repairer and wood turner, a stained glass artist, a mixed media artist, and a leather worker. Some operate premises open to the public, others work by commission and to order. Some are seasonal, some open all year round. There are self-catering holiday lets, a bookshop, gallery and restaurant, an artisan bakery and an award winning chocolatier with coffee shop. A masseur and hairdresser is our newest resident.

The operator of the Cape Wrath ferry lives with his family in the village, and a copy editor and a software designer are able to work remotely from here. There are also retired members of our community, the oldest of whom is over ninety. From the earliest days, the population of the village has tended to be multinational, and this is still the case. Whilst the majority of residents are Scottish and English, there are individuals from Germany, Austria, South Africa and Belgium. There is no organising group or committee. Those operating businesses do so independently of each other, although there is some joint advertising. Much of the Craft Village land is held in common by the residents, and group decisions are made about its upkeep and management.



IMAGE 156 BALNAKEIL CRAFT VILLAGE GATE SIGN

## Faraid Head

Walk along Balnakeil Beach and up the tract through the dunes, and on to the peninsula of Faraid Head (Fear Ard – or High Fellow) where high cliffs rise to nearly one hundred metres above sea level at Flirum. The diagonally banded cliffs to the left were formed more than three hundred million years ago by a process known as thrusting and faulting. At this time, the cliffs were alongside Whiten Head ten miles to the east. Puffins and other seabirds, porpoises, seals, dolphins and whales may be observed. From the deserted war time buildings there are commanding spectacular views over to Cape Wrath, Loch Eriboll and Whiten Head.



IMAGE 157 THROUGH THE SAND DUNES ON FARIAD HEAD

Faraid Head peninsula consists of a block of gneiss tilted towards the southwest and terminating on its north and west sides in high cliffs. It is connected on its southern margin to another tilted block, this time of schist. Both of these blocks appear to be fault-bounded, and another fault-line runs west-east across the south side of the bay separating the metamorphic rocks from limestone. Thus the structure is simply that of two blocks tilted towards the southwest, presenting an inclined plane up which large quantities of sand are progressing in a north-easterly direction.

Marine erosion is active around the headland, but on the east side of the peninsula a wide abrasion platform has formed which gives a measure of protection to the cliffs which are now mostly inactive. On the short east-west section, coinciding with the faulted block edges, however, active cliffing is still proceeding, and the existence of stacks, such as the Clach Mhòr na Faraid testify to the cliff recession which has occurred.

A military installation exists on the top of Faraid Head accessed by the road track leaving the far end of the first beach of Balnakeil. This road suffers from submergence by sand, and access along it is not possible for normal vehicles and is cleared when military activities are scheduled.

### **Story of the Faraid Head Military Installation<sup>52</sup>**

The final stage of the ROTOR Programme (Rotor 3) was to provide radar cover for the north and west of the British Isles which were still exposed to attack and to give low and surface level cover over the Atlantic, the absence of which prevented effective action against low flying enemy aircraft. Three new CEW stations were to be built at Faraid Head, Aird Uig, and Saxa Vord equipped with Type 80 Mk 2 and Type 13 radars. The new CEW operations buildings were to be above ground, heavily built and designated R10, similar in internal layout to the underground R1 bunkers. Rotor 3 included five new Chain Home Extra Low (CHEL) stations equipped with Stage 1 radar equipment to enable detection and tracking of low flying aircraft. (Stage 1 comprised Type 7 Early Warning [E/W] GCI, Type 14 E/W search radar E/W or Fighter Control [CEW station], Type 13 H/F and a Type 15 [mobile Type 7] - radars from this list were installed as required) The proposed stations were at Kilchiaran, Murlough Bay (demolished), Prestatyn, Snaefell and West Myne (not built). These were to be heavily built operations blocks, designated R11; the above ground version of an R2 bunker.

Two new GCI stations were also proposed as part of the Rotor 3 programme, each equipped with a Type 80 radar and R8 prefabricated operations block. One at Ballywooden (Killard Point) in Northern Ireland and the other at Wick on the Scottish east coast. It is unclear if Wick was ever built. The proposed location was Hill of Ulbster the site of a WW2 Chain Home Low reserve radar station. It was hoped that The ROTOR 3 programme would be complete by 1957 and all technical aspects were classified as 'Super Priority'.

PRO File Air 2/2062 is the 'Secret Works File' on RAF Faraid Head; this file was opened on 18.5.1953 and lists the various dispersed sites, equipment and cost of the station. The total cost, including all the sites was £250,000. Authorised equipment for the station was one Type 1A radar (Type 80), one Type 13 Mk V1, one Type 14 Mk IX, six Type 64 consoles, two Type 61 consoles, one 'A' Scope, three video mapping units and one radio link in lieu of a GPO phone line. This linked to the VHF transmitter site at Mael A' Bhuic. It is unclear whether the Type 80 radar was ever installed although some of the bases for the steel gantry that straddled the building are visible.

By the target completion date of 1956 some ROTOR stations had already closed down and the introduction of the 'Comprehensive Radar Station' as part of the '1958' plan had no place for Faraid Head. The equipment was dismantled on 4th February 1957 and the station was placed on care and maintenance on 27th August 1957. All remaining equipment and personnel were withdrawn from 1st September 1958 and the site was abandoned.

The head remained in MOD hand however and the Type 80 modulator building was renovated for use as a range control tower for the Cape Wrath and Garvie Island naval ranges. It still performs this function today. Most of the buildings on the technical site have now been demolished. They were located on a small plateau to the south and below the modulator building on the head. The position of each building on the site is clearly defined as the concrete bases can still be seen. One small building survives. Internally the modulator building has been completely refitted with kitchen, dormitory, radio room, crew room and a ladder up into the new control tower built on the roof.

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<sup>52</sup> Subterranea Britannica, Faraid Head Rotor Radar Station. Written by Nick Catford on 10 June 2004

Faraid Head is located two miles to the north of Balnakeil village. There is a metaled road but much of it is impassable without a four wheel drive vehicle as sand from the surrounding dunes has blown across it, in places up to a foot thick. The first half mile involves driving along Balnakeil Beach. Much of the area is free public access but the head itself, including the modulator building and the technical site, is fenced with limited public access when the ranges are not in use.



IMAGE 158 AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL "THE BEE" ON FARAID HEAD

In order to provide communication between the controllers in the R10 operations block at RAF Faraid Head and the intercepting aircraft, two VHF/UHF multi-channel radio transmitter and receiver blocks were built at remote sites to the south of Faraid Head. The blocks were remotely sited to stop interference and swamping of the radio signals by the radar arrays. Transmitter and receiver blocks come in two sizes, designated 'small' and 'large'; those at Faraid Head are small. Each site consisted of two buildings, the operations building and a standby set house. As built the transmitter site comprised the transmitter hall, mechanical and electrical room, store, workshop, staff room and toilet. The electrical room also housed GPO equipment with a tower and microwave link to the main operations site.

The two buildings stand at Mael A' Bhuic, another headland one mile south east of Faraid Head. Both buildings have been stripped of any original fittings and have been partly demolished as part of a training exercise. They are due to be blown up by the Royal Engineers as part of a future exercise. To the rear of the buildings four concrete mast bases and the stub of the transmitter aerial tower can also be seen. The smaller receiver block is located at Aodanm Mhor, a third headland half a mile south east of the receiver site. It has not been visited but can be clearly seen from the transmitter site. As built the receiver site comprised a receiver room, mechanical and electrical room, store, workshop, staff room and toilet. A VHF fixer site was also located at Durness. Initially the domestic camp for the adjacent Sango Chain Home radar station was used until the new camp at Balnakeil was built. This camp is largely intact; it was sold by the MOD in 1964 and now houses the Balnakeil Craft Centre.

## Kyle of Durness



IMAGE 159 KYLE OF DURNESS

The A838 road runs along the eastern shore of the Kyle of Durness in its southern section, with an unclassified road leading to Keoldale. The Cape Wrath road runs along the shore from the ferry slipway. This dates from the 1830s having been built to supply the lighthouse at Cape Wrath. A previous landing site towards the mouth of the Kyle was originally used and is the site of a ruined storehouse. This road was constructed in or shortly after 1828 to link a storehouse and slipway at the north end of the Kyle of Durness with the lighthouse at Cape Wrath. The storehouse and slipway went out of use in the 1830s, after another slipway was built at Ferry House, about 4km to the south, and a new section of road built to link that slipway to the existing road.<sup>53</sup> This is the slipway used to the summer excursion and access to Cape Wrath.

Land to the north of Keoldale is used by the Keoldale Sheep Stock Club, a joint farm run by crofters in the Durness area. Beaches along the shore of the Kyle are backed by narrow machair with few dunes. The western shore of the Kyle on Cape Wrath is uninhabited with the former farmsteads at Achiemore and Dail the only settlements.

Unlike the other inlets on the north coast of Scotland, the Kyle of Durness is not straight, but contains two major bends, the more southerly of which is a right angle. At the outer edge of this right angle, a sandy beach has formed, and behind it a machair slopes up to the 50m limestone plateau which lies between the Kyle and the village of Durness.<sup>54</sup> The shoreline is generally precipitous and rugged with intervening bays of sand or shingle. At ebb, it appears as a large field of sand. Near its entrance on the west side of Balnakeil Bay are bars and

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<sup>53</sup> Royal Commission on the ancient and historical monuments of Scotland

<sup>54</sup> Beaches of Sutherland, Scottish Natural Heritage

shallows that frequently shift their position with north winds. Entry is therefore denied to all but those smaller vessels with familiar crews. This firth is about ten kilometres long and averages over one point five kilometres wide. The Kyle of Durness washes over huge sand banks, which are quite beautiful but can make a dangerous crossing. It has never been used frequently for shelter or commerce and is little visited by vessels.

At Solmar, It is said that a wrecked ship lies in the mouth of the Kyle buried under the sand bars. Here there is evidence of small vessels that once frequented the Kyle. Set back from the site of a natural pier are typical community ruins of the 17th and 18th century people living in groups of four to five families. From Sutherland OS Name Books, 1871-1875 the Reverend J.M. Joass and Mr. John McKay states this name Sàilmhòr applies to a Shepherds dwelling situated about one half mile north east of "Loch Lòn na h-Innse" the building is one Storey high thatched and in fair repair. His Grace the Duke of Sutherland Proprietor'

Sol--mar could be derived from Old Norse, with sol- interpreted as 'muddy' (Johnston 1934, 298).

Information from Graham Bruce and David Morrison.

*House and barn the thin rectangle at top right. The other markings are cultivation strips and enclosures. Last occupied 1880's. Once part of extensive settlement between Balnakeil and Keodale most of which was cleared about 1830. The alkaline sand neutralised the acid soils making it ideal for cultivation, hence settlement from ancient times. The last people who lived in Solmar were Macdonald's, Meg Macrae's grandfather, Henry Macdonald was a descendant.*

*In 2016 after involvement with the Durness Highland Games since the revival the tribute has been bestowed on Margaret MacRae. Meg, since 1970 when the Durness games were rejuvenated, has missed only one; volunteering in some capacity, catering, clerking and pay clerk. Meg has been actively supportive in many other community groups and activities. Meg has been a teacher at Durness Primary School since 1975, teaching Durness children for 34 years, with seven years taken off to have her two sons Ewan and Neil. Meg was brought up in Loth and attended Loth primary school, Brora and Golspie secondary schools. In 1968 the family returned to Durness family croft where Meg can trace her ancestors back to 1841.*

Rivers empty themselves at the top of the Kyle.

The River Grudie, which consists of a number of burns which drain the northern slopes of Creag Riabhach, Farmheall and Ghias Bheinn. The bridge at the estuary to reach the shepherd's house was constructed in July 1986 by Condor Troop 59 Independent Commando Squadron of the Royal Engineers.

The River Dionard whose source is in the mountains south of Loch Eriboll and rises on the north eastern slopes of Meall Horn at seven hundred and seventy seven metres; its upper courses traversing Lochan Ulabhith, An Dubh Loch and Loch Dionard four hundred and twenty metres above sea level running a distance of twenty three and a half kilometres; is a rapid river especially when swelled by tributary streams. The river produces good numbers of salmon and grilse in the summer, as well as the more numerous sea trout. The Dionard is a spate river, requiring rain to give of its best but, on a falling spate salmon and sea trout can be caught in good numbers. The main runs enter the river from June onwards, with August perhaps the best month for salmon.

The River Daill rises on the slopes of Fashven flowing through Loch Airigh na Beinne and the smaller Loch Bad na Fheur and enters the Kyle near the mouth.

The Kervaig River rises in the Lochs na Gainmhich, Loch na Glaic Tarsuinn and Lochan na Glamhaich under the mountains of Fashven, Cnoc na Glaic Tarsuinn and Beinn Dearg and runs about five kilometres into the Atlantic Ocean near the most north westerly point.



IMAGE 160 KYLE OF DURNESS



## Laid



IMAGE 161 A838 THROUGH LAID

A township created in 1832-1835 referred to in early publications as Leathad to settle some subtenants from Eriboll and to relieve congested settlements established elsewhere after evictions. For some of the original inhabitants of Laid, this was their second enforced movement within a few years. A long defile of single and one and a half storey cottages, set on a rugged and rocky coastline on the A838 Durness to Tongue road. Each cottage, many now ruins or replaced with modern bungalows and a patch of land, enclosed by a massive dry-stone dyke constructed of stone cleared from the land to create patches of soil able to be cultivated. A rocky near lunar landscape and barren land contrasting with the greenness of Eriboll on the east side of the sea loch. The sea loch with diverse and plentiful supplies was the main provider of food. *It is a striking fact that cover the entire area of Laid there is no trace of any building earlier than 1835, nor any archaeological feature, not even a single hut circle. For six thousand years people appear to have felt that this ground was too poor to support any kind of permanent settlement.*<sup>55</sup>

The nickname of “Croppies” was associated to the Laid population while the people of Durness were called “Machairich” or field people. There is evidence of clay workings with small limestone kilns. A small gabled former school and schoolhouse built in 1894 of local rubble, reddish-tooled dressing and tall chimney stacks is now a holiday home. The role was about an

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<sup>55</sup> What to see Around Durness. Local History Archaeology Geology by Kevin J. O’Reilly and Ashley Crockford.

attendance of forty children at that time. The school was frequently used for dances and occasional weddings. There are many stories of a hard but happy life style in this community.

Kelp was harvested in this area for the manufacture of soap and glass to supplement wages but returns for hard labour were very small. It was not until September 1982 the first mains electricity arrived in Laid. In 1965, the township of Laid was not given very good recount, described as “artificially sited with crofting having never been successful and the township can be considered a failing community.” More recently with the advent of diversification on the Laid crofts, moves are afoot to re-establish Laid with its own identity and turn around the situation of neglect and decline. In March 1998 for the first time, a Laid Grazing Committee was elected by the shareholders of Laid Common Grazing. As well as aiming to produce a town development plan, efforts are underway to form geology and heritage trails. In December 1999 Laid residents were been told that they will not be able to receive watchable terrestrial television, the planned TV signal repeater unit will still not give the required amplification to the signal. They have been advised that digital television is the answer to their situation. This will allow all the present terrestrial channels except the ITV network including Grampian.

In August 2001 Laid Grazing Committee has had work started on establishing their heritage trail. Historic Scotland carried out consolidation on the bulging walls of the wheelhouse and listed the building as scheduled monument. The ancient building sited on Meall-an Feadain west of Laid was showing signs of ice damage. The affected walls were restored to their original state by careful mapping and numbering of each stone before the wall was taken apart. Noel Foujeg the archaeologist in charge of Historic Scotland visited the Bronze Age burial Cairns above the last house on the west of Laid and an initial survey reveals that they may be Neolithic. They have been listed for a more detailed survey on a return visit.

December 2001

The Laid Grazing committee representing the interests of the crofters is the only formal group within the Laid area and the residents believed that this group could not satisfactorily care for the interests of all the sections of the community. The Laid Grazing committee are currently embarking on an ambitious scheme to purchase the Common Grazing from Vibel the Lichenstine owners of the Durness Estate. Every one of the eighteen people present were resident on the west shore of Loch Eriboll to include Laid, Polla and Portnancon agreed that an association should be formed.

### **Napier Commission submission**

#### **At Kinlochbervie, Sutherland, 26 July 1883 - Donald Mackay, Laid, Port-na-Con.**

This crofting hamlet of Laid is the most recently formed of all the settlements, in consequence of the evictions previous to 1835, the year when I first left the parish. Laid then was of so little account that there were only some kelp-workers' huts on the shore, that any person could reside in and do what he liked, without let or hindrance. The mountain slope rises from the water side, and the hamlet has a frontage of nearly two or three miles on the slope. The road runs parallel with the sea to the village, and the houses are between the road and the sea. The formation of the surface of the mountain is quartzite rock, and above this there is a cairn of the same material, which is chemically the same as flint, and a thin skin of peat over this, with the cairn protruding, so that there are only patches here and there between the protruding cairn which can be at all tilled. In dry weather this is traversed by currents of air in the fissures, and when the soil is dry and pulverises, this communicates with the cairn above; and in winter or spring the rain falls upon the whole mountain slope and runs down, because there are no depressions in the rock to store it, and it comes through this cairn and wells up through the cultivated soil, so that the tilled land becomes flooded, and it washes away the soil. In dry weather the soil is simply peat

dust, which becomes, if there is a length of drought, as dry as chaff and nearly as light, and part is blown away with the winds. The general result is, that since the place was settled in 1835 many of the plots first brought under cultivation have disappeared; and with regard to the remaining plots, some half or more, the same process is going on, and in another generation or so the crofts will have to be left, because there will be no soil. There is a mountain torrent at the little hamlet, and there is a delta of gravel and quartzite sand of some three acres, where this stream enters the sea. The sand and gravel are not drifted away, so that this site, to any person of ordinary powers of observation and the least humanity, would be seen to be absolutely unfit for occupation. It was like penal servitude to put people to cultivate such a place.

The first man that was put there by eviction was from the sheep farm of Eriboll. He was sent there before the place was laid out. There was a fine green spot at the head of Loch Eriboll, where he had a small croft, and he was evicted, and settled where this stream is. He was a man who had served his country; he was a piper in the army, and was over in Ireland. He was a most inoffensive kind of man, I and my father went to see him on his death-bed. The last formed sheep farm was Rispond, and my maternal grandmother was evicted from Rispond, and had to settle here at Laid. Several other parties from Rispond sheep farm also settled there. There are altogether twenty-three families, but one of these, although in the same community, is the family of a keeper who has a croft. There are nineteen crofts, and one is a cottar, who has a small spot near the boundary, and pays no rent; and I think there are two sub-crofters. There are twenty-nine cows in the hamlet, I believe, and eleven stirks, making the whole number forty, which is nearly two beasts per family. There are, as far as I could ascertain, about 121 sheep, or five and a quarter per family. There is a population, taking an average, of a little over five to each family.

There is no land. The big sheep farms of Rispond, on the one side, and Eriboll on the other, would in my opinion accommodate more than the present population of the parishes; but there is no other way of providing for them. There is a fertile limestone island; the peculiarity of this place is that there are various formations of limestone, gneiss and micaceous schist; and in this peculiar place there is not a particle of light soil but it goes away.

No one is able to make a living out of the land. Since the potato failure it does not support them at all. The main benefit which they get from the corn produce in their crofts is to winter their beasts, and it is not sufficient for that; they have always every year to buy fodder for their cattle, to import it. One thing further that I should tell about the place is, that it is imperfectly sheltered; it is an even plane, which tells greatly against it. It is situated on the mountain slope, and there is no shelter from one end to the other. There is abundant shelter on the sheep farms about, but not at Laid. The only other means taken advantage of to get money by the most of the population is whelk gathering. These they commence to gather about the new year, and they continue to gather them until they commence the crop cultivation in spring. Engaged in this work, in the most inclement season of the year, are women and half-clothed children, which tells most dreadfully against the constitutions of the children. The herring fishing is very poor in Loch Eriboll; some years there may be a few, but ordinarily they are not there.

The marriageable young people are about equal in number, but I consider, especially the females, from delicacy of constitution and disease, very few are fit to rear healthy offspring. There is a number of young men, who have good constitutions, hardy and able. There are two families side by side, in which there are six young men who have been marriageable for the last ten years, and they have seen that the most misery is where there are large families. I think it is miserable that during youth these young men should not have sufficient subsistence, and I have been speaking to them, as I have been on intimate terms with them since I came, and they

told me what deterred them from marrying was the misery they would entail upon their offspring. I think it is a deplorable state of things, that young men who are industrious and prudent and of good constitution, should be deterred from marrying from these considerations.

Just before I was born Strathmore was cleared. I was removed when I was at the breast to Strathbeg, at the head of Loch Eriboll, and I resided there until I was twelve years of age, when my father removed to Nova Scotia. I have been residing at Laid for ten years.

See interview with Donnie Mackay who was brought up in Laid.



IMAGE 162 LAID EARLY 20TH CENTURY MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

## Cape Wrath



IMAGE 163 ARIEL VIEW OF THE PARPH AND CAPE WRATH FROM THE MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

The Cape Wrath Site of Special Scientific Interest covers 1014 hectares (2505 acres) of coastal land adjacent to the Garvie Island bombardment target and the Clo Mor cliffs, and on the west coast between the Bay of Kervaig and the cliffs immediately to the east of Cape Wrath. Within the “Site of Special Scientific Interest” SSSI are coastal, heath and mountain areas providing some of Scotland’s most notable examples of this type of wild habitat. There are huge seabird breeding colonies, and the whole area is home to long-established herds of red deer roaming unmanaged over the whole of this desolate landscape. Eighteen kilometres from Durness Village is Cape Wrath Lighthouse. The land between the village and the lighthouse is known as the Parph, The first road in the district, built in 1828 by The Lighthouse Commission, was constructed across the Parph (58° 37.5` N. Latitude; 50° 00.0` W. Latitude) to Britain's most north westerly point, what is essentially an unmade single track road built when the sole means of motive power was the horse, is itself something of an achievement. The land between the Durness and the lighthouse is moorland. The site is an undulating expanse of rocks, mosses,

acidic pools, and peat bogs, and home to an abundance of species. At 58° north, closer to the Arctic Circle than to London, Looking east to Clo Mor at two hundred and seventy four metres is the highest cliff on mainland Britain.

The Cape Wrath peninsula is no environment in which to be alone. You need precise planning, specialist equipment, experience of remote and isolated areas and sufficient food to sustain you for the whole of your time there. The unwary, or ill-prepared, have died there in recent years, victims of the severe weather or unfortunate circumstances, or both. The absolute isolation of the place can be very unforgiving, especially in winter. This really is a wild place.

The word Wrath is a corruption of the Norse word 'Hvarf' meaning turning point. Looking out to sea from the point are two low rocks, Am Bodach – The Old Man and A'Chailleach, The Old Woman. Cape Wrath and Cape Cornwall at completely the other end of the UK, are the only two Capes in Britain. Wrath is probably a very bad English approximation of the Gaelic word for Cape Wrath which is Am Parbh (pronounced "am parve"). In the Lewis dialect of Gaelic, it is Carbh not Parbh. Parbh is one of the few Gaelic place names to take the definite article, Am. Ultimately the Gaelic derives from the Old Norse for Cape in the sense of "Headland used as a turning point", so Cape Wrath actually means 'Cape Cape'.

A century ago there was probably about twenty five or thirty people permanently resident on the Cape. From 1935 to 1938 there was around thirty five people living on the Cape Side and apart from the lighthouse keepers, all the men were shepherds working for two local farms. Once there was a thriving population in this now desolate area a world of difference to the Cape Wrath of nowadays where, like many other small Highland communities, the houses lie sad and empty. Do the hundreds of tourists who speed past Achimore, Daill, Inshore and Kervaig ever give a thought to the families who lived there and the way of life now gone? Like many places in the Highlands it was once a lively community, until the people drifted away to less isolated areas.

### **An Article from December 1991**

*Mary Mackay reminds us that once there was a thriving population in this now desolate area. The only inhabitants on Cape Wrath now are the lighthouse keepers. How things have changed over the years. Like many places in the Highlands it was once a lively community, until the people drifted away to less isolated areas. Mrs. Jess Morrison of Sangobeg Durness, was a teacher on Cape Wrath from 1935 to 1938. At that time there was around thirty five people living on the Cape Side and apart from the lighthouse keepers, all the men were shepherds working for two local farms. There were ten children attending the school, which was situated at Achimore. The children had to go over to Durness to sit their "Qualifying Exams" and for their Christmas Party. It was thought at the time that the school was the most isolated on the mainland of Great Britain. Mrs. Morrison says that everything depended on the ferry and the weather. The highlight of the week was when the lighthouse lorry picked up the provisions from the ferry and delivered them to each household. The mail was delivered three times a week by the Durness postman who cycled the twenty two mile round trip. With no television or radio, the families made their own entertainment, playing cards and ceiliding in each other's houses. Mrs. Morrison recalls Donald Macdonald who hailed from Ullapool and was a beautiful singer of both Gaelic and English songs. He used to sing a lot of old Scottish ballads that are now unfortunately lost forever because no one thought to write them down. Another character living over there was Charlie Mackenzie, nicknamed "the doctor" by the locals. He was a great storyteller and "very fond of the drams". He had a wealth of knowledge of the Durness area and people never tired of listening to him. Although most of the families have long since left Cape Wrath, Hughie Morrison, who went to school over there still lives in Durness. John Mackenzie, who also lives in Durness was the last of the Mackenzie family to be born on the*

*cape side, but his family moved to Durness when he was five, as by then there was no school there. A world of difference to the Cape Wrath of nowadays where, like many other small Highland communities, the houses lie sad and empty. Do the hundreds of tourists who speed past Achimore, Daill, Inshore and Kervaig ever give a thought to the families who lived there and the way of life now gone?*

### **Cape Wrath Ferry**

Cape Wrath is inaccessible by direct road to reach it you must take a passenger ferry (which operates from May to September) at Keoldale across the Kyle of Durness which takes approximately a quarter of an hour. From the ferry at west Keoldale, a minibus runs to the Cape Wrath. The Kyle of Durness ferry is the smallest passenger ferry service in Great Britain.



IMAGE 164 ONE OF THE FIRST FERRY CROSSING TO CAPE WRATH. IMAGE YVETTE BROWN

Ferry rights were established by the Northern Lighthouse Board in the nineteenth century and the Board retained the right to operate the ferry across the Kyle until the 1980s. The Highland Regional Council acquired the ferry rights in 1983. Thereafter the right to operate the ferry connection to the lighthouse road has been leased to the present operator.

The slipway at the west Keoldale side of the Kyle of Durness was constructed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and has been improved and extended a number of times, most notably when the Northern Lighthouse Board established the ferry service, and during Sutherland County Council and Highland Regional Council ownership. Prior to the formation of the slipway a small sheltered cove approximately half a mile northwards was the landing point, at a place still known as “the well”. The slipway on the Cape Wrath side of the Kyle was constructed by the Northern Lighthouse Board to accommodate the ferry service during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It, too, has been successively lengthened and improved over time. There are still examples of the original winch and winding gear in place. This machinery was used to draw up the oar-driven wooden ferry boats in the days before small or portable marine engines became widely available. The small parking and turning area at the Capeside landing is a relatively modern introduction necessary in more recent years when two buses have been the norm for the Cape

Wrath lighthouse service.

From May to September the Cape Wrath ferry and Mini bus services carry passengers from Keoldale to the lighthouse. Two mini buses are transported over the Kyle of Durness on a purpose built raft towed by the smallest ferry operation in the land. Until recently the raft was a home constructed barge type vessel made from oil drums and palates. The frequency of the service is dependent on the state of the tide and weather conditions. Sometimes about two hours either side of low tide the service can stop altogether. There is a channel on the Cape Wrath side, so sometimes a smaller boat is used to ferry passengers across the channel and they have to walk over the sand back to Keoldale.

Ferryman John Morrison is reputed to be the first independent operator for a very long time, perhaps since 1827 when the lighthouse was built. The service has been operated continuously since 1984 by John Morrison, a native-born highlander. The Northern Lighthouse Board used to employ a man to operate it living in the first house on the Cape Side. In 1983, the Board sold the slipway, house and ferry rights to the Highland Regional Council and they are leased to an individual. Walkers heading to the lighthouse, or over to Sandwood Bay and back via Kinlochbervie, cyclists and visitors, young and old take the ferry ride there and back. The winter service is considerably scaled down with no transport on the Cape side except Balnakeil Farm and MOD. There are holiday houses and the Mountain Bothy Association has a bothy. The ferry service has been used to take over indiscriminate articles including tar for the road surface but this is more modern being flown over by helicopter.

On completion of the ferry trip there is an optional bus which takes you to the Cape Wrath Lighthouse. The bus trip takes approximately half an hour each way, the entire excursion takes approximately two and a half hours.

### **The Road to Cape Wrath**

In 1961 Paul Brown met Mr. D.R. Fasham Sutherland Development Officer and along with enthusiastic support of developing Balnakeil Craft Village they discussed the opportunity to create a service that would carry passenger visitors to the most north westerly point of Cape Wrath. Mr. Fasham wanted to give the opportunity to local people and called a public meeting to present his ideas and seek takers. No one took up the prospect and Paul Brown saw the potential, sat a public service vehicle driving license, bought a mini bus and started the first service in the summer of 1963 on a very informal basis. In 1964 he was more organised and publicised the excursion widely.<sup>56</sup> Tom Weir champion of the wild places, veteran broadcaster, and naturalist was also a renowned climber and author was on the inaugural trip and wrote about this in *My Month by Tom Weir*.

The bus service started by Paul and Yvette Brown was taken over by Iris and Donnie Mackay in 1982 until 2010 when James Mather, Iris's nephew replaced iris and Donnie to operating the enterprise.

#### *Cape Wrath Mini Bus Service stays in the Family*<sup>57</sup>

*This is a significant business enterprise to the economy of Durness. Prior to Iris's passing in November Last year she had announced that the 2010 season would be her last operating the mini bus service to Cape Wrath. Transport has been in the Mather family for years; with her brother Michael working for the Sutherland Transport and Trading Company, driving daily to and from Lairg until the opening of the Kinlochbervie High school when he transported pupils daily to and from Durness for 10 years before retiring. Iris's mother had the local school*

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<sup>56</sup> From an interview and scrap book archive with Yvette Brown. The image is of the first mini bus on Cape Side.

<sup>57</sup> Article for the Northern Times



*contract runs. This started with the family car, and then a Bedford mini bus, driving which Iris passed her PSV driving test. Iris took over that contract and had been the provider of school transport in Durness ever since. Michael's son and Iris's nephew James will continue the family enterprise and take on the responsible role of operator of the Cape Wrath mini bus service. This was Iris's wish and maintains the family tradition. James will become responsible from this year for the popular Cape Wrath mini bus excursion during the summer months. James lives and works from the Mather family home Breamar, where he works the croft, has employment with the RSPB and is an experienced and successful inshore fisherman and a renowned piper. James has plans to try and improve the Cape Wrath experience and address some of the concerns that such a remote and unique excursion has.*



IMAGE 165 ONE OF THE EARLY MINI BUSES FOR PUBLIC EXCURSIONS ON CAPE SIDE IMAGE FROM YVETTE BROWN

The popular Cape Wrath mini bus excursion to Cape Wrath during the summer months has been a major development put on a regular footing. The occasional service was operated prior to 1982 but with legal directives being enforced then Iris was in a position to provide a regulated service. Iris drove herself for about fifteen years to the lighthouse and would return for the school run and back to Cape side. The original rafts to transport the busses over were very much make shift boats strapped together. Today the arrangement is much more sophisticated with a locally made barge available for the purpose. In all the time she has been involved only one bus has been lost this was due to an engine fire on Dail brae! All busses have to be legal with tax insurance and certification of road worthiness which is an immense commitment for two vehicles on a track road with the need to transport fuel and any spare parts for running repairs and regular service over the Kyle of Durness. The logistical arrangements require a great deal of organisation. The task not made easier by the narrow and only basically

maintained single track road for eleven miles to the lighthouse. Driving requires specific timing for vehicles meeting and passing on route coordinating with the passenger ferry ensuring people are not stranded and left waiting at the start and destination points. The road takes its toll on the vehicles.

An expedition along what is fundamentally a very basically maintained single track, the first road in the district, built in 1828 by the lighthouse commission, From Keoldale west from the ferry point to Cape Wrath is eleven miles. This is the road the bus travels in the summer taking visitors to the most north westerly point. A very popular excursion along a poorly maintained road and timed to allow busses to pass at appropriate points without causing difficulty. The Cape Wrath road is rough but has some magnificent views. From the bus, several interesting landmarks can be seen. The lighthouse road from the ferry landing stage at West Keoldale was built entirely with muscle and horse power in 1828 and adopted as a county highway maintainable at the public expense within a few years of its completion, although as beneficial users the Lighthouse Board always covered the majority of the maintenance and repair costs. The road was built to accommodate nothing larger than horse and cart transport. The first section of road towards the lighthouse (officially designated the U70) was built by the Northern Lighthouse Board when the ferry rights were established in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Increased traffic generated by wartime conditions and the establishment of a coastal watch station at Cape Wrath contributed to much greater motor vehicle use of the road, its eventual deterioration and periods of closure.

The white cottage was established as the ferryman's accommodation by the NLB on the site of a smaller dwelling. It is still known as Ferry House, is now in private ownership and is without mains water, drainage or electricity. The road is quite narrow and the initial gradient diminishes as it borders the western shore of the Kyle of Durness, gradually gaining height to views along the estuary towards the north Atlantic. At low water the exposed sandbars make a narrow channel for the river Dionard. There is always a shallow river channel to the sea whatever the state of the tide, though the sandbars are constantly shifting.

As the road reaches the level it crosses two substantial stone arch bridges built over small burns, and reaches, at ten miles to go, Achiemore, a substantial stone-built farmhouse to the right. Just beyond Achiemore, on the left, is the first military vidette, decorated in large black and white squares. This is the beginning of the Cape Wrath Bombardment and Firing Range; from here to the second vidette, is MOD land. Immediately to the right of the vidette the foundations of the old Achiemore Side School remain visible. The original road to the lighthouse started at this point sections of the road still exists as a footpath. The ruinous storehouse situated overlooking the very northern end of the Kyle, almost at sea level, built by the NLB in the mid-1820s to facilitate the building of the lighthouse can be seen.

From the first vidette the road turns sharply left and approaches the River Daill and Daill House down a steep brae. Until relatively recent times the river here was crossed by a ford, which frequently impeded further progress. The small footbridge here is occasionally covered when the river is in spate. In the early days of the minibus service it was common practise for the driver, to have to check the river level. If the bus stalled in mid-stream it was expected that passengers would leap out and push.

The road bridge was built by the Royal Engineers and Royal Marines in 1981 as a “temporary moveable structure”. This is nine miles from Cape Wrath. The road climbs progressively and sharply up Daill brae. The peak of Fashven, at 460 metres the highest point on this part of the Cape, is visible to the left. Loch Inshore is on the right. Close to Inshore House, is milestone seven. Inshore House is an early 20<sup>th</sup> century building adjacent to a well-preserved 19<sup>th</sup> century cottage now restored. Inshore House was for a time a holiday cottage for members of the armed forces. It has recently been refurbished with the provision of separate shower and toilet facilities as accommodation for civilian and service personnel involved in the conduct of military exercises. The bridge just past Inshore House is the second of the two original small stone bridges. This bridge, together with the rather more impressive bridge over the River Kervaig some miles further along, determines the maximum size and width of the minibuses able to be used on the road.



IMAGE 166 CAPE WRATH ROAD DAILL FORD 1930S MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

The road crosses the Allt na Guaille a second time, via a wooden structure, on the gradual climb to the summit between the hills of Maovally on the left and Sgribhis-bheinn on the right. At the summit Kervaig Bay and Cape Wrath come into view. At five miles to go is the turnoff to Kervaig. The house on the beach at Kervaig is now used as accommodation by the Scottish Mountain Bothy Association.

To the right are the Clo Mor cliffs, at well over 900 feet tall the highest on the British mainland. Clo Mor is renowned for the numbers and diversity of seabirds nesting on the cliffs. Just offshore beyond the Clo Mor cliffs is An Garbh-eilean (Garvie Island), the main bombing target. With a further four miles to go the stone arch of the Kervaig Bridge and the second vidette marks the end of the military firing range. Kervaig Bridge has stood virtually unaltered since 1828. After crossing the bridge over the Kervaig River there is view into Kervaig Bay. The sea stack in Kervaig Bay is called Stack Clo Kearvaig commonly referred to as “The Cathedral” because of the twin spires with the natural window between.

With three miles to go the road follows the contours of the land, avoiding the necessity to ascend steep hills or cross geographical features by further bridges and cuttings. Traces of the many localised rock outcrops used as quarry sources may also be seen. At two miles there are

good views of the eastern cliffs of Cape Wrath 300feet high as the road takes a steep gradient and series of corners to the junction with the road from Clais Charnach, where the second of the two NLB storehouses, built to facilitate the delivery of equipment and building materials during the construction of the lighthouse still exists, exactly as it was erected almost two hundred years ago. There is a very well-engineered slipway at Clais Charnach, complete with the remains of rope wire haulage winches dating from the very earliest days of the NLB's involvement with Cape Wrath. The supply jetty was used when the lighthouse was stocked and serviced from the Pole Star supply ship. The seven green tanks at the jetty held thirteen thousand gallons of diesel each. Collectively they were able to supply the energy requirements of the lighthouse for one year. All the supplies were delivered by sea to Clais Charnach and hauled to the lighthouse two miles away by road. Traces of the peat-cutting beds may still be seen to the west of Clais Charnach cut and dried here by the families' resident at Cape Wrath, before being used for domestic heating and cooking. There have been no trees on the Cape within living memory, and therefore no wood for burning. The lighthouse personnel were provided with coal. The remaining wooden poles seen alongside the road in various places are the few survivors of the overhead telephone line installed to service the war signalling station in 1939. The Post Office Engineering Department erected 400 poles and eleven miles of double wire at the directive of the naval authorities. When the overhead line was replaced with a buried connection the poles were left in situ. Most of the more easily accessible ones were scavenged for firewood.

At one mile Sandwood Bay and the sea stack known as Am Buachaille, or The Herdsman can be seen in the distance about six miles away. Directly northwards there is no land between here and the North Pole, 3500 kilometres away eastern Siberia is the first landmass to be encountered along this line of longitude, westwards there is no land until the coast of Canada. Away to the south-west the Butt of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides can often be seen, around forty miles distant, and from the tip of Cape Wrath itself it is often possible to see Orkney. Rounding a corner the first sight of the lighthouse. The road ends at the lighthouse where there is an average of gales on thirty eight days of the year.

The large regular rectangular buildings on the left are the compressor and machine rooms built at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to power the newly-developed fog warning apparatus. The similar buildings on the hill top to the right were established by Lloyds of London as a radio signalling and receiving station. The small square building opposite the compressor rooms is a pump house built to raise water from a spring a hundred or so feet down the nearby cliff face. This is the only natural water supply at Cape Wrath. Lighthouse men, their families and signallers stationed here relied mainly for their everyday needs on rainwater, which was stored in large tanks and on a system of underground cisterns installed as part of the lighthouse construction scheme.

The original fog horn survives, although it is no longer used. The fog warning apparatus was first used on 1<sup>st</sup>. November 1905 and was terminated on 23<sup>rd</sup>. September 2001. Shipping now relies on global positioning satellite technology. There is a substantial stone wall at the fog horn house which provides a safe viewing gallery for those who want to be right at the very tip of the Cape. From here, the very north-western most point of Cape Wrath, it is sometimes possible to see dolphins and porpoises. Seals also appear in the cove at the Cape; they bask on the exposed rocks at low water. Fulmars, kittiwakes, shags, gannets, cormorants and puffins may also be seen, in season, soaring around the cliffs. Small fishing vessels and huge cruise liners pass Cape Wrath. Frequently warships of many nations pass very close inshore and

occasionally an enormous oil drilling rig can be watched being towed either to the Shetland drilling fields or to storage in the Cromarty Firth near Invergordon.

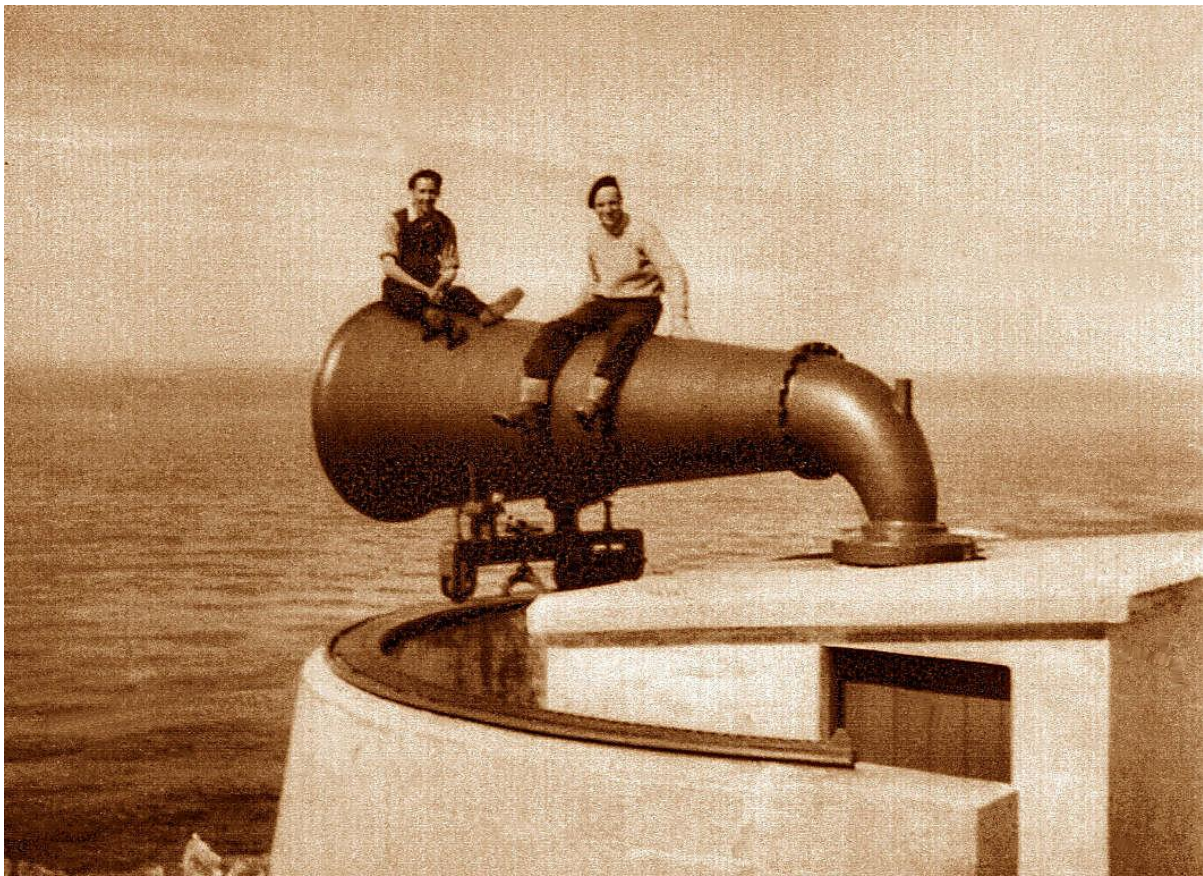


IMAGE 167 CAPE WRATH LIGHTHOUSE FOGHORN. MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

Originally there were eleven miles stones beside the public road, but milestone eight, the most easterly is now missing. A local tradition that the milestones were fabricated by lighthouse keepers cannot be substantiated but it would provide an explanation, why there is such a wide variation in their respective designs and dimensions. The milestones are likely to have been erected soon after the road was adopted at a public highway in 1833.

### **The Potential Logistical Problems<sup>58</sup>**

A report on an 'epic experience' for passengers as Cape Wrath minibus gets stuck in ditch. May 2011

*The managers of the Cape Wrath minibus service promise their customers an "epic experience", and that's exactly what they got during one recent excursion. The minibus with 16 passengers on board became well and truly stuck in the ditch after the verge gave way on the rough, 11-mile track that connects the 523ft high Cape Wrath lighthouse to the landing point for the ferry across the Kyle of Durness. Attempts to budge it using stones, a lever and a trolley jack were unsuccessful. Eventually, a quad bike, Ministry of Defence pick-up and truck all converged on the scene but the U70 track was still completely blocked for around two-and-a-half hours. One of the passengers was David Maclennan, who is retired and has a home in Melness. A veteran of the Cape Wrath journey, it was his fifth visit to the lighthouse, he has*

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<sup>58</sup> Published: 23/06/2011

*even cycled there on one previous occasion. He said: "Every other time I have gone by bus, it has been very straightforward but not on this occasion!" But Mr MacLennan said fellow passengers, who included a couple of European visitors, did not appear to be to be phased.*

*The incident happened on a return journey last week for the party who had crossed on the 11am ferry. Mr MacLennan says: "About two-and-a-half miles from the lighthouse, the verge of the road gave way and the minibus gently embedded itself in the peat ditch which had been made even softer by the overnight rain." Unfortunately, the area was out of mobile range and the ferryman was not answering his radio. So there was nothing for it but for everyone to pitch in and fill the ditch with stones, a hard task as there were few to be found on the surrounding moorland. An old, disused telephone pole was also uprooted to use as a lever. Continued Mr MacLennan: "Alan, the driver, resplendent in kilt and shirt-sleeves and brogues, was not ideally dressed for rescuing a ditched minibus nor crawling underneath it!" But when efforts proved unsuccessful two of the party walked back to the lighthouse to summon assistance. Meanwhile, the ferryman had been phoning the lighthouse to try and discover what had become of the minibus. Once the penny dropped, a truck was sent out from the lighthouse containing planks, a rope and a trolley jack. Extra help came in the form of the MOD pick-up and quad bike, sent out from the jetty.*

*"Eventually the combined brawn and skill of the rescue party got the minibus back on the road and the return journey was completed late. It was quite an adventure," says Mr MacLennan.*

*Running a minibus service in such a remote spot certainly represents an enormous logistical challenge, as operators the Mackay family well know. Iris Mather Mackay started the service in 1982 and developed it into a very popular and successful summer excursion. Following Iris's death last November, her nephew James Mather has taken over the reins. The vehicles have to be floated across the Kyle of Durness at the start and end of the season on a specially-built pontoon barge. A calm, wind-free day is usually needed and the operation has to take place during the slack water period at either side of high tide. And the fragility of the track also presents its own particular challenges. However the journey is well worth it with plenty for visitors to see. The Clo Mor cliffs at the lighthouse are the highest on the British mainland and home to important breeding populations of kittiwakes and guillemots as well as razorbills. Seals swim in the waters below. On a clear day, the isles of Lewis and Orkney can be seen to the west and north east.*

## **Another Route**

Cape Wrath is accessible on foot by crossing the river at Grudge and walking an unmarked route to Cape Wrath. The bridge at the estuary of the Kyle of Durness over the River Grudie was swept into the water during severe weather in January 2000. The suspension bridge original built in 1948 was replaced in 1986 by Condor Troop 59 of the Commando squadron of the Royal engineers. They completed a Galloway steel footbridge 50 metres long. The bridge is in frequent use for moving sheep from Keoldale Farm and to reach the shepherd's house. Condor Troop 59 Independent Commando Squadron of the Royal Engineers constructed the bridge in July 1986.

Or from Sandwood and walking the coast as part of the Cape Wrath Trail from Fort William. This is only recommended for the very adventurous. There are two mountain bothies on Cape Wrath, Strathan and Kearvaig.

Cape Wrath is a very remote and can be a very dangerous place to be isolated. During the winter months there can be no persons on the Cape Side to help anyone in distress apart from the occasional shepherd. As forages are being made again to live in remote areas the owner of the Ozone Café is resident all year.

## Woman Found 9<sup>th</sup> December 2002

*Shepherds on the Cape side last week discovered a woman in an unconscious state at Kervaig House. It is understood she had been living and sleeping from a tent for about three weeks and was surviving solely from the elements. Help was summoned and the thirty nine year old woman was flown to hospital in Stornoway where even with the help of a life support machine she died on Saturday night.*

## Cape Wrath Signal Station

A group of buildings known as the Lloyds Buildings, constructed about 1900 by Lloyds Insurers to monitor shipping passing round the Cape. They comprise of a lookout building and



IMAGE 168 LLOYDS BUILDINGS, CONSTRUCTED ABOUT 1900 BY LLOYDS INSURERS TO MONITOR SHIPPING PASSING ROUND THE CAPE.

accommodation blocks. These buildings are now in a ruinous state, although they remain substantially intact. Lloyd's of London established their signal stations in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to give notice of vessels in distress and requiring assistance. Lloyd's of London acquired the Cape Wrath site in January 1890 following a visit by the Secretary of Lloyd's to northern Scotland in October 1888. The site involved the provision of offices and accommodations for four families and owing to the remote positions were works of considerable difficulty, but were successfully carried out. Signalling was discontinued from 31<sup>st</sup> October 1932. The station opened in the 1930s and all passing shipping had to signal to the station information about cargo, port of departure and estimated time of arrival at next port.

Cape Wrath, Lloyd's Signal Station Including Admiralty and Lloyd's Signal Hut, Cottages and Outbuilding.<sup>59</sup>

Situated in one of Scotland's most remote areas and the most north-westerly point on the mainland, this cluster of buildings is a rare survivor of a formerly extensive series of similar installations erected across the entirety of Britain's coastline during the early years of radio, ship to shore, and eventually global communications. It is thought that these buildings may be one of the few survivors of their type in the UK. They form a significant grouping of communication buildings, set in a dramatic remote landscape and near an outstanding Stevenson lighthouse. Although in poor condition, what survives is largely in its original form

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<sup>59</sup> From Historic Environment Scotland.

and it retains its functional character. The site demonstrates the evolution of advancements in signaling in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is evidence of the importance of Lloyd's of London in shipping and ship insurance underwriting history in Britain. The Admiralty signal hut building first appears on Ordnance Survey map of 1896, the area having been surveyed for map making in 1894. From map evidence the building appears to have been erected no later than 1894 as it does not appear on the 1<sup>st</sup>. Edition OS map, surveyed 1873 and published 1882, and therefore was present prior to Lloyd's involvement with the site.

Lloyd's acquired the Cape Wrath site in January 1890 following a visit by the Secretary of Lloyd's in October 1888. This was to secure the site while Lloyd's decided whether to establish a station at Cape Wrath or at the Butt of Lewis. Subsequently, the Admiralty proposed that Lloyd's erect buildings for a joint station. As a result, the original site was surrendered in 1903. A different nearby site was leased from the Commissioners of Northern Lights, owners of the nearby lighthouse. The Commissioners also leased an adjacent site to the Admiralty where they had already installed a signal hut. In 1903, David A Stevenson was asked by Lloyd's to design and establish their offices and accommodation at Cape Wrath, and this was completed in the same year. Historic plans and drawings supplied by the National Lighthouse Board show the Admiralty Signal Hut being extant prior to the construction of the cottages. Stevenson has been documented as having made improvements to the Lighthouse at Cape Wrath in 1896. It may be assumed that Stevenson was familiar with the site because of the prior involvement with the lighthouse improvements seven years before. In 1908 Lloyd's and the Admiralty agreed that the station should be taken over by the Admiralty and signaling commenced on 1<sup>st</sup>. October 1910 by the Coastguard under this agreement as a day station only.

In July 1932 the Admiralty asked Lloyd's whether it would be willing to close the Cape Wrath station as it was considered too expensive to operate. Signaling was discontinued from 31<sup>st</sup>. October 1932. In the summer of 1939 the former Lloyd's buildings were reactivated as an observation post, listening station and signal station (logging station type CWHI 27a). Between 1941 and 1943 a permanent listening and radar installation was established in nearby Durness and the relevance of the Lloyd's site was diminished. In 1943 the Cape Wrath Signaling Station was down-graded to Coast Watch Station, with the main data-gathering function transferred to the newly established Royal Air Force radar, listening and transmitting facilities in Durness.

Lloyd's of London established their signal stations in the late 19th century, beginning with a station at Deal, Kent, in 1852. In 1882 Lloyd's stated that the signal stations were to give notice of vessels in distress and requiring assistance, of the state of the wind and weather, and to report to owners and others persons interested in shipping of all passing vessels that made their names known to the station. Information on the movement of ships on route from port to port was of direct benefit to Lloyd's underwriters, and made Lloyd's the recognised clearing house for global shipping intelligence. By 1891 there were 40 stations in the UK and 118 abroad, either controlled by or affiliated to Lloyd's. In the 20th century Lloyd's used wireless telegraphy to signal between ship and station. Ship owners used the signaling station network to communicate changes in orders to ships in UK and foreign waters. It was the Lloyd's network that intercepted the first distress call from the Titanic in 1912. Some stations, such as at Cape Wrath, were operated by the Coastguard (under the Admiralty, later the Board of Trade) who carried out commercial signaling on behalf of Lloyd's.

David Alan Stevenson (1854, 1938) was a lighthouse engineer who built twenty six lighthouses in Scotland. He was educated at Edinburgh University. Part of the renowned dynasty of Stevenson lighthouse engineers he was a cousin of the author Robert Louis Stevenson and between 1885 and 1886 he built three lighthouses with his uncle, Thomas Stevenson, and over the following 50 years, built a further 23 lighthouses with his brother, Charles Stevenson.



Hut roofless and in ruinous condition (2013); outbuilding and cottages in ruinous condition (2013).

Circa 1894-1930, signaling station complex at various levels of disrepair (2013) established by Lloyd's of London Marine and Commercial Insurers comprising signal hut, cottages for staff accommodation (by D A Stevenson) and outbuilding. 3 rectangular-plan single storey buildings, of different size but of similar construction, set in remote coastal landscape. Roughly tooled and droved, squared and coursed stone, base course, brick window surrounds and concrete render. Stone and brick stacks, some clay cans.

Admiralty and Lloyd's Signal Hut circa 1894 located 15m to the N of cottages and outbuilding, ruinous and poor condition (2013). Single-storey, 3-bay, rectangular-plan, gabled hut, now roofless without skews (evidence of former corrugated-steel roof covering, now collapsed inward). Coursed rubble, with cement render to exterior; cement rendered brick-lined walls to interior. Openings to SW, NE and NW gable end. Slate damp proof coursing evident. No interior features survive (2013). Later addition of stone and concrete observation platform with iron ladder, attached to building, also in poor condition. Stone lean-to to SE with door and window.

Cottages David A Stevenson, 1903. 3-bay single storey, rectangular-plan flat roofed terrace of 3 cottages facing NW. Small flat roof outshots to rear (SE) of each cottage (all now roofless), used as main entrance and accompanied by adjacent store. Rendered coursed rubble, ashlar quoins, stone copes, base course, slate damp proof course. Stone cills and brick surrounds to windows. Regular fenestration to rear (SE) elevation, arranged 3-3-3. Concrete hard standing. 5 tall coped square-plan stacks, some with clay cans extant. All openings boarded up (2013).

Outbuilding circa 1930, possibly former laundry and store, adjacent to cottages. Single storey, 3 bays with projecting central bay, rectangular plan and of similar construction to cottages with door and window openings to the inland-facing SW elevation only. One brick stack. No interior features survive. In ruinous condition with partial collapse at S corner (2013).

## **The Lighthouse**

Cape Wrath Lighthouse was first lit on Christmas Day, 1828. On The 17<sup>th</sup>. January 1977, a helicopter carried out the Cape Wrath relief, a history making moment as it was the first time in the Northern Lighthouse Boards' history that a shore lighthouse has been so relieved. Earlier, as the lighthouse was not easily accessible by road, all the stores including household goods, spare parts, the diesel and paraffin oil required to power the machinery were landed once a year by the lighthouse tender MV Pharos. This was one of the three ships whose duty was to convey stores to the isolated lighthouses along the Scottish and Manx Coasts.

In approximately 1795, a proposed improvement to navigation would be contributed if a lighthouse were erected at Cape Wrath. Some shipwrecks had happened in the previous ten years off the coast of Durness and it was considered the bearings of the rocks ought to be accurately ascertained. Built in 1828 by Robert Stevenson at a cost of fourteen thousand pounds, the buildings are extensive and spacious surrounded by a high wall. The white tower is twenty metres high with eighty one steps to the top. The tower is built of hand dressed stone and the rest of the building is constructed of large blocks of granite quarried from Clash Carnoch. The lighthouse tower and dwelling houses are listed buildings of Architectural and Historic Interest.

The Cape Wrath lighthouse stands over one hundred and twenty one metres high above mean sea level on spectacular cliffs facing the stormy Atlantic Ocean. To reach this point there is the choice of either a passenger ferry across the Kyle of Durness followed by a minibus ride of nearly eighteen kilometres on a narrow rough winding road through wild moorland, a twenty

five mile walk up the coast from an approach at Sandwood Bay, landing by sea or by helicopter. The latter was the method used to bring keepers and supplies until the lighthouse was automated. On The 17th January 1977, a helicopter carried out the Cape Wrath relief, a history making moment as it was the first time in the Northern Lighthouse Boards' history that a shore lighthouse has been so relieved. Earlier, as the lighthouse was not easily accessible by road, all the stores including household goods, spare parts, the diesel and paraffin oil required to power the machinery were landed once a year by the lighthouse tender MV Pharos. This was one of the three ships whose duty was to convey stores to the isolated lighthouses along the Scottish and Manx Coasts.

In 1978, mercury vapour lamps replaced the paraffin vapour burner and in January 1980, an electrically operated temporary power beam beacon was installed. In December 1980, a completely new gearless pedestal and lamp array system was inaugurated. As well as their primary duties of looking after the light, fog signal and radio beacon, the keepers did most of the maintenance work on the station. Four white lights flash every thirty seconds. Candlepower of 204,000 candles to a range of thirty nine kilometres and a fog siren in bad visibility emits a six second blast every ninety seconds. The power is provided by green brass generators, which replaced the original hand, wound clockwork motor.

The six-man crew operated a one month on one month off system throughout their four-year posting. The lighthouse went automatic in February 1998. A report in September 1998 revealed that there were no ferry service and minibus trips to Cape Wrath Lighthouse due to the adverse weather conditions. Although there was shepherds on the Cape Side during the day, a reliable source believes that Tuesday night of the 1st. September could have been the first night since the lighthouse was built in 1828 no people were on the most north westerly part of mainland Britain. All the holiday homes were empty, the bothies were deserted and two workmen had completed maintenance to the lighthouse the previous day.

An account in the Weekly Scotsman of August 1911 reports the Commissioners of the Northern Lighthouse had on hand a scheme for removal of the existing lighthouse. The plan was to move the light and horn from where they stood for eighty five years to a lower adjoining rock running four hundred and fifty seven metres further into the Atlantic Ocean. The reason for this proposed change was that the present lighthouse as it stood was too high. It was often more or less obscured by fog and mists that gather along these huge cliffs. Elaborate plans were explained involving the engineering difficulties of connecting the stack to build the lighthouse on with the mainland. To the left of the dyke, that surrounds the lighthouse and outbuildings lie the remnants of stones and old cogs and pulleys. This is the evidence of an attempt to build the lighthouse on the group of rocks that jut out from the towering coastline. A well was sunk, now filled in with boulders, to the first of the rocks to meet up with the narrow ridge, which runs along the top. A covered walkway was proposed of swing bridges to enable access to the lighthouse that was to be sighted on the furthest rock. This project was abandoned due to the difficulties encountered and the prohibitive costs. Science ran its course and improvements to lighting apparatus dealt with the problems.

Meteorological observations were taken and reported by the keepers but toward the end of 1997, when technicians moved in to complete work for automation the observations ceased.



IMAGE 169 CAPE WRATH LIGHTHOUSE

### **Ozone Café<sup>60</sup>**

In 1996, a Family from Glasgow moved to a rented building in the Balnakeil Craft Village with the intention of opening a cafe in the buildings at the lighthouse. They had obtained a lease for one pound per annum from the Highland Council for buildings around the lighthouse. In March 1997 a planning application to site a caravan selling snacks for the 1997 summer season was lodged with the aim of converting the building to the required standard to open in 1998. On the 14<sup>th</sup>. June, a converted caravan was taken over the Kyle to be the most north westerly snack bar on the mainland. The Ozone Cafe is situated at the lighthouse and is run by John Ure, among other things, “famous” for the Christmas Turkey Expedition. The cafe is open 365 days a year, 24 hours a day and serves a selection of hot and cold snacks. Toilets are available at the café.'

John manages to successfully run the adjacent Ozone Cafe and a bunkhouse with his daughter, Angela, and welcome more than 6,000 people a year. It was twenty five years ago that John and his late wife Kay arrived at this outpost on the most north-westerly tip of the mainland. The reason for being there was simple: “We had three small kids in Glasgow and didn’t want them to grow up there,” he says. They had joined a charity run by Historic Environment Scotland, which aimed to save buildings at risk. First, they tried to move to Ardnamurchan Lighthouse, further down the west coast but they missed that opportunity. Then they found buildings at Cape Wrath were available on a £1-a-year lease after being compulsorily purchased by the Highland Council. The lighthouse tower is still owned and operated by the Northern Lighthouse Board, but the former Principal Lighthouse Keeper’s house and the machine room have been transformed into a home, cafe and now a bunkhouse.

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<sup>60</sup> Interview with John Ure published online

John says conditions were harsh at first: "It was really hard to start with because there was no power and water. The first 10 years we spent renovating; it was derelict more or less." And it is no understatement when John, who used to run a roller shutter business, says: "It changed my life completely." Even with generators, thick walls and a water supply, the weather can make Cape Wrath a tough place; winds have been recorded at more than 100mph. John says: "February is the worst. It is storm force for most of the month. You can't go out really. You can get coal from the shed, but you can't go up the hill or anything like that because you would get blown off your feet – it shoves down some of the (drystone) walls." "I find it quite entertaining. Once you get the fire on you can sit and watch the sea being wild, it is quite nice. The walls of the house are quite substantial."

Despite the harsh climate, John says visitors, who come from across the globe, are attracted by the remoteness on one of the four corners of the British mainland. Many tourists arrive via the Kyle of Durness boat, followed by a minibus ride along the single-track road, while others use their own power to reach the remote spot, following long-distance footpaths, such as the Cape Wrath Trail, or arriving on mountain bikes. A new bunkhouse has proved popular among the walkers and mountain bikers, and it can be handy when the weather gets bad. "It is quite a regular thing to have people stranded. It's a case of sitting it out when the weather is really bad. As long as they get here, we can cater for them because we have plenty of supplies."

### **Loo with a view will be most remote in UK<sup>61</sup>**

The remotest public loo on mainland Britain is to be built more than 300 feet above the sea and in a bombing range! The toilet at Cape Wrath, the most north westerly point on mainland UK, is being constructed by the peninsula's only resident. John Ure is also converting the old machine room near Cape Wrath Lighthouse into a bunkhouse capable of taking ten people. He is also opening the loo for the public in a nearby outbuilding. Mr. Ure runs the most remote cafe in the country right next to the lighthouse and admits he has not seen any customers for more than a month. He usually serves around 3000 people a year, concentrated in the main season, when the area is not being used as a bombing range by the MOD. But getting to the Sutherland lighthouse, four miles from the 900-foot highest vertical cliffs on mainland UK, is not easy. It involves a seasonal ferry journey across the narrow Kyle of Durness and an eleven mile trip up a bumpy road. But still a few thousand walkers and tourists head to the cape each year.

"I think the main thing that has been missing up here is a public toilet so I am planning to install one in an outbuilding and have it open around May," said Glaswegian Mr. Ure, 63, a former engineer. "I am hoping to also have the full bunkhouse facilities open at the same time. But if anybody makes it up here before then, there are bunkhouse facilities in the cafe. "I once had seventeen people stay – they got caught in a storm last year. They just kept coming in twos and threes. It was a great night. The walkers are always good company. "I just thought it would be great to upgrade the facilities and a loo was desperately needed. There's none literally for miles and we are trying to discourage people using the place as a wild toilet. "I will also be offering evening meals and breakfast, a grocery shop in the cafe for the walkers, as well as among the best views on the planet."

The military are also increasing their use of Cape Wrath with the installation of three new major gun battery sites. The build-up comes at a time when the nearby community of Durness is bidding to buy the only land the military do not own at the remote peninsula. However, the group behind the community buyout bid said it believed the new gun emplacements would not pose a threat to its scheme to secure the area around the famous Cape Wrath lighthouse. Work

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<sup>61</sup> Northern times Published: 30/12/2016

has begun on what now gives the army and navy a greater ability to fire more regularly from inside the range to targets within it. Each installation will be capable of taking five artillery guns. The military usually shell from the land at the Faraid Head peninsula – opposite the cape at Durness – and often to Garvie Island. It is believed among the users of the new firing sites at Cape Wrath will be 148 battery, part of 29 Commando, Royal Artillery. The cost of the work at Cape Wrath has not been disclosed. A spokesperson for the MOD said: "Planning permission has been granted by Highland Council to develop five gun placements at three locations on the range."

### Old Reports



IMAGE 170 NEWSPAPER CUTTING, IMAGE OF A TRUCK BEING TRANSPORTED OVER THE KYLE FOR TRANSPORT TO CAPE WRATH LIGHTHOUSE

In 1860, a dogcart was hired from the Inn to take the travellers to Cape Wrath and back. The time of high water rendered it necessary to take the dogcart across the Kyle some hours before and the horse had to be ridden round the head of the Kyle as the ferryboat was not adapted to take horses. After a seven mile drive a cabin tenanted by a shepherd was the only dwelling between Durine and Cape Wrath.

Twenty revolving lights displaying alternatively red and white light every two minutes. Two men work the lighthouse. Two watches are kept during the summer and four during the winter. The average annual consumption of colza is eight hundred gallons. On the 19th June the lamps are to be lighted at 9.53pm and extinguished at 9am and on the 19<sup>th</sup>. December are to be lighted at 3.44pm and extinguished at 8.11am. The light can be seen for over forty two kilometres.

### Sir Walter Scott, Diary 1814.

*To the east of the lighthouse, above the bay of Kearvaig, are the highest sea cliffs in mainland Britain, the Clo Mor Cliffs. They have a drop of 281m (nearly 1000 feet), which affords spectacular sea views.*

*"This dread Cape (Wrath), so fatal to mariners, is a high promontory, whose steep sides go sheer down to the breakers which lash its feet. There is no landing, except in a small creek, about a mile and a half to the eastward. There the foam of the sea plays `longbowls` with a huge collection of large stones some of them a ton in weight but which these fearful billows*

*chuck up and down as a child tosses a ball. Cape Wrath is a striking point, both from the dignity of its own appearance, and from the mental association of its being the extreme cape of Scotland, with reference to the North West. There is no land in the direct line between this point and America."*

In 1951 a text was published that Cape Wrath was the best place on the Scottish coast to watch passing gannets. From March until autumn and sometimes during the winter these birds appeared to pass in a continuous stream. In a description of Sutherland Volume iii page one hundred of MacFarlanes Geographical Collection this quote is taken. *"There is an excellent and delectable place for hunting called the Parve, where they hunt red deer in abundance and sometimes they drive them into the ocean sea Atlantic, at Pharohead (Cape Wrath) where they take them in boats as they list."*

For more information on Cape Wrath a book the Penetrable Wilderness A Brief Foray into Scotland's North West Frontier by David M. Hird.

### **Wrecks of Cape Wrath<sup>62 63</sup>**

Nine wrecks were known to be in the area, Alwaki, Prince Rupert City, HMS Bullen, Manipur, Majorka (previously dived), Fornebo, a possible sub and two unknowns. Some sources also put Caribbean between Cape Wrath and Orkney but other sources place it to the west side of the Cape. The first day saw us find the Alwaki, torpedoed by U-61 on 10/7/40, in a depth of about 75m, bottom times of up to 30 mins saw the stern of the wreck well explored. The sheer size of this 4533 ton freighter meant that the forward section is still to be looked at. Her identity was confirmed by the finding of a dinner plate with the owning companies' initials marking the plate.

Bullen started life as an American frigate known as the USS DE78 before she was leased to Britain and used by the RN. She was torpedoed by U-775 on 6 Dec 1944 and lay undiscovered until 28/7/02 when she was marked on Karins sounder in a general depth of 80-90m. and was first dived on 29/7/02. Bottom times were up to 20 mins and the deepest recorded depth was 91m, the four open circuit divers concluded that for real exploration this was close to the max depth for their cylinders, the five rebreathers did not have this limitation. The shot line had landed in the open bridge area so an immediate recognition of the wreck being a warship was easy, fire control and range finding equipment jumbled in amongst the compass and telegraphs and further up the wreck were small deck guns with ammunition spewed out over the sea bed.

SS Manipur is known locally in Kinlochbervie as the copper wreck and has been salvaged by Risdon Beasley in the 70s and Alec Crawford in the 90s. Whether or not the Manipur was actually dived or not during these operations is not known but the general depth of 70m would not of been an easy dive in those days and we are sure that no previous techie team has ever been there. She lies where she was torpedoed by U-57 on 17/7/1940 west of Cape Wrath and was located by Karin on 29/7/02 and dived the following day. The wreck is well broken and her general cargo was open to see, small caterpillar tracked vehicles being the most unusual objects, the odd copper ingot was seen but generally the team was most impressed by the efficiency of the salvors. Bottom times were up to 40 mins in a depth of about 70m. Manipur is a huge wreck and will need several more visits to get a clear picture of the layout of the wreck.

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<sup>62</sup> NW Scotland Scottish Shipwrecks – Information and Pictures of Shipwrecks in Scotland

<sup>63</sup> 2004 Scapa Flow Diving Ric Waring and his group of Northern gas divers.

The fourth day saw our dreams of six virgins in six days shattered as the seas off Cape Wrath were too rough to dive in. We returned to the sheltered waters of Orkney where the last two days saw us dive HMS Pheasant, she lies in 84m west of Hoy where she sank on 1/3/17 from either a torpedo or mine.

Seven new wrecks were located and three of them dived and identified.

<sup>64</sup>On September 27, 1915, while sailing for Scapa Flow, HMS Caribbean (known as RMS Dunottar Castle before being requisitioned for wartime service) foundered off Cape Wrath in bad weather. A tow by HMS Birkenhead was unsuccessful, and 15 died. An inquiry later blamed the ship's carpenter for being insufficiently familiar with the ship and for failing to shut all the scuttles—like most of the crew, he had joined the ship just 10 days earlier. The ship served in various capacities during World War I, but she was best known for reducing the voyage time from Southampton, England, to Cape Town, South Africa, by half in the 1890s, and for transporting many famous soldiers and statesmen to and from the Cape Colony during the Second Boer War. The wreck was found in 2004, 35 miles off Cape Wrath, undisturbed except for fishing nets.

### **Cape Wrath Environment Summary Survey Report<sup>65</sup>**

As well as being a famous nautical landmark, Cape Wrath marks a geographical and biological boundary between the exposed, current-swept north coast and Pentland Firth, and the more gentle waters of the Minch. The survey covered twenty sites spread over a large area of this spectacular part of north-west Scotland.

#### **Cape Wrath**

Cape Wrath proved as spectacular underwater as above, with wave-battered slopes covered with curvilinear kelp (*Laminaria hyperborea*), and a dense short turf of animals beneath the kelp and in deeper water. Sea squirts were particularly abundant, together with sea mats, sea fans, and anemones including dahlia, jewel, plumose and elegant (*Sagartia elegans*). There were two caves at the base of the rock slope. One was only 2-3m high, but extended at least 20m into the cliff, and had a sand floor with abundant burrowing anemones *Cerianthus lloydii*. The other cave was more than 8m high and 15m deep, with rock around the entrance covered with gooseberry sea squirts and the white sponge *Clathrina coriacea*. Clean sand at the base of the rock slope was inhabited by small cuttlefish *Sepioloidea atlantica*, and marbled crabs *Liocarcinus marmoratus*.

#### **Am Balg and Am Buachaille**

These sites were intermediate in character between the current-swept north coast and the more urchin-grazed Minch sites to the south. The seabed beneath the spectacular stack of Am Buachaille was of horizontal rock with deep, wide gullies floored with clean mobile sand. Amongst the many scour-resistant organisms were keel worms, barnacles, red seaweeds, colonial sea squirts and the bushy sea mat *Flustra foliacea*. Vertical rock faces had many deep cracks inhabited by a particularly wide variety of fish, including 3-bearded rockling, ling, lemon sole, Yarrell's blenny, and tompot or red blenny. Off shore sites around Am Balg were less scoured, and vertical rock faces were covered with soft corals, sponges and other animals.

#### **Islands west of Loch Inchart**

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<sup>64</sup> Cape Wrath - Shipwrecks | Technology Trends (primidi.com)

<sup>65</sup> Report of a SEASEARCH survey around Cape Wrath, Sutherland May 3rd, 7th 2002 Sue Scott February 2003. A report to Scottish Natural Heritage

Were the furthest south in the Minch, and in the lee of small islands. Communities here reflected less extreme water movement, with rock slopes in deeper water more urchin-grazed, and with ascidian and anemone turfs replaced by feather stars and dense turfs of small hydroids. Soft corals were abundant on vertical rock.

#### Loch Inchard

In complete contrast to the exposed coasts, inside Loch Inchard was an extremely sheltered sheer cliff plunging to deeper than 40m, with communities typical of deep rock inside sea lochs. The sea loch anemone *Protanthea simplex* was very abundant, with brachiopods *Neocrania anomala* and *Terebratulina retusa*, peacock fanworms, tubeworms *Serpula vermicularis*, parchment worm *Chaetopterus variopedatus* and seasquirts *Ascidia mentula*. Also found were the bright blue sponge *Hymedesmiapaupertas* and stalked sponge *Halicionaurceolus*.

#### Loch Eriboll

Near the entrance to Loch Eriboll had vertical rock covered with dense mussels in the infralittoral fringe, with cuviekelp and soft corals below. At the cliff base, rock and boulders were urchin-grazed, leaving encrusting coralline algae as the predominant cover. Below about 10m, slopes of sand and shell gravel became increasingly muddy with depth, and were inhabited by a variety of typical species including hermit crabs, brown crabs, burrowing anemones, razor shells and common starfish. The giant naked *foraminifera* *Toxisarcon alba* was found.

#### Eilean Hoan

Eilean Hoan is made of Durness limestone, which was often pitted, forming a sheltered refuge for a variety of infauna, including large numbers of the uncommon banded brittlestar *Ophiactis balli*. The crevice brittlestar *Ophiopholis aculeata*, peacrab, molluscs and seasquirts were also common. the hairy hermit crab *Pagurus cuanensis* was found in the shell of the large snail *Colus gracilis*.

#### Faraid Head

Rock and boulders, slightly sheltered from the main current by offshore rocks had little development of animal turf except for vertical faces where soft corals were dense in places. Cobbles and clean sand at the base of the rock slopes scoured surrounding rocks, which were covered with pink and brown encrusting algae and keelworms, with dahliaanemones growing in rock crevices and patches of black brittlestars on bedrock outcrops.

#### North Coast

On the north coast were swept by strong currents, and exposed to waves from northerly directions. Cuvie kelp forests grew in shallow water, with dense red algae (*Delesseriasanguinea*, *Plocamium cartilagineum*, *Phycodrys rubens* and *Odonthalia dentata*) on stipes and on rocks beneath. At the extremely exposed offshore rock Duslic, clumps of blue mussels grew on kelp stipes, and breadcrumb sponge was common wrapped around kelp stipes at several sites. In deeper water, animal turfs covered rocks. Dominant animals varied from site to site, but colonial and small solitary sea squirts were particularly abundant. At An Garb Eilean a small island used by the military for target practice, north-east facing rock slopes were covered with denseoaten-pipe sea fir *Tubularia indivisa*, together with abundant elegant anemones on vertical faces. Where rocks were scoured by nearby sand, bushy sea mats *Securiflustra securifrons* and *Flustrafoliacea* were common, with featherstars and scattered jewel anemones on vertical faces.



## **Environmental Report on the Cape Wrath Range 1989<sup>66</sup>**

In December 1971 the coastline from Geoha Ruah na Fola over 4Km south of the Cape, to Durness more than 18km to the east, was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest SSSI under the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act. It is one of the most varied and unique sections of coastal landscape in Scotland and includes cliffs of Lewisian Gneiss, Torridonian Sandstone and Durness Limestone, several mobile dune systems and the sandy estuary of the Kyle of Durness. Cape Wrath is one of the MOD's least known properties that has long been recognised as being nationally important for its wildlife. Extending to 3138 hectares this ancient and fragile wilderness has a diverse and contrasting variety of habitats which are an outstanding wildlife outpost. Illustrating a fundamental ecological principle the rich and valuable resources of the marine environment. The Cape Wrath Weapons Range was commissioned in February 1933 and consists of 2046 hectares to the south of the lighthouse track which is owned by the MOD, and 1092 hectares to the north which is on a 21 year lease.

### **Weather**

Extensive climatological information has been collected at the weather station at Cape Wrath Lighthouse since 1940. The region has a high annual rainfall, with an average of over 1150mm per annum. Predominant wind direction is southwesterly and gales and strong winds are desolate and inhospitable. For example, during December 1988 gale force winds were recorded on 19 days. The maritime influence on temperature ensures that during the summer the Cape is regularly the coldest recorded site in Britain, but prolonged frosts are rare and winter temperatures are above those recorded in inland areas of Scotland.

### **Geology**

A spectacular feature of the region is the 4.8km long precipice of "Clo Mor" that towers to over 210m, the highest coastal cliffs on the British mainland. These remarkable and handsome promontories that form the north western part of the range are cut in Torridonian Sandstone. They have been weathered and eroded by the frequent Atlantic storms to form tiers of horizontal ledges and indentations used by myriads of breeding and roosting seafowl. Abutting "Clo Mor" is the abrupt northern face of "Cnoc Carn an Leim" at 371m noted for its variety of montane acidic heaths at a low elevation. There are several small islands close to the coast including "An Carbh-Eilean" (Garvie Island) which NATO aircraft use for live weapon training. Torridonian Sandstone, Lewisian Gneiss and Cambrian Quartzite appear on the less precipitous coast that forms the north eastern end of the estate. The area is used for aircraft strafing exercises and is the only mainland naval bombardment site in Britain.

Looking north from this bleak and forbidding windswept headland, no land lies between here and the North Pole. To the south in the hinterland is the barren, uninhabited, moorland and blanket peat bog of "Parph", a Gaelic rendering of the Norse name of turning point. The underlying rock is a tangle of Torridonian Sandstone and Lewisian Gneiss thinly covered with nutrient poor peat. The sterile moor has a varied relief unremarkable hills, separated by stream valleys interspersed with peat stained lochans. And complexes blanket mire. And At the southern extremity lies Fashven the highest point (457 m) on the range with steep rocky outcrops on the northern and western faces.

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<sup>66</sup> From work carried out by the MOD and deposited through the liaison group for Durness community information.

## Botany

The vegetation of the sea cliffs is much influenced by the weather and of considerable botanical value. In places it consists largely of lush growths of scurvy grass (*Cochlearia sp*) elsewhere the cliffs have an abundance of the common plants such as Thrift (*Ameria maritima*) Primrose (*Primula sp*) and Sea Campion (*Silene valguris martima*). Other species more typically associated with inland habitats that are able to stand the constant exposure to strong winds and salt include Wild Angelica (*Angelica sylvestris*) and Goldenrod (*Solidago sp.*). Above the cliff edges there is a variety of submaritime Dwarf Willow (*Salix herbacea*). The moorland presents a complex variety of habitats that are typical at the North West Highlands of Scotland. The predominance of heather and its influence on microclimate and soils restricts the diversity of plant species on lie moor. Bell and Ling Heather (*Erica Sp*) dominate; Great Sundew (*Drosera anglica*). Sphagnum Moss (*Sphagnum sp.*) Bog Asphodel (*Narthecium ossifragum*)) are also abundant. The stream valleys provide some shelter from the prevailing winds and support more luxurious vegetation such as Rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*), Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*) and Ground Ivy (*Glechoma hederacea*). Freshwater lochs encourage a limited variety of plant species including Bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*) and White Water Lilly (*Nymphaea a ba*). On the windswept plains and the hostile plateaus of the inland hills lichens. Juniper (*Juniperus cormunis*) Dog Rose (*Rosa canina*) and Sage (*Populus tremula*) are all present.

## Birds

Cape Wrath range hosts one of the major seabird breeding stations in Britain. The rich and substantial feeding grounds which lie in close proximity to the coast and the suitable nesting environment on the cliffs are the fundamental requirements for a thriving seafoal community. Many species have been recorded breeding here. Small fish such as Sand-Eels (*Ammodytes tobianus*) and Norway Pout (*Trisopterus esmarkii*), crustaceans, seaweeds and algae are some of the vital food sources that support the predominant species that inhabit the site.

The sea-cliff faces are composed of a number of microhabitats each containing its characteristic avifauna. The lowest part of the structure with its fissures, talus and caves provides the main breeding area for Shags (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*) and Cormorants (*P. carbo*). Black Guillemots (*Cephus grylle*), our scarcest and least sociable indigenous Auk, are scattered in small loose colonies in suitably secluded crannies and boulder fields around this level. Sheltered ledges beneath overhangs and narrow crevices are favoured by Razorbills (*Alca torda*) which breed in large numbers along this coastal belt. The middle and upper zones are dominated by Kittiwakes (*Larus tridactyla*), the most maritime of our gulls which breed abundantly on the narrowest of ledges, cementing their nests to the rock with a mixture of algae and guano. Vast numbers of the gregarious and handsome Guillemot (*Uria aalge*) breed on the wider ledges of this storey, laying a single pear- shaped egg that has evolved so that when knocked it does not roll off the ledge. In 1897 “Clo Mor” was the first site on mainland Britain to be colonised by Fulmars (*Fulmarus glacialis*). Since then the British population has shown a spectacular increase and spread to most coastal regions throughout Britain. Fulmars breed on well vegetated ledges and shallow embrasures around the higher levels of the cliffs. The grassy gradients between the vertical faces provide ideal habitat for the burrow nesting Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*), the smallest of our breeding Auks; “Clo Mor” has the largest colony on mainland Britain which exceeds 25,000 pairs. .

Between April and July the dense colonies of seabirds with their eggs and young are concentrated in a relatively small area and are vulnerable to many predators. The opportunistic and powerful Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinas*) is an omnivorous scavenger, taking a wide variety of food including adult Puffins and the young and eggs of other seabirds. It is the largest of our gulls and breeds in the vicinity of the Puffin colonies and on the less disturbed

offshore islands. The Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus*) is less prevalent in this region, preferring generally flatter breeding sites with short vegetation. The bird is more agile and smaller than its cousin, much less a scavenger relying on food piracy and surface feeding on the sea. The Herring Gull (*L. argentatus*) is the most abundant and opportunistic of the predators on the Cape and is also most catholic in its choice of both breeding sites and food. Several pairs of Great Skuas (*Stercorarius skua*) nest on the open moorland; they harass and steal food from other avian thieves and are also known to attack sheep and even humans that stray close to their nests! The much smaller Arctic Skua (*S. parasiticus*) is also seen in small numbers on the range although breeding is not known. Two or more pairs of Ravens (*Corvus corax*), the largest of the raptors, breed on the coast. The smaller and colourful Hooded Crow (*Corvus corone*) occasionally scavenges along the coastline preferring to build large tree nests in the secluded stream valleys of the interior. Our fastest aerial predator, the Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), also breeds on the range. This Falcon is strictly a bird hunter, and its functional design for pursuit and capture of flying quarry reaches a degree of perfection unmatched by any other raptor.

In the interior around the summit of “Fashven”, Ptarmigan (*Lagopus mutus*) breed. This is the most northerly point and the lowest altitude that this grouse is recorded on mainland Britain. Red grouse (*L. lagopus*), an endemic subspecies of the Willow Grouse, also occur in low densities throughout the moorland. Many migrant waders are present on the range during the summer months. The abundance of freshwater and poorly drained areas of moorland attract many insects which support many wading birds and their young during the breeding season. Curlew (*Numenius arquata*) and groups of Golden Plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*) inhabit the drier areas. Snipe, (*Gallinago gallinago*), Common Sandpipers (*Actitis hypoleucos*) and Redshank (*Tiranga totanus*) prefer the more luxuriant sites around the burns, whilst the Greenshanks (*T. nebularia*) and Dunlins (*Calidris alpina*) nest near the small pools and lochans. There is sometimes a small breeding colony of Common Gulls (*Larus canus*) on three small islands on Loch “Airigh na Beinn”. On some of the less accessible lochs the shy Red Throated Divers (*Gavia stellata*) occur. Several pairs with nests were located on the range during the 1987 breeding season. On the River Daill, Dippers (*Cinclus cinclus*), Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*), Common Sandpipers, Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) and Pied Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) can be seen. During the late spring the smallest of our falcons, the Merlin (*Falco columbarius*), can be observed in pursuit of other summer migrants such as Twite (*Carduelis flavirostris*), Skylarks (*Alauda avensis*), Rock and Meadow Pipits (*Anthus spp*), and Wheatears (*Oenanthe oenanthe*). The magnificent Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) is one of only a few birds that is present throughout the year. This hard raptor feeds on birds, mammals and carrion on the estate.

## **Mammals**

Several species of cetaceans (marine mammals) pass along the coast and are regularly seen around the island of the region. The main attraction of the Cape area to marine mammals appears to be the rich feeding on giant shoals of pelagic Herring and Mackerel. The reproductive and migratory cycles of these fish drive them inshore to take advantage of the plankton that lies in the warm surface drifting, shrimp like creatures called Copepods are especially favoured. They occur super abundantly in late summer in the waters around the north coast. Calanus is also a direct food source for larger plankton eating whales which pass southwards in September and August on migration to equatorial waters.

Killer Whales (*Orcinus orca*) are regularly seen in the vicinity of the range. The basic social unit is the pod which appears to be an extended family of five to twenty members. They are powerfully built, robust and dolphin-like in appearance. The most useful field characteristic is

the tall sword-like fin which in adult males may be two metres high. Found in all oceans, they are predators feeding on a wide variety of prey including other cetaceans, seals and large fish; in the Arctic regions even fully grown Polar Bears are not immune. Large schools of White-beaked Dolphins (*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*) can be encountered between May and September. This creature is sometimes referred to as “The Squid Hound”, as it feeds primarily on squid. However fish such as Cod, Mackerel and Herring are also taken. The Bottle-nosed Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) can still be seen daily around some parts of the Scottish coast. Small migrant schools pass the Cape during the summer. This is one of the most widespread of the dolphins. Its catholic appetite is the key to its success. Bottle-noses eat between 8 and 15kg a day, feeding largely on inshore bottom dwelling fish but will take Eels, Crabs and have a liking for Salmon. Two species of seal occur around the Cape. The Grey Seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) breeds. Common Seal (*Phoca vitulina*) and sometimes referred to as the “Sat” They can normally be seen hauled at low tide on the sand in the Kyle. The Mountain or Blue Hare (*Lepus timidus*) is found throughout the west highlands. The terrain and vegetation of the site is well suited to them through the heather on conspicuous they feed mainly on heather and in summer, Cottongrass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*), Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) and Leer’s Sedge (*Carex\_ ssp*). Their main predators on the site are Foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*), Stoats (*Myerminea*) and Golden Eagles. Nesting Harriers are known to take leverets. There is a herd of native deer the Red Deer (*Cervus*) roaming the range. In recent years the population of this mammal has escalated in Scotland. The damage inflicted our upland woodland by feeding has caused a great deal of concern to conservationists and foresters.

In the summer they feed mainly on dwarf shrubs, grasses and sedges conifers, leaves and branches of deciduous trees and ferns are also eaten. During winter months they will strip and eat bark of trees killing many. Otters are present on the range if distribution is unknown. Evidence presence of this shy mammal found at Kearvaig and on Loch Inshore. They inhabit the coast, lochs and straths but are capable of long overland between watersheds. The larger lochs of the estate have good stocks of Salmon (*Salmo trutta fario*) and Eel (*Anguilla*). In general, Otters feed on insects although diet may include small proportions of birds and other small mammals. Feeding patterns, however, normally reflect the availability and vulnerability of prey species. The Fox and Stoat are the common ground predators of the region. Both are opportunist feeders and predate on small animals such as Field Voles (*Microtus agrestis*), Moles (*Talpa europaea*) and Rabbits, birds and their eggs, carrion and berries are also eaten.

### **Access**

The ferry connects with a bus service which crosses 20km of arguably the most desolate sub-Arctic landscape in the British Isles, to the lighthouse. The lighthouse was constructed on the Schist headland by Stevenson and completed during 1828. There is a team of three lighthouse keepers on station at all times. It is open to the public and from the top 112m above sea level there is a vantage point for observing the seabird station at Clo Mor. The Cape Wrath Bombardment Range is closed to public access and can only be visited with the permission of the Range Authority. The use of the range by the military is a contentious issue especially in the areas that lie within the SSSI. Armed exercises are strictly controlled and every effort is made to restrict the threat to the flora and fauna. It is inevitable that a limited amount of disturbance and damage does occur. However, the military causes little long term harm to the wildlife on the estate. In contrast, land management poses a greater hazard. Years of overgrazing by sheep has destroyed much of the vegetation and recently excavated drainage ditches, slowly draining the pool complexes, are steadily destroying the nature of the flow land which the wading birds depend upon. Studies have shown that the main danger to the seabirds and the marine environment at Cape Wrath is not the disturbance by the military but the over exploitation of vital fish stocks and marine toxic pollution. In 1989 many traditional seabird

ledges lay empty. A more responsible and enlightened attitude is required from mankind if this valuable and historical ecosystem is to survive. The range closes from early April to the end of May for lambing and during the summer. Plans are being made in an attempt to extend the spring shutdown to reduce the disturbance to the seabird colony during the breeding season.

### **Archaeological & Architectural<sup>67</sup>**

The report summarised the results of an archaeological and architectural survey undertaken by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) of the Cape Wrath Training Centre (CWTC), Highland, in August 2008. The survey followed an approach by Defence Estates (DE), a top level budget holder within the Ministry of Defence, to provide, in partnership, a baseline survey to enhance the historic component of the Land Management Plan for the CWTC. The survey set out to record all visible archaeological features and architectural structures, map them using differential Global Positioning System (GPS), digitally photograph them, and assess and record their condition using criteria defined by Defence Estates. The survey also recorded all the redundant and current boundaries around and within the centre. Sufficient time was available towards the end of the survey to enable detailed measured drawing surveys to be undertaken of some of the more interesting monuments within the CWTC.

The RCAHMS Survey Comprised Four Main Elements:

- The baseline archaeological survey, which saw: 120 archaeological and architectural monuments described and mapped; 442 individual structures/features recorded; 377 digital images and supporting GIS and database files provided to Defence Estates.
- The condition survey, which saw: 168 Defence Estate pro forma completed.
- The boundary survey, which saw: 47km of boundaries characterised.
- Individual site survey, which saw: 6 sites surveyed and drawn in detail.

Training Centre comprises a tract of rough, boggy extending some 11.5km from west-north-west to by up to 7km transversely and covering an area approximately 59 sq. km in extent. The survey also included an area of ground, approximately 9ha in extent, at Faraid Head on the east side of the Kyle of Durness, which contains the range control facility. At its fullest extent, the area of the Training Centre also includes an extensive offshore component, which contains several small islands and stacks, but this did not form part of the present survey. Nor did the survey include a strip of land owned by the Northern Lighthouse Board, which includes Cape Wrath itself and covers some 25ha, extending along the cliff-top south-east of the lighthouse for a distance of 1km.

The Parph is characterised by a rugged, often spectacular, coastline of steep cliffs and an inhospitable hinterland which is dominated by an extensive cover of blanket bog. The northern edge of the Training Centre runs from the west side of the Kyle of Durness, opposite Balnakeil Bay, to the east flank of Dunan Mor, immediately south-east of Cape Wrath. Since the early 1930s, much of the northern part of the Parph has been used as a bombing and gunnery practice range, the extent of which was initially limited to a relatively small area north of the Lighthouse Rd. However, as Hird noted, (2008) in the early 1950s, it was not uncommon for shells to land well outside the target area. One of the consequences being the house at Insure suffering structural damage. In recent years the area used by the military has expanded considerably, and in 2005 it ceased to be a simple naval gunnery and bombing range developing instead into an all services training centre playing a major role in NATO exercises.

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<sup>67</sup> Cape Wrath Training Centre. An Archaeological and Architectural Survey Royal; Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland.

Since 1996, the area defined as an SSSI and has also been designated a special protected area in accordance with Article four of the European Commission's directive on the conservation of wild birds. The same area because of the nationally important types of plants it supports as also been designated a special area of conservation in accordance with Article three of the European Commission's directive on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild flora and fauna.

This district is largely devoid of settlement, remains from any period, and the reason for this is that its soils and climate render most forms of permanent settlement very difficult except in a few small coastal plots where some arable cultivation is feasible. The very peaty, largely waterlogged Moreland is suitable only for grazing sheep and a few structures that are encountered. Their modern military ones accepted relate to shieling activity, probably dating before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Put simply, the Parph feels empty to visitors because essentially that is exactly what it is and probably always has been. There is very little evidence to suggest a prehistoric presence across the area. There are no occurrence of hut circles or burned mounds and no evidence in the form of clearance cairns or stone walls that might indicate the existence of prehistoric field systems, later settlement. Shielings accepted appears to be limited to the coast and even after the route to the lighthouse was built in the late 1820s, the only permanent structure built away from the coast was the shepherd's house at Inshore and it may have been built there because the area was traditionally shieling ground.

The archaeological record indicates that the economy of the Parph has probably always been based on coastal settlement which was part of a social and economic infrastructure that also included communities on the eastern side on the Kyle of Durness. Today the park is very much a shared resource between the military, agriculture and tourism. The archaeological and Architectural Survey carried out by the MOD Took a holistic approach to the range of monuments recorded and has resulted in the modern record for the range Now taking into account the abandonment of traditional forms of settlement around the mid to 20<sup>th</sup> century and the impact on the landscape caused by the military presence. It also means that in addition to the range monuments traditionally recorded there are no records for the many marker cairns and stones the redundant armored personnel carriers that are now used as military targets The 19<sup>th</sup> century milestones along the lighthouse road and indeed, the road itself.

The earliest reports of archaeological sites on the Parph date to 1972 a year in which both Dr. Raymond Lamb and Dr. Thomas Welch separately visited the area. In 2000 and in 2001 Defence Estates commissioned a survey of the then naval bombing range under the auspices of Operation Auk, a task force assembled to gather information on a broad range of heritage subjects in order to inform conservation and management policy.

One of the most useful accounts of the area is the earliest dating to 1726. A list of farms in Durness Parish, reproduced in volume one of McFarlane's geographical collections.

Mitchell details the names and locations of the three farms that were extent at the time on the West side of the Kyle of Durness. Two of them. Aldan, and Geochreamh both now long abandoned. Portover also long deserted is located on the west side of the Kyle of Durness in the North East corner of the survey area. This is the earliest and only literally reference to this farmstead, which is depicted on a mid-18th century coastal chart (Price and Cooper around 1744) but is not shown on any subsequent map, including Roy's military map.1747 to 1755. The list does not include the farmstead at curve Kervaig, though it surely existed at that time being depicted on both Bryce's and Roy's marks.

MacFarlane's collections also makes reference to the Parph as a celebrated hunting ground in the 16th or 17th centuries. Under later account, referring to the practice of driving red deer into the sea at from where they were taken away in boats.

## **Cape Wrath Buyout (Proposed)**

The first application Community Right to buy under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 was made in 2005. The report here was the second application being prepared as the first had expired. No funding was committed for the first application and its preparation.

Written by Mike Merritt, Extract from The Northern Times.

£22.5k for Cape Wrath community land buyout. A remote village community has been given a major boost in its unusual bid to buy land in a bombing range to increase its use as a tourist attraction. The site in Sutherland is near the famous lighthouse at Cape Wrath, mainland Britain's most northerly point. Now the Scottish Land Fund (SLF) has awarded £22,500 to a development group to work up a business plan and feasibility study so that locals at the nearest village of Durness – 10 miles away – can buy 111 acres of the cape. Durness Development Group (DDG) said it has six months to submit its scheme, which would include asking for the money to buy the only land the Ministry of Defence (MOD) does not own at the cape, which for 120 days of the year is a bombing range. DDG director Neil Fuller said the award from the SLF meant that it was now pushing ahead with one of the country's most unusual community buyouts. Once DDG has worked up a proposal for a bunkhouse and toilets, it is likely to come back and ask for most of the £58,000 it believes it will need to buy the land – and also the money to develop the scheme. Residents at Durness are mounting a community buyout under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. There was once a full-time community of around 35 people living on the Cape in the 1930s. Today it is just John Ure, who runs the cafe by the lighthouse. He is also planning to install a public toilet and bunkhouse nearby. At the centre of the unusual community buyout is just 111 acres around Cape Wrath Lighthouse. Three years ago the MOD was halted in its £58,000 purchase of the land from the Northern Lighthouse Board (NLB), which would have added to the 25,000 acres it already owns in the area. The then First Minister Alex Salmond said: "If the community is able to go ahead and successfully purchase the land, it will secure a stronger local economy for the people of Durness and preserve one of Scotland's iconic landscapes for generations to come. "Put bluntly, we would see more benefits for the local area rather than more land for bombing – the principal use the rest of the cape is put to by the MOD." The then Scottish Environment Minister Paul Wheelhouse approved an application by DDG to register a community interest in the site. It means that the community have to be given first option to buy if the NLB goes ahead with plans to sell the land. "The NLB's intention is to sell and trigger the right-to-buy – which they are yet to do," said Mr Fuller. "We are delighted to have received the money for the feasibility study and full business plan. "We have six months in which to go to the next stage and work up proposals and ask for the money to buy and develop the site. "It has to be a viable business. Public toilets and a bunkhouse will be the main priority as well as looking after this unique site. But it is vital for the future of the area."

Because of the community's interest, the MOD announced in 2014 that it had decided "not to proceed" with the purchase of land around the 400-foot high light, built in 1828 by Robert Louis Stevenson's grandfather Robert, with the installation of three new major gun battery sites.

## Moine

Peat in Gaelic. The jagged cliffs of its headland extended to the Atlantic, before travel as we know today to traverse the ground of the Moine, even in the driest weather, could be exceeding wearisome; in winter it became hazardous when the snow driven by strong winds, filled its black gullies and altered its contours entirely.



IMAGE 171 MOINE

On the A838 beyond Eriboll travelling east past Hope takes the traveler onto the Moine, a large table of peatland across some of the most barren land with distant mountains views. The Moine as it is known is the moor between Hope and the Kyle of Tongue, a bleak stretch of road on a winters' day. This is the most northerly road in the Kingdom and a grand and wild bit of Sutherland. It is also one of the loneliest stretches of road in the country and from its edge miles and miles of reddish, undulating moor sweep up to the flanks of the two fine mountains Ben loyal and Hope.

Dr. Ian Grimble writes in his book *The World of Rob Donn*

*"The Reverend Murdo Macdonald scarcely ever failed to grumble into his diary about the discomforts of the Moine, when he was forced to cross it to attend presbytery meetings in Tongue, and there were occasions when he preferred the no less treacherous ocean."*

One of these occurred in April 1737 when he planned to visit Thurso in order to attend the funeral of the Reverend William Innes, taking with him his wife, who was pregnant, and their children of eight and six years. The party set off from Balnakeil for the little creek of Smoo about a mile from the manse. Here yawns the entrance to the cave that Sir Walter Scott was to make famous when he visited it, beyond a shingle beach on which boats could be hauled to safety. *"The day was gloomy and foggy, as indeed it was to me in several respects and there was a gentle north-east breeze which made the heaving sea very unfavorable to our purpose,*



*so that when we came to the place my wife durst not try it, but choose to continue on horseback till she came to Rispond where she stayed the night."*

Here, after a day's travel, they had not yet crossed Loch Eriboll to reach the barony of Westmoin.

*"The bairnies went by sea from Smoo to Rispond and got the first handsell of seasickness. Next day being Thursday, there was a pretty brisk gale of south-easterly wind which was almost ahead of us, but the crew thinking to make it by rowing and coasting close by shore, which they expected would shelter them, they set out with us towards the White Head as they call it. But as we were advanced half-way to turn the Head, the wind increased to such a height and contrariety to us that by the unanimous voice of the crew it was best to turn back, which we accordingly did, and in the afternoon came on shore at Badilhavish in Westmoin: where I intended to stay, it being one of the preaching places of my parish."*

They had failed to pass the Moine after two days' travel, and were forced to remain where they were for another two days.

*On the Thursday we were in our boat off the Head, we observed just coming after us into Loch Eriboll two ships which were directed from their easterly course by the same cross-wind. This might alleviate our part of the calamity when great vessels must yield to the weather, nay, when God with east wind breaks the strong ships of Tarshish. It came in my head that we might in that case have the convenience of a passage in them just come to our hand. When therefore they came to anchor I went in the evening against a boisterous gale to see, but found none of them was bound for the south further than Peterhead. Thus God's ways are not ours, nor his thoughts ours always."*

Macdonald's own thoughts are obscure enough, since these ships could easily have carried his family to Thurso on their way to Peterhead, unless they intended to sail round the Orkney Islands rather than face the dangers of the Pentland Firth. What is noteworthy is that despite his wife's fear of the sea, he made no attempt to transport her over the Moine but waited instead for a boat to make the journey.

At the eastern boundary of the parish, approaching from Tongue across the Moine is the ruins of Moine House. The road now bypasses this house of refuge built to provide shelter for travelers caught in bad weather. The Marquis of Stafford built the old original road in 1830 and parts can be seen crossing this bleak and desolate moor. From Tongue the Moine House is visible on the skyline and from Moine Tongue sits far in the distance under the towering mountain of Loyal. As the road twists traveling over the Moine the mountains look, as they are the moveable parts of the landscape. Ben Loyal with its turrets and castle features seems to appear in different parts.

This area was considered as a sight of a Dartmoor type prison and does contain some of the most interesting geology. As the approach to the Kyle of Tongue becomes apparent the scene changes and the mountain of Ben Loyal heralds the backdrop to the village and the Kyle of Tongue. Crossing the Causeway after passing the turnoff for Melness and Talmine north and south to Kinloch the road moves through green fertile land into the village of Tongue. The main A836 road travelled is single and double tract stretches.

### **Alastair Mitchell explores the history of The Moine**

(Gaelic A' Mhoine), an extensive area of peatland, part of the Flow Country, that lies between Loch Eriboll and the Kyle of Tongue. To us in the 21st century, The Moine is a unique, unspoilt region supporting a spectrum of rare plant, animal and bird life. To the inhabitants of the area

in the 18th and 19th centuries, it was a formidable area of bog that presented huge problems when travelling from Durness to Tongue.

It is marked on Bryce's Map of the North Coast as "The Moan, a great morass", the Moan indeed a suitable name for it. Bishop Pococke, travelling in 1760, called it "a morassy country, impassable except to their little bog horses" and had to be escorted over by a Mr Forbes. John Knox, in 1786, observed that it was "partly a deep moss floating on water. It has no traces of a path, is much cut up, and though no more than eight miles across in a direct line, whoever passes that way in October, must walk at least twenty miles of a most fatiguing journey." Knox had two guides to see him over to Tongue, but he was so exhausted that he went to bed early, and was very nearly suffocated by the peat fire that was smouldering in the grate.

Perhaps the person who struggled most was the Reverend MacDonald. As Minister of Durness, he had to make regular trips over the Flow to preach at Tongue. He wrote in his diary "On the Monday, I was obliged to pass over the Moine, a tedious, fatiguing moss of five miles...in worse weather than I had in December", and later, in 1755 "in the form of a boisterous wind I came over the Moine and preached this day at the Meeting House here, in much weakness of bodye [and] mind, occasioned partly by the toil and weariness of the journey."

The road over the Moine was not built until 1830, the work organised and paid for by the Duke of Sutherland. Anderson's Guide to the Highlands notes that "the passage of the Moine, which formerly was the laborious achievement of an entire day, may now be accomplished in an hour's time with ease and comfort. The expense attending the construction of this piece of road must have been very great, from the mossy nature of the ground", and it then proceeds to describe the method of construction, which involved first bundles of coppice wood, then turf, and finally gravel. The Duke also built Moine House "for the refuge of the traveller", which now stands a ruin on the skyline.

#### Early appearances on maps

- The only 17th-century cartography to show the Moine are by Blaeu and Jansson, on their detailed maps of the North of Scotland, where it is referred to as the "West Moan."
- Detail from Blaeu's map of Strathnaver, published in 1654. West Moan is shown between Loch Erebill (sic) and Loch Kuntail (the Kyle of Tongue).
- After 1750, cartographers like Dorret, the Bowens and Kitchin began to include the region on their maps. I suspect that Bryce had told them of the difficulties there which he had encountered whilst making his survey.
- "The Moan" is given particular prominence on this map of Scotland by Thomas Bowen, published c.1770
- As news of the area spread via accounts like those of Pococke and Knox, so other mapmakers began to include the Moine in their cartography.
- "The Moine, a deep Morass", from The Travelling Map of Scotland, published by P Hill c.1820. The road shown is not that built by the Duke of Sutherland, but rather an old drover's track that ran below Ben Hope
- Once the Duke of Sutherland's road was in place, the area lost its menace, and was not worthy of a mention. But it is now back in the news, with the possibility of a Satellite Launch Station being built there on the coast.

## Memories of Moine House<sup>68</sup>

*“My mother and father were in the Moine House and my sister was born in Moine House. My brother and I were born in Melness, and my father was in the Navy during the war, and when the war was over and he came home, he was postman at, well, probably Melness, but I know then we came to Moine House and he was posting to Gobernuisgach and Arnaboll. And he went there, and my mother was in Moine House; my father was away, was it two nights or three nights in the week. He didn't get home; there would be no cars then, anyway. But you don't ask a lot of questions, because you just got by, sort of from day-to-day. But we left there when it was time for me to go to school at five – we were in Moine House.*

*I don't remember a lot about it, to be quite honest. I only know that we had an awful lot of animals. We had hens and we had pigs and we had cows and plenty of good food, you know. Yes. The best. And then we went to Melvich.*

*Aye, my brother and myself went to Moine House and Rena, my sister, was born in Moine House. She was born in Moine House. I don't remember a lot about it, and I'm quite pleased I don't. It would be so lonely so I don't remember much about it, but my mother said we were so happy there, and we loved the animals, you see, we were ... yes. And plenty milk and butter and crowdie and everything, you know.*

*It's very on its own, oh, very on its own, and my mother was alone with us for ... I think it was three nights in the week. And at that time there was tramps, as they called them, going. My mother got a fright once or twice, but they were all right, and she would always give them tea and boil their wee cans, and sandwiches and things like that. She wouldn't allow them in the house.*

*My mother had ... how many sisters, four, it was, or five, sisters and they were very often there, because they all loved it, you see. Then my mother's people went to Rogart. And when my mother went on holiday to Rogart with my sister and brother, I went to Melness, to my grandparents in Melness with my father.*

*I don't know what the transport was like on the Moine, but it was in a sort of bus affair that we went to the MOD. It would be Burr's at the time. And we used to cycle a lot; we had bikes when we were in Melvich. At least we had bikes, and we did a lot of cycling, yeah.*

*I'm not sure if other people moved into Moine House after us, because it's not like today, if you were moving from there. When we left to go to Melvich, I don't think I passed Moine House until after I came from the ATS, and that was ... I had my twenty-first birthday in the Services, and it was after that I came up to Eriboll, because I had an aunt married in Eriboll, a sister of my mother's.*

*I went to see her, and passed Moine House. Yes, that would have been my first time. And then the next time was when I came to Durness here. I was just really home a couple of weeks or that, out of the services, and I went into Thurso to see if there was anything ... to the Labour Exchange to see if there was any jobs, and there was nothing. And at that time my brother was away from home and my sister was away. My sister worked in the post office in Thurso, and I came to Durness. Oh, I went to the Labour Exchange and she said, no, we have nothing but hotel work and, she said, you wouldn't want to try that. And I said, well, I was so lonely after coming home, after the company, you know, and I mind my father saying, surely you can stay at home for a while, you were away long enough, and that, but it was lonely.*

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<sup>68</sup> Jessie Macpherson from an oral history interview during Back to the Future project.

*Anyway, much as I loved them, my mother and father, she said, there's a job – it's a waitress job. Oh, I said, I've never done that kind of work. So she said, I'm afraid that's all – a hotel in ... the Cape Wrath Hotel in Durness, and the Dornoch Hotel. And it's waitresses they want. So I said, och, I wonder, I said, would I give it a try? It's work as I have never done, and would they be pleased with that? She said, yes, they would. So I said, well, I'll go for a week or two to Durness – and I've been here ever since! That was in 1945 or 46, I think. And I got married in 1949."*

### **Barrier to Travellers: The Moine**

This was traditionally the great physical barrier between either ends of Mackay Country. In the Statistical Account of 1791 –99, Reverends William Mackenzie and Hugh Ross describe it thus:

*"from the foot of Ben Hope to the Whiting Head on the west, and as far as Tongue Bay on the east, the Moine, a long tract of hilly desert, covered with dark heath, and interspersed with greyish rocks, impassable bogs, and stagnant pools of brownish water, presents a prospect uniformly rugged and dreary."*

The eastern shore of Loch Eriboll and Strath More were at this time known as Westmoin and formed part of the presbytery of Tongue.

In the Statistical Account of 1845, Rev Hugh Mackay Mackenzie observes that

*"Even Macculloch, with all his antipathy to the north, has admitted, that, were the Moine, on west side of the [Tongue] Bay, to some extent planted, this place would not be exceeded in beauty by many parts of the Highlands'.*

### **Moine House**



IMAGE 172 ABANDONED AND DERELICT MOINE HOUSE

Moine House was built as a shelter for travelers and is the earliest known roadside shelter for travelers in the Highlands that was not an inn. On the gable end wall there is a plaque that reads

*“This House Erected for the refuge of the traveler. Serves to commemorate the construction of the road across the deep and dangerous morass of the Moine impracticable to all but the hardy and active native to him even it was a day of toil and of labour.*

*This road was made in the year 1830 and at the sole expense of the Marquis of Stafford.*

*Those who feel not the delay nor experience the fatigue nor suffer from the risked and interruptions incident to the former state of the country can but slightly estimate the advantages of its present improved condition or what it cost to procure them.*

*To mark this change- to note these facts- to record this date this inscription is put up and dedicated by James Loch Esq. MP Auditor and commissioner upon his Lordships estates and John Horsburgh ESQ. Factor for the Reay Country, Strathnaver, Starth Hallidale and Assynt under whose directions this work was executed and who alone know the difficulties that occurred in its execution and liberality and perseverance by which they were overcome  
Peter Lawson Surveyor.”*

## **Spaceport on the Moine**

The proposed site was first announced in July 2018 at the Farnborough Air Show and had hoped it might be ready for first launches in 2020. On 31 July 2019 Highlands and Islands Enterprise signed a lease for the proposed site with the Melness Crofters Estate and in September 2019 they began a formal public consultation phase, ahead of the formal application for planning consent, which was filed in December 2019. Planning permission was granted by Highland Council on 5 August 2020 after the Scottish Government chose to make no interventions on the decision. Application had then to be made to the Scottish Land Court to get permission to enclose the common grazing land. With regulatory approval to move forward, construction is planned to begin in 2021 with the hope of a first launch before the end of 2022. The planning consent was for a single launch pad and an upper limit of twelve flights per year.

Two open days have been held in Tongue and Melness as the first stages in community engagement for the proposed Spaceport on the Moine. HIE, Lockheed Martin and UK-based early stage spaceflight company, Orbex were all represented to inform and discuss the ongoing process. The displays gave an outline of the current circumstances and highlighted the positive and potential advantages that this development could bring including the benefits to support businesses, inward investment potential, increased tourism activity and increased educational opportunities in science, technology, engineering and maths. There is a projected estimate of around forty long term jobs along with construction employment. These consultations involve close collaboration with Scottish Natural Heritage and conservation agencies. Steps are listed as, agreement with the Melness Crofters, environmental surveys, and ongoing community consultations, launch site operator procurement, site design development and planning applications. HIE are keen to include as many of the communities along the north coast and encourage participation at early stages. Over the next eighteen months, HIE will lead the development project and prepare a planning application to Highland Council. As the project is expected to deliver significant community benefits, they intend consult widely with the local community to share details of plans, and invite feedback to help shape plans.

The international space sector is set to grow significantly in the coming years, and HIE want to ensure that businesses are ready to reap the economic benefits that will be generated. Further ideas for engagement are being planned and if there is interest shown from further west this could occur in Durness and Kinlochbervie. Being involved early gives more chance to bring workers and families to the wider area.

## Loch Eriboll

Loch Eriboll is derived from the Norse meaning “home on a gravelly beach.” Eyrar-bol” Sandbank steading.” Bol- a farm, and Eyrr – a beach. Loch Eriboll, Hoan Fjord, is a lengthy and deep sea loch about sixteen kilometres long with a south west direction and varying from one point five to six point five kilometres in breadth. On the east, it is bounded at the entrance by the clear and elevated rocks of Whiten Head. The waters are of a depth varying from fifteen to sixty fathoms. It is set in panoramic mountain hinterland dominated by Ben Hope.



IMAGE 173 LOCH ERIBOLL’S MOST INTRIGUING FEATURE IS ARD NEAKIE

The east side is green with native lime rich fields, the west a rocky barren coast. The total length of the coastline is over thirty eight kilometres with a wide variety of shore types; bedrock, boulders, shingle, gravel, sand and mud. The main input of fresh water is from Loch Hope situated near the seaward end and by comparison, Strath Beag at the inner end of the loch has a relatively small fresh water catchment area. Tidal streams are weak with only slight acceleration locally around the islands. Exposure to wave action ranges from the open coast at the entrance that is exposed to the north, to shelter in the inner reaches. The innermost parts of the loch have a considerable fetch to the north-east, and experience occasional wave action.

Loch Eriboll’s most intriguing feature is Ard Neakie. The crescent promontory of Ard Neakie pushes out to the middle from the eastern shore. It is connected to the mainland by a narrow split with two identically curving sandy beaches. Ard Neakie was once the site of a limestone quarry and limestone kilns. Both these features are still visible from the road. The lime was used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a neutralising agent when reclaiming peaty soils for cultivation. Prior to this industry, Ard Neakie was one of the centres for a local kelp industry. Ard Neakie is notable for the four large lime kilns built in 1870. The Reay Estate produced large amounts of lime here and on the nearby island of Eilean Choraigh.

Alan Mackay who still lives and works locally had family that lived and worked at Heilam Ferry (Ard Neakie) from 1885 to 1893 as boat builders and ferry operators. During the time the ferry was run by his family and there was a shop at Ard Neakie. The ferry ran from Ard Neakie across to Portnancon. It was only a passenger ferry for two people, and it used to originally run from Eriboll. A map of 1823 shows the ferry operating from Eriboll to Port Chamuill, in 1833 the map shows the ferry from Ard Neakie to Portnancon a Ordnance Survey

six inch map 1885-1900 shows two ferries the Eriboll Ferry from Inveran on the coast adjacent to the Eriboll free church and the Helium Ferry both running to Portnancon. The ferry continued to operate until the mid-1940s certainly after the war. Alan's story is recorded later in the work "Taken on a Journey".

The ferry house built in 1831 still stands. Heilam Inn is the house on Ard Neakie and ceased to be an inn around the 1850s. The inn was eventually refused a license to sell alcohol because of over indulgence by lime kiln workers, and there was also a sailor stabbed to death outside the house, whether this had any bearing on the loss of the license is unknown. The liquor store still stands today. There are written articles about an ammunition store but there was never ammunition stored in the lime kilns but a mine did explode during WWII on the north bay of the peninsular.

Heilam occurs frequently in the history of the area. It was the site of the ferry to Portnancon and an important stop for north coast travellers. It was the home of the infamous Domhnall MacMhurchaidh who is said to have murdered at least eighteen people.

The island in the mouth of Loch Eriboll, Eilean Hoan located at the northern, seaward end of the loch is leased by the RSPB and has been managed as a nature reserve since 1975. Ruins of homesteads are obvious but it was last occupied in the early 1800s. It was known as Howga in 1570 and Haga in 1601. It is about 28 hectares (69 acres) in extent and the highest point is 25 metres (82 ft.) above sea level. Its name is of Gaelic and Old Norse derivation and means "Haven Island". As the name indicates it was the burial place of the Norsemen and probably used by their Gaelic successors.

An island in the loch Eilean Choraidh, also known as Horse Island was once inhabited but has in recent times only been used for grazing sheep from Eriboll Farm. It is about 26 hectares (64 acres) in extent and the highest point is 26 metres (85 ft.) above sea level. There is evidence of a substantial amount of activity at one time. The Ordnance Survey indicate the presence of two ruined buildings, one in the centre of the island north of a long wall that runs east to west and another at the north end. The census of 1931 records a single male inhabitant, and there has been no indication of any permanent residents since then. An island with good soil, fresh water springs on the shore, and ruined remains of shelters and dwellings that must have been in existence before the clearances and settlements at Laid. The survival of the remains of large limestone kilns clearly shows that this was an industrial place at some time. Possibly built by Lord Reay in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. There is indication of the time in more recent history, around 1944, when the island was used for target practice with bomb creators and ruined target markers.

This loch has been used as a naval anchorage for much of the 20th century. Loch Eriboll was the site of the surrender of the German U-boat fleet in May 1945. Between the 10th and 20th May, over thirty U-boats came into Loch Eriboll.

### **Surrender of U-Boat fleet**

One of Germany's most terrifying and devastating weapons of WW2. The vessels that surrendered here were responsible for sinking or damaging 59 merchant ships and 14 warships, 300,000 tonnes of allied shipping.

Loch Eriboll 1945. (Image from WW11 Research for Strathnaver Museum)

The Highland Loch, close to Durness, was the only Scottish rendezvous point for U-boats. In the space of two weeks, from May 10 to May 25, 1945, it turned into the biggest single gathering of the German submarine fleet anywhere in the world. The U-boats, nicknamed grey wolves, were part of Hitler's plan to starve Britain of food, raw materials and equipment. The



surrender of German submarines in Loch Eriboll in Sutherland was one of the strangest episodes at the end of World War II. Locals were sworn to secrecy and it has often been assumed that only “two or three” crews gave themselves up in the sheltered inlet but in fact 33 U-boat commanders surrendered in the space of 12 days in the 10-mile long loch.



IMAGE 174 SURRENDER OF U-BOAT FLEET MAGE FROM DURNES ARCHIVE

Each U-boat had between 30 and 50 crew. The crews were happy to surrender in Scotland, as it was the Russians they were worried about. They just didn't want to give up to them. The surrender included U-1231, which was used as the fleet's “off-licence” and was laden with wine, and U-532 which had just returned from Japan and was carrying raw rubber, quinine and other war supplies.

Fifteen U-boats were brought under convoy from Norway by Canadian warships and all were disarmed within hours. Explosives and other armaments were dumped over the side in Loch Eriboll and they were then re-routed to locations including Lochalsh in Wester Ross, where the crews were arrested, the loch's seabed to this day is littered with explosives and armaments.

As part of Operation Deadlight, the U-boats were scuttled in the Atlantic, with 121 of the 154 U-boats that surrendered being sunk in deep water off Lisahally, Northern Ireland, or Loch Ryan, in the west of Scotland in late 1945 and early 1946. Loch Eriboll was chosen because of its isolation and deep anchorage. It also limited any opportunity for a last show of defiance from the U-boat commanders.

There was one incident, when U-295 rammed a Canadian escort ship, HMCS Nene, punching a hole in the starboard side. The U-boat captain claimed it was an accident. The U-boat captain read a message to his ship's company telling them that they were leaving their boat and I imagine there were a few tears of these very brave men.

The BBC asked the public to contribute their memories of World War Two to a website between June 2003 and January 2006.

- Loch Eriboll 8th May 1945 Contributed by navigium
- Location of story: Loch Eriboll, Cape Wrath, Sutherland
- Background to story: Royal Navy Article ID: A4128608
- Contributed on: 29 May 2005

On VE Day 8<sup>th</sup>. May 45, I was serving in HMS Byron, an anti- submarine frigate built in the USA. On VE Day, we, together with the rest of the 21<sup>st</sup>. Escort Group, were ordered from Belfast to Loch Eriboll, a sea loch near Cape Wrath on the north west corner of Scotland, remote, rugged, grand; a sheet of water about ten miles long with the hills of Sutherland in the background, to accept the surrender of the U Boat fleet operating in the North Atlantic and Arctic.

The Group arrived at Loch Eriboll during the early morning of 9<sup>th</sup>. May. We waited. The boarding parties drew weapons and rations, a Motor Launch patrolled the entrance and then on 10<sup>th</sup> May at 8.15am DBST (Double British Summer Time), the first U Boat, U 1009, arrived on the surface flying a tattered black flag from its periscope as a sign that it was ready to surrender. Everyone went to action stations.

Byron was guard ship and the motor boat was launched with the boarding party aboard. The U Boat was boarded, guns and torpedo firing pistols were thrown overboard and log books and other documents were removed in preparation for the escorted passage to Loch Alsh where the crew were to be taken into captivity. Next morning we arrived at Loch Alsh and took the boat alongside a submarine depot ship. The U Boat Captain read a message to his ship's company telling them that they were leaving their boat and I think there were a few tears.

The 21<sup>st</sup>. Escort Group/Loch Eriboll surrender operation lasted from 10<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup>. May and during that time 33 U Boats gave themselves up. On 22<sup>nd</sup>. May, the group escorted four boats across the Irish Sea to Moville on the shores of Loch Foyle ready for the formal surrender to Admiral Sir Max Horton, C in C Western Approaches in Londonderry.

The Kriegs Marine? We found them to be sailors much like ourselves, well disciplined, responsive to the orders of their officers, still motivated to work their ships and with their morale intact even at the moment of surrender, despite the U Boat service having sustained casualties unsurpassed by any other enemy or allied fighting service. When shown photographs in 'Picture Post' of Auschwitz and Belsen, they were unable to believe that their country could do such things and called it Allied propaganda.

Such was the drama of those days in May 1945, played out on the quiet waters of a Scottish loch when peace returned to the Atlantic, when history was made. My remaining memories are of the White Ensign flying proudly over the swastika ensign of Hitler's navy on the first U Boat to enter an Allied harbour and of the short service which was conducted by our Captain at 'divisions' on the first Sunday morning of peace. We sang 'O God our help in ages past' and 'Eternal Father strong to save'. We recited the Navy prayer and the reading was from Psalm 107 (verses 23 – 30) which seemed to sum it all up. We were glad that the war in Europe was over, we 'spliced the main brace' and were thankful.

We now had to prepare ourselves for transfer to the Pacific war against Japan, which still raged. We heard that HMS Byron had been allocated to the British Pacific Fleet.

In the blizzard of January 1955, the aircraft carrier Glory arrived at Loch Eriboll and with her helicopter was able to bring food and medical help to the district. While anchored in Eriboll the captain was requested to move the ship as the radio transmission from the telephone kiosk

on the roadside on the east side was unable to communicate with the west side of Eriboll. The ship was preventing and interfering with the signals.

## HMS HOOD

When ships anchored in Loch Eriboll in the 1920s and 1930s some crew members would climb the hill to the west of the loch and leave their ship's name written in stone letters about two metres high in a patch one by two metres. The best viewing point to see the names is at the first large lay-by beyond Portnancon road end, at the disused quarry, travelling east and looking directly up the hill with a pair of binoculars, once identified can be distinguished. At this point, a walk to the ship's names that include the Valiant, Swift, Whirlwind, Union, Unga, Lucretia, Johanna, (a Dutch minesweeper) and H43, the only submarine on the hillside, are within reach. In 2002 the name SUTHERLAND joined the stone memorial. A remarkable memorial that has lain largely unnoticed. Repeated attempts have failed to preserve the names. They include appeals to the Ministry of Defence; the War Grave's Commission and the Queen. The stones are becoming embedded in the heather and slowly sinking.

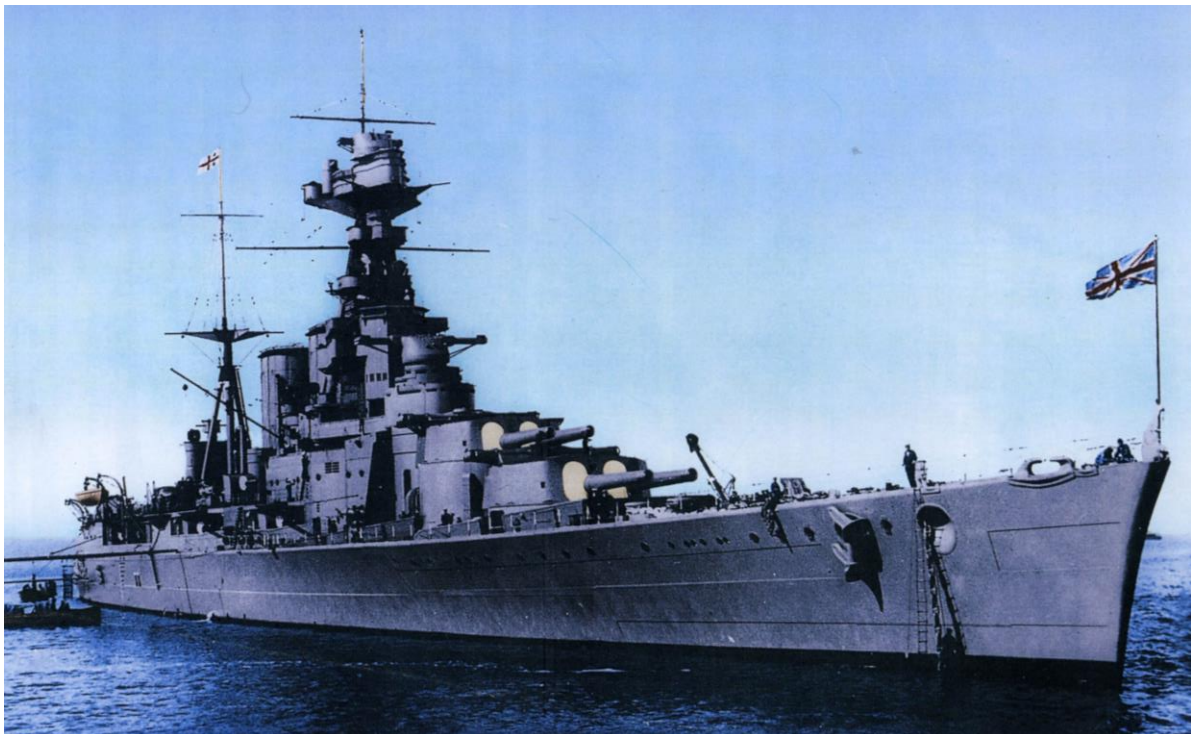


IMAGE 175 HMS HOOD

In 1937, HMS Hood, the world's biggest battleship anchored in Loch Eriboll – it is the Hood's tragic history that makes the hillside such a poignant spot. During its nine day stay sailors wrote the name "Hood" in stones on the hillside to the west of the Loch. This continued a tradition started some 1tenyears earlier by other ships and continued until the 1960's. The Hood was sunk by the German warship Bismarck off Greenland in 1941 with the loss of 1400 lives, all the crew except for three. The two meter high stones bare mute testimony to the tragic event. The stones were restored by local school children in 1993 and 1999 painted the stones of the HMS Hood and H43 to be visible from the roadside. The Mighty Hood as she was known was the single biggest British naval loss in World War 11. When the war started, she was the largest warship in commission in the world. For the whole intra war period from her completion in 1920, HMS Hood had stood as a symbol of Britain's supremacy as a sea power.

A close relationship exists between Durness and the HMS Hood Association. On The 22<sup>nd</sup>. May 1997, a plaque was unveiled in the privately owned Eriboll church in commemoration of the seamen on HMS Hood. The primary school was presented with a book about Shetland from a family who lost a member on the Hood. When Prince Charles visited the newly opened health centre and lunched at the Cape Wrath Hotel with senior citizens on the occasion of opening the Kinlochbervie High School he expressed an interest in the school's participation with the Hood. Durness Primary School is carried out an ongoing investigation into the history of Loch Eriboll and close correspondence is transferred between the school and the Hood Association. In April 1998, they received a limited edition print of the HOOD signed by the last surviving crew member.



IMAGE 176 HOOD STONES MARKED OUT ON THE HILL ABOVE LAID

To mark the occasion, the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the sinking, the children, teachers, the parish minister the Rev John Mann accompanied parents and some grandparents and they all climbed the hill above Laid to the HOOD stones. These large boulder stones that spell out the ships name have been maintained by the primary school and were once again painted. After clearing away two years' worth of heather growth and painting the stones there was an assembly. Rev Mann led the singing of a hymn, a short sermon and prayer.

Nixie Traverter, daughter of the late Captain Rory O'Connor who commanded the Hood between 1933 and 1936, has requested the school to write about the ship and their association. Nixie is writing a book about the people who served on the ship and how it is remembered to day. A chapter is being devoted to the stones and the role the school has had in preserving and maintaining them. There will be extracts from the recent pieces of children's writing and from previous letters by past pupils to the Hood Association.

### **The Herald 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2016**

It was 100 years ago this week that the Clydebank shipbuilding yard of John Brown's received written confirmation from the Admiralty that it was to build one of the country's mightiest warships. If the Navy was Britain's arm at sea, then this warship would be its fist.

Its plans were still being created when the order was placed, as naval architects wrestled with the conundrum of how to make a battlecruiser far faster than previous lethargic battleships, but with enough heavy plating to withstand attack. The drawings later arrived and on September 1<sup>st</sup> the keel of ship number 460 was laid at Clydebank, with 1000 steelworkers riveting the ship. On August 22<sup>nd</sup> 1918, it was launched as HMS Hood by the widow of Rear Admiral Sir Horace Hood, a great-great-grandson of Admiral Samuel Hood, for whom the ship was named.

Britain was still at war with Germany, and for security reasons the launch was not publicised. The next day's Glasgow Herald made no mention of it, although it had room for the trivia of war – a discharged soldier, it reported, was charged with the reset of a turnip stolen from a

farmer's field at Stirling Sheriff Court. He had been hungry and ate it. The Sheriff admonished him.

If it had been allowed, The Herald would have recorded the launch of Britain's longest warship at 859.5ft (262 metres) – a record that would stand until the Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier two years ago. It was a long, sleek boat which carried a great deal of menace. Its main armaments were eight 15-inch guns, with an astonishing range of up to 17 miles. Many a captain of foreign navy ships felt distinctly unwell when a gun with a diameter of 15 inches was trained on them.

The public, once they learned of it, called it The Mighty Hood. Crew members were less kind, calling it HMS Wobbly due to its handling. It weighed 42,100 tons and had a speed of 31 knots. There are lighter destroyers today that would be happy with that speed. Fuel consumption at full speed was three yards to the gallon. It had a crew of more than 1400 sailors. Breakfast alone consisted of 100 gallons of tea, four sides of bacon, 300 pounds of tomatoes, 600 pounds of bread, and 75 pounds of butter.

Yet for all its speed and firepower, HMS Hood, still operating in the Second World War, became one of Britain's worst naval disasters when it was attacked between Greenland and Iceland by Germany's equally awesome Bismarck 75 years ago next month, and sank in only three minutes. Of the crew of 1415 souls, only three survived, such was the speed of its sinking. One of them, William John Dundas, was from Edinburgh, and only a teenage midshipman when the ship was sunk. He was a hero that day, but never spoke in public about it, and died in a car crash near Tyndrum in 1965.

But back to Hood's earlier, grand days. By the time it was fitted out, the First World War was over, and Hood spent the twenties and thirties throughout the world, a symbol of Britain's naval power. Simply turning up was sufficient. During the Spanish Civil War, Franco's ships fired on British cargo ships taking food supplies to the republicans in Bilbao. Hood, on patrol, merely trained its guns on the attacking Spanish warship and it immediately stood down.

It could be argued that Hood was showing its age when the Second World War broke out, but all hands were needed on deck, as the saying goes, and she continued in service, becoming involved in 1941 in the search for the German battleship Bismarck which was trying to sail from Norway to the Atlantic where it hoped to cause havoc on the vital Atlantic supply lines. Bismarck was discovered in terrible weather, west of Iceland. Battle was engaged. As Bob Tilburn, one of the three survivors from HMS Hood later recalled: "Everyone was prepared as far as they could be. Everyone knew that there would be casualties – but it would be someone else, not you. No one thought that the Hood would be sunk – no one gave it a thought." Salvoes of fire boomed out from Hood, but they were returned. A shell from the Bismarck penetrated the ship's armour and blew up the Hood's magazine where a mountain of shells and flammable cordite was stored. It sank within minutes with a horrendous loss of life.

Only Ted Briggs, William Dundas, and Bob Tilburn bobbed to the surface of the sea. Clinging to buoyancy aids, Briggs and Tilburn could feel themselves slipping into a sleep which would have finished them off. They were saved by Dundas who kept singing popular songs and urging them to join in until a ship came to their rescue. As Jack Taylor on the rescue destroyer Electra recalled: "We made ready to pick up hundreds of injured and wounded men from the grey cold sea. Blankets, medical supplies, hot beverages and rum were got ready. Scrambling nets were flung over the ship's side, trailing into the water. Men were lining the side ready with hand lines, eyes straining into the greyness ahead.

"It was only what seemed like a matter of minutes when we broke out of a mist patch into the clear. And there it was. The place where the Hood had sunk. Wreckage of all descriptions was

floating on the surface. Hammocks, broken rafts, boots, clothes, caps. Of the hundreds of men we expected to see there was no sign. "We nosed our way slowly amongst all the pitiful remains of books, letters, photos, and other personal effects floating by and a shout went up as a man appeared clinging to a piece of flotsam a little further away. Two more were seen. "We searched for a long time among what remained of this once proud ship but there was no one. Not even a body."

Ted Briggs later wrote his memoirs of the loss and stated: "I swam as best I could in water four inches thick with oil and managed to get on one of the small rafts she carried, of which there were a large number floating around. When I turned again she had gone and there was a fire on the water where her bows had been. I saw Dundas and Tilburn on similar rafts. There was not another soul to be seen. We hand-paddled towards each other and held on to one another's rafts until our hands became too numb to do so.

"The Prince of Wales [battleship] had apparently reported, Hood sunk, very little hope of survivors'. The commander in chief however, had refused to believe this and ordered two of Hood's destroyer screen to close the area and search for survivors. Thus it was that three and a half hours later we saw the very welcome sight of Electra's bows as she headed towards us."

Recalling the moment he found himself underwater, Ted wrote: "I was not making any progress. The suction was dragging me down. The pressure on my ears was increasing each second, and panic returned in its worse intensity. I was going to die. I struggled madly to try to heave myself up to the surface. I got nowhere. "Although it seemed an eternity, I was under water for barely a minute. My lungs were bursting. I knew that I just had to breathe. I opened my lips and gulped in a mouthful of water. I was not going to reach the surface. I was going to die.

"As I weakened, my resolve left me. What was the use of struggling? Panic subsided. I had heard it was nice to drown. I stopped trying to swim upwards. The water was a peaceful cradle. I was being rocked off to sleep. There was nothing I could do about it – goodnight, mum. I was ready to meet God. My blissful acceptance of death ended in a sudden surge beneath me, which shot me to the surface like a decanted cork in a Champagne bottle. I trod water as I panted in great gulps of air. I was alive."

The loss shocked the whole of Britain which had also believed the Hood was unsinkable. It was a Pyrrhic victory for the Bismarck. Hood's destruction spurred a relentless pursuit by all available Royal Navy warships, and two days later it was hit by an old Fairey Swordfish biplane torpedo bomber launched from the aircraft carrier Ark Royal. Bismarck lay vulnerable in the water, its steering gear inoperable, as all ships sped towards the stricken ship with guns blazing. It was scuttled by its crew with a heavy loss of life.

Today the HMS Hood Association is still active. As the association's secretary Jackie Miller told me: "Hood has remained iconic and alive in the hearts of our veterans, members and the families of the men who were lost. Whilst we still have a small number of veterans who served on her their numbers are now in single figures. Our focus now is to perpetuate the values and aspirations of all those men lost by supporting young people in the cadet groups linked to our association."

Apart from John Brown's and survivor William Dundas, there is another link to Scotland. Above Loch Eriboll, the name HOOD is picked out in white stones which were set there by crew members in 1935. Ever since, the site has been maintained by locals, including children from Durness Primary School. In this small part of Scotland, the name HMS Hood will never be forgotten.

## **Loch Eriboll Pier**

In the middle of 1998, Wallace Stone and Partners, consulting civil engineers from Inverness proposed three sites for a new pier on the shores of Loch Eriboll. The crofters, fishermen and people with an interest were asked to comment on the draft presentation. Two options were included for a Portnancon locality. Portnancon north, requiring a new road to access with landing and parking and storage for pier users. Portnancon south not to include landing, berthing, parking and storage. Port Chamuill with landing facilities, parking and storage for pier users only. The need for a new pier was being presented as practical because at present there is no full time proper safe and permanently usable utility.

Loch Eriboll has an increasing number of local aquaculture operations, an increasing traffic of visiting vessels and there is no appropriate pier for mounting a rescue should it be necessary. Several times since the issue of a pier is brought to discussion and funding sought for studies but to date no further progress has been manifested.

## **Oil Company Interested in Loch Eriboll**

Northern Times April 14, 1972

*Sutherland County Council are sending a deputation to the south of England next month for talks with an oil company who are interested in Loch Eriboll's deep water anchorage.*

*“Loch Eriboll is now clearly in the minds of those concerned in off-shore oil production, Mr John Green, Sutherland's Development Officer, told The Northern Times on Wednesday. “It will be the deputation's aim to find out what is required at Eriboll if it is to play a part in off-shore oil production. In any event, we are starting to get the message across now, and the Council will be emphasising just how serious they are about developing all the necessary facilities in the event of Loch Eriboll's being used either as a pipeline terminal or as a supply base for off-shore drilling.” A preliminary survey had already been launched. The deputation, who fly south about the middle of next month, will be led by Mr Donald McBain (County Convener). He will be accompanied by Mr George Murray (chair-man of the Development Committee), Mr John Mackay, (chairman of the Harbours Committee), Mr J B Rodger (County Clerk), Mr Green, and Mr G Low (County Treasurer). By the time off-shore oil exploration had reached west of Orkney and Shetland, Sutherland County Council's development plans for Loch Eriboll should have reached fruition, ready to cope with any call on this deep-water anchorage, Mr Green had told The Northern Times last Tuesday, when he was commenting on the news that oil companies were planning an advance service centre at the former naval base at Scapa Flow to cope with exploration work to be carried out in northern waters over the next six or seven years. Mr Green felt that once exploration began west of Shetland, Loch Eriboll would be in a strong position. At the moment all the interest was on the east side. “We have the next two years to get Eriboll developed,” he said. Sutherland County Council's consulting engineers were making a preliminary survey of Loch Eriboll and this report should be available by the end of next month. There would be a full scale survey during the summer. The immediate aim was to provide pier facilities for the feldspar industry to be developed in Durness. Charter Exploration, working in close co-operation with the Highland Development Board, had proved the mineral was there to be exploited and could be sold at an economic price. Mr Green said they would have to pin their hopes, so far as off-shore oil was concerned on the north and west coasts at this stage.*

## **Loch Eriboll Aquaculture Framework Plan**

Produced by The Planning and Development Service, The Highland Council August 2000. Loch Eriboll is the only sea loch on Scotland's north coast and it is one of the most remote from the main centres of population. The development of aquaculture here helps to generate

employment and income in a very sparsely populated area which has a limited range of economic alternatives.

The objectives of the framework plan for Loch Eriboll are:

- To identify opportunities for aquaculture development compatible with other interests.
- To raise public awareness of the multi-faceted resources of Loch Eriboll and its environs.
- To safeguard the natural heritage interest of the area – its landscape, and coastal and marine nature conservation interest.
- To identify and safeguard the recreation/tourism assets of the loch.
- To identify infrastructure investment priorities to support the development of aquaculture and to maximise the general economic and recreational value of the loch

### **The Wreck of the Sark**

This vessel was wrecked on rocks at Loch Eriboll Light. Loch Eriboll Light' is presumably the White Head Light or Beacon. The steam trawler Sark fouled her propeller with her own nets and was eventually blown ashore in Loch Eriboll. Two of the crew were drowned. The wrecking occurred in 1920 but much ironwork and two boilers remain, with a winch near the bow visible on the shoreline.

### **Loch Eriboll Lighthouse**

Northern Lighthouse board Journal Christmas 2003

In 1895 my Great Grandfather, James Clarke, became Attendant Lighthouse Keeper of the newly built Eriboll Lighthouse, built by David Stevenson. At the same time he was building his own house at Kempie, including in it a small window overlooking the Loch where a lamp could be lit as a guide to boats on the Loch, the house even today is occupied by his descendants. His youngest son, also James Clarke was born there and was later to follow his father as Attendant Keeper of Eriboll Lighthouse, and to raise his family there. In 1963 his youngest son, Walter Clarke, took over as Attendant Keeper, until 1981, completing a total of 86 years and three generations of taking care of the lighthouse. I wonder, is this a record?

Eriboll lighthouse was at first lit by paraffin, and in those days had to be visited very couple of days to trim the wicks, no mean task. On a good day they would be able to get there by boat, on others it would mean a walk from Kempie, a trip of several miles each way. When paraffin was discontinued the light was lit by Carbide, the residue of which was dispensed down the rocks, painting them in a brilliant white which could be seen for several miles. Finally it was lit by gas cylinder which has been used until now. 2003 brings another change Eriboll Lighthouse is replaced by Solar: a tinge of sadness at this departure, but safety regulations from Europe require this change.



## Loch Eriboll Church



IMAGE 177 LOCH ERIBOLL CHURCH

Eriboll Church is an old Presbyterian church on the 18,000-acre Eriboll Estate owned by Mr. Povlsen. The Church, a significant landmark locally and highly visible to those who travel around Loch Eriboll on the A838.

*A generous donation allowed the SSPCK to set up missions, and in 1794 one was established at Eriboll to serve the districts of Westmoin, Melness and Oldshores. The missionary preached at 'Cambusnadun' near Eriboll and Melness in winter and spring, and preached 12 Sabbaths in summer and autumn at Kinlochbervie. A new mission church was built at Eriboll in 1804.*

Eriboll Church has been a place of worship, refuge and marking of occasions. The church originally doubled as a mission schoolhouse for children on the estate. The church graveyard is situated two miles away over “the hill”, facing south, so that the souls within encounter the sun’s warmth. Rectangular-plan single storey church, harled with a pitched slate roof. The front elevation extends to 3 bays with pointed single windows. A gabled porch extension and pointed finial sit to the right, with a lower vestry extension and ball finial to the left. The Church has seen some remarkable occasions over the last 215 years.

On The 22nd May 1997, a plaque was unveiled in the privately owned Eriboll church in commemoration of the seamen on HMS Hood. The primary school was presented with a book about Shetland from a family who lost a member on the Hood.

In 2007 James and Julie Clark invite all to attend the nine lessons and Carol Service at Eriboll church on the 18 December at 3pm.

Anders and Anne Povlsen are custodians of the church and Wildland appointed leading conservation specialists Groves-Raines Architects to come up with the restoration scheme and undertook a full restoration.

## **Celebration to Mark Eriboll Church Renovation**

**Published in the Northern Times 20 December 2019**

The church is on the 18,000-acre Eriboll Estate owned by Mr Povlsen. A celebration has been held to mark the restoration of a historic north-coast church which had started to become an eyesore. Danish clothing magnate Anders Holch Povlsen's company Wildland Ltd undertook a full restoration of Eriboll Church near Durness costing "six figures" Around 100 people attended the dedication service, conducted by the Rev Simon Matthews, who spoke of new beginnings and the "great natural theatre we find ourselves in." Tim Kirkwood, CEO of Wildland Ltd, told the service that Eriboll Church was built around 1804 as a place of worship, refuge and marking of occasions. "The Church has seen some extraordinary events over the last 215 years," he said.

In 1934, HMS Hood which had been launched in 1918 as Britain's biggest warship, spent some time at anchor in Loch Eriboll. "Members of the crew came ashore and set out the name of the ship in stones on the hillside above Laid. "Seven years later in 1941, the Hood was sunk by the German warship Bismark, during the battle of the Denmark Strait between Iceland and Greenland. Of the 1418 members of crew on board, only three survived.

"A plaque to their memory is on the wall of this church and thanks to the efforts of children from Durness Primary School who started their conservation in 1993, the stones still pick out the name on the hillside.

"The Church, privately owned by Eriboll Estate, whilst only a building, is a notable landmark locally and highly visible by the many who now travel the North Coast 500 route. "It is therefore, perhaps, perceived as an indicator of how things are going in the community and landscape of this truly remarkable and special area. "Anders and Anne Povlsen are now custodians of the church and Wildland is committed to restoration and creating new beginnings for the area.

"This church – MOD est – understated, but I hope you agree, beautifully restored, filled with the sound of singing and music is a step in that direction. "Without people and place, opportunity and livelihood, our landscapes will be poorer. "We hope that Eriboll Church – historic and MOD est but beautiful and rejuvenated, will be set in a flourishing and enriched landscape. "A place that will bring people together for celebration – for weddings, for christenings, a place for remembrance and sanctuary – a place that reflects a community that values its heritage and environment. "Thank you, Anders and Anne who have made this possible."

Children from Farr High School and the Big Sing Choir provided music and Rachel Parrott recited a reading.

Wildland appointed leading conservation specialists Groves-Raines Architects to come up with the restoration scheme.

The church originally doubled as a mission schoolhouse for children on the estate. The church graveyard is situated two miles away over "the hill", facing south, so that the souls within encounter the sun's warmth.

## Portnancon



IMAGE 178 PORTNANCON

Portnancon meaning “Port of the Dogs” is a former fishing station, on the west shore of Loch Eriboll 8 miles (13 km) west along the A838 road from Durness village.

A pier and storehouse built mid-19th century and a pier with wooden jetty and the store is now a guesthouse and restaurant. Approached by a short road there are a number of derelict croft houses, which indicate that Portnancon must have, been a busy little community at one time. The first shepherd on the Rispond Farm had a house constructed at Portnancon and the ruined walls can be seen. The ferryman's' house, which was also the local inn, has survived and from here the ferry to Heilam on the opposite shore of Eriboll ran until about 1930. The shop that was at one time on the pier sold groceries and paraffin for lamps the goods being brought by steamer from Aberdeen, this was referred to as the Custom House.

Since 2012 Portnancon has been a private residence. For about 10 years previous the store was a guest house and restaurant. Portnancon consists of a pier and storehouse built mid-19th century with a wooden jetty. The fishing pier was also used by a ferry, which crossed the loch until the 1930s. Approached by a short road there are a number of derelict croft houses, which indicate that Portnancon must have, been a busy little community at one time.

### **A Memory of Past Times.**

Written in November 1968 by Norman & James Mackay Morrison.

The family, was born at the east end of Laid but about 1898 the father, John Morrison, took over the job of ferryman at Portnancon on the death of the previous ferryman named Mackay. John Morrison had previously gone south to Aberdeenshire every summer to work at the herring fishing and in the winter worked lobsters and gathered whelks. There were two ferrymen, John Morrison at Portnancon, and the father of Anson Mackay at Heilam.

The ferry originally ran from Port Chamuill, where there was no slip. The ferryman there also built boats. No date given for transfer of ferry to Portnancon. Name means Port of the dogs, and was said to be so named because when people first landed there they found two dogs fighting. The ferry from Portnancon landed passengers at Eriboll, Kempie or Heilam. The fare, in James's time was 1/- to Eriboll (single), 9d to Heilam, 1/6 if taking a bicycle. The boat was a 15ft sailing boat (no engine). Often the weather prevented it sailing in winter, and Norman remembers being stranded on the far side, and walking back, with his father, round the head of the Loch. The wind was so strong that at Whale's corner they had to hang on to each other to resist wind. (Name of Whale's corner derives from a stranded whale, type unknown but about fifteen foot long, which was stranded on shore in 1930. It took two horses from Eriboll to drag it high enough up shore to bury it.

The ferry house at Portnancon was originally an Inn, and the pegs that held the sign are still visible on left front of the house. The tall building next to the ferry house, now used as the byre, was originally a store, with a shop for sale of general groceries. Above it lived William Mackay, his sister Isabella and their father – Mackay, who came originally from Laid, but immigrated to Australia. Presumably he married an Australian and the children were born there. When he returned to Portnancon, he left his wife behind in Australia. They ran the store until, eventually all died. Neither child married, the daughter was lame and with a deformed hand and arm. All buried in Balnakeil.

The small building most recently used as a shop, was a fish smoking house. William Mackay smoked the fish, and took them round with a bicycle, to sell at houses. The house north of the burn was occupied at the time the Morrisons moved into the ferry house, by a family called Mackay, John, David and Donald, and their sister Christina. All the men went blind.

After this family, the house was occupied by a family called Mackenzie. At least one baby was born there, and Norman had to go by their lorry on a very bad night to fetch the nurse (English, called Jackson) from Parkhill.

The house half way up the hill to the main road was occupied at this time by a family. Four children, Hugh, William, Dolly and Maggie Morrison. This had enough land to be worked as a croft, unlike the houses at Portnancon. The men also worked shellfish, in winter, and went away to fishing in summer. The Father died fairly young, and Granny also lived in the house with them. One daughter married and went to live in the house at present owned by John Phillips in Laid.

The house at the top of the hill, near the main road, was built by the widow of the ferryman previous to John Morrison. She was related to Jimmy Gunn of Sangomore. The house was later occupied by a family named Campbell.

Men going to Aberdeenshire for herring fishing took the ferry from Portnancon about 4 or 5 - P.M, walked over the Craggans road across the ford at Cashel Dhu through Strath More to Altnaharra and then walked on the main road to Lairg arriving in time for the midday train on the following day.

The pier at Portnancon was built about 1889 by an Arbroath firm. Once a month a North of Scotland Shipping Co. vessel arrived with general cargo and passengers. The single fare was £1 (cf. Mrs. Robina Campbell). The ships were the St. Ninian, St. Clair, St. Ola and in addition as a special run the Queen brought back men and women from the herring fishing, calling at Scrabster, Melness (landing passengers by boat), Portnancon and Loch Clash.

Norman went away to herring fishing in summer and in winter worked the shellfish with his father and Jimmy. The latter stayed at home, at first helping his father with the ferry and later running it himself. It ceased to run in 1939, as it no longer paid due to the improvement of the

road and coming of motor transport. Norman remembers sailing ships coming from Brittany to fish for lobsters. They had a well amidships in which the lobsters were kept alive.

Both Norman and Jimmy went to school in Laid. Teachers, Mr. Taylor followed by Mr. Macdonald (from Plockton) during Norman's time and Mr. Clement in Jimmy's time. During the first war, they had women teachers. Each pupil took a peat to school, for the classroom fire, during winter. There were thirty eight children in school when Jimmy was there.

## Smoo Cave



IMAGE 179 SMOO CAVE

The word Smoo is a Norse word "Sumvya"(Smjuga) meaning creek or cleft. The limestone cave lies east of Durness village. There is a signposted carpark, with toilet facilities. The cave is approached by a steep track down to the inlet where the sea water meets the river after flowing from the fall through two chambers of the cave which is not accessible to wheelchairs. The crossing of a burn is required which has been no more than stepping stones but more recently, July 2006 a substantial bridge was installed.

The cave is at the end of an eight hundred metre sea inlet; Geodha Smoo; where the Smoo burn drops from the level of the road underground. Alt Smoo flowing off the moors drops nearly twenty five metres into the second chamber down a vertical shaft the Falais Smoo or Chimney Smoo as the sink hole in the roof is called. The falling stream strikes a rock about three metres above the water surface before disappearing in a shining apron of scattered silver in a deep pool with a depth around eight metres. After hard rain, the Alt Smoo is changed into a raging torrent that crashes into the underground lochan with a gigantic roar.

The cave opens as a large cavern in the lime stone cliffs over sixty metres long, forty metres wide and an entrance arch over fifteen metres high. An attempt to bring the inner chambers within public reach was made in 1977. A student during summer vacation escorted visitors climbing over rocks. This was stopped due to the dangers encountered.



IMAGE 180 SMOO CAVE WATERFALL

In 1985, the Highland Council spent forty five thousand pounds on land acquisition, car parking facilities, picnic site and footpath with viewing area improvements around Smoo. In 1986, the Royal Engineers of the Territorial Army built steps descending the steep slope and a stone bridge over the burn making the entrance to the cave easily accessible. Smoo cave is accessible up to the water fall chamber 365 days a year with public at no charge. The second chamber has become accessible by a wooden bridge over a rock wall and Smoo burn. This second cavern is about twenty one metres by nine metres with two openings in the roof.

For the slightly adventurous by descending a ladder, approximately two metres, to a small dinghy the third chamber can be accessible. Able to carry six persons across a deep pool into which the water from Smoo Burn falls from one of the roof holes, about thirty seven metres wide. The waterfall dictates when this excursion is possible as at times the water can be falling too hard to allow a safe passage. The "blow hole" and waterfall can be observed from the top of the cave from an observation point.

The stream dissolving the limestone has produced the cave and Dolomite working along the lines of weakness in the rock e.g. fault joints, and enlarging them. The hole down which the stream flows has been formed by the solution of the rocks where they are faulted. The isolated blocks of rock outside the main chamber and in the long narrow sea inlet are remnants of pillars which once supported caverns like the present one but have since collapsed. It has been stated the inlet was created as the cave roof progressively collapsed deepening the cavern. At occasional times of high tides, the sea can lap the back wall of the cave. The process is continuing and eventually Smoo Cave will collapse and the sea inlet will advance a little further inland. The ground level in the cave has risen over the years and the sea tide has altered course.

It is likely that further cave systems exist in the vicinity with passages extending underground for some considerable distance.

On more than one occasion, archaeological digs have shown signs that Smoo Cave has been used for fishing and living in for thousands of years. Samples have been obtained from the ancient midden estimated to be about seven thousand years old at the entrance. It is full of discarded shell fish and bits of animal bones dated to different periods showing the cave has been used at altered times. The most recent excavations were conducted by archaeologists from Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division and the Highland Council in 1992 and 1995. These were the first systematic archaeological investigations. Other references to exploration are from Ordnance Survey records and there is a small entry in *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland* by Keillar 1972.

In 1992, investigations of the eroding shell midden were carried out prior to the construction of a protective wall. This work involved cutting back, sampling and recording of the eroding section. This resulted in the identification of several occupation and activity horizons. The shell midden, the earliest phases of which appeared to be Iron Age, represented the latest phase of activity. The earliest deposits substantially lower than the present cave floor may represent Mesolithic activity. The investigation revealed further sites and deposits located close by. The conclusions to the report on the investigation reveal the cave to hold a valuable source of evidence of multi-period occupation. The work was a major contribution to the possible identification of the most northerly site of Mesolithic activity on mainland Scotland.

In addition to inspiring myth and legend a dig in 1904 was recalled by Donald Macdonald of Sangomore in 1986 of which no record could be found but he remembers that a number of bones were discovered. A mound was also detected thought to be a kitchen from when the cave was used for a dwelling. Mr. Ian Keillar from Elgin uncovered human bones and a worked stone which had been exposed by the action of the burn on the sandy cave floor. These were found to be from the Mesolithic period. The first inhabitants of Durness very probably used the cave for shelter.

There are vague stories, likely based on some fact, of the cave being smugglers' hideaway and linked with tales of the supernatural. It was formally believed to be the abode of spirits who guarded this entrance to the nether world. The first Lord of Reay met with the Devil on several occasions and was able to get the better of him. The Prince of Darkness was none too pleased about this and followed Donald Mackay to Durness where he sought to waylay him in Smoo Cave. Lord Reay was heading for the cavern just before dawn but had the good fortune to send his dog into the blackness in front of him. When the animal came out howling and hairless the master of Reay realised what lay in store for him. He held back for a moment and in that moment the sun rose. In the light of day, the Devil was powerless and left through the roof of the cave leaving the three holes seen today.

The following is an account from a party entering the cave in 1833.

" After providing ourselves with a small boat and lights, and raising them over the arc, we found ourselves in a lake about thirty yards long and nearly as broad; we now lighted our candles and approached an arch in the rock under which we could just pass by lying flat on the boat. This opened to another lake of equal length, but gradually diminishing in breadth. Having at the upper end left the boat we walked over the rock about thirty paces in the same direction. The height of the roof is various from twenty to sixty feet and its sides and bases are almost covered with stalactites and stalagmites formed by the dropping roof of the cave, which is entirely, composed of limestone. The temperature of a well at the upper end we found to be forty-eight degrees Fahrenheit."



In 1860, a traveller reported the possibility of being ferried across the inner pool but to do this boatmen must be engaged who charged fifteen shillings and another charge for lights.

In the diary of Sir Walter Scott for the 19th September 1814 there is a covering description of his visit to the cave and he notes the effects of his lamp on the dew covered stalactites as, “The effect of ten thousand birthday candles. The cave was covered with stalactites and stalagmites. A water kelpie or an evil spirit of aquatic propensities could not have chosen a fitter abode and to say the truth I believe at our first entrance and all our feelings were afloat at the marvelling of the scene the unexpected splashing of a seal would have routed the whole dozen of us. Impossible for description to explain the impression made by so strange a place.”

The cave was used as a store for the 18th Century Orkney merchant builder of Smoo Lodge. He is also reputed to have built the small limestone block hut at the foot of the path. This house is roofless but is a sturdy building.

The rocky slopes around the cave are usually abundant with stone graffiti left as a reminder by tourists and a token of a visit. In 1991, floodlights were installed. These have been well concealed to give a dramatic and clear illumination of the cave and can now be explored without torches and candles. On many occasions the cave has been used for theatre and concerts.

### **Proposed Development & Improvements to Smoo Cave.**

A major visitor attraction remains relatively untouched in commercial undertakings but at times there have been ambitious plans to have designs for interpretation, access and marketing.

26<sup>th</sup>. November 2001

The consultants John Findlay associates of Edinburgh architects and designers specialising in heritage, tourism and leisure projects have presented an interim report addressing the development potential of Smoo Cave. Durness Community Council, Highland Council, Historic Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage are working in partnership to improve the scheduled ancient monument with a number of enhancements. These improvements are defined as visitor needs, local economy needs and project needs. The signage and marketing of the cave needs improvement at all levels. It is proposed that all visitors to the cave will have to pass through a new interpretive centre housing facts about the cave, a zone that looks forward collating past geological and archaeological information and putting them into a future context and a virtual visit designed to provide a substitute visit for disabled users. This would have two remote CCTV cameras located in the cave and linked to screens in the centre. Listening posts will give access to arrange of pre-recorded sounds such as the waterfall, nesting birds and underwater sounds. The visitor experience in the centre would include some of the myths and legends associated with the cave. There would be a cost to enter the facility, as underlining the whole proposal is the implication that Smoo Cave must become a paid attraction. Without this being accepted it is difficult for the consultants to see how any refurbished development can be fiscally maintained and marketed in the years to come.

On leaving the centre visitors would descend via a disabled friendly ramp to a picnic area and the cave trail. Just before the beech level is reached are the remains of a former fishers store and it is suggested that this building be restored and turned into a small seasonal smoo shop selling a range of Smoo and other products. Changes would be made to the river crossing and have an art light creation installed as in some cathedrals. The proposals include replacing the current walkway and viewing gallery. Beyond the river and beach before entering the cave mouth is a steep grassy hillside covered in names and messages created by visitors following a tradition that has been ongoing in living memory. To maintain this tradition in the new

millennium it is proposed that a community art project is undertaken on the slope. Using the traditional beech stone a large symbolic ground installation could be created.

The return trail will be via the sinkhole, which requires upgrading. Visitors would depart via the interpretation centre. The current toilet block would be demolished. A company limited by guarantee with charitable status probably called Smoo Ltd would have to be established to run the entire project from inception to completion then operate and manage the completed redevelopment that is estimated to cost £844842. A least one full time job would be created. Durness Community Council is fully behind the proposals and there is to be a public meeting on the 4<sup>th</sup>. December for community discussion. Smoo Cave has the potential to be amongst the best visitor attractions in the north of Scotland due to its unique and inherent natural qualities. The cave already attracts about 40000 visitors a year and this is seen as a significant development platform.

10th. December 2001

Councillor Keith chaired a community meeting on Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> to discuss and respond to the consultation concept for Smoo Cave prepared by John Findlay associates of Edinburgh, architects and designers specialising in heritage, tourism and leisure projects. After the presentation, summarised in the Northern Times Durness news of the 30<sup>th</sup>. November, it was apparent that there were many issues that needed to be clearly considered and as only one document had been available to the community further time for a response was necessary.

Mr. Findlay very professionally presented his vision of what could be experienced by visitors to the Cave. It omitted any options within the proposal and was vigorously defended. Many matters would be for the management of the project proposed to be a partnership of a company limited by guarantee between the Highland Council, SNH and the community. Several issues were requiring reflection. A development that would cost in the region of three quarters of a million pounds is considered of great importance to the area and an immense potential benefit. It was agreed that the community should meet after considering the document and prepare a constructive response. Scottish Natural Heritage and the consultants should have all comments before Christmas with the consultation period completed by mid-February at the latest.

The meeting was attended by Geoff Robson of the planning Department of the Highland Council who announced that if this development, which includes elements in the design to improve access and safety, is not accepted there is every possibility that in the not too distant future the cave could be closed for public access. The Highland Council planning who own the cave have financial responsibilities that require restrictions on spending. The planning budget cannot sustain maintenance. Smoo Cave has had large amounts of money spent recently on fencing and other improvements around the environs but is considered to be third world in its facilities for visitors not providing the experience that visitors require.

31 December 2001

There was a second meeting for public consultation and discussion regarding the proposals for the Smoo Cave development last Thursday the 13<sup>th</sup>. December. Councillor Keith chaired the meeting that addressed topics that were felt to need more consideration at the previous meeting earlier in the month when the consultant was present. The concept of the improvements was regarded as a good development although there were issues within the concept that were believed to be out of keeping. The proposed artwork was not what would be acceptable locally. Although the lighting requires improvement a permanent light show would not be necessary. If the experience to the cave and the interpretation were of high quality then there was no disagreement about having to charge for admission. The rights of way will have to be made clear before a charge could be made as it was pointed out that the cave may be a right of way.

If the toilets are to be demolished for the new building it should be ensured that the new facilities were in place before the current building is demolished. By a large majority it was agreed that the village would be unable to support another gift shop on the complex and if the financial details were more accurately scrutinised many savings and alterations to the package would counteract the income being projected from a shop. The old fish store where the shop was proposed was not felt to be suitable and this building could be used for a display and information on local fishing and the part that the building played. The idea to interpret the shell midden was given full support if permission for this could be achieved from Historic Scotland. The access paths to the cave and the steps are requiring improvements and the designs for this and the new bridge over the burn were agreed to be good. The design for access to the inner cave could be improved and further suggestions about the route and a less intrusive design will be forwarded with the comments from the community consultation. The possibility of the Cave for concerts was seen as having great potential. It was suggested that an annual safety review should be included in the proposal and be built into the costs. There should be an exploration of the viability of producing electricity from the waterfall included. These comments are to be forwarded from the community through the community council to Scottish Natural Heritage and the consultants John Findlay associates of Edinburgh.

7<sup>th</sup>. January 2002

There was a second meeting for public consultation and discussion regarding the proposals for the Smoo Cave development last Thursday the 13 December. Councillor Keith chaired the meeting that addressed topics that were felt to need more consideration at the previous meeting earlier in the month when the consultant was present. The concept of the improvements was regarded as a good development although there were issues within the concept that were believed to be out of keeping. The proposed artwork was not what would be acceptable locally. Although the lighting requires improvement a permanent light show would not be necessary. If the experience to the cave and the interpretation were of high quality then there was no disagreement about having to charge for admission. The rights of way will have to be made clear before a charge could be made as it was pointed out that the cave may be a right of way. If the toilets are to be demolished for the new building it should be ensured that the new facilities were in place before the current building is demolished. By a large majority it was agreed that the village would be unable to support another gift shop on the complex and if the financial details were more accurately scrutinised many savings and alterations to the package would counteract the income being projected from a shop. The old fish store where the shop was proposed was not felt to be suitable and this building could be used for a display and information on local fishing and the part that the building played. The idea to interpret the shell midden was given full support if permission for this could be achieved from Historic Scotland. The access paths to the cave and the steps are requiring improvements and the designs for this and the new bridge over the burn were agreed to be good. The design for access to the inner cave could be improved and further suggestions about the route and a less intrusive design will be forwarded with the comments from the community consultation. The possibility of the Cave for concerts was seen as having great potential. It was suggested that an annual Safety Review should be included in the proposal and be built into the costs. There should be an exploration of the viability of producing electricity from the waterfall included. These comments are to be forwarded from the community through the community council to Scottish Natural Heritage and the consultants John Findlay associates of Edinburgh.

11<sup>th</sup>. March 2002

The Final report for the Smoo Cave Development from the consultants John Findlay Associates has been received. Valerie Wilson from SNH will be arranging a meeting with the Community

Council in the near future to discuss the options. It is expected that a community meeting will follow soon after wards. Pressure pad counters have been installed at the entrance to the cave complex to count the number of visitors. All the figures in the report are based on visitor numbers of 40000 and it is expected to justify this number over the summer season. The east path to the cave has been closed due to the dangerous condition. It is hoped that emergency repair work can be carried out under the BTVC scheme. A quote for work to the boardwalks at Sangomore and the cave path has been received and the Community Council are seeking funding to have the work carried out.

24<sup>th</sup>. June 2002

There was a meeting last Monday 17<sup>th</sup> to discuss the final report of John Findlay Associates about development of Smoo cave and for the Durness Community Council to find a way ahead for the scheme. The purpose was informing the new Community Council of the situation and to draw a conclusion on the matter whether the Cave is to be improved. Agency representatives were present from Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Highland Council planning Department, who own the cave, and Durness Community Council

The final report from John Findlay Associates was referred to and Valerie Wilson SNH went through the options that had been presented in the report. Disappointment was expressed that the report was not a fulfilment of the brief. Several different options were expected but four options on one main alternative were only examined in the report. This was unavoidable as only the one consultant firm tendered for the brief and the commission had to be given to this firm although eight were asked to tender.

Everybody present agreed that the aim was to carry forward a good proposal. The chairman Councillor Francs Keith asked that all present gave a positive front on the proposed development of Smoo Cave as this could involve some controversy but the importance of the development to the locality could not be overstated. After discussion the meeting made several alterations to the main option and the chairman indicated that he estimated that the saving on the option with alterations could be about £100000 making the approximate cost of the development about £700000. Any improvements are dependent on an admission charge being levied. The main points raised and to be included in the response were a new interpretive centre and toilets, External works required and alterations to the car park. Local signage improved with a redesign of the picnic area but the “decoration” of the area may not be necessary. Footpaths and bridges, interior work to the cave, using the old fish building as an exhibition site and landscaping the locality, with no permanent land art needed just encouraging the tradition of writing names in stone should be continued. No lightshow was felt to be necessary but definite improvement to the cave lighting.

Sculptures in the car park area should be considered but this could be scaled down from the proposals. A web site, company registration and the retail area to be included although it is stressed that the retail area will sell only Smoo Cave orientated products.

The chairman asked that the meeting discussed the way ahead. He suggested that the community Council should designate 5 people and not necessary Community Councillors to start the next phase. The project will have to be phased with a development and technical phase followed by a capital phase. It was envisaged that most of the funding would be through a lotteries heritage award applied for from a limited company. This will take preparation time and it was suggested that the information required by the lotteries should be determined.

A development officer is going to have to employ either directly or commissioned. SNH indicated that they could have funding for this. A visitor’s survey and liaison with the lotteries funding body needs to be initiated immediately. Information available should be adapted and

preparatory work carried out. Starting now would still mean an application not being ready before 2004.

The local group has to be established and approach SNH, CED and CASE for funding to proceed with a project/development officer. Visitor's counters are currently in place but a questionnaire has to be produced soon to catch this year's visitors. Questions should include why visited, likes, and dislikes, length of stay in the area, payment? The meeting felt substantial progress has been made and will wait for a response from the Durness Community Council.

August 2002

Yvonne Mackay community councillor and member of the Smoo Cave sub group declared that all the community were not supportive of such an ambitious scheme. She was asked to raise this at the Community Council. Suggestion about displaying various alternatives and seeking comments and or an accompanying a questionnaire were discussed.

The ambitious proposals came to an end and no further action was taken on the development of the suggestions. The charging of an entrance fee appeared to be impossible as the Cave was a right of way and has always had public access. Local support was not forthcoming in any strength.

Smoo Cave November 2007

Consultations are underway with the Highland Council to renew the interpretive themes and picnic area at Smoo Cave along with improved signage to and surrounding the cave approaches. The Community Council was given the first draft of the proposals for input and comment. It is planned the new interpretation and displays will be in place for the spring of 2008.

### **Colin Coventry 11/06/1957, 29/01/2019**

The life of caver Colin Coventry, who died in February at the age of 61 and who ran Smoo Cave tours for over 30 years, was marked in a touching and poignant ceremony at Durness on Saturday, June 15. A handsome plaque was erected in Mr. Coventry's memory above the sign for Smoo Cave and his ashes were scattered in Elephant Cave, where he loved to sit, and also in the waterfall inside Smoo Cave. It was attended by friends and family members from Dunfermline and Orkney, as well as local people and members of the Grampian Speleological Society.

There can be no other with the knowledge of Smoo Cave than Colin Coventry "Colin the Caveman" as he was locally known. Colin has been the registered occupier of Smoo Cave since scheduling and a tour guide at Smoo for the last 35 years. He could deliver his tour in several languages and maintained his duty of care of the cave keeping the site litter free, bringing issues of safety to appropriate authorities, working with conservation agencies to ensure the cave and the environs are preserved from erosion. Mr Eadie is continuing to run Smoo Cave Tours and said he would also keep on going with his and Mr Coventry's winter project, digging with hand tools a tunnel from Smoo in the hope of finding a rear chamber. "We've been digging for the last five years and the tunnel now goes back 40 odd metres," he said.

### **New Chamber?**

In the south east corner of the main chamber there exists a large flow stone from which exits a small stream, this is the entrance to the dig. A tunnel is presently being dug towards an obvious fault line. In September 2012 Colin acquired permission for the exploration of a possible new chamber identified by geology which branches off from the main chamber of Smoo cave. The cave is owned by The Highland Council and is a scheduled Scottish monument and consent had to be approved by Historic Scotland. The suspect chamber is underneath a "cemented

debris fan or flowstone, a tallus of triangular shaped deposit fills the base of a large vertical fault line in the Limestone. Although relatively unexplored, this chamber has long been known about and was included in a detailed study of the paleoenvironmental history of Smoo cave by Gleed-Owen in 1992. This study took samples of the deposits which form the back of the chamber for environmental analysis, and attempted to reconstruct the genesis of the feature as a whole. Although no firm conclusions were drawn, it is clear that the flowstone and underlying material is naturally deposited and covers a significant fault line which has and still does channel fresh water. For the past two winters Colin has been digging a tunnel towards the fault line with less than 2 metres to go until he reaches the fault line where there is likely to be further chambers.

With the prospect of another chamber being opened in Smoo Cave another new cave was found in Durness! Whilst visiting from Germany, good friends of Colin, Arie and Dagmar were walking along the beach on the Kyle of Durness, and discovered a new cave. The first chamber is called Chamber Dagarie, because of Arie and Dagmar. New chambers will be explored as the tides permit.

### **Caves of Geodha Smoo<sup>69</sup>**

In 1995 Historic Scotland commissioned Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division to preserve by record the Archaeological deposits contained within two marine caves situated within the western wall of the inlet Geodha Smoo. At some point in the distant past, it is considered these existed as side chambers within the main cavern but are now separate, opening out from the cliff walls of the Geodha. This work was carried out over a four week period by a team of four archaeologists before deposits were lost in their entirety to marine erosion and the sea. cursory investigation of a third cave located on higher ground opposite on the east side of the inlet revealed evidence of prehistoric use. The excavations resulted in the recovery of a large number of samples, valuable artefactual and environmental evidence, and the identification of complex archaeological deposits, data and scientific reports.

The caves reported here may have, at some point in the distant past, existed as slide chambers within the main cave now represented by Smoo Cave. With the land ward retreat of the main cavern these now exist as separate shelters opening out from the cliff walls of the Geodha. It is likely that further cave systems exist in the vicinity, with passages perhaps extending underground for some considerable distance. Indeed, work on the third of the sites discussed here brought to light a partially collapsed passage at the rear of the cave.

The first two caves, Glassknapper's Cave and Antler Cave, are immediate neighbors, and are situated in the western wall of the Geodha. It was the presence of deep archaeological deposits visible in an eroding section face, which extends across the mouth of both caves which prompted the present work. These deposits rise up from the rear of the present beach to a height of around 1.5m, but at some time in the past the cave floor would have been at the same level as the beach as it appears today, and in fact probably lower. These caves, like the parent cave, appear to have undergone considerable collapse through time, with fragments of Limestone visible within the eroding deposits. The third of the caves to be discussed here (Wetweather Cave) is located in the eastern wall of the Geodha, where it curves to the southwest to meet the entrance of Smoo Cave. The cave is situated at the juncture of a grass-covered slope, which may itself represent cave roof collapse, and the present cliff face, around 10 metres above sea

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<sup>69</sup> Glassknapper's Cave, Antler Cave and Wetweather Cave. Tony Pollard, Scottish Archaeological Internet Reports

level.

For the purposes of site recording and in order to prevent future confusion with Smoo Cave it was decided to allocate each of the caves reported here with a name. The northern cave is henceforth referred to as the Antler Cave (AC), after the early finds of red deer antler. The southern cave was labeled Glassknapper's Cave (GKC) following the recovery of bottle glass, which appears to have been deliberately retouched. The presence of substantial fragments of rock in the various parts of the section indicated that the upper parts of both caves had suffered serious collapse at some point in the past. The caves may therefore have been considerably larger than they are now, a factor, which may have made them more fitting for human use than they appear today. Nevertheless, the presence of tractor batteries and boating equipment in the southern cave clearly indicates its use as an equipment store in recent times. Having completed a survey of the cave interiors it became apparent that the most efficient means of fulfilling the objectives of the excavation would be to cut a single trench from the exposed section to the back of Glassknapper's Cave. The same would also be attempted for the Antler Cave, but priority was given to the first cave as this appeared to contain more complex archaeological deposits. The cave floor was divided into two, roughly along its central axis. By the time the excavation had been completed much of the southern half had been removed, while the northern portion remained intact, providing a full section through the cave deposits. Several sections were cut through the southern half of the cave, at right angles to the actual section, thus providing an insight into the nature of the stratigraphy in a north-south plane (across the cave interior) as well as in an east-west plane (cave mouth to cave interior). The deposits were excavated down onto the former beach surface, where the concreted nature of the gravels and health and safety considerations prevented further investigation.

Wetweather Cave, one problem encountered during the project was caused by water, at various times either rain or melted snow, dripping from the roofs of the caves. At times the quantity of water made working within the caves very difficult, turning the deposits into a sticky dark mud, the problem being most acute in the Antler Cave where water was always present. In order to reduce the amount of time wasted due to wet conditions, which also made working within these caves dangerous, it was decided to carry out a smaller scale investigation in a further cave within the Geodha Smoo complex. The deposits in this third cave were nowhere near as deep as those in the other caves and its roof was relatively waterproof, hence its name, the Wetweather Cave. The Wetweather Cave was situated to the northeast of the mouth of the largest cave (Smoo Cave), where the foot of the cliff meets with a steeply rising grass covered slope. This cave differed in having a wide mouth, which gave way, for much of its width at least, to a head high overhang, some 3-4m deep. As such the site would probably be described as an overhang or rock-shelter in the earlier literature on cave archaeology. However to the rear of the overhang were at least two inner chambers, neither of which was examined.

### Conclusion and discussion

The excavation of the Geodha Smoo Caves resulted in the identification of complex archaeological deposits and the recovery of valuable artefactual and environmental evidence. Optimum preservation levels were encountered, with animal bones and organic artifacts plentiful in a number of deposits. The presence of archaeological deposits in the three caves described here and in Smoo Cave itself clearly indicate the importance of this coastal location in the past. Prehistoric activity is evidenced by the deposits in the Wetweather Cave but the majority of the evidence, from all of the other caves, indicates their use during the Norse period.

Despite its confirmed occurrence in only one of the caves (but see Pollard 1992), the discovery of prehistoric activity in the Wetweather Cave is of some considerable importance. Our present understanding of the extent and character of prehistoric, and indeed later, settlement in this

extreme northwest corner Scotland is limited, with very little fieldwork so far carried out in the area; a rare exception being Reld's survey of prehistoric monuments in the Dumess area (1967). The prehistoric utilization of coastal caves and marine resources in the northern fringes of mainland Scotland should perhaps come as no surprise and the patterns of activity evidenced may be some similarly to those envisaged for the west coast of Scotland (Pollard 1994).

The evidence from the other caves clearly indicates that marine resources continued to play an important role in the historic period. The deposits within the Glassknapper's Cave strongly suggest that the Norse, in an area characterized by an exposed coastline regularly battered by heavy seas, regarded the Geodha Smoo as an important natural harbor. There is also place name evidence (Fraser 1995, 94) to suggest a Norse presence, with the name Smoo perhaps having its origins in the Norse Smúga (rift, cleft, cave).

In common with other northern Scottish sites, the presence of quantities of large fish bones in the Glassknapper's Cave suggests that deep sea fishing played an important role in the Norse economy. The importance of boats is further emphasized by the presence of rivets and metal slag, both of which indicate the repair of boats. It is difficult to say whether this activity merely represents one component of a more complex Norse archaeological landscape, with settlements situated in reasonably close proximity to the caves. If this were the case then the caves may relate to the daily practice of marine exploitation, representing the place at which fish were landed and processed before being transported to the settlement, balt (shellfish?) prepared and boats maintained. However, as yet, no Norse settlements have been identified in this area, although the recovery of a Norse burial from the sand dunes at Balnakeil some 4 km to the northwest (Dorothy Low pers comm) does suggest that activity was not confined to the caves and their immediate environs. As with the case of prehistoric settlement, our understanding of Norse activity along this part of the northern coast of mainland Scotland requires a more intensive programme of research. Excavations at Freswick Links and Robert's Haven have provided physical evidence for the Norse presence in Caithness suggested by a proliferation of Norse place names. More recently small scale excavation at Dunnet Bay, some 75km to the east of Smoo, has revealed the presence of a Norse settlement on the northern coast of Caithness (Pollard 1996). It remains to be seen whether this settlement pattern extends as far west as Smoo or whether the deposits in the caves were merely the results of temporary stop-over by Norse mariners on their voyages from Scandinavia and the northern Isles to the western Isles and more southerly destinations such as Ireland and the Isle of Man.

In the absence of further evidence this latter hypothesis is an attractive one, with the sheltered Geodha and the caves providing the ideal location in which to carry out repairs on boats, which may have suffered damage in heavy seas, the beach allowing boats to be hauled ashore if necessary. This 'port in a storm' would also provide the opportunity to process fish caught on the voyage and to procure other foodstuffs, both wild and domestic, from the immediate environs of the caves. Although the deposits in both the GKC and AC were of considerable depth they may have resulted from regular visits, perhaps several times a year, and thus may have built up quite rapidly, perhaps over a period no longer than one or two hundred years. Despite the fact that much of the activity does appear to relate to Norse activity the potential for earlier (perhaps Iron Age) and later (Medieval and post Medieval) phases of use should not be overlooked. It is hoped that radiocarbon dating will help to clarify these chronological issues. Only with the completion of a full post-excavation programme will we begin to more fully understand the archaeological implications of the deposits reported here. However, in the meantime, it is hoped that this report has served to demonstrate the rich potential of these sites.



## Angling and Other Experiences' At Durness<sup>70</sup>

*We had read about the Cave of Smoo ("As mo"; or "Smutha" meaning the largest or biggest cave) in the district, on more than one occasion, and our desire, apart from fishing, was to explore it, as from reports we had gathered, it contained, in one of its chambers, a perpendicular waterfall quite worthy of merit; but hitherto our experience had been that waterfalls which possess a great reputation were, on a visit, sometimes disappointing. However, while at supper that evening, we made a general enquiry regarding the cave and were rather surprised to learn from the table maid a local girl who had lived all her life at Durness that she knew of the cave but had never seen the waterfall inside it. There are several caves, and the one inside, behind the one where the fall is, is not only dangerous, but is said to possess an evil reputation," and nervously she left the room.*

*Her remarks certainly whetted my appetite, and I thereupon decided to visit the caves that night, as I had previously mapped out a fairly extensive fishing programme for this particular part of the country, which would negative the chance of my exploring the Smoo Caves at any other time during this visit. I may say my wife demurred, but my mind was made up, and finally, after a little argument, she reluctantly consented to accompany me. I thereupon summoned another member of the staff, who also admitted he had never visited the innermost caverns of Smoo, but suggested we might call upon Donald Cameron, a fisherman, who lived in a cottage nearby, who might accompany us, as he was more or less acquainted with all the caves in the district.*

*We changed into our oldest angling togs. I discarded my kilt for a pair of shorts, as "shorts" are handiest to swim in, in an emergency, I provided they are technically what their name implies and sufficiently roomy and light in weight. Slipping an electric torch into the pocket of my jacket, we boarded the car and drove along a narrow sandy road in the direction of this "mysterious cavern, which is situated about two miles west of Rispond—on the north east side of Loch Eriboll.*

*Having studied the map beforehand, I knew exactly where to pull up (via one and three-quarter miles East of Durness Church) and ran the car on to a grassy slope near a bridge on the side of the road, as the evening was drawing to a close. On stopping the engine, we dismounted in the thick of the lashing rain, rain which stung our faces as we made our way in the direction of the bridge, below which echoed roaring torrents; but on looking over the parapet wall on the north side of this bridge, we were perfectly astounded, as no water could be seen. So we re-crossed the narrow road and peered over the south side of the bridge, to view a foaming stream, disappearing from view into an evil-looking dark hole in the grounds of its rocky bed a few feet in front of where we stood, which we afterwards discovered descended perpendicularly down a fissure locally known as "Falais-Smoo" or the Chimney of Smoo, through a gateway in a vertical column of water, falling sheer into a great pool at the bottom of a recess in the second chamber of the Smoo Cave.*

*The Smoo Burn has its source in Cnoe Leathann, from where it drains into Loch Meadaidh (Meadie), which sends of a stream two miles north northeastward to the sea near Smoo House. This burn sweeps its dark-brown waters through comparatively smooth moorland until it reaches a crevasse, or hole in the ground, into which they are precipitated. Here they break into white foam and disappear into the' blackness of an abyss.*

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<sup>70</sup> From the book Angling in Wildest Scotland R.Macdonald Robertson Internet Archive

*Just at that very minute a man of high-blood-pressure age appeared on the scene, who was well-equipped for bad weather, and going up to him I asked if he knew Donald Cameron. I am Donald Cameron," was his reply. "Good," I said, "we want to see through the Caves of Smoo. Can you show us the way? " "Oh! Not to-night, sir," was his reply, "the burn is too high, but if you come back when the rain is over, probably in a day or so, I will conduct you." "No," I demanded, "now or never, as our programme is already fully made out for fishing each day," and placing in the palm of his hand a sum of money to encourage him, he thereupon, after many reluctant mutterings in Gaelic, consented to pilot us. We climbed over a stile, and commenced a long downhill zigzag route in the direction of a small sea-inlet, descending a grassy knoll, following as best we could a slippery winding path, on the right-hand side of which was a perpendicular drop and at the foot a noisy stream rushed nearly bank-highly seawards.*

*On reaching the bottom of the path, we perceived at almost unbelievable sight. To the south 'and sheer above our heads, yawned the gigantic arch 'of'a mighty cavern, partly covered with a huge limestone roof, larger than we could ever dreamed of. In fact, the scene resembled the den of the bad fairies in the Drury Lane Christmas pantomime but it was REAL. Among all the Caves of Sutherland, the Smoo Caves are paramount. On entering, human beings seem literally dwarfed in comparison with the size and the height of the titanic arch, which towers above one.*

*The Cave consists of three (or more) chambers, and opens at the extremity of a deep cove hollowed out of the limestone rock, which rises in lofty cliffs. On bright sunny days the light upon the seaside rocks, when surveyed from the extreme end of the outer or main cave, is very picturesque, though the effect-is, to some extent, negative by an irregular-shaped hole in the roof above. To the north is a narrow creek with projecting sides. At high tide the sea rushes up to the first cavity, between the long narrow chasm, which is lined on both sides by perpendicular rocks. Limestone scenery, of a large order, is almost unique in Scotland. Durness-Eriboll limestone of this district—of upper Cambrian age—are particularly interest to the geologist. Although caves invariably appeal to most people in one way or another, many are disappointing or more or less artificial in reality, especially those that have had the misfortune to become commercialized; but the caverns of North-West Sutherlandshire are free to the public and "more than realize the most extravagant imaginings."*

*With considerable difficulty we crossed over some stepping-stones in the bed of the burn. I mean with difficulty, for our feet got soaked, as some of the shaky stones were completely submerged, due to the swollen condition of the Smoo Burn.*

*At the bottom of the entrance to the cave, which comprises at least three intercommunicating chambers in the limestone cliffs, there is a pebbly' beach, through which the water of the Smoo Burn, which precipitates into the second chamber of the cavern by the aforesaid opening (high up above), makes its way eventually "along the trend of the shore," to the sea. The mighty arch of the cavern loomed menacingly over us and the air was damp and chill underneath the gloom of its huge Gothic-like span: with high entablature and spreading pillars, which filled us with a sense of solemn foreboding, as we peered into its dim and slimy depth (every word we whispered resounding in the black, vaulted arches), the incessant roar of an unseen cataract ever sounding in our ears. 'High up above us, on a ledge behind a small black crevice on the west side of the precipitous rock, sat a Snowy Owl (Nyctea Scandiaca), where it had made its nest. These birds are to be found principally on the cold and barren lands and fields of the Arctic Regions.*

*As we walked abreast below the vaulted roof, which has a small vertical aperture to the open; air, every footfall echoed and re-echoed on the soil and shingle, and we became more and more impressed and overcome by the size and overpower at the atmosphere of this place of stygian*

*gloom. To us it seemed as if we were the only living beings on the earth. Even on bright days an intolerable silence reigns within the Great Cavern, which looks a murderous spot and grips one with a sense eeriness as moist airs whisper about one's ears within. One imagines a crouching figure lingering in the semi-darkness behind some boulder, or the footfall of some unseen visitor gradually and steadily approaching one from the rear with panther-like softness, while wild-birds cry piteously far out on the moorland. In fact, the whole setting seems evil-looking and depressingly lifeless.*

*Our guide then led us across the burn once more from the east side to the west (which, actually, we were forced to wade at places knee-deep) and, having recrossed the stream, our real difficulty started. We were literally forced to scramble, on all fours, up the slimy side of a gigantic out-jutting rock. Having gained the top, we had to ascend a steepish and uneven slope on a precipitous ledge of overhanging rock, where distant figures appeared to lurk in the twilight, towards a narrow slit or fissure on the west side of the cave, roughly 15 feet in height by 6 to 8 feet in width—a hazardous business, as a menacing inky black pool lay below us.*

*Having crawled with considerable difficulty for several yards, balancing as best we could, we were forced to descend an almost vertical depression on the top of a natural archway, or barrier, of roughly 3 to 6 feet high, above water level, below which, the burn emerged from under a natural bridge, or ledge of rock, called "Staraich," or the doorstep of the cave; all the while the loud noise of a mighty unseen waterfall pounded on our ear-drums.*

*This great underground compartment, or tunnel, the sea-creek, actually runs under the main (over which we had passed a short while as far back, if not further than, Smoo a square white building on the hillside on ^the' south side of the highway. Gothic-like construction of the transverse added grandeur to the height and width the cavern; while the thunderous roar of the incited our curiosity to penetrate into the 'gaping black hole in the face of rock to the right; of us, into which we peered but could see nothing at first. But, as our eyes became accustomed to the gloom, we perceived a faint glimmer of light beyond a jutting-out ledge of rock, inside, to the left-hand side of this second chamber. For our purpose a dinghy (capable of holding not more than three persons at a time) had been lured and moored inside this second chamber, which the Smoo Burn descends at the far end.*

*It was a risky business, clambering down over steep and slippery rocks into the small boat, which had several leaks, judging from the amount of water in the bottom of it. This comment is roughly, in places, anything from 70 feet in height, having a length of roughly 35 to 75 feet, and has its whole area covered with water of considerable depth, which, our guide Donald told us, harbored trout and eels of large size. As we pushed off from the rock in semi-darkness, we found that this chamber was illuminated at the top (or back) or south end by a vertical aperture in the arched roof, through which the subterranean waters of the Smoo Burn descended, ever sad and weary with the burdens of the song they bear, in a perpendicular cascade of foam, roughly anything from 80 to 100 feet in one sheer leap, which added an almost evil sense of terror to the scene!*

*NOTE. —When the Smoo Burn is in flood the waterfall must be carefully avoided by the boatman to prevent swamping.*

*(As already mentioned, we had viewed the top of the waterfall from the bridge a short while ago, before we descended to the Cave). When the fall is in flood—to say nothing of being drenched to the skin—one is so blinded by the swirling spray, and so deafened by the tumbling and rumbling thunder of the crashing water, that one's condition is far from enviable, as one clings, "lonely lover of Nature," to the seat of the light skiff, eminent for safety, below the horrid gulf, down which the waters descend in a column of condensed fury. To attempt to*

*illuminate this natural beauty spot by intensive artificial means would only be an act of vandalism.*

*The waves caused by the energy of this descending column of water rocked our fragile craft in most unsafe and undignified manner as tongues of swirling vapor saturated us while the savage waterfall thundered perpetually in our ears. The vaulted chamber is famous for its extraordinary echo, the ordinary voice being amplified as to almost startle one as sounds are distinctly repeated. Here, the height of the roof varies. Artificial light is not altogether necessary in this Compartment, but we found it absolutely essential to use our torches in order to explore the third or innermost grotto, which stretches (about 120 feet by 8 feet in breadth and from 12 to 40 feet in height in places), further into the gloom. To gain access to this chamber, we were forced to lie almost flat on the bottom of the boat, as we manipulated it, with considerable difficulty, underneath a low and narrow archway a barrier of scarcely three feet in height.*

*Heard from a distance, the noises of the chasm (down. which the Smoo Burn precipitates its furies. seem. but 'one low dull murmur, but, if you listen: 'attentively 'and sympathetically, as you along the pathway (underneath the great archway of the cave), you are filled with a feeling passion and wild emotion. "Now we hear a sulky roar of a wild beast crawling from his den, a weary sighs, as of a hapless hopeless lover. At times it sounds an eerie wail, as of an infant " crying in the night "; at times a wild dirge, sinking and swelling, as when the clan bewails its fallen chief. But, while you look for glimpses of the waters, and hearken to their ever-changing music, do not forget to mark how wild and grand are the rocky walls of this deep, amazing cavern.*

*Anchoring our boat at the far end, we entered a natural tunnel, through which we clambered a distance of roughly forty yards, splashing our way up the slimy bed of a small stream, and at the end of it we entered the third or innermost cavern, all the while with torches in hand. The square white house on the hillside (Smoo House) already referred to is the landmark above the caves, which extend underground this distance, if not further. This stream emanates from a deep pool of limpid water in the pitch darkness, whose temperature, it is said, never exceeds 48° F. In this last chamber the air was damp and oppressive, and as if "perfumed from an unseen censer." According to local tradition, it was believed that these black holes of Smoo were tenanted by evil spirits, and formed the entrance to Hell. Actually, we heaved a sigh of relief when we were safely seated in our motorcar again that evening.*

*Inside the Cave of Smoo there are said to be many hidden chambers, known only to some of the older inhabitants of the district, who have had the courage to explore them, and those holes are reached by passageways so difficult to negotiate that they are truly termed: " Places to weed out men of undue circumference"; but even in North west Sutherland to-day there still remain fissures and holes which " have baffled most determined attempts to explore their mysteries. To describe minutely the awesome wonderment of Smoo cave would be a physical impossibility and a waste of time. " Tradition says that the only person who ever had the courage to attempt to explore them was one Donald, Master of Reay; and that the extinction of the lights, by foul air, obliged him to return before he could advance to the extremity of the lake"—but, between our-selves, I think he must have breathed rather heavily upon his torch!*

*The CÁVE OF SMOO in past ages served a double purpose to its near Inhabitants. It was a safe place of retreat from their enemies and a very convenient and suitable place for distilling and concealing whisky. Some legends still linger round the Cave of Smoo, two of the following being traditional but nevertheless credible;*

*In or about the year 1720, the clan Gunn from the borders' of Sutherland<sup>^</sup> made an unexpected raid on the district of Durness. The inhabitants were taken unawares, and being unprepared had no alternative but to resort to stratagem, pretending to flee to safety they enticed the guns to follow them into the depths of the Smoo cave when once there they concealed themselves in the hidden recesses and crevices of this underground passageway in the limestone rocks from which they slaughtered the Gunns to the very last man,*

*A few years after the 45 rebellion an Inland Revenue Supervisor in the company of another Excise Officer, were ordered by the Government, to suppress the illegal practice of working small stills in the district of Durness, having authority to arrest the person involved in such illicit practices with power to confiscate their distilling plant. The gaugers bribed one, Donald Mackay by name, who resided in the vicinity of the Smoo Cave, to conduct them in his small boat into the inner chambers of the cave, where the illicit practice of distilling was, they had heard, being carried out in regular and uninterrupted fashion.*

*On this particular occasion on which Donald Mackay was employed by them, the Smoo Burn was in high flood, and on pushing off from the anchorage inside the second chamber of the cave, Mackay observed that the two gaugers were literally terrified, as he rowed them into the spray of the waterfall inside it.*

*Donald Mackay, being a strong swimmer, purposely maneuvered his craft into dangerous proximity to the crashing furies at the base of the fall and purposely capsized the boat, when he swam to safety, leaving the two unfortunate Inland Revenue officers to drown amid the angry, troubled waters. Rumors has it that one of the bodies has never been found to this day; but the ghost of this lost man appears in the roam below the waterfall inside the second chamber of Smoo Cave when the burn is in high flood. Shortly after this "accident" the distilling plant was tactfully removed to a place of safety and the cave was deserted by the smugglers.*

*Modern travelers, however, have the option of exploring the caverns for themselves with the aid of a boat furnished by the courtesy of the neighboring peasantry. I can only recommend those of my readers who are interested sufficiently 'to make such an examination, and if they do so, I feel assured they will certainly not return disappointed, especially if they are fortunate enough to witness the Smoo Burn in flood, as we found it that evening.*

#### **Extract from "Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott"**

Diary. Vol.4. 19<sup>th</sup>. Aug. 1814.

"After breakfast, took the long boat to see the remarkable natural curiosity, called 'Uamh Smowe, or the largest Cave. After rowing about five miles to the westward of the entrance to the sea from Loch Eriboll, we enter a creek, between two ledges of very high rocks, and landing, find ourselves in front of the wonder we came to see. The exterior parts of the cavern opens under a tremendous rock, facing the creek, and occupies the full space of the ravine where we landed. From the top of the rock to the base of the cavern, as we afterwards discovered by plumb, is 80 feet, of which the height of the arch is 55 feet; the rest, being 27 feet is occupied by the precipitous rock under which it opens; the width is fully in proportion to this great height, being 110 feet. The depth of this exterior cavern is 200 feet, and it is apparently separated by an intermediate column of natural rock. Being open to daylight and the sea air, the cavern is perfectly clean and dry, and the sides are incrustated with stalactites. This immense cavern is so well proportioned, that I was not aware of its extraordinary height and extent, till I saw our two friends, who had somewhat preceded us, having made the journey by land, appearing like pigmies among its recesses. Afterwards, on entering the cave, I climbed up a sloping rock at its extremity, and was struck with the prospect, looking outward from this

magnificent arched cavern upon our boat and its crew, the view being otherwise bounded by the ledge of rocks which form each side of the creek. We now propose to investigate the farther wonders of the Cave of Smowe.

In the right or west side of the cave opens an interior cavern of a difficult aspect. The height of this second passage may be 12 or 14 feet, and its breadth about 6 or 8 feet, neatly formed into a Gothic portal by the hand of nature. The lower part of this porch is closed by a ledge of rock, rising to a height of between 5 and 6 feet, and which I can compare to nothing but the hatch door of a shop. Beneath this hatch a brook finds its way out, forms a deep black pool below the Gothic archway, and then escapes to the sea, and forms the creek in which we landed. It is somewhat difficult to approach this strange pass, so as to gain a view of the interior of the cavern. By clambering along a broken and dangerous cliff, you can, however, look into it; but only so far as to see a twilight space filled with dark-coloured water in great agitation, and representing a subterranean lake, moved by some fearful convulsion of nature. How this pond is supplied with water you cannot see from even this point of vantage, but you are partly made sensible of the truth by a sound like the dashing of a sullen cataract in the bowels of the earth. Here adventure has usually been abandoned, and Mr Anderson only mentioned two travellers whose curiosity had led them farther. We were resolved, however, to see the adventures of this new cave of Montesano's to an end. Duff had already secured the use of a fisherman's boat and its hands, our own long boat being too heavy and far too valuable to be ventured upon this Cocytus. Accordingly the skiff was dragged up the brook to the rock ledge or hatch which barred the interior of the cavern, and there, by force of hands, our boat crew and two or three fishers raised the boat's bow upon the ledge of rock, then brought her to a level, being poised upon that narrow hatch and lastly launched her down into the dark and deep subterranean lake within.

The entrance was so narrow, and the boat so clumsy, that we, who were all the while clinging to the rock like sea fowl, and with scarce more footing, were greatly alarmed for the safety of our trusty sailors. At the instant when the boat sloped inward to the cave, a Highlander threw himself into it with great boldness and dexterity, and, at the expense of some bruises, shared its precipitous fall into the waters under the earth. This dangerous exploit was to prevent the boat drifting away from us, but, a cord at its stern would have been a safer and surer expedient. When our enfant perdu had recovered breath and legs, he brought the boat back to the entrance and took us in. We now found ourselves embarked on a deep black of irregular form, the rocks rising like a dome all around us, and high over our heads. The light, a sort of dubious twilight, was derived from two chasms in the roof of the vault, for that offered by the entrance was but trifling. Down one of those rents there poured from a height of 80 feet, in a sheet of foam, the brook, which, after supplying the subterranean pond with water, finds its way out beneath the ledge of rock that blocks its entrance. The other skylight, if I may so term it, looks on the clear blue sky. It is impossible for description to explain the impression made by so strange a place, to which we had been conveyed with so much difficulty. The cave itself, the cataract, the pool, would have been each separate places of wonder, but all united together, and affecting at once the ear, the eye, and the imagination, their effect is indescribable. The length of this pond, or loch as the people here call it, is 70 feet, the breadth about 50 feet at the narrowest, and it is of great depth. As we resolved to proceed, we directed the boat to a natural arch on the right hand, or west side of the cataract. This archway was double, a high arch being placed upon a very low one, as in a Roman aqueduct.

The ledge of rock which forms this lower arch, is not above 2½ feet high above the water, and under this we were to pass in the boat; so that we were fain to pile ourselves flat upon each other, like a layer of herrings.

By this judicious disposition we were pushed in safety beneath this low-browed rock into a region of utter darkness. For this, however, we were provided, for we had a tinder box of lights. The view back upon the twilight lake we had crossed, its sullen eddies whirling round and round, and its echoes resounding to the ceaseless thunder of the waterfall, seemed dismal enough, and was aggravated by temporary darkness, and in some degree by a sense of danger. The lights, however, dispelled the latter sensation, if it prevailed to any extent, and we found ourselves in a narrow cavern, sloping somewhat up from the water. We got out of the boat, proceeded along some slippery places upon shelves of the rock, and gained the dry land. I cannot say DRY, excepting comparatively.

We were then in an arched cave, 12 feet in the roof and about 12 feet in breadth, which went winding into the bowels of the earth for about 100 feet.

The sides, being like those of the whole cavern, of limestone rock, were covered with stalactites, and with small drops of water like dew, glancing like ten thousand sets of birthday diamonds under the glare of our lights. In some places these stalactites branch out into broad and curious ramifications, resembling coral and the foliage of submarine plants.

When we reached the extremity of this passage, we found it declined suddenly to a horrible gulf, or well, filled with dark water, and of great depth, over which the rock closed. We threw stones, which indicated great profundity by their sound; and growing more familiar with the horrors of this den, we sounded an oar, and found about 10 feet depth at the entrance, but discovered in the same manner, that the gulf extended under the rock, deepening as it went, God knows how far. Imagination can figure few deaths more horrible than to be sucked under these rocks into some unfathomable abyss.....

The mouth of this ugly gulf was all covered with slimy alluvium substances which led Mr. Stephenson to observe that it could not have any separate source, but must be fed from the waters of the outer lake and brook, as it lay upon the same level, and seemed to rise and fall with them, without having anything to indicate a separate current of its own. Rounding this perilous hole, or gulf, upon the aforesaid alluvium substance, which formed its shores, we reached the extremity of the cavern, which there ascend: like a vent, or funnel, directly up a sloping precipice, hideously black and slippery from wet and seaweeds. One of our sailors, a Zetiander, climbed a good way, and by holding up a light, we could plainly perceive that this vent closed after ascending to a considerable height; and here, therefore, closed the adventure of the Cave of Smowe, for it appeared utterly impossible to proceed further in any direction whatever.

There is a tradition that the first Lord Reay went through various subterranean abysses, and at length returned after ineffectually endeavouring to the extremity of the Smowe Cave."

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## **The Caving Potential of Areas in and Around Durness**

Iain Greig Grampian Speleological Society

With carbonates of the Durness Group dominating the Durness lowland areas, Durness is currently one of the best prospect locations in Scotland for cave exploration. Nearby limestone regions formed of rocks belonging to the Durness Group (formerly known as the Durness Limestone) in Assynt are home to the largest caves in Scotland. Uamh An Claonalte being the longest at over 3km long which is still being extended to this day through digging. As an overlooked site mainly due to its remoteness, several caves are undoubtedly waiting to be discovered both in and around the village of Durness.

Geologically, the caves of Assynt are formed exclusively within the two lowermost units of the Durness Group (the Ghrudaidh and Eileen Dubh Formations). The Durness region however shows outcrops of all seven formations (Ghrudaidh through to the Durine foundations) and offers the potential for possibly longer caves and certainly deeper caves with limestone sequences in Durness being over 800m in stratigraphic thickness (with an even thicker true vertical depth taking an average bedrock dip of 15 degrees into account). This is significantly thicker than any part of Assynt where a carbonate stratigraphic column would struggle to reach over 200m.

Few caves in Durness are currently accessible, the best known being Smoo Cave which has been well documented in the past, although this is mainly due to it being easily accessible. Other less well known caves are present however; Web Cave near Sarsgrum, Lesser Northern Egg Timer and 'Croispol Cave' being three other established caves, all of which show further digging potential. Although Smoo Cave has the largest sea-cave entrance in Britain, the inner waterfall and stream chambers that form the freshwater sections of this cave are by no means exceptionally large passages compared with other caves found within the Durness Group. Few lowland 'limestone' areas around Durness do not have shakeholes (natural depressions in the land surface communicating with subterranean passages) which implies numerous discoveries have yet to be made across much of the area.

The purpose of this short report is to demonstrate the cave potential of the Durness area for a region that promises so much yet so far has revealed so little. It also aims to highlight some of the potential problems that have hindered development in the region.

### **Smoo Cave Sea-Cave Resurgence**

Largest and longest cave in the region, Smoo Cave shows promise for a larger cave system extending both south and west of the currently mapped passages. A large active stream resurgence is found at the rear of the sea cave chamber and contains a larger volume of flowing water than that of the inner stream passage at the rear of the inner cave. This indicates that there may be the potential for the discovery of a larger passage beyond the rear wall of the sea-cave, although this is currently obstructed by a thick flowstone deposit. Digging of clay deposits behind the flowstone has now revealed a small chamber that can be accessed via a low crawl below the flowstone beside the stream resurgence. A small pool of upwelling water with a large volume of water (even present during drought conditions) is found within the floor of this small chamber and may well benefit from further exploration, although further digging is required as the spring is choked by clays and gravels. Digging beyond the resurgence may also reveal further passage as much of the material below the large flowstone ramp does not appear to be bedrock.

## **Sump Passage.**

The terminal sump chamber at the rear of the stream passage now also shows promise for two new routes. The most obvious is an active sump of which the upwelling waters feed the stream passage. Dye-testing has revealed a south end trending link between this point and a sink point. where in all water conditions, the Allt Smoo river disappears into an upstream sink at a sharp meander found more than a hundred metres upstream from the main waterfall sinkhole (NC 417 669). It is worth noting that the main waterfall sink (with viewing platform) is only active in moderate to high water conditions when the upstream sink backs up and the Allt Smoo overflows into the lower stream and into the waterfall chamber. Therefore the main stream passage is thought to originate from the upstream sink which requires over 100m of cave passage to feed the terminal chamber sump pool. The upstream sink however is currently choked, filled with several large boulders which cause the Allt Smoo to back up more easily.

## **Flowstone Passage**

The recent discovery of fluvial (or water derived) clay deposits at least 3m thick directly behind the flowstone in the terminal sump chamber implies that a large stream once fed into this chamber from the western side of the cave (Druim Bhlairst direction) before it was choked by glacial sediments and covered by a younger stalactite-flow deposit. A likely interpretation is that much of the current stream passage was once filled by these clays, although the later formation of a waterfall (now the inactive sump chamber aven in the ceiling) would have removed any downstream deposits, leaving these upstream clays protected from waters falling from above unlike those clays downstream from the ancient waterfall. With this interpretation, it is likely that the chamber will be choked back to the original sink location unless it is intersected by any abandoned passages which is always a possibility. The current sump chamber lies directly below the garden of the Smoo Falls B&B where a small shakehole can be seen and with additional shakeholes being found in the field immediately west to this building, this also shows promising evidence for a westwards extension of Smoo Cave towards Druim Bhlairst. Only digging behind the flowstone will provide access to such passage unless the original sink point is discovered which would also require digging of peat and glacial till even to reach the blockage.

## **Druim Bhlairst Sinks (NC 414 667)**

A couple of well choked flood sinks are present in a nearby peaty. flood channel close to Drum Bhlairst. During the summer of 2007, a previously hidden flood sink appeared after a large peat bank collapse. The current peat hole is about 6m deep and over 5m diameter. Some bedrock can be seen at the bottom with some large quartzite chert blocks. The main open hole at the bottom of this pit is about 1m diameter and appears to level off. However, over 5m of peat and till deposits hang above the passage opening which makes further exploration or digging dangerous without artificial support of the ceiling. A large volume of water flows into this sinkhole during flood although it is completely dry during normal conditions making it one of the best dig prospect around Durness at the moment half a dozen large shake holes can be found between this sink and the Allt Smoo which leads into Smoo Cave. Therefore it may be possible that flood waters entering the main sink here may drain into the Smoo Cave system as no other springs or resurgences are found in the surrounding area. As seen from a shakehole plot of the area, the Druim Bhlairst flood sinks are located half-way between a larger system to the east (inferred from clusters of large shakeholes towards the Sangomore radio-mast ridge) and a series of shakes that are probably form a southern part of the Smoo Cave system. One exceptionally large shakehole (over 5m deep and 20m across) is also found beside the sinks and is geologically downdip from the main sink point. Should flood waters follow the dip of the underlying rock, it is reasonable to assume that this shakehole is linked to this stream

system. A similar peat bank collapse in Assynt within the last few years revealed a smaller hole which was later discovered to be Storm Cave, a small passage that leads into a large and lengthy chamber passage that is still to be fully excavated

However, failure to protect such sites can result in further peat bank collapse which results in promising caves being lost (such as Cave of the Deep Depression nearby Inchnadamph which is yet to reopen). Beige limestone outcrops seen at the base of one of the overflow flood sinks are marker horizons for the top Sangomore Formation of the Durness Group (as opposed to Ghrudalbh & Eilean Dubh in Assynt). This indicates two main points; 1. The Durness Group here is at least 350m thick and 2. less than 50m below this marker is one of the few zones where the true limestones are found in the Durness Group.

This is similar to the limestone pavements above Loch Borrallie. Durness where large shakeholes and blocked sinks appear where there are outcrops of the limestone zones of the Croisaphuill Formation. The most soluble parts of the Durness Group are the uppermost Sangomore & Croisaphuill Formations where the only true limestones are found (no longer known as the Durness Limestone as most of the rock is composed of dolomite, an Mg-rich carbonate).

### **Lesser Northern Egg Timer (and Borrallie Area)**

A short cave found to the west of Durness, this was once a choked cave which was only revealed after careful digging of an entrance exposed on a steep cliff-face. Although only a short, tight cave that one is unable to stand up within the glacial deposits filling the cave have yielded several important fossils of animals that are now no longer found in the Durness region. Similar to the Inchnadamph Bone Caves in Assynt, the bones of several ice-age faunas (including Bear and Lynx) have been found, making Egg Timer one of Scotland's most important archaeological caves.

Egg Timer's fortunate location, sheltered upon a cliff-face has allowed an entrance to the cave to have been found relatively easily. Other caves are likely to exist in the surrounding area as several promising dig-sites have been identified, particularly upon the hillocks between the southern shores of Loch Croispol and Loch Borrallie (areas owned by Keoldale crofters). Therefore several archaeologically important sites may be lying undiscovered due to a lack of digging, but mostly due to a lack of digging permission as all potential development sites in the Durness area are located on either private or common grazings land. This problem does not affect the Allt Nam Uamh and Tralligill basins in Assynt so much where the majority of result of digging the blocked cave entrances.

One choked sinkhole on the plateau above the Egg Timer Dig shows good potential and is found within one of the several impressive limestone pavements that is reminiscent of several caves in Yorkshire. Another shake informally known as Easter Hole. Located in a grassy field between Loch Borrallie and Keoldale Brae (the A838 road) shows a promising opening into dark-grey limestones of the Croisaphuill Formation, although it is currently blocked by a large granitic erratic rock which on removal should reveal an excellent dig.

### **Croispol Cave (NC388 681)**

A small cave about 20-30m in length on the hillside above the western shore of Loch Croispol, the entrance is often obscured by nettle growth to reveal a low crawl which leads into a passage which opens up over a short distance in which one can comfortably stand. Another low crawl is then reached which again opens up into a narrower chamber. The cave appears to dip further west but further passage is not accessible due to a boulder choke, particularly one large rock which is well wedged and appears difficult to remove by hand. The cave appears to be

following a fault westwards which can be traced beyond the hillock which the entrance disappears into. The cave appears to be a fossil cave as water no longer enters the passage.

The plot above (with shakehole locations plotted in purple) has been superimposed upon a geological fieldslip. It shows the location of notable shakeholes / dolines to the east of Durness between Sangomore and Sangobeg where the Durness Group is terminated by a large fault which has placed it in direct contact with quartzite's of the Eriboll Sandstone Group (yellow / orange areas). Several small but lengthy SW-NE trending clusters can be seen across the Sangomore 'plateau' and to the rear of Druim Bhlairst I village hall which most likely indicates the presence of underground dissolution structures in these parts. Only three active sinks have been noted in the area, all marked in blue and in the Smool / Druim Bhlairst area. .

Located between two\_ major shake clusters, these sinks may have formed caves that could link any caves below the two cluster sets. The more isolated cluster to the south of Smoo Cave (to the rear of Smoo Cottage) is also located closer to the limestone-quartzite faulted boundary. This opens up the possibility of now abandoned streams (formerly large glacial meltwater channels) once crossing the impermeable quartzite (with a Ceannabeinne source?) and sinking on contact with the permeable Durness Group limestones and dolostones as it would be unlikely that the only sink would be c.200m across this border where the current Smoo Cave waterfall is located.

The Lerinbeg area also shows evidence for a small system, although the only known spring in the area is one found in the western wall of the Geodha Smoo which also has noticeable shakes directly above it on the cliff-top. This would imply that any cave system here has been abandoned as no streams are present, although a large channel feature noticeable at the top of the Sangomore Fault cliff-face (as seen from Sango Bay) would suggest that this has not always been the case.

### **Durness (West)**

The area west of Durness particularly around the Balnakeil Craft Village also shows promise for the discovery of caves although digging is required even in the best of places. Plots here appear more scattered from the exception of another SW-NE trending line of shakeholes running along a wide gully almost half way between Durine and Balnakeil Craft Village. These shakeholes are easily accessible from the road and overall, form a near-straight, best-fit line over one kilometre long, therefore indicating a possible lengthy system which appear to be isolated from any other shakehole areas.

The topographically highest hillocks forming the eastern and northern shores of Loch Borrallie show the best potential, being formed in well exposed outcrops of the limestone-bearing Croisaphuill Formation. Here glacial till and peat cover is minimal and so only the till that has choked the entrances of cave passages are required to be removed unlike low-lying areas to the east of Durness. One notable dig location is found just south of the old manse at the head of a small gully (NC 394 676) where a low crawl entrance is blocked with loose rubble which could well be worth further exploration. This is also found almost halfway between two large shakehole clusters along a fault that appears to connect the two shake-rich areas.

Most of the carbonate areas to the west of Loch Borrallie are now under several tens of metres of raised beach sediments where bedrock outcrops are scarce. However where extensive outcrops are found several infilled shakes (and not to forget 'Croispol Cave') are present and so some parts are likely to contain underground passage, although not as easily accessible beneath large sand dunes and a golf course. The northwest corner of Loch Borrallie shows some minor spring resurgences and an exceptionally large depression can be found nearby beside the

golf course (NC 384 679), although it is difficult to determine whether this is a large shakehole or a depression with poor drainage forming a central pool of water.

The NNE-SSW trending best-fit line between the plotted shakes (on the above plot) is also near-parallel with several geological faults affecting this area (bold red lines), indicating that a cave system of some description is likely to be following the weaker rocks along this faulted section. There is however a gap between the northernmost shakes along this line where a NEE-SWW trending fault is thought to be intersecting this line, indicating that any cave system may alter in direction here.

### **Durness (South)**

A band of Durness Group carbonates just over a kilometre wide runs southwards from Keoldale down to Drochaid Mhor where the carbonate sequence ends conformably against the Salterella Grit. To the east, the Durness Group carbonates are faulted against the Lewisian which forms the lower slopes of Meall Meadhonach. This provides an excellent platform for rainwater to run onto from higher grounds, therefore making it likely that caves are present along this margin. Although the carbonates are dipping SE here against the direction of water flow (which hinders cave development), caves are found in very similar circumstances at Allt a' Chalda Morin Assynt and several large shakeholes can be seen across the entire area, even from the A838 as soon as carbonate ground are reached from the River Dionard northwards.

As well as Web Cave a number of smaller caves have also been discovered at Ach a' Chorrain near Sarsgrum and several other streams (Allt Acnaidh in particular) could benefit from further mapping and exploration. Stream banks expose the dolostones quite well in these parts (hence the relatively easy discoveries) although the moorland between here and Loch Meadaidh also shows great, if not greater promise. However, more digging is required just to remove the peat and glacial deposits and peat-bank collapse is the best that can be expected without digging permission on this common grazings land.

### **Summary of problems**

With Durness being over an hour's drive north from Scotland's main caving area (Assynt), Scottish based cavers and cave diggers tend to pre-occupied with exploration and digging around Inchnadamph which is already a several hours drive from most Scottish towns and cities. Therefore Durness is hugely under-visited from an exploration perspective, ironic seeing as Scotland's only show cave (Smoo Cave) attracts thousands of visitors every year. Only areas immediately surrounding the village have received proper shakehole plotting and thorough searching, although the best potential areas probably lie below the Ceannabinne fault escarpment from Smoo down to Drochaid Mor (Big Bridge) where water is able to run over carbonate grounds directly from the steep Lewisian Gneiss upland areas.

Much of this area however has significant drift deposits hindering exploration. Several metres of glacial till, plus additional glacial inwash and thick peat deposits make it difficult just to locate major sink points and other points of entry, not to forget the digging of the cave passages themselves. Therefore without digging permission from private landowners or the Crofters Commission for common grazings, the majority of promising sites in and around Durness cannot be developed further despite the proven richness of local cave sites of both archaeological and scientific interest. Several promising shakeholes have also been artificially filled with rubble (and commonly corrugated iron alongside other waste) in the past which hinders development of such shakeholes. Only waiting for shakehole collapse such as the recent discovery of the Druim Bhlair Flood Sink reveals passage without digging at present, but even these sites are in need of attention I protection before further collapse hides them once again.

Finally, it cannot be stressed enough that most of the Caves of Assynt have mainly been discovered through digging, although this region has not had the same strict land ownership problems as Durness mainly due to absentee landlords. Two of Scotland's largest caves, Uamh An Claonaite and Allt Nam Uamh Stream Cave have only been discovered by digging of cave entrances and otherwise would still be sitting waiting to be discovered, just like many of the caves in and around Durness today.

## **Caves<sup>71</sup>**

From Angling in Wildest Scotland

*There are a further series of caves and arches on the eastern shores of Loch Eriboll, pronounced by Dr. Macculloch "the most extensive and extraordinary in any part of the Scottish coast"*

*A little over a century ago, the Highlands and Islands of Scotland were the notorious scenes of many a smuggling enter. In those days the smugglers at Smoo Cave worked in conjunction with those along the Loch Eriboll coast. An outlook was stationed on Eilean Cluimhrig off Rispond whose duty it was to signal the warning of any suspicious looking boat, to the smugglers who worked along the east coast of the loch from Cnoc nan Gobhar to Kennageall (or Whiten Head), while frequently another similarly signalled to Smoo the approach of any suspicious craft from the highest part of Eilean Hoan. In fact a perfect spying system was organised by the smugglers, who were then reputed to be "as cunning as foxes."*

## **Freisgill**

*"Fraisgall Cave" exceeds in beauty, splendour and sublimity of effect, all the caves of Scotland, except perhaps, those of "Papa Stour" in Shetland. Fraisgall Cavern is anything from 50 to 80 feet in height by 20 to 50 feet wide at its entrance, runs about half a mile into the bowels of the earth, but gradually contracts in size. Its walls are variegated with a thousand colours so delicately blended as to mock the most exquisite Titanium's of art. It is situated on the west base of Whiten Head, roughly six miles NNE of Heilam Ferry. It derives its name from Hugo, son of Freskyn de Moravia, who at the end of the twelfth century headed a migration, in which the Murrays were brought over to Sutherlandshire and remained one of the principal families in the country until the early part of the sixteenth century.*

*The interior of the cave on both sides, especially near the mouth, is lined with ledges or slabs of rock, on which sea-birds of various species build their many nests. In the winter time this cavern forms the home of the grey seal. The atmosphere was damp and humid, and a great stillness reigned, as the little waves lapped the rocks on each side of the deep channel under the gigantic arch, up which we steadily drifted. A chill whiff of air greeted us from within. The titanic opening looked grim and awesome, and as we peered through the darkness we could just see dimly, at the far end, the place where the roof and the water met at the termination of this long, straight and lofty chamber.*

*On each side were huge ledges of shelving rock running parallel down each side of the cave, at an angle downwards towards, the water, which almost resembled galleries in a cathedral (behind these—inky blackness!), upon which myriads of birds, of different species, were busy nesting. On hearing our voices, which echoed and re-echoed in the gloom, hundreds of these feathered creatures took wing and circled screaming in agitated confusion on their hurried exit seawards overhead.*

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<sup>71</sup> Angling in Wildest Scotland by Robertson (Ronald MacDonald). Published by Herbert Jenkins. London. 1936

*On leaning over the side of the boat and gazing into the mysterious depths below us, we could clearly perceive, through the sheen of the greenish-blue water, a bottom of rock, and here and there a fish or two, scuttling away above a cluster of loose stones amongst a veritable fairyland of beautifully-coloured rocks and seaweed. The rock walls, alternating with occasional patches of colourful conglomerate, appeared brilliant in places, with yellow stains from deposits of ochre, green from copper, red from iron and black from manganese. As we quietly negotiated our way up the middle the cavern seemed to gradually contract in height and width towards the extreme end joining a gravelly beach which met the massive rock roof, where it dipped threateningly at an awkward angle. To our left the massive arches dipped more abruptly amid a number of scattered stones and boulders, behind which was fairly visible, in the dim light, the dark outline of the outline of a small crevice, below which the black rocks, slimy with seaweed moisture, seemed eerie in the rays of the dying light in the gloom, still further ahead. Everything was silent as the tomb, except for the screaming of the startled seabirds and the irregular swell with a gurgling roar, bringing to memory the plaintive and most heavenly inspired notes which no organist, other than a blind one, in my memory, has ever yet been able to transcribe. Such were the thoughts which lingered in our minds when setting out upon our return journey from within the very bowels of the earth, as only those who have risked penetrating to the extreme limit of this immense under land way will appreciate fully how far this particular cavern really extends underground. In fact, on looking sea ward from inside its far end, this cave is impressive.*



## Durness Natural Environment

The coastline, protected by a National Trust Conservation Agreement, is fringed with spectacular beaches of silver sand, soaring cliffs and deep caves. It is an ideal place to explore the solitude of the Highlands, to watch the varied wildlife and birds, or enjoy a spot of fishing or golf. For the amateur and professional naturalist, the territory abounds with interest. Ornithologists are treated to a myriad of colonies of seabirds and the flora and fauna is abundant.

The spectacular mountain scenery is formed from some of the oldest rocks in the world, Lewisian Gneiss. This is an ancient land with many historical remains to be explored. Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age relics are sometimes exposed from the windblown sand and various artefacts have been discovered. There has been very little detailed professional investigation into the numerous sites.

Birds and flowers are the main wildlife features. More than 550 plant species have been recorded in the area. The rare and the beautiful are not always difficult to find, for what is rare in many parts of Britain is often common in the far north. This is especially true of mountain plants that descend to sea level on the north coast. A plant which thrives on the limestone is



IMAGE 181 SCOTS PRIMROSE

the mountain avens. Within Britain and Ireland, the principal extensive areas of mountain avens on limestone are in the Co. Clare, Eire. Not only is the extent of mountain avens at Durness impressive, but the plants can often be accessible. In other places, you might need to climb hills to see mountain avens. Here, you can find them both near sea level and at greater altitudes. Some other very attractive plants grow together with the avens. These include common plants such as wild thyme, bird's-foot trefoil and various orchids.

Added to these assets is the presence of Scots primrose. Found only along the north mainland and in Orkney, but nowhere else in the world. Durness is one of the key sites for the species on the mainland.

Local mammals include otter (UK priority species). While offshore, there is potential for occasional sightings of porpoise, dolphins (various species), whales (especially minke whale) and seals (common and grey). Though small in comparison with the huge machairs of the Hebrides, the Durness machair is one of the best in the north mainland.

Another key local species is the great yellow bumble-bee (UK priority species). This species has undergone a dramatic decline in range and abundance through-out the UK, probably due to habitat loss to modern agricultural practices.



IMAGE 182 GOLDEN PLOVER

The North West corner of Britain is renowned for the variety and numbers of birds. Well in advance of 200 species have been observed and recorded including some of the rarest during all seasons of the year. Many resident Highland species such as golden eagle, ptarmigan, crossbill and crested tit are found here. The area is particularly important for large populations of migratory species that visit either during the breeding season or to over winter. From April until July the expanses of open peatlands are home to greenshank, golden plover, dunlin and many other species of wading bird, that raise their broods on the teeming insect life of the blanket bogs. The complex network of dark shallow pools contain some of the most spectacular colonies of seabirds in Britain, with huge numbers of guillemot and kittiwake crowding the cliff ledges. At the end of the breeding season the intertidal

flats in sheltered lochs and bays and offshore waters become the focus of attention, when many thousands of migratory wildfowl and waders arrive for food and shelter over the winter months. Particularly impressive are the late autumn gatherings. Puffins, to be found in May, June and July in the area around Faraid Head, are a major draw for visitors, and there is an impressive range of seabirds to be found along the cliffs, including guillemots. A further bonus for on the croft land in general is the corncrake. This bird is now high on the wish list of birdwatchers.

Much of Durness is designated a site of special scientific interest in recognition of the important colonies of plants and birds. There are seabirds galore on Clo Mor and Faraid Head. Otters, foxes, badgers, eagles and peregrine falcons may also be seen. This is surely one of the most beautiful areas of Europe with sparkling rivers, scattered lochs, shimmering beaches, rugged mountains and vast expanses of open moorland, here visitors and residents find peace and quietness; an absolute abundance of wildlife, clean, uncrowded beaches; some of the world's best fishing; and space in which to enjoy the clear invigorating air. Most of the area is above 200m in height. Much of the land is only capable of use as rough grazing and only a limited proportion of ground can be used for production of anything more than a narrow range of

agricultural products. Peatland accounts for a good percentage and most of the remainder is under crofting tenure.

There are numerous scheduled ancient monuments identified by Historic Scotland including forts, chambered cairns, brochs, castles, hut circles, and deserted townships. It is the wilderness experience of the far north and it's all but empty grandeur which will leave the strongest impression.

Skies that are forever changing are in step with the weather that is constantly varying. Rainbows appear and colour a black sky. Early in the year ferocious storms can lash the coast and the skies can be even more dramatic. There is always something to see with a constantly altering light. The winter skies produce some amazing displays of the northern lights, as lights flicker and dance in the sky. On the misty days the dreich damp, typical Scottish weather the mountains peak through the mist silhouetted as line shapes, the sky overcast grey black clouds an impression of a heavy lost land. As the clouds change and move showing and hiding shapes of the large mountainous structures the landscapes appears dynamic. The weather is very unpredictable can change very quickly and shows a wide range of variability. Rain can be heavy and prolonged likely to be pleasant with light fresh winds low cloud cover very local. Pale grey seas and skies seem to roll into one. Daylight is short in winter as the dawn and dusk merge and the days can be dark bleak and bracing and when the wind and rain come together from every direction the climate may seem merciless. Spring brings bright clear days and by the middle of June it is still light at midnight. This is a place both wild and rugged. Here, identification with the land has always run strong. The cool and drizzly weather creates a perpetual sense of "in-betweenness," an atmosphere of twilight, between dark and light, and dew, between rain and river. The vocabulary of the winds, breeze, gust, gale, is something all Highlanders know, something they can define by individual force and pitch, from whisper to scream.

Northwest Sutherland is the emptiest county in the UK and you do not have to go far from the main road to find large tracts of uninhabited spaces. This is a huge land with a small population. This area has a population density of less than 1 person per square kilometre and second to the people it's the unspoilt nature and diversity, the wealth of flora and fauna in the area; the natural environment, that is one of the greatest strengths. The distinctive landscape is very valuable where cultural and environmental values go hand in hand. Sheep have grazed much of the land for nearly two hundred years and this has had an impact of what you now see in the way of vegetation. There is no one way to examine the living organisms but individuals do not occur in isolation and distribution depends upon a combination of environmental factors. The relationship of geology, landscape, climate and vegetation cannot be totally separated except for ease of investigation.

Wind is a factor of notable variability and of extreme. The topography enters greatly into exposure of wind and in many places is a prominent factor that prevents healthy tree growth. There are small sections where sheep cannot reach and single or small clusters have managed to survive. Rowan, willow, hazel and birch are the most common in situations usually close to rivers. Small dwarf variety cling to rock faces at a few locations. The single examples of solitary species, which are represented, struggle against extreme exposure without any intervention and protection. In recent years in a few isolated remote parts of the straths where fencing has prevented grazing of deer and sheep, regeneration of natural growth has started mainly showing mountain ash and birch. Soil is a major multiple factor with a close correlation between rock type and soil character. The elements of climate, vegetation and relief are determinant in soil formation. Soil is of vital importance to countless living organisms and its nature depends on respective diverse processes interacting over a long period. With scenery

formed by glacial erosion and the passage of time the area has representation of a unique mixture of mountains, glens and moorland dotted with countless lochans and lochs, beautiful landscapes and a rich cultural heritage. Internationally important habitats and wildlife, the areas of the open countryside. Many beautiful beaches found along the coast on the many small and secluded inlets.

Sand dunes are the most obvious feature of coastal vegetation and due to their continual state of flux, they represent a large range of habitats. The species richness of a sand dune system depends largely upon the chemical composition of the underlying sand. Splendid examples of sand dunes and the successional stages in dune development into a type of heathland scrub are well marked around Durness. Sand deposited on the shore by the sea, dried and wind-blown, forms dunes colonised only by salt tolerant species. Marram grass (*Ammophila arenaria*) is the main stabilising influence to the less maritime regions where grassland scrub has become established. At Balnakeil Bay, there is a stretch of sand which inland forms a machair; in short, a grassland of calcareous type, consolidating land initially stabilised by Marram. Moderate grazing perpetuates it by adding organic matter. Snails abound in lime rich conditions. Slugs are common. The Blue Butterfly *Lycaena icarus* is in profusion. Sand couch grass (*Agropyron junceiforme*) often prepares the way for the entry of marram grass. Due to high winds in this area, the dune system is clearly in a dynamic state. A feature of coastal plants is their relatively small size. In dune systems and on exposed cliff tops, numerous plants are reduced to almost unrecognisable forms. Three factors control their size, they are grazed by sheep, the sand has little reserve of nutrients or water and they are found in positions exposed to high winds. The coasts come into their own with sea bird colonies notably on Faraid Head and the Clo Mor on Cape Side. Foxes, rabbits, shrews (pygmy), voles, mice are present in dunes. The invertebrate fauna can be expected to be diverse species of beetles, harvestmen, earthworms, spiders and grasshoppers.

### **Climate**

The climate shows a wide range of variability and is unpredictable. Weather varies according to latitude, longitude, and altitude, according to contour of the country, situation on the coast or inland, direction, and velocity of the prevailing wind, the humidity, and temperature of the air, the temperature of the land and sea. Many changeable factors interact to govern the climate of any one locality.

Rain occurs on more than two hundred days each year with an average rainfall of ninety one centimeters. During the spring and early summer cold northerly and north easterly winds prevail, occasionally bringing sea fog. The mean annual temperature is 6.2° C (45° F). As a coastal locality, snow seldom lies long and the winters are comparatively mild for these latitudes although long and severe, dark, dreary and boisterous. Wind exerts a profound influence often blowing at gale force.

Since the Ice Age the climate has passed through cycles of weather ranging from Arctic through Periglacial to humid Atlantic conditions and has created the range of conditions under which the various types of landform development have proceeded. The climate of today also controls the thermal and hydrological background to the present slow process of landscape evolution. Indirectly it affects the land use which is now a highly pertinent aspect of the problem. For any coastal study, however, the understanding of wind direction is the most important climatic element. Wind vectors control wave action which in turn determines the nature and extent of both depositional and erosive marine activity.

The weather in the area is very local and can be remarkably at variance within a twenty-mile radius. Strong winds, heavy snow and rainfall can affect close areas differently and can be

experienced travelling in a short distance. The area is swept by moisture laden south westerly winds from over the North Atlantic Drift and by current depressions associated with rain cloud and changeable weather. The laving waters of the northern sweep of the Gulf Stream, which we call the North Atlantic Drift, keep our insular climate equitable generally described as mild and humid. The south west winds rising over the mountain barrier of western Scotland give heavy rainfall to the North West. A common feature is horizontal rain.



IMAGE 183 SHEEP IN THE SNOW

The amount and distribution of snow is extremely variable and being near the coast severe falls and ice are only occasionally significant. Roads are rarely blocked but even with light falls, drifting can be a problem and gritting and clearing are constant during threats. Heavy coverings have brought down power and telephone lines but in recent year's total isolation is a very rare event. In the spring of 1930, Durness was isolated for a week by a snow storm of great severity. Frost has a distribution somewhat like that of snow. In 1952 there was another term of isolation due to snow and several reports of the methods of coping are dealt with elsewhere in this work.

Durness enjoys relatively clean air. Occasional banks of sea fog or "haar" are brought onshore in the summer months and can persist very local for several days. Low cloud that develops in the moist and rain bearing winds envelops much of the higher ground and can be particularly persistent over the hills. Hill fog can cut down on the sunshine reducing the temperature and increasing the humidity.

On average, the sea temperature reaches a maximum of 13` centigrade in August and it's coldest in March when the average is around 6` centigrade. In these cool northerly latitudes, close to the north Atlantic storm tracks, there is a high proportion of days with rain and a correspondingly low insulation may be expected. The Durness peninsula is exposed and reaches an elevation of over seven hundred and sixty metres so that a high percentage of the area, all the surfaces above one hundred and twenty metres, is commonly subject to wetting by

low cloud. Above one hundred and twenty metres, ground conditions are only intermittently dry.

North West Britain is an area of consistent progression and recoil of the oceanic and continental air. It is this which makes the climate so changeable and when altered by the relief of the mountain country consequently incomparable. Daylight differs widely between summer and winter. Daylight in June approximates twenty hours a day while in January there is scarcely six. The skies both night and day are vast and variable. The northern lights and crisp clear starry skies can be captivating. The alterations in light at various times of the year and different times of the day reflect the landscape as an ever-changing kaleidoscope.

Local stories regarding the weather have become established and worth a note. When the Orkney Islands or the neighboring mountains can be seen either a storm or continuation of bad weather is the certain consequence. When the sound of the breakers on the shore are heard distinctly it indicates frost. The appearance of the swan is a precursor of snow. To experience conditions from all the seasons in one day is common.

### **Peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland.**

*Lindsay, Richard & Charman, Dan & Everingham, F. & O'Reilly, R.M. & Palmer, M.A. & Rowell, T.A. & Stroud, David. (1988). The flow country.*

Climate is of overriding importance in the development of blanket bog. The widespread occurrence of this vegetation and its associated deep peat across Caithness and Sutherland suggests that the climate of the whole region is, or has been, suitable for its development. The combination of high and regular precipitation, high atmospheric humidity, relatively cool mean temperatures, and small annual temperature range required for the growth of ombrotrophic bog is eminently well satisfied across the region. There are, nevertheless, various gradients of climate which need to be considered. The prevailing westerly airstreams from the Atlantic impose an underlying gradient of climatic wetness from west to east. The moisture-laden air gives high rainfall and atmospheric humidity in western, coastal areas, and there is a decrease in both conditions with distance eastwards, so that the eastern coastal areas are drier. As in other parts of Britain, the presence of a high range of mountains close to and parallel with the west coast greatly amplifies this broad geographical gradient. The western mountains of Sutherland produce extremely high orographic rainfall (up to 2500 mm) and then a marked rain shadow effect eastwards, so that precipitation rapidly declines to 1200 mm in central Sutherland and is only 700 mm at the north-east tip of Caithness (see Figure 12a). There is an anomaly, in that the high mountain topography which produces the heaviest rainfall is also the least conducive to extensive waterlogging and development of blanket bog. Although also very wet and humid, the lower western zone of coastal moorlands is also mostly too rugged and irregular to allow extensive growth of bog. In both these zones of Sutherland there is a general prevalence of heavily leached and acidic soils, with surface horizons of 'mor' humus or shallow peat with frequent occurrence of deeper peat wherever topography allows.

### **From the Highland Council Ranger Service**

Seasonal Notes. North West Sutherland Countryside Ranger Donald Mitchell

#### **Autumn**

The fields of the straths should be filling up with wintering fieldfare, redwing and flocks of lapwing and curlew. Look in the fields of fodder for flocks of yellow hammer, twite and green finches feeding on the seed.

Highland mists and mellow fruitfulness; a beautiful time to be in the hills of the northwest, in the serene mysterious atmosphere of wispy misty peat bogs or around haar shrouded sea inlets.

The cooler air and end of season light inspires much of our wildlife to be on the move. Look out for birds of prey such as peregrine falcons and buzzards. Other migrant species are gathering to head south or alternatively beginning to arrive from further north like our Greenland barnacle geese that over winter near Durness.

Autumnal colours can be seen in a rich array of brightly coloured mosses and grasses across wide tracts of the hills. The mauve of the ling still lingers too, as does the blue scabious and along the northern fringe it may still be possible to find a second flowering of Scottish primrose on Balnakeil and Faraid head.

Keep your eyes on the coastal fringes too, for sightings of seals, whales, dolphins and porpoises and to the shore itself for otters, as the year's young are less shy, more mobile and can be quite noisily playful. The beaches and estuaries are fine places to see many common species of waders and perhaps less common greenshank and whimbrel on the Kyle of Durness. Out in the bays of Scourie, Oldshoremore or Loch Eriboll it is quite possible to view groups of rare black or red-throated divers and the larger more solitary great northern diver.

## **Spring**

Migrant birds are naturally later in the north and it is worth heading to the coast for first sights of some species; Fulmars come in early, already in Durness by mid-January and Rock Pipits seem to be ever present. Shags too will be settling in around the breeding areas such as Faraid Head. Whilst out on the cliffs look carefully for some gems of early flowers such as Moss Campion and Purple Saxifrage. These plants are more commonly found at high levels, but can be found at some special sites near Scourie, Fanagmore and Sandwood bay.

## **Summer**

April sees the departure from Durness of over wintering Barnacle Geese. Up to 800 birds flit between Eilean Hoan and the fields of Balnakeil. Greylag Geese, Mallard, Curlew, Golden Plover and early arriving Lapwing also feed in the fields here. In late April the ever popular Puffin returns to Faraid Head and Handa Island.

Birds of prey are regularly seen along the north coasts: Peregrines are early nesters and Buzzards display to their mates becoming uncharacteristically acrobatic. Look in the deep dark dubh lochans for signs of stirring Frogs and in the warmer days for the Palmate Newts, often be found in remarkably small pools.

This is a spectacular time to visit the northwest, with wildlife in abundance. Look closely at the grazed swathes of coastal grasses particularly around Durness and along the north coast. You may find the diminutive Scottish primrose, a flower unique to Scotland. In the machair it can literally be near impossible to walk without stepping on flowers of dozens of different species including many varieties of orchids including early purple, heath spotted, fragrant, lesser twayblade. Others, including eyebrights, grass of parnassus, and trefoil, create a riot of colour and scents.

The north and west coasts are certainly the place to see the seabirds just now as they breed in vast numbers. Handa Island near Scourie is one of the best bird islands in Britain to visit. With more than 200,000 birds it would be a pity to miss this dramatic spectacle. Guillemots, puffins, razorbills, kittiwakes and skuas are there in abundance. Cape Wrath and the Clo Mor cliffs also have huge breeding colonies and there are more approachable nesting cliff sites at Faraid head by Durness. However the cliffs are naturally collapsing all the time so beware! Look out for whales, dolphins and porpoises as well as otters. Otters are best seen at low tides and in early mornings. Kylestrome and Scourie coasts are good for them but keep your eyes peeled from many coastal viewpoints

## Rare Bird

28<sup>th</sup> September 1998

Information regarding a locality of a Daurian Starling *Sturninans vulgaris* has been released to bird watchers. The first sighting was last week when an unusual caller joined the flocks being fed on kitchen scraps. Positive identification was a few days later. A slightly smaller stature than the common starling, with a light grey/ white underside with a purple black back. An adult male in its first winter has been flying around the craft village landing on the telephone wires and rowan trees. A mega twitch was expected in Balnakeil this week and preparation for large numbers of visitors got underway. Watchers started arriving on Sunday afternoon from North Yorkshire and Aberdeen. Traffic cones were placed on the Durness to Balnakeil road and traffic from the south directed through Ullapool on Sunday night. On Monday morning, about a hundred twitchers were stationed around Durness from as far as Southampton but there had been no appearance of the bird.

The first siting of this species in Europe was in the Fairisles in 1986 when it stayed three weeks, returning in the autumn. Another was shot dead in Norway.

The bird is resident in the Daurian region of Mongolia and is a common species in Siberia and the coastline of China. A report from a 1921 journal states that this bird has never been successfully kept in captivity. A Mediterranean Gull, only the second siting in Sutherland, a Barn Owl nesting locally, the furthest north one has been recorded, a Sakia Falcon and a Yellow Breasted Bunting have all been identified in the last week.

## Special Area of Conservation<sup>72</sup>

This area has great UK and European importance for a range of geological, freshwater, marine and botanical interests. This is made clear through EU designation of the Durness Special Area of Conservation, which lists the following primary habitats:

- fixed dunes with calcareous vegetation
- hard oligo-mesotrophic waters with benthic vegetation of stonewort (*Chara*) species
- alpine and sub-alpine calcareous grasslands
- limestone pavement

Habitats are a primary reason for selection of this site.

Fixed coastal dunes with herbaceous vegetation ("grey dunes") \* Priority feature

Durness contains one of the largest sand dune systems in the north of Scotland. It is an example of an extreme northern variant of fixed dunes with herbaceous vegetation. The site is maintained by very active physical and biological processes. Fixed dune vegetation at this site occurs on an extensive and diverse sequence of dunes and on soils covered with blown sand. A rich variety of calcareous dune grassland species grow here in association with arctic-alpine plants such as mountain avens *Dryas octopetala*.

Hard oligo-mesotrophic waters with benthic vegetation of *Chara* spp.

Durness contains a cluster of three marl lochs (Croispol, Borrallie and Caladail) on Dalradian Durness limestone in the extreme north-west of Scotland. These are the northernmost examples of marl lakes in the UK and one of the few high-quality occurrences of the habitat type in Scotland. The water is very clear, low in nutrients and with little phytoplankton production.

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<sup>72</sup> June 2010 notification from Scottish Natural Heritage



There are extensive growths of submerged macrophytes, including seven species of pondweed *Potamogeton* and three species of stonewort *Chara*. In addition, Borrallie is the only marl lake in the UK with a population of Arctic charr *Salvelinus alpinus*.

#### Alpine and subalpine calcareous grasslands

Durness is one of four sites representing the low-altitude Alpine and subalpine calcareous grasslands that are restricted to the north-west mainland of Scotland. Durness contains the largest stands of CG13 *Dryas octopetala* – *Carex flacca* heath in the UK, developed on dolomitic limestone at 0–60 m. The site has an outstanding representation of characteristic species, including wild thyme *Thymus polytrichus*, ribwort plantain *Plantago lanceolata*, sea plantain *Plantago maritima*, purging flax *Linum catharticum* and common bird's-foot-trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*. The endemic Scottish primrose *Primula scotica* is present, and other uncommon species include mountain everlasting *Antennaria dioica*, hair sedge *Carex capillaris*, lesser meadow-rue *Thalictrum minus*, frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride* and hart's-tongue *Phyllitis scolopendrium*. Locally, the calcifuge species crowberry *Empetrum nigrum* occurs, giving rise to an unusual sub-type of *Dryas* heath. There are transitions to a wide range of other communities, including coastal dunes, other types of base-rich grasslands, and a range of dwarf-shrub heaths.

#### Limestone pavements \* Priority feature

This site on Cambro–Ordovician Durness limestone is the most north-westerly occurrence of Limestone pavements in the UK. It is one of five sites representing the northern variant of this habitat type. Because of its location it supports a diverse flora rich in northern and arctic-alpine species. The site supports communities with a maritime element, similar to those on Strath, with burnet rose *Rosa pimpinellifolia*, stone bramble *Rubus saxatilis*, mountain avens *Dryas octopetala*, dark-red helleborine *Epipactis atrorubens* and black spleenwort *Asplenium adiantum-nigrum*. Both lesser meadow-rue *Thalictrum minus* and alpine meadow-rue *Thalictrum alpinum* occur here. Further inland, brittle bladder-fern *Cystopteris fragilis* and hard shield-fern *Polystichum aculeatum* flourish.

### **Durness SSSI Statement of Importance**

By David Horsfield 16<sup>th</sup>. June 2004 for Scottish Natural Heritage

#### Introduction

To the north are the distinctive headlands of An Fharaid and Faraid Head with dunes and sea-cliffs rising to 100m in height. Coastal cliffs also extend from An Fharaid around Aodann Mhór and detached cliff sections occur at Leirinbeg and Lerinmore. The dunes of the ground west of Keoldale to Balnakeil stretch about 1.5 km inland and rise to about 59m. Further inland, south-east of Lochs Croispol and Borraile, upland grassland and moorland rising to 90m occupies the ground southward to the shores of Loch Meadaidh. Two small sections of upland grassland and moorland occur at South Kyle and Grudie at the southern end of the site. West of the Kyle of Durness there are sections of coastal cliff, heathland, and grassland between the ferry landing and Achimore and north of Daill.

The rocks are mainly Durness limestone and dolomite with An Fharaid and Faraid Head Lewisian gneiss and Moine psammite. West of the Kyle of Durness, with the split through Grudie, there is Lewisian gneiss and Torridonian sandstone. The limestone and dolomite terrain, including limestone pavement, is best developed in the Keoldale – Balvaich sector between Loch Borrallie and the A838 road. There are cliffs around much of the coast. Inland, slopes are mainly gentle, though there are cliffs and steep slopes above Loch Borrallie and moderately steep to steep ground on the west of the Kyle of Durness. This is a mixed interest

site with important coastal, aquatic and upland habitats. The main importance of the upland habitats is due to the calcareous habitats associated with the Durness limestone.

#### Summary of importance

- Durness is a low altitude site of mixed interest consisting of coastal, aquatic and upland habitat.
- There are extensive outcrops of Durness limestone occurring mainly as pavements or crags.
- The site is nationally and internationally important for a range of calcareous habitats associated with Durness limestone including Dryas-Carex heath, Festuca-Agrostis-Thymus grassland, limestone pavement and alkaline fens.
- The site is nationally important for a range of flush mires including communities undescribed in Britain.
- Other internationally important upland habitats include dry heaths, wet heaths and tall-herb community.

#### Earthquakes

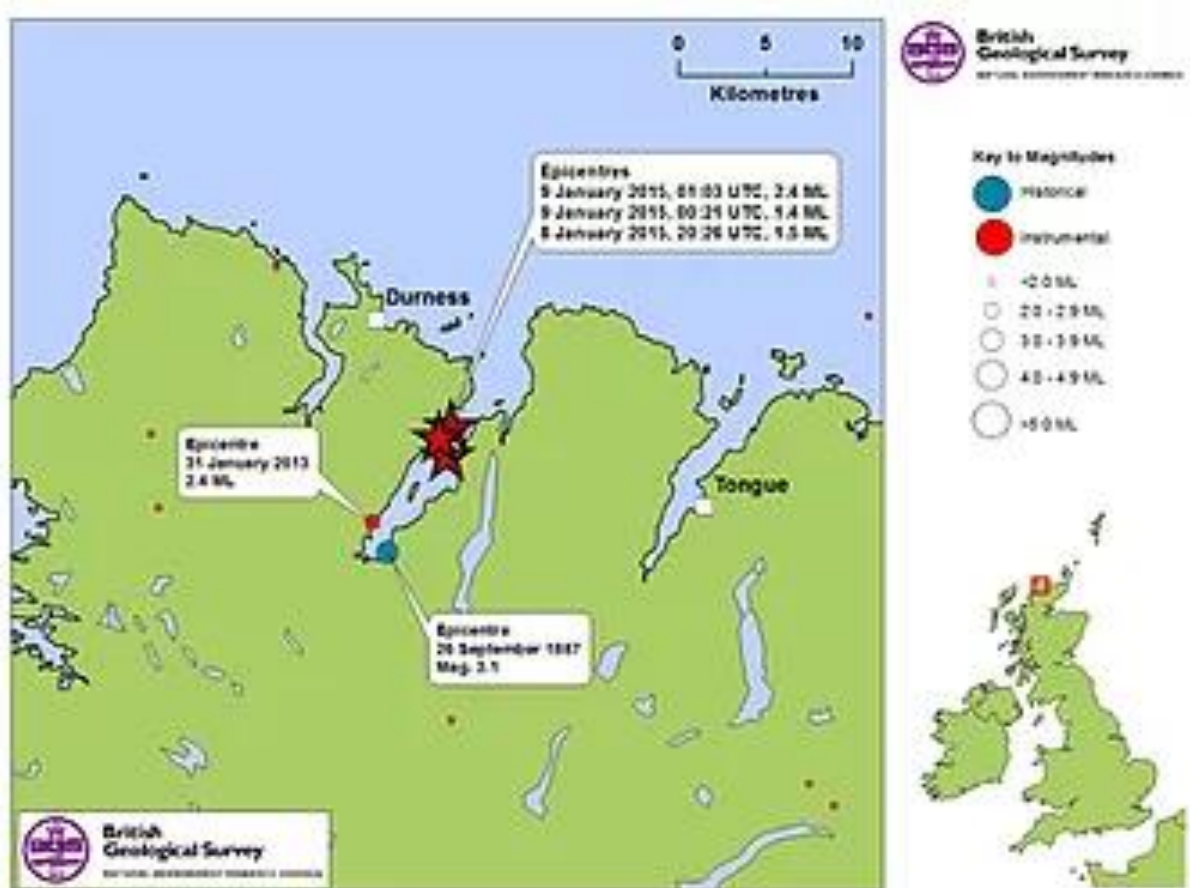


IMAGE 184 EARTHQUAKE MAP OF DURNESS THE BRITISH GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

Three small earthquakes have been recorded at Durness, the largest village in the remote north-western corner of Scotland.

The British Geological Survey recorded a 1.5 magnitude quake on Friday night 9th January 2015 during a storm with 100 mile an winds, and quakes of 1.4 and 2.4 in the early hours of Saturday. A 2.4 magnitude earthquake was previously recorded at Durness in Sutherland in February 2013. Small earthquakes are frequently recorded in the Highlands.

## Durness Beaches

The beaches around Durness are magnificent, clean, and safe. They are large and easily accessible offering space and endless opportunities to explore. There are many little inlets around the Durness coastline as they map below shows. Some areas are accessible with great care and some areas are not recommended. The four easily accessible beaches, Balnakeil, Sango, Sangobeg, and Ceannabeinne (Traigh Allt Chailgeag)

### Geodha



IMAGE 185 GEODHA BEACH

This secluded beach accessed via the Geo Brat and Eden's walk from Durine or Balnakeil is less accessible but worth and worth exploring. In the late 18<sup>th</sup>, early 19<sup>th</sup> century kelp was cut at low tide, dried on the beach, and then burnt. The ash was an important ingredient in several industries, especially soap and glass. The industry collapsed when cheap foreign imports became available in the 1820's. Seaweed was also collected here for manure for the crofts.

### Balnakeil Beach

One mile from the centre of Durness Balnakeil beach is very easily accessible. The sandy bay with the shell sand, having a high lime content, which inland forms a machair, is crescent shaped and facing west where bathing is safe from pollution, unspoilt and quiet. The area offers unparalleled sunsets. Balnakeil Sands occupy the west side of the neck of land joining the Faraid Head peninsula to the mainland just to the north of Durness in a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The setting of the beach and the long sweep of the beach is unique in the north and west of the county. The beach is nearly 1.25 miles long, with an inter-tidal zone averaging over 200 yards wide. Half way along, the line of the beach is broken by a rocky protuberance washed

at high tide. The sandy bay is crescent shaped and faces west. The sand dunes are a most obvious feature of the coast, they represent a large range of habitats and form a machair, a grassland of the calcareous type initially stabilised by Marram Grass.



IMAGE 186 BALNAKEIL BEACH

The land is part of Balnakeil Farm, and is used as rough grazing for cattle and sheep. The grazing potential is not high. Rights and traditions and a Land Court Ruling from two generations past ruled Crofters are allowed to cut bent, a kind of grass, for thatching from Balnakeil. In the Marine Conservation Society's guide to more than one hundred and eighty of Britain's best beaches Balnakeil Bay is chosen for special recommendation and is given top of the league status.

At the furthest part of Balnakeil beach and situated behind a small inlet secluded from immediate view is an old boathouse and focus for a small inshore shellfish operation. The crofter still uses the area for fishing but the upturned boat and stone built shelter is no longer used for overnight expeditions and is falling into disrepair. In the not so distant past, this was an ideal and well equipped shelter when travelling to this point was only possible on foot.

The pattern of recreational use tends to be one of short visits during which the tourists walk some distance along the beach and then return to their cars parked at the road end between the churchyard and Balnakeil Farm.

The "Dalkeith" wreck on the second beach of Balnakeil sometimes exposed. Carrying a shipment of iron ore taken from the wreck to Portnancon and loaded on to another ship. There is no confirmation regarding this (the name may not be correct) and any information would be gratefully received.

In 1994 gates and a fence were erected at Balnakeil causing local concern. Local people were adamant that the Balnakeil estate had no right to take this action. An opposition group was formed and protest marches along the beach with petitions to Scottish Natural Heritage. Andrew Elliot of Balnakeil Farm insisted the gates and fence remain but agreed to install something more appropriate and in keeping with the locality.

### **Balnakeil Viking.**<sup>73</sup>



IMAGE 187 ARTIST IMPRESSION OF BALNAKEIL VIKING BURIAL

On May the 23rd 1991, after the shoreline had been pounded by fierce storms, a tourist reported human remains at the north end of Balnakeil Bay. The local doctor and Police arrived and confirmed the remains human and dead. The sand had exposed the grave of a Viking about four metres above the high water mark. No coffin was found in the grave believed to be dated between eight hundred and eleven hundred AD. In addition, there was a body stain that suggests the remains could have been wrapped in a simple shroud. An Iron sword had been placed beneath the body, a wooden scabbard, three decorative beads two amber one white and blue glass, a spear ring pin, brooch, a comb made from bone, a shield boss, horn objects which could have been parts from a game and unidentifiable metal objects were present. The skeletal material of about one point three metres and the artefacts were removed to the Archaeology Department at Inverness and because of the fragile and poor state of preservation were taken to the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh for treatment. Owing to the discovery being declared treasure trove, the finder was rewarded financially.

The sand had exposed the grave of a Viking about four metres above the high water mark. The grave was noticed in the sandy coastal area, in time for Highland Regional Council to mount a

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<sup>73</sup> A detailed study and report by Glasgow University A Viking burial at Balnakeil, Sutherland Colleen E. Batey and Caroline Paterson can be downloaded 45706.pdf (gla.ac.uk)

rescue-excavation, which recovered most of the remains. He was buried on a bedding of feathers and straw, with the boy was buried with various adult iron weapons including a sword in its scabbard and a shield boss. The skull and torso uncovered were accompanied by grave-goods there was a body stain that suggests the remains could have been wrapped in a simple shroud. An Iron sword had been placed beneath the body, a wooden scabbard, three decorative beads two amber one white and blue glass, a spear ring pin, brooch, a comb made from bone, a shield boss, horn objects which could have been parts from a game and unidentifiable metal objects were present. The skeletal material of about one point three metres and the artefacts were removed to the Archaeology Department at Inverness and because of the fragile and poor state of preservation were taken to the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh for treatment.

### **Sango Beach**



IMAGE 188 SANGO BEACH

Sited in the centre of Durness close what was the Tourist Information Centre until 2019, Sango is a series of three small inlets exposing areas of sandy beach popular with visitors being obvious from the road and easily reached. The access to Sango beach was improved by the construction of steps in 1995 after concern about the erosion to the coastal slope from entry and exit to the sands by unsuitable routes. Sango as an accolade as an award winning beach. In 2011 the Highland Council removed the steps after occasions required repairs and re-sighting due to sand movement and tide damage. Risk assessment indicated that the steps were unsafe and did not meet safety standards. In March 1998, a path was constructed to the headland above Sango beach to provide access to a viewpoint. It consists of a wide stretch of golden sand divided into three smaller coves by a series of rocky outcrops. Scattered along the beach are various rocks, stacks and skerries. The back of the beach varies along its length with steep dunes and machair making up large sections and sheer cliffs of Creag Thairbhe to the east.

The dune system and coastal slope have been strengthened by tying brushwood in to the sand to stabilise and encourage root growth of the grasses and deposits of topsoil from local excavations have been laid down at distant times. Today there is a very well kept and asset to Durness with the Sango Sands camp site. The beach access is unmarked although attempts locally have been made to encourage a single access people tend to use the shortest route through the dunes.

### **Sangobeg Beach**

Sangobeg Sands occupy a small embayment in the northwest to southeast trending coastline about two miles to the east of Durness. The beach is nearly 300 yards long and 150 yards wide, with a very narrow upper beach a few yards across. The relatively sheltered position of the beach behind the offshore skerries means that little marine erosion takes place. Some erosion occurs on both headlands however, but especially on the western limestone one.

### **Ceannabeinne Beach**



IMAGE 189 CEANNABEINNE BEACH

Durness is approached on the A838 from the east about 2 miles from the village the spectacular bay of Ceannabeinne is encountered. Translated from Gaelic Ceannabeinne means head or end of the mountains. A steep grassy slope gives access to this stretch and when the tide is fully out access to little remote inlets are easily available.

Traditionally the beach was known as Traigh Allt Chailgeag – the beach of the burn of bereavement and death. This referred to a story of how an elderly woman fell into the burn, which flows onto the beach, and drowned. The burn Allt Chailgeag, was in spate at the time and her body was washed down to the shore. The ruined stone dykes visible by the burn and

shore were part of the small farm of Clais Charnach, the foundations of which can be found on the hillside above the car park.

The area is intensively grazed by sheep, and rabbits are numerous. The pattern of use is that of the short visit. The beach, being an attractive one close to but some way below the road draws many tourists on the course of their journey along the north coast. After initial exhilaration at the beauty most of the visits are, however, very brief; the tourists just walk down to the beach from their cars, go a short distance along it and then return.



IMAGE 190 CEANNABEINNE BEACH



## Geology



IMAGE 191 THE ROCKS CAN ONLY ATTRACT CURIOSITY AND FASCINATION.

For the interested amateur the shapes, colours and situations of some of the rocks can only attract curiosity and fascination. The geology within and around Durness is rather complex with an impressive range of sedimentary and metamorphic rock types for what is only a small area. The parish can be divided into well determined geological regions. Distribution is defined more by faulting than any other single factor. Faults have brought the limestone against the Lower Cambrian and Pre-Cambrian so that there are contrasting adjacent rocks types. Conclusive proof can be found in the area that North West Scotland was divided from the rest of Britain and most of Western Europe and lay on the opposite side of the Lower Paleozoic Proto-Atlantic Ocean. One of Britain's outstanding earth science sites, it is of essential importance in studies of transatlantic correlation, paleogeography and faunas.

The area contains rock formations of outstanding geological interest, which span over 2,800 million years and include some of the oldest surface rocks in Britain. Along the west coast, the oldest rock in the region, Lewisian gneiss, creates a landscape of low hills and scattered lochans. Rising from this gneiss landscape are huge masses of Torridonian sandstone, capped by quartzite. Much is comprised of schists and granulites of the Moine series named after A' Mhoine near Tongue where they were first described. The softer schists of the series have weathered to produce the level landscape of the peatlands, from which the more resistant rock masses of Ben Hope and Ben Klibreck were formed. The Moine Thrust zone, which lies east of the gneiss and sandstone area, crosses the region from north to south. This zone provides evidence of immense disturbance of the earth's crust some 400 million years ago and has long been an area of study for geologists from all over the world.

The country is a Geologists playground, with rocks displaying 3 billion years of geological time. It is located within the North West Highland Geopark, one of the finest regions of the world for understanding geology, particularly mountain building processes. This is largely due

to a major thrust fault known as the Moine Thrust. The Moine rocks and related thrust simply take their names from the extensive A' Mhoine blanket bog area which sits upon the impermeable schist between Durness and Tongue.

Durness is also the extreme north-west location for limestone pavement in the UK. These special habitats create an area is rich in flora and fauna.

There is a high number of academic Geological papers of very specific interest available.

### Durness Limestone

Most of Durness village lies on a thick (up to ~800m) succession of dolostone and limestone rocks that were deposited along the margins of the Iapetu Ocean during Cambrian and Ordovician times (510-470 million years ago). These rock types are quite rare across Scotland and therefore so are features such as freshwater caves, limestone pavements and shakeholes, all of which can be found around Durness. This underlying geology with its high levels of calcium carbonate has also resulted in the Durness area being one of the most fertile areas in northern Scotland, partly why it shows evidence of very long term human occupation.

Fossils within the Durness Limestone are relatively rare (partly because of dolomite recrystallizing the original limestone rock) but those still found such as small cephalopods, gastropods and sponges were exceptionally complex for their time, even if they may seem underwhelming today. These lived relatively shortly after the Cambrian Explosion when all life was still restricted to water. The sequence is extremely abundant in algal structures such as stromatolites and thrombolites however these increased oxygen levels within the Earth's atmosphere at the time through photosynthesis, encouraging rapid evolution to continue.

### Localities of Geological Interest in and Around Durness

#### By Iain Greig.

The oldest rocks in the area are of the oldest in the world. Three major divisions of the pre-Cambrian system are found. The oldest is Lewisian comprising of rock between one thousand four hundred million years and two thousand six hundred million years old. The other two divisions Moine series and Torridonian, eight hundred to nine hundred million years old, distinguishable by their appearance. The youngest solid rocks are of Cambrian and lower Ordovician, approximately four to six hundred million years. An excellent section through some of the Cambro-Ordovician Rocks can be seen along the south shore of Balnakeil Bay. Limestones and Dolomites are present here and some of the former contains fossils and a large number of Chert Nodules, sub spherical masses of rock with a chemical composition similar to quartz. The compacting of sediment deposited in a low energy marine environment that is on a part of the seabed where there was little or no wave or current action formed these rocks. They are fine-grained (tiny particles) and muddy rocks. At Faraid Head, the rocks are associated with gigantic earth movements, which took place approximately three hundred and seventy five million years ago during the latter stages of the Caledonian Orogeny (mountain building movement). The rocks forming Faraid Head are metamorphosed but they had a different origin from the Lewisian Gneiss and were altered at a much later date. In Sango Bay, there is another small belt of rocks, which have been thrust over from the east and faulted down. The actual fault plane is the steep cliff that forms the eastern end of the bay.

The rocks at the western end of Sangobeg Sands are of the Lower Cambrian age and are known as pipe rocks because of the pipe like markings in the Quartzite (metamorphosed sandstone) of which they are composed. These markings are not true fossils but are called 'trace fossils' because they are impressions left in the original sediment by organisms. Worm like creatures with vertical burrows formed these 'pipes'. The rocks at the eastern end of the sands are

Lewisian Gneiss with an age of about fourteen to eighteen hundred million years. Veins substantially thick of biotite and or hornblende can be found as garnets, amethyst, and iron ore minerals. At approximately grid ref. 420650 there is a huge mass of almost pure Feldspar. Three or four vertical Pegmatite veins (very coarse grained crystalline rock) each approximately three hundred metres long and one hundred metres wide occur in the Lewisian Gneiss. There is a minimum of twelve million tons of pegmatite in about half a square kilometre of ground and the feldspar comprises about seventy percent of this. Feldspar is used in the glass and ceramics industries. Dolomite is utilised for magnesium production.

### **The Earth Science Importance of the North West Highlands**

The North West Highlands contains some of the most important and diverse geological and geomorphological features in the British Isles. Geologically, the area is dominated by the Moine Thrust Zone, which runs from north to south through west Sutherland and Wester Ross and is a structure of international importance. To the west of the Moine Thrust Zone lies the Lewisian Foreland, containing some of the oldest rocks in Europe; to the east are the enigmatic rocks of the Moine Supergroup.

The North West Highlands have a unique landscape, which strikingly reflects the underlying geology and geomorphology. Along the line of the Moine Thrust Zone are craggy peaks of Torridonian Sandstone and Cambrian Quartzite, shaped by the action of glaciers during the Quaternary Period. Between the mountains are secluded glens, some of them floored by the largest areas of limestone in Scotland. Some caves in that limestone has yielded fossil evidence of Pleistocene 'Ice-age' fauna; reindeer, polar bears and wolves. To the west of the mountains lies a stretch of Lewisian Gneiss with the typical rugged 'Cnoc-and-Lochan' landscape. Where the coast is formed by Lewisian gneiss, numerous small coves and craggy headlands occur with lower areas covered by unusual machair sands with it their associated rich flora. In contrast, coast formed by Torridonian Sandstone shows high cliffs with occasional sea stacks such as the Old Man of Stoer. East of the mountains is the wild, boggy country that has developed on the rocks of the Moine Supergroup.

The North West Highlands is also a key area for the historical development of the science of geology. Famous geologists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as Roderick Murchison, Archibald Geikie, Benjamin Peach and John Horne, cut their geological teeth on the rocks of Sutherland. For much of that century, the so-called "Highlands Controversy" raged over the relationships of these rocks, finally ending in the recognition of the complexities of the Moine Thrust Zone. Research into the rocks, structures and geomorphological features of the North West Highlands continues to this day, and hundreds of geology students from across the globe visit the region every year.

### **Scotland's First European Geopark**

The story of the Geopark also links directly to the Victorian geologists who first tried to understand and explain the complex geology of the area – this controversy and debate led to a scientific revolution in how we understand geology today. North West Highlands Geopark became Scotland's first European Geopark in 2004, and was later joined by a second Scottish Geopark, Lochaber, awarded in April 2007. The key functions of European Geoparks are to protect geological heritage, promote geology to the public and to use geology and other aspects of its natural and cultural heritage to promote sustainable economic development, normally through geotourism. The boundary stretches from Cape Wrath in the north to Ben More Coigach in the south, and from the coast in the west to the approximate line of the Moine Thrust in the east. The area covers some 200,000 hectares. Geologically, the North West Highlands of Scotland contain rock formations of outstanding interest, which span over 3000 million years

of Earth history and include some of the oldest rocks in Europe. Along the west coast, Lewisian gneiss, creates a landscape of low hills and scattered lochans. The Moine Thrust Zone lies east of the gneiss and sandstone area and crosses the region from north to south.

Scottish Natural Heritage erected twelve interpretation panels along the roadside from Ullapool to just north of Laxford Bridge as part of a series of satellite sites from Knockan Crag. All the panels are situated where there are excellent views of various aspects of the geological history. Each panel gives a brief explanation of the story behind the scenery at that location. A leaflet is provided which motorists can use to plan a route around these sites.

In the Laxford Brae area road improvements have exposed folded patterns in the ancient Lewisian gneiss rocks. These rocks, originally laid down billions of years ago in horizontal layers, have become twisted, broken, and folded through the intense pressure and movements of the Earth's crust

Despite over 100 years of research, the North West Highlands area remains an outstanding natural laboratory, where new observations are still being made and new hypotheses are being tested. There is massive amounts of information on the geology of the area. Here I have tried to be as simple as possible. An exhibition in Balnakeil Craft village, Deep Time is excellent and arrangements can be made for Durness Geology Walking Tours.

19th September 2005

The North West Highland Geopark Launch held a day in Durness last Friday. The Highland Council Rangers were out in force demonstrating and encouraging participation in panning for gold, making fossils and discovering from the time line the geology of the district. The event organised by Issie McPhail was held at the car park above Smoo Cave. Painting sea creatures on stones to be later become part of an exhibition cave was being carried out by all the visiting children from the local schools of Durness and Kinlochbervie. Stamped Postcards from ariel photographs of the Geopark to mark the occasion were distributed and posted to those unable to attend. A demonstration on how geological configuration are formed proved popular. A rectangular box with several layers of material along the base was compressed to show the occurrences over millions of years of how mountains and thrusts are created. Several other events are happening throughout the area and another event is planned for Durness on the 22 November.

### **Moine Thrust**

About 430 million years ago two ancient continents collided creating the British Isles as we know it today. The Moine Thrust Belt was formed during the late stages of the Caledonian Orogeny 520 million years ago. Huge sheets of rock were pushed up to 100km to the west, creating the Moine Thrust. The Moine Thrust is the easternmost and oldest of a series of low-angle faults which comprise a thrust zone, up to 6 miles (10 km) in width, within which older sheets of rock (or nappes) are piled up over younger sequences. The Moine Thrust Belt or Moine Thrust Zone is a linear tectonic feature in the Scottish Highlands which runs from Loch Eriboll on the north coast 190 kilometres (120 mi) south-west to the Sleat peninsula on the Isle of Skye. The effects of this thrusting can be seen at a number of locations, Knockan Crag, Traligill, Loch Glencoul, Foinaven, Faraid Head, Eriboll and Whiten Head. The work of the Geological Survey in NW Scotland during the 1880s, led by Ben Peach and John Horne, is widely regarded as the first attempt to obtain a 3D description of a thrust belt. Since the thrust belt was first identified in the late 19th century, it has become a classical site for the study of structural geology. Its mode of formation has been re-interpreted several times as understanding of the science developed, but the detailed field mapping and understanding was the work of Ben Peach (1842, 1926) and John Horne (1848, 1928), published in a memoir in

1907. Understanding of thrust faults and the processes of thrusting has advanced over the decades since the work of Peach and Horne.

The geology of NW Scotland is highly varied. Two or three times a year geology students of all levels arrive in Durness and Mackay Country for two or three weeks from national and international Universities to study local rocks. One of these from the 1930's is worth mentioning.

### **Cheng Yuqi**

Professor Cheng Yuqi was born in Zhenjiang Province on October 7<sup>th</sup>. 1912 and became, in terms of seniority and the number of geoscientists whose lives he touched, perhaps the most important and influential geologist of his generation. A graduate of the Tsinghua University (1933) and appointed to the Geological Survey of the Ministry of Commerce in Beijing, Cheng Yuqi came to work for his PhD, studying the Bettyhill migmatites, Sutherland (1935-1938).

Having gained his PhD (1938) Cheng's findings were communicated by Read to the Geological Society (1942, 1943) by which time he had incorporated them into his Imperial College teaching programme on the origin of granites.

On the 50th anniversary to the week of his PhD, Cheng Yuqi (by then an Academician, a past-President of the Geological Society of China, President of the Chinese Academy of Geological Sciences and an Honorary Fellow of the Geological Society) returned for a reunion in Bettyhill.

During the Cultural Revolution, Professor Cheng was imprisoned and set to manual labour, not resuming scientific and administrative work until 1966. By 1979 he was appointed to his most senior administrative post (vice-Minister in the Ministry of Geology) while in 1980 he became Chairman of the Chinese National Committee for the IGCP. Professor Cheng's affection for the UK, fostered at Liverpool and in the Scottish Highlands, was encapsulated in the extraordinary detail of his memories of Britain in the late 1930s,

## Archaeology in the Durness Parish

Durness area is rich in archaeological features dating from pre-historic times (circa 3000BC) to post-war military installations. This is an ancient land full of history and with many historical remains to be explored. Some sites are periodically exposed from the windblown sand at some locations and accounts of finds of various artefacts are occasionally related. There has been very little detailed professional investigation into the abundance of sites.

In 1965, a party from Glasgow University compiled maps of the Durness peninsula to show eighty two archaeological monuments of apparent Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age date, plotted alongside a background of solid geology and superficial deposits.

Without detailed excavations, difficulties arose in relating particular monuments to a particular period. Evidence of Neolithic settlement is scanty but certainly represented by cairns. Funerary monuments account for the greater part of evidence of the Bronze Age in the peninsula, the weight of distribution on the Durness limestone. Six certain Bronze Age cairns and one probable cairn marked by standing stones stretch in a line from NC 38896151 to east of Keoldale. Each one is associated with good pasture and land easily cultivated. The cairns are often built on the shoulder of a ridge, not necessarily on the highest point and appear to be in a position relevant to once settled localities. The cairn at Sarsgrum NC 379 643 is some six metres in diameter and lies about three hundred and fifty metres north east of the shepherds house. Most of the cairn has been removed, exposing a cist consisting of three upright slabs and one fallen. The capstone measuring about one point five by one metre and twenty centimetres thick lies on top of the cist.

The cairns on the Quartz form a loose agglomeration. All the monuments are constructed of frost shattered quartz boulders. Vegetation is sparse and poor although in the Bronze Age a thin covering of till, since stripped by erosion, and is not impossible. The cairns are not readily associated with any form of settlement either temporary or as might be used by shepherds or cowherds. All the cairns lie above three hundred metres with views eastward across Loch Eriboll some visible from almost any point on the Durness peninsula. The most prominent is at Carn an Righ. It is suggested they may be associated with one of the easier routes across the peninsula. In the recent past Bealach Mor, a little to the north, was used in conjunction with a ferry by travellers journeying to Tongue. Before modern roads round sea lochs were built, a more direct route, which crossed lochs and peninsulas, appears to have been in general use.

Apart from funerary monuments the only definite evidence for settlement in the Bronze Age may lie in the numerous small heaps of loose stones, possible field clearance heaps centred on NC 38806525 and NC 38886578. From one of those mounds came a fragment of Bronze Age pottery.

Monuments attributable to the Iron Age are not only more numerous than those of earlier periods but also include well-attested dwellings. The three Iron Age sites outside the limestone belt are explained singly.

The most prominent feature of the distribution map is the concentration of sites on limestone. Hut circles are the most numerous class of monument and duns are represented. Of the ancient monuments recorded nine percent occur on lewisian and quartz which constitute some eighty percent of the total area. Pre-historic societies evidently favoured lighter, free drained, less acid soils which developed on the limestone. The pre-clearance townships which, existed on the east of the peninsula, not on limestone, appear to have been associated with fishing. Archaeology that is more recent, has included all the abandoned buildings erected by the military scattered around, especially at Faraid Head and Lerin.

## Short History<sup>74</sup>

*Sometime after the end of the last Ice Age the first extended family group of “Mesolithic Hunter Gatherers” arrived on what is now the north coast of Sutherland. The land they travelled through over 8,000 years ago was not the barren landscape you see today. Their land was shrouded in an ancient Birch Forest which included scots pine, alder, willow and hazel with clearings full of shrubs, flowers and lush grasses. They had probably travelled from the eastern side of the country. It’s believed it was easier for them to travel along the coast than through the interior. When finding a river valley they would explore it for game and shelter. As they followed the game trails they would have searched for berries, nuts and edible roots to supplement their diet, the men hunting the native animals and wildfowl. They would trap fish in the rivers and lochs. Saltwater fish and shellfish would be available to them around the coast.*

*Perhaps they followed the River Helmsdale inland eventually reaching the area we call Kinbrace. From there they had a choice to make, exploring on to the north by way of the Ben Griam’s and over to the coast at Melvich, or go westerly through Badanloch and Syre reaching the coast at the mouth of the River Naver? Whichever way they choose they left very little trace. The only Mesolithic artefacts found locally are a few fire hardened wooden arrow points and a spear point found in a peat bank at Skelpick. There were also some small lithic and flint shards found at a possible camp site at the mouth of the River Naver. “Shell Middens” have been identified inside Smoo Cave at Durness and another near the causeway on the west side of the Kyle of Tongue.*

*About 6,000 years ago the early farmers, the “Neolithic” people began to appear in the north. Small groups started to settle in one place, creating the first hamlets, growing crops and keeping domesticated animals. They burnt areas of the forest and cleared the ground to make their fields. To make the ground cultivatable they removed the stones and left them in small cairns and dykes around the margins of their fields. Over time they found ways of storing any excess food making it easier for them to survive the winter months. This surplus of food gave the Neolithic people the means to leave their mark on the landscape they were the “Cairn Builders”. They built the “Stone Circles”. They were responsible for the “Cup and Ring” decorations you find all over Scotland.*

*There are many round “Burial Cairns” in the north, fewer “Long Cairns” but these are the more impressive. The cairns were usually built with internal chambers to house the dead. The long cairn at Skelpick “Achcoillenaborgie” is almost 60M long. It has a horned forecourt at the north end where ritual ceremonies must have taken place. With the Neolithic came the first pottery to Scotland with drinking cups, bowls, cooking vessels, storage vessels and the “Beakers” often found in burial cists. Many beakers were found to have contained the charred remains of a cremation, or food supplies to sustain the departed person into the next world.*

*Around 4,000 years ago the first metal workers arrive in Scotland. The Bronze Age people lived in “Round Houses” and their remains can be found all over Scotland. Many of them in Sutherland are within 50M of our modern roads. The round house was home to an extended family, sometimes three generations in the one house. The outer walls were often built from turf over a stone foundation with long poles rising to a central apex used as rafters. The doorway nearly always opened to the south east. The hearth was usually in the centre of the internal space and the smoke drifted out through the thatched roof. The hearth was used for cooking, winter heat and illuminated the inside of the house. There were designated areas*

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<sup>74</sup> Author unknown

*inside for living, working and sleeping, the men and women slept separately on opposite sides of the house. Much of the daily work would have taken place outside when there was good weather. Several of the houses had an underground store attached or nearby, this became known as a souterrain. As much of the houses were constructed from organic materials not much of them survived. What remains that have survived now resemble a large mouldy green dough ring (Bagel?).*

*Bronze spear heads and axes have been found locally. As there were no viable copper or tin deposits locally they must have been brought in from elsewhere. A spearhead found south of Kirtomy gave its name to that particular design of spearhead. Recently a metal detectorist found the axe head now on display in the museum. Between the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age some of the population began building their houses in a different style. Some rebuilt their homes on what we call "Crannogs", either on stilts out in the lochs or on the natural islands or manmade structures. They fortified narrow cliff promontories, where the cliff had been cut into by deep geos leaving a narrow neck of land projecting into the sea. "Promontory Forts" as they came to be called are found all over Britain. They also built tall round towers, with thick double walls these were the "Broch's" and are nearly all confined to Northern Scotland.*

*Many towers had an inner and an outer wall, the inner wall vertical and the outer wall inclined inward a few degrees. This type of construction was stronger than a solid wall and allowed them to build to greater heights. This enabled them to construct platforms on the inside which could be reached by ladders or stairways built into the walls. They also built the "Hill Fort" a large defended position on the top of a hill with ramparts ditches and wooden palisades to deter their enemies and impress their visitors, often seen as a status symbol. Many of these hill forts were like small villages where a local "Chief or Leader" held court.*

*Was this the beginning of an organised social life in the highlands?*

*Another and unusual dwelling from this time was the "Wheelhouse" or "Wag" One has been identified at Tigh na Fiarain (House of the Fingalians) on the hillside above Laid, on the west side of Loch Eriboll. This type of dwelling was more common in Ireland than in Scotland*

*Stronger and more durable than bronze the iron tools held their sharpened edge for a longer period. There was a low grade source of Iron ore called "Bog Iron" which was dug from beneath the peat. A purer ore was later mined and processed locally, whether this was just for personal use or for trading we don't know. These people became known as the Picts, a very elusive population. They were made up of several different tribes and are best remembered for their carved stones and their resistance to the Romans who never fully conquered Scotland. After the battle of Mons Grampus (somewhere in central Aberdeenshire?) in 83AD the Romans abandoning their conquest of the north, returned to the lowlands and erected Hadrian's Wall around 122AD to stop the Picts raiding to the south.*

*By the seventh century Christianity was established among the northern populations. There is a local tradition that a missionary from St Columba Abbey on Iona established a Chapel in this vicinity. They choose a frugal life and spent much of their time at their prayers. They lived out with the local community. Many of them lived solitary lives on islands just off the coast. Island Neve was home to a follower of St Columba and he preached across the narrow sea channel to those listening on the shore. The Priest's Stone or the Strathy Stone has an early Latin style Christian cross, with Pictish elements and dates to the seventh century. There is also a Greek cross carved in the space below the left arm. This was probably a later addition. The impressive Farr Stone which also has Christian and Pictish elements dates to the eighth century. It is thought it may have been moved to its present position to mark the grave of a*



*prominent local person. In Strathnaver there is a cross stone that commemorates the “Red Priest”. This may be a reference to a martyred priest who was killed for his believes.*

*On a promontory near Portskerra is the site of a small monastic settlement of An Tornaiddh Bhuidhe. It is believed by some to date to the 7<sup>th</sup> century and may be contemporary with the Priest’s stone at Strathy. Could the stone at Strathy have been a “Sanctuary Stone” similar to that found at Applecross? (Sanctuary stones defined an area around a monastic site where people could claim Gods protection and were safe from the law of the land while they remained inside the limits?)*

*From the late 8<sup>th</sup> century the Norsemen or Vikings were raiding around the coast of Britain. On voyages to the Hebrides and Ireland some of them stopped off at Smoo Cave to repair any damage they had suffered to their Long ships as they crossed the North Sea. There was a Viking burial found at Sandside, Reay and another at Balnakeil, Durness. The Reay burial is on display at Caithness Horizons in Thurso. The Balnakeil burial dated between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century was of a youth aged between 8 and 12 years of age. He was buried with a selection of grave goods including a sword, shield and spear. As well as an antler comb, gaming pieces, two amber beads and a blue and white glass bead.*

*We leave our trip into the past with the Norse settling along the river mouths and lower valleys of the north coast. They inter-married with the local people and their genetic influence can still be seen in today’s population. Their place names are still around us today in the names of some villages and farms.*

### **In Scotland Places Sutherland,**

#### **OS Name Books, 1871-1875 Sutherland from volume 10.**

The Reverend J.M. Joass and Mr. John McKay reported at Keoldale Cnoc nan Ceannan that this name applies to a small mound having an elevation of about five feet above the general surface there is a tradition that it marks the graves of several Danes who were slain at this spot, but the date of the occurrence is unknown. A portion of this mound was taken away A.D. 1835 when several human bones were found as well as a small bronze elliptical cockade, & polished bone supposed to be used for fastening the military plaid. It signifies the "Hillock of Heads".

About two hundred metres south east of the farm steading of Eriboll in the middle of an arable field is a flagstone covering the entrance to an earth house. It is not now accessible. The following details are abstracted from a description written in 1865.

*“The whole length of the passage is thirty three feet but is known to have been ten or twelve feet longer. The passage at its entrance is less than two feet wide and under four feet high. The average height of the passage is four feet, the average width two feet. At the entrance it curves for a few feet round to the right thereafter it is straight. It terminates in a pear shaped chamber at its widest three and a half feet. A width it retains for only three feet of its length. A spherical object of bronze showing numerous small hammer marks on its surface measuring one and five sixths inches in diameter is preserved in Dunrobin Museum and is said to have been found along with a spiral finger ring of the same metal.”*

#### **Excavation of an Iron Age burial mound, Loch Borrallie<sup>75</sup>**

In February 1998 as part of the Historic Scotland Human Remains Call off Contract, Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division (GUARD) undertook an archaeological

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<sup>75</sup> Durness, Sutherland by Gavin MacGregor GUARD, University of Glasgow, with contributions from Adrian Cox, Michael Donnelly and Julie Roberts Scottish Archaeological Internet Report 9, 2003 (Extracts)

evaluation of the find spot of a human skull from a cairn at Loch Borrallie, Sutherland (NGR NC 3790 6761). Excavation recovered the remains of two burials beneath the cairn and established that the cairn was multi-phased. One individual was an adult male (Skeleton 1), while the other was immature and of undeterminable sex (Skeleton 2). Both individuals showed signs of ill health, and dogs and or rats appear to have gnawed their bones. A ring-headed pin was recovered close to Skeleton 1 during the excavation. A radiocarbon date was obtained from the left humerus of Skeleton 1 of 40 calBC– calAD210 at 2 sigma (OxA-10253).

The tradition of extended inhumations within sub-rectangular cairns is a recognised funerary practice in the north of Britain during the first millennium AD. Many of these burials are generally considered to be Pictish in date, but Loch Borrallie indicates that the tradition commenced in the Iron Age. There is increasing evidence for the variety of ways in which human remains were treated after death in the Iron Age, including cremations in re-used cists, single inhumations in graves and cists, multiple inhumations and the incorporation of human remains in ‘domestic’ contexts. The results of the excavation of the burial mound at Loch Borrallie provide a useful addition to the range of mortuary and funerary rites which were practised during the Iron Age in Scotland.

The site is located to the north of Durness (NG NC 3790 6761) on a peninsula between the Kyle of Durness and Balnakeil Bay. The peninsula is characterised by undulating hill slopes with light, freely draining sandy soils and several large areas of sand erosion. The peninsula contains a significant number of archaeological remains, ranging from prehistoric to post-Medieval in date (Reid et al 1967; Lelong and MacGregor forthcoming). In several areas of severe erosion, or deflated dunes, archaeological deposits can be temporarily revealed (Lelong and MacGregor 2002)

The evaluation of the site aimed to establish whether further human remains were present, how the human remains had been deposited at the site, the extent and number of cists or graves and the extent of the cairn.

### **Excavation results**

Excavation revealed that the cairn had a maximum height of 1.2 m and was composed of large, sub-angular and sub-rounded rocks (including quartz and quartzite) and occasional rounded cobbles within yellow-orange sand. The cairn sealed a layer of red brown sand up to 0.20m depth. Further excavation revealed the remains of two inhumations. Both were supine and lay east to west with their heads at the east end. An iron ring-headed pin was recovered during the excavation of the red brown sand.

### **The Skeletons from Loch Borrallie by Julie Roberts**

The remains of possibly three individuals were received for analysis. However, those recovered in 1998 (a skull) were found to belong to the excavated burial Skeleton 2 and are discussed below as part of this burial.

Skeleton 1 was approximately 50% complete. The right and left tibia, fibula and feet were entirely missing, as was the right femur with the exception of the proximal end, which was lodged in the acetabulum. The right clavicle, left radius and left hand, and the facial bones (right and left zygoma, nasal bones, and maxilla) were also missing. All of the surviving long bones had been broken around the mid-shaft region, and there was evidence of gnawing by rodents at the fractured ends. There was also gnawing of the menton (the chin) on the anterior surface.

Skeleton 2 (incorporating the earlier find of a skull) was approximately 25% complete. The left scapula, clavicle, radius, pelvis, femur, fibula, foot and most of the hand were missing entirely,

as were the sternum, sacrum, right fibula and foot. Only a small fragment of the right ilium was present, and the surviving piece of femur could not be attributed to either side. Again, there was severe surface erosion of the bones, and many were split longitudinally. There was possible evidence of gnawing by rodents at the ends of the humeri and tibial fragments, but no mid-shaft breakage as seen in Skeleton 1.

Skeleton 1 had reached dental and skeletal maturity, and the auricular surface of the ilium indicated an age of between 45 and 60 years. The degenerative changes present in the spine were also consistent with an age at death greater than 45 years. The bones of Skeleton 1 were extremely small and gracile and, on the basis of size alone, looked more female than male. The sexually dimorphic features of the pelvis, sacrum, and cranium were, however, all male. The impression they gave, therefore, was of a small, slightly built male, of middle age or older.

Skeleton 2 was immature; therefore, a more precise age could not be determined. Analysis of the dentition has indicated an age at death of 15 years  $\pm$  36 months. In addition, the epiphyses of the humerus and scapula had not fused, suggesting an age of less than 15 to 18 years at death. Also, as Skeleton 2 was an immature individual, the sex could not be estimated.

The evidence was that Skeleton 1 had suffered from osteoarthritis of the spine and iron deficiency anaemia. Skeleton 2 had suffered from possible scurvy and secondary arthritis of the cervical spine. Both individuals had suffered from different types of oral pathology. The adult male (Skeleton 1) had also suffered from iron deficiency anaemia of moderate severity, characterised by Cribra Orbitalia (lesions in the roofs of the orbits). There are many causes of iron deficiency anaemia, among the most common being lack of absorbable iron in the diet and a high pathogen load within the body (Grauer 1991). The disease, in this instance, may have caused a general feeling of fatigue and malaise, but it was probably of insufficient severity to cause the more extreme manifestations of breathlessness and palpitations.

Skeleton 2 had suffered from a different type of metabolic disorder – scurvy, a condition caused by prolonged, inadequate intake of vitamin C (Ortner and Putschar 1981). The resultant weakening of the blood vessels can cause sub-periosteal haemorrhaging, commonly on the orbital roofs and at the metaphyses of the long bones. Due to the poor state of preservation of Skeleton 2, and in particular the absence of the ends of the long bones, differential diagnosis of the condition was difficult. The presence of new bone formation in the orbits was, however, suggestive of scurvy. This individual also suffered from dental enamel hypoplasia (DEH) and it is possible that the two conditions were linked. DEH is the name given to the defects that appear in the enamel of the teeth, representing a cessation in growth and development. They are considered to be indicators of physiological stress, and febrile infections, malnutrition and metabolic disorders during childhood have all been cited as possible causes (Aufderheide and Rodriguez- Martin 1998). The condition was evident on all the maxillary incisors, the mandibular and maxillary canines and the right mandibular third molar of Skeleton 2.

Skeleton 1 had experienced ante-mortem loss of both mandibular first molars and second premolars. A common cause of this is the formation of plaque and it occurs due to poor oral hygiene.

### **Discussion by Gavin MacGregor**

The archaeological evaluation established that the find spot of the skull (now seen to be part of Skeleton 2) was a cairn, with several phases to its construction and use, containing inhumations orientated east to west. The earliest identifiable phase of activity involved the construction of a low primary cairn. This was followed by the burial of Skeleton 1 on this cairn, which was then sealed by a layer of clean sand. Later, Skeleton 2 was buried in an irregular grave cut through the sand layer. The relatively clean and uniform nature of sand layer would suggest

that this sequence of events took place over a short time span. Both burials were, however, ultimately sealed by a larger cairn. It is probable that further burials are present within the remainder of the cairn, which extended outside the excavation trench. Radiocarbon dating on Skeleton 1 indicates that the burial mound was probably in use during the first quarter of the first millennium AD. It is probable that the individuals buried at Borrallie lived in nearby settlements on the headland, where examples of hut circles and a possible dun are present, which probably date to the Iron Age (Reid et al 1967; Lelong and MacGregor forthcoming). Analysis of both skeletons has shown their general state of ill health. It is difficult to generalise from just the two individuals from the Borrallie mound, but this suggests that the population of the area may have been under stress at the time, perhaps through factors such as population pressure or several seasons of poor harvests.

Of particular note about the individuals buried was the absence or incompleteness of several major limbs. There is the possibility that this may relate to dogs initially having gnawed the bones and suggested that a tradition of spring burial may have resulted in the exposure of the bodies to dogs. (The possibility has also to be considered that this may have been the result of deliberate excarnation before burial (cf Armit 1997, 96; Bristow 1998, 158; Carr and Knüsel 1997). The tradition of extended inhumations within sub-rectangular cairns is a recognised funerary practice in the north of Britain during the first millennium AD (Ashmore 1981; Close-Brooks 1984) Many of these burials are generally considered to be Pictish in date, but the results of the excavation at Loch Borrallie indicates that the tradition commenced in the Iron Age.

Another interesting feature of the burials was the general ill-health of the two individuals. Both had suffered from nutritional disorders that may have been the result of dietary deficiencies or endemic infection. The poor state of preservation of the remains meant that a true assessment of skeletal pathology could not be made, but the available evidence is suggestive of individuals that were physiologically stressed. Analysis of more burials from this group would be required in order to determine whether this applied to the community as a whole.

It is of note that the ring-headed pin found at Loch Borrallie was almost certainly a deliberate deposit with one of the burials. Its close proximity to Skeleton 1 may suggest that it relates to this burial, but as it was recovered during the excavation of the clean sand above the primary cairn it may have been carried downwards from the later Skeleton 2 through burrowing.

### **Prehistoric Settlement in Durness<sup>76</sup>**

The area covered by the survey is the Durness Peninsula, Sutherland. It first came to the notice during the excavation of a souterrain in 1964 and 1965. In the course of examining Durness Parish for comparative material two facts became apparent. First, there appeared to be a number of hitherto unrecorded ancient monuments. Second, the parish could be divided into well-defined, contrasting geological regions. On account of the combination of these two factors it was decided to attempt an archaeological survey of the Durness Peninsula, treating it as a pilot area on the basis of which, if successful, other areas in the NW. Highlands of Scotland might be investigated. . A party of undergraduates from the University of Glasgow directed by the writers undertook the field work, which was completed in a period of two weeks in July 1966. Basic information was plotted directly on Ordnance Survey 6-inch sheets by field parties separately responsible for the archaeology or geology of a given section.

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<sup>76</sup> By R. W. K. Reid, F.S.A.Scot., G. David, F.S.A.Scot., and A. Aitken

## Summary

This paper is devoted to a study of the correlation between ancient monuments of the Neolithic period, Bronze and Iron Ages and the physical background in the Durness Peninsula, Sutherland. The study is divided into two sections. The first describes the physical background of the area. The second attempts to analyse the distribution of the archaeological material. Consideration of agricultural potential indicates why the limestone zone was favoured by prehistoric peoples. When the digging stick and spade, or caschrom, were in use, before the introduction of the plough, it was no doubt possible to cultivate slopes of steeper gradient. Slopes on the lewisian and quartzite are, however, often excessively steep. In these northerly latitudes soils developed on these rocks are leached and the upper limit of cultivation is low. Soils developed on sand were also avoided until the Iron Age except, perhaps, seasonally, and even during this period their use must have been for grazing. It seems to have been realised that inherent fertility of sandy soils is low, and that ploughing would lead to wind erosion. Sandy soils, on the other hand, produce excellent pasture and, as their thermal conductivity is high, warm up early in spring. At a time when the keeping of young animals through the winter was difficult the early growth of young grass must have been a considerable advantage.

## General Archaeological Interpretation

The most prominent feature of the distribution is the concentration of sites on the limestone. Of the ancient monuments some 9% occur on the Lewisian and quartzite which constitute some 80% of the total area. Prehistoric societies evidently favoured the lighter, freely-drained, less acid soils which developed on the limestone. This accords with the known distribution of medieval and early Modern settlement. Those pre-clearance townships which existed on the east side of the Peninsula, and not on limestone, seem to have been small, late, and were probably associated with fishing. The present-day township of Laid is artificially sited and situated, in that it belongs to the clearance period. Crofting in the immediate neighbourhood has never been successful and the township can be considered a failing community. The gneiss and quartzite, much of it above 400 ft. O.D. and with a high proportion of steep slopes, has always been more or less ignored. Four of the seven prehistoric sites in this zone appear to be funerary. Of the remaining three, the site of Seanachaisteal, a promontory fort, was, of course, chosen with a view to defence but is, nevertheless, backed by cultivable or pasture land. The souterrain at Portnancon is associated with a small area of flatter land on the coast partially formed by stream deposition. Above the souterrain are slopes suitable for grazing. Finally, whereas all the other sites in the Peninsula are examples of monuments typical of the NW. mainland of Scotland, the roundhouse (40496101:80)3 is exotic. It lies at a high elevation in an area of broken, poorly-drained land.

## Loch Borralie, Kyle of Durness An archaeological Survey 2003 <sup>77</sup>

Notes and extracts

Archaeological survey of the headland centred on Loch Borralie, on the eastern side of the Kyle of Durness, recorded nearly 200 archaeological sites. These vary from isolated, fragmentary structures or walls to extensive settlements and field systems, ranging in date from later prehistory to the medieval period to the nineteenth century. Many of the sites are eroding out of deflated areas in the fixed dune grasslands that cover much of the headland. This report details and interprets the results of the survey and makes recommendations for the future management of the archaeological resource. The fieldwork has produced a comprehensive and

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<sup>77</sup> Carried out by Olivia Lelong and Gavin MacGregor on behalf of Historic Scotland Glasgow University 2003. This report is one of a series published by GUARD, Gregory Building, Lilybank Gardens, Glasgow, G12 8QQ

detailed understanding of a rich, multi-period archaeological landscape in an area of northern Scotland that has generally been neglected in archaeological research.

This area is extraordinarily rich in archaeological remains, a richness that has come to light through the vulnerability and progressive erosion of the remains. Intensive burrowing by rabbits, sheep grazing and wind erosion all pose a significant threat to the archaeological resource over much of the proposed survey area. The area has been regularly walked over the years by local inhabitants, some of whom have observed the rates of erosion of deflating dunes and have collected and recorded surface finds of various periods from them.

Three lochs – Borrallie, Croispol and Lanlish – dominate the eastern part of the headland. The survey area extends from the west sides of lochs Borrallie and Croispol to the shores of the Kyle. It excludes the area of Durness Golf Course in the north-eastern part of the headland, which surrounds Loch Lanlish; it also excludes the area of a fenced-off forestry plantation. Within and around the survey area, known archaeological remains abound and have been noted in the Highland Sites and Monuments Record and National Monuments Record for Scotland. Still others have emerged through erosion in recent years and been observed by local amateur archaeologists. There has also been a limited intermittent tradition of metal detecting on the headland.

There are abundant remains of prehistoric date in the vicinity, indicating that it must have been densely settled in the Neolithic and Bronze Age. Several archaeological monuments are known in the area from later prehistory. In the eighteenth century there were local traditions of a former monastery on the site of the Manse, recorded in a 1726 reference to a stone wall about 100 feet long which had recently been dismantled to build the Manse (at NC 393 678) (Macfarlane 1906). Early Medieval activity in the vicinity is attested by the place names ‘Balnakeil’ and ‘Ach’ na h-Anaite’, indicating churches or chapels here between the seventh and ninth centuries AD. Other scattered, more circumstantial pieces of evidence support this.

The overall aims of the fieldwork were:

- To record the extent of erosion and the visible archaeological remains in the survey area, as well as artefacts collected from the area in the past;
  - To further understanding of the area’s occupation at different times in the past and set this within our understanding of the prehistory and history of northern Sutherland, and
  - To provide a basis for management recommendations to protect the archaeological resource.
- The specific objectives of the project were:

- To establish the rate of erosion in the area through examination of aerial photographs; • to map the extent of present major erosion;
- To systematically walk the area and record the locations and character of archaeological structures, features and surface scatters;
- To produce detailed plans of selected sites, and
- To produce a series of specific management proposals, highlighting areas requiring both emergency and longer-term protective measures.

Within the survey area, a total of 27 sites and find spots were noted in the National Monuments Record of Scotland and Highland Sites and Monuments Record before the survey commenced. Most of these are concentrated in the eastern part of the area, to the west of Keoldale and Lochs Borrallie and Croispol, with a few others along the coastal fringe. The walkover survey identified a total of 195 sites, 27 of which were previously recorded in the NMRS and SMR. There is no firm evidence of activity on the headland that pre-dates the second millennium BC.

However, the presence of chambered cairns to the SSE of the survey area indicates people did occupy the vicinity in the fourth to third millennia BC; especially given the character of the headland, it is possible and even likely that they also occupied it.

## Conclusions

The headland's archaeological resource is both extremely rich and, in many cases, extremely vulnerable. The survey work has produced a comprehensive and fairly detailed record of that resource, highlighting those parts of it that are most vulnerable and require the most active management. The results of the desk-based assessment have indicated that the headland has a long history of occupation, with Early Medieval activity at least around if not within the survey area, probable Norse settlement and Medieval to post-Medieval occupation. There is abundant potential for further historical research here, particularly in relation to the post-Medieval settlements on the headland such as Borralie and Claishneach. The results of the fieldwork have revealed an astonishing variety and wealth of archaeological remains, particularly from prehistory and also from the Norse or Medieval periods, potentially filling a significant gap in the archaeological record of the northern Highlands. In this respect the archaeology of the headland is at least regionally significant and potentially nationally important. The overall picture compiled of the archaeological resource will form an invaluable basis for further work. Hypotheses formed about the date and function of particular sites or kinds of monuments could be tested through trial excavation, thereby building up a firmer and more detailed understanding of the landscape's chronology. The headland holds great potential for answering significant questions about settlement and burial in northern Scotland, particularly for the first millennium AD and into the first half of the second millennium. Not only does the headland have a significant cultural heritage, it also provides an important natural heritage resource. The survey has also illuminated the ways in which a range of erosional processes are affecting archaeological sites on the headland. The inter-relationship between these erosional processes, the best interests of the archaeological sites and the concerns of other parties such as Scottish Natural Heritage and the Keoldale Sheep Stock Club should inform future management of the landscape and the archaeological resource

## **Strathnaver Province Archaeological Research Project<sup>78</sup>**

The fieldwork season for archaeological fieldwork carried out in as part of the Strathnaver Province Archaeological Research Project, a five-year excavation and survey project directed by staff from the University of Glasgow and Assumption College, Massachusetts targeted the area around Loch Borralie, immediately south-west of the village of Durness. Baseline and some detailed survey work had already been carried out across the headland that centres on the loch, identifying and recording extensive archaeological landscapes of prehistoric and medieval to post-Medieval date (Lelong & MacGregor 2000; Lelong & MacGregor forthcoming).

Two sites were selected for investigation because the forms of their structures, the stratigraphic relationship of earlier with later structures, their positions and their artefactual associations all suggest that they are potentially medieval in date.

### **The Project<sup>79</sup>**

In the Medieval period, the Province of Strathnaver stretched from the border with Caithness on the east to Cape Wrath and Assynt on the west. Northern Sutherland has some of the richest archaeology in Scotland. The Strathnaver Province Archaeology Project is investigating the

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<sup>78</sup> Extracts from the Project design GUARD by Dr. Olivia Lelong and Amy Gazin-Schwartz

<sup>79</sup> From the project website no longer available.

archaeology of Viking, Norse and Medieval settlement in the old Province of Strathnaver, through a combination of excavation, survey and documentary research.

Settlement here in the medieval period is likely to have involved the Norse. They came from Norway, Orkney, Shetland and Caithness: at first in the 9<sup>th</sup> century as Viking raiders and then from about the 10<sup>th</sup> century on to settle as farmers. There is plenty of place-name evidence to suggest that the Norse settled around Durness, along the Kyle of Tongue and in the valley of Strathnaver; many of the old township names are Norse, and these names appear in charters from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onward. But little archaeological evidence has so far been found to show that the Norse definitely settled here, where or how they lived, or what life was like in the centuries (13<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup>) after the period of Norse domination. Most of the visible township remains date to the period of the Improvements, when tenants of many townships were evicted to make way for sheep in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Strathnaver Province Archaeology Project was set up to investigate the archaeological evidence for settlement in the region during the medieval period (c AD 600-1600). It has three main aims:

- To understand the character of Medieval remains in northern Sutherland, in order to help guide further research into medieval settlement in the region and inform management of the archaeology.
- To increase our understanding of the Medieval settlement pattern in the region, the role of Norse colonisation and cultural influence and the development of townships.
- To involve local communities in the project, encouraging a sense of shared historical identity and ownership of the archaeological heritage across the region.

## The Project Team



IMAGE 192 THE ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT TEAM

The project was jointly directed by Dr. Amy Gazin-Schwartz, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Assumption College, Massachusetts, USA. Amy is particularly interested in studying continuity and change in rural settlement and relationships between folklore and archaeology and Dr. Olivia Lelong, a Project Manager at Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division (GUARD). Olivia has extensive

experience both in archaeological fieldwork and with training volunteers in excavation. She has strong research interests in the Pictish, early Christian and Viking/Norse periods in the North Atlantic, and also excavates in Shetland and on St. Kilda.



Ingrid Shearer, the website designer and one of the excavation supervisors, is a Project Officer with GUARD. Ingrid has a long standing interest in the archaeology of the far north of Scotland and the Isles and has worked in Orkney, Shetland, the Western Isles and St Kilda. Dr. Andrew Baines also supervised the excavations at Borralie in 2004 and 2005. Andrew is a freelance archaeologist, who has worked throughout Scotland on both commercial and research projects, and has published on various aspects of Scottish prehistory and archaeological theory. Dr. Amelia Pannett also worked as an excavation supervisor in 2004 and 2005, and Ally Beckett supervised the 2006 excavations. The excellent excavation team in 2004 consisted of Matthew Bell, Ross Cameron, John Carrigan, Tegan Daly, Bruce Dunsmore, Cheryl Leggett, Stephen Leggett, Nicola McConnell, Jennifer Melia, Heidi Monin, Stuart Paterson, Alexis Skinner, Andrea Tulloch and Claire Williamson. Students from Farr Secondary School and Kinlochbervie High School also participated in the work. The equally stunning 2005 team was made up of Courtenay Buchanan, Richard Campbell, Katie Cummings, Rachel Dingfelder, Claire Doyle, Ashley Echard, Bradley Gutkin, Francine Melia, Sandy Maclean, Stuart Paterson and Cynthia Sanden. Sarah Mackay and Rebekah Brett-Pitt from Farr Secondary School and Craig Stangroon and John Marks, residents of the Durness area, also helped out on site. Our stellar 2006 team consisted of Alex Brey, Andrew Colling, Jessica Bain Connaster, Scott Forsyth, Erin Jackson, David MacGowran, Marlyn Price and Susan Roberston. Clayton Tinsley joined us to analyse animal bone from Borralie and teach the students about faunal analysis.

### **2004 Fieldwork Season**



IMAGE 193 ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE BORRALIE AREA IN 2004

The two buildings investigated in June 2004 were discovered during GUARD's survey of the area in 2001. Both had been exposed through erosion of the wind-blown sand that covered them. They are substantial, sub-rectangular buildings with distinctive bowed sides, similar to Norse structures identified elsewhere in the far north of Scotland, in Caithness, Orkney and Shetland.

One of the buildings (structure 46) sits high on a ridge to the west of Loch Borrallie, next to a yard and a small field. Excavation showed that its interior had been scoured out in the past by erosion, but there were traces of a small hearth, a few sherds of coarse pottery and a scrap of decorated bronze. On the basis of the material culture, the form of the building and its isolated position, it is likely to be of Norse/Medieval date.

The other building (structure 89) runs beneath later, 18th-century structures on a terrace west of the loch. This proved to be very complex. It had been built on top of earlier deposits of charcoal-rich midden material. Its walls were very thick, and they had been made even thicker over time with the addition of outer wall skins, with several small quern stones or fishing weights built into them. Outside the building were midden deposits contemporary with its occupation: fish bones, animal bones, limpet shells and charcoal. Inside, excavation revealed paving and what may be a hearth, along with spreads of burnt clay. Pottery sealed by the building's walls appears to date to the late first millennium AD, which suggests that the building itself could be Norse/ Medieval in date. Further excavation and some radiocarbon dates should provide answers.

#### Site Location, Topography and Geology

The two sites proposed for the 2004 fieldwork season lie immediately west of Loch Borrallie, at the centre of a large headland on the eastern side of the Kyle of Durness. The landscape is open and undulating, consisting of grassland overlying fixed dunes with a solid geology of limestone that trends NNE/SSW and outcrops in long dykes over parts of the headland. The calcareous and freely draining nature of the soils has produced a green and fertile pocket of land, unusual in the typically acidic and peaty northern Highlands. The headland has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest and has also been recommended as a candidate Special Area of Conservation for its fixed dunes, limestone pavements, alpine and subalpine calcareous grasslands and hard mesotephic waters, for all of which it is considered one of the best areas in the UK. The headland also supports a significant presence of otter, alkaline fens, European dry heaths, humid dune slacks, hydrophilous tall herb fringe communities, Northern Atlantic wet heaths and, along the shoreline, shifting dunes. The area is subject to severe gales during the autumn and winter, particularly from the south-west. Rabbit burrowing and sheep grazing disturb the turf and expose the sand beneath, which is then vulnerable to wind erosion. The wind denudes large areas of turf, and further burrowing and sheep disturbance undermine the sides of deflated areas and loosen the sand so that it is more easily removed by wind. Sand that is blown out of one area accumulates over another. Thus, the local weather patterns and the abundant rabbit and sheep populations create a cycle of disturbance, erosion and accretion, each exacerbating the effects of the other. This longstanding pattern of deflation and accretion is evident in the sides of deflated areas, where old turf lines are visible interleaved with thick deposits of windblown sand.

The Sutherland Coastal Survey, led by Kevin Brady and Christopher Morris on behalf of Historic Scotland in 1997, examined the headland's coastal fringe (Brady & Morris 1998). In 2000, on behalf of Historic Scotland, GUARD undertook the rescue excavation of two burials in a multi-phased, sub-rectangular cairn to the west of Loch Borrallie. The baseline survey carried out on the headland in 2001 (Lelong & MacGregor 2003) recorded approximately 200 archaeological monuments, ranging from extensive prehistoric hut-circle settlements and cairn fields to isolated shieling huts, burial cairns and field walls. Many of these were discovered eroding out of deflated areas in the fixed dunes.

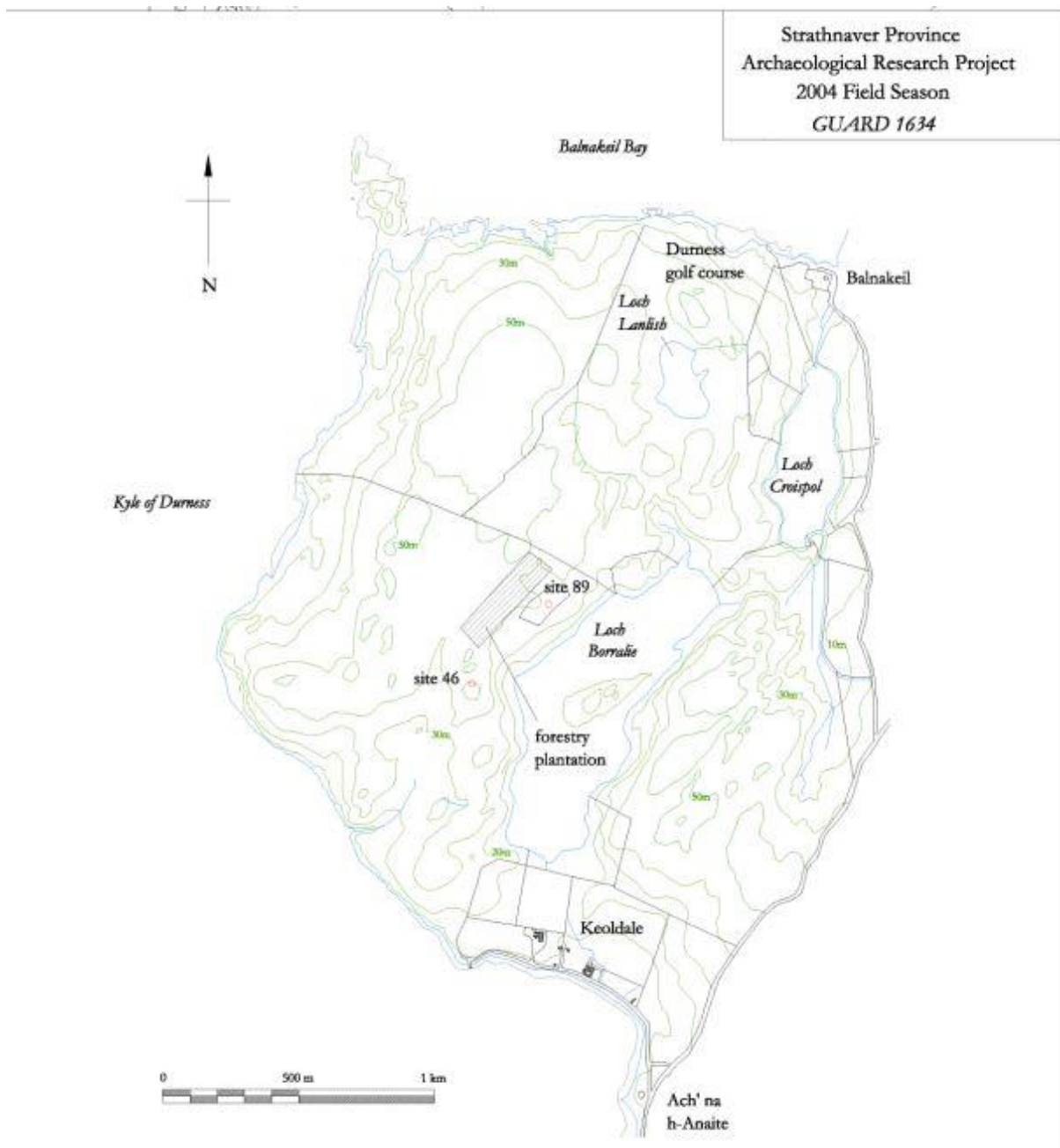


IMAGE 194 MAP SHOWING LOCATIONS OF SITES PROPOSED FOR INVESTIGATION IN 2004. GUARD IMAGE

The place name ‘Borrallie’ may derive from the Old Norse borg- for houses clustered around a fort or monastic site and -ley, probably the plural of meadow (Johnston 1934, 12; Darwood 1995). The name most likely refers to a dun (site 123 in Lelong & MacGregor 2003) which is perched on a small headland overlooking the loch, around which cluster later, eighteenth-century township buildings. Some promising sites of potential Norse to Medieval were discovered during the 2001 survey on the high ground to the west of Loch Borrallie, most notably site 46 and site 89. Site 46 sits in a cleft in the ridge to the west of the loch, close to an eroding prehistoric structure. Another building (site 89), very similar in form to site 46, was found about 350 m to the NNE in a large, linear deflation.

Over the past few decades, numerous artefacts have been collected from the surface of deflated areas by local people. During the baseline survey, these were catalogued and their locations were recorded wherever possible. They include sherds of later prehistoric pottery; worked

bone; several copper alloy pins of Medieval date; pieces of late Medieval metalwork; spindle whorls; sixteenth- and seventeenth century coins; slag and furnace lining, and post-Medieval buttons and pottery. The distribution of the artefact concentrations helps to clarify the settlement chronology somewhat, with particular concentrations of late Medieval finds discovered around site 89. There appears to have been a shift in the local settlement pattern between the later prehistoric and medieval periods. The distribution of sites suggests that the more permanent Norse/Medieval settlement was not as extensive or diffuse across the headland as the prehistoric settlement. The later settlement appears to have focused on the terraces and ridge to the north and west of Loch Borrallie, perhaps with seasonal occupation on the headland's fringes. The areas to the north that formed the focus of prehistoric settlement may have been exclusively used for agricultural purposes. Whereas in the early centuries A.D. people were buried in the centre of the headland, by the Norse to Medieval periods the church at Balnakeil on the coast was the focus of worship and burial.

The two monuments proposed for investigation in 2004 (sites 89 and 46 in Lelong & MacGregor 2003) both sit on the high ground overlooking Loch Borrallie (see Figure 1).

Site 89 lies at about 35 m above OD, at the base of a large, linear deflated area (NC 3807 6745). It is visible as a sub-rectangular structure defined by double-skinned drystone footings, one course high and in most cases set flush with the ground. As exposed, it measures 12.8 m east/west by 3.5 m wide internally. The long walls are distinctly bowed. An entrance leading through the south wall is defined by a length of wall projecting for 2.4 m at an angle from the structure, curving SSE/NNW to form a sheltered approach 0.6 m wide. Intensive animal burrowing inside and around the exterior of site 89, particularly within the entrance, has revealed a lower course of stonework. A thin covering of grass has developed on the surface of the sand in and around the structure. The deflated area contains a complex of tumbled, but much more upstanding, rectangular drystone structures, including a multi-compartmental longhouse and a small outbuilding. The eastern end of site 89 runs beneath the outbuilding and its western end runs beneath the corner of another drystone structure just exposed in the side of the deflation. The more upstanding buildings are of likely eighteenth-century date, related to the post-Medieval township of Borrallie or Clashnyach. Both are on slightly different alignments from structure 89, although they could represent the rebuilding of parts of it if it were originally larger than it currently appears. The stratigraphy evident in the structural relationships suggests the long, perhaps continuous occupation of this site, and the range of artefacts collected from the vicinity of these buildings supports this. They include an amber bead, several copper-alloy frustum-headed pins of medieval date (see Batey 1992 for a description of one of them) and a copper-alloy brooch of late medieval date. Other finds of post medieval pottery and metalwork date from the later township.

Site 46 is perched on a ridge at 50 m above OD to the west of the loch, at the base of a now stable deflated area between marram-covered dunes (NC 3780 6717). It consists of a sub-rectangular structure, measuring (as exposed) 10.3 m long internally by 3.2 m wide and defined by substantial, double-skinned drystone wall footings 1 m wide and one course high. The structure is only partially exposed; its south-east side disappears beneath a fixed dune. It is aligned east/west, with a distinct bow apparent on its long sides and a large orthostatic boulder forming part of its western gable end. An entrance leads through the north side into a small yard about 10 m wide, defined by two parallel walls that run beneath a fixed dune to the north. The ground level outside the structure is comparatively low, with weathered bedrock visible in several places, suggesting that occupation deposits may have built up inside the structure. The interior is covered in short grass, and a number of animal burrows are visible in it. A third, right-angled wall running along the edge of the contour defines a small field or enclosure about 30 m wide to the east. These two structures (46 and 89) are strikingly similar in their dimensions

and form, and dissimilar to the typical post-Medieval longhouses known in the area. Their bowed sides and generous proportions are reminiscent of Norse structures excavated in the Northern Isles, and the isolated position of site 46, set high on the ridge with its own associated enclosure and field, suggests it represents a very different, more diffuse pattern of settlement than the township clusters.

### 2005 Fieldwork Season



IMAGE 195 ARCHAEOLOGY DURING THE 2005 SEASON

We returned in June 2005 to spend four weeks excavating one of the buildings we'd begun to examine in 2004 – structure 89. The site had been well protected from winter storms, and it took days to remove all the sand and turf we had carefully replaced the year before. This year's excavation proved even more interesting than last. Inside the building, we uncovered a central hearth, based on a burnt, heat-fractured limestone slab. Nearby were several smaller fire-spots and fire-pits and we found pieces of worked red deer antler, which suggests that this part of the house was used for some small-scale industrial activity. Our star find from this area was a spindle whorl, which was used to maintain the tension on wool during spinning. Further along inside the house was a beautifully built, circular stone oven, with clay packed between the stones to make it airtight. It had probably had a clay capping, as we found red and green (heat-affected) clay spread over and around it.

We also removed parts of the south wall, and discovered that it had gone through at least three phases of re-building, with the addition of extra skins of stone and turf to make it stronger and thicker. There was also evidence of an external hearth and an earlier paved entrance. After the walls had been thickened one last time, the entrance was shifted to the east and a curving wall was built to shelter it. Underneath the south wall we found a thick midden deposit, and under

that was a pit full of willow charcoal and coarse pottery. The north side of the building seemed to have been built over just one phase. Here the wall also lay on a thick midden deposit, full of animal and fish bone, charcoal and pottery. Sherds from imported Dutch cooking pots, dating to the 16th century, lay beneath the north wall. These show it was built sometime during (or after) the 1500s.

This ties in well with a radiocarbon date from animal bone, also sealed beneath the wall, which produced a calibrated date of AD 1450 to 1640. Charcoal from the pit beneath the deep midden deposits on the south side produced a calibrated date of AD 1395 to 1470, so we can safely say that activity had begun on the site at least by that point. A linear stone-built feature, including many burnt limestones, lay beneath the midden deposits that were sealed by the north wall. This could be a remnant of an earlier building on the site.

There are other hints of even earlier activity. Some of the pottery from the earlier midden deposits is handmade, with low-fired, grass-tempered, dark fabrics – very similar to pottery from late Norse contexts elsewhere in northern Scotland. Other artefacts, like fishing weights that were re-used in walls and paving, are also typically late Norse in character. The area is rich in Norse place names (including Borrallie), and it may be that the people who first came to the site were Norse settlers, or that they used artefacts like those used by the Norse elsewhere, and continued to use them well into the Medieval period.

## **2006 Fieldwork Season**

In 2006, our attention shifted to the project's other geographical focus, the valley of Strathnaver. We chose the township of Klibreck on the south side of Loch Naver. It has a Norse place name (meaning 'cliff slope'), it's mentioned in charters as early as 1269, and it also has an early Christian chapel site – all clues that this place was occupied from perhaps as early as the late first millennium AD.

### **The township of Klibreck.**

In April, Amy and Olivia spent a week doing walkover survey of the township – literally walking systematically across it, carefully recording the visible remains through written descriptions, sketches and photos, and getting National Grid References for each feature using a hand-held GPS. We identified almost 100 features, including longhouses, barns and other outbuildings, the chapel site, a horizontal mill, kailyards and other enclosures – and a boulder bearing about 114 cup marks, a form of prehistoric rock art! At the end of the week, we had a good sense of the variety of buildings that made up the township and which ones we thought were likely to be older. We selected four of these for trial excavation and received Scheduled Monument Consent from Historic Scotland for the work, as the site is protected by law.

We returned with a larger team in June to spend three weeks opening trial trenches and carrying out topographic survey of the township. Two of the buildings we chose showed as very faint traces on the ground before digging commenced, with low, turf banks defining the walls. One of these was built over the end of the other, and the earlier of the two had been scoured out by some later use, perhaps by cattle. The later of the two had a well-laid floor of pale grey silt. Neither one produced any finds that could help to date their use. This was disappointing, but at least neither produced the industrial ceramics or glass usually found in 18th-century buildings, which suggests that they are earlier. There may be enough charcoal in the soil samples we took to get radiocarbon dates for their use.

The third building was a longhouse like those typically making up the township: very long and broad, with an upper living end and a lower byre end where animals were kept in winter. Its walls had been robbed of stone after it fell out of use. This building too had been scoured out inside by later use, and one wall had been disturbed by an adjacent kailyard. This was an

interesting result, because it showed that during the life of the township, some buildings went out of use while others continued to be occupied; people would have carried on living with the ruins of old buildings, probably re-using them as enclosures.

The fourth building produced the most surprising results. This was another longhouse, and we expected it to be fairly late in date because it was so well preserved. In fact, it probably was occupied till the 18<sup>th</sup> century, (because we found industrial ceramics and glass), but it also went back a long way. Inside it, it proved to have a magnificent central hearth – large and well-built, with a big spalled and reddened slab where the fire had burned. There were sherds of glass and glazed pottery around it in the ash that had been swept out of its open northern end. Underneath this was another hearth, a rectangular area of paving with pink, scorched soil between the stones. Underneath this was yet another hearth, again formed of slabs and scorched soil.

Tucked in among the stones of the second hearth was a sherd of black, handmade, grass-tempered pottery, just like the sherds we've found in 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century contexts at Borralie. This was the best result we could have hoped for. Most of the longhouses in Highland townships excavated so far have turned out to be fairly late (usually 18<sup>th</sup> century), and it seemed that over the centuries people had rebuilt their houses in different places, so it would be difficult to find the earlier houses. Here we seem to have one house that had its hearth rebuilt on the same spot over time. We will have to await radiocarbon dating of charcoal from the earliest hearth to be sure, but the handmade pottery seems to be a good indicator that the house was occupied at least as early as the 1500s.

### **2007 Fieldwork Season**

Fieldwork in 2007 consisted mainly of survey, with limited excavation at Ceannabeinne Township near Durness.

The 2004, 2005 and 2006 seasons of excavation at Borralie and survey and excavation at Klibreck proved that buildings of late medieval date do survive in at least two townships in Strathnaver Province. Armed with better knowledge of what Medieval remains might look like in the field, we decided to carry out surveys of several townships and some possibly Medieval features, both in Strathnaver and near Durness. In Strathnaver, we carried out rapid walkover surveys at the townships of Langdale, Grumbeg and Achadh an Eas (pronounced Achness), all in the upper part of the valley. We recorded the visible building footings through sketches, photographs and written descriptions, with the aim of building up a basic picture of their character and identifying possibly earlier features among the later remains. Achadh an Eas and Grumbeg are under heavy bracken cover and were difficult to assess, but they still have the potential to clarify their development through more detailed survey.

Langdale seemed to exhibit the most complexity and the best potential for further investigation. One of its largest clusters contains the ephemeral remains of buildings that may have fallen out of use during the township's occupation, rather than after its eviction. This cluster also lies closest to the pre-Reformation chapel of Cladh Langdale, and to a banked and moated enclosure called the Tulloch. We made a detailed topographic survey of this earthwork, which could reflect Langdale's importance during the medieval period. Mounds known as 'tullochs' are recorded from Medieval Ireland; they served as local gathering places where justice was administered. Barbara Crawford believes the place name Langdale, paired in Strathnaver with Rosal, indicates an important inland routeway (with the 'long valley' plus 'horse field' names pointing to vital pasturing for the horses used in transit). Those travelling to Lairg and the east coast via Strathnaver would have had to pass through Langdale, and the proximity of the Tulloch and the chapel suggests this was a seat of some civil and ecclesiastical authority who controlled that movement during the late Norse and Medieval periods.

We also turned our attention to the township of Ceannabeinne, to the east of Durness. It saw one of the last Clearances in the Highlands, in 1841, and the occupants' response in the Durness Riots helped set in motion processes that would eventually bring an end to such evictions and improve the rights of crofters. The township is first mentioned in documentary sources in the 1600s, but it may have originated earlier. Our work there produced a detailed map of the various longhouses, barns, enclosures and cultivation remains, and we opened trial trenches in four of the buildings. Two were byres, with a paved floor in one and a rubble drain in the other. The third was a dwelling, with two successive, superimposed stone hearths in the centre of the floor. The fourth was built very late, perhaps just before the evictions; it had a gable-end fireplace, with plaster still adhering to the wall faces!

We also examined what may be a much earlier feature, on a sea-girt promontory known as Traigh na H'Uamhag. It is joined to the mainland by a narrow land bridge, and it holds the remains of at least two buildings, with sections of walling built across the neck of land. Its isolated position hints it is something out of the ordinary from normal Medieval or post-Medieval settlement. It could be the site of an early monastic hermitage. The larger building had a substantial wall and a roughly cobbled floor, with numerous fire-cracked stones and a scatter of charcoal. The smaller one, which was tucked between rock outcrops, had a beautifully paved floor and a well-constructed wall of upright boulders and slab-built masonry. Could this have been a chapel? We await a radiocarbon date from charcoal from the larger building.

The structures seem good candidates for having Medieval origins, based on their form, position and associated artefacts. Both have been exposed through deflation and are clearly being damaged by rabbit burrowing. Excavation will establish the nature and extent of the damage and rescue information from archaeological deposits and features that would otherwise be destroyed. The excavation results will serve as a guide to identifying similar structures of comparable date through fieldwork elsewhere in the Province, both in subsequent stages of the project and in the context of future research and management of the area's archaeological resource.

## **2010 Season**

The 2010 work focused on a later period from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> into the late 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and has revealed evidence of what are often called 'pre-clearance' settlement and land use patterns, patterns from before the creation of the crofting system and associated settlement patterns with which we are so familiar today. The current townships were laid out in the course of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and are organised in a very different way socially and spatially from the previous tenure system.

The unmarked trail on the Borrallie Headland established extends north from the Kyle of Durness to Balnakeil Bay is an area of Durness Limestone. That means it is a very fertile corner of Mackay Country so not surprisingly there are a number of ancient remains such as hut circles, a chambered cairn and old homesteads already identified. The Loch Borrallie area is scattered with remains from different periods and although it is a particularly rich archaeological landscape, the types of features you see here can also be seen in variety of other locations around Sutherland.

The land to the south of Balnakeil Bay, bounded on the west by the Kyle of Durness, is a landscape of grass-covered sand dunes with heathery moorland to the north around Loch Croispol. This area was home to generations of people, from at least the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the area was cleared of farmsteads to make way for sheep. The limestone geology has made this a fertile area, always attractive to settlement. Walking across the ground, you can see the remains of houses, fields and burial mounds that attest to this long,



rich history. The fragile, dynamic qualities of the landscape mean that much of this archaeology is exposed when the wind blows out the thick layers of sand that cover ancient remains, exposing them to erosion. At other times the wind blows sand over them, protecting them and hiding them from view.

Archaeology that is more recent, has included all the abandoned buildings erected by the military scattered around, especially at Faraid Head and Lerin. The area of the parish on the west of Eriboll has a wealth of history and stories of antiquity to be examined. Many sites have not been investigated and information is patchy.

For further archaeology see Ceannabeinne Township and Loch Croispol School, Borralie Headland.

### **Wheelhouse NC4049 6102**



IMAGE 196 WHEELHOUSE STRUCTURE KNOWN AS TIGH NA FIARNAIN, HOUSE OF THE FINGALIANS,

A wheelhouse is a dry stone dwelling house used in the Iron Age. Circular in construction with slabs of rock forming the basis of a roof, these slabs appear also to mark interior divisions of a family habitation. The wheelhouse on the trail is an enigmatic structure known as Tigh na Fiarnain, House of the Fingalians, which lies at a height of 950 feet at the end of a ridge overlooking a lochan. Considering its age of some 2000 years it is in excellent condition, one of the best preserved in Scotland. It measures 5.5 metres NE-SW by 5 metres NW-SE within its dry built wall. 1.1 metres thick and 1.4 metres high, with the entrance in the east. In the interior a circle of seven orthostats set at a distance of about one meter from the wall one of which is lintled another partially with roofing slabs lying close by. Some of the internal lintels appear to be re-erectments. To the north are traces of an outer wall, which appears to curve in towards the wall and on the southwest are traces of yet another enclosure formed by erect slabs now, collapsed.

The enigma is a double one. Firstly these structures are found in three main areas, the Hebrides, Shetland (but not Orkney) and Caithness and the latter is the type to which this wheelhouse belongs because of its free standing orthostats as opposed to the radial walls of the true Hebridean wheelhouse. This one is a geographically isolated example. Secondly nearly all other wheelhouses lie below the 50-foot contour and are associated with other buildings. This one is in a higher and more isolated spot.

**Earth-House or Galleried Building near Durness, Sutherland. John Mathieson, F.R.S.E., P.R.S.G.S., Corresponding Member.**

This earth-house, locally known as Tigh na Fiarnain (house of the Fingalians), is situated near the summit of the range of mountains which separates Loch, Eriboll from the Kyle of Durness. It stands on the slope of a small hillock, nearly 1000 feet above sea-level, about one mile south of Meall Meadhonach (middle hill), and about one mile and a half west of Portnancon Pier, and an equal distance from the earth house at Port Chamuill,

The building consists of a roughly circular chamber measuring about 17 feet in greatest internal diameter, the wall, which is of dry-stone building, measuring from about 2 feet to 4 feet 6 inches in thickness. Abutting on the south-west is a crescentic-shaped enclosure or annexe on the south-west, which measures about 26 feet in greatest length and about 10 feet in greatest breadth internally. The entrance to the main chamber is on the east side, commanding a good view of the sea as far as Whiten Head. The entrance passage is well built, and measures 2J-feet wide, but no trace of a doorway in the annexe is discernible. Built on ground sloping to the north, the south side of the main structure is level with the ground, but the north side has a well-built dry-stone wall rising on the outside to a height of 4 feet 6 inches. The adjoining enclosure is almost level with the surface, except, where the wall is about 2 feet in height above ground.

The inner part of the building is so tumbled in that it is impossible, without excavation, to say what the original formation was. There are six pillars arranged round the centre and one against the eastern wall. The pillars stand about 4 feet high, and slabs measuring 5 feet in length radiate from these to the circumference. The space between these lintels also appears to have been covered with large slabs, of which there are plenty in the immediate neighbourhood.

<sup>80</sup>From the outside the wheelhouse resembles a very small sheepfold, it is a horse shoe shaped stone structure. It is located at a high altitude in a harsh and barren environment where any form of agriculture would be bound to fail. One cannot help wondering what sort of people lived here, why they chose this bleak location and how they survived. This is a unique and puzzling site.

**Promontory Fort NC405 694**

*A note is the presence of a possible early Celtic monastic site located on a promontory at Aodann Mhor (Lamb 1973).*

At Seanachaisteal on a cliff top on Aodan Mhor are the remains of a structure on a rocky outcrop backed by cultivable or pasture land with a view to defence. The point of Aodann Mhor is about one kilometer due north of Durness. The cliff rises to about thirty metres where the summit measures sixteen point five metres by a little over eleven metres and is grass covered. The ditches and grassy mound where a fort was, is quite obvious. Towards the landward end, it presents a comparatively even grassy surface, while seaward it slopes away to the edge of the cliff, rugged with confusing masses of rock and crags. The neck of the promontory has been traversed by a high stony rampart with a trench on either side. To the outside, the rampart is

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<sup>80</sup> Kevin J. O'Reilly and Ashley Crockford

about two and a half metres above the bottom of the ditch, highest on the west side and about two metres on the inner side. It is about eight metres wide at the base. The remains to the east where the ground slopes away are less distinct. The entrance has been through the middle of the rampart and to the west of the entrance, there is a circular depression on the inner side on the top of the rampart. There is a similar depression with signs of low enclosing walls about the summit.

### **Faolinn**

At map reference NC 4038 5409. At the head of Loch Eriboll is Faolinn. In 1960 workers were excavating for the foundations to build a house and discovered an underground shelter. Opposite the sheep fold on the north east side of Loch Eriboll near the top and on the other side of the road.

Excavations in 1964 and 1965 revealed that it was about twenty metres long, curved almost at right angles, and had no side chambers. The entrance at the down slope end had steps down to a souterrain and the entrance passage just over half a meter wide and was lined by large slabs surmounted by drystone walling. The souterrain itself had been formed by digging a trench into a glacial mound lining the slabs with drystone walling and roofing it with slabs. The average width was just over a meter. Associated surface structures, presumably dwellings were located at the upper end of the souterrain. Among the finds were querns and a glass bead probably dating from the Iron Age. At some period during or after the souterrains use, the entrance passage was blocked by large stones. The centre portion is covered by a stratified midden composed mainly of mussel and oyster shells, and burnt material. A midden also blocks a possible entrance. This find has been covered over and is not accessible.

### **Archaeology at Sangobeg.<sup>81</sup>**

Salvage excavation was carried out on an archaeological site, discovered during the North Sutherland Coastal Zone Assessment Survey in 1998, in dunes at Sangobeg, near Durness in northern Sutherland. The excavation, conducted in 2000, uncovered the fragmentary remains of probable Norse-period settlement, including stone walling, a hearth, and occupation deposits that had been truncated by erosion. Sealed beneath the Norse-period remains was the burial of a child of indeterminate sex, aged between 8–10 years, who had been placed in a flexed position on a bed of quartzite pebbles and covered with a mound of clean sand, capped with larger quartzite stones. The burial was dated by radiocarbon to 170 cal BC–cal AD 30 (GU-12535).

This was a significant find. A pre Christian burial site, amongst a midden layer, was revealed. On a bed of white pebbles lying in a north south direction the skeletal remains of what was suspected to be an ancient Pictish inhabitant was uncovered. The fragile bones were easily seen but in an advanced state of decomposition.

The team of archaeologists, 2 dig directors, 3 supervisors and 7 students carefully revealed the delicate structure lying in a foetal position under a cairn. The discovery was made at the beginning of the second week of a four-week dig after clearing several areas of the midden. The vicinity has obviously been inhabited by diverse peoples over the centuries unaware that this grave was present from about the 6 or 7 century as early signs indicate. There have also been a lot of artefacts found including pottery from the late medieval period. The site at Sangobeg was identified in 1997 during a survey and was believed to accommodate possible Viking remnants. As the area is in a dynamic state of flux with the high tide water mark having

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<sup>81</sup> Scottish Archaeological Journal, Volume 29 Issue 1, Page 51-82, ISSN 1471-5767 Available Online Aug 2009

moved considerably more inland over the years there is every possibility the area could reveal further sites worthy of investigation.



IMAGE 197 A PRE CHRISTIAN BURIAL SITE, AT SANGOBEG

## Dun Dornaigil Broch

Dun Dornaigil (Dornadilla), an ancient broch over two thousand years old on the River Hope in Strath More, 10 miles from the turn off on the A838 at Hope along the beautiful road Glen Golly to Altnaharra This ruined broch, standing in a superb position on a low terrace on the River Hope in Strath More has been carefully preserved, not restored, and is most impressive although it cannot be entered. Just south of Ben Hope (NC456450))

A distinguishing feature is the massive triangular lintel over the debris-blocked entrance. It stands 1.8m to 3.3m high but rises to 6.7m on the north-east. Only the outer face of the wall survives: the inner one has collapsed and now a Modern buttress supports the surviving wall. The interior is about eight metres in diameter and the top of the walls at their present level over two metres in thickness. The entrance faces the north east. There is evidence of the guard chamber. The interior is filled up with debris almost to the level of the top of the surrounding wall. There is a tale about the skeletons of two men being found in the broch in the latter part of the 18th century. On being exposed to the air, they disintegrated.

Within the wall's thickness a stone stairway gave access to several narrow galleries. When this broch was built Dornadilla, would have stood twice as tall its high drystone walls formed a complete circle pierced only by a single narrow entrance. The walls were hollow and within their thickness a stone stair gave access to several narrow galleries probably used for



IMAGE 198 DUN DORNAIGIL BROCH

storage. The inner courtyard would have held a thatched wooden dwelling, which housed a small farming community who had built the broch as a shelter against marauding raiders. Who these raiders were are unknown, perhaps feuding neighbours from along the glen or pirates seeking slaves to sell.

Another tale suggest said the broch may have been have been built by a Scottish king of that name and used as a hunting residence. During the last centuries BC and first AD life in most

of Europe was troubled. Shortages of land led to movements of people, which led to pressure on land, and this led to conflict and conflict led to building of defences. This ruined broch, standing in a superb position on a low terrace on the River Hope in Strath More is most impressive although it cannot be entered. The structure is owned by Historic Scotland. It is an excellent example of a Pictish broch with walls 14-feet thick and it is 27-feet in diameter in the interior.

This broch of which there are over 500 examples in Scotland was a local response. Built quickly but carefully with local materials it could give a small number of people shelter against every form of attack except prolonged siege or attack with heavy weapons. These methods were unknown outside the hands of the Romans who never penetrated this far in strength. When a lookout on the wallhead saw a hostile band appearing the farmers would leave their fields scatter their cattle to the hills and head for the broch. With the door firmly closed defenders on the wallhead could throw down stones or unpleasant substances on anyone trying to scale the walls. The long narrow entrance passage made it impossible to use battering rams on the door. The design of the brochs suggests their builders were sure that if they held off the first attack their assailants would move on. The fact that brochs throughout Scotland were abandoned as a means of defence in the first of second century AD suggests that there were major changes in society. This could have involved a lessening of tensions and thus a need for defence or a change in fighting methods, which made brochs obsolete.

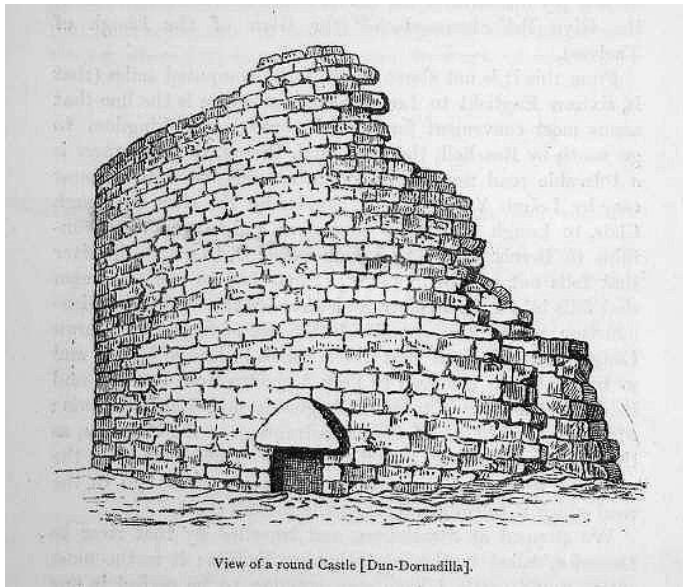
In 1760 Richard Pococke, the Protestant Bishop of Ossory in Ireland visited Strathnaver while on a tour of Scotland. He made his way to Strath More where he made drawings of the broch called Dornadilla, showing how much more of the structure remained intact at the time compared with now. He left an exact description of the monument.

#### **Tours in Scotland 1747, 1750, 1760<sup>82</sup>**

*We stopped at Strath More, and travelled by that river to Doundor, called in the map, Dundor Nadilla; it is the most entire round castle I have seen, seeming to be perfect in one part about thirty feet high. Every tier of stone sets in on the outside about an inch. The top is crowned with long even stones; it consists of two walls. There is a set-off within of one foot three inches, where the inner wall is three feet six inches thick; the outer wall four feet three inches at bottom, but both of them lessen to two feet five inches; and the space between the walls is two feet five inches; the court within is twenty-six feet six inches in diameter. It is divided by the stones laid across into three stories, and opposite to the entrance, it is open for about two feet and a half in breadth, divided in three parts by the floor. In the middle on the left hand it is the same, as it was probably in the right, which is now ruined. These seem to have been below as entrances, and above to give light; and being divided in this manner into four parts to each story, there might be twelve separate places for twelve families for lodgings in time of danger, and they might have some light doors to them. However, it seems not to have been very strong except at the bottom, and now the support of the circle being lost, as it is ruinous, it is in a very tottering condition. It is built on an eminence over the river, on which side the foundation is ten or twelve feet lower than in the other part, as it is laid near the bottom of the hillock. A view of the inside and outside are here seen.*

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<sup>82</sup> Pococke, Richard, bishop of Meath, 1704-1765; Kemp, Daniel William Internet Archive



View of a round Castle [Dun-Dornadilla].

*The hill we crossed to Strath More is a foot of Benhope. Inside view of a round Castle [Dun Dornadilla]. Under the foot of this mountain we travell'd, which is a fine natural slope, with perpendicular rocks over it, resembling ruined buildings. This continues on all under the mountain itself with a sort of terrace on it, from which the mountain rises most beautifully, being divided by several pyramidal risings with little hillocks between them to the number of above twenty, in which little cascades of water fall down after rain in a very beautiful manner. And before we came*

*to this part we saw a sheet of water falling down into a hollow about hundred feet, and 'tis said falls fifty more out of sight. All the cascades after the morning showers appeared very beautiful. A little lower, Strath More falls into Lough Hope, which is fresh water, and empties itself by a river into Lough Eribol to which we crossed over a foot of a mountain. I here sent my horses back to Strath More, and so round about to Tongue to avoid the bog of the Moan, and so to Thyrso. Over that Lough Eribol we ferried, and Lord Reay's horses met me, and I rid three*

*miles to Durness, Lord Reay's house, which is situated at the south-east end of Durness Bay, where there is a fine strand bounded to the north by Farout Head, the end of which is in the degree of 58.45. To the west of this head are two little points which appear to have been fortified.*



Inside view of a round Castle [Dun-Dornadilla].

These sketches of Dun-Dornadilla, or Dun-Dornigil, are the earliest known. This illustration was taken from 'Antiquities and Scenery of the North of Scotland, in a series of letters to Thomas Pennant Esq', by Rev Charles Cordiner, Minister of St Andrew's Chapel, Banff (1780)

## Souterrains in Sutherland

Alex. Morrison

The Sutherland Souterrains vary in size if not greatly in shape. Wainwright 1953 suggests that they are similarly in shape and plan with souterrains in Angus, and: *The fact that that are all essentially passages as distinct from chambers, sets them apart from the structures of northern isles. Perhaps the Sutherland souterrains of this kind were normally adjuncts to surface structures, in which case they would have more in common with the souterrains attached to Hebridean wheel houses that with the souterrains of Angus. The latter were not subsidiary to any other structure.*

The 1911 RCAHMS Sutherland Inventory (1911. xxxii-xxxiii) casts doubt on the possible use of the structures as dwellings or 'sleeping- chambers' because:... *the extreme narrowness of the first variety and the small dimensions of the expansions at the inner end, together with the lack of air and light, make them very unsuitable places for human habitation.*

The vast majority of the sites, lie in the zone of greatest archaeological destruction, and they have mostly been discovered by man's activities, agricultural or otherwise. By the very nature of their subterranean construction and survival, as against the destructive activities which have occurred on the surface, many have no evidence of associated structures at all. The terminology of these sites has varied considerably over the past 150 years, with labels such as *Pict's house, eirde house, earth-house* (RCAHMS Sutherland Inventory 1911), *weem and leabidh fholaich* being used at different times, and mostly suggesting a dwelling or refuge function. Some of this has been discussed by Brothwell (1977. 179), who avoided the word Souterrain as: ... *a more cautious term, covering as it does an underground passage, tunnel, subway structure, but does not imply any expanded or terminal 'living' or 'storage' area which some seem to show, and it is difficult to determine how much of some structures was originally underground.*

### List of Sutherland Souterrains

1. Portnancon, Durness NC 428 613
2. Fouhlin, Durness NC 404 541
3. Eriboll, Durness NC 433 563
4. Loch Hope, Durness NC 469 590
5. Achintyhalavin, Tongue NC 566 643
6. Ribigill, Tongue NC 582 545
7. Deanside, Tongue (?) NC 591 557
8. Kirkiboll, Tongue NC 59 57
9. Skerray Mains, NC660631
10. Cracknie. Farr NC 665 509
11. Achnabourin, Farr NC 709 585
12. Achnabourin, Farr NC710582
13. Skelpick Burn, Parr NC 728 563
14. Syre, Parr NC 692 440
15. Rosal, Strathnaver, NC 689 417
16. Strathy, Parr NC 836 651



**Proceedings of the society, April 8, 1935. Earth-house at Portnancon, Sutherland. 431 IV. Earth-house at Portnancon, Sutherland. By Dr. J. Buxton.<sup>83</sup>**

This lies close to a road bridge, half a mile north of Portnancon Pier on the 'west side of Loch Eriboll, and, was visited in 1909 when some measurements were taken, but these have since been found incorrect. In 1927 my brothers, Mr Alexander MacDonald, and I determined to explore it in spite of fearful warnings from the local inhabitants, some of whom assured us that the place was haunted and to meddle with it was courting disaster, and others that it was a great underground loch of unfathomable depth.

Despite these rumours, however, Mr D. M. Reid, of Harrow School, had been excavating at various times, and had discovered the roof of the building. Mr Donald MacDonald showed us a small hollow in the ground with a large heavy stone in it. At the lowest part of the hollow we could just see an opening. With the help of motor-jacks we removed this stone, which was 3 feet 6 inches long and 2 feet 6 inches high and probably used for blocking the entrance. It now lies just outside it. Having removed the slab, "we were able to dig out the heap of earth and stones which was blocking the tunnel. At length after many days' digging we came upon a small flight of stone steps between 17 inches and 28 inches wide, with a stone wall on each side. There was no mortar, and we could see no tool marks on the stones. Seven steps led down to the entrance of the gallery and then five more to a mud floor. These varied from 2 inches to 9 inches in height.

The entrance is 2 feet 4 inches wide and 3 feet high 'with no traces of jambs or bar-holes. At the foot of the staircase was a gallery filled with water, but we ventured a little way down the tunnel, and by tapping on the roof others outside were able to mark its direction so that we could examine it from the surface.

The roof was soon exposed, but before the gallery could be farther explored it was necessary to get rid of the water. We dug a trench from the end of the gallery to a burn nearby. This took us no little time as we were only able to work at it for a few weeks each year. Eventually it was finished. The trench dug was some 23 yards long crossing the old road to Durness, the outline of which can still be traced. The structure was about 10 feet deep at the upper end, and from here we drained most of the water away, leaving a long low gallery from 4 feet 4 inches to 5 feet 5 inches high.

The floor is of earth covered with loose stones and the was stoutly hunt of undressed blocks of all shapes and sizes, rising in an outward curve so that while the width at the floor in the middle of the gallery is 4 foot 3 inches half-way up it is 5 feet, and at the roof 3 feet 5 inches.

The roof is formed of stone lintels spanning the building, these averages about 4 feet 8 inches in visible length, 1 foot 8 inches in width, and 8 inches in thickness.

The gallery itself is 27 feet in length along the middle of the floor and at the inner end 4 feet 9 inches high, with a width of 5 feet 7 inches (fig. 2). In the north-east corner of this widened part is a hollow in the floor, 4 feet in diameter and about 2 feet deep, by which the gallery may originally have been drained. To avoid its refilling we have put in a drain-pipe from this hollow to the burn.

Nothing of archaeological interest in the matter of relics was found during our excavations, but the earth-house is in a remarkably good state of preservation and can easily be visited by anyone passing along the road from Durness to Portnancon. Subsequently, when the structure was

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<sup>83</sup> In the Report and Inventory of Monuments and Constructions in the County of Sutherland, No. 160 of the Parish of Durness is a description of "Earth-house, Portnancon."

drained, Mr Alexander MacDonald examined the deposit on the floor, but he found only some fragments of bone too small to be identified.

### **From Souterrains in Sutherland by Alex Morrison**

Portnancon is noted as having been entered from what was originally the south-east arc of a hut circle. Describing the eirde house at Eriboll, Arthur Mitchell (1866) noted that other underground structures in the district were known as leabidh fholaich ('hiding beds'). Wainwright (1963: 14) dismissed the 'refuge' theory, noting the impossibility of defending such a structure from the inside and particularly that their location would not be unknown to a potential attacker. It would also be unlikely if, as suggested above, the roofing were visible on the surface. The Sutherland sites are even less likely, on account of their narrowness and lower roofing, to have offered safe refuge in times of trouble. By contrast, many of the Irish souterrains, with their elaborate air vents, angled passages, hidden chambers, drop holes and 'creeps', seem to be constructed for defence or protection rather than storage (Warner 1979).

The Faoilinn souterrain is the lowest-lying site at around 6 m above sea level. The Fouhlin souterrain, Durness has a western lower entrance with four steps down into the passage (Morrison & Reid 1964, 1965: report forthcoming). This entrance and the steps are at the rounded, slightly expanded, end of the souterrain passage. In many of Sutherland's single-entrance souterrains this is the shape of the inner, closed end of the passage, the 'pear-shaped expansion'. It could be suggested that this western entrance is a secondary construction inserted into the 'dead end' of a pre-existing single-entrance souterrain, perhaps found necessary because of the unusual length of the passage, or because of an extension of that passage, but there is no definite proof of this. The actual entrance gap is very narrow, only 0.58 m wide. It is flanked by two large, upright orthostatic stones which play no part in supporting the last roofing slab. These orthostats are surrounded by very well-constructed dry-stone walling which continues the walls of the passage out into the open and above the top of the last slab of the roof. Despite its smallness and narrowness, this western opening is a true entrance with steps and vertical 'doorway'. By comparison the south-eastern, upslope entrance looks much more like a 'trapdoor' leading down through the floor of a house, but this was perhaps the original and 'proper' entrance. Three large slabs around the opening are very like paving on the floor of a surface structure or dwelling, and there were traces of the ruined wall of a possible hut circle running just beyond the edge of the opening, so that it could be suggested that the entrance to the souterrain passage at this end was through the floor of a hut. This would not be unusual, considering the number of souterrains known to be connected with the walls of hut circles in the Strath of Kildonan and elsewhere. The 'steps' leading down from this end, to the passage below, are quite unlike those at the western end. They consist of thin slabs, almost flagstones, projecting from the end of the souterrain passage, with a gap under each slab, more resembling a ladder than a stairway. The Faoilinn structure thus had two entrances; one of which might have been a later addition. There are relatively straight-passaged souterrains such as Eriboll but the majority of the passage forms are curved. The curving might have been related to the nature of the surface structures with which the souterrains were associated, the Fouhlin structure being the longest so far discovered in the county.

At Faoilinn the trench was dug into fluvio-glacial material, and the line of the original cutting could be seen in profile in the face of some of the sections excavated. The ochreous, compacted fluvio-glacial material had been excavated by the souterrain-builders to form a trench about 2.1 m deep and 2.1, 2.4 m. The dry-stone walling along the sides of the trench is fairly typical of souterrain construction, having large basal stones supporting several courses of smaller stones. Building material was available from the surrounding hill slopes, which are strewn with glacial boulders. Since the majority of the boulders used are rounded rather than slabby, a fair

amount of selection must have been necessary in order to produce a stable wall, and wedging or pinning stones had been jammed or hammered into the gaps between the larger stones to improve stability (cf. Watkins 1980b. 169-170).

The roofing slabs are of irregular shape but they fit closely enough to leave only small gaps in the roof. The roof and wall tops had been packed with stones to increase stability and to seal any gaps. The largest and heaviest roofing slabs, up to 2.4 m in length and 0.3 m thick, are at the western end, and this is also where the passage expands into the rounded 'end chamber' shape. The problem of roofing the passage with slabs, which in some places were rather shorter than desirable, was overcome by having two courses of large flat stones at the top of the wall projecting slightly in a crude form of corbelling and weighted at their outside edges with boulders. This device enabled the builders to construct a passage wider than would otherwise have been possible with the available slabs. In general, the information for the roofing of Sutherland souterrains, while incomplete, indicates that stone slabs were used on most sites. But for reasons varying from the absence of suitable building material to the requirements of function, some appear to have had other forms of roofing.

During the excavation of the Faolinn site, traces of surface structures were detected. Some of these appear to have been built across the line of the roof of the souterrain, but they were fragmentary and not easy to follow. What seemed to be parts of the foundations of hut-circle walls petered out before much of the circumference could be determined, and in places the stones were missing altogether. Examination of the remains of what might have been a surface hut foundation above the south-eastern entrance revealed parts of querns. A matching lower quern stone for one of these was found on the floor of the souterrain passage just at the bottom of the steps of this south-eastern entrance, supporting the suggestion that, at this end at least and at one stage of its use, the souterrain could have been entered through the floor of a surface building.

At Fouhlin the sheer length of the souterrain would have provided space for storage for a number of families, and the double entrance might have been an adaptation towards allowing access from different surface structures or by different users. The question of size and space for storage is thus bedeviled by the problem of access. Even two 'end-entrances' would not bring within easy reach materials stored in the middle of a souterrain the length of Fouhlin. There is still a possibility that some structures had roofs not below, but flush with the ground surface, and that occasional (or regular) removal of roofing slabs was necessary to get at the contents. This would, also remove such structures from consideration as 'places of refuge'.

Shell midden material was found in the passage at Fouhlin, including mussel and oyster shells what was part of what may have been a much larger once concentration on the surface. It is possible here, too, that a roofing, slab of the souterrain might have been deliberately removed in order to dispose of some surface accumulation, at a time when the souterrain itself was no longer serving its original purpose. There are two areas where roofing slabs are missing. One is where Modern clearance for house foundations broke through the roof of the souterrain; there is no shell midden beneath this. The other gap is immediately above the concentration of midden material in the passage. There is no midden material at the rubbish were deliberately dumped in the passage through a gap made in the roof, the true entrance was already obscured or blocked. It also means that any objects under the midden material in the passage (e.g. there were discrete patches of rust in the floor at this point) pre-date, the intrusion of that material. They too may have been dumped, but they may also belong to the period of original use of the souterrain.

At the time of the discovery of the Fouhlin souterrain, a small pair of bronze toilet shears was discovered projecting from between the wall stones near the roof and just beyond the collapsed

roofing slab (Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot. vol 94. 1960-61. 327). The shears are unique in Scotland, if not in the British Isles, and comparisons of form and decoration have been made with bucket handles from Traprain Law and Dowalton Loch, Kirkciidbright, the Benwell torc and the Newstead tankard holdfast (McGregor 1976. no 277). Again, the completely unstratified location can indicate only deposition at some period, probably early, in the souterrains use. Excavation of the surface structure connected with the south-eastern entrance to the souterrain uncovered a bead of greenish glass with a yellow enamel spiral running through it. This type has been classified by Margaret Guido (1978. 85-87, ig. 33/2) as a North Scottish spiral-decorated bead, possibly derived from, but later than, the Meare spiral beads. These Scottish beads were presumably made in the early 1st century AD or shortly before. It is impossible to say accurately when they ceased to be produced, but it may have been in the late 1st century AD. Some may have survived until the late 2nd century, but probably not later. This unfortunately does not tell us when the bead arrived at Fouhlin, although the discovery of the matching quern stone at the bottom of the south-eastern steps indicates that souterrain passage and hut circle floor were connected at some point.

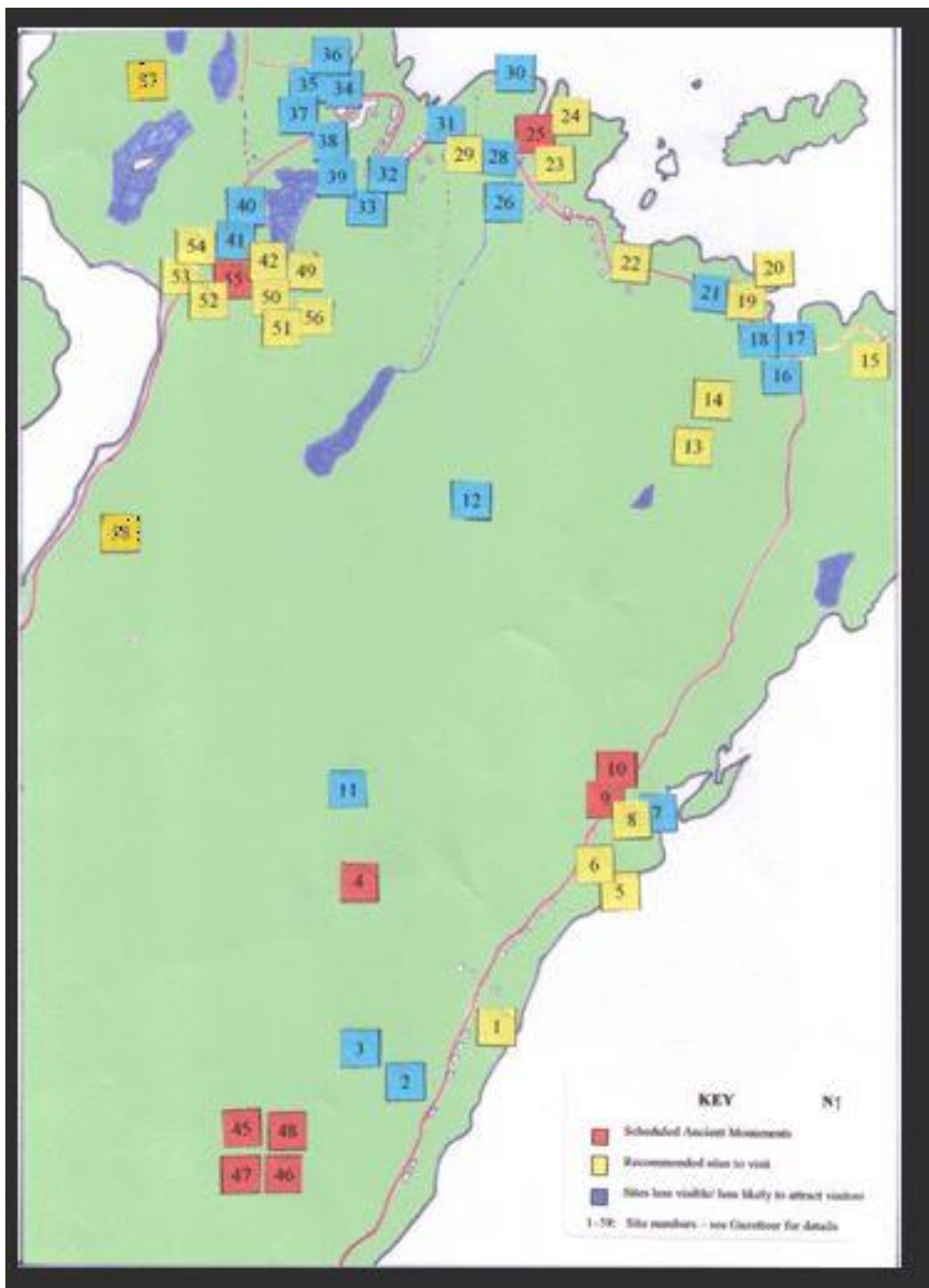
The evidence from about half of the known Sutherland souterrains suggests that they were connected or associated with surface structures, and careful examination or excavation of the areas immediately surrounding some of the other sites listed might reveal similar evidence. If we can demonstrate that most or all souterrains were constructed as important adjuncts of surface structures, then we may be closer to answering the question of their functions and to using them as a true indication of settlement distribution.



IMAGE 199 STE OF THE ENTRANCE TO THE SOUTERRAIN AT PORTNANCON

The entrance to the Souterrain described as being sited at Portnancon is situated at the side of the road just prior to the junction to Port Chamuill. Without prior knowledge this can be difficult to identify as for most of the year the locality is covered with bracken. Two small cairns which can be recognized in the image mark the position of the entrance.

## Sites and Monuments



This map shows details of sites and monuments as listed in the NMRS and/or SMR and located either on the Durness Estate or close to its boundaries.

The main source in drawing up an inventory of archaeological features in the area was the National Monuments Record Scotland (NMRS) operated by the Royal Commission for Ancient and Historic Monuments in Scotland (RCAHMS). This was supplemented by reference to the Highland Councils Sites and Monuments Record (SMR). A check against the sites listed in “What to see around Durness” by Kevin J. O’ Reilly and Ashley Ashcroft was also undertaken.

The information contained in the NMRS and the SMR, although a good starting point, should be treated with some caution as many of these sites listed have not been surveyed in detail since originally recorded (often in the 1960s and 1970s). Descriptions may not be entirely accurate and/or current archaeological thinking may interpret them differently from the way they were originally described. Sites may not now be as visible as when originally recorded either due to seasonal vegetation growth or because of damage through erosion or disturbance. The number of features recorded is likely to be only a fraction of the features actually present due to the fact that very little formal archaeological surveying has been carried out in the Durness area.

Two archaeological surveys have been made recently of sites in and around Durness, Durness Archaeological Interpretation Project Report, which includes details of sites recorded during walkover surveys of the settlement at Ceannabeinne cleared in 1842 (scene of the Durness Riots) and of the hillside west of Loch Croispol, where extensive, easily-visible features can be seen, ranging from Bronze Age burial cairns and hut circles to 18th Century improved agricultural landscape features. The majority of features at both sites were previously unrecorded in the NMRS and SMR. GUARD walkover survey of Loch Croispol and Loch Borrallie. This survey identified over 2,000 features, of which the vast majority are not recorded in the NMRS or SMR. A GUARD excavation of some of these features is planned for summer 2004.

Further information has been referenced from

- Extracts from Elizabeth Beaton’s Sutherland An Illustrated Architectural Guide have been added to the NMRS/SMR extracts
- What to see around Durness Local history, archaeology, geology, Kevin J O’Reilly and Ashley Crockford, Cheltenham, 2001
- Durness Archaeological Interpretation Project, undertaken by Rowan Tree Consulting for the Durness Development Group Ltd, February 2003
- Loch Borrallie, Kyle of Durness- Project 950, GUARD, Glasgow University ,
- Sutherland An Illustrated Guide, Elizabeth Beaton, The Rutland Press, Edinburgh, 1995 2003

#### **Durness Limekiln Site no. 1**

NMRS Number: NC45NW 19. Location: NC 4163 5908 SMR No. NC 45 NW0044. Site Type: Limekiln

#### **Allt An Lagain Site no. 2**

NMRS Number: NC45NW 23 Location: NC 4115 5915 Site Type: Building Description: The footings of a crudely-constructed building 6.5m by 3.5m. Early modern.

#### **Allt An Lagain Site no. 3**

NMRS Number: NC45NW 22 Location: NC 4060 5970 Site Type: Enclosure Description: A probable early Modern cattle pound in a shallow natural gorge. It measures 17 ft. by 15 ft. and the stones are piled, not built. Letter from K Reid to Ordnance Survey, 25 September 1978.

#### **Loch Eriboll Site no. 4**

NMRS Number: NC46SW 1 Location: NC 4049 6102 Site Type: Wheel House SMR Number: NC46SW0001

Scheduled Ancient Monument Description: An enigmatic structure known as Tigh na Fiarnain House of the Fingalians and set in an uncultivable area of almost bare rock at a height of over 900ft. It measures 5.5m NE-SW by 5m NW-SE within its dry-built wall, 1.1m thick and 1.4m high, with the entrance in the E. In the interior is a circle of seven orthostats set at a distance of about 1m from the wall, one of which is lintelled, another partially so, and possible roofing slabs lie about. On the W, an annexe, 8.5m long and 3m broad, defined by erect slabs bedded in the peat, curves round the structure. The peat in the interior has been scooped out. To the N are traces of an outer wall which appear to curve in towards the annexe wall; and to the SW are vague traces of yet another enclosure formed by erect slabs, now collapsed, and bounded by rock outcrops on the S. J Mathieson 1925; Information from Dr C S Sandeman, 2nd March 1959; Visited by Ordnance Survey, 5th April 1959. An unusually well-preserved example of a wheelhouse, as described and illustrated by the previous authorities. Tumble has been added to the wall accentuating its height, and the S side of the entrance has been buttressed against collapse. Some of the internal lintels appear to be re-erections by Ordnance Survey, 12th May 1980.

This structure is more akin to the round aisled-houses or ‘wags’ of the Latheron district of Caithness, having free-standing orthostats as opposed to radial walls or slabs of the true Hebridean wheel-house, and should be considered as a homestead for publication. Its remote location and being so distant from the main group far to the east, is puzzling. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 1st February 1983 The SMR notes that Historic Scotland had suggested that this site would benefit from some management works to enhance its visitor interest. It was noted that some rebuilt elements of the structure looked precarious. To ensure visitor safety, stabilisation of the worst sections was recommended, and it was suggested that a Historic Scotland architect be consulted. It is understood that Laid Grazings Committee is interested in including this site in a proposed Laid Heritage and Geology Trail.

#### **Portnancon Site no. 5**

NMRS Number: NC46SW 5.01 Location: NC 4271 6031 Site Type: Fishing Station Description: For Portnancon township (centred NC 426 606), see NC46SW 5.00. (Location cited as NC 427 603). Portnancon, pier, store etc. Mid-19th Century. A long coursed-rubble pier with a ramp on one side, with a wood-piled extension at right-angles. There is a two-storey and attic storehouse with external stair to the first floor and the characteristic Sutherland Estates projecting eaves. A small cottage next door is in similar style. There is also a small smoking house of wooden construction on a stone base. J R Hume 1977

#### **Site no. 6 Portnancon**

NMRS Number: NC46SW 5.00 Location: NC 426 606 Site Type: Township Description: A township comprising two unroofed and seven roofed buildings is depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Sutherland 1878, sheet xv). The township contains four unroofed and five roofed buildings and several enclosures on the current OS 1:10,560 map (1961). Three of the roofed buildings on the 1st edition OS 6-inch are part of Portnancon Fishing Station at NC 427 603 (NC46SW 5.01). Information from RCAHMS, 14 August 1995.

#### **Port Chamuill Site no. 7**

NMRS Number: NC46SW 11 Location: NC 4312 6094 Site Type: Longhouse Description: Longhouse, 25m by 5m.

### **Port Chamuill Site no. 8**

NMRS Number: NC46SW 12 Location: NC 429 611 Site Type: Township Description: Footings of three buildings, measuring from 14m by 4m to 21m by 4m, of 18th-19th century date and remains of accompanying enclosures. Lazy-bed cultivation is present. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 17th April 1980. A township comprising two unroofed buildings and an area of cultivated ground is depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Sutherland 1878, sheet xv). The township is depicted as seven unroofed buildings on the current edition OS 1:10,560 map (1961). Information from RCAHMS, 15th August 1995.

### **Portnancon South Site no. 9**

NMRS Number: NC46SW 3 Location: NC 427 611 Site Type: Souterrain (Possible) SMR Number: NC46SW0003 Scheduled Ancient Monument Description: NC 427 611. This possible souterrain is a mound within 10.0m E of the road, with stonework in the base of the lower (E) side; it sounds hollow when jumped on. Visited by A L F Rivet, Assistant. Archaeological Officer, 21st August 1964. The SMR record goes on to note that “there is no evidence of a souterrain at the map reference given or in the vicinity. The only mound located is natural”.

### **Portnancon Site no. 10**

NMRS Number: NC46SW 2 Location: NC 4282 6129 Site Type: Souterrain; Hut-Circle SMR number: NC46SW0002 Scheduled Ancient Monument Description: An Leabaidh-fholaich’ – the Hiding Place (Name Book 1874) – or ‘An Tigh Fo Thalaidh’ (OS 6”map, 2nd ed., 1908) – an apparently meaningless name, which may be for ‘An Tigh Fo Thalaimh’ – the House below the Ground – is a souterrain which was cleared and drained by Buxton between 1927 and 1935.

The entrance was blocked by a slab 3ft 6ins long and 2ft 6ins high which now lies beside it, and the flight of twelve stone steps which led down into the gallery had been infilled by earth and stones. The gallery itself was 27ft long and 4ft 4ins to 5ft 5ins high; and the walls of undressed stone rose in an outward curve so that the width across the floor was 4ft 3ins, half-way up it was 5ft and at the roof, where it was spanned by stone lintels, it was 3ft 5ins. The end chamber was 4ft 9ins high and 5ft 7ins wide and at the NE corner was a hollow in the floor 4ft in diameter and about 2ft deep, which may have been used to drain the gallery. No relics were found but, after draining, the floor deposit yielded fragments of bone which were, however, too small for identification.

The entrance passage to the souterrain measures 3m long and 0.8m wide. The gallery could not be examined as the floor is again flooded but it could be seen that the walls and roof were in good condition. A mound, 1m high, covers the souterrain. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 5th April 1960. The souterrain is as described in the preceding reports. It has been entered from within a hut circle in the SE arc but all that remains of the latter is an arc of walling extending for about 4.5m on either side of the entrance to the souterrain. The wall is overlaid by debris (presumably cleared from the souterrain) but it appears to have been about 2.0m wide, with five or six large stones on edge defining the inner face. The majority of the hut has been destroyed by the road and a ruinous field wall parallel to the road. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 12th May 1980.

The SMR notes that it has been suggested by Historic Scotland that this site would benefit from some management works to enhance its visitor interest. The souterrain is hidden by dense bracken in high summer and autumn. It is recommended that the bracken should be controlled to allow easier access, and to reveal the remains of the associated hut-circle. Again, it is understood that Laid Grazings Committee is interested in including this site in a proposed Laid Heritage and Geology Trail



### **Coire Na Creubhaich Site no. 11**

NMRS Number: NC36SE 27 Location: NC 399 619 Site Type: Shieling-Huts (Possible)

Description: Three unroofed structures which are depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Sutherland 1878, sheet xiv) may be shieling-huts. On the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1988) there are three unroofed structures shown, one of which is depicted as a ruin. Information from RCAHMS, 10th August 1995.

### **Meall Meadhonach Site no. 12**

NMRS Number: NC46SW 16 Location: NC 411 635 Site Type: Shieling-Huts (Possible) Description: What may be two unroofed shieling-huts are depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Sutherland 1878, sheet xv). They are not depicted on the current edition OS 1:10,560 map (1961). Information from RCAHMS, 15th August 1995.

### **Allt Chailgeag Site no. 14**

NMRS Number: NC46SW 13 Location: NC 4351 6471 Site Type: Shieling-Hut Description: Turf and stone footings, approximately 6m by 4m, of a shieling bothy; 20m to the N a linked series of small, crudely-built structures are probably lambing pens. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 17th April 1980.

### **Rispond Site no. 15**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 13 Location: NC 449 652 Site Type: Township Description: NC 448 653: Three longhouses, 14m by 19m long by 5m across, with associated enclosures, etc, lie on the N side of the road. Also, at NC 450 652 are two longhouses, one with an enclosure, two ovals 9m by 4m and 7m by 4m, and two rectangles 9m by 5m and 8m by 5m. T C Welsh 1972ab. Corrected to NC 449 652. Deserted Crofting Township abandoned in 18th-19th century, on W side of Rispod Bay. Landward extent delimited by a head dyke in part renovated and incorporated in the line of a later wall. There are remains of five longhouses, dimensions between 11m to 18m long by 4.5m, with accompanying enclosures and field walls Visited by Ordnance Survey, 11th April 1980.

Footings of longhouse, 26m by 4m, on the N side of the road. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 11th April 1980. A township comprising seven roofed buildings and one unroofed building is depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Sutherland 1878, sheet vi), but not one of the buildings noted by the OS and by Welsh (1972) are shown. One of the roofed buildings is part of Rispod fishing station (see NC46NE 1). Five roofed buildings are shown on the current edition of the OS 1:10,560 map (1961). Information from RCAHMS, 14th August 1995.

### **Allt Chailgeag Site no. 16**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 12 Location: NC 442 652 Site Type: Buildings Description: NC 442 652. Steading, 9.5m by 4m, with enclosures. TC Welsh 1972. NC 4423 6524 and NC 4429 6529. Ruins of two dry stone buildings, 10m by 3m and 7m by 4m, one with an adjoining enclosure. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 11th April 1980.

### **Rispond Road End, Site no. 17**

Bridge NMRS Number: NC46NW 24 Location: NC 44416528 Site Type: Bridge Description: None

### **Beinn Ceannabeinne Site no. 13**

NMRS Number: NC46SW. Location: NC 432 644 Site Type: Shieling-Huts Description: Steading, 6.0m by 4.0m, with spring and enclosures; on the 550ft contour. T C Welsh 1972. Centred NC 432 644, on a shelf on a hillside, are the earth and stone footings of at least six

shieling bothies, dimensions ranging between 4.0m to 5.0m long by 2.0m to 3.0m broad, and the ruins of a later dry-stone building, 6.0m by 4.0m. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 16th April 1980.

#### **Clais Charnach Site no. 18**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 19 Location: NC 4409 6542 Site Type: Building Description: One unroofed building is depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Sutherland 1878, sheet vi). There are no buildings shown at this location on the current edition OS 1:10,560 (1961). Information from RCAHMS, 8th August 1995

#### **Ceannabeinne Site no. 19**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 20 Location: NC 4397 6570 Site Type: Enclosure Description: A single enclosure is depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Sutherland 1878, sheet vi). What may be a wall of the enclosure is shown on the current edition of the OS 1:10,560 map (1961). Information from RCAHMS, 14th August 1995. Note: a walk-over survey of this site which provides much more detailed information on its archaeological features was undertaken by Rowan Tree Consulting for the Durness Development Group

#### **Traigh Na H'Uamhag Site no. 20**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 4 Location: NC 4415 6599 Site Type: Monastery (Possible) Description: (NC 4415 6599) Over a natural arch is a causeway defended by two lines of boulders. On the promontory are two buildings – rectangular. The SW edge of the promontory may have been delimited by a wall. Information from Dr C S Sandeman, Durness, 14<sup>th</sup>. March 1967. The promontory is approached by a natural causeway about 15ft wide over a natural arch. At the W end six boulders have been set upright in the earth. Sixteen feet to the E of the boulders the causeway is 9ft wide. On the promontory is a sub-rectangular structure, with a rectangular structure about 33ft to the E. Information contained in letter and field notes from K Reid to Ordnance Survey, 25th September 1978.

A cliff-girt promontory accessible from the landward side by a natural causeway over a natural arch. A line of earth fast angular boulders block the approach, and on the causeway itself an embedded, transverse slab may indicate a further blocking wall. On the promontory are footings of a rectangular structure measuring an estimated 8.5m by 5.0m within a wall 1.2m thick; a short distance to the E among rock outcrops are traces of a small, possibly circular structure. Along the SW side of the promontory and round the NW, stone showing in an eroded scarp indicates a skirting wall. It is unlikely that this is a fort in view of vulnerability from the NE where the cliffs give way to shelving rock. This could well be a monastic settlement and it may not be coincidental that a monastic site (NC46NW 5) is clearly viewed to the W. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 23rd April 1980.

#### **Cnoc Nan Uamhag Site no. 21**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 18 Location: NC 438 658 Site Type: Farmstead Description: This farmstead which comprises two unroofed buildings and one enclosure is depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Sutherland 1878, sheet vi). The site comprises two unroofed buildings and three enclosures as depicted on the current edition OS 1:10,560 map (1961). Information from RCAHMS, 8th August 1995.

#### **Sangobeg Site no. 22**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 17 Location: NC 427 661 Site Type: Township Description: A township, comprising five unroofed, twenty-four roofed buildings, one partially roofed building and seventeen enclosures is depicted on the 1st edition OS 6-inch map (Sutherland

1878, sheet vi). The township has sixteen unroofed and nine roofed buildings on the current edition OS map (1961). Information from RCAHMS. 9th August 1995.

#### **Leirinmore Site no. 23**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 16 Location: NC 421 669 Site Type: Crofting Township Description: A township, comprising one unroofed and twelve roofed buildings is depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Sutherland 1878, sheet vi). The township has six unroofed and seventeen roofed buildings on the current OS 1:10,560 map (1961). Information from RCAHMS, 9th August 1995.

#### **Leirinmore Site no. 24**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 23 Location: NC 4215 6716 Site Type: Radar Station Description: The transmitter block for a Chain Home radar station is situated approximately 70m N of the Smoo Cave Hotel within an area annotated Leirinmore on the current chart copy edition of the OS 1:10560 map (1967). The radar station, which lies to the E of Sango, Smoo radar station (NC46NW 22.00), is visible on vertical air photographs (CPE/Scot/UK/185: 3161-62, flown 1946). Two masts, the transmitter block and the bases of at least two huts are visible on the photographs. Information from RCAHMS, February 1999. This is possibly a Gee rather than a Chain Home Station, for radio direction of bombers. Information from C Latham and A Stobbs, 1997.

#### **Smoo Cave Site no. 25**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 6 Location: NC 4188 6714 Site Type: Caves – settlement site SMR Number: NC46NW0006 Scheduled Ancient Monument. Description: Excavated by GUARD – copy reports available from Highland Council Archaeology Unit

#### **Smoo Site no. 26**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 15 Location: NC 417 669 Site Type: Crofting Township Description: A township, comprising eighteen roofed and two unroofed buildings is depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Sutherland 1878, sheet vi). The township has 16 roofed and 2 unroofed buildings on the current edition OS 1:10,560 map (1961). Information from RCAHMS, 9th August 1995.

#### **Sango Radar Station Site no. 27**

NMRS Number: NC46NW22.01 Location: NC 4170 6685 Site Type: Military Camp Description: The accommodation camp and what may be the remote reserve generator house for the radar station are situated to the S of Smoo Lodge. The buildings are visible on vertical air photographs CPE/Scot/UK/185: 3160-61, flown 1946). Information from RCAHMS, February 1999.

#### **Smoo Lodge Site no. 28**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 7 Location: NC 4165 6720 Site Type: Gatepiers Description: Smoo Lodge – Gate piers. Sutherland: An Illustrated Architectural Guide: Smoo Lodge – 18th Century and later. Wide crow-stepped house said to incorporate the 17th Century house of Murdo Lowe. Lowe was an Orkney merchant who traded out of the geo (inlet) of Smoo and is reputed to have employed local women to carry sacks of meal up the steep track from beach to cliff top in return for an oatmeal biscuit.

#### **Leirinbeg, Sango Radar Station Site no. 29**

NMRS Number: NC46NW Location: NC 4153 6750 Site Type: Radar Station Description: Sango or Smoo, Chain Home Low Radar Station occupies much of the area annotated

Leirinbeg on the current chart copy edition of the OS 1:10560 map, (1967). Several of the buildings, including the transmitter/receiver block (NC 4150 6780), with tracks and bunkers connected with the radar station are depicted on the map. The Radar Station, with at least five upstanding masts (NC c.4189 6770, NC c.4159 6749, NC c.4148 6754, NC c.4136 6754 and NC c.4127 6756) and a further two mast bases A picture from during the second world war period showing the masts of the Radar station at Smoo in the background. (NC c.4175 6764 and NC c.4180 6755), is visible on vertical air photographs (CPE/Scot/UK/185, 3160-61, flown 1946). Many accommodation buildings are also visible, with what may be the remote reserve generator (NC46NW 22.01). Information from RCAHMS and Mr I Brown, February 1999 Situated to the N and S side of the A 838 public road, just E of Durness (NC46NW 8). Many buildings are extant connected with the radar and accommodation sites. J Guy 2000; NMRS MS 810/10, Part.1, 4, Vol.3, 4-8

### **Geodha Smoo Site no. 30**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 10 Location: NC 420 677 Site Type: Landing-Place Description: None.

### **Lerinbeg House Site no. 31**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 9.00 Location: NC 4108 6741 Site Type: Residential Description: None. Alexander Coupar. Simple, dignified regularly fronted two-storey whitewashed house built for the Sutherland Estate Ground Officer, the date stone enriched with the Stafford arms. It is said that masons who worked on Cape Wrath Lighthouse were at Lerinbeg when bad weather kept them from the lighthouse. Sutherland: An Illustrated Architectural Guide. Lerinbeg House built in 1830 over looking Sango Bay. Lived in now as a private home.

### **Church of Scotland Site no. 32**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 27 Location: NC 4041 6693 Site Type: Church Description: None. Sutherland: An Illustrated Architectural Guide. Sangomore, 1844. William Henderson, remodelled 1891. White-harled, plain former Free Church with entry in north-facing gable crowned with bellcote.

### **The Old Manse Site no. 33**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 26 Location: NC 4038 6688 Site Type: Manse Description: None. Sutherland: An Illustrated Architectural Guide: 1885-86 and 1830; drawing- and dining-room addition 1865. Plain house with mural sundial. Re-used moulded door piece dated 1727 inscribed MMD (Murdoch MacDonald) and God sees you. The Revd Murdoch Macdonald (1769-1763) became Minister of Durness in 1726; an accomplished musician, he was well-known as a most melodious and powerful singer and as a supporter of the local Gaelic poet, Rob Donn, who composed an elegy in his memory. (Note: this is an extract from a more detailed entry about the Old Manse contained in the book).

### **Durine School/Schoolhouse Site no. 34**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 25 Location: NC 4031 6760 Site Type: School

### **Site no. 35 Durness Inn**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 21 Location: NC 403 677 Site Type: Inn Description: Destroyed by fire in 1908 and the ruins remained until 1952.

### **Durness Durine Site no. 36**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 8 Location: NC 4031 6775 Site Type: Crofting Township. Description: Dr Close-Brooks notes the generally older houses gable-end on to road, newer

houses side-on. Narrow crofts run back from houses. Information from Dr J Close-Brooks, 1986.

### **Balvolich Durness Site no. 37**

NMRS Number: NC36NE 82 Location: NC 3982 6783 Site Type: Building (possible) Description: What may be an unroofed building is depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Sutherland 1878, sheet v) and is shown as unroofed on the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1991). Information from RCAHMS, 14th August 1995.

### **Durine Durness Site no. 38**

NMRS Number: NC36NE 81 Location: NC 399 673 Site Type: Crofting Township Description: A crofting township containing seventeen roofed and two unroofed buildings is depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Sutherland 1878, sheet v). The township has eight roofed and five unroofed buildings on the current OS 1:10,000 maps: NC46NW (1961). Information from RCAHMS, 14th August 1995.

### **Durness Site no. 39**

NMRS Number: NC46NW 3 Location: NC 40 67 Site Type: Find spot SMR Number: NC46NW0003 Description: In Dunrobin Castle Museum is a 'Bronze swivel, about 2,000 years old, from Durness' (NC 40 67). Visited by Ordnance Survey, 1st July 1960. A sketch of the swivel is given in a letter from J M Joass, Golspie, to Dr J Anderson, National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (NMAS), which suggests that it had been found shortly before. He says in a second letter that the keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, after seeing a sketch of it, calls it Late Celtic and believes that it might be from horse gear or a dog collar, although too heavy for the jesses of a falcon. Joass adds that its Celtic character suggests a local origin although Durness was a Viking station. Letters from J M Joass, 10 December 1894 and 20 February 1895. A bronze swivel, total length 1.8ins, consisting of two cast hemispheres connected by a ball and socket joint, each having a similar loop, 1.85ins across, swelling into animal heads where they are attached to the hemispheres. Surface much worn (Accession No: 109). Information from TS catalogue of Dunrobin Museum (A S Henshall to Ordnance Survey)

### **Loch Caladail Site no. 40**

NMRS Number: NC36NE 43 Location: NC 393 667 Site Type: Enclosures Description: (A: NC 3949 6687; B: NC 3938 6684; C: NC 3937 6674; D: NC 3937 6663; E: NC 3827 6649) Enclosures. Visible on Ordnance Survey air photographs 64.457. (Undated) annotation on Ordnance Survey record card.

'A' is a natural rock formation. 'B' is a sub-rectangular enclosure on a steep, E-facing slope. It measures 10.5m N-S by 9.0m within a spread, turf-covered wall, 1.5m wide and up to 0.5m high. The interior follows the natural steep slope. The age of the enclosure is unknown, but it is probably early modern. 'C': No artificial platform or enclosure. 'D', at NC 3938 6663, is a distinctly pear-shaped enclosure measuring 10.5m WSW-ENE by 7.5m within a spread bank, 1.5m wide and 0.3m high. There is no surface evidence of stone in the bank. The sloping interior shows no indication of levelling. No entrance is visible. The date and purpose of the enclosure are unknown, but it may pre-date the early Modern period. 'E' is a natural platform by erosion. 'B' and 'D' surveyed at 1:2500. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 1st May 1980.

### **Loch Caladail Site no. 41**

NMRS Number: NC36NE 21 Location: NC 3909 6645 Site Type: Settlement (Possible) Description: NC 3909 6645. An occupation site may have existed on an eroded sand-hill, from which Mr Campbell (G Campbell, Achins, Durness) has obtained a few medieval or

later pot-sherds and pieces of metal. It may have been abandoned because of shifting sand. No evidence of building was seen. The finds are in Mr Campbell's possession, as is a quantity of water-worn stones and pebbles of no archaeological value. Visited by Ordnance Survey 4th June 1959. No trace and no further information. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 20th July 1971.

No change to previous field report. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 9th May 1980.

A survey was undertaken along a proposed water pipeline route close to Durness. The assessment was designed to identify and evaluate any archaeological monuments present in the areas, through the examination of documentary sources and fieldwalking. The results of this work suggested that, although the locality is rich in archaeological remains, the pipeline successfully avoids all but a few monuments of lesser worth. Only previously unrecorded monuments are presented in the following list

NC 3875 6607 (centre) Rig and furrow

NC 3876 6603 to NC 3881 6609 Turf bank.

NC 3890 6604 to NC 3892 6608 Turf bank.

NC 3894 6606 Penannular stone feature.

NC 3923 6598 to NC 3926 6601 to NC 3930 6609 Fieldbank.

NC 3936 6602 Small stone pile.

NC 3914 6600 Sheepfold.

NC 3921 6609 to NC 3926 6611 Turf dyke.

NC 3923 6611 (centre) Rig and furrow.

NC 3909 6600 to NC 3910 6609 to NC 3906 6637 Field bank.

Gap between NC3910 6605 and NC 39106606 NC 3881 6616 (centre) Turf banked, rectilinear enclosure. The entry noted that a report would be lodged with NMRS. Sponsor: Highland Regional Council. (T Neighbour 1995).

Note: This site was the subject of a site visit on 10th May 2004. With the exception of the turf dykes/ banks and some evidence of rig and furrow, the features recorded above were not easily identifiable. It is considered that this site would not be a good candidate for interpretation to the general public, particularly as better (ie, more easily identifiable) examples can be seen in the Loch Croispol area.

#### **Loch Caladail West Site no. 42**

NMRS Number: NC36NE 35 Location: NC 393 663 Site Type: Hut-Circles Description: ('A': NC 3927 6639 & 'B': NC 3933 6632 & 'C': NC 3928 6629) Huts or enclosures. Visible on OS air photographs 68.057: 090-1 (flown 15th April 1968) A settlement of three oval stone-walled huts (A-C). Heavy peat growth over the surrounding area and no trace of contemporary cultivation. 'A' measures 11.5m NW-SE by 10.0m transversely between the centres of a wall, obscured by peat, spread to indeterminate width except in the NE where two outer facing stones are evident and the wall is spread to 2.5m. The entrance in the SE is ill-defined. 'B' measures 13.5m NW-SE by 11.0m transversely. The wall is mainly obscured by peat except in the NW where it incorporates a rocky outcrop. The entrance in the SE is ill-defined. 'C' measures 10.0m WNW-ESE by 8.5m transversely between the centres of a wall, obscured by peat and spread to an indeterminate width. The entrance in the SE is ill-defined. The S arc is scarcely discernible. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 22nd July 1971. No change to the previous field report. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 21st April 1980. Note: This site was walked was the

subject of a visit on 10th May 2004. The features previously recorded were not easily identifiable, and there was some doubt as to whether all are actually hut circles as opposed to natural features or later sheep-related structures. It is considered that this site would not be a good candidate for interpretation to the general public, particularly as better (ie, more easily identifiable) examples can be seen in the Loch Croispol area.

#### **Loch Meadaidh Site no. 43**

NMRS Number: NC36SE 5 Location: NC 398 640 Site Type: Shieling-Huts Description: (Centred NC 398 640) Old Shielings (NAT) (Remains of) OS 6"map, (1961) NC 3978 6401. Situated at the head of Loch Meadie on low-lying ground which has been cleared are approximately twelve shieling foundations mostly of square plan. There are no circular ones among them. They lie between two streams and all are considerably mutilated. They vary from 3.0m by 2.4m to 5.0m by 2.4m and 0.2m maximum height. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 7th April 1960. No change to the previous field report. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 21st November 1978.

#### **Bealach Mor Site no. 44**

NMRS Number: NC36SE 8 Location: NC 38 60 Site Type: Chapel (Possible) Description: 'The Red Priest is believed to have built a chapel at Bealach Mhor between Durness (NC 403 677) and Eriboll (NC 432 565) at which the inhabitants of Eriboll occasionally worshipped . . . The Red Priest is said to have been the last incumbent of Farr (NC 7163) or of Durness previously to the Reformation and withal a worker of miracles.' (OPS 1855). The only 'Bealach Mor' between Durness and Eriboll would appear to be at NC 3860. It seems ridiculous to suggest that the inhabitants of Eriboll worshipped here but the name 'Ach na h' Anaite' (NC 385 656) might have some relevance. 'The Red Priest' is also associated with Durness church (NC36NE 1) which, in turn, is associated with St Maelrubha. (See also Applecross (NG74NW 1) for the association of St Maelrubha and the 'Red Priest'.) Orig Paroch Scot 1855; Information contained in letter from E McIver to J Loch. No further information was found locally regarding this site. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 22 April 1980.

#### **Allt An Tighe Site no. 45**

NMRS Number: NC35NE 6 Location: NC 3875 5877 Site Type: Cairn Scheduled Ancient Monument Description: (NC 3875 5877) A cairn, 25 ft by 16 ft, with an upright pointed stone at the SW end, lies at a height of 1075 ft about 80 yds. N of NC35NE 3. R Reid 1968; Information from Dr C S Sandeman, Durness, 14th March 1967. This is a natural accumulation of broken slab in a glacial field. It is a feature of the area. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 15th April 1980. Scheduled with NC35NE 2, 3 and 5 as Meall nan Cra, cairns. Information from Historic Scotland, scheduling document dated 13th December 2000.

#### **Allt An Tighe Site no. 46**

NMRS Number: NC35NE 5 Location: NC 3870 5874 Site Type: Cairn Scheduled Ancient Monument Description: (NC 3870 5874) A cairn lies, at an elevation of 1075ft, about 100yds NW of NC35NE 2. It is constructed of thin slabs placed on edge with their long axes tangential to the 'circle', 17 ft by 14 ft. R Reid 1968; Information from Dr C S Sandeman, Durness, 14th March 1967. This is a natural accumulation of broken slab in a glacial field. It is a feature of the area. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 15th April 1980. Scheduled with NC35NE 2, 3 and 6 as Meall nan Cra, cairns. Information from Historic Scotland, scheduling document dated 13th December 2000.

### **Allt An Tighe Site no. 47**

NMRS Number: NC35NE 3 Location: NC 3875 5869 Site Type: Cairn SMR Number: NC35NE0003 Scheduled Ancient Monument Description: (NC 3875 5869) A possible cairn, oval, measuring 16 ft by 13 t, lies about 80 ft NW of NC35NE 2. R Reid 1968; Information from Dr C S Sandeman, Durness, 14th March 1967. This is a natural accumulation of broken slab in a glacial field. It is a feature of the area. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 15th April 1980. Scheduled with NC35NE 2, 5 and 6 as Meall nan Cra, cairn. Information from Historic Scotland, scheduling document dated 13th December 2000.

### **Allt An Tighe Site no. 48**

NMRS Number: NC35NE 2 Location: NC 3877 5866 Site Type: Cairn Scheduled Ancient Monument Description: NC 3877 5866. A large round cairn is situated on fairly level ground NE of Carn an Righ at a height of 1050 ft OD. It measures 19.0m in diameter with a maximum height of 4.0m, but the W half only remains, the E half having been extensively robbed. It is formed of small broken stones and is partly heather and turf covered. In the centre, a number of flat stones, not in situ, possibly represent the remains of a cist. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 3rd June 1959. This is a natural mound of shattered rock in a glacial field. There are several similar mounds in the area. Published survey (6") deleted. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 15th April 1980. The Ordnance Survey surveyor (15th April 1980) is incorrect in his description and the earlier visit in 1959 is more accurate. This is a large D-shaped cairn which may be chambered, although the slumped internal slab-built construction makes this hard to determine for certain. There are also a number of smaller cairns nearby. Information contained in a letter from Historic Scotland (Dr N Fojut), dated 16th August 2000. Scheduled with NC35NE 3, 5 and 6 as Meall nan Cra, cairns. Information from Historic Scotland, scheduling document dated 13 December 2000.

### **Loch Caladail Site no. 49**

NMRS Number: NC36NE 22 Location: NC 3949 6612 Site Type: Cairn: Kerb Description: On a rise, a cairn 10.7m overall diameter and 0.8m high, partly robbed but not deep enough to expose a cist. Six boulders (two displaced) of the kerb survive in the SE arc. The rest of the kerb has been removed, leaving a trench 0.7m wide by 0.3m deep in which the boulders were embedded. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 5th April 1960 and 22nd July 1971.

### **Loch Caladail Site no. 50**

NMRS Number: NC36NE 11 Location: NC 391 660 Site Type: Settlement Description: Two well-defined hut circles: 'A' – A circle of stones with a slight bank in places. It measures 8.2m by 9.2m with a 1.0m wide entrance on the E. The interior is slightly scooped, the floor lying 0.7m below the bank. 'B' – A bank of earth and stones 0.7m high by 1.0m broad. A revetting kerb is clearly visible on the NW and the entrance is in the NE. It lies at the base of a rocky scarp. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 7th April 1960. Three other huts (D, E and F) noted by Dr Sandeman at NC 3917 6614, NC 3915 6607 and NC 3919 6601. Information from Dr C S Sandeman, Durness, 14 March 1967. A settlement of six stone-walled huts (A – F), centred at NC 391 660. Apart from two or three denuded stone clearance heaps near hut 'F', there is no trace of contemporary cultivation. The area is enclosed by later walls and has been used for rough grazing. 'A' is circular, measuring 9.5m in diameter between the centres of a wall spread to 2.5m. The outer face is visible in the W and the inner face in the N. The simple entrance is in the E. Inside the hut are several stones which have rolled from the wall. 'B' is oval, measuring 7.0m NE-SW by 6.0m transversely between the centres of a wall spread to 2.0m. The outer wall face is apparent in the NE. The simple entrance is in the NE. 'C' and 'D' are identical and measure 10.0m E-W by 8.5m transversely between the centres of a wall spread



to 2.5m. Each has a mutilated entrance in the E. There is a swallow hole in the centre of 'C'. 'E' measures 10.5m in diameter between the centres of a wall spread to 2.5m. The simple entrance in the ESE is flanked on the N side of an earthfast stone. Immediately outside the entrance on the S side is an outer wall facing stone. Some 4.0m outside the entrance is a mound which is probably a contemporary ramp leading to the hut door. 'F', heavily overgrown with peat, measures 9.0m in diameter between the centres of a wall spread to about 2.0m. There is an earthfast stone on the S side of the simple entrance which is in the E. There is also an earthfast stone on the outside wall in the N. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 21st July 1971. This settlement of six hut circles among undulating limestone country is as described in the previous field report. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 14th November 1978. Note: This site was the subject of a site visit on 10th May 2004. The features previously recorded were not easily identifiable, and the site is situated at some distance on foot from the village of Durness. It is considered that this site would not be a good candidate for interpretation to the general public, particularly as better (ie, more easily identifiable and closer to the village) examples can be seen in the Loch Croispol area.

### **Cnoc Na Moine Site no. 51**

NMRS Number: NC36NE 85 Location: NC 3914 6600 Site Type: Sheepfold Description: A survey was undertaken along a proposed water pipeline route close to Durness. The assessment was designed to identify and evaluate any archaeological monuments present in the areas, through the examination of documentary sources and fieldwalking. The results of this work suggested that, although the locality is rich in archaeological remains, the pipeline successfully avoids all but a few monuments of lesser worth. Sponsor: Highland Regional Council. (T Neighbour 1995).

### **Site no. 52 Cape Wrath Hotel**

NMRS Number: NC36NE 13 Location: NC 3898 6609 Site Type: Chambered Cairn Description: The heavily robbed remains of an Orkney-Cromarty round cairn with a polygonal chamber (A S Henshall 1972), found during field investigation (OS [JLD] 7 April 1960). Peat covers the remains of the cairn material but a slight bank round the W and N sides seems to represent the original edge of the cairn giving a diameter of between 55 ft and 65 ft. The cairn material seems to have spread beyond the original edge on the E and S, the orthostats of the chamber standing in the resulting slight hollow with varying amount of cairn material surrounding them. Robbing has been heaviest behind the chamber, inside which there is about 3 ft of stone. A S Henshall 1972, visited 1963; Visited by Ordnance Survey, 7th April 1963. Sutherland: An Illustrated Architectural Guide: Cape Wrath Hotel, Keoldale (also Keodale). From c 1835. Typical double-pile north-west Sutherland estate house similar to Melvich Hotel and Scourie; crow-stepped gables, diagonal chimney stacks, balck and white paintwork. Unusual small circular walled gardens. Set in green fields on a sheltered site on the shores of the Kyle of Durness, Keoldale was long occupied but the Balnakeil factors of the Lords of Reay, whose principal residence was at Tongue.

### **Keodale Site no. 53**

NMRS Number: NC36NE 12 Location: NC 3888 6640 Site Type: Cairn; Mound Description: The remains of a cairn, 12.5m in diameter and 1.2m high, now turf-covered and considerably mutilated. The footings of a small house encroach on the E side. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 8th April 1960. Some 20m to the NE is another mound, 9.0m in diameter and about 1.0m high, which shows some stone content; possibly a cairn. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 23rd July 1971. The cairn published by the Ordnance Survey is as described by Ordnance Survey field surveyor. The mound to the NE is heather-covered, contrasting sharply with the turf mantle of

the cairn, and though some stone is apparent in its content, it cannot be classified with certainty as a cairn, and it may even be a natural accumulation. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 28th May 1980

#### **Cnoc Na Moine, North Site no. 54**

NMRS Number: NC36NE 48 Location: NC 3892 6627 Site Type: Cairn Description: At NC 3892 6627 on top of a knoll is an oval, turf-covered stony mound about 8.5m by 6.5m. Possible cairn, possibly natural. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 22nd July 1971. This is probably a cairn, prominently situated on a knoll in a similar position to the example 150m to the NNW (NC36NE 12). It appears to be composed of rubble stones, but is disturbed, surviving to a height of 0.3m. No cist or kerb is exposed, and what remains is too slight to enable sound classification. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 22nd May 1980.

#### **Cape Wrath Hotel Site no. 55**

NMRS Number: NC36NE 14 Location: NC 3906 6613 Site Type: Cairn: Kerb SMR Number: NC36NE0014 Scheduled Ancient Monument Description: An approximately circular setting of six large stones which appears to be the kerb of a robbed cairn about 15.5m in diameter. It is situated on the summit of a knoll. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 7th April 1960. The poor remains of a robbed cairn surviving as a rim of cairn material, about 14.0m in diameter and 0.2m in height. Within the cairn, and outside it on the N, are about twelve boulders, some earthfast, presenting no intelligible plan, which probably constitute part of a displaced kerb. These boulders are very similar to the kerb of the cairn described on NC36NE Visited by Ordnance Survey, 21st July 1971.

#### **Cnoc Na Moine Site no. 56**

NMRS Number: NC36NE 34 Location: NC 391 659 Site Type: Hut-Circles Description: NC 3918 6593) Probable hut circle with a most unusual entrance; 27 1/2 ft by 28 ft. (NC 3918 6597) (i) Ruined hut circle, overall 36 ft. (ii) Some 50 ft to the S is a hut circle, with a complex entrance facing E; overall 32 ft. Information from Dr C S Sandeman, Durness, 14th March 1967. (NC 391 659) A group of three hut circles (A – C) lying between the 150 ft and 175 ft contours. ‘A’, at NC 3918 6593, is built against a steep bank. It measures 29 ft by 37 ft 6 ins overall and has an extended entrance. ‘B’ at NC 3918 6597, measures 36ft overall. ‘C’ lies about 50 ft S of ‘B’ and has measured about 32 ft overall. The entrance is sheltered by a boomerang-shaped arrangement of stones, thought to have protected a cooking-fire. RWK Reid 1968. The site, in a valley of broken limestone country, comprises two hut circles (‘A’ and ‘C’). ‘B’ was not certainly identified, but an arc of walling at the given location has possibly been interpreted as a hut. ‘A’, at NC 3918 6592, is as described above, being 8.0m N-S by 6.0m internally. The elongated entrance in the S is 2.8m long and 0.7m wide. The hut wall is more evident on the E side, opposite the steep slope, where it is spread to 2.0m and 0.4m high. A number of outer facing stones are visible around this arc. ‘C’, at NC 3920 6596, is about 7.5m in diameter within a wall spread to 1.5m and 0.3m high. The entrance is in the E with an upright slab 0.5m high probably defining the inner S side. The ‘boomerang-shaped arrangement of stones’ was not noted. A sheep track crossing the hut has slightly disfigured the wall in two places in the S. The wall is best-preserved in the SSE where some outer facing stones show. A small number of widely scattered clearance heaps are the only evidence of contemporary cultivation.

#### **Balnakeil Church Site no. 57**

NMRS Number: NC36NE 1.01 Location: NC 39090 68653 Site Type: Church Description: The remains of the former parish church which was built in 1619 and had an aisle added to the N in 1692. It was in use until about 1814 when the present church was built (at NC 4042 6693).

Although somewhat irregular in plan, it is generally typical of its period with a belfry on the E gable. The remains stand to the wall-head, the crow-stepped gables being intact. The earliest reference occurs between 1223 and 1245 when it was assigned to find light and incense for the cathedral church (NH78NE), but it is said to have been a Celtic foundation of St Maelrubha (6, 7 & 8). An old font known as the ‘Clach na sagart ruadh’ or ‘stone of the Red Priest’ (cf Applecross – NG74NW 1 – for association of St Maelrubha and ‘the Red Priest’), lay in front of the door of Balnakeil House (NC36NE 4) before 1867 but by 1874 it had been moved to within the church. The church is said to occupy ‘the site of a cell of Dornoch monastery’ (? NH78NE), but there is no mention of such by Easson. Visible on RAF air photographs CPE/Scot/UK 185: 1150-1: flown 1946. Orig Paroch Scot 1855; J Horsburgh 1870; H Morrison 1883; D MacGibbon and T Ross 1897; RCAHMS 1911; A Mackay 1914; A B Scott 1918; D E Easson 1957. What could be a former, circular, enclosing bank of the churchyard is visible on aerial photographs within the confines of the Modern graveyard. D E Easson 1957. The church is well preserved, the walls of rubble masonry being 0.8m thick and averaging 2.3m in height. Externally, the nave measures 13.8m by 6.0m and the aisle 7.7m by 6.0m. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 5th April 1960. This church is as described and planned by MacGibbon and Ross. The font stands within the church and is covered by the top half of a rotary quern. There is no ground trace of the suggested circular graveyard wall. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 22nd July 1971. The church is as described by the previous authorities. The font has been removed by persons unknown in recent years. A holy water stoup, now cracked in half, lies immediately inside the church entrance on the S side. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 22nd April 1980. Scheduled as Durness Old Church, Balnakeil. Information from Historic Scotland, scheduling document dated 9 October 2001. Sutherland: An Illustrated Architectural Guide: 1619, north aisle 1692, some reconstruction, including gables, 1727-28. Roofless crowstepped T-plan church with similarities to Tongue Church. The oldest portion is aligned east-west in pre-Reformation manner, apparently incorporating the ground plan of an earlier medieval church. Table tomb of Duncan MacMorrach. Memorial in burial ground to Rob Donn, the “Burns of the North”.

### **Balnakeil House Site no. 58**

and associated features NMRS Number: NC36NE 4 Location: NC 3919 6863 Site Type: Laird’s House Description: Balnakeil House, built in 1744, occupies the site of the former summer residence of the Bishop of Caithness (D MacGibbon and T Ross 1891), which was presumably the ‘Castle of Durinas’ referred to by Gordon in 1630 as having existed at ‘Baill-ne-Kill’. Balnacille mannour, there was to be seen – till this last year (i.e. 1725) that it was thrown down for building a new house – the ruins of an old wall about eight or nine foot thick and in some places thirty foot high, without any window thereon, it seemed to extend on the one side one hundred foot long, and in breadth forty foot; there is no tradition by whom it was built, or for what purpose; it seems to have been some old monastery (W Macfarlane 1906). (The present house is a mansion in the traditional style, harled, with crowsteps (1967). R Gordon 1813; D MacGibbon and T Ross 1891; W Macfarlane 1906. The house is in use. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 23rd June 1960. Superbly situated on a mound, Balnakeil House may incorporate remains of the bishop’s residence but appears to be basically a laird’s house of the 17th century, altered and extended the following century, forming an E-plan with the main block running N-S and the wings projecting W at either end. The oldest part of the house is said to be the N wing but the walling is very thick in various other parts. The walls are harled and rise to three storeys and a garret, with the gables crow-stepped. N Tranter 1970. No trace of the earlier work. The present house is occupied and is of no outstanding architectural merit. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 22nd July 1971. Balnakeil (nameplate) is situated on a natural rocky mound. No change to previous information. Visited by Ordnance Survey, 15th April

1980. Sutherland: An Illustrated Architectural Guide: Commenced in 1720s, allegedly completed c 744. Incorporates earlier cellars and perhaps earlier fabric in the west (rear) elevation, probably of medieval summer palace of the Bishops of Caithness. Important and handsome crowstepped two-storey, shallow U-plan mansion, this was the occasional residence of the Lords of Reay. Walled garden is dated 1863, farm steading incorporated the earliest improved buildings in the north-west, disused early 19th Century corn mill served by lade (millstream) diverted from the burn flowing out of Loch Croispol. Ruined wheelhouse downstream from the mill once housed a wheel and endless wire rope on pulley wheels running up to the steading to motivate threshing machinery and agricultural tasks, the only known detached wheelhouse of its type in the Highlands. The Balnakeil area is notable for fine drystone dykes enclosing the fields. (Note: This is an extract of a more detailed entry for Balnakeil House and associated buildings which can be found in the book).

### **Balnakeil Craft Village Site no. 59**

NMRS Number: NC36NE 90 Location: NC 3928 6791 Site Type: Village Description: Post-1939-45 war built village visible on vertical air photographs (V 540/RAF/1631, 0081-0082, flown 1 June 1955). The air photographs show the village under construction. Information from RCAHMS, May 2004 Sutherland: An Illustrated Architectural Guide: 1939-1945. Rehabilitated military encampment of flat-roofed white-painted cabins, quite incongruous in relation to its Highland setting but full of varying enterprise, including hotel and craft workshops.

## **Durness Development Group**

Until 2009 I was very involved with Durness Development Group, designing projects and securing funding. I was secretary, administrator for the Company. I detail here the activities that occurred during my participation. Until 2020 when the company was dissolved I was involved with Mackay Country Community Trust as Secretary, administrator carrying out much the same duties as I had with Durness Development Group. Both groups are outlined here and some of the projects undertaken detailed in the book text.

The past in Durness is very much of a more populated place than at present and hence recent development of industry and commerce has been practically non-existent. Few influences have altered the life and living to the extent of society at large. Development has moved at a slow rate. New and established businesses have been deterred from the locality by the uneconomic distance from suppliers and markets and the infrastructure of road and rail being unsuitable. The economics for development from outside have not been practical. Small-scale business development in answer to local demand has been the result.

### **History behind forming Durness Development Group**

This area has been the subject of various initiatives the most recent was Duthchas a European Scheme and Initiative at the Edge a Government programme. These projects set in motion the first stages whereby the area communities could draw up their own development programme and then with the assistance of local funding agencies take some of the projects forward. Amongst the conclusions drawn was that that local remote villages should form structures as the development group to tackle local problems from local ideas. This group followed the model examples provided from these initiatives.

The Durness Development Group started in July 2000 at a public meeting in Durness Village hall attended by forty people with an interest in tourism. Durness Community Council and Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise initiated the first meeting after a number of people approached these organisations with concerns about the lack of community development and coordination especially for visitors. There was serious concern for the lack of underdeveloped facilities. The community has an aging population and the younger members have to leave because of lack of opportunities. Many suggestions had been made about tackling the problems but there has been no coherent coordinated attempt to carry out any feasibility study.

The Group's first aim was to improve communication within the community, and with this in mind a monthly diary was produced so that visitors and locals were up to date with forthcoming events. A newsletter and the Durness diary were available to everyone, and the diary was regularly updated. The information was also included on a new web site created for this purpose. The group constantly looked for new ideas to encourage visitors both to come and stay in and around Durness, and they were all be considered after feasibility and costing exercises have been undertaken.

Frequent meetings continued with a regular core and floating attendances. Specific ideas for the village development as a whole were being suggested along with the intention of acquiring premises suitable for the group's own needs and to enable the group to assist with the requirements of other village organisations. A more suitable structure and remit were necessary than a tourist group and the group proposed that an incorporated body limited by guarantee without shares would be the best way forward. Articles of association and memorandum were prepared and submitted to the Inland Revenue for acceptance as charitable status. A Network21 application was submitted for funding for a three months post to hire a research worker to develop a three year plan. Discussions had taken place with the Community Land Fund and Scottish Land Fund about purchasing a property in Durness. Two premises were considered

the one being most appropriate was sold in advance of the groups offer. In the beginning of May 2001 an extraordinary general meeting was called to elect new office bearers and prepare the ground for establishing a limited company with directors with a wider remit than tourism. The name was changed to Durness Development Group.

The group's statement of purpose was,

"Encourage and promote sustainable development in the Parish of Durness for the benefit of the community"

Sustainability and innovation were the main criteria for grant aid. All the projects undertaken were financed in this way. Grant schemes came and went with funding bodies and the process of delivering projects to fit criteria was a challenge as the projects were fundamentally ideas from people living in the operation area. Social, economic, and environmental conditions were the basis of project development. The projects undertaken from inception to 2009.

### **2002-2004**

Work in partnership with the community council to develop a footpath network around Durness. Funding secured through the Highland Council.

Commissioned archaeological consultants Rowan Tree Consulting to report on two important sites. The ruins of an old school at Croispol and Ceannabeinne Township. Funded by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. Both are detailed in this work.

Feasibility Studies on Durness Estates with funding from Community Land Unit Strengthening Communities Group to discover the potential of the purchase of Durness Estate as a whole. This proved after detailed consultations and feasibility studies to be an unviable project and was not pursued.

A Renewable Energy feasibility study on Durness Estate by Grangeston Economics to give the community an opportunity to understand the true potential of the estate and address the local needs.

Successful application to the Scottish Land Fund and Highlands and Islands Enterprise to purchase a community building to house a Youth Café and office facility and employ a supervisor and work with the North West Youth Initiative to prepare a funding package to have the property converted to health and safety and building regulations.

Employed a Youth Worker to provide a supervisor coordinator and leader for all the groups that involve youths in the parish of Durness. This post was funded for three years by the Lotteries Community Fund and the job share commenced on the 1<sup>st</sup>. April 2004.

Organised with Durness Youth Club Young Roots a youth heritage discovery, interpretation, display and creation scheme funded through Heritage Lotteries in conjunction with Durness Youth Club and Scotland Against Drugs.

Liaison with the North Sutherland Community Development Forum in initiating a scheme that encompasses the area of North West Sutherland formally the Land of the Clan Mackay which instigated four Mackay Country projects.

- Intervillage Marketing. Funded by Community Economic Development programme.
- Mackay Country web site. Funded by Community Economic Development programme.
- Signage Strategy. Funded by Community Economic Development programme.
- Back to the Future partnership between Scottish Communities Action Research Fund, Heritage Lotteries and Community Economic Development and CASE to fund one full time researcher and four part time research assistants to deliver this project.

### **2003**

In 2003 The Tourist Board put Durness Development Group forward for a Thistle Award.

### **Purchased Bard Terrace Community House**

#### **Durness Community Building 1 Bard Terrace**

This building was acquired with  
funding from  
The Scottish Land Fund  
Opened on the 5th. April 2003  
by  
Councillor Margaret Davidson

The building houses 3 offices and a  
Youth Leisure and Recreational Facility  
For the North West Youth Initiative

For the success of this project we gratefully  
acknowledge the funders:

Scottish Land Fund, Highland & Islands Enterprise  
Community Land Unit, Network Twenty-One, Social  
Inclusion Partnership, Caithness and Sutherland  
Enterprise, Scotland Against Drugs, Princes Trust,  
Community Economic Development, Initiative at the  
Edge

After local discussions about the possible acquisition of the empty Health Board property in Bard Terrace that was in the past used for medical staff accommodation the Durness Development Group made approaches about the possible acquisition. The house had been empty for two years and was no longer of use to the Health Board. This process started around March 2001 and initial talks revealed that the Scottish Land Unit would be able to assist with the purchase when a detailed plan of the uses was available. This was found to be the provision of an administration centre and office facilities for the group and employees, provide facilities for the North West Youth Initiative, supply administration and offices space for agencies and offer a meeting place for the group and other community groups and to establish an administrative centre. An application was submitted to the Land Fund in August 2001 to purchase the property, and have alterations carried out. Supporting funders Highland & Islands

Enterprise Community Land Unit, Network Twenty-one, Social Inclusion Partnership, Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise, Scotland Against Drugs, Princes Trust, Community Economic Development and Initiative at the Edge funded the recreation and leisure facility, youth café and accommodation for multi-functional community uses. Two computers with public internet access were available through the Scottish Executive Digital Inclusion Strategy. The facility was opened on 5<sup>th</sup>. April 2003 by Councillor Margaret Davidson.

### **2005**

**Mackay Country.** With the conclusion looming of Mackay Country Back to the Future successful meetings took place with the principal of the University of the Highlands and Islands in particular the History faculty to cultivate heritage projects in Mackay Country and this scheme will be removed from the Development Group structure and independently created into a company in its own right.

**Home Front.** A Heritage Oral History project which ran from 2005 into spring 2006. It was focused on exploring the experiences of World War II in Mackay Country. The aim was to record the 'Home Front' memories of local men and women Themes to be covered included memories of evacuees, domestic life (food, clothes, croft etc.), memories of serving in armed forces, memories of forces stationed in area, homecoming memories and thoughts on what World War II meant at the time and what it means to people now. Funded through a Lotteries Scheme to mark 60 years since the end of the war.

**New Dynamics.** This project involved 13 - 20 year olds in finding out about their heritage, developing skills, building confidence and promoting community involvement. Our project is related to the local and culturally varied heritage of the UK and beyond. At one occasion during the project we had youth's visits from the World Youth Congress, from international cultures. New Dynamics was funded through Scotland Against Drugs, and Heritage Lottery Young Roots.

- The project involved young people researching local archives and doing practical work on the findings. A professional researcher was commissioned and youths had the opportunity to investigate the wealth of heritage work in the information previously gathered and currently being catalogued including, video and photographic material and supplement this with new material relevant to the local heritage.
- Young people with guidance interpreted this with digital technology into visual animated and reality displays building into a cyber museum. Digital artists were commissioned to provide expertise. Youths were involved in an archaeological dig which demonstrated the technical and practical side of how delicate the environment is and how it must be treated in respect to understanding the perception of the past.
- A third aspect of the project was producing in ceramic an artefact to commemorate the present activity in context with the past discovered in the dig and archives, Earth to Earth.
- **Peer Support Worker** George Miller was employed for 30 hours a week from to August to work on the youth aspects of the projects of the Development Group and maintain the ongoing running of the Digital Studio when there were no artists in residence. Funding for this was channelled from the grant applications with youth aspect.

**Leaflet.** Forward Scotland granted funds to have the first Mackay Country brochure produced.

**Cape Wrath.** Application to the Scottish Executive to register a community interest in land for a community buyout.

**Arts Residency.** An application to the Lottery funded Scottish Arts Council Partners Residency Programme and Highland 2007 awarded Durness Development Group Mackay Country project funds for the commissioning of three artists for a period of three months each to work with sites of historical and scientific interest and develop work that would be accessible to the local community and beyond.

## **2006**

**Ceannabeinne Township.** Funding secured from Your Heritage Lottery fund, Scottish Natural Heritage and Highland Year of Culture 2007 for a research project.

**Durness brochure.** Grant help for was given to the community council to update and printing the A3 colour brochure of Durness.

**Data protection** policy and registration was carried out during this year.

**Tourist Information Centre** meeting plan, displays are being coordinated by the development group and funds for an interpretive planner are secured through Scottish Natural Heritage for a consultant to coordinate all the ideas of the groups involved.

## **2007**



**Youth Workers.** This 3 year successful program came to an end in May 2007 but an application was submitted to Lloyds TSB. Margery Morrison was retained on a reduced salary with responsibilities centred around Bard Terrace.

**Renewable Energy.** An ongoing liaison for a Renewable Energy project was initiated. Funding for one year has been secured from the Big Lotteries.

**Tourist Information Centre.** Durness Development Group Limited commission consultants to develop an Interpretive Plan for Durness Tourist Information Centre. This Interpretive Plan was prepared by Rowan Tree Consulting. The overall aim of the plan was to provide a framework for the development of thematically-co-ordinated interpretation at the Durness Tourist Information Centre and Visitor Centre. As part of the process of preparing the draft plan, we looked at existing interpretive provision and how it might be refreshed or improved as well as at options for new interpretive provision. The plan identified the target audience or audiences including visitors to Durness and local people, and included a range of interests and abilities surveyed over the season in 2007. Identified sub themes reflecting a breakdown of topics for each subject and identified how they relate to the main theme. These subjects included archaeology, geology, local history and its wider context, natural heritage including wildlife, biodiversity, and landscape, current and historic land use including crofting and water resources. Each of the behavioural, emotional, promotional and learning objectives of the interpretation were addressed.

## 2008

**Youth Workers** Funding application to Lloyds TSB for a further 3 years of employing the youth workers has been successful and with this discretionary funding from the Ward Forum budget of the Highland Council.

**Renewable Energy.** RD Energy Solutions Ltd was commissioned to tender to provide support in relation to an on-shore wind energy feasibility study on parts of the Durness estates. Pre planning documentation was written and the steps completed for an Environmental Impact Assessment to be initiated as soon as the economics regarding hydroelectric line infrastructure improvements have been declared.

**Tourist Information Centre.** Following on from the commission consultants to develop an interpretive plan for Durness Tourist Information Centre a registration of Interest was successfully lodged with the Scottish Government.

## 2009

**Two Renewable Energy schemes pursued.** Hydro Scheme on Loch Meadaidh- Hydro Pre-Feasibility Report has shown that the project is worth pursuing. Community Energy Scotland has given support to work forward in the CARES schemes. This allows a financial input to develop the project to planning. This is underway with an application to LEADER for a Community Coordinator and a tender brief to commission a consultant to work closely with the Community.

Onshore wind Energy – SRDP requirements being pursued and both the project and line upgrade are being followed.

Potential for a wind generator specific to the village hall appeared feasible.

**Interpretation & Exploration of the landscape at Loch Croispol.** The Schoolhouse and the position of this in the history and heritage of Mackay Country funded by Heritage Lottery, Highland Legacy and Historic Scotland.

This was my last project with Durness Development Group.

The renewable energy projects were studied by an outside consultant and no further action was taken. Changes were made to the trustees and Bard Terrace was converted back to living accommodation and rented. Information from the annual trustee's reports shows accumulated substantial resources from rent income from Bard Terrace which can be used to fund projects in the community. A sum was given towards toilets at Cape Wrath, funding youth workers, bike hire, impact assessment for Loch Eriboll harbor, health hub at village hall, funding for local development officer, renewal of right to buy Tourist Information Centre and Cape Wrath, and organising the senior citizens Christmas party. The group continues to operate.

## New Dynamics and Young Routes

Several threads ran through this project, entwining to bring together physical relics from the past and the present.

In 2004 – 2005 the young people of Durness worked with Beverley Carpenter, artist in residence for the projects. Over the period Beverly engaged a range of artists that visited Durness to set up and work in a digital arts studio with the young people. The success of the project was dependence on the idea being acceptable. We planned to involve drama, music, language and art explaining the findings with 3d, animations in graphic visual displays from



IMAGE 200 THE EXHIBITION OF THE YOUTH PROJECT NEW DYNAMICS AND YOUNG ROUTES

video and photography.

Beverley appointed moving image artists, working with the youths in producing animations using Macromedia Flash for incorporation into DVD and later use in online website. (Unfortunately control of the website remained with the artists and eventually was lost from the internet.) In the studio they transferred dv tape material to cd and printing images of animation frames and gathering of data for the website of profiles of the young people.

Beverly said *“I see the work with the young people as being the community element of the residency that had two separate strands to it, one, continuation of my own work as artist, two, work with young people here. Work produced with the young people, and largely by them will also be shown on the final night. This is in many ways separate to my concept of the use of the cave and is largely a learning project for them. They have the opportunity after I have left to go on to produce art films that are more considered now that they have the necessary skills. They have also provided me with a rich source of interaction and research material to work with during my time here and we have enjoyed learning from each other in professional and social terms.”*

Gabriel Norland, DJ and sound artist passed on skills in DJ, sound and software to the young people involved in the project. He developed ways to engage the young people and organisation of workshops allowing them to learn new skills and develop existing skills. They worked with sound software, hardware and engaged their own creative responses. They collected and

produced material (i.e. sound recordings, documentation of events etc.). One of the outcomes of this residency was a song ‘Something About Love’. The music video for this song was piled from documentary footage of the workshops that took place throughout Sutherland. It was shot and edited entirely by youths. This artist residency responded strongly with the pieces of music created for the Virtual Mackay website. An excellent video was produced with Karen Whiteread “*Lost for Words.*”

Roger Day writer and web designer was working in poetry with audio clips and vocal recordings to overlay pictures and compiling text from interviews working with local dialects and sound clips. These have come from young people, a fisherman, mixed in with a clip from visitors to the area and project and interlinked to a range of commentaries. This artist held school workshops and several sessions in the digital studio with the youths.

Video footage, photographic images and interviews were recorded of the different stages – both of the work and of the young people’s reactions to it. This, along with other digital images of the process and the products, was developed into a piece of digital art by the students involved, working with a digital artist and an archaeologist specialising in IT. This was mounted on the web for wider appreciation and published on DVD. It also formed the centrepiece of an event and exhibition to celebrate the completion of the project and display the results.

The wall, was the final media event, at Smoo Cave. This event of cave architecture and contemporary video featured work created by the young people. There was film projections onto the cave walls and sound works provided by London disc jockeys, Gabe Norland and Richard Searle. They were mixing and improvising soundscapes in addition to providing some funky house dance rhythms. The concept of connecting the past (cave paintings) with the future (cave projections) is Beverley’s area of research “Moving Image in Architecture”. The Durness New Media Production & Projection kit was funded by CASE, CED & Highland Council Social Inclusion Partnership.

The opportunity to become involved with a delegation from the World Youth Congress through the Princes Trust was a highlight during this project. In August 2005. The Congress young people visiting spent 2 half days and one full day three nights participating in our Digital project.

### **An Art Project with GUARD and Lotte Glob**

To help young people relate to the past and to give something back to it. It involved taking something from the Borrallie archaeological site – clay that was used to make a floor inside a building hundreds of years old – and transforming it by fire into objects that are meaningful in the present. These objects were returned to the ground, bearing messages that convey something about the present. In this way, the clay taken from the dig became part of the ground again, but in a new form, having taken on new meanings.

A group of young people initially spend time on the excavations, helping to excavate the site, making contact with the physical remains of the past and forming impressions of what it was like to live there hundreds of years ago.

Clay floor deposits were found inside the building being excavated, and these were removed and mixed with better-quality potter’s clay for the project. The same group of young people worked with Lotte Glob to make tile tablets out of the clay. They then inscribed messages on the clay. These might have been messages to the past or to the future, or simply statements about themselves and their world. Their ideas about the content evolved through their work on the dig, through thinking about what happened there in the past and how it relates to them. The tablets were fired in an outdoor pit kiln,

Finally, the young people buried their fired-clay messages in the ground. This was hoped could be done in the backfill of the excavation trench, as a time capsule for future archaeologists to find (or perhaps for the wind to uncover in time). But due to time restrictions the tiles were buried on Lotte Glob's sculpture croft. A framed photographic display of the tiles was displayed in the Village Hall.



IMAGE 201 EARTH TO EARTH TILES

# Digital arts project work on show

AN EXHIBITION of the work carried out by young people over the past year under the Durness-based Digital Arts Interpretation Project opened in Durness Village Hall on Monday evening.

The hall was rigged with a 20ft boat mast put in place with help from the local fire service, from which three large screens were suspended and images projected from strategically-placed projectors.

Artefacts were on display, photographs from the Mackay Country archive and DVD presentations of the young people's work.

More than 50 people from around the north attended the opening, where Malkie's chip van provided the French fries.

After a welcome and thank you, Shona Munro and Feis air an Oir gave a musical introduction and declared the exhibition – VRoom (virtual room) – open.

Through a partnership between local young people and a range of digital artists, this project has been running for the past year to interpret local heritage using a range of digital media.

The aim has been to generate new ways of seeing and representing familiar local places.

This project came about due to the success and enthusiasm of the local young people in a previous project, New Dynamics.

The project was created and managed by Durness



Pictured are some of the Durness young people involved in the Digital Arts Interpretation Project. This particular group worked with London-based artist Karen Lois Whiteroad on production of a video called *Lost for Words*. They are (from left, standing) Mairi Ross, Ross O'Brien, Ashleigh Boyd, Ashley Milne, Emma Boyd and George Miller, and (crouched behind camera) Donald Morrison.

Development Group in partnership with Durness Youth Club.

Funding was received from the Heritage Lottery Young Roots programme and Durness Youth Club, in order to carry out the work, in conjunction with a local private sector supporting partnership.

Ongoing support from Roxana Meechan, Highland Council's arts development officer for Suther-

land, has been another essential component.

This work has built on the technical abilities of the young people and provided new experiences in the arts – and new skills for life.

Young people from right across Mackay Country – the parishes of Eddrachilles, Durness, Tongue and Farr – were involved in these activities.

The exhibition provided an insight into the work of

the artists, the activities which local young people were engaged in, and a sample of material from the Mackay Country Archive.

This exhibition has been created and curated by local artist Gavin Lockhart. Gavin has brought to bear his considerable international experience of community arts projects in order to create a memorable and challenging

experience throughout the exhibition and a lasting legacy in the form of the exhibition DVD called "The Reel Mackay".

After the exhibition Gavin's creation will be made available on the Virtual Mackay Country web site [www.virtualmackaycountry.co.uk](http://www.virtualmackaycountry.co.uk) and will hence reach not just a local but also an international audience.

The work of another local artist, Lotte Glob, was

also on display. Her part of this project is called *Earth to Earth* and links with the ongoing archaeology project being carried out in Strathnaver and Durness by Glasgow University Archaeology Division under the direction of Olivia Lelong.

During the dig at Borralie evidence of an ancient kiln and clay workings were found.

For the *Earth to Earth* project some of this clay was extracted from the site, mixed with modern clay and reworked by local children into "contemporary artefacts".

These tiles, made by the children with Lotte's help, have been fired and put on display.

After the exhibition they will be returned to the earth at Borralie when the archaeological site is once more covered over for protection and preservation.

Local stone sculptor Neil Fuller introduced the young people to methods for working stone. A number of his pieces are on display.

In addition to Gavin, Lotte and Neil, the other five artists who travelled to Mackay Country to work with the young people on this project are arts coordinator Beverley Carpenter, Roger Day, Gabe Norlands, Rob Birch and Karen Whiteroad.

Samples of their work were included in the exhibition, which runs until tomorrow (Saturday).

## **Ceannabeinne and Loch Croispol School**

Working closely with the Durness grazing committee and Durness Estates in 2003 Rowan Tree consulting were engaged to carry out feasibility studies and reports on two sites of interest for further detailed research. Rowan Tree commenced work during June 2002 at two local sites of archaeological and historical interest Loch Croispol School and Ceannabeinne Township were surveyed for interesting opportunities for interpretation and promotion both to local people and visitors to the area.

At Balnakeil, Loch Croispol, there are archaeological remains dating from prehistoric times onward. The unusual geology and fertile land have made it an attractive place to settlers since early times and its archaeological landscape has a fascinating and distinctive story to tell. This area is close to Balnakeil Craft Village and Balnakeil Beach – both of which already attract significant numbers of visitors and it therefore seems reasonable to suggest that investment in interpretive projects may help retain a proportion of these visitors longer in Durness. The wealth of archaeology may also, if appropriately developed and interpreted, attract visitors to Durness who might not otherwise have visited the village.

Ceannabeinne also has special features of interest particularly its role as the location of the Durness Riots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The site is adjacent to, and easily accessible from, the A838 road along the north coast, and there may well be opportunities to promote it as a site to complement the interpretation of the Rosal clearance village in Strathnaver. As with Balnakeil, Loch Croispol, with appropriate development and promotion, Ceannabeinne could perhaps not only help retain visitors in the Durness area but also attract new visitors.

In order to identify and cost potential projects, the following inter-related survey and plans were produced in assessing the potential for the two sites.

- An archaeological survey – to identify the visible and accessible archaeological features in both of the areas, assess them in terms of their suitability
- Development/interpretation and identify any work which may be required to consolidate or conserve them if they are to be interpreted and promoted to the public. No excavation will be undertaken. This was not a full archaeological survey of the sites concerned but aimed instead to identify sites and structures which offered the potential to be interpreted and promoted to the public. We concentrated on upstanding monuments and visible features which were within easy walking distance of existing roads and paths
- An interpretive plan to identify appropriate themes, objectives and methods of interpretation in relation to sites suitable for development/interpretation.
- A project action plan a prioritised programme of possible projects, showing options for phasing where appropriate and including indicative timescales and costings.

A desk-based assessment was undertaken in advance of the site visit, using sources including The Highland Council Sites and Monuments Record (SMR), The Highland Council Archives, The National Monuments Record, locally-held records and other sources of local information, and aerial photographic coverage of the area. A walkover survey of the two areas was carried out, to identify upstanding remains and visible features. At Loch Croispol, which was surveyed extensively by Glasgow University's Archaeology Unit (awaiting publication), we did not seek to record all features but instead focussed on those which were visible and likely to lend themselves to interpretation to the public without a requirement for excavation or disturbance. At Ceannabeinne, which we understood not to have been surveyed previously, we carried out a more detailed survey of the township.

## Ceannabeinne Site



IMAGE 203 THE SITE OF CEANNABEINNE TOWNSHIP

### Summary

Ceannabeinne Township, was once a thriving township on the Rispond Estate. Today it consists of several ruined structures situated by the side of the A838 Durness to Tongue road. In many cases only the lowest courses of the foundation survive, as the substantial stone enclosure dykes built after the clearance of the settlement in 1842 have re-used much of the stone from the buildings. Overall, the site is well preserved with the visible remains of 10 buildings and their associated enclosures. Only one building from the township remains roofed Ceannabeinne cottage which once served as a school but which is now a private residence lying out with the area surveyed for this report.

### Archaeological and historical background

Before the clearances of the 1840s, the area around modern Durness was made up of many small townships. These included Durine, Lerin, Sangomore, Smoo, Sangobeg, Balnakeil, Keoldale, Hope, Eriboll and Ceannabeinne. On the eastern outskirts of Durness, Ceannabeinne was a thriving township. It was the biggest farm town on the Rispond Estate with fourteen houses and a school, and the census of June 1841 details ten families living there. Although owned by Lord Reay, from 1788, the leasehold of Rispond and Ceannabeinne was held by James Anderson, the tacksman. James Anderson held a lease on the land for 76 years and although the land became part of the Duke of Sutherland's Estate in 1829, Anderson retained his legal rights over the land and his sub-tenants. From the beginning of his lease Anderson had made money from fishing and fish processing, leasing tackle and fishing rights to his tenants and purchasing their catches. But with changes in the economy after the Napoleonic wars, these industries became less profitable and he decided to become a sheep farmer. To do this he needed to clear the tenants from his land.



There had been evictions on Lord Reay's estate from the early 1800s and by the 1840s the nearby townships of Keoldale, Hope and Eriboll had all been turned into sheep farms and the ancient townships of Borrallie and Croispol had disappeared. The townsfolk had to adjust to these changes. Some worked on the land and, by combining this with fishing and kelp-gathering, made a living; some found jobs as shepherds or labourers on the big sheep farms; some left Durness to work in city factories further south and some emigrated.

Anderson started his evictions in 1839 and at first they were carried out in an orderly manner, but in September 1841, the people of Ceannabeinne were told they had to leave.

The desk-based assessment of Ceannabeinne was carried out and we found only two sites recorded on the SMR as detailed below.

1. SMR no: NC46NW0004 NGR: NC 4415 6599 The SMR records a "possible monastery on headland".
2. SMR no: NC46NW0019 NC438 658. The SMR records "a farmstead comprising two unroofed buildings and one enclosure depicted on the 1<sup>st</sup> Edition of the OS 6-inch map. Two unroofed buildings and three enclosures depicted on the current edition".

A study of the first edition OS map from 1878 (Sutherland 1878, sheet vi), shows the stone dyke enclosing the fields and the remains of the buildings and enclosures beyond the dyke. Aerial photographs (1946) of the site held by the Highland Council Archaeology Unit show the enclosing walls and the remains of several structures. A walkover survey was carried out. Ceannabeinne Cottage, the only surviving roofed building from the settlement lies to the south of the road, a short distance from the main site surveyed. The remains of the township are situated in a cluster between the cliffs and the north side of the road. The area is now divided into fields by later stone dykes which in some areas dissect the earlier buildings. The site can be entered from the roadside.

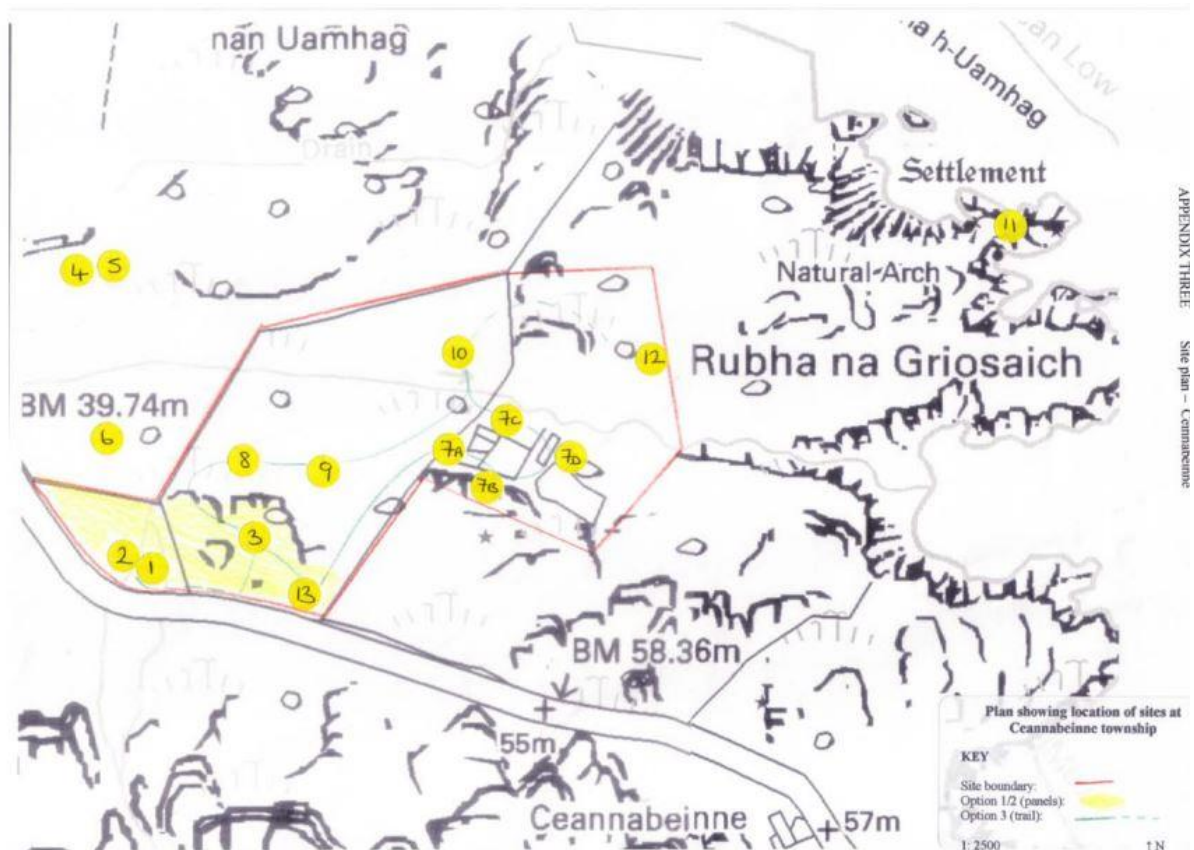


IMAGE 204 ROWAN TREE SURVEY MAP

The following refer to Rowan Tree Survey Map

***Corn kiln, building footings and lazy beds (Sites 2, 3 and 6).*** Adjacent to the road, the first remains of the township to be found are a rectangular structure (site 2) and corn kiln (site 1). The circular corn kiln feature is bounded closely in each side by a small stream, this may have been the result of drainage related to the building of the road. The structure (site 3), survives as turf covered footings. No doorways are visible, but the location next to the corn kiln and alignment suggest that this may have been a barn, or agricultural building and not a dwelling house. The site also lies close to site 6, an area of lazy beds now bounded to the south side by a later stone dyke.

***Longhouse remains and enclosures (Sites 3 and 13).*** Within the stone dyke, on a rocky outcrop next to the road are the visible remains of one structure and the possible footing of another. Both are aligned roughly east/west, so the prevailing winds would have swept along the length of the buildings, with the entrances protected from the worst gales. Site 3 is 25.5m long with internal sub-divisions. The building has the remains of an enclosed yard to the back. A further small rectangular feature is visible on the slope directly north of the structure, possibly another enclosure. Closer to the boundary wall, undulations in the ground suggest there may be another longhouse structure (site 13) and of similar length (20m).

***Cairn and wooden post (Sites 8 and 9).*** Below the rocky outcrop the land slopes down to a marshy area. In this area are the remains of a small rectangular cairn (site 8). The cairn is aligned north/south and comprised of small stones. It may represent field clearance. Adjacent to the cairn is site 9, a wooden post standing upright in boggy ground, approximately 1.8m high. A series of round holes are irregularly placed throughout the length. One hole at the bottom contains the remains of a wooden peg, whilst the top is studded with metal nails. Although its use is obscure, this is likely to be a modern feature.

***Longhouse structures and enclosures (Site 10).*** Beyond this, a small stream running west to east cuts across the site. Crossing the stream towards the headland there are the remains of a further structure. Situated on a slight rise, site 10 is a longhouse structure, surviving to foundation level only. The site is likely to have been robbed out to build a nearby dyke. There are three structures in alignment, the main section length 33.2m, and width, 5.3m. Two internal subdivisions are visible although the substantial tumbling of the walls makes it unclear as to whether these buildings were adjoined or separate. As with many of the other structures of the site the alignment is roughly east/west. The remains of yard enclosures to the rear are indicated by boulder alignments.

***Longhouse and enclosure structures (Site 7).*** No trackways are visible through the settlement although aerial photography may reveal evidence of previous routes. (See Fred Geddes' report for his suggestions as to a possible route on the south side of Site 7). A gap where the boundary wall has tumbled gives access to another complex (Site 7) of buildings. They are in a sheltered position by the stream between the hillside to the south and rocky outcrops of the cliff top to the north. There are four main features:

1. The first feature, Feature A, is dissected by the stone dyke. The longhouse structure is similar in length to the others on the site and has two internal subdivisions visible.
2. Possible remains of yard enclosures, Feature B, can be seen to the front and rear. Again orientated east/west a small, square hole can be found built into the footings of the east wall. It is the full depth of wall into the building. The gradient slopes down to the east gable and to the front of the building suggesting that this is a drainage hole and part of the structure may have been used as a byre.

3. Feature C is a longhouse structure, with much better survival than the other buildings on the site, prompting speculation that this building may have been occupied after the clearance in 1842, and that because of this the building had not been robbed for the stone dyke. The walls survive to a maximum height of 1.7m. The length of the first section of the building is 6.8m long by 5m wide and it is the best surviving section of the building. The central section of the building is narrower and has been filled by the tumble of the adjoining walls. The third section of the building is a single celled structure, 7m x 5.2m, with maximum surviving wall height of 0.6m. Orientated east/west the building features an unusual bowed gabled to the east end. The west gable is very tumbled, but does not appear to be bowed. The doorway to the structure is to the left and not central. There is evidence of enclosures behind the building.
4. *Feature D*, the final structure in the cluster, is aligned fully north/south unlike any other building in this part of the site. The structure survives to max height of 1.5m and is very over-grown by bracken. Length 16m, width, 4m. Two internal subdivisions are visible creating three cells, unlike many of the other buildings, a clear doorway between the sections are visible. No fireplace is visible and the building is closely surrounded by an enclosing wall. Further enclosures are visible to the back of the building leading up the hillside.

**Cleared areas (Site 10).** Beyond these structures are cleared areas that may relate to the agricultural activities of the townsfolk. Site 10 is an area of bracken with numerous cairns and stone clearance heaps. These may have been cultivation areas and animal enclosures. The hillside too shows evidence of strips of stone clearance and attempts may have been made to cultivate the hillside.

### **Why interpret Ceannabeinne?**

As an example of a pre-Clearance settlement, the abandoned township at Ceannabeinne has an interesting story to tell about the way of life of the people who lived there. However, unlike many similar abandoned settlements in Sutherland, there are historical records of events linked to this site, i.e. the Durness Riots which give it a special significance. Although a few other clearance-related sites in Sutherland are already interpreted (notably Rosal in Strathnaver), their interpretation has focused largely on the way of lives of the inhabitants prior to their eviction. At Ceannabeinne, in contrast, there is an opportunity to focus on a different story – the Durness Riots can be seen as an early example of resistance to the Clearances which were followed in time by further resistance in places such as Skye, by the formation of the Highland Land League and pressure for legislation eventually passed to give crofters security of tenure. As many Ceannabeinne residents seem to have been re-settled elsewhere in the Durness area, there is also an opportunity to look at the theme of the effects on the people who were displaced to less-favourable sites, using archival material (for example, evidence given to parliamentary commissions by inhabitants of Durness and Laid in the 1890s).

The archaeology on the site is fairly well preserved and most of the visible features could be readily identified by visitors with the help of well-designed interpretation. The Ceannabeinne site has the added advantages of being scenic, atmospheric and fairly sheltered from the wind. Last, but by no means least, it has the advantage of being located close to, and visible from, the A838 Durness – Tongue road with relatively easy access, significant passing traffic and the potential to be part of a North-Coast “trail” whereby visitors could be encouraged to visit both Rosal and Ceannabeinne (and perhaps other locations on route such as Strathnaver Museum) to learn more about the Sutherland Clearances.

In addition to the cleared settlement at Ceannabeinne, there are various other features in the site surveyed - particularly Site 13 (thought to be a monastic settlement, possibly dating from early medieval times) and various patches of cultivation strips and terrace-like features which may pre-date the cleared township. However, we would recommend that interpretation of the site should focus on the cleared settlement as currently nothing is known about these other features and there are substantial safety concerns in terms of promoting public access to the monastic settlement, given the proximity of high cliffs as well as the access to it which is by means of a very narrow, eroding, windswept land bridge with steep drops on either side.



IMAGE 205 TRAIGH NA H'UAMHAG SITE OF A MONASTIC CELL

These detailed reports from Rowntree Consulting summarised were used to apply for funding which was secured to peruse detailed heritage research on the sites. Our community-focused project endeavored to consolidate or conserve, identify the visible and accessible archaeological features of Ceannabeinne Township for promotion to the public and provide informative access and interpret the biggest well preserved pre clearance farm town in Sutherland with the visible remains of buildings and their associated enclosures.

Funding was received from Highland Year of Culture 2007, Heritage Lottery, and Scottish Natural Heritage and the interpretive project was initiated. The project Consolidation, access and interpretation of heritage, to conserve and enhance the environment of Ceannabeinne preclearance township was established within the criteria required by the funders. Below is a rundown of the outputs and outcomes submitted to the funders.

- Archaeological mapping with an archeological detailed, metrically accurate plan of the buildings, enclosures, field dykes and other features making up the township through a topographic survey.
- Biodiversity study with analytical and applied ecological assessment of 1841 and 2006 A botanical report with, a bird list compiled from several visits by an ornithologist, with botanists visiting the site and identifying flora and habitats.

- Constructing a footpath around the site including clearing bracken. Dry stone wall repairs for reconstructing the access around the site. The stages of footpath trail construction and the boardwalks will be built to direct people to the information areas with minimal detrimental impact on the environment to preserve the habitats around the site. We will create a carpark at the now recognised entrance to the site.
- Archaeological digs including excavation of trial trenches over 4 of the buildings identified as possible dwellings and an excavation trench over the visible remains at the possible monastic site (which has turned out to be much older than predicted.)
- Interpretation of the site in a narrative and media recording artist's impressions and compiled as individual stories, riot story, life in the township exploring all the elements with analysis. A virtual tour compiled with this information as a record of the aspects involved leading to the deeper explanation of many events taken place during this section, school visits, field and local studies group visit, and visits from the Museum of Strathnaver and Highlands and Island University.
- Interpretation of archaeological finds reported in a data structure report and completed with talks and exhibits. The radio carbon dating of the envisaged monastic site proved to be exciting and unexpected. (86 objects in total were found during the archaeology. These are detailed in the Archaeology report).
- Information boards' specific to each site within township and the general story were written. The information boards' specific to each site within township and the general story summarized into sections and being told as in stages on each board. Drawings of the archaeology, artist's impressions and photographs are included.
- Install display panels with relevant information at the relevant locations.
- Produced an information leaflet to accompany the opening of the trail. A great deal of specialist information and historical understanding had to be condensed and retold in a comprehensive manner that described all the essential fundamental information. Descriptive text had to be combined with illustrations in drawing and photographic media.
- Compile the stories, poetry and songs that relate to the event. A song has been written, recorded and performed by a local musician inspired Marty Mackay to write and record a ballad "The Ceannabeinne Uprising" The song tells the story concisely of the hardship and resistance that was raised by the people when they were told of their eviction in 1841. Marty has captured the essence of the scenes that were recorded at the time by the local press. Marty is a well-known local musician singer and guitarist with Blue Ridge but also found many a time in a duo with accordionist John Carbrek Morrison.
- Arrange costumes, props, filming sites. A good deal of research into the clothes and life styles was carried out and recreation of the sites. Clothes have been modified and altered to recreate the period providing Costumes to simulate the time. Old artefacts were borrowed or made to provide the props and filming sites were identified to provide a backdrop that would be suitable for the period.
- Identify present descendants of the evicted families. We have identified several of the families living in distant parts of the world and we continue to develop alliances and assist in their research where applicable to identify their ancestor's role in the Ceannabeinne story.
- An edited program of the Story of Ceannabeinne past and present DVD has been compiled in the format of a today narrative with film from the past. An aged process has been used in the edit to depict the period. The filming was carried out over the year of 2007 recreating the story. Included on DVD Virtual Tour which opens in Internet

Explorer and links to a 360degree panoramas with hyperlinks from the map to views in the township with sections on

- Brief History of the Highland Clearances
- Brief history of Ceannabeinne with link to Pdf Of Durness Archaeological Interpretation Project
- The Project with links to
  - The Trail Ceannabeinne Beach Slide Show
  - Photographic slide show of The making of STV' History program that features Ceannabeinne in part 4
  - Site 11 Monastic site Photographic Slide show of Archaeology
  - Audio of Discussion about the Monastic Site 11 with Dr. Olivia Lelong GUARD and Mr. Graham Bruce
- Photographic Slide show of Archaeology Site 3
- Photographic Slide Show of Archaeology Site 7
- Photographic Slide show of Archaeology Site 10
- An electronic trip around the trail
- Ceannabeinne Names
- Artists Impressions with link to Photo Gallery that illustrates what Ceannabeinne might have looked like with costumes and dwellings of the 19th. century
- Drama - The Durness Riots

#### On DVD 2

- Archaeology of the monastic site in video
- Introduction to Ceannabeinne video ( 4.5 minutes on separate DVD)
- Site 3 Fireplace Archaeology (27 minutes on separate DVD)
- Site 7 Drain Archaeology (6 minutes on separate DVD)
- Site 10 Longhouse archaeology (12 minutes on separate DVD)

Along with many press interests SMG Productions based in Glasgow made a television programme following a similar theme to the very successful “Coast” production on the Highland Clearances. As part of the programme screened on STV and the History Channel the production crew and presenters were in Durness during the Ceannabeinne Project. The presenter of the programme is TV crime drama Taggart star John Michie who plays Detective Inspector Robbie Ross. On an atmospheric day John walked the site with Graham Bruce discussing the story of Ceannabeinne and was filmed talking about Ceannabeinne on site to camera.

John loves the outdoors when he gets time off from filming Taggart; he heads for the West Highlands of Scotland. Hill walking has always been a hobby for him and he has a deep interest in Scottish History particularly the period of the Highland Clearances. STV broadcast the first in the series of the story of the Highlands and the subsequent five programmes were shown at 5:45pm on the following five Sundays. Durness & Ceannabeinne are featured in the fourth programme of the series.

An academic study was made of the project “Re-stor(y)ing North West Sutherland, Scotland” by A. Fiona D. Mackenzie Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, Carleton University, Ottawa. The paper argues that the projects remap the land in ways that suggest an alternative imaginary to that aligned with processes of dispossession that have for so long defined social and economic practice in the area. Literally and figuratively, the projects map openings which challenge the norms through which the land is frequently cast. In the case of Ceannabeinne, this new mapping makes visible a land which both bears the markings of different peoples’ histories and demonstrates how intertwined the ‘social’ and the ‘natural’ (see Castree & Braun, 2001; Braun 2002) were in these histories. As I show, through the working of community, ‘place’ is reconfigured.



IMAGE 206 JOHN MICHIE RECORDS FOR STV AND THE HISTORY CHANNEL

## **Ceannabeinne Clearance Township**

### **An Ancient Land Full Of History.**

The area of Ceannabeinne on the eastern outskirts of Durness was a thriving township up until the clearances about 1842. With close inspection, many signs of the township are still visible. The lazybed and runrig systems can be clearly seen. Ceannabeinne cottage is probably the only lasting testament to the settlements, now a holiday home, this building used to be a school. To the untrained eye or the casual observer there is no more to be observed than an area of fallen rocks and stones. The dwellings reveal that they were part of a well-established community with a varying degree of standards. There is evidence of substantial properties, cottages with chimneys and partitions that would have been improved from the black house around 1800. There are dwellings with well-defined gardens and some show building techniques specific to the area. Doors in gable ends and round curved walls.

A census of the 16<sup>th</sup> June 1841 details ten families and their occupations living in fourteen houses and 4 unoccupied houses and a school.

- Donald Munro 35 Sailor, Jane 30, Peggy 12, Hugh 8, James 4, Donald 2.
- George MacIntosh 60 Agricultural Labourer, Mary 50, Hector 25, Hugh 20, Margaret 14, Betty 9.
- Eric MacKay 35 Boat Carpenter, Isabella 35.
- George MacKay 30 Agricultural Labourer, Jannet 30, Johne 10, Kelly 9, Ann 7, Bell 5, Alexanderina 1,
- Catherine MacKay 50, Anne 25, Alex 20.
- Ann Morrison 25 Agricultural Labourer, Kelly 5, Jessy 4, Johana 3, Margaret 1.
- Neil Sutherland 30 Sailor, Jye 25, Margaret 5, Alex 3, Kenneth 2.
- George Morrison 50, Isobella 45, George 15, Murdo 15, Mary 13, Jamima 10.
- John Munro 45 Agricultural Labourer, Barbara 40, John 15, Margaret 13, William 12, Jane 10, Ann 8, Hugh 6, Mary 1.
- Margaret Morrison 65.

### **The Riots**

Ceannabeinne can arguably be described as an important township in bringing to attention of the Scottish population the atrocious situation in the Highlands. The publicity of one the first organised riots was in part responsible in bringing about the crofting legislation.

About 1810, a lowland Scot obtained the leasehold from the Duke of Sutherland, who lived at Dunrobin Castle, of Rispond and Ceannabeinne and became the tacksman. This meant he had complete control over the tenants of the district and was responsible for improvements. By 1813, he had built a pier at Rispond, several houses for fishermen and a smoke curing building for fish. The tacksman rented sea areas to local men and charged them money to go fishing. He owned all the fishing boats and equipment and rented at very high prices. The fishermen had to sell their catch to James Anderson the tacksman at very low prices.

By 1840 the townships of Balnakeil, (the main settlement around Durness) Keoldale, Hope and Eriboll had all been turned into sheep farms and the ancient townships of Borrallie and Croispol had disappeared. By 1841 particularly in Durine and Lerin but also Sangomore, Smoo and Sangobeg, clearances for sheep had remodeled township living as crofting townships. Houses had a garden where the family's crops were grown emerged. The landowner, the Duke of Sutherland saw this as an improvement but most of the local people did not like the changes. Some worked hard on the land and along with fishing and kelp gathering, they made a living. Others found jobs as shepherds or laborers on the big sheep farms at Keoldale, Balnakeil and Eriboll. Some left Durness and went to work in the city factories and some immigrated to Canada. By 1841, the only survivors of the old townships were those on the Rispond Estate. The biggest farm town on the Estate was Ceannabeinne. Here there were fourteen houses and a school. By working part of the year away from home often, fishing in Caithness, some of the people did manage to gradually improve their lifestyle despite the hardships. Foundations at Ceannabeinne and Rispond would suggest some houses were developing away from the traditional black house to ones with windows and doors and a hanging lum. In September 1841, the people of Ceannabeinne were told they had to leave.

Local stories and slightly conflicting newspaper reports relate the event. A Sheriff Officer (doubts as to whether this man was an officer or an employee of James Anderson) from Dornoch brought the note of eviction on a day the men of the township were cutting bent (grass) for thatch at Balnakeil about ten kilometres away when a woman was heard shouting from Ceannabeinne. The woman of the township forced the sheriff officer to burn the writ by holding



his hand over a fire. The next event about the 10th September 1841 was the non-arrival of the same officer with instructions to raise a trusty party to help. As the party arrived at the Hope Ferry they were warned the people of Durness were ready for more trouble and feeling there was not enough support returned to Dornoch. The most serious riot occurred on Saturday 17th September. A sheriff substitute, the procurator fiscal, police superintendent and fourteen special constables arrived in Durness at the inn at Durine about nine in the evening. Forty-eight men of Durness tried to talk with the sheriff and ask that the eviction not be carried out on the Sabbath day but this was refused. At about ten o'clock the men who had gathered at the well on the Park Hill opposite the inn attacked. How much violence is unclear but the constables were removed and disarmed. The sheriff officer escaped and hid. The procurator fiscal and the superintendent stood their ground but were eventually removed from a room in the inn and escorted to the parish boundaries.

Shortly after the riots at the Durine Inn, Sheriff Lumsden arrived in Durness and delivered a powerful speech that included the threat of the 53rd Regiment from Edinburgh being sent to enforce the eviction. The riot had attracted many newspaper reports, which was unusual at this time, and an official investigation was ordered from government officials in Edinburgh. The call for the 53rd Regiment was cancelled and a fair investigation was initiated. As James Anderson had not broken any law, the people of Ceannabeinne had to leave their homes in May 1842. Some good did come out of the affair. The publicity stopped the Duke of Sutherland's Factor clearing the tenants from the Durness Estate and the people remain on the good land at Sangomore and Durine to this day. In 1886, the Crofters Act became law and landowners could no longer force their tenants off the land.



IMAGE 207 IMAGE FROM THE DRAMA. JAMES CAMPBELL THE SHERIFF-OFFICER WHO SERVED THE WRIT BY TWO OF THE WOMEN WHO FORCED HIM TO THRUST IT INTO THE FIRE WHERE IT WAS DESTROYED.

There can be little doubt about the hardships imposed when the period referred to nowadays as the Clearances affected the population of this Parish. Newspaper reports and articles gave conflicting reports. In a series of letters published in the Edinburgh Weekly Chronicle in the

years 1840 and 1841, reproduced in the History of Sutherlandshire by Donald MacLeod, is the request that for revenge of the evil that was done to many an innocent, individual letters written about the time may be preserved for many days in his native country.

Like the remains of the homes, the story of Ceannabeinne and the Durness riots faded from memory and it wasn't until the 1980's and the resurgence of interest in Gaelic and Highland heritage that the story was resurrected. Since then its place in Highland history has been recognised and the Ceannabeinne Trail is the culmination of a project to preserve and interpret this fascinating relic of a lifestyle and times long gone.

Riots in Durness, The story of the clearance of Ceannabeinne and the townships of Rispond Estate by Graham Bruce is an excellent booklet giving more detail.

## Archaeology

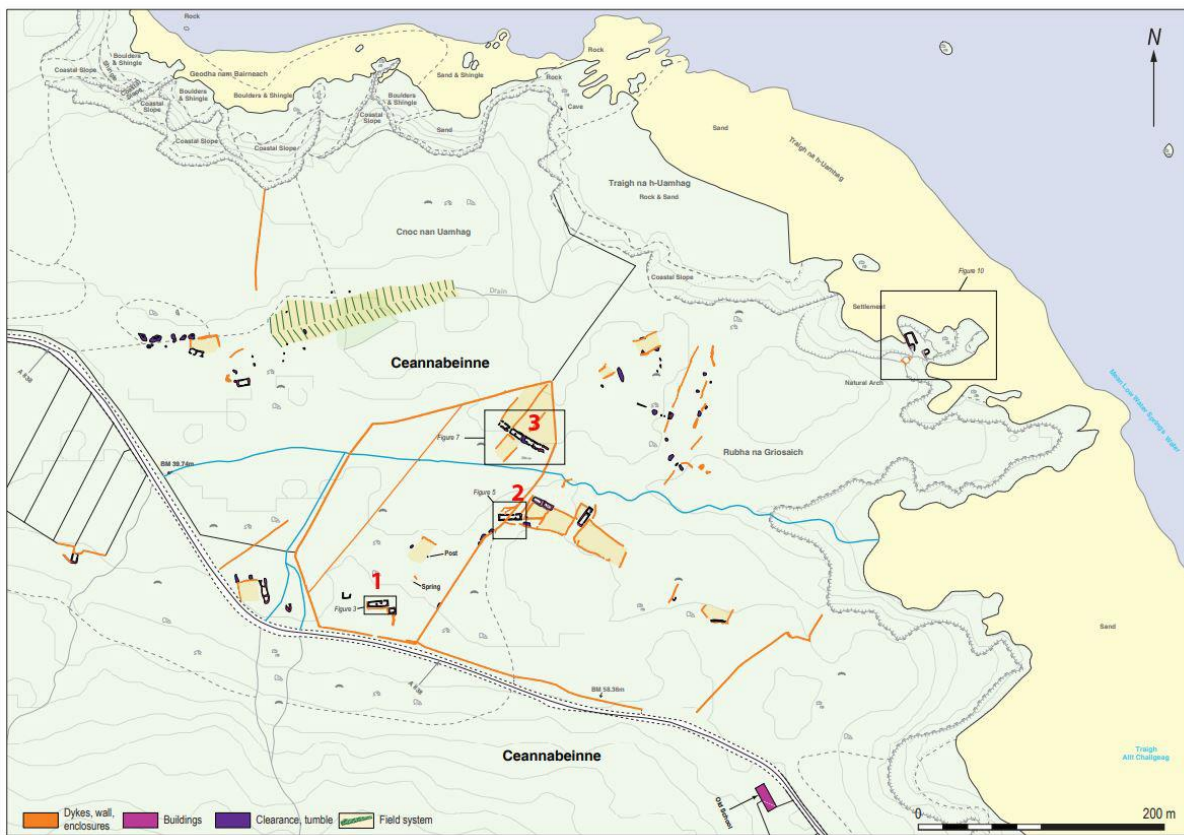


IMAGE 208 ARCHAEOLOGIST MAP WITH NUMBERS REFERRING TO THIS TEXT

Archaeologists from Glasgow University worked on three specific sites and mapped the entire place recording various features. Initial results showed that the site was intensely farmed using every available fertile area and the houses were in the most sheltered places out of the wind. The three sites being archeologically examined were detailed on the interpretive panels along with the historical story on the trail being developed with artists impressions of the locality. The archaeology explored three long houses each with a different aspect.

The first has been shown to have a fireplace in a gable end wall. This is noteworthy in determining the period that the house was lived in as moving away from the central hearth was a significant social move. This house also shows signs of plaster on the walls and possible glass windows as fragments of glass have been found. A small trench was excavated over the western end of the building to investigate the possibility that its gable wall held a fireplace. This building seemed larger and squarer than other remains in the township, and it was thought it

might be later in date. The excavations confirmed this. Set in the centre of the gable wall was a fireplace, with a hearth slab in front of it. The slabs were scorched and cracked from the heat and charcoal had been swept out of the fireplace, staining the floor black. At some point, the fireplace had been blocked up with roughly built drystone masonry, possibly as backing for a new cast-iron grate. This room in the house was finer than what we would normally expect in a township dwelling. Its walls had been plastered: some of the plaster was found still adhering to the wall beside the fireplace, while some of it had fallen away and lay in pieces on the earthen floor. Sherds of pottery and glass were also found in the floor. This house was certainly unusual. Most Highland longhouses had hearths in the centre of the floor and would have had unadorned walls of turf or stone. It may have been built late in the history of the township, perhaps shortly before the evictions in 1841.



IMAGE 209 SITE 1 ON MAP

The second archaeological site is exploring a drain proving to be from a byre at one end of another house where occupants kept cattle. Artefacts have been found in the drain and will be identified and dated and used to help further the explanation of the township. Before any excavation took place in this building, a stone-built drain was already visible running through the rubble footings of the eastern gable wall. This indicated that the eastern part of the building had contained a byre to house animals. A trench was excavated to investigate the drain and the byre end. The drain consisted of a shallow trench, cut to run along the centre of the building and through the wall. It had partly filled up with sticky, dark brown organic soil (probably from the animals' waste). Later, rubble had been dumped into the trench to provide a soakaway for fluids. Sherds of pottery and glass and several iron objects were also tossed into the drain. This was probably a typical Highland longhouse. People would have lived in the other end of the building. They would have kept their cattle in the byre end over the winter, to keep them out of the cold and allow the cows' body heat to warm the house.



IMAGE 211 SITE 2 ON MAP

At the third archeologically site the dig appears to be uncovering a longhouse with a central hearth off set to the door giving a less modernised abode. There is still much work to be carried out but current resources have indicated that this area developed over a long period and housed families in different kinds of living accommodation all based on the traditional longhouse. A trench excavated over the doorway of this building found it was covered with well-laid paving. The paving slabs formed a threshold into the building, which stepped down into the interior. This part of the building would probably have been used as a byre, to hold animals over the winter. The paving slabs would have prevented the animals' hooves from churning up the floor.



IMAGE 210 SITE 3 ON MAP

Excavations in this building showed it had been a house, and it was probably lived in for several generations. It contained a hearth, which was set in the centre of the floor as in most Highland longhouses. The hearth was built of slabs, and over time these became cracked and worn from the fire that burned continuously on them. When the first hearth wore out, a new one was built on top of it, and the slabs of this second hearth also became extremely cracked and spalled from exposure to heat. Finally, the second hearth fell out of use and an internal partition wall was built over it. The house may have become an outbuilding at this stage, or perhaps a third hearth was built somewhere else inside it.

### **Extracts from Durness Data Structure Report**

#### **Ceannabeinne Township & Traigh Na H'Uamhag.**

Topographic survey and trial excavation at the township of Ceannabeinne, near Durness, in May and July 2007 involved investigation of the post-medieval township remains and also of archaeological remains on an adjacent promontory known as Traigh na H'Uamhag. The work was carried out by Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division (GUARD) in order to clarify the character of several buildings in the township and to investigate and characterise two small structures on the promontory.

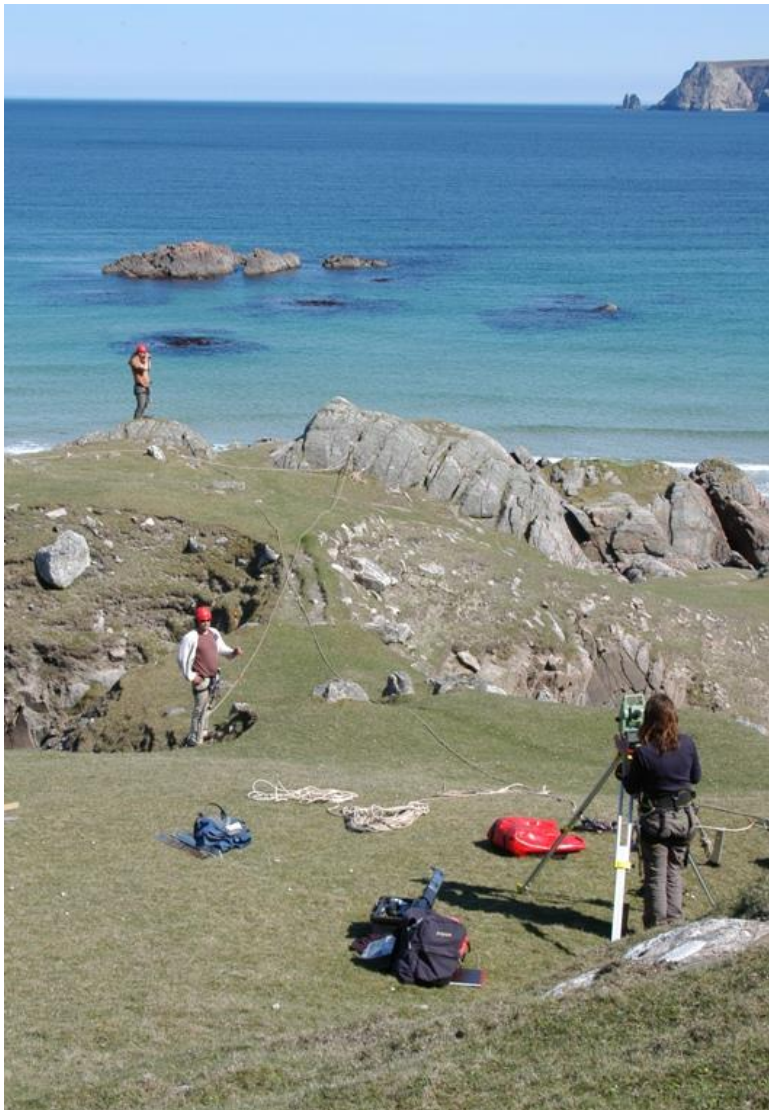


IMAGE 212 ARCHAEOLOGISTS WORK AT THE PROMONTORY AT TRAIGH NA H'UAMHAG

The topographic survey recorded the remains of 17 buildings, including nine probable dwellings, along with several enclosures, field walls and cultivation remains. Trial trenches excavated in four of the township buildings revealed evidence for their different uses, including two superimposed central hearths in one, a paved entrance in another, a rubble drain in a third and a gable fireplace and plastered walls in the fourth. The results from these trenches illustrate the character of life in the township during the generations preceding its clearance in 1841. Some of the structures could have been in use for some time, although at least one was probably built shortly before the Clearances.

Trial trenches excavated in two buildings on the promontory at Traigh na H'Uamhag revealed well-laid paving and carefully constructed masonry in one, and a roughly cobbled floor, a substantial stone-built wall and numerous fire-cracked pebbles

in the other. These could be Medieval in date, if the buildings on the promontory represent an eremitic monastery.

The township consists of four main clusters of buildings and enclosures. These occupy several knolls and terraces to either side of the valley. Cultivation terraces and rigs are also visible on the steep slopes leading down to the sea shore. The promontory containing the possible monastic site lies at the eastern end of the beach, at NC 4415 6599. The stack is joined to the mainland by a narrow land bridge, and traces of two small buildings are visible on it. The land is currently rough pasture, used for grazing, with areas of boggy grass in the valley bottom and thick bracken over some of the lower slopes.



IMAGE 213 DIGGING AT TRAIGH NA H'UAMHAG

The visible remains on the promontory at Traigh na H'Uamhag (NMRS NC46NW 4) have been identified as a possible monastic settlement, in the tradition of small, remote, eremitic sites identified on other tiny islands and rock stacks in the far north of Scotland, the Western Isles and the Northern Isles (Lamb 1973). It stands within view of another possible early monastic site on the rock stack of Aodann Mhor, c 5 km to the north-west. Very few of these sites have been investigated archaeologically, but the structures visible at Traigh na H'Uamhag fall in the tradition of small, square or oblong buildings identified by Lamb (1973) as being characteristic of them. If they were small monasteries, they may have been established by evangelising monks sent by larger monasteries based in Pictland, Ireland or the west coast of Scotland. Given the site's low position relative to the high ground that leads to it from the south, the stack is unlikely to have been a fort, as it would have been easily vulnerable to attack. There are no definitive traces or records of early Medieval, Norse or late medieval settlement on the mainland at Ceannabeinne, but this is typical both for the region and the Highlands in

general. The first recorded references to Ceannabeinne Township date from the 1600s, when the settlement is mentioned in hearth tax records. Blaeu's map of 1654 shows 'Mynes Keanbeym' in the vicinity of the township (<http://www.nls.uk/maps/early/blaeu/121.html>), but no settlement. By the late eighteenth century, Ceannabeinne was one of several small townships in the vicinity of Durness, including Durine, Sangomore, Lerin, Smoo, Sangobeg, Balnakeil, Keoldale, Hope and Eriboll. The land on which the township stood was owned by Lord Reay and, from 1788, the leasehold of Rispond and Ceannabeinne was held by James Anderson, the tacksman. In 1829, the land became part of the Sutherland estate, although Anderson retained legal rights over the land and his sub-tenants. Evictions had begun on Lord Reay's lands locally in the early 1800s, and by the 1840s the townships of Keoldale, Hope, Eriboll, Borrallie and Croispol had all been cleared of their inhabitants. Ceannabeinne was the largest of the townships on the Rispond Estate. The inhabitants received notice in September 1841 that they were to be evicted, with the remarkably short notice of 48 hours. The sheriff officers serving the eviction notices met strong resistance, culminating in a riot in Durness during which constables were disarmed and the procurator fiscal and superintendent were ejected from the parish. This led to an official government investigation into the circumstances of the riots and the ordered evictions, and as a result the township's inhabitants reached an agreement with James Anderson to remove themselves voluntarily by the following May. They were allocated crofts on the nearby but much poorer land at Sangobeg.



IMAGE 214 THE SCHOOL AT CEANNABEINNE, NOW A HOLIDAY HOUSE

The school at Ceannabeinne, now a holiday house, continued in use until the 1880s. As a result of the publicity, the Duke of Sutherland's factor ceased clearing tenants from the Durness

estate, and by 1886 the Crofters Act was in place, preventing landowners from forcing tenants off the land.

Ceannabeinne Township is an important place in the history of the northern Highlands. Its evictions and riots helped to set in motion processes that would eventually bring an end to the Clearances and improve the rights of crofters. The ongoing links between the township's history and the descendants of those who were cleared from it, some of whom still live in or have strong ties to the area, further enhance its importance as part of the social history of Durness.

The programme of archaeological work at Ceannabeinne recorded the complexity of the visible surface remains. It also provided information on the nature and date of occupation in four of the buildings in the township and two on the promontory, along with assessment of their preservation and the potential for further work. The trial trenches illuminated how the four structures were occupied, providing a range of evidence for their varying uses. The superimposed central hearths and later partition wall illustrate longevity of occupation and changing uses of space in a typical Highland longhouse. The paving and drain illustrate the use of parts of both buildings as byres. The gable end fireplace and in-situ plaster show that important transitions were taking place in the positioning of fireplaces and the standards of room finishing towards the end of the township's life. Of the structures excavated, all appeared to have been robbed for stone after the evictions. Their walls (and, in one case the paved floor) were almost certainly the source for some of the stone in the substantial dykes that cross the township and define enclosures for sheep. In spite of this, reasonably good evidence for the buildings' uses survives. The two dwellings contained the most compelling evidence for how people lived, and these two would merit some further investigation. A structure that appeared to be a typical Highland longhouse with a relatively long occupation span. It produced artefacts, including thimbles, a button and sherds of crockery, that attest to the activities of its occupants. With the other structures in the same cluster, it comprises a neat grouping of houses, outbuildings and associated fields. Further excavation would help to establish the layout of the building's interior and the nature and chronology of its use (by finding dating evidence beneath the earlier hearth, for example). The other dwelling provides a striking contrast. With its clearly defined stone wall bases and gable end fireplace, it appears to have been built late in the township's history, perhaps only a single generation before the Clearances. The construction of a house with a gable-end fireplace – or even the shifting of an earlier hearth to that position – would have marked a significant change in the way space was used in a Highland house. The hearth in the centre of the floor, with the smoke escaping through the thatched roof, had been symbolically important in Highland culture. Frequent toasts were made 'to your fire-side' or 'to your roof-tree' (Jamieson 1974, 59). The hearth was the source of light, heat and food – in fact, the source of the elements necessary for survival – and was generally never allowed to go out, but damped down each night and revived the next morning. One was meant to move around it in a sunwise direction (Grant 1961). Only in times of extreme catastrophe, particularly when a contagious disease was spreading among a township's cattle, was the fire extinguished. A 'forced fire' was then kindled using a wheel or by rubbing dry sticks together, and a new hearth fire would be lit from this (Shaw 1775, 248). This was meant to purify the fire and purge the cattle of disease. A central hearth would have been a focus of family life, allowing members to gather around it on all sides as they cooked, ate, talked or sewed. A gable-end hearth would have changed the ways that family members physically interacted with each other and occupied their domestic space. This house produced evidence of how its occupants had lived, in the form of sherds of crockery and glass, including possible lantern glass. Further excavation would provide more information on how the use of this house differed, whether it was entirely built at a late date or whether it was an older longhouse that was altered and expanded in the early



nineteenth century. Other structures in the township could also merit investigation. The two more upstanding structures may contain well-preserved traces of their occupation. These would, however, require some dismantling of walls adjacent to trenches on health and safety grounds, to avoid destabilising them. The corn-drying kiln could also be a fruitful object of investigation, providing evidence for how the township's inhabitants processed their crops.

### **Traigh na H'Uamhag**

The trial trenching at Traigh na H'Uamhag provided a rare and fascinating opportunity to examine a possible monastic eremitic site. While the structures are as yet undated, the character of the buildings and the lack of modern material in them would suggest they pre-date the post-medieval occupation of the township. They could relate to a monastic establishment, but equally they could represent Norse, Medieval or even earlier settlement. The site fits well within what Lamb (1973, 76) has described as 'a remarkable and little-known group of sites in the most ridiculous-seeming positions on high offshore rock-stacks, on small inaccessible islets, and on precipitous headlands joined to the mainland only by dangerous knife-edged ridges.' Usually they contain the remains of squarish or sub rectangular buildings, and often have traces of walling along their cliff tops – both of which survive at Traigh na H'Uamhag. Lamb (1973) has identified a number of these on rock stacks and islets in Orkney and Shetland and along the north coast of the mainland; they have also been recorded in the Western Isles (McHardy in prep). Lamb rejects the notion that these might be later prehistoric promontory forts, or fishing or fowling stations; many are positioned for poor defence and dangerous access to the sea or to cliffs. He notes that many have buildings perched on a slope facing downwards to the sea, so that the inhabitants had a view of the ocean and could not be overlooked from land. He argues that they are likely to have been pre Norse eremitic monasteries, and the buildings were cells and oratories (ibid., 82).

The choice to live on a remote islet or inaccessible stack would have been consistent with early monastics' ascetic ideals, especially following after the Culdee revival; their physical isolation and the walls or banks along their edges echo the 'vallum monasterii', the banks and ditches that emphasised monasteries' separation from the secular world (ibid., 84). So little is known about when and how these sites were used that any investigations into them help to fill out the picture. It is not yet certain that they do form a coherent chronological group, as Lamb postulated. Recent work on the islet of Brei Holm, off Papa Stour in Shetland, has demonstrated at least two phases of occupation – one in the sixth century AD and another in the late Norse period (Brady 2002; Brady et al in prep). In the Western Isles, several rock stacks and islets bearing archaeological remains have recently been investigated, and one (Dunasbroc) has produced evidence from the fourth millennium BC and the late first millennium BC to early first millennium AD (Barrowman & McHardy in prep). More work needs to be carried out on more of these sites in order to illuminate how and when they were used. Based on the results of the survey and trial trenching, the promontory at Traigh na H'Uamhag holds archaeological remains of potentially early date. Charcoal from an occupation deposit should prove suitable for radiocarbon dating, and this would help to place the site within its proper chronological framework. Further excavation in both structures J and K would increase our understanding of the nature of their use and how they may have related to other, similar sites in the north of Scotland, not least nearby Aodann Mhor.

### **The Promontory at Traigh na H'Uamhag**

On a rock stack by the cliffs below and out of site of the township trail, are the scant remains of an early Christian monastic settlement consisting of domestic buildings and a chapel. From here you can see across the mouth of Loch Eriboll to Whiten Head. The island is Eilean Hoan and it too was cleared in 1842 when its four families were evicted. On the island is a medieval

cemetery used by Durness people, according to tradition, to bury their dead as graves on the mainland would be disturbed by wolves! You can also see Ceannabeinne cottage beside the main road, the only survivor of the township. It was built in 1827 as a school and schoolhouse and survived as such until 1847.

The remains of two small buildings are visible on the promontory, and three trenches were excavated to discover how they had been used. The larger building had a thick stone wall and a very roughly cobbled floor, laid around the bedrock that outcrops across the promontory. Many fire-cracked stones were found in the floor, along with charcoal, so the building probably contained a hearth. The smaller building had a floor made of paving, with large slabs fitted neatly around outcropping bedrock. It had a wall built of very large, upright boulders and well-built, coursed, slab masonry. The positions of the buildings, and the sections of walling that cut off the promontory from the mainland, indicate that it was a place set apart from other settlements. It may have been an early Christian monastery, occupied by hermits who sought to meditate and pray away from the concerns of everyday life.

Based on the results of the survey and trial trenching, the promontory at Traigh na H'Uamhag holds archaeological remains of potentially early date. Charcoal from an occupation deposit was dated by radiocarbon to 370-100 BC. This suggests an Iron Age promontory fort. Further work to clarify this and explore the site remains a very exciting prospect.

### **Ceannabeinne Township Environment<sup>84</sup>**

The abandoned township of Ceannabeinne (meaning 'head of the mountain') lies to the east of the village of Durness, at the northern end of the mountain from which the township takes its name (centred at NC 438 658). It lies mainly to the north of the A838 road that leads from Durness to Tongue, with one outlying building to the south of the road. The topography consists of craggy knolls and steep-sided hills to either side of the burn known as Allt Chailgeag ('burn of bereavement and death'). The burn runs through a broad, flat-bottomed valley in the western part of the township and then descends a narrow, steep-sided valley toward the beach of the same name. To the north of the valley, the ground rises in undulating knolls and then descends steeply toward the sea shore, dropping to cliffs above the broad beach known as Traigh na H'Uamhag ('beach of the little cave').

Ceannabeinne is a small part of the North West Highlands Geopark in the heart of Mackay Country. A Geopark is an environment with the incredible legacy left by an extraordinary geological past. The mountains and coasts, the flora and fauna, the communities and culture all owe a great deal to the difference which the underlying geology makes. The Geopark extends to the east of Durness, beyond Loch Eriboll, and on to The Moine. The eastern boundary of the Geopark largely follows the Moine Thrust zone, a famous and important geological structure.

The landscape in and around Durness including the Ceannabeinne site is considered as 'moorland slopes and hills' (Caithness and Sutherland Landscape assessment (1998)) The site is outside the Durness SAC and SSSI and roughly 1 km from the Eilean Hoan SSSI/North Sutherland Coastal Islands SPA. These sites are key habitats and species of international importance. Durness SAC and SSSI site was originally designated as a SSSI in 1990 and then subsequently also as an SAC on the 17th of March 2005. The map adjacent provides an overview of the extent of the designated area which covers 1,997 hectares.

The qualifying reasons for the original SSSI designation was due primarily to interesting geological formations and rare floral habitats and species The qualifying reasons for

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By P.A-Evans and I.M.Evans on 27.05.07 and 29.06.07 at the Ceannabeinne Archaeological Site

designation as an SAC have been listed below. The priority habitats within this area consist of the limestone pavements and dune grassland. The key conservation objective is to avoid the deterioration of habitats utilised by Otters and avoiding disturbance where possible.

#### Scientific name

- Alkaline fens
- Alpine and Sub-alpine calcareous grasslands
- European dry heaths
- Fixed dunes with herbaceous vegetation
- Hard oligo-mesotrophic waters with benthic vegetation
- Humid dune stacks
- Hydrophilous tall herb fringe communities
- Limestone pavements
- *Lutra lutra* (Otter )
- Shifting dunes with *Ammophila arenaria* (Marram grass)

The pre clearance township site is located to the south west of the Island of Eilean Hoan that is a SSSI and also part of the North Sutherland Coastal Islands Special Protection Area (SPA) along with another Island, Eilean nan Ron, located further to the east and is about 1.25 km from the township. The 48 hectare Island has its designation primarily because of its internationally important wintering population of Greenland Barnacle Geese (*Branta leucopsis*). At peak times a total of 630 individuals have been counted on both Islands and this represents 2% of the global breeding population. The geese primarily feed on the Island's grassland but also feed on the improved agricultural land on the mainland. There are also a number of important breeding populations of other seabirds that frequent the Island. Of these the greatest importance is the nationally important breeding population of Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) with 470 pairs (3% of GB population).

There is no one way to examine the living organisms but individuals do not occur in isolation and distribution depends upon a combination of environmental factors. The relationship of geology, scenery, climate and vegetation cannot be totally separated except for ease of investigation. Wind is a factor of notable variability and of extreme. The topography enters greatly into exposure of wind and in many places is a prominent factor. Soil is a major multiple factor with a close correlation between rock type and soil character. The elements of climate, vegetation and relief are determinant in soil formation.

#### **Assessment 1841 and 2007**

Ceannabeinne Township was once a thriving township on the Rispond Estate. Today it consists of several ruined structures situated by the side of the A838 Durness to Tongue road. In many cases only the lowest courses of the foundation survive, as the substantial stone enclosure dykes built after the clearance of the settlement in 1842 have re-used much of the stone from the buildings. The township now is undistinguished and forms part of the Durness common grazing.

People lived with flocks of goats, sheep, horses and cattle, and they were living happy, with flesh and fish and butter, and cheese and fowl and potatoes and kale and milk too. There was no want of anything. The illustration is an artist's impression of how Ceannabeinne may have looked prior to 1841.



IMAGE 215 CEANNABEINNE PRE 1841 ARTIST IMPRESSION NICOLA POOL

Ceannabeinne is a different entity today than in 1841 for comparative reason principally because of a loss of boundary features. The walls demarcating the site today used to be part of the township making the built environment inhabited by the township people and their stock. This would have had a different effect on the “wildlife” associated with the stone habitat and the ecology of the area. The flora and fauna changes with the geology, climate and land use and cultivation ceased for sheep farming and human impact has determined the presence and abundance of many current plants and animals.

What was once a farm town evolving in 1841 abruptly became an area dominated by sheep grazing that the complexes in their comparison may not be apparent. The farm town would comprise of a variety of situations many of them inherently ephemeral but stabilized for a time by human control while laterally the area was maintained by the multifarious activities of a single domesticated animal species instead of by the influence of climate or large plants. More recently even with the grazing of sheep the area is likelier to be of a natural climax, Blanket bog and sparse grassland. Grazing pressure is a key factor in determining ecological variation while the site is becoming waterlogged and declining into moor land.

At present, much of the land is given over to sheep. Very little arable was encountered, even in those areas where it was deemed likely that crops could be grown. It was quite common to encounter land which had apparently been cultivated in the recent past but which was now poorly tended and waterlogged and declining into moorland. Analysis of this information is not straightforward, partly due to the sheer scale of the information but also because of the nature of the resource and the problems of summarizing an extremely heterogeneous data set within tight parameters. It was commonplace to encounter isolated fragments of what were most likely to be much larger residues of past activity. An example of this might be a ruinous

dyke, or an outbuilding which functioned only as part of a field system, cleared areas that may relate to the agricultural activities of the townfolk, cultivation areas and animal enclosures. The hillside too shows evidence of strips of stone clearance and attempts may have been made to cultivate the hillside.

Today it is described as an area of rocky outcrops and steep mountainside to the south of the road, and of green fields and rocky cliff line, high above the sea-shore to the north. The remains of the township are situated in a cluster between the cliffs and the north side of the road. The area is now divided into fields by later stone dykes, which in some areas dissect the earlier buildings.

### **Farming before the improvements**

Pre 1841 at Ceannabeinne and throughout Scotland the land was farmed by a method known as the run-rig system. There were no large farms as we know them today; instead the land was divided into numerous, narrow strips of land. Landscape can be characterized as rugged and hilly with small well defined areas of good land. The garden areas were very fertile in their day growing potatoes, cabbage, kale, onions and carrots. Difficult to understand now as heavily grazed by sheep since the township was cleared. Grazing sheep and rabbits keep grass incredibly short and bracken has become invasive.

In 1841 domesticated farm animals and humans shared a common protective existence. Ceannabeinne was the biggest farm town on the Rispond Estate. The farmers rented the land from the local landowner and usually paid him in kind. They lived in small clusters of houses and, each day, went forth to farm their rigs and tend to their animals. Most of them rented a number of rigs, but it was unusual for a farmer to have two or more rigs alongside each other. These strips were curved into a sort of S shape because of the need for turning space for the teams of oxen pulling the heavy, wooden, "Old Scots Plough". The best land (known as the Infield) was always kept under crop. It was never rested and, on most rigs, the same crop was grown year after year. Some of the poorer township land (Outfield) was either cropped once in a while or left as pasture. Nearly every farmer kept a few animals and grazed them on the common grazing land, which was shared by all the villagers. Not all the land was arranged in rigs. The people were not able to drain the land as would happen today and so there was a deal of marshland, the flat land with the deepest and richest soil, close to the river banks, probably flooded and couldn't be used for farming. These marshlands were home to numerous insects, including the mosquito, which spread diseases amongst the country folk. But they were also home to wild fowl which were much sought after as a source of fresh meat. The landscape would be a completely alien one to anyone from our time. They would have good and safe access from the sea, grazing for animals, soils suitable for growing crops, and be sheltered by surrounding hills. Biodiversity means the variety of life or the richness of nature concerned with the relationship of nature and people.

At present, much of the land is given over to sheep. Very little arable was encountered, even in those areas where it was deemed likely that crops could be grown. It was quite common to encounter land which had apparently been cultivated in the recent past but which was now poorly tended and waterlogged and declining into moorland. It was commonplace to encounter isolated fragments of what were most likely to be much larger residues of past activity. An example of this might be a ruinous dyke, or an outbuilding which functioned only as part of a field system, cleared areas that may relate to the agricultural activities of the townfolk, cultivation areas and animal enclosures. The hillside too shows evidence of strips of stone clearance and attempts may have been made to cultivate the hillside.

Lowland heath can be divided into three main types: dry, wet and humid the latter bearing characteristics of both wet and dry heath. All 3 are found at Ceannabeinne. Lowland heath is usually a man-made environment.

The open lowland heath landscape is characterized by low-growing shrubs like gorse and heather. The other plant which grows here in abundance is bracken. Common gorse can be seen in spring the air is filled with its coconut smell. The purple expanse of heather is a characteristic of lowland heath in summer. Other heathland plants include haresfoot clover and St John's wort. Typical grass species include bristlebent and sheep's fescue. In the areas of wet heath species such as marsh gentian, sphagnum moss and the carnivorous sundews can be seen.

Wet heath is characterised by the presence of cross-leaved heath, purple moor grass, cotton grass, Apart from grazing sheep, the lowland heath environment is not a suitable habitat to support many species of UK mammal.

Dry heath occurs where the soils are free-draining and where the water table always remains below the surface. The shrubs commonly found on areas on dry lowland heath are common heather (ling), bell heather, crossleaved heath and three species of gorse: common, western and dwarf. Other plants include grasses like bristle bent and sheep's fescue. These dry sandy heaths are ideal habitats for reptiles. All six species of UK reptiles can be found here, which is one reason why it's important to conserve this declining habitat.

It is not uncommon to catch glimpses of dolphins, whales and porpoises off the coast at Ceannabeinne. These marine mammals are collectively known as cetaceans. Viable from the land Bottlenose Dolphin occasional in summer, Risso's porpoise occasional May \_ October, White beaked dolphin occasional May \_ October, and Minkie Whale rare in spring frequent June – August.

### **Ceannabeinne botanical report**

1. The site was visited by Pat and Ian Evans on 27<sup>th</sup>. May and 29<sup>th</sup>. June 2007.
2. 119 species of ferns and higher plants were listed from the site; further visits would add more, but probably not many. This is a respectable number of species from a relatively small area and reflects the wide range of habitats present and the different plant communities they support.
3. The plant communities form a mosaic. Their variety and distribution may be explained by factors such as the topography, presence of outcrop rock, steepness of slope, drainage/water logging, underlying soil type (acid/neutral/basic, peaty/sandy) and past and present management of the site (cultivation, grazing and the construction of drains, walls and buildings).
4. The plant communities have characteristic indicator species, such as members of the heather family. However, some species occur across a range of communities and the communities tend to intergraded at their edges.
5. There are only a few species obviously associated with past occupation of the site. They include tough, long lived perennials, such as stinging nettle, and others, typical of scree elsewhere, which are protected from grazing in the tumbledown walls.
6. For more information see the full species list and detailed comments.

### **Detailed comments on the vegetation**

1. The area surveyed consists of two 'fields' to the west, which are bounded by the road and walls/fences, and a larger area to the east, on both sides of the main bum, which contains the

main concentration of ruins (sites 7a7d); this larger area is bounded by notional lines on the map supplied. The site extends for some 400m west to east and 200m north to south and has an area of approx. 5 hectares.

2. Some 119 species of higher plants were recorded from the site and a few more might be added with further visits. This is a good number for a relatively small area and reflects the considerable range of habitats present. These habitats form a mosaic across the site, their presence in any one area depending on a number of factors.

These factors include the following:

A. the varied topography of the site, and the resultant drainage patterns, with well- and poorly-drained areas cut by burns and drains.

B. the presence and nature of outcrop rock (Lewisian gneiss), which may be relatively mineral-rich in places.

C. the presence in the main burn valley (and possibly elsewhere on the site) of a considerable depth (up to 3m) of glacial debris (moraine), the surface layers of which appear to have been augmented by sand blown up from the bay at the mouth of the burn. This sand may have a shell component, helping to explain the presence of some 'lime-loving' species of plants such as hair sedge *Carex capillaris*, which is locally frequent in the lower parts of the site.

D. the presence, elsewhere on the site, of a shallow layer of peat (although this may have been cut for fuel, or affected by cultivation).

E. the history of the site, including former cultivation areas (and associated drains/ditches), the ruins of buildings, enclosures and their walls, and more recent management (close grazing by livestock).

3. The different habitats support characteristic plant communities, although they do tend to intergrade on their edges. These may be recognised by 'indicator species', such as ling and other heathers, cotton-grass or bog-moss Sphagnum. No attempt was made, in the time available, to map the habitats, but they include the following:

A. outcrop rock, with associated thinly-soiled areas on flat surfaces, in gulleys and on shelves; the steeper north faces of some of the outcrops are richer than the more gently-sloping south-facing slopes (partly because they are shaded/damper and also because they are relatively inaccessible to grazing animals).

B. dry, acid grassland.

C. dry heath.

D. wet heath/bog/marsh.

E. dry neutral/calcareous grassland.

F. damp neutral/calcareous grassland.

G. open water along the drains and burn courses.

H. tumbledown walls of the former building and associated enclosures, and more modern walls.

4. Plants characteristic of the plant communities present are as follows. They are not all large and conspicuous, and some species occur in a range of communities.

A. outcrop rock: maidenhair spleenwort, early hair-grass, mountain everlasting, sea-pink, crowberry, primrose (gullies on north-facing crags), bilberry.

B. dry, acid grassland: sweet vernal-grass, heath bedstraw, common thyme (also in other well-drained short grassland), tormentil; bracken (former cultivation areas?)

C. Dry Heath: Ling.

D. wet heath/bog/marsh: bog-moss, cotton-grass, cross-leaved heath, bog asphodel, bog myrtle, sundews, heath spotted-orchid, compact and soft rushes. Grasses such as Yorkshire fog and crested dog's-tail occur in lush areas at edge of the marshy ground, with northern marsh-orchid.

E. dry neutral/calcareous grassland: hair sedge, crested hair-grass, limestone bedstraw, fairy flax, common thyme, lady's bedstraw, alpine bistort, mouse-ear hawkweed, mountain avens.

F. damp neutral/calcareous grassland (including damp flushes): lesser clubmoss, yellow saxifrage, alpine meadow-rue, tawny sedge, grass-of-parnassus.

G. drains, ditches and burns: bog pondweed, water horsetail, marsh horsetail, lesser spearwort, bulbous rush.

H. buildings and walls: stinging nettle, spear thistle, broad buckler-fem, common polypody fem, field forget-me-not.

5. Plants associated with former occupation of the site (see immediately above) are few and mostly extremely tough perennial 'weeds' such as stinging nettle. There are also some annual 'weeds' typical of disturbed ground, and ferns, elsewhere found in scree, which are protected from grazing amongst the stones of the tumbledown walls.

A. Wet heath/bog/marsh: bog-moss, cotton-grass, cross-leaved heath, bog asphodel, bog myrtle, sundews, heath spotted-orchid, compact and soft rushes. Grasses such as Yorkshire fog and crested dog's-tail occur in lush areas at edge of the marshy ground, with northern marsh-orchid. e. dry neutral/calcareous grassland: hair sedge, crested hair-grass, limestone bedstraw, fairy flax, common thyme, lady's bedstraw, alpine bistort, mouse-ear hawkweed, mountain avens.

B. Damp neutral/calcareous grassland (including damp flushes): lesser clubmoss, yellow saxifrage, alpine meadow-rue, tawny sedge, grass-of-parnassus.

C. Drains, ditches and burns: bog pondweed, water horsetail, marsh horsetail, lesser spearwort, bulbous rush.

D. Buildings and walls: stinging nettle, spear thistle, broad buckler-fem, common polypody fem, field forget-me-not.

List of species recorded by P.A-Evans and I.M.Evans on 27.05.07 and 29.06.07 at the Ceannabeinne Archaeological Site

## FERNS & ALLIES

Common Name	Latin Name	Common Name	Latin Name
Lesser Clubmoss	Selaginella selaginoides	Hard Fem	Blechnum spicant
Water Horsetail	Equisetum fluviatile	Broad Buckler-fem	Dryopteris dilatata
Marsh Horsetail	Equisetum palustre	Lady Fem	Athyrium filix-femina
Moonvort	Botrychium lunaria	Maidenhair Spleenwort	Asplenium trichomanes
Polypody	Polypodium vulgare agg.	Black Spleenvort	Asplenium adiantum-nigrum
Bracken	Pteridium aquilinum	Lemon-scented Fem	Oreopteris limbospenna

## FLOWERING PLANTS

Common Name	Latin Name	Common Name	Latin Name
Marsh Marigold	Caltha palustris	Creeping Buttercup	Ranunculus repens
Lesser Spearwort	Ranunculus flammula	Lesser Celandine	Ranunculus ficaria
Lesser Meadow-rue	Thalictrum minus	Alpine Meadow-rue	Thalictrum alpinum



Common Nettle	<i>Urtica dioica</i>	Bog Myrtle	<i>Myrica gale</i>
Common Chickweed	<i>Stellaria media</i>	Common Mouse-ear	<i>Cerastium fontanum</i>
Procumbent Pearlwort	<i>Sagina procumbens</i>	Ragged Robin	<i>Lychnis flos-cuculi</i>
Alpine Bistort	<i>Persicaria vivipara</i>	Sheep's Sorrel [agg.]	<i>Rumex acetosella</i>
Common Sorrel	<i>Rumex acetosa</i>	Thrift	<i>Armeria maritima</i>
Slender St. John's-wort	<i>Hypericum pulchrum</i>	Round-leaved Sundew	<i>Drosera rotundifolia</i>
Great Sundew	<i>Drosera longifolia</i>	Common Dog-violet	<i>Viola riviniana</i>
Marsh Violet	<i>Viola palustris</i>	Cuckoo-flower	<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>
Hairy Bitter-cress	<i>Cardamine hirsuta</i>	Crowberry	<i>Empetrum nigrum</i>
Heather	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>	Cross-leaved Heath	<i>Erica tetralix</i>
Bilberry	<i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i>	Primrose	<i>Primula vulgaris</i>
Yellow Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga aizoides</i>	Stone Bramble	<i>Rubus saxatilis</i>
Grass of Paranssus	<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>	Tormentil	<i>Potentilla erecta</i>
Mountain Avens	<i>Dryas octopetala</i>	Tufted Vetch	<i>Vicia cracca</i>
White Clover	<i>Trifolium repens</i>	Gorse	<i>Ulex europaeus</i>
Short-fruited Willow herb	<i>Epilobium obscurum</i>	Fairy Flax	<i>Linum catharticum</i>
Common Milkwort	<i>Polygala vulgaris</i>	Heath Milkwort	<i>Polygala serpyllifolia</i>
Wood-sorrel	<i>Oxális acetosella</i>	Field Forget-me-not	<i>Myosotis arvensis</i>
Selfheal	<i>Prunella vulgaris</i>	Wild Thyme	<i>Thymus polytrichus</i>
Sea Plantain	<i>Plantago maritima</i>	Ribwort Plantain	<i>Plantago lanceolata</i>
Thyme-leaved Speedwell	<i>Veronica serpyllifolia</i>	Wall Speedvell	<i>Veronica arvensis</i>
an eyebright	<i>Euphrasia micrantha</i>	Lousewort	<i>Pedicularis sylvatica</i>
Pale Butterwort	<i>Pinguicula lusitanica</i>	Common Buttenvort	<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>
Lady's Bedstraw	<i>Galium verum</i>	Limestone Bedstraw	<i>Galium stemi</i>
Heath Bedstraw	<i>Galium saxatile</i>	Deviils-bit Scabious	<i>Succisa pratensis</i>
Spear Thistle	<i>Cirsium vulgare</i>	Marsh Thistle	<i>Cirsium palustre</i>
Creeping Thistle	<i>Cirsium arvense</i>	Autumnal Hawkbit	<i>Leontodon autumnalis</i>
Dandelion	<i>Taraxacum officinale</i> agg.	Mouse-ear-hawkweed	<i>Pilosella officinarum</i>
Mountain Everlasting	<i>Antennaria dioica</i>	Daisy	<i>Bellis perennis</i>
Yarrow	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>	Common Ragwort	<i>Seneciojacobaea</i>
Marsh Ragwort	<i>Senecio aquaticus</i>	Marsh Arrovgrass	<i>Triglochin palustre</i>
Bog Pondweed	<i>Potamogeton polygonifolius</i>	Heath Rush	<i>Juncus squarrosus</i>
Jointed Rush	<i>Juncus articulatus</i>	Bulbous Rush	<i>Juncus bulbosus</i>
Soft Rush	<i>Juncus effusus</i>	Compact Rush	<i>Juncus conglomeratus</i>
Field Wood-rush	<i>Luzula campestris</i>	Heath Wood-rush	<i>Luzula multiflora</i>
Common Cottongrass	<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>	Deergrass	<i>Trichophorum cespitosum</i>
Few-flowered Spike-rush	<i>Eleocharis quinqueflora</i>	Black Bog-rush	<i>Schoenus nigricans</i>
Star Sedge	<i>Carex echinata</i>	DioeciousSedge	<i>Carex dioica</i>
Hair Sedge	<i>Carex capillaris</i>	Glaucous Sedge	<i>Carex flacca</i>
Camation Sedge	<i>Carex panicea</i>	Tawny Sedge	<i>Carex hostiana</i>
Common Yellow Sedge	<i>Carex viridula</i> ssp. <i>oedocarpa</i>	Pill Sedge	<i>Carex pilulifera</i>
Common Sedge	<i>Carex nigra</i>	Flea Sedge	<i>Carex pulicaris</i>
Mat-grass	<i>Nardus stricta</i>	Red Fescue	<i>Festuca rubra</i> sens.str.
Sheep's Fescue [agg.]	<i>Festuca ovina</i> agg.	Crested Dog's-tail	<i>Cynosurus cristatus</i>
Rough Meadow-grass	<i>Poa trivialis</i>	Crested Hair-grass	<i>Koeleria macrantha</i>
Yorkshire-fog	<i>Holcus lanatus</i>	Early Hair-grass	<i>Aira praecox</i>
Sweet Vernal Grass	<i>Anthoxanthum odoratum</i>	Velvet Bent	<i>Agrostis canina</i> sens.lat.
Heath-grass	<i>Danthonia decumbens</i>	Purple Moor-grass	<i>Molinia caerulea</i>
Bog Asphodel	<i>Nartheicum ossifragum</i>	Frog Orchid	<i>Coeloglossum viride</i>
a heath spotted-orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i> ssp. <i>ericeto</i>	Northern Marsh-orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza purpurella</i>

## The Trail

The abandoned township of Ceannabeinne (meaning ‘head of the mountain’) lies two miles to the east of the village of Durness in northern Sutherland, at the northern end of the mountain from which the township takes its name. It lies to the north of the A838 road that leads from Durness to Tongue.

A marked route will take you round a deserted township abandoned in 1842. Information signs will guide you and explain what you can see along with the story of the Durness Riots outlined elsewhere. The route is over rough ground. It is approximately 1 kilometre and will take about 30 minutes to complete. Several inclines but clear pathways are defined. There are 9 interpretive panels. The first gives the introduction above.



IMAGE 216 CEANNABEINNE A DESERTED TOWNSHIP ABANDONED IN 1842.

The opening of the trail was on 7<sup>th</sup> February 2009 at 2 pm at Ceannabeinne by BBC broadcaster Iain Anderson, and after at the village hall for exhibition and displays with refreshments and the drama video showing at 4.30pm.

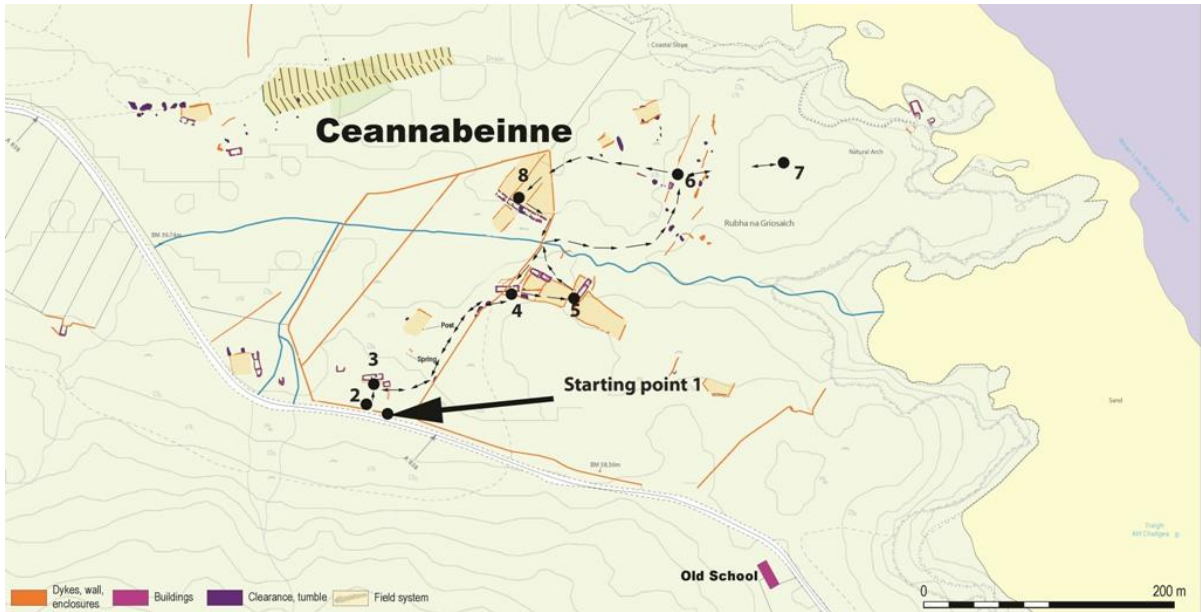


IMAGE 217 CEANNABEINNE TRAIL MAP

### Sign 2. The Highland Township

In the Eighteenth century Ceannabeinne was typical of a farming community in the Highlands. The farm was rented by a Tacksman from Lord Reay, Chief of Clan MacKay. In turn he sublet the farm to tenants. The wealth of the farm lay not in crops, but in cattle which were grazed on the extensive hill ground nearby. Working together in a communal, self-sufficient way, the



IMAGE 218 SIGN 3 SITE RECTANGULAR FOUNDATION OF A HOUSE, PROBABLY BUILT ABOUT 1800

tenants created a close-knit community. In 1841 there were 50 people living here in ten households. The following year there were none.

### Sign 3. Houses and Homes Life begins to get better

Of the 14 houses recorded here in 1841, little remains. However, in front of this sign you should be able to make out the rectangular foundation of a house, probably built about 1800. An archaeological dig revealed the western gable had a fireplace and the inside walls were plastered both unusual in a township of this date. The site has been drained and flattened, there is a garden between here and the road and it commands a view over the township. Tenants had no security over their homes so whoever built this house was relatively well off and confident in his future. The garden of this house has reverted, like much of the higher parts of the site, to a patchwork of close-grazed grassland and wet heath. There are cushions of bog-moss in the wettest places. The tall tussocks of soft rush follow the line of a former ditch on the up-slope side of the house.

### Sign 4. The Traditional Longhouse

Nearly all sites of former habitation in this area are marked by patches of stinging nettle, which is eaten by sheep in the spring, but can survive decades of grazing. Nettles have also extended down the relatively new wall, where sheep take shelter.

The stone wall to the side was constructed after Ceannabeinne was abandoned in 1842 and is partly made from the walls of the houses. Look carefully and you will see the grass covered foundation of a building. The stone wall goes right through it! This was a traditional longhouse. To the left was the living quarters and to the right was the byre for the cattle, separated by a wall of stone or wood, but with a door between the two. Can you spot the hole in the base of the gable to your right? This was the end of a channel which drained the effluent from the byre.

### Sign 5. Homes and Gardens

The Lewisian gneiss cliffs behind these houses, and the steep slopes below them, have a rich assemblage of plants, including primrose and the spiky rosettes of yellow saxifrage. The richness may be due to minerals leaching out of the rock, or to shell sand blown up from the shore. Here you can see much more clearly what a longhouse looked like. This house was not demolished and has simply collapsed over time. You can also see a large rectangular garden. The house probably had two rooms separated by a simple wooden partition. One room was the kitchen with a central hearth where all the daily family life went on. The other room was a bedroom, sometimes furnished with box beds, where everyone slept. In this building you can still see the connecting doorway in the gable between the house and the byre where the animals were kept. In the garden there would have been kale, cabbage and the all-important potato. Oats and bere (a type of barley) were grown on the arable land and ground for meal to make oatcakes and beremeal scones. Butter and cheese came from the herds of cattle which were the main source of wealth for Highlanders. Being so close to the sea, fish would also have played an important part in the diet of the people

### Sign 6. Signs of life a very long time ago

Bracken has colonised areas of well-drained soil all over this site, many of which must have formerly been cultivated. Bracken has its uses, as bedding for stock, but there would not have been much here in the past. The close-grazed grassy areas are carpeted by small herbs, including daisy, self-heal and wild thyme. Settlement here at Ceannabeinne may go back a very long way. Durness was heavily settled during the Neolithic period which began about 6000 years ago. This small valley stretching from the burn appears to have been cultivated as there are a number of clearance piles which are stones collected when the land is being cultivated.

Some appear to be quite neat cairns. If you look very closely at the hillside in front of you, you may be able to see the strips of land that are clearer of stones than the surrounding land. You can also see terracing on the land behind you as it drops from the ridge down to the sea. This could be evidence of very ancient farming, but it is muddled up with later changes and practices.

#### Sign 7. A Sign with a View – Religion and Education



IMAGE 219 SIGN 7 SITE THE MOUTH OF LOCH ERIBOLL TO WHITEN HEAD. THE ISLAND IS EILEAN HOAN

The bright green grassland on the limestones of Eilean Hoan provides excellent grazing for sheep, which are still ferried out there. On the seaward side of this hill, wind-blown sand supports low-growing shrubby plants such as mountain avens and creeping willow, with lots of tiny stripy snails.

From here you can see across the mouth of Loch Eriboll to Whiten Head. The island is Eilean Hoan and it too was cleared in 1842 when its four families were evicted. On the island is a medieval cemetery used by Durness people, according to tradition, to bury their dead as graves on the mainland would be disturbed by wolves! You can also see Ceannabeinne cottage beside the main road, the only survivor of the township. It was built in 1827 as a school and schoolhouse and survived as such until 1847. On a rock stack, by the cliffs below and out of sight of this spot, are the scant remains of a settlement. Consisting of at least two buildings it was thought to have been an early Christian monastic site, but charcoal remains have been dated by radiocarbon to 370-100 BC. This suggests an Iron Age promontory fort.

#### Sign 8. A Row of Cottages

The adjacent wall, built since the site was cleared, has been standing long enough to become covered with lichens, which are very slow-growing. Conspicuous along the top of the wall are the grey tufts of one of them, sea-ivory. From this abundant plant came a dye which, depending

on the strength of the mixture, gave red, orange and yellow and it was used to colour wool before it was woven into garments.

This lichen would have present pre 1842 and as it yields a dye that is variously described as red, orange and yellow was very likely used to dye wool.

Here there were three cottages with long, narrow gardens. Excavations showed the central house had a stone paved floor and the house to the right had been rebuilt at least twice since its original construction. In this house was a central fireplace and round it was found evidence, in the form of two thimbles and a brass button, of an important occupation in a township, tailoring. Township life was a communal affair and people relied on one another to help in the struggle from one year to the next. While most people were farmers obtaining money from the sale of cattle, in 1841 there were two sailors and a boat carpenter living in Ceannabeinne. They would have been employed by James Anderson at Rispond. That was, however, to no avail, and in the Spring of 1842 they, along with the other residents of the township, made their way past the newly built Rispond Estate wall to the sparse, barren hillside at Sangobeg, just few hundred yards down the road or further afield to new beginnings in the cities of the Lowlands or the distant lands overseas.

**Ceannabeinne Township Trail**

Discover the story of the Highland Clearances and the Durness Riots

**Ceannabeinne**

**You Are Here**

**Old School**

From here a marked route will take you round a deserted township abandoned in 1842.

Information signs will guide you and explain what you can see.

Please take care as the route is over rough ground and appropriate stout footwear should be worn. It is approximately 1 kilometre and will take about 30 minutes to complete. This land is part of the Durness Common Grazing and the Scottish Outdoor Access Code should be adhered to including keeping dogs under control.

Further information can be found in the leaflet 'Riots in Durness' available in the Durness Visitor Centre.

This is a project commissioned by the Durness Development Group Ltd and funded by Scottish National Heritage, Highland Year of Culture and Heritage Lottery

SCOTTISH NATIONAL HERITAGE  
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IMAGE 220 CEANNABEINNE TRAIL INFORMATION PANEL

## Loch Croispol Schoolhouse.



IMAGE 221 LOCH CROISPOL SCHOOLHOUSE ON THE SHORE OF LOCH CROISPOL

The main area of study was the Loch Croispol schoolhouse and the surrounding hillsides where visitors could be directed for walking. The aim was to identify the visible and accessible archaeological features in the area, assess them in terms of their suitability for development interpretation and identify any work which may be required to consolidate or conserve them if they were to be interpreted and promoted to the public. There is archaeological evidence of settlement in the area from early times. This theme looks at the settlement and agricultural use of the land from the Bronze Age to current times. The earliest settlement remains are of Bronze Age hut circles on the hillside above Loch Croispol. The church of Balnakeil, Balnakeil House and farm (visible from the hillside) flourished from medieval times. Post-medieval settlement remains can be found on the hillside (further research would be required to date the site more precisely), 18<sup>th</sup> Century agriculture is evidenced by the sheepfolds and enclosures on the hillside, while the Victorian period is shown by the Cape Wrath Lighthouse visible from the hill top. Balnakeil Craft Village represents post-war activity in the area.

### **Archaeological and historical background<sup>85</sup>**

The area around Loch Croispol is rich in archaeological features from pre-historic to early modern. The main site investigated was the old school house adjacent to Loch Croispol and close to Balnakeil Manse, (a listed building). The schoolhouse was built with the help of the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK), a body founded in 1709 to establish schools in the Highlands and Islands in order to promote Christian learning. Supported by the Presbytery of Tongue and the Rev Murdoch MacDonald of Tongue, construction of the schoolhouse began in 1765. The building was completed in 1766. There is little documentation on the running of the school, but sometime during the 1840s, the

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<sup>85</sup> From the initial consultancy report from Rowan Tree Consulting.

headmaster and the local minister had a major disagreement. The headmaster was sacked by the Presbytery, but appealed to the Court of Session and was reinstated. However, with the opening of schools in Durine (1844) and Sangomore (1846), the school ceased to be attended and was eventually closed in 1861. The building appears to have fallen out of use at this time.



IMAGE 222 REPRODUCED WITH THE PERMISSION OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SCOTLAND' THE FIRST EDITION ORDNANCE SURVEY MAP OF 1878

The assessment identified several features in the area from Loch Croispol to Loch Borrallie. These ranged from pre-historic cairns and hut circles to early modern settlement remains and sheepfolds. The majority of sites were surveyed in 1980 by the Ordnance Survey (OS). Recent work (mainly walkover survey of the coastline) has been carried out in the area by GUARD (Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division). The First Edition Ordnance Survey map of 1878 shows the stone dykes and the schoolhouse, as well as the larger sheepfolds on the hillside. Aerial photographs (1946) of the site held by the Highland Council Archaeology Unit show the stone walls and the remains of the schoolhouse. The sheepfold is also visible.

The existing records as well as work undertaken by GUARD and a walkover survey show that the area is very rich in archaeological sites. Further recording is needed to identify and classify all the sites in the area. Within the area walked, there are eight sites recorded on the SMR. Archaeological excavations in the Loch Borrallie area in 2004 and 2005 revealed buildings of late medieval origin. This work yielded evidence of the sites being reused from the Norse period through into the 1600s. Pottery shards, a spindle whorl and pieces of worked red deer antler reveal early industry, Norse links and later trading links. The current work focuses on a later period from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> into the late 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and will reveal evidence of what are often called 'pre-clearance' settlement and land use patterns – patterns from before the creation of the crofting system and associated settlement patterns with which we are so familiar today.



The current townships were laid out in the course of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and are organised in a very different way socially and spatially from the previous tenure system.

### **Interpretation & Exploration of the landscape at Loch Croispol Sgoil Chroispal Schoolhouse and the position of this in the history and heritage of Mackay Country.**



IMAGE 223 LOCH CROISPOL SCHOOLHOUSE

We used the Rowan Tree report as we sought funding to preserve the history of Loch Croispal Schoolhouse and give an insight into education and society in the Highlands in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The school was built on church land. Over a two year period this community based project engaged a team of academics, local experts and interested volunteers to investigate the history and archaeology associated with a rather unusual schoolhouse in the parish of Durness and the environment in which the building is situated. This project was supported through funding from Historic Scotland, Highland Legacy Fund and Heritage Lottery. From the research and activities of the project we produced documentation, visual and audio material in the form of video and photograph. The completed video took two forms.

- An explanation and recording of the project and all its aspects ongoing and completed with interviews with all involved. Detailed recording of archaeology daily.
- An edited documentary of the historical and heritage of the area with particular reference to the history and story of the school and its role in Scottish Education.

The subsequent list is the outcomes and outputs that were agreed with the funders. Followed by the research review and information summation from the project.

- Carry out in association with local footpaths officer, countryside ranger, local access panel, archaeologists, building control and building risk assessment.

- In consultation with archaeologists, building control and builder commission work to be carried out to stabilize the schoolhouse to prevent further deterioration and make safe for public access.
- Compile a full documented report and any advice material discovered during the searches.
- Undertake limited archaeological excavation to shed more light on how the schoolhouse might have looked and functioned when in use as a school with an archaeological data structure report on the findings, results, and conclusions.
- Organise workshops group sessions.
- Commission artist.
- Install way marker directing public to schoolhouse and install small interpretive panel at schoolhouse & schoolhouse leaflet.
- Arrange exhibition and opening.
- Commission landscape survey to work with archaeologist and produce documented map of the area to set the various types of features visible within an archaeological timeline on the Borralie Headland.
- Produce documented environment map with an archaeological time line of the area and identify the main types of archaeological features visible particularly burial cairns, hut circles, pre clearance settlement remains and “improved” agricultural landscapes.
- To have joined up approach for a coordinated trail and leaflet describing the links between the features with networked and matched interpretation.
- Recoded all aspects of the project with interviews with all involved at every aspect. Edit footage into packages available for diverse uses writing and copying to DVD.

A new interpretation panel was unveiled in Durness on Sat 22<sup>nd</sup> January at the old schoolhouse followed by a guided walk round the trail using the new leaflet and mobile phone based audio trail. Exhibition of art inspired by this work plus selected highlights from the archaeology, ecology and history discoveries. DVD describing the archaeology, history and ecology followed.

### **Place-name Evidence**

Several of the place names around the study area probably derive from Old Norse (Waugh 2000), while several others may have their origins in Gaelic. The place names Durness, Croispol, Borralie, Solmar and Keoldale are probably Norse in origin. Several other place names, including Ach' na h-Anaite and Balnakeil, suggest ecclesiastical establishments in the area during the early medieval period. The Norse place names seem to be strong evidence for a Norse presence in and around the survey area between AD 880 and 1200, the main period of Norse linguistic influence in the north of Scotland (Fraser 1979, 23; Waugh 2000). While some of the names are topographic while others may be habitative, the presence of the former need not harm the case for Norse settlement in the area. As Waugh (2000, 15) argues, ‘It is difficult to believe that Norse terms could attach themselves with such tenacity to topographical features if the Scandinavians were not present, on the land, in numbers large enough and permanent enough to perpetuate the names surrounding their dwellings.’ Ach' na h Anaite This refers to a field associated with a church that was probably established by the ninth century and may have been a mother church. The field may have been owned by the church, and need not have been in close proximity to it (Clancy 1995, 111). Balnakeil probably derives from Bal-, a town or village, and -cille relating to an early Christian monastic cell or church (Johnston 1934; Darwood 1995), such as that reputedly established here by St. Maelrubha (OPS 1855). Durness probably derives from Old Norse, perhaps dyr, meaning ‘wild beast’, and -nes meaning ‘peninsula’ or ‘cape’ (Fraser 1979, 23; 1995, 94). Croispol may also have its origins in Old

Norse (Fraser 1995, 94). It could derive from cross, the Norse for ‘cross’, or indeed the Gaelic equivalent crois. Similarly, -poll may derive from Old Norse for ‘farm’, or the Gaelic -poll, meaning ‘hollow’ or ‘pool’ (Darwood 1995). Cartographic evidence shows it labelled as ‘Loch na Kill’, an interesting Gaelic twist on the Norse ‘croispol’, or ‘church-farm’ (see above). Keoldale It has been suggested that Keoldale derives from Old Norse, Kaldr dalr, meaning cold valley (Fraser 1979). Borley (Borrallie) this may derive from Old Norse borg- for houses clustered around a fort or monastic site and -ley which is probably the plural of meadow (Johnston 1934, 112; Darwood 1995). The name most likely refers to the probable dun (site 123), and may have originally been attached to the cluster of longhouses and outbuildings around it. Solmar Sol--mar could be derived from Old Norse, with sol- interpreted as ‘muddy’ (Johnston 1934, 298).

## Area Context



IMAGE 224 MAP OF THE AREA UNDER INVESTIGATION

The Schoolhouse is sited in the former township of Knockbreck in the parish of Durness, Sutherland about 1.5km south of Durine which is the accepted centre of the village of Durness. Centred on OS map reference NC392 674, it covers the area from, and includes, Balnakeil Craft Village to Loch Caladail a distance of 1.2km. It is bisected by the A838 road which enters the township at the Grasskeeper’s Cottage in Achins and exits at the top of Keoldale Brae. Essentially Knockbreck is a shallow valley which runs north – south about 0.7km broad which rises from Loch Croispol (10m above mean sea level) to the ridge (43m) which the A838 runs along, before falling to Loch Caladail (30m). The land to the west rises to about 60m while to the east about 50m. For such a small area the landscape is one of contrast. The north end is divided into neat, green fields, an extension of the

fertile land which makes up Balnakeil Farm while the valley is surrounded by rugged outcrops of limestone split with small gullies and steep banks and cliffs. As the land rises at the south it meets the fossilized dune system associated with the Kyle of Durness, much of it given over to rough grazing although there is clear evidence of rig and lazy beds on much of the land. The floor of the valley is remarkably flat and boggy and criss-crossed with drainage ditches suggesting this was once a small loch. A notable feature in the centre of the area is an outcrop

of limestone forming a small hill, almost certainly the ‘cnoc’ which gives the township its name – Knockbreck meaning the speckled hillock and it is just that, a small green hill speckled with grey outcrops of limestone. Water flows south to north to Loch Croispol, mostly from two springs, the larger known as Fuaran Fheoraidh which has been suggested locally as an outlet from Loch Caladail. While heaths and heather grow on much of the rougher ground, there isn’t much peat cover due to the limestone and sand. Some very old willow trees grow along the burn side on the valley floor. While the fields on the Glebe were cultivated within the last 60 years, all the land is now used for sheep grazing, although a few cattle are grazed on the crofting ground at the south end. Land ownership is divided between private individuals in Balnakeil Craft Village, the former Balnakeil Manse and Achins cottage; The General Trustees of the Church of Scotland as one-third of the area forms the Durness Glebe and the Scottish Government Department of Agriculture Keoldale Estate which is let to the Durness Sheepstock Club. Being on the Durness Limestone, Knockbreck is surrounded by extensive archaeological remains, from the earliest hunters of the Mesolithic at Smoo Cave to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Clearances. Within Knockbreck there are 10 sites listed in the SMR plus the unlisted ruins of the 18th century parish school.<sup>86</sup>



IMAGE 225 LOOKING INTO KNOCKBRECK FROM ACHINS

The abandoned Schoolhouse is located at the southern end of Loch Croispol not far from the Balnakeil Craft Village and would have originally sat within the township of Knockbreck (Cnocbreac). It was constructed in the early 1760s and appears to have fallen into disuse in 1861. Over a two year period (2009, 2010) a team of academics, local experts and interested volunteers investigated the history and archaeology associated with this rather unusual Schoolhouse in the parish of Durness. The study area extended north from the Kyle of Durness to Balnakeil Bay in an area of Durness Limestone. That means it is a very fertile corner of Mackay Country so not surprisingly there are a number of ancient remains such as hut circles, a chambered cairn and old homesteads. The wider a study is detailed under the Borralie Headland where a trail was developed from the investigations during this project.

In advance of the Glasgow University Archaeology Research Division archaeologists arriving in August a very hard working team of local volunteers cleared the substantial buildup of fallen masonry and rubble out of the interior of the Schoolhouse. During the dig these volunteers

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<sup>86</sup> This introduction is from a paper written by Graham Bruce. The Cnocbreac Dykes. An Investigation into the turf dykes of Cnocbreac, Durness, Sutherland.

worked alongside the archaeologists turfing and sifting through each layer of soil to help uncover the story of this building and its past use.

A range of local schools joined in

- Durness Primary School
- Kinlochbervie Primary School
- Kinlochbervie High School
- Tongue Primary School
- Farr Primary School
- Farr High School

The Archaeological work was carried out by Dr. Olivia Lelong and Dr. Ally Beckett of GUARD. Local history research was carried out by Graham Bruce. Research into relevant regional and national history was undertaken by Dr. Isobel MacPhail, of Assynt Research and Consultancy, also of the University Highlands and Islands for History. Project organisation, administration & management, video and image recording Ronnie Lansley.



IMAGE 226 HARD WORKING TEAM OF LOCAL VOLUNTEERS

Additional specialist advice and research was provided by:

- Dr. Mary Beith, 'Planting the Past', local medicinal and domestic use of plants in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.
- Dr. Malcolm Bangor Jones, 'Durness Parish, From Clanship to Crofting', social and cultural change in the area from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- Andrew Wright, chartered architect and heritage consultant specializing in significant historic buildings on the importance of this schoolhouse locally and nationally.
- Arthur Dutch, 'A Tinsmith's Tales', an account of the history of metalworking and design in Scotland with a focus on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

- Essie Stewart, traditions of the travelling families relevant to trade and daily life in the study period.
- Catriona Macleod, Gaelic support and translation for contemporary Gaelic and Mackay Country Gaelic words and phrases.
- Nicola Pool artist to produce work relevant and coordinated with the research producing impressions, illustrations, and creative interpretations related to the periods in appropriate media.
- UHI Centre for History, access to key books from the Dr. Pennie Collection.

Local folk and visitors attended workshops, guided walks, illustrated talks and ceilidhs focused on this work.

At the heart of all of this was the Durness Parish Schoolhouse itself. This school does not appear on the list of SSPCK schools from 1748 however by the 1760s the Parish School which is the focus of this study was in operation. By 1845 the parish had three other schools in addition to the original Parish School on the shores of Loch Croispol.

### **Durness Parish School, November 2001**

Graham Bruce wrote a brief paper on the research.

Education within the parish almost certainly pre-dates the opening of the parish school in 1766. The Mackay family seems to have been keen on the idea of education even as early as the first part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The noted minister of Durness, Rev Alexander Munro was tutor to the family of Mackay of Renevie (Skerray) until he became minister in Durness about 1734 and it is likely a tutor would have been employed at Balnakeil House as well. It is possible the minister himself would have educated a few favoured locals.

In 1709, the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge was set up. The purpose of the Society was to establish schools in the Highlands and Islands in order to promote Christian learning, but also to help stamp out Roman Catholicism and Gaelic. In 1740, the Presbytery of Tongue, which encompassed the parishes of the Reay Country (the Mackay Clan lands), was eager to establish schools throughout the area and it was the Rev Murdoch MacDonald of Durness who was the keen advocate the working of the SSPCK. However it took some time to raise the funds for the school building and it was not until 1765 that the construction of the building below the manse on the shore of Loch Croispol started. On the 22<sup>nd</sup>. December of that year the Kirk Session noted that the building had not been finished. They offered John MacKay of Sarsgrum (a township in the parish) £40 Scots to complete the work immediately. This he seems to have done, for on the 24<sup>th</sup>. March 1766, the session inspected the school and agreed it was worth £40. The timber came from Westmoin, the eastern part of the parish encompassing Hope and Eriboll, cost 6/- (shillings) including the carriage. The timber almost certainly came from the managed woodlands at Arnaboll. The door, lock, window and bands were paid for by the session and the £40 by Lord Reay.

Unfortunately not much is known about the school beyond this, although a search of the SSPCK records would no doubt throw up more information. A local story relates it was the first parish school in Scotland, but this seems unlikely. It may well have been the first parish school in the Reay Country. In 1826 an entry in the Durness Labour Book showed payment for the thatching on the Schoolhouse. This is interesting as a number of pantiles have been recovered from the site of the school and it has been presumed the roof was tiled. However from the Day Book in 1824-25 a number of men were employed to land tile from the ship 'Betsy' at Rispond and in 1826 men were employed to secure the tiles at the manse for the winter.

The Parish School came to a somewhat ignominious end at some point about 1840, the minister and the head teacher had a major disagreement. He was sacked by the Presbytery on the recommendation of the Kirk Session. However, he applied to the Court of Session and was reinstated. Very few children attended and after the opening of the General Assembly School in Durine about 1844 and the Free Church School in Sangomore two years later, it ceased to be attended. However, the head teacher remained in post for another fifteen years with no pupils! He retired as a consequence of the Parochial and Burgh Schoolmasters (Scotland) Act 1861. The school was then closed. Judging by the state of the building, it would seem likely the building was not occupied after this and gradually fell into ruin. There are no references in any of the later census accounts to someone living at the school and there are no local traditions of it being anything other than the parish school.

#### *References*

*Sutherland Estate Papers (Dep313/3347)*

*Durness Kirk Session Minute Book*

*Notes on the Early Church of Tongue (W. Mackay 1962)*

*The New Statistical Account 1843*

*Papers relating to Campbell v Beaton 24 October 1900 Public Record Office Ref: TS18/750 8129*

### **Durness Parish School 2009**

Graham Bruce wrote a second paper relating to Durness Parish School. August 2009

The remains of the parish school are situated at the south end of Loch Croispol (NC 390677) approximately 1km west of Durness Village Square and close to Balnakeil Craft Village. It is sometimes referred to as Balnakeil School or Loch Croispol School, both terms are almost certainly late 20<sup>th</sup> century ones. Although lacking the context of settlement today, it was situated in the township of Knockbreck, one of a number of pre-clearance townships in the area. The substantial former parish manse dating from 1728 stands nearby, although the ruined parish church at Balnakeil is one kilometer to the north.

Constructed in the early 1760's, it was built to a very high standard almost entirely of local limestone bound with lime mortar. The different courses of stone were leveled with Easdale slate. Window sills and the slabbing round the chimney top are possibly schist from nearby Faraid Head. The gable ends were crow stepped as can be seen in the remaining west gable. Initially thatched, it was later (possibly about 1793) re-roofed with pantiles. Plaster remains found while moving stones in preparation for archaeology showed that at least the east end interior was lath and plaster lined. The building has one window to the east of the door on the south wall and two to the west. On the north wall there are two, possibly three windows, one of which has been partially blocked up. To the west end is a clearly defined garden surrounded by a dry stone dyke with turf on the top. A blocked up gateway is evident in the south side which faced the old route way to Borralie and Clashneuch, two pre-clearance settlements close by.

The Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge established a school in Durness possibly as early as 1708. A local story related the school was the first parish school in Scotland – it may be that the first SSPCK School was established in Durness. The building of the school was pioneered by the Rev Murdoch MacDonald, the parish minister from 1726 to 1763. A significant figure in the Province of Strathnaver or Mackay Country, he was a great supporter of not just education, but of the arts, most notably as a backer of the great Gaelic poet, Rob Donn. His son Joseph was the first person to collect and write down bagpipe music and in 1760 wrote 'The Complete Theory of the Scots Highland Bagpipe', a seminal work in the world of piping. MacDonald struggled to gain support for the school, but with funds from Lord Reay, chief of Clan MacKay, work probably began before his death in 1763. The first

written record appears in the Kirk Session minutes for December 1765 when it was noted the building was still not finished, but by March 1766 the building appeared to be ready. The Kirk Session accounts give frequent references to the school in the period 1765 to 1814, with the bridge over the school burn appearing to need fairly frequent repair. The Statistical Account for the early 1790's states there were approximately 45 pupils at the school and that the building 'will be in excellent repair very soon'. It also details the subjects taught and the fees involved. The New Statistical Account of 1834 paints a different story stating 'The former has not the legal accommodations'. By this time there were three other schools in the parish. In a testimonial in court papers relating to the contesting of the will of Patrick Campbell, who left £10,000 to education and the poor in Durness, there was some sort of major breakdown between the parents and the schoolmaster in 1841 and all the children were withdrawn from the school and sent to the school at Ceannabeinne about six kilometers to the east. Owing to a watertight contract, the Kirk Session was unable to sack the master, despite going to the Court of Session in Edinburgh and he continued in post with no pupils until 1861! An Education Act of this date finally removed the teacher and it is probable that the school was then closed and abandoned at this date. There are no local tales of 'my grandfather went to that school' or indeed of the school continuing as a house, it is only remembered as a ruin and as a school. The current ruinous state of the building would be conducive to the decline of a building over that period of time since 1861.

The school sits on the western edge of the Durness Glebe which extends to some 40 acres and is still owned by the Church of Scotland and tenanted by a local crofter. The Glebe is used exclusively for sheep grazing. Access to Loch Croispol for fishermen is along the north side of the building and fishing rights of the Church of Scotland are held by a local fishing group who built and maintain the bridge over the burn on the approach to the school.

### **Archaeology**

The structure is not listed in the National Monuments Record of Scotland. However, an assessment of its historical value by Andrew Wright, a chartered conservation architect, has identified it as possessing some architectural significance, in terms of an eighteenth century schoolhouse and in particular noted the high standards of construction employed by the masons.

The schoolhouse occupies what would have been a fairly central position for schoolchildren attending from the nearby townships of Borrallie, Borrallie Beg, Knockbreck, and Clashneuch. These links to surrounding settlements are attested by a footpath which leads westward through a now-blocked gap in the stone dyke immediately south of the schoolhouse, climbing along a natural terrace in the limestone outcrops above the loch shore. A hollowed lane leading between parallel dykes from the manse attests to the close links between the parish minister and this church-run school.

### **From the final report Loch Croispol Schoolhouse Data Structure Report Project by Alastair Becket with contributions by Olivia Lelong.**

Archaeologists from Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division (GUARD), along with local volunteers, undertook the excavation of eight small trenches in and around the ruins of the Loch Croispol Schoolhouse in August 2009. Upstanding remains of the schoolhouse, which is known to have been in use between c 1760 and 1860, were recorded, and a topographic survey of the school and its immediate environs was conducted.

Evidence for two distinct floor layers was encountered within the structure along with a range of artefacts which can be attributed to the use of the building as a school. A barbed and tanged



arrowhead made from black chert was recovered from a garden soil deposit in the school garden.

The solid geology consists of the Croisaphuill Formation, comprising ‘fossiliferous mid grey and dark grey dolomitic limestones and limestones with burrow mottling and chert nodules. Fossils include brachiopods, gastropods, cephalopods and trilobites’ (EDINA Geology DigiMap: <http://digimap.edina.ac.uk>). The subsoil overlying the bedrock is yellow grey clay on the higher ground. The schoolhouse stands at the northern end of a broad north/south-running valley near the southern end of Loch Croispol. Craggy slopes rise from the valley floor along the west, while the ground rises more gradually to the east towards Balnakeil. The broad, flat, marshy floor of the valley is covered with peat and alluvium, and may have once held a small loch. Several canalised burns run along it now, draining the land and converging into one water course c 65 m to the south-east of the schoolhouse. The schoolhouse itself occupies a small knoll with rocky outcrops which bridges the northern end of the valley. The burn runs past it on the east, bordered by stretches of low-lying ground on either side.



IMAGE 227 LOCH CROISPOL SCHOOLHOUSE ON THE SHORE OF LOCH CROISPOL

In the environs of the schoolhouse, particularly on the higher ground to the south-east, are the remains of cultivation ridges that probably relate to Knockbreck Township. The township buildings most likely occupied the lower, sloping ground to the south-east, between the schoolhouse and the manse, until the settlement was cleared at some point in the 1840's (Graham Bruce, pers. comm.). In terms of earlier archaeological remains, the surrounding limestone grasslands are particularly rich. Neolithic and Bronze Age cairns and standing stones have been recorded about 1.5 km to the south, with the main cluster on Cnoc na Mòine, centred at NC 389 662. The same ridge supports extensive prehistoric roundhouse settlements and field systems. Around Loch Croispol itself, archaeological survey in 2001 identified an extensive prehistoric cairn field on the high ground between it and Loch Borrallie, prehistoric roundhouses and field systems above the western shore of Loch Croispol and further prehistoric settlement remains on the higher ground to the west (Lelong & MacGregor 2001).

Loch Croispol Schoolhouse is a roofless, partly ruined building. Dimensions are given here in imperial as well as metric, as the former would have been used by the masons who built it. It is carefully proportioned, measuring in length exactly double its width -- 11 m (36') north-east/south-west by 5.3 m (about 17½') externally -- with walls on average of 0.62 m (2') thick. It is built of roughly shaped stone blocks, mainly limestone but also quartzite, of both coursed and random rubble construction. It has been heavily pointed with lime mortar in places, but courses are visible running along the lower sections of the walls and also higher up in the external south-west gable. Large quoins (up to 0.9 m, 3', long) form the corners, and small slabs have been set between the courses as pinning stones. A collapsed section of walling along the north reveals light brown sandy silt packed between the stones of the wall's core. If this is characteristic of the entire building, then it shows that the stones were bedded in this material rather than mortared together through the fabric, with lime mortar used only for pointing the wall faces. The south-western gable is nearly complete, with crow-steps topped with Easdale slate climbing to a central chimney. The walls survive to the wall-head along much of the north and to the north-east of the doorway on the south (up to 2 m high). Elsewhere along the south the wall is reduced to 0.9-1.63 m high. The north-eastern gable is the most poorly preserved. It stands to 2.10 m at the northern corner, but much of it is tumbled to a height of about 1 m. Several anomalies are apparent in its interior wall-face. A vertical gap is visible in the masonry to the north-west of the fireplace; this section has not been rebuilt, as it is keyed into the north-west corner, and it may be that the fabric pulled apart under tension over time. To the south-east of the fireplace is a rectangular wedge of poorly built stonework (0.8 m high by 0.9 m maximum), which appears to be a repair. These anomalies may indicate that the north-east gable was originally of inferior construction. Alternatively, it could be that the wall base rested on unstable deposits. Excavation revealed a remnant turf line (041) running beneath the wall, so the building was constructed on the existing ground surface rather than seated in foundation trenches. If the underlying subsoil consists of soft clay, as is often the case locally between limestone outcrops (Graham Bruce, pers. comm.), this may have contributed to the gable's instability.

A central doorway pierces the south wall, with two splayed windows to the south-west of it and one to the north-east. Along the north wall are two window apertures -- one towards the south-west end and another roughly opposite the doorway -- with a probable third towards the north-east, now represented by a section of collapsed walling. The five surviving window apertures are all straight-sided through the outer thickness of the wall and splayed through the inner thickness, giving consistent widths of approximately 0.6 m (2') on the exterior and 1.23-1.31 m (about 4') on the interior. Schist slabs form the window sills, which survive in all but one. The central window in the north wall has been reduced in size at its base with mortared stone blocks that rest on the sill.

There is a fireplace central to each gable. The original aperture of the north-eastern fireplace measured 0.65 m wide (about 2') at the rear and 0.92 (3') at the wall face. It has been narrowed at either side with the addition of lime-mortared masonry and its upper part stepped back from the wall face, giving it a reduced opening of 0.53 m (1' 8''); the sides and front of the secondary masonry are partly covered with lime render. The original hearth slab still protrudes beneath the later one, which is heavily spalled and scorched black and red. At the back and sides, the stones are blackened to a height of 0.2 m (8''). The absence of soot above this suggests the presence of an iron chimney liner or stove pipe.



IMAGE 228 ARCHAEOLOGIST MAP THE SCHOOLHOUSE FIREPLACE

The south-western fireplace measures 0.45 (about 1'5") at the rear and 1.05 m (about 3'5") at the wall face. It has also been constricted, although less formally, with the addition of lime-mortared masonry to receive a cast-iron grate. A roughly mortared arrangement of slabs, heavily spalled, extends out from the aperture. Several drystone dykes converge on the schoolhouse. One substantial dyke leads southwards from its south-west corner along the foot of a rocky ridge. A rectangular drystone wall extends to the west of this dyke and the schoolhouse and would have enclosed the schoolhouse garden, which measures c 18 m by 12 m (approximately 60' by 40'). The garden was originally entered through a gap beside the schoolhouse on the north and through another, now-blocked gap through the south wall of the enclosure. The schoolhouse occupies what would have been a fairly central position for schoolchildren attending from the nearby townships of Borralie, Borralie Beg, Knockbreck and Clashneuch. These links to surrounding settlements are attested by a footpath which leads westward through a now-blocked gap in the stone dyke immediately south of the schoolhouse, climbing along a natural terrace in the limestone 10 outcrops above the loch shore. A hollowed lane leading between parallel dykes from the Manse attests to the close links between the parish minister and this church-run school. Several more ephemeral features are evidence of attempts to contain and control the burn. It appears that the burn has been at least partly canalised, probably in an attempt to contain and control the water flow. Along its western side is a low, flat-topped turf bank with occasional stones visible in its fabric, created from upcast during canalisation to prevent water from flowing out across the adjacent low ground. A low, fragmentary drystone dyke runs along its eastern side; the gaps in it may represent stone robbing or sections that have been washed away by the burn in spate. On the west, the ground extends low and marshy as far as the edge of two low, craggy knolls. The gap between the

knolls has been linked with a low turf bank, probably also constructed to prevent flooding of the ground closer to the schoolhouse. A small bridge, roughly constructed of slabs, spans the burn at the foot of the lane leading from the Manse and a short distance upstream from a Modern wooden footbridge. As late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Kirk accounts record expenditure on repairs to a bridge relating to the schoolhouse, it seems likely that at the time the burn was broader and more unruly and that this slab-built bridge was built after it was canalised and narrowed. On the lochside west of the schoolhouse, an arc of stones extends across a shallow bay and the stone dyke defining the schoolhouse garden continues into the shallows for several metres. These features may be of more recent date, relating to the use of the loch for fishing, or they could relate to Knockbreck township's exploitation of the loch. A turf and stone dyke recorded during the survey, snaking up the hill to the south of the loch to the west of the schoolhouse, may also relate to the township.

Four trenches were opened within the schoolhouse itself, three trial pits were opened in the school garden to the west, and one trench was opened to the south of the school across a low bank. The four trenches opened within the schoolhouse were all interconnecting. The trenches provided an east/west profile across the building and were situated to investigate the fireplaces at either end of the structure as well as the southern doorway. All three garden trenches contained unexpected depths (up to 0.9 m) of soil over the natural subsoil. A range of artefacts recovered from the topsoil of each included ceramics and glass, likely to be of nineteenth-century date, as well as the chance find of a black chert barbed and tanged arrowhead (SF 57) in trench 6. A piece of possibly flaked yellow chert was recovered from trench 8. No archaeological features were encountered within the garden trenches, although changes in the soil formation were noted which might correspond to different phases of cultivation.



IMAGE 229 ARCHAEOLOGISTS AT WORK AT THE LOCH CROISPOL SCHOOLHOUSE

The archaeological evidence from the schoolhouse points at three distinct phases of use defined by alterations to the interior space. These phases are considered here chronologically beginning

with the construction of the building itself. The construction of the building is in keeping with the 1760s date suggested by historical records. Artefacts relating to the use of the building as a school (a piece of writing slate (SF 39) and an inkwell (SF 55)) were recovered from both ends of the structure.

It is clear that after the building went out of use, most likely in the 1860s, a process of collapse began. This collapse was preceded and partially caused by the salvaging of useful, and valuable, materials from the schoolhouse. The timber floor and interior frame were removed along with roofing materials, leaving plaster collapsed directly on the sub-floor deposits in the north-eastern room. Salvaged pantiles can still be seen within the nearby Balnakeil Craft Village, for example. All window and door lintels had been removed as well as the sill stone from Window. Removal of timbers and stone may have resulted in the collapse of the north-eastern gable, a wall which was already unstable. The partially collapsed structure remained as a place in which rubbish was dumped, perhaps from the nearby manse, and later was used as an out-of-the-way (out of parental view perhaps) location for camp fires and drinking!

The dykes, lane and footpath leading out from the schoolhouse illustrate its close links with townships in the surrounding landscape and with the minister resident in Balnakeil Manse.

### The Loch Croispol Arrowhead

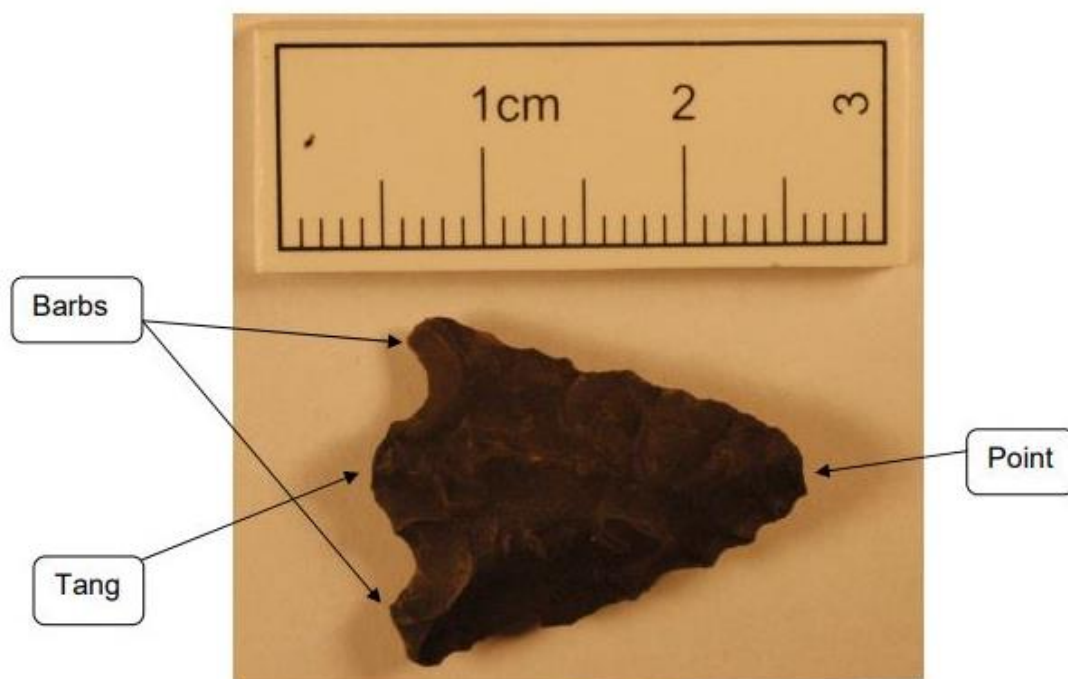


IMAGE 230 ARROWHEAD DISCOVERED DURING THE ARCHAEOLOGY

The chance discovery of a late Neolithic/early Bronze Age barbed and tanged arrowhead, made in what is probably local chert, has cast unexpected light on the prehistoric occupation of the landscape. Although no Neolithic settlements are known in the area, roundhouse settlement and field systems of likely Bronze Age and Iron Age date have been previously identified to the west of Loch Croispol (Lelong & MacGregor 2001). The National Monuments Records of Scotland list cairns, standing stones, hut circles and prehistoric settlements in the wider Loch Borrallie and Loch Croispol area which also attest to Neolithic and Bronze Age occupation of the landscape. If the arrowhead was lost by a hunter, then its find spot – on a rocky bridge of land between two lochs – is easily explicable. This spot at the water's edge would have been

an ideal place to stalk game. It is of course possible that the arrowhead found its way into the garden soil from the private collection of someone (perhaps the schoolmaster), having been discovered somewhere else locally.

Little archaeological work has been carried out on rural school buildings of this period. Loch Croispol Schoolhouse is an important component in the historic landscape of Durness, with architectural merit as well as an interesting story of its own. The formal interpretation of the site's history and archaeology would make a valuable contribution to the already rich and diverse presentation of the area's cultural heritage for visitors and locals alike.

### **A summary of a conversation after the archaeology**

A reflection on how the archaeology proceeded, pointing out various features and finds what was discovered against expectations and where we've reached.

One of the many motivating details regarding this archaeological phase is that very few expectations have been met, they've been exceeded, in almost every sense, because in every area that has been looked at, trenching inside and outside the school, nothing has quite happened the way we expected them to happen, and one remarkable observation inside the school is the fact that we've got so much going on! We've got layers of floors; with different escapades happening. There is a sense of finding where money's been spent on the school, and when it's been spent. We are sure we'll be able to tie some of that together, and be able to confirm the fact that renovations have been made, money's been spent and fit these into a timeframe. Finds have included artefacts which relate to school, the bits of slate, the little stylus, and the inkpot. There were surprises outside, the arrowhead just that little hint of something thousands of years before the school, which has survived in the soil. It may have come from somewhere else, it may have been there originally, but just that little glimpse of pre-history in Durness is lovely to see. We've answered lots of questions inside the school, but we've also raised a few questions about what's going on more widely as well. We've got a building with two fireplaces one at either end. The one in the east end is a much, much smaller fireplace and in a small fireplace it is actually difficult to burn peat but with a big fireplace in



IMAGE 231 ARTIST IMPRESSION OF THE SCHOOL ROOM BY NICOLA POOLE

the west end, burning peat would be no problem. Children brought peat to school – that was part and parcel of their payment and that's recorded throughout Scotland, and if peat is to burn effectively, there has to be a reasonably big fireplace. The west end gable is ideal while the east end fireplace is more for burning coal and we got peat ash, as well, in the big fireplace.

It's suggestive that the west end was actually the schoolroom. Although there's peat ash in the east end, and the east end hearth was remodelled and made smaller. It was originally bigger. This would lend itself to the idea about swapping around the use of the ends of the building during its life. That's important because we do have this change and the evidence we've got for the split of the rooms – we've got the later phase where the smaller room is on the west side, when in the earlier phases the split's on the east side of the door. We may be missing something about the third room, which may have an impact on that. There may be an indication that things could have changed round including the size of the rooms and what they were used for.

East Gable. It's also interesting the way the east end has sunk, the floor, if there was a lot of people using that room, there's more pressure on it, the more it sinks, and possibly that was originally the schoolroom, and they moved the schoolroom to the west end simply because of all the pressure, that usage on the east end, Who knows? And possibly because the east end gable was about to fall in! It's interesting in terms of the east-west splitting up of the building, different uses at either end but also very different builds, with very different techniques in both ends for stabilization. The west end, which drops away where stones were piled in, and then the building built with possibly foundations. It's, coursed on the west end it looks a nicer build. The east end's quite different and we've seen a turf layer right beneath the stones which looks like the wall's just been built directly on top of the turf, we haven't seen anything like that at the west end at all. This creates curiosity about the builders, who were brought in to build. There's an impression in the 1764 entry in the Session Book implying that the building wasn't finished. The Reverend Murdo MacDonald pressed for the building and the whole aspect of education in Durness, and he died in 1761. Was the building under construction before he died? There wouldn't have been local builders, who were capable of building that kind of construction, and maybe Murdo MacDonald brought in builders from Ross-shire or from Caithness, then he took ill and there was no incentive to keep pursuing construction. Perhaps it was partially built, he died, and then in 1764 the Kirk Session relied on local builders to construct the east end. Local builders wouldn't have had the same expertise, certainly lime mortar to build up the walls, and maybe we had a situation where construction was carried out by two entirely different groups of builders. In the north wall, where the facings actually collapsed, there's no mortar between the stones– it's sort of sandy silt. There may be a little few flecks of mortar but hardly any at all. It's hard to tell whether it's fallen in; the stones aren't mortared together, they're kind of packed in.

There's quite a skill in making lime mortar, because lime mortar is a process. There's heat involved, and builders would require having that knowledge. Despite the fact that there is a huge quantity of lime in the local area, and apart from the significant buildings pre-Clearance like Balnakeil House, the Manse and the Factor's house, everything else is drystone built. The local expertise was for drystone building. It's interesting in the way that the east gable has got lime mortar in it, maybe, if this building had progressed, they'd run out of money – because the Church never has enough money, even historically and present day! This building has certainly been substantial and it's been there a long time. Was this the first building on that site or was there anything there previous to the school? There is no any evidence of there being anything, putting aside the Neolithic find, the location in terms of; it's a central location of that period; suggests that it's been a vacant plot of land which is not an ideal plot of land, and obviously required a bit of work be able to build on. In fact to build it up and re-work the land,

it doesn't lend itself to other buildings, There's nothing in the archaeology trenches we've opened that's shown that it's an older site of something.

Speculate, on this arrowhead. Where did it come from, what would the environment have resembled round Croispol in the Neolithic times? We could be looking at perhaps a zone between tree and loch and, where water and forest come together, hazel, rowan, birch, we are just of out of the oak zone the furthest north oak is found in Assynt, at Lochinver,. With the present day reduction in sheep numbers on Keoldale Farm, it's noticeable on the other side of Loch Croispol there's several stands of hazel beginning to appear. They've survived in the limestone, and grew up through cracks in the limestone, and there's obviously sufficient depth of soil in the limestone cracks to have sustained this hazel, despite the sheep grazing. There's a quite a big stand over at Borralie and the hazel has obviously managed to survive in those cracks, always cropped off, but because the sheep are off that land at Croispol and it's now cattle, cattle aren't interested in cropping hazel, and it's actually now up to a meter high, that's



IMAGE 232 THE AREA TO THE SOUTH OF THE SCHOOLHOUSE KNOCKBRECK

an indication that hazel certainly grew in the area. Picture of hazel growing on Limestone cracks around Borralie. The bog area to the south which looks like it may have been a loch and, whether there might be a depth of material there that might lend itself to coring or, there could be prehistoric deposits. The locality was likely, scrubby woodland, a place where the arrowhead fits into a place where hunting, fishing was carried out. It was also interesting that we got that flake of chert, which suggests that people were actually working with chert, a flint-like substance. Smoo Cave shows some good examples of chert. The end of the loch is quite sheltered that sort of bowl of land that actually very sheltered from the south-west, and it's an ideal place for some sort of settlement, for some encampment at that end of the loch.



The bog area to the south which looks like it may have been a loch, Loch Croispol has been dammed up, and is higher than it was historically. If the Loch was lower, then there would be more flow in the river there, so the area behind the schoolhouse which is currently marshy might not have been so marshy as there would have been more flow in the river, so it would have been a faster flowing river and perhaps wider. The water's not getting dammed up so much, therefore flowing through more with the possibilities of a lot of additional flooding. The whole level marsh area beyond the school is fascinating, because it's very flat and with reference to the Pont map, that shows two lochs draining into Balnakeil Bay. We presumed that it was Loch Borrallie and Loch Croispol but maybe it could well have been a loch beside the school and – maybe it's Loch Croispol and this “vanished” loch, perhaps drained, that Pont recorded on the map. The sides of the valley died down and then this flat was the vestiges. That could have happened in prehistory or the last 300 years. The burn coming out of that flat area is actually incredibly deep, and it's obviously been ditched in – presumably the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and that's acutely lowered the level of whatever was beyond. So, if Loch Croispol was lower, maybe that whole marshy area was a loch, and there was just a fast-flowing river between the two lochs. Prehistorically, if there was a loch, there could be all sorts of nice organic material in lower soil depths. In terms of the bridge, the only indicator as to the location is actuality the path down, and estimating the size and width of the river would be – maybe make an educated guess, whatever stream or river was there was bigger than the little canalised drainage ditch which is there now, deep as it may be, it's not big enough to warrant the problems caused and the money spent.

It would be interesting to know when that area was actually drained. There are stories about an area just as you leave Durness, heading south, that has been drained or attempted to be drained, and that local story is that it was drained by Irish navies. Apparently, after the Caledonian Canal was built, there was a huge influx of Irish navies in the Highlands, looking for work, and there



IMAGE 233 ARTIST IMPRESSION OF THE SCHOOLHOUSE NICOLA POOLE

was all nature of drainage works carried out. This would be around the 1820s. The story about the Cow Park and the drainage scheme, fitted into that period. It is possible there could have been a lot of drainage work going on in Durness, in that early 19<sup>th</sup> century period and that might fit in with the area which has obviously changed topographically because of various man-activities: drainage and redirections of waterways. The school was fairly central to the feeding localities, the surrounding townships. Knockbreck was presumably a very busy township and the children came from Balnakeil, Durine, and from Borralie and would have served this area of the parish. Locally this was always described as a parish school, but in reality it served the immediate locality, given the size of Durness. Children may have walked one or two miles, it is very unlikely to have served people from the Westmoin, from Eriboll and Hope. Given there was settlement by that period right to the head of the Kyle of Durness. It's also credible only the middle-class layer of society would be affording education. This was prior to the whole society education. Forty-five children were recorded attending in the 1790s, reflecting quite nicely the middle-class society at the time given there was quite large families. It's probably not that many families that were actually attending school, although that would depend on the wealth and, if it was just the sons or would daughters to go for education. Considering the number of townships within reasonable walking distance, that probably represents the tacksmen level who rented the farms, that of middle-class level. Forty-five children is probably quite representative of that middle-class society, who had the money to send their children to school. The landscape pre-clearance was different, plainly there was no sheep cropping growing plants right down to absolutely nothing. Bracken was absent, and a lot more people present. Knockbreck would have been quite a central part of what we understand is Durness now. Knockbreck is interesting because it lasted until the 1840s, when everything else had been cleared in the vicinity, Knockbreck was still there as mention was made in the 1841 census but sometime after the Kirk Session record book recorded the area had been enclosed to create the Glebe, and everybody at that point had moved. Knockbreck must have been a fairly important community to survive beyond the general Clearances in Durness in the 1830s.

## **Census Accounts 1841 – 1901 for Knockbreck**

### **1841**

Knockbreck consisted of six inhabited buildings.

1. Jane Sutherland (60) Independent and probably her unmarried son Daniel (35) and possibly a daughter/granddaughter, Jane Sutherland (12). They were all described as 'Independent' suggesting a pension was being paid.
2. Duncan MacArthur (50), joiner, Johana MacArthur (30), probably his wife, and their children Isabella (10) and Jane (8).
3. John MacKay (40) possibly a Carrier (writing very unclear), Alexiana (30), Georgiana (14), John (12), Angus (10), Thomas (8), Flora (4)
4. Nathaniel Poison (40), mason, Johana (23), William (2) and Margaret (1)
5. William Macintosh (35) Agricultural Labourer, Rachell (20?), John (13), James (15), Angus (7)
6. William Ross (55) possible the teacher.

The Glebe was enclosed and accepted as such on 25<sup>th</sup> August 1836. It is notable that of the six households, only William Macintosh is described as an agricultural labourer, the rest having trades or professions or independent. This would suggest that the houses in Knockbreck were still being let, despite there being no land with them. It is possible that three of the houses are the ruin on the east side of the Glebe, the Grasskeeper's House and Achins. The School is the obvious one and the other two could be the double foundation beside the Cnoc.

## **The Manse**

There appears to have been the main manse building, lived in by Rev William Findlater and his wife Mary and five of their children, three female servants, an independent person and a male servant, and a second dwelling occupied by George MacKay, an agricultural labourer, his wife and four children. Given the size of the Glebe (46 acres/19 hectares) it is not surprising that someone was employed to work it on behalf of the minister.

### **1851**

Knockbreck now consisted of three dwellings:

Jane Sutherland (79), now described as a pauper who was born in Eddrachilles; Donald Sutherland (53) to whom nothing was ascribed other than he was born in Creich and Jane Sutherland (21), a servant who was born in Isla, Argyllshire. Also living there was Barbara MacKay (32) a niece of Jane's who was a seamstress. It is probable that they were living in what is now the ruin next to the Black Park on the east side of the Glebe, this is away from the arable land, out of sight of the Manse and has a garden and associated lazy beds.

In the School was William Ross (56), teacher.

In the Manse was Rev Alexander McColl (52) who was born in Lismore, Argyllshire and was unmarried; James McColl (17) his nephew also from Lismore and a student at King's College (probably Aberdeen); Archibald McColl (24) another nephew, described as a 'manager' and Catherine (15) his niece. Then there were the servants: Hugh MacKay (21) an Agricultural labourer; Catherine Campbell (24) serving maid, Catherine McIntosh (18) servant and Hughina McKay (27) also a servant.

### **1861**

The enumerator districts changed for this account and Knockbreck had become part of Durine. However it is fairly safe to say that the three households occupied the same buildings as 1851. This census began to record the number of rooms with one or more windows, giving an idea of the size of a house.

Durine. The Manse Rev W.C.M Grant and family, 6 rooms, Durine William Ross (64), schoolmaster, 1 room, Durine John MacKay and family, Dyker, 2 rooms.

### **1871**

In this account there is recorded the 'Parochial Schoolhouse' in Durine, a building with rooms and home to Torquil Nicholson (27), Schoolmaster (parochial) and Registrar. This is the current Schoolhouse. Nicholson was around for a long time and is recorded in the current school records.

The Enumerator Districts had been rearranged again making individual house easier to identify. There were now two households on the Glebe. The Manse, Rev Grant was still there, Old Schoolhouse William Ross (84) Schoolmaster (superannuated, parochial), 1 room, Glebe Neil MacLeod and family, Farm servant, 2 rooms, Glebe Hector MacKay and family, Farm Servant, 2 rooms.

### **1881**

The Manse (with 19 rooms) where Grant was still the occupant and The Glebe (2 rooms), home to George MacKay (44), Agricultural Labourer and his family. There was a third building recorded as uninhabited, it's either the school or the second house of 1871. There is no record of William Ross, so it is likely he died between '71 and '81. There is no tombstone in Balnakeil to him (or in Tongue or Melness).

1891

George MacKay and family were still in the house on the Glebe, but it now had three rooms.

The Manse was still occupied by Grant, his son William CM. Grant was described as a farmer and employer. There were six family members aged 16, 30 living at home unmarried and six others (servants etc.) living there as well. Extending to over 40 acres with 100 sheep on Keoldale farm, the Glebe was similar in size to many small family farms elsewhere in Scotland so could easily have kept Grant's son employed. Grant had gone, he died in 1900 after 44 years as minister. Now it was occupied by James Duff MacDonald (28), his widowed mother Jane (53), his sister Christian (25) and a servant. The days of the Manse throbbing with the coming and goings of many people were past and the 20<sup>th</sup> century was to see its demise as a religious building.

George and Mary MacKay were still there in their 3 roomed house as a general farm servant, but the house was described as 'Farm Servant's House'. Was there a cottage in the now demolished range of buildings beside the Manse? Or is it the east side ruin? That might explain why this ruin has no name, it was just on the Glebe and was for a farm servant.



IMAGE 234 ARTIST IMPRESSION OF THE TEACHER IN THE SCHOOLHOUSE NICOLA POOLE

What does this tell us about the school? William Ross was there as a teacher in 1841. Ten years later it was described as the abandoned parochial school. The Durine school had been built by this time and from the Campbell Court Papers we know that the children had been withdrawn. However the building was still described as the Parochial School and William Ross aged 56 was living there. In 1861 all we know is William Ross, now 64, schoolmaster, was still there, but we now know the dwelling had only one window. The most likely explanation is that he was living in the east room which has only one window and the rest of the building was classified as an abandoned school and not counted as accommodation. This was also the year of an Act of Parliament which allowed the Tongue Presbytery to retire William Ross because of old age and infirmity which they did along with his brother George Ross in Edrachilles. By 1871 the building was called the 'Old Schoolhouse', still with one window, Ross was 74 and described as

'superannuated, parochial', in other words he had a pension from his job as parochial schoolmaster. By 1881 he was gone, probably dead and there was no mention of the schoolhouse, only an uninhabited building. From 1891 there was no mention of an uninhabited building, probably because it had become ruinous. Evidence from the archaeological excavation possibly backs this up as late Victorian/Edwardian rubbish was found in the east room on top of the collapsed ceiling plaster.

William Ross was born in 1797 and probably became teacher at the parochial school of Durness when he was 16 about 1812. Apart from four years in the 1820's as a result of the Findlater affair, he remained there for the rest of his life

### **How did the Archaeology depict the building?**

Four trenches were opened up inside the school all connected together. What we tried to do was open up either end of the structure to have a look around the fireplaces, the business end, of both rooms, and try to get a feel for those rooms. In both of those areas we picked up very different deposits. This is when the rooms become important with the different décor of the rooms.



IMAGE 235 CROISPOL SCHOOLHOUSE TRENCH WAS OPENED TO GIVE A PEEK AT THE DOORWAY

At the east end we've got the plaster walls and timber floor, plaster ceiling in the latest phase, whereas at the west end we've got the clay floor and the big fireplace. These two sides have been tied together by a long trench that we put across the middle and in that trench we've picked up the evidence for a room division, showing the early phases of use. There are divisions of rooms on the east side of the doorway, whereas in the later phase it's on the west side. Another trench was opened to give a peek at the doorway, to try and see exactly what's going on in terms of the levels of the threshold, because there might be some interesting things going on with the relative floor levels at either side. There were points that did not look quite right, especially with the levels of thresholds; it appears there was a step in, which is a bit strange. That's quite unusual, to step down into a building but it may be that we're missing the timber floor, so maybe entrance was on to a timber floor because it's the latest phase or maybe

flagstones, that might well have been lifted. There is a threshold stone under the exposed one. Flagstones could have gone in the same way of the timbers and it appears many of the useful stones have been taken from the building.

Part of the reference from a local point of view is places like Arnaboll, on Loch Hope, which is certainly an early 19<sup>th</sup> century building and as you walk into Arnaboll, there is flagstone in the east end and flagstone in the lobby, the corridor, but wooden floors in the small room at the back and the west. At Ceannabeinne flagstone floors are found. Flagstone was not unknown in this area. In fact, there is schist at Faraid Head that splits into flagstone, and there's also the big flagstone deposit over at Melness, with records of that being brought round for the Manse and the Manse buildings, the now demolished farm buildings. In the schoolhouse we have found no evidence of flagstones.

Was there a second floor, was there a loft, and was there an attic?

There was a space there which may have been used, we've got a ceiling at one end of the building recognised because of the way in which this plaster had fallen down – if we've got a ceiling there, there would be a space above it. The other end may have been open; and may have had rafters; it is possible there was space which could have been used for storage but, this is purely speculating. We do have a record of a skylight being installed. Church records account for the provision of a skylight, which does imply that there is possibly a second floor. Returning to the example at Arnaboll, which is possibly the oldest complete building in the whole of the parish, at one end there's no attic, because the room goes up into the ceiling space, and there's an attic at the other end. It is possible a skylight may have simply provided more light to one big room. Even though it doesn't have a roof or anything, the west end of the building is obviously darker than the other end. There are the two windows, but, with the roof on it's imaginable that this end would be quite a dark space. Perhaps the skylight would be put in there to allow the children to see to write on their slates and dip in their inkwells. In terms of rooms, because we found the end of the floor at the west end, there are divisions but perhaps expectations were they would be more clearly defined, possibly, that we might find the alcove where the staircase went up. One of the things which have masked these divisions has been the fact that most of them have been made out of timber, and the timber's been, removed from each phase of construction perhaps reused. One of the best divisions was the little trench with some stones in it which looked like a foundation for an internal wall. But then that tells a story as well, to do with the way in which people saw the value in these building materials. The whole thing's told a much more complex story than visualised. We've got a historical record and the fact that the historical record ties in with the archaeology these records show expenditure in the 1790s and the old Statistical Accounts recording the schoolroom will be in good order soon, and then all this archaeology that's unfolding there was a major change at some time in this building, it's all tying together.

There's been a lot of finds happened over the past ten days? These finds have been from various eras, from various times, how have they come about, where they've been and what significance they've had to the archaeology in this.

The interesting thing is the frequency of finds and the type of find is really directly related to the use of the building, so what we've seen as we've dug down, is lots of stuff on the surface because it's been used pretty much as a midden, and a barbecue site in the very recent times, hence the vodka bottles and other bits and pieces on the surface, and probably some of the detritus we've left behind inadvertently as well. as we've gone down, there has been lots of stuff, rubbish, but as we've started to get into the floor levels proper, that's when the finds get fewer, but they become a little bit more meaningful in terms that they relate to the building, so there's bits and pieces which relate to the school – bits of slate, the little stylus and the inkwell,

but also got other things bits of window-glass, we've got little hints of the windows and some of the fixtures, the fact that we're getting some of these things from lower levels is interesting. One of the interesting things was the pantiles, which we know were on the roof at one stage but we found that we had pantiles in a level below the later floor level, but not whole pantiles – just fragments.

And what that's sort of saying is that the period of renovation was quite substantial – people came in, laid lots of stones and things on the floor, but at the same time they were putting up a new roof, or a new covering on the roof, and there is the occasional pantile slipped or broken and fragments remain. There's not much of it, but there's bits and pieces being incorporated below the new floor, and then the new roof going on the top, so it sort of fits with this somewhere round 1795. This is compatible with money being spent on the school although the finds get less and less, each one becomes a little bit more meaningful, although what the sewing-kit's all about is a bit of a mystery. It's appealing that most of the school finds were in the west end on the south-west corner, and the fact that there were also quite a lot of nails found in that area. It's almost as though there had been some sort of cupboard there, in that south-west corner. When you clean out a cupboard and you don't quite get everything out of it? There's maybe stuff just at the back, and the cupboard would be then ripped out when they came in to put in to put this new floor, stuff had fallen out, like the inkwell, and there was that bit of the glass bottle, and the bit of blue plate. The inkwell, it's small, but it's not remarkably small could it have been lost and incorporated? It gives the impression that when you get workmen in to do something, and you've got stuff piled up somewhere or in one corner, somebody knocks something and it falls, it's just not being quite as careful as you would be with your objects. It's not the sort of thing you would just lose. There was an occasion, the present Durness school is actually again built on the side of a hill, and it's very much built up, so below the two, sort of the late-50s classrooms, there's actually a quite a significant void below the infant classroom where you can stand fully, because there's a huge space beneath the classrooms. The access is through the senior classroom and once I got the opportunity to go down there and see what there was. There was actually a crisp packet but the interesting thing was, it was a Golden Wonder crisp packet, and it was four pence that was on it. There's a grid on the outside of the building, and obviously some kid had meticulously pushed this crisp packet right through this little ventilation grid until finally disappeared inside! That's a clue of how things get into positions. The finds are really exactly what we could wish for to illustrate the school. It would be nice to see more of the interior and see more of that internal partition and see more of these features, the alcove for the stairwell, for example the third room. There's certainly more that could be done, but within the limits of the trenches, there's been an amazing amount of information come out and questions answered.

### **What did they find in all those trenches?**

#### Schoolhouse

The archaeological evidence from the schoolhouse points at three distinct phases of use defined by alterations to the interior space. These phases are considered here chronologically beginning with the construction of the building itself.

#### Construction

The construction of the building is in keeping with the 1760s date suggested by historical records. The building was generally of sound construction, although the north-eastern gable appears to have been less well built, perhaps contributing to its later collapse. The presence of the underlying turf-line and low quality stonework suggests that perhaps some corners were cut during construction of this gable. Perhaps this was due to the sloping natural subsoil, which

required deeper foundations to the south west and thus a more stable gable. It is also possible that low quality repairs were made to the north-eastern gable, perhaps following subsidence.

Overall, however, very few alterations appear to have been made to the main fabric of the building. To form the floor within the building the natural clay subsoil had been used. At the north-eastern end of the building this was accomplished by clearing the topsoil and levelling the subsoil beneath into a flat surface. To compensate for the east/west slope, deposits of stones (042 and 021) were placed upon the exposed subsoil, forming a foundation for the clay floor. It may be that the subsoil surface formed the original floor level but the clean, relatively un-trampled appearance of this deposit suggests otherwise.

The roof of the structure was originally thatched (Graham Bruce, pers. comm.) although the presence of pantiles shows that, probably in its final state, the roof had been tiled.

#### Phase 1 of this School's Use

The original late eighteenth-century configuration of the schoolhouse appears to have consisted of two rooms, according with the description of the First Statistical Accounts of Scotland (Thomson 1799, 583-4). A third small room cannot be ruled out, however, and may have been located against the northwestern wall in the vicinity of the back window. Entering the schoolhouse would have required stepping down from threshold to the lower floor level in a large room which took up the south-western end of the building. The floor deposits in this room contained a lead pencil, which might suggest that this larger western room was the schoolroom.

Little evidence was encountered to suggest that the rooms in this phase had been decorated in any way. A number of nails and pieces of wood were found which may represent fittings and fixtures on the wall, but none were in situ. A likely explanation for this is that the interior walls were bare stone in the original phase of use. The internal dividing wall was likely to have been a timber frame, resting upon a stone foundation. This frame may have been covered with planks.

#### Alterations

It appears that, perhaps due to the softness of the subsoil, the floor in the north-eastern room, tentatively interpreted as the school master's room, had subsided. A new floor was laid on top of a significant dump of stones which raised the interior level by approximately 0.2 m. The raised floor level may have had a number of intended effects such as stabilising the north-eastern gable and aiding drainage. Along with the change in floor level it appears that the internal layout of the rooms was changed.

#### Second Phase of this School's use...

The second phase of the schoolhouse had also a minimum of two rooms. As with the first phase of use there was a step down into the structure and there may have been an additional room outside the excavated area. No direct evidence of internal walls was encountered, although the extents of clay and mortar floor surfaces at both the south-western end and the entrance suggest the location of divisions which were later removed. Taking these extents as the approximate room layout suggests that the southwestern room was no longer the larger of the two (main) rooms.

More significantly, the two sides of the structure appear to have been very different in character in this phase. The larger north-eastern room(s) had no surviving floor surface, suggesting that a timber floor was constructed here, whilst the south-western room had a clay floor which needed frequent repair. Similar contrasts between the rooms were seen in the fireplaces, which may have originally been similar simple hearths but had later both been improved, with the north-eastern fireplace becoming the finer of the two.



The walls and ceiling of the north-eastern room had been lined with lath and plaster and painted.



IMAGE 236 INKWELL DISCOVERED

The second phase of the schoolhouse therefore saw a marked distinction between the north-eastern and south-western rooms. The larger part of the structure, the north-eastern room(s), had seen significant investment and improvement. The smaller, western room remained much as the previous phase, with a hard clay floor and bare stone walls. Artefacts relating to the use of the building as a school (a piece of writing slate (SF 39) and an inkwell (SF 55)) were recovered from both ends of the structure.

The Inkwell would be used by the children. A big jar of ink was bought and used to fill the inkwells at the child's desk. The Slate and Pencil would be used by the scholars too. In some places sandboxes were also used for learning to write and doing sums. Paper was expensive and was only used by older children to do their 'good copy'. For basic work the slate

was crucial. Date: 18th century

#### Abandonment

It is clear that after the building went out of use, most likely in the 1860s, a process of collapse began. This collapse was preceded and partially caused by the salvaging of useful, and valuable, materials from the schoolhouse. The timber floor and interior frame were removed along with roofing materials, leaving plaster collapsed directly on the sub-floor deposits in the north-eastern room. Salvaged pantiles can still be seen within the nearby Balnakeil Craft Village, for example. All window and door lintels had been removed as well as the sill stone. Removal of timbers and stone may have resulted in the collapse of the north-eastern gable, a wall which was already unstable. The partially collapsed structure remained as a place in which rubbish was dumped, perhaps from the nearby manse, and later was used as an out-of-the-way (out of parental view perhaps) location.

#### The Star find – The Arrowhead

The chance discovery of a late Neolithic/early Bronze Age barbed and tanged arrowhead made in what is probably local chert, has cast unexpected light on the prehistoric occupation of the landscape. (This was discovered in the garden dig by a Kinlochbervie primary school pupil.)

Rev Findlater noted in 1834:

'Heads of arrows are occasionally found in the mosses; they are from two to three inches long, formed of a brown, red or whitish flint-like stone.'

Neolithic and Bronze Age hunting techniques included use of weapons such as bows and arrows but also using the landscape itself to help drive animals into corners where it was considerably easier to catch and kill them. As well as weapons traps were used – for instance a snare like arrangement to catch a deer’s legs when the herd came down to a favoured drinking spot or moved through a boggy patch between grazings.



IMAGE 237 LATE NEOLITHIC/EARLY BRONZE AGE BARBED AND TANGED ARROWHEAD

- The arrowhead was found during archaeological excavations in the garden of Loch Croispol Schoolhouse in Durness and is a very unusual and special find.
- It is made from a type of stone called chert.
- People in the past liked to use chert to make tools with because it can be broken to make sharp edges, much like glass.
- The arrowhead was made by very delicately chipping pieces of stone away. It would have been very easy to make a mistake and break it!
- This shape of the arrowhead is called ‘barbed and tanged’. This was a type of arrowhead that people made and used in the late Neolithic and early Bronze Age in Scotland. This means the arrowhead is between 4000 and 5000 years old
- The arrowhead has ‘barbs’, which helped it stick in prey.
- The ‘tang’ is the central piece between the barbs. This is the point at which the shaft of the arrow, a long piece of wood, would have been attached.
- The arrow may have been used for hunting or even fishing.

## The Archeological Finds

### From the inside of the schoolhouse

14 Ceramic Rennet jar sherds  
3 Fe. Nails  
11 Glass Sherds of bottle glass  
2 Coal Lump of coal  
1 Metal and wood Lock with four screws and wood attached  
4 Fe. Cast iron cooking pot fragments  
58 Glass Clear/green glass sherds  
2 Ceramic White glazed  
1 Ceramic with mortar attached  
8 Fe. Nails, piece of chain, 2 tin cans  
1 Glass Pink coloured with twist  
1 Bone Animal bone  
3 Plaster Rear ridged, grey paint on face  
2 Ceramic Stoneware jar sherds  
1 Glass Blue, medicine bottle fragment  
8 Fe. Nails?  
1 Stone Roofing slate with nail hole  
1 Metal and wood Stake-end with nail  
1 Metal and wood Stake-end with nail  
7 Fe. Various  
28 Glass Blue (medicine bottle?) sherds and window glass  
16 Ceramic Various  
10 Fe Nails  
4 Cu. alloy Paraffin lamp covers  
1 Leather and Fe. Sole and heel of boot  
1 Cu. Alloy Thimble  
1 Pp. Lead object  
1 Wood Piece of wood  
4 Bone Animal bone  
1 Fe. Iron object  
1 Cu. alloy Round button  
1 Cu. alloy Eyelet  
9 Fe. Nails and objects

3 Glass Clear and green sherds  
1 Ceramic Rennet jar sherds  
8 Fe. Nails and objects  
6 Ceramic Various  
28 Glass Various  
1 Stone Possible fragment of a writing slate  
7 Ceramic Rennet jar sherds  
11 Glass various, one sherd of clear, square profile bottle glass was marked 'John Mackay & Co... ..SENSE OF RENNET...  
1 Bone Butchered animal bone  
2 Glass Bottle glass  
2 Ceramic Cream glazed rennet jar fragments  
1 Bone Wishbone  
1 Bone Small round button  
1 Wood Fragment of brush head  
1 Cu. alloy Round button  
3 Fe. Nails  
3 Ceramic Various  
1 Ceramic Pan tile fragment  
1 Glass Bottle sherd  
3 Fe. Nails  
1 Cu. alloy Button  
1 Ceramic Inkwell  
1 Glass Rim sherd  
Garden 1 Stone Barbed and tanged arrowhead, black chert  
2 Stone Unworked pebbles - similar  
1 Wood Dook?  
2 Cu. alloy Pin and other object  
1 Stone Stylus for writing on slate  
1 Glass Window glass  
3 Glass Window glass

### From the garden

22 Ceramic Mixed sherds  
6 Glass Mixed sherds, window, bottle and base of a wine glass  
1 Stone Fragment of a writing slate  
3 Fe. Iron object  
11 Ceramic Mixed sherds  
3 Glass Mixed sherds  
5 Bone Animal bone  
16 Ceramic Mixed sherds  
2 Glass Mixed sherds  
2 Stone Chert flakes?



IMAGE 238 SOME OF THE ARCHELOGY FINDS FROM CROISPOL SCHOOL HOUSE ON EXHIBITION

### Exploring the Landscape

The limestone landscape was good for farming and also provides a special habitat for plants, some of which would have been used in folk medicine, cooking and dyeing cloth for thousands of years. We explored the limestone geology of the area and the lime-loving plants which can be seen in the fields and on the hillside. Interpretation included identification of plants and details of traditional folk uses in the form of an environmental report.

For a weekend during the 2 year project the Mackay Country team camped down at Keoldale Farm at the southern end of the study area with the Bough Tent and Marquee. an illustrated chat and amble about *'Planting the Past - Medicines, Maladies & Daily Life in 18<sup>th</sup> & 19<sup>th</sup> Century Durness'* led by author and historian Mary Beithin, the team explored the life and times of the old Parish School and the surrounding townships *through 'Stories and Srupag'* with Essie Stewart and *'Tinsmith's Tales – Craft Working Through the Ages'* with Arthur Dutch at the Bough Tent at Keoldale. The evening was Archive Film Night and Ceilidh Night.

### Wildlife, Habitat and Geology, Changes over Time

As part of the Loch Croispol School Research Project Roz Summers was commissioned to research the natural environment. November 2010.

#### Introduction

As you walk down the hill toward the schoolhouse between the dykes raise your eyes from the building and encounter a wonderful world. You have moved away from the fields of sheep, poor in plant species, to a fascinating mosaic of habitats which give clues to the sheer abundance of life which once nourished and supported the ancestors. They indeed lived here

once as part of the ecosystem. Walking down the hill on your right you see Loch Croispol, ahead above the school the hill and cliffs of limestone, on your left the wetland and burn.

### Designations

Much of the land and water around the school house is within the Durness Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI No. 580) and the Geological Conservation Review Site (volume 18). The SSSI was notified because it is of national importance for its geology and for a number of habitats associated with the Durness limestone that underlies much of the site.

### Geology

The rocks around Loch Croispol are part of a series of limestone and magnesium-rich limestone known as dolomite. They are between 490 and 470 million years old. They are part of a sequence of rocks known as the “Durness Group”. At Loch Croispol the limestone is specifically part of the Croisaphuill formation (about 350m thick) which is particularly rich in fossils of ancient molluscs. They include sponges, gastropods, trilobites, brachiopods, nautiloids and rostraconchs. The Croisaphuill formation also contains occasional brown cherts (nodules of silica much the same as flint found in chalk).

These fossils are similar to fossils of the same age from North America and Greenland. One of the reasons the Durness limestone fossils are so important is it provides strong evidence that during the early Ordovician, Scotland formed part of the same continental landmass as North America and Greenland known as Laurentia. Laurentia was divided from Wales and England by a wide ocean called Iapetus. This site is therefore important in understanding ancient faunas and paleogeography, and is crucial in correlating rocks that occur on either side of the Atlantic. After the deposition of the Durness group the Iapetus Ocean began to close and Scotland collided with England causing the mountain-building event known as the Moine Thrust. Also because this area is west of the thrust and has not undergone massive distortion, geologists have mapped the layers of strata most completely which helps with mapping the very complex area where the Moine Thrust occurred.

At this time in the Earth’s history Scotland was in the southern hemisphere and near the equator. The Durness group of limestones were laid down in tropical and probably very shallow seas on the continental shelf of Laurentia. The limestone here is a mixture of chemically deposited limestone (magnesium carbonates) and organically deposited limestones (calcium carbonates). The former is created by evaporation of the shallow seas leaving a mineral rich sediment on the sea bed and the latter is created by a build-up of thousands of calcium-rich shells of molluscs that die and build up on the seabed.

At Loch Croispol there are places where the limestone takes the form known as limestone pavements, especially on the west side of Loch Croispol. Pavement features were caused first by the weight of ice during the last ice-age which removed the soil that lay over the limestone and then fracturing the rock along existing horizontal surfaces of weaknesses known as bedding planes. Fractured rocks were stripped away leaving level platforms of limestone on which boulder clay was deposited. From the flat limestone surfaces the characteristic features of limestone pavement have been formed by water in the glacially deposited soil exploiting cracks and fissures in the rocks. In some cases this causes blocks bounded by deep vertical fissures known as clints and grikes. These clints and grikes were formed under relatively deep cover of soil. This soil was subsequently weathered away over time, probably caused by forest clearance and overgrazing by livestock, as humans exploited the landscape.

The biggest impact of the geology on the landscape from a human perspective is the type of soil it creates. Limestone is easily dissolved by rain water and generally the soil overlying

limestone is nutrient-rich with moderate to high ph. This is in sharp contrast to the peat and acid nature of soils found elsewhere in North West Sutherland.

#### Flora and Fauna, Limestone Areas

##### South of Loch Croispol

Climbing over the wall to the south of the Schoolhouse lets the naturalist into a thrilling area. The limestone crags and associated grassland are very rich in plant species, and evidence of other wildlife abounds.

##### Plants



**Ancient Mountain Avens at Top of Cliff**

The land is heavily grazed by both sheep and rabbits, and the closeness of the sward in places shows how they much prefer the vegetation on the thin soils. The dominant species on exposed rock faces is the mountain avens *Dryas octopetala*, which interestingly is one of the first of the higher plants to colonise after the ice melted around

12 000 years ago. Along with lichens and mosses, they contribute to the formation of the rich and fertile soil you can see around you. This is known as calcareous grassland. Many of the typical limestone species are found here. On a brief site visit in early November we recorded mountain thyme, dog violet, primrose, St John's wort, fairy flax, devil's bit scabious, ladies bedstraw, creeping willow, mountain everlasting, eyebright, glaucous sedge, crested dogstail and Yorkshire fog.

The number of Wax Cap fungi species present is sure evidence of unimproved grassland.

Between the crags of exposed limestone there are patches of what are known as calcareous heaths, and species include heather, tormentil, bog asphodel, heath bedstraw, heath-spotted orchid. Patches of bracken can be an indication of past cultivation, past more intensive livestock grazing and dunging, or past woodland cover. In the rock outcrop on the south shore of the loch, out of reach of grazing animals were ivy, hazel, downy birch, eared willow, golden scaly male fern and lady fern, primrose, and goldenrod. In the shady crevices on the limestone and indeed some on the school walls themselves are growing maidenhair and black Spleenwort, and wall rue. A comprehensive plant list including much of the area was made by Pat and Ian Evans in September 2009. They noted a number of rare species and unusual habitats.

## Fauna



**Top of Cliff South Shore of Loch, Looking North to Schoolhouse. Otter Spraint Hill and Badger Signs in Foreground**

We saw a badger latrine and much evidence of digging: the badgers will be feeding on earthworms and dead rabbits. On thicker soils there were mole hills, a sure sign of plentiful worms. The abundant rabbits were undoubtedly the reason for signs of fox. It is reasonable to assume stoats and weasels would be living in the limestone crevices and feeding on the rabbits. We saw an otter and we are aware of holts and other otter sightings in the vicinity (Donald Mitchell pers comm.) In the longer heathy grassland there were signs of field voles. There are likely to be Pipistrelle bats feeding over the area.

### Birds

Meadow pipits are the commonest bird in this habitat – they would nest on the ground in the heathery areas. There is evidence of a nearby buzzard nest, again taking advantage of the rabbit population. We saw a kestrel and, most unusual for this part of Scotland, a barn owl: both of these would mainly feed on the field voles.

Short-eared owl, merlin, golden and white-tailed eagle have been seen here on occasions (Michael Fitch pers comm.). We saw hooded crow, raven, starling, wren and redwing.

Thrushes were seen feeding on numerous banded snails using the exposed limestone as an anvil to break the shells.

West of Loch Croispol

## Relict Hazel Wood



### Hazel in Gryke

On the south facing slopes amongst the crevices in the limestone (grikes) is rich vegetation out of reach of most grazing animals and similar to a woodland flora. This is a most unusual and rare habitat very similar to the famous limestone area in West Ireland known as the Burren. Splendid but restrained hazel trees are growing up to 1.4 metres tall as well as holly and eared willow. We found woodland flora such as sanicle, stone bramble, primrose, goldenrod, wood sage, dog violets, black knapweed, herb Robert, water avens and a vetch species as well as some ferns including hard shield fern and common polypody. It is certain that this is a relic of a very old Atlantic hazel woodland. These Atlantic hazel woodlands are some of the most ancient of all Scottish woodlands and can stretch back 10,000 years. They have often been described as the Celtic Rainforest. The woodland here however is very restricted due to heavy grazing and very vulnerable to first turning bonsai and then extinction. Burnet rose has been recorded here (Pat and Ian Evans pers comm.) Silverweed can be found in the wetter grassland areas, especially by the high stone wall. There are signs that cattle have been grazing here.

### Loch Croispol

Loch Croispol is one of four marl lochs in the Durness area which are the best known limestone lochs in North West Sutherland. The word marl refers to the limestone, here actually dolostone, meaning much of the chemical present is magnesium carbonate rather than calcium carbonate.

The loch is just under 700m long and 11.55 ha in size. It is 14m above sea level. The water is very clear, and the loch is mostly shallow with some deep holes. The waters are very fertile and termed strongly eutrophic due to being fed almost entirely by water originating in limestone. The loch is fed by underground burns in the limestone and by a hidden outflow from Loch Borralie as well as the burn flowing down the glen from the wetlands in the east.



The aquatic plant species are typical of base rich waters and include several notable species of pondweed *Potamogeton* sp. At present we have little information on other plant species, but it should be noted that Loch Borrallie is a very important site for bluegreen algae, so it is likely this loch is too. We would expect there to be dragonflies and damselflies using the loch, due to lack of lochside vegetation for emerging adults. Reduced grazing would help this situation, and incidentally increase the larval food supply for the trout. The loch is one of the four famous for many years for the wild brown trout frequently caught here, and also for the presence of ferox or cannibalistic trout.

Intriguingly a British species of crayfish, the white-clawed crayfish, not apparently present in Scotland was introduced into the loch probably in 1945. Many other water bodies in Britain have been infested with the Signal Crayfish, originally from North America which preys on the wild crayfish and also infects them with crayfish plague. It appears so far that the introduction of white-clawed crayfish has not had a negative effect on the other plant or animal species in the loch, and so now the crayfish population is considered to be a useful “ark” population hopefully far enough away from others to be safe from Signal Crayfish infestation. They are still present (Donald Mitchell pers. comm.)

Tufted ducks are one of the commonest ducks on the loch. A small breeding population is supplemented by winter birds (pers comm. Michael Fitch). Mallards breed here and in the winter little grebes, red-breasted mergansers, teal, widgeon can be seen. Whooper swans and goldeneye arrive in November time. We saw a cormorant catch a large trout. Summer migrants such as common sand pipers breed on the margins. Gulls roost on the loch and occasional great skuas can be seen overhead. Barnacle geese use the adjacent field in winter and also use the loch as a safe roost.

The water is artificially raised by a weir on the north end towards the sea which fed the Balnakeil water mill. This weir is now only partially functional.

The bank side vegetation is largely absent due to grazing, and there are some margins of the loch colonised by meadowsweet, common reed and yellow iris, and water avens. Pat and Ian Evans recorded the rare Grass of Parnassus here.

#### The Wetland

The burn flowing past the school flows out of a flat area of wetland with more than one metre of deep fen peat. There is evidence of past drainage and it is currently grazed by sheep. Some of the ditches are over 60cm deep. The wetland is technically described as a minerotrophic mire which means it is basic and rich in minerals. It is fed by water flowing through limestone overland and underground. We found bog myrtle, purple moor grass with black sedge, soft rush and articulated rush, and the Pat and Ian recorded flea sedge, common spike rush and compact rush. Also growing in the drier areas were creeping buttercup, scabious, meadowsweet, alexanders and flag iris. Battered eared willow grows on the edge of the mire.

In the open water there were marsh horsetail and pondweeds. Ian and Pat Evans discovered water speedwell and bay willow growing in the burn flowing into Loch Croispol in 2009 both of which are rare.

It is the perfect habitat for breeding snipe and wintering woodcock.

#### Discussion: Changes for People and Wildlife in the Landscape

Humans probably first visited this area around 7,000 years ago, from the sea. They would have encountered a wooded landscape and probably salmon and sea trout as well as brown trout and eels in Loch Croispol – in abundance. As the seas were teeming with life as well, obtaining food would have been a lot easier perhaps than for our more recent ancestors. They are likely

to have used starchy wild plants such as silverweed, pignut, dandelion and bush vetch as part of the diet, as well as hazelnuts and blueberries, cloudberries, cowberries, wild strawberries and bearberries in season. Greens include sea rocket, wood sorrel, ramsons, chickweed and sea sandwort.

There are likely to have been brown bear, lynx, elk, and certainly wild boar, wildcat and wolf as well as wildlife still here now. There may have been auroch (wild cattle) and beaver too. There would have been a sea eagle territory at the shore and golden eagle inland. There would have been plenty of geese and ducks and seabirds, probably not as wary as they are now, a potential food source.

By around 6,000 years ago humans are likely to have settled here and brought with them the machinery of the beginnings of agriculture – bere barley, dogs, goats, a few sheep for wool. Around this time the English Channel flooded and no more animals could emigrate from Europe. The people were clearing the land in earnest now, possibly with axes.

During the following centuries the living for most people would have been subsistence – but this term does not give credit to the huge skill and resourcefulness of the population, and the degree of organisation they would have had in their daily lives. Using all the wildlife and resources around them they could build warm homes, hunt or forage, cook food, grow crops and also trade. The main difference in the environment from then till now, is the sheer productivity of the ancient landscape, increasing in biodiversity from the new start as the ice retreated. There was more of everything, more to hunt, more to fish, more trees. Imagine a habitat which can support brown bears (bones were found near the Alt nam Uamh at Inchnadamph not far south, dated to 2,600 years ago). Think of all those berries....

As humans became more “civilised” they began to impact more on the landscape, and cut down too many trees, and hugely increased the grazing pressure with their domestic animals. You would expect that some of the wild predators would have been seen as dangerous to domestic animals, but it is worth noting that the wolf was still in these parts in the 1600’s and the other smaller predators were not driven to extinction or near extinction until the mid-1800’s onwards. They all managed to live together. However it is likely that the felling of the woodlands led to the extinction of the brown bear, wild boar and lynx. It is likely some woods were protected and managed to ensure a plentiful supply of hazel wood for hurdle and trap making, and willow for cordage for net and rope making. Heather, with long stems was used for basket making also.

The proximity to the sea was an important factor in humans settling in the Durness area. The special geomorphological conditions in the west of Scotland with its shallow continental shelf and frequent heavy winter storms would have ensured a very fertile coast. Huge fish catches could be made using stone fish traps or yairs. Fishing would have been easy. Later however, especially after the introduction of trawling in the mid-eighteenth century, the easy pickings soon disappeared.

The use of goats as domestic livestock was probably a key to the survival of the community from early times. Knowing goats and sheep, I can vouch for the qualities of goats: they live in a proper flock and are very organised, being well able to defend their kids from foxes and wolves. The goatherds would have been the children, and before schools opened for a different sort of learning, their job would have been to lead the flock to the right location for the time of year, and the goats under those conditions stick to a routine and do not stray into the crops and cause havoc. The relationship between these species would have been very close – goats are much friendlier than sheep. Goats are by nature browsers on varied vegetation rather than grazers and thrive on many more species than do sheep. They of course provide milk and meat

and skin with a great efficiency. There are a number of places nearby with Gaelic place names including goat (an gobhar).

Goats are not mentioned much in literature and often denigrated. This is probably because they were not a cash crop and indeed if not well managed they can go feral, and have done so in the north-west. Once they had been replaced by sheep, perhaps seen as the better financial option, tenants may well have been forced to use more milk from cows for themselves, thus weakening the calves and reducing the value of beef. In the nearby parish of Assynt for example, in 1812, every tenant had 20-80 goats and they almost all (2,000) died of “scab and rot”, probably brought in by sheep. That must have been devastating for the families and really impacted the famine years.

By the 1700’s sheep were increasing in the area and the die was cast for using the land to create more income for the landowners. Either suddenly or gradually, the tenants had much less in resources to survive. While the potato must have looked like good news, the knowledge of other wild food sources and crop diversity must have started to diminish. Overgrazing will have reduced the supply of medicinal plants as well. Where people had to live within much smaller areas and the rest was grazed by sheep, the resources available to them were drastically reduced. At the same time, of course, their rents went up.

What about the wolf? Well, the descriptions of the sorry last few wolves digging up bodies hint at the situation. It appears that until there were guns, people could manage to live with wolves. The wolves controlled the deer population. Wolves live in packs and like to den in quite open woods. They move out from here to hunt. The deer keep away from wolf smells – hence the trees can regenerate in a wolf wood. When the wood gets too overgrown, the wolves move elsewhere and soon the deer will browse in that wood again for a while. The cycle continues, the result being the effects of grazing are spread, and other wildlife can thrive such as field and bank voles, which in turn are prey for pine martens, owls and eagles.

Rabbits were introduced to the highlands in the late 1700’s by the Mackenzies of Gairloch: they soon regretted the move. They would not have taken long to reach Durness, and of course would prove very difficult to keep away from crops without modern chicken wire.

Wildlife was suffering from the huge reduction in productivity of the land, due to overgrazing by vast flocks of sheep. By the time sheep lost their value and the alternative hunting culture came to the fore, the die was set. Valuing the land for the number of deer and sometimes grouse created a sort of factory farming – now we are left with hardly a tree or heath. As sheep farming is still a source of income for some this loss of plant life is exacerbated by over burning, further destroying juniper, otter holts, adders and amphibians.

In the 1850’s people began to be paid for killing things which supposedly affected the hunt. So dippers in the burns were killed as they thought they ate young trout – in fact they eat dragon- and damselfly larvae which eat trout eggs. Sparrows, pine martens, weasels, you name it. The gamekeepers came to the fore and soon the polecat and sea eagle was extinct in Scotland. Without the tragic intervention of World War I (and the keepers going to war) probably the pine marten, otter, golden eagle, badger and peregrine would have gone the same way. In the Sutherland Estate in 1819-1826, 295 adult eagles were killed plus 60 eaglets and eggs. There are less than one seventh of that number of golden eagles breeding now, a reflection of loss of habitat as well as persecution.

Vast numbers of foxes were being killed too – in Langwell and Sandside 1819-26, 546 foxes were killed. Foxes are very important and were the preferred prey species for golden eagles. The irony of the so-called deer forests is that by reducing the woodland cover and natural productivity of the hills the prized red deer themselves are reduced. In order to survive these

harsh conditions their adaptations mean they have grown to one-third smaller than English deer.

## Management

In summary, this is a fascinating area for wildlife and once would have been very productive for humans too. Some of this biodiversity could be restored by reducing the grazing pressure, including fencing off the hazel hanging on in the grykes. Reduced grazing would also have a knock on effect of increasing loch shore-side vegetation which would increase invertebrates and benefit the fish.

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## Project End

At the conclusion of the project the new interpretation panel was unveiled on Sat 22<sup>nd</sup>. January 11.00am at the old schoolhouse followed by a guided walk round the Borralie trail using the new leaflet. Some 30 people attended a guided walk and talk at the site of the old school in beautiful sunshine. Nicola Pool and Ruth MacDougal held studio opportunities to produce artist impressions illustrating the period of the school. Also from the arts, the well-known poet George Gunn who has Durness connections, talked about the literary connections of people to the environment.

An Exhibition of art inspired by this work plus selected highlights from the archaeology, ecology and history discoveries. DVD describing the archaeology, history and ecology followed in Durness Hall. The Exhibition seeks to give an account of what has been learned so far. A highlight will be the opening talk by historian Malcolm Bangor Jones. Durness village hall was prepared with an outline of the actual size of the ruined school marked out on the floor. This demonstrated just how pupils managed to learn and work in the building. Visiting primary schools were given the opportunity to arrange their classes within the space.



IMAGE 239 SETTING THE EXHIBITION IN DURNESS VILLAGE HALL

### **Post Project**

The site was also visited by Andrew PK Wright OBE Chartered Architect and Heritage Consultant who said *“This is without question an important site of which a surprising amount remains which is a testament to the high standards of construction employed by the masons. There is sufficient surviving here to confirm the original use and the likely date of the structure. It is important at this early stage to stress that the importance of the site should not just relate to the architectural significance of the structure, but should take in the surrounding cultural landscape which appears to be of unusual richness. I am minded to suggest that, on the basis of what I have seen so far, it should be scheduled as an ancient monument for which there would have to be agreement that the site is of national importance as set out in the recent Scottish Historic Environment Policy document (SHEP) published by Historic Scotland in October 2008. In order to achieve this it may be necessary to make a case for rarity, if not actually uniqueness. An appropriate designation may hold the key to securing funding, and funding should be available for the preparation of a conservation plan.”*

The ruined school which was built on church land in 1766 and has remained to this day in Church of Scotland ownership. The project to Interpret & Explore of the landscape at Loch Croispol School and carry out an archaeological excavation was supported by the church and we received the permission required for this project through the parish minister of Durness & Kinlochbervie John Mann. The next stage of this project was preparing an application to Historic Scotland for preparation of a conservation as a consolidated ancient monument and ensure that the craft skills engaged on the project are appropriate for the standard of work to be undertake and Under the Historic Scotland Historic Building Repair Grants Scheme, financial help is available to owners to meet the cost of high-quality repairs using traditional materials and specialist craftsman to conserve original features in buildings of special architectural or

historic interest. In return, owners must insure and maintain the building and allow some access to visitors.

I was in correspondence with the Church of Scotland and they were supportive of a sale or lease to allow further work to continue but as this was my last project with Durness Development Group I passed this on to my successors but I understand no further action was taken.

## Borrallie Headland

### Archaeological Context of Borrallie, Durness

Dr. Olivia Lelong



IMAGE 240 BORRALLIE HEADLAND OVERLOOKING LOCH BORRALLIE

Before the 2001 survey carried out by GUARD and the 2004 season of the Strathnaver Province Archaeology Project, archaeologists had carried out some research in the area around Durness. A limited survey of the headland centred on Loch Borrallie took place in 1966 (Reid et al 1968) and highlighted the significant quantities of prehistoric monuments here and an apparent relationship between the concentrations of hut circles and limestones. The Sutherland Coastal Survey, carried out on behalf of Historic Scotland in 1997, examined the headland's coastal fringe (Brady & Morris 1998). In 2000, on behalf of Historic Scotland, GUARD undertook the rescue excavation of two burials in a multi-phased, sub-rectangular cairn to the west of Loch Borrallie. One of the skeletons was radiocarbon dated to 40 cal BC – cal AD 210 (OxA-10253) (MacGregor 2003).

A baseline survey carried out on the headland in 2001 (Lelong & MacGregor 2003; 2004) recorded approximately 200 archaeological monuments, ranging from extensive prehistoric hut-circle settlements and cairn fields to isolated shieling huts, burial cairns and field walls. Many of these were discovered eroding out of deflated areas in the fixed dunes. In addition to sites 46 and 89 (excavated in 2004 described above in archaeology), several other archaeological features of possible Norse or Medieval date were identified. In a broad valley running down to the Kyle of Durness, a small sand blow revealed a short length of walling with an associated old ground surface eroding out beside it. This may have been a metal-working site. During the baseline survey, pieces of slag, sherds of probable Norse pottery and a small charm or pendant, made of a quartzite pebble in a copper-alloy setting, were collected from the

eroding surface. When the site was visited in July 2003 it had been destroyed by the collapse of the deflating section above it.

A striking number of small, isolated, circular or oval structures were recorded on the high rim of ground along the western part of the survey area. These could be shieling structures, perhaps dating from a period when the flocks of the Bishop of Caithness were grazed here in summer (Mackay 1906, 37). They do suggest that the headland's grassy expanses were occupied on some temporary, seasonal basis in the past.

Over the past several decades, numerous artefacts have been collected from the surface of deflated areas by local people. During the baseline survey, these were catalogued and their locations were recorded wherever possible. They include several copper alloy frustum-headed pins of medieval date, pieces of late medieval metalwork, and an amber bead, concentrated in the vicinity of structure 89. Sherds of later prehistoric pottery, worked bone, industrial waste, spindle whorls, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century coins and post-Medieval buttons and pottery have also been picked up both in this area and elsewhere on the headland. They hint at the dense and potentially continuous or continual occupation of the headland from later prehistory onward.

It is likely that the headland saw Norse settlement, given its fertility, its proximity to the sea and the place name and archaeological evidence. The area around Durness contains a large number of place names that are Norse in origin, including Durness itself ('deer point'), Keoldale ('cold valley') and Smoo ('inlet') (Waugh 2000). The place name 'Borrallie' may derive from the Old Norse borg- for houses clustered around a fort or monastic site and -ley, probably the plural of meadow (Johnston 1934, 12; Darwood 1995). The name most likely refers to a dun (site 123 in Lelong & MacGregor 2003) which is perched on a small headland overlooking the loch, around which cluster later, eighteenth-century township buildings.

Archaeological evidence for Viking/Norse activity in northern Sutherland is sparse in comparison to that in Caithness or Orkney, but much of what is known has been found in the vicinity of Durness. A single, ninth- or tenth-century burial of a young male was found in the dunes at Balnakeil Bay (Low, Batey & Gourlay 2000), and another possible burial is known from Keoldale, less than a kilometre to the south of Loch Borrallie (Batey 1993). A ninth- to twelfth-century midden excavated in a small cave off Smoo Inlet is thought to have been left by Norse sailors using the inlet for shelter (Pollard forthcoming). At Sangobeg, the largely eroded remains of a Late Norse settlement were excavated and found to overlie a pre-Christian burial (Brady, Lelong & Batey in prep).

However, here as elsewhere in the northern Highlands, substantial archaeological evidence for Norse or medieval rural settlement is conspicuously elusive (Lelong 2003). One of the main aims of the Strathnaver Province Archaeological Project is to investigate those sites in the former province with the highest potential for yielding medieval archaeology and to refine our methodologies for locating medieval settlement remains in the region.

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Brady, K.B. & Morris, C.D. 1998 *Sutherland Coastal Survey*. University of Glasgow Department of Archaeology Report.

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MacKay, A 1906 *The Book of MacKay*. Edinburgh: Norman MacLeod.

Pollard, T forthcoming 'The Excavation of Four Caves in the Geodha Smoo, Durness.' *Scottish Archaeological Internet Review*.

Reid, R W K, David, G & Aitken, A 1968 'Prehistoric Settlement in Durness', in *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* (1966-67), 21-53.

Waugh, D 2000 A Scattering of Norse Names in Strathnaver. In Baldwin, J R (ed) *The Province of Strathnaver*. Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 13-23.

Rhubha Bhoralaidh Archaeological excavations in the Loch Borrallie area in 2004 and 2005 revealed buildings of late medieval origin. This work yielded evidence of the sites being reused from the Norse period through into the 1600s. Pottery shards, a spindle whorl and pieces of worked red deer antler reveal early industry, Norse links and later trading links.

The Mackay Country Archive Accession Number *DurMixVid 0018* has video of a more in-depth discussion with Dr. Oliva Lelong.

## Loch Borrallie Trail

This trail takes you through the archaeology and history of the area, taking you back over 2,000 years of life on the Durness limestones.

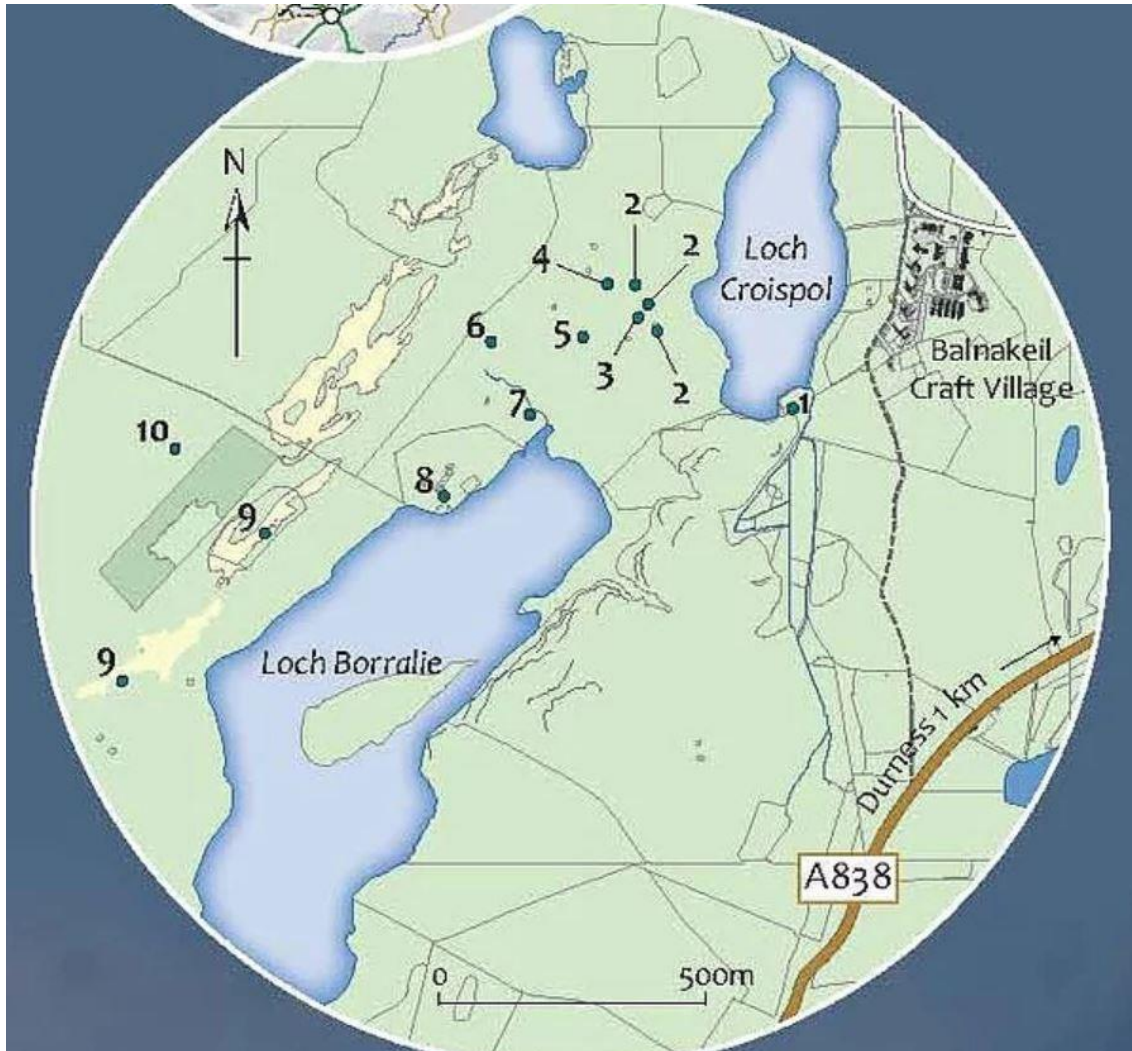


IMAGE 241 LOCH BORRALIE TRAIL MAP

### 1. Croispol schoolhouse, Taigh-sgoile Chroispal (NC 3908 6769)

At the south-east edge of Loch Croispol stands a schoolhouse that was the parish school from about 1760 to 1861. At top of the track leading down to the schoolhouse from the north-east you'll find a display board where you can read about its unusual history, and the evidence that excavation found for its use, alteration, and collapse.

### 2. Prehistoric houses and fields – Taighean is achaidhean aosmhor

Around the south western edge of Loch Croispol are the remains of houses and small fields where people lived and farmed more than 2,000 years ago. The houses are visible now as low circular and oval banks (like those at NC 3878 6785 and 3881 6782) that supported timber or turf walls, with a cone-shaped roof resting on a ring of posts around the hearth inside. A system of small fields extends northward from the roundhouse at NC 3877 6791, defined by stony banks and clearance cairns, and created when stones were cleared to make way for cultivation.

### 3. Sheepfold – Crò-chaorach (NC 3879 6787)

A circular, stone-built sheepfold (or a ‘stell’, to use its local name) stands among the remains of prehistoric settlement beside Loch Croispol. It was built in the 19th century when people living in the area were moved out to make way for sheep farming. It stands atop a substantial circular stony bank that may be an earlier cattlefold that was robbed to build the sheepfold. Another arcing bank beneath the sheepfold could be a prehistoric house.



IMAGE 242 LOCH BORRALIE SHEEPFOLD



IMAGE 243 LOCH BORRALIE FARMSTEAD

### 4. Farmstead – Tuathanas (NC 3871 6791)

The remains of a small farmstead are nestled in a narrow, sheltered valley to the west of Loch Croispol and the areas of prehistoric settlement. You can see the tumbled stony remains of a house, with associated dykes and clearance cairns. This was probably occupied during the 18th century, before the area was cleared for sheep.

5. Loch Croispol cairns & building – Cùirn is togalaichean Loch Croispol (NC 3867 6781).

In a shallow bowl near the top of the ridge that separates Lochs Croispol and Borrallie are the ruins of a small farmstead, with a tumbled building and a small adjacent yard. This may be the remains of a 19th-century shepherd's dwelling. Lying across the broad slope leading south-east from here (centered at NC 3872 6770) are up to 70 stone cairns. They range from 2 to 9 m across and some are defined by neat kerbs. They may relate to cultivation of the ground, but it is quite likely that at least some are prehistoric burial cairns



IMAGE 244 LOCH BORRALIE CAIRNS & BUILDING

.6. Hakon's Bowl prehistoric house – Taigh aosmhor Chuach Acain (NC 3850 6780)



IMAGE 245 LOCH BORRALIE HAKON'S BOWL PREHISTORIC HOUSE

At the northern edge of the natural amphitheater known as Hakon's Bowl (after a Norwegian king who was said to have sheltered here) are the remains of a large prehistoric house. It is

visible as a substantial circular bank, with a low curving bank outside it on the north-east that was probably an associated yard (to the right in the photo). The house once stood on the shore of a loch, evident now in the thick, soft peat covering the floor of the Bowl.

#### 7. Hakon's Bowl mystery building – Togalach neo-aithnichte Chuach Acain (NC 3857 6767)

An enigmatic structure is tucked into the quarried face of a rocky outcrop at the mouth of Hakon's Bowl. It is defined by a stone-and-turf wall base with several upright stones. It could be a prehistoric house or a later shelter or enclosure. You can see remnants of ancient hazel woodland growing among the surrounding outcrops.



IMAGE 246 LOCH BORRALIE HAKON'S BOWL MYSTERY BUILDING

#### 8. Loch Borralie dun and township – Baile is Dùn Loch Bhoralaidh (NC 3841 6752)



IMAGE 247 LOCH BORRALIE DUN AND TOWNSHIP

Keep to the slope above the loch shore to climb to this site on a prominent knoll overlooking Loch Borralie. You'll find an intriguing complex of buildings. The earliest is a defended homestead, visible as a pronounced circular mound ringed by a bank on the south and west, perched above the steep slope that leads down to the loch. This was probably occupied during

the mid-first millennium AD, and when Norse speakers arrived in the area they named it ‘Borrallie’ after this fort (or ‘borg’). A small township was built around the homestead, with several long, rectangular houses and yards. They were probably constructed using stones from the homestead, and one was dug into its south-west flank. Finally, after the inhabitants of Borrallie township were evicted in the early 19th century, a sheepfold was built in its midst.

#### 9. Loch Borrallie medieval houses – Taighean meadhan-aoiseil Loch Bhoralaidh

From site 8, go through the gate at the loch side and then climb the slope diagonally towards the forestry plantation. Along the western side of Loch Borrallie are two settlements dating from the 1400s. One (at NC 3807 6745) sits within a large fenced enclosure and is being investigated by archaeologists; the excavation trench outline is marked out with stones, and later (18th-century) buildings sit partly over it. The other (at NC 3780 6717) sits high above the loch in a hollow, with stone walls defining a small yard and a field beside it.

#### 10. Loch Borrallie burial cairns – Cùirn tiodhlacaidh Loch Bhoralaidh (NC 3790 6761)



IMAGE 248 LOCH BORRALIE BURIAL CAIRNS

Several circular and rectangular arrangements of stone, between 1 and 3 metres across, lie on this south-west facing slope in an area of limestone crags. These are burial cairns built about 2,000 years ago. The largest was partly excavated in 2000 when rabbit burrowing disturbed human remains. It covered the skeletons of two people, who had been buried at different times, one with an iron ring-headed pin. Radiocarbon dating showed that one of people died between 40 BC and AD 210.

## Durness Walking Network

Tracks and Paths – part of Scotland’s attraction is the wilderness of its countryside. Mountain paths are not signposted and even those marked on maps may sometimes be difficult to trace. It’s very easy to follow a sheep or deer track that leads to nowhere! Use your map and check your location at all times. Scotland’s varied terrain – the ground you cover – from heather and peat bog to rocky paths – makes walking in the Scottish hills exciting; however, it can make walking slow and exhausting. Rivers and burns can rise rapidly and become impassable. Consider these points when planning your walk, for it will affect the distance you can cover in the time available.

Shelter – do not assume you will find emergency shelter on the Scottish hills as even those marked on maps may not be suitable. Ensure that you are properly equipped. Snow? – During the summer months you may find patches of snow. You should avoid these areas unless you have the skills to cope with the extra hazard. Remember, many mountain accidents result from a simple slip. It can snow during any month of the year in the Scottish hills. Hillwalking in winter should be regarded as mountaineering and requires extra precautions. Daylight hours are shorter and weather conditions are more severe. Gain experience in summer conditions before venturing out in winter.

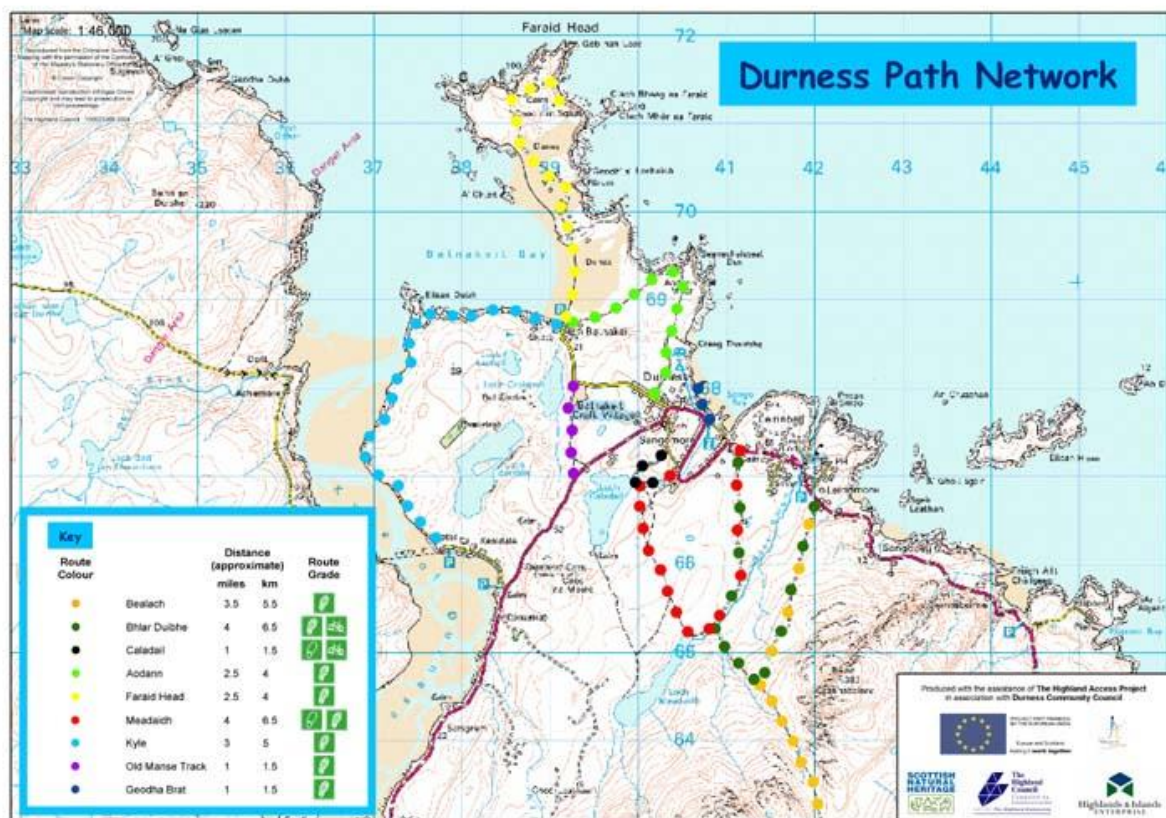


IMAGE 249 DURNESS PATH NETWORK MAP

The Durness walking network of paths was established with the collaboration of Durness Crofters, Durness Estates, Community Council, and the Highland Council in consequence of access rights that provide better opportunities for all to enjoy the outdoors. The area covered by the Durness path network may seem largely wild and remote in character but it remains a working landscape that is also highly important for wildlife and plants. Most of the routes pass through extensively grazed areas, including open hill and heath, where dogs should be kept

under close control particularly before and during lambing season and through the breeding season for birds – most of which are ground nesting in this area. Common sense with regards to young livestock is necessary and areas with calves and lambs should be avoided

The routes as described in this booklet are largely traditional routes and tracks, many of which have not been ‘improved’ to make a surfaced path. In many cases, such as the Kyle and Aodann routes, there is merely rudimentary way marking to guide people at certain points. This approach has been agreed locally to limit the impact of the path network on the landscape, people and wildlife and it is hoped that this approach is understood and appreciated by visitors.

### **Bealach/Ceannabeinne 4km**

The hill walk (Yellow Dots on Map)

This route follows a well-defined gravelled hill track to an impressive viewpoint. The route starts on the right hand side of the road as you are leaving Durness at Leirinmore just past the Smoo Cave Hotel sign and is clearly sign posted. Alternatively a longer route can be chosen by following the Meadaidh route, taking the turning towards the hills across the Allt Smoo burn just before reaching Loch Meadaidh. The track makes for easy walking, if a little arduous, as it is all uphill! If going beyond the track to tackle Beinn Ceannabeinne or even to hike across to the settlement of Laid full hill walking gear and map reading skills are required. Spectacular views from the ridge over Loch Eriboll and Laid are not to be missed on a clear day. This route is an ancient link road through the parish and is still used by crofters and shepherds today, which may mean that quad bikes and 4x4’s may be encountered!

### **Bhlar Duibhe 6.5km**

(Green Dots on Map)

The route starts on the right hand side of the road as you are leaving Durness at Leirinmore just past the Smoo Cave Hotel sign and is clearly sign posted. Follow the track along the side of Ceannabeinne until it comes to the junction with the Bealach track. This is the area known as Bhlar Duibhe. Turn right and head downhill, fording the Smoo burn at the junction with the Meadaidh track. Turn right and head back towards the village. Vehicles used by local crofters also take this route, as does the occasional mountain biker. The lower levels of this walk provide an enjoyable moorland experience with typical Scottish heathland flowers. All three common types of heathers can be found; the earlier flowering purple Bell heather, not as widespread as the lilac coloured Ling which flowers in late summer and, on the wetter boggy ground, the more delicate looking pink Cross-leaved heath. Amongst the heather look for the many coloured variations of Heath Spotted Orchid and the brilliant blue of the tiny Milkwort contrasting with the tiny sunspot yellow of the ubiquitous Tormentil.

Across the richly coloured moss covered boggy ground, dotted white by the bobbing heads of Bog cotton, examine the plants closely to find the carnivores! Beautiful red and yellow Sundews glistening with fatal attraction for insects beside the pale green starlike spread leaves of the blue flowering Butterwort, another plant we need more of to help tackle the midges. Many plants in exposed, windy situations develop ways of retaining moisture to prevent drying out.

On the higher more exposed ground the plant life changes, amongst the hard quartzite rocks wind ancient Juniper trees, very low ground hugging shrubs, difficult to see at first. Also here and there Club mosses pop up like little green deer’s antlers. Between the lichen decorated rocks you can find Stonecrop with an attractive little white flower and succulent, fleshy leaves that prevent desiccation. These are just a few gems amongst many on Ceannabeinne, take your time to study what is at your feet when not taking in the fine views!



### **Caladail 1.5k**

(Black dots on map)

The Caladail walk is a wee walk within the bounds of Durness. It follows mainly gravel tracks, is around 2km long and can be strolled in under an hour. Turn right toward the village square on leaving the Tourist Information car park and walk up to Mackays Rooms and Restaurant and turn left. Follow the main road and turn left on School Road between the Health Centre and the School. Follow the road past the playing field, past the houses to the hut of the volunteer fire brigade. Leave the road and take a right along the track toward Loch Caladail. At the foot of the hill follow the fence and the track by the Sango Burn back to Sangomore. For those wishing a shorter circular route remain on the road at the fire station and continue along School Road to Sangomore. Loch Caladail was damned in 1906 to provide a water supply for the village the first mains water to Durness, and is a limestone loch rich in aquatic life, notably trout.

### **Aodann (Edens) 4.0km**

(Green dots on map)

Beaches and Cliffs

From the car park at Sango beach walk through the village heading towards Balnakeil. The start of the Aodann walk is on your right just past the large white former church, now the joiners' workshop. Follow the track through the fields and across two open fields separated by a drystone dyke. On the skyline are the remains of two old military buildings that mark the highest part of the route. From there follow the cliff top back towards the fields, go through the gate and follow the track towards house and farm steading at Balnakeil. This will take you to the car park at the ruined Balnakeil church. The minor road can then be followed back into Durness.

What may be seen?



IMAGE 250 AODANN TRACES OF RUNRIGS

### Aodann Mhor (The Edens)

There was a farming township here until the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was swept away by the third Lord Reay, chief of clan Mackay, when he remodeled his lands at Balnakeil. Along the wall separating the headland from the fields can be seen the traces of runrigs, the long narrow cultivation strips which were created at this time.

### Seanachaisteal (The Old Castle)

This is the remains of a promontory fort, probably of Iron Age date and reputedly destroyed by Vikings in 1265. Led by King Hakon, the Vikings were on their way to defeat by the Scots at the Battle of Largs, bringing to an end Norse domination of the Western Isles. While they were here they burnt twenty townships in the immediate area. The most obvious feature of the fort is the defence ditch. On a small, precarious headland to the right of the fort the faint traces of a monastic cell can be seen. This was associated with the 8th century monastery at Balnakeil.

The flat roofed buildings date from the early 1950s and were the site of a radar mast and equipment for detecting airplanes flying at very low levels.

Burragaig. This is an unusual beach for Durness as it is composed of large pebbles, rather than sand. Seaweed was gathered here by crofters in the past to be used as fertilizer in their fields.

Wildlife you may see:

White Field Gentian, Primrose, Meadowsweet, Monkey Flower, Grass of Parnassus, Wild Thyme, Red Bartsia, Mayweed, Eyebright, Orchids, Violets, Roseroot, Sea Champion, Scots Lovage Ragwort, Rockrose, Wild Angelica, Burdock, Ragged Robin, Harebell, Bards Foot Trefoil, Violets, Dune Pansies, Yellow, Saxifaras, Forget me not, Marsh marigold, Thrift Terns, Fulmars, Great Black backs, Herring Gulls, Buzzard, Corncrake, Lapwing, Curlew, Mallard, Eider, Starlings, Gannets, Meadow Pipits, Pied Wagtail, Rock Pipit, Sedge warbler, Reed Bunting, Black Headed Gull, Guillemot, Shag, Hooded Crow, Raven, Rabbits, Fox, Badger, Seals, Whales, Voles, Otter, Polecat, Feral Cats.



IMAGE 251 FARAID HEAD

### **The Faraid Head Walk 4.0km**

Stunning coastal route

The main starting point to this route is from the shore at Balnakeil Bay. From the car park, walk along the beach to the other end where a road heads up into the dunes. Continue along this road until you reach the MOD property on Faraid Head. Follow the fence to the right, which leads on to a viewpoint marked with a cairn. From here head back through the dunes to link with the road. As a further option at low tide it is possible to walk from the far end of the beach round the rocky headland to the main beach and return to Balnakeil.

What may be seen?

Balnakeil is from the Gaelic meaning village or place of the church. The sandy bay is crescent shaped and facing west where bathing is safe from pollution, unspoilt and quiet. The area offers unparalleled sunsets. The sand dunes are a dramatic feature and are reminiscent of desert scenery. The rear of the dunes form a machair, a Gaelic word meaning an area of grasslands enriched by windblown shell sand abundant with wild flowers.

The farm was considered to be one of the most productive in the Highlands and was one of the first to be improved in the very early 19th century. The substantial stone dykes surrounding the fields date from this time. It is a prominent sheep farm today. The mill, used for grinding oats, was built in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and last used as such about 1912.

### **The Meadaidh Walk 6.5km**

A Route of two Lochs.



IMAGE 252 LOCH MEADAIDH

The Meadaidh walk is a low-level moorland route. The walk follows a well-defined route, much of which is on a gravel track. The section between Loch Meadaidh and Loch Caladail is unsurfaced, necessitating suitable protective footwear as it becomes boggy in wet weather. Tackle this walk by leaving the Sango car park and following the main road towards Durness Church. The start of the route is marked with a finger post directing you to follow a track on the right hand side of the road. The first Loch that you pass in this direction is Loch Caladail before you cross the boggy section of link route to Loch Meadaidh and rejoin a gravel track leading back to the village. On rejoining the main road, the little minor road following the coast can be taken as a short cut back to the TIC. The route is way marked with red banded posts on the cross-country section and can be tackled from either direction.

What may be seen?

A coal fueled fire gives out as much as four times the amount of heat than that produced by the same weight of peat! The moorland between the road and the loch is composed of peat, the result of thousands of years of slowly decaying plant material in waterlogged conditions – a reflection of the areas rainfall. Peat when dried makes a useful fuel, an important resource in a treeless area although it is a local saying that ‘the most heat generated from peat is in the cutting rather than the burning’ – a reflection of the hard work in digging and laying out the peats to dry! The ‘fug’ produced by a peat fire is an oft reminisced loss to the modern day convenience of central heating. Most of the peat banks to the east of the Smoo Burn have been cut for fuel.

The acidic nature of the peat is balanced by the alkaline nature of the underlying limestone as you cross between Loch Meadaidh and Loch Caladail. This change is noted in the change in vegetation, which is both greener and is comprised of different species and ratios of moorland plants. A further effect is in the lochs themselves as the more alkaline Loch Caladail supports more aquatic life and bigger, pink-fleshed brown trout than does the acidic Loch Meadaidh, resulting in Caladail being the favoured loch for the fishermen.

### **The Kyle of Durness Walk 5.0km**

A wild coastal experience.

This is a remote coastal route providing dramatic coastal vistas and unspoilt beaches. From the Sango car park walk to the village square and follow the road to Balnakeil. From the car park at the ruined kirk (church) follow the road round to the golf course. Enter through the gate and follow the sign for walkers and the route marked by boulders. The route from this point follows the coastline and care should be taken on the steeper sections as this is a wild route without any path surface. Follow the coast leaving the defined track at the gate exiting the golf course. Extreme caution is advised if you walk on the sands as the incoming tide covers the sand very quickly. By keeping the sea on your right hand side you can safely walk all the way to the Cape Wrath Ferry pier on the west side of the Kyle of Durness. From the pier follow the road back to the village. If you have left your car at Balnakeil take the track on the left – marked as the Old Manse track, about 1.5km from the pier and return by the old manse and Balnakeil Craft Village. Depending on the variation this walk can take between 3-5 hours and is over rough ground.

What may be seen?

Stromatolite – trace fossils of algae which can be seen on limestone. One of the earliest fossils to be found. Just before entering the golf course along the shore of Balnakeil there are good specimens of stromatolites and the area including the golf course is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The Interpretative panel at the club house is worth reading. As you leave the golf course the rare Scottish Primrose can be seen in the vicinity of the fence. You are now entering an area rich in archaeology.

The small fenced area is an interesting geological feature, a blow hole—an underground inlet of the sea. The small ruined buildings are the remains of Solmar, a settlement that was inhabited until the 1880s. From this point there is no real defined track but the route is through a stable dune system. If you follow the manse route back to Balnakeil an excellent example of a limestone drystone dyke borders the track.

Wildlife you may see:

Depending on the season—very variable. Bog Asphodel, Scottish primrose, Grass of Parnassus Twayblade, Scented orchid, Marsh orchid, Early purple Orchid, Burdock, Eyebright, Hellebore, Kidney Vetch, Primrose, Hare Bell, Spring Squill, Butterwort, Yellow Saxifrage, Milkwort, Trefoil, Bedstraw, Ragwort, Thyme Meadow Pipit, Wheateater, Tystie, Common gull, Black Headed Gull, Common Tern, Shag, Wagtail, Twite, Starling, Swallow, Eider, Red Throated Diver, Buzzard, Corncrake (Heard), oystercatcher, Curlew, Ringed Plover, Heron., Black guillemots, Common Seal, rabbits, Porpoises, and signs of Otters, Badgers and Foxes.

### **The Old Manse Track 1.5km**

A wee link track through time.

This is straightforward; short walk following roads and an old cart track. Take a right turn from the Sango car park toward the Village Square. Veer right on the road to Balnakeil. From the village square toward Balnakeil you pass through parts of the old townships of Durine and Balvolich. Pass the craft village and at the corner turn left through the gate onto The Manse track with Loch Croispol on the right. An interesting detour is possible at The Manse by following the path leading to the loch and the ruined school, return by the same route and continue following the track. At the main road turn left to enter Durness from the South taking care of the passing traffic on this single track section of road. At the village square turn right, heading back to Sango carpark.

## Arts Residency

The Durness Development Group arranged this project on behalf of the emerging Mackay Country structure in 2005.

Commissioning of artists to work with sites of historical and scientific interest and develop work that will be accessible to the local community and beyond. The project involved commissioning of artists to work location specifically on three key sites of historical and scientific interest in Sutherland. The project was managed by an arts director with a local administrator and utilised the youth clubs digital arts studio in Durness as a base. It included contact time with young people in this social inclusion area and workshops in Farr, Kinlochbervie High Schools and Durness, Kinlochbervie, Tongue, Farr and Scourie Primary Schools. The intention of the residency was for artists to engage with the sites and develop site specific work that was accessible to the local community and beyond. The artistic interpretation of the site developed over the period of each artist's residency and culminated in an exhibition event. There was also documentation of the residencies on the Mackay Country website and a CD Rom containing images, sound files and video interviews. Support to the artists was in the form of studio space, a peer support technician, artistic director's assistance and the support of the facilitating organisation with Durness Youth Club. The period of the project was for one year.

Three artists were appointed to carry out artistic interpretation of heritage sites in Mackay Country each working in different forms and media. The intention of the residency was for artists to engage with the sites and develop site specific work.

### Joanne B Kaar



IMAGE 253 MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE CANTON OF HULL SHIPWRECK

Based at Dunnet Head, on the north coast of Caithness. Joanne worked from Durness based at the community house with specific interest in Cape Wrath. Joanne is a fibre artist and has particular expertise in paper-making and its' associated creative artefacts – including 'log books' and their history. Joanne Kaar's work was also stimulated by ideas of journeys over land and sea, and through timescales that included archaeological periods. These were realised in a series of handmade 'books' and paper objects contained in boxes within a boat-shaped case. Exploring new techniques, Joanne examined the physical and chemical effects of the landscape on artworks buried in a peat bog or placed in saltwater and dried in the wind.

Among other experiments, she initiated a grow-your-own hut circle and threw six identical bottles into the sea off Faraid Head. This particular act – both commemorative and exploratory, took

place on the date that the Canton was shipwrecked off the rocks in 1849. Each bottle held an account of the disaster.

<sup>87</sup>As the culmination of a three month residency in Durness, ‘Journeys’ reflects a process of cultural excavation and interpretation “over land, sea, and time”

There are many travelling services which visit Durness including a mobile bank, cinema, and library, and Joanne has now added a travelling school. Achiemore Side School on Cape Wrath closed in 1947 when there was only one pupil left. It was a very small school and only the



foundation stones now remain. Joanne mixed banana skins from the Sango Sands restaurant in Durness and mixed them with linen to create a similar texture to the stones. She then joined the papers together in the shape of the school, added rusty colour papers to mark the corners, and unrolled the

IMAGE 255 SIDE SCHOOL MADE OUT ON ORIGINAL LOCATION



IMAGE 254 CAPE WRATH SCHOOL IN THE PLAYGROUND OF DURNESS PRIMARY SCHOOL SO THE CURRENT CLASS COULD STAND INSIDE IT.

<sup>87</sup> The following is a report from Northings Highlands and Islands art Journal.

Cape Wrath school in the playground of Durness Primary School so the current class could stand inside it.



An exhibition of work by Joanne was on for two weeks from 26<sup>th</sup>. November 2006 at 1 Bard Terrace, Durness, Sutherland. Open daily. What was so extraordinary about this exhibition is both the expansive scope of the project and its intimate scale. For those who participated in ‘Journeys’ during its development as part of the residency, and for subsequent audiences of the exhibition, ‘Journeys’ reveals much about its location. The artist has thoroughly immersed herself in uncovering, sifting, and merging creative process and technique with the natural environment. Taking joy in the everyday and the unique character of place that is so often taken for granted, such a project makes us all examine our own place in the world with fresh eyes.

Each bound work which integrates natural materials and papermaking techniques with layers of history, archaeology, and human experience. Each piece is fascinating, filled with the landscape and its stories,

IMAGE 256 JOANNE’S EXHIBITION IS CLEVERLY DISPLAYED IN A PORTABLE CASE MADE FROM AN OLD CANOE BY ALAN HERMAN

the beautiful tactile experience of handmade fibers, the smell of natural elements mixed into the pages and the wonderful skill of artist Joanne Kaar in binding all these layers together. The exhibition is cleverly displayed in a portable case made from an old canoe by Alan Herman in nearby Balnakeil Craft Village. The creative process in ‘Journeys’ interprets and reflects a community and its environment by use of materials, content and active involvement. It is a reflection of the way that our creative influence as individuals can extend beyond any idea of isolation that may confine us geographically. The residency unfolded online in tandem with activities on the ground and connected artists as far away as America and New Zealand with the whole creative process.

The original starting point, the origins of ships log books, was transformed into the modern blog as a document of the journeys taken within the project. The linking of Durness as a creative community to a potential worldwide audience through the internet is not only an important form of documentation, but also a means of communication about the unique qualities of the



area. The series of book boxes naturally invite the viewer to experience them – opening every wooden toggle is a discovery! They record a wide range of interpretations and the act of looking at them is immediate, personal, and tactile.

Made from coffee grains collected from Mackay's Hotel in Durness, 'The Shipping News' combines local history, with intoxicating smell and the image of a three mast Braque, a type of sailing ship wrecked in the area during a time of merchant voyages. The image of the ship is simply and beautifully realised using a water cut technique, drawing through thin pulp while it is still in the papermaking mold. Personal and local history combined in the reading of the 'Shipping News' was recorded photographically on site. Those services currently visiting the area include a mobile bank, library, and cinema, and are part of life in far north communities.

Local Ranger Donald Mitchell was invited to choose ten wildflowers from the local area which the artist translated into stone carved seals bound and presented in layers of precious white parchment and red ink. Another part of the project took prints from marks made by man and nature in stone and presented them in an intricately folded binding perfectly in tune with its contents. These are not just surface rubbings or beautiful fibers but tangible links with human and natural history that an audience are invited to touch. The delicate pink tinge and texture of kelp papers in a long binding imitate the wave of fronds in nature. Embossed key words from the history of the Kelp Industry in the area (1760's to 1940's) are visible on their surface in relief.

The experimental nature of creating art works using paper in the landscape are revealed in 'Message in a Bottle', based on the story of the Canton shipwreck of 1849. On 12 August (the date which commemorates the wreck), six message bottles were thrown into the sea off Faraid Head. Joanne explains: "I wanted to discover where goods from the ship would have been taken by the sea". Another work inspired by the wreck of the Canton is 'Balnakeil Bay Bank Notes', separated for security and cut in diagonal sections. Bank notes were washed ashore in 1849 inspiring a site specific work that was created from handmade paper with embossed watermarks and then photographed.

A work taken by the sea and returned by waves is 'Sango Sands Sea Papers'. This has a wonderful soft texture created from herbs, linen fibers, and elephant dung, encrusted with sand, and partially formed by the action of sea water. Now dried and rediscovered by opening a book box, "it looks like it has been on an exciting journey". In an area of rich archaeology ancient marks on the landscape were retraced by imitating the markers used by archaeologists during excavation this time using dried pods of yellow paper pulp. The predominance of hut circles in the region inspired a 'Grow Your Own Hut Circle' for peat (acid soil) and Limestone (alkaline soil). These circular rolled papers with wildflower seeds buried in the landscape extend the artist's experimentation with the effects of different soils upon natural materials.

A Viking burial uncovered in 1991 provided the inspiration for another work using waste linen from a weaving shed on Scalpay in the Western Isles. The action of the wind creating "boat like hollows" in the dunes and related finds from the burial of a boy in the 9th or 10th century influenced the creation of a linen paper shroud. Two metres long and bound with a stitched brooch pin, this work reminds us that there is always human history waiting to be uncovered by the elements.

Joanne Kaar's work incorporated research, creating new temporary work in the landscape and permanent work for exhibition from natural elements collected in the parish of Durness. A series of workshops for adults and children in skills such as silk papermaking and stone seal carving extended the reach of the residency in the community. Primary Schools in Durness, Kinlochbervie, and Achfary participated in the project, producing their own fold-out books of

journeys. Their travels to school, the long journey into Inverness for shopping, the excitement of visiting a parent in Kinlochbervie, seeing eagles and deer on a day out in the hills, flying to America or a trip to nearby Balnakeil beach provide a window into the daily life of children living in the far North of Scotland. The artist's skills in Eastern and Western techniques of papermaking, use of recycling and inspired creative imagination left their mark as the comments of workshop participants testify. Each book box informs the other and the artist's own blog book account of meeting local people, describing the environment, landscape, weather, historical and personal influences on the work as it was being made adds to the overall experience of viewing the exhibition.

The sum of all these parts was inspirational to me in terms of the process of the artist residency and the far reaching affect such a project can have. It is wonderful to see a small community committed to creative engagement and self-determination, and Durness Development and Mackay Country are to be congratulated on initiating this landmark project. As part of a series of three, three-month artist residencies in Mackay country it is a model for integrated work in rural communities with few resources and arts infrastructure. Tackling many of the problems faced by communities in the Highlands and Islands at local level, the scope of this project as a model for future projects in the area is positively inspirational.

From Exhibitionist Mental Contagion web site magazine

#### "Message in a Bottle"

On Saturday 12th August 2006, I threw 6 identical messages in bottles into the sea off Faraid Head. It was on this day in 1849, a ship called the Canton was wrecked on the rocks at Clach Mhor Na Faraid. I wanted to discover where goods from the ship would have been taken by the sea. Goods include Clydesdale Bank notes which had been cut in two, diagonally. Some were washed ashore on Balnakeil Beach. There may be more... Other accounts give the 22nd August 1847 as the day the Canton was shipwrecked. In this box is a replica message in a bottle!

#### "Archeological Markers"

There are many ancient historical sites around Durness. You have to know what to look for, as they're well hidden in the landscape. I visited a site to west of Loch Borrallie which has Norse beginnings. Archaeologists had already investigated, and covered the site with rabbit proof mesh held in place with a grid of stones to protect it for the future. When documenting a site, archaeologists use a variety of bright coloured markers and flags. I brought my own archaeological markers of bright yellow nuggets of paper pulp to highlight the patterns of stones, some made by the archaeologists and others much more ancient!

#### "Ghost Money"

Is made with recycled ghost money and covers of bamboo. They were part of the exhibition at the Su-Ho Paper Museum in Taipei. The lower image is a book is made with pages of recycled ghost money. The book box is made from a Taiwan newspaper. I chose the sections with the most red print. These simple origami boxes made from waste papers are used every day in Taiwan for kitchen waste.

#### "Sango Sands Sea papers"

On Thursday 3rd August I threw a book into the sea at Sango Sands. The pages of this chunky book were made from a variety of different handmade papers including linen fiber, ellie poo, all my out of date herbs and waste paper. I wanted to discover what the effects of the sea would have on the papers and the binding. It looked alive while floating in between the waves. Now dry, and still full of sand, it looks like it has been on an exciting journey.

## "Hut Circle"

There are many hut circles in the landscape around Durness. In this box you'll find a kit to grow your own! The size is based on one at Cnoc na Moine which has a diameter of 8.5m (28ft). This area is limestone ground. I purchased a mix pack of wild flowers for Calcareous Soil – (chalk and limestone) and added them to the paper pulp. Species Include :- Agrimony, Wild Basil, Ladys Bedstraw, Birds-foot-trefoil, Burnet Salad, Wild Carrot, Cowslip, Oxeye Daisy, Rough Hawkbit, Common and Greater Knapweed, Black Medic, Wild Mignonette, Hoary Plantain, Field and Small Scabious, Selfheal, Kidney Vetch, Yarrow, Yellow-Rattle/Field Scabious. The flowers will grow when the paper is planted and watered.

## "Kelp Papers"

Kelp was traditionally collected from two areas in Durness Parish, the stony beaches of Geodha Brat and Burragaig. Kelpers worked on these shores from the 1760's to the 1940's. Kelp was dried, then burnt before being sold. Burnt kelp was an ingredient for making glass and soap. Kelpers wages were between £1 and £3 per ton. These papers are 1m long and made from kelp collected on Burragaig beach, mixed with linen rag with embossed words.

## Deirdre Nelson



IMAGE 257 DEIRDRE'S KNITTED PUFFIN

From Ireland but now based in Glasgow worked on Handa Island based in Eddrachilles. Deirdre's textile practice has evolved through experimenting with materials and methods of making in which hand work and craftsmanship provide both direction and context. Hand skills are transposed though the work in a humorous commentary on social and textile history within the contemporary gallery. Her textile work employs a variety of techniques and materials fusing traditional textile skills and contemporary reinterpretation through photography and digital manipulation. Deirdre works in a variety of scales and explores social dimensions through textiles, with sewing and knitting retaining their hand-skilled character while being considerably

more than a technical processes. Her area of research being Handa Island she has been interested in the importance of the birds on the island in the past (as a source of food) and the present importance of Handa as a bird sanctuary bringing many visitors to the island over the summer. Discovering that feathers from the birds were bartered for wool on the mainland Deirdre began to think of ways of incorporating this into her work. She knitted the bird species of Handa, some of from cheviot wool spun by a local Tarbet spinner Irene Garrioch. Deirdre has been interested in creating birds which can be a learning resource for children in the future in the area but also play a part in telling the story of Handa. She has been interested in emigration of members of the community from Handa to Nova Scotia and Cape Breton but also in the migration of the birds to and from Handa. *“I have been busy working in schools for a few weeks working with the children to create birds. Each child has chosen a bird to represent themselves and is exploring drawing and making of the bird. We hope to make an exchange with Cape Breton in the form of postcards which can be sent over to a school there with information about the children and the area.”* With children in Scourie, Kinlochbervie and Achfary Deirdre and the pupils created a community of birds which were photographed and printed onto postcards and these postcards then took the same journey as the immigrants in the past in an exchange with the children in Cape Breton. Deirdre Nelson actively engaged with all ages. Deirdre is linked with an art teacher in Cape Breton (whose ancestors travelled on the Hector one of the first boats to travel to the area from Loch Broom.)

Deirdre knitted an array of birds identified on Handa from natural material's found on the island. *“I discovered that there was an albino bird on Handa at one time. I could make an albino oystercatcher from the cream wool spun from the cheviot sheep for this. A twisted red bill and pink legs from twine and fishing line would be a good contrast... it will also be a good odd bird to put in amongst the others, perhaps to represent the queen of Handa.”*

*I was interested to know more about the use of feathers at that time and found an article relating to feathers and bird killing at Lundy Island. I had also read that in Handa they used fulmar oil in lamps.*

*In the late 1800's, fashionable ladies' hats were adorned with lacy feathers called plumes' in 1816, 379 pounds of feathers were plucked by the women, 24 puffins yielding one pound of feathers' 'Auks are the most profitable, twelve of them producing one pound of feathers after being plucked they are skinned; these skins are boiled in a furnace for the oil they yield, which is used instead of candles'*



IMAGE 258 THE KNITTED BIRDS OF WEAVERS BAY

An exhibition of the work by Deirdre and the children of Scourie Nursery, Kinlochbervie High School and the Primary schools of Scourie, Achfary, Kinlochbervie and Sydney, Cape Breton, called ‘birdies of weavers bay’, was held at Scourie Village Hall, Scourie, by Lairg on Saturday 25 November 2006 between 10am and 5pm.

### Ruth Macdougall



IMAGE 259 RUTJH MACDOUGALL

Ruth is from Glasgow and worked in Strathnaver based in Skerry. Ruth pursued to communicate the socio-political history of the site in a way that would empower the local community, identifying their relationship with the site and offering a site specific happening that would encourage a dialogue between past and present. Since graduating with a first class honours degree from the Glasgow School of Art Ruth has spent much of her time travelling, researching and collaborating on artistic projects, enabled by the British Airways Travel award she was given for her final degree show work. Ruth’s site-specific practice is intriguingly wide-ranging, but she has recently returned to photography and performance-to-camera. *“My residency in MacKay country is based on local history as told through the story telling and bardic tradition of the area. Before arriving here I knew little of Eilean Nan Ron (Island of the Seals) but have since found myself completely seduced by the stories that surround the island and its inhabitants. Ideas of territory, Utopia and its impossibility have emerged time and again in my work and there is certainly an element of the Utopian in the stories that I have heard of The Island. Over the next three months I intend to develop a site specific work that will both communicate the sentiment and culture of the area whilst opening up a new dialogue between island and mainland, past and present.”*

## Norman Gibson



IMAGE 260 ARTS COORDINATOR NORMAN GIBSON WITH JOANNE KAA RUTH MACDOUGALL AND DEIRDRE NELSON

To liaise with the organising group in order to direct the programme of residencies that are site specific and to ensure artistic excellence and exhibition/event presentation with professional assistance to the artists Norman Gibson was appointed as arts coordinator for the project. Norman is a Sculptor and designer with a thematic focus on landscape, archaeology and visual memory.

### **Final Report and Evaluation**

Norman Gibson, Arts Coordinator

Eight candidates were selected for interview from a high-quality field of seventeen applicants, one withdrawing shortly before the interviews took place (another opportunity taken up elsewhere). With a wide range of art forms and media on offer from the seven attending candidates, the interview panel was presented a considerable challenge to decide on the most appropriate trio relative to the outlined brief. In the end, the three successful artists were Joanne Kaar from Dunnet Head, Ruth Macdougall and Deirdre Nelson from Glasgow, all three having offered excellent presentations and an impressive range of experience to bring to the project.

From the outset, all three artists had a broad idea of their preferred areas within Mackay Country and their distinctive potential for research and creative output. In due course, the choices were all confirmed, though it took a little time and initiative to finally settle on accommodation and work spaces. Joanne was located in the community house at Bard Terrace in Durness, her living quarters being on the village campsite for the whole period, first under canvas and latterly in a caravan. Ruth was accommodated in Meg Telfer's Skerray studio space

and was resident in a comfortable croft house, albeit some fourteen miles distant from her workspace. Deirdre, after some early difficulties, was for most of the time installed in a cottage in Tarbet, this also providing her studio space.

It quickly became clear that each artist had taken on the residency challenge with enthusiasm, imagination and competence. A remarkable range of ideas emerged as each began to explore possibilities, not only at personal levels but also with local residents, with each other and with members of the Mackay Country project team - i.e. Ronnie Lansley, DDG Secretary, and Roxana Meechan, Arts Development Officer for Sutherland, Issie MacPhail, Cultural Researcher, and Norman Gibson, Arts Coordinator. The team, in turn, proved to be very willing to engage in numerous ways both practical and conceptual. Local residents too were quickly drawn into the frame after only a very few weeks and in many cases became increasingly and actively involved – not least via the programme of workshops in schools and studios.

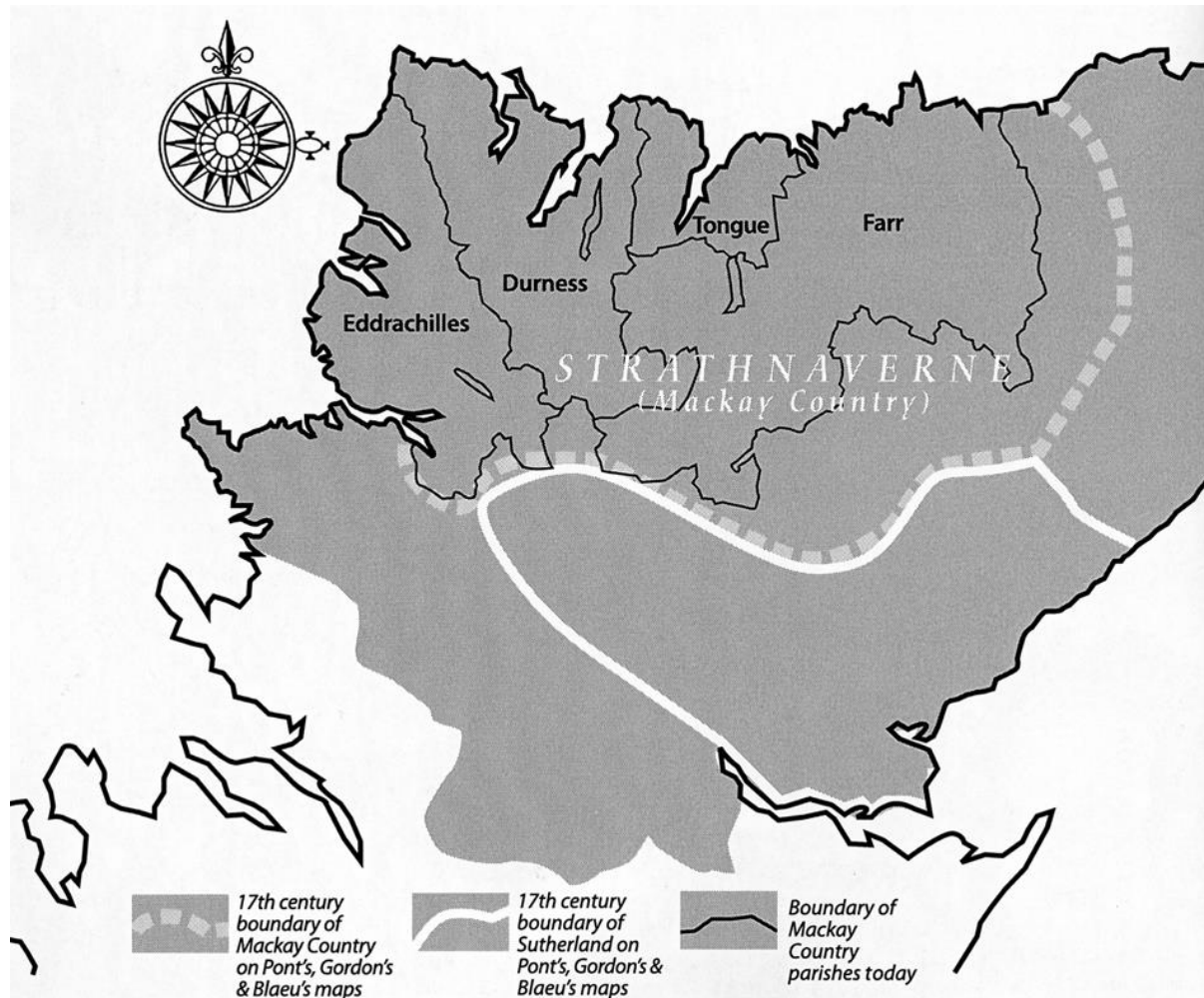
Over the entire period, the artists and the support staff achieved fairly extensive coverage of the project by way of intimations and articles sent to a range of newspapers, magazines, journals and websites. The artists also publicised their local exhibitions by way of well-designed and commercially printed graphics. Though personally dedicated websites did exist prior to the residencies, none of the artists had explored web-log facilities. Ever responsive to suggestion, however, each developed a blogpost and these proved to be a very effective means of documenting and communicating ongoing experience and the evolution of ideas. All three rapidly expanded their personal sites with a wide range of texts, images, reports, research and so forth.

Ronnie Lansley, overall manager of the project, was within reasonable distance of all three artists' communities and this, along with his extensive local knowledge, was of key importance to the practical success of the residency scheme. Community contact with the artists was achieved in each area by their own successful approaches and by ongoing dialogue between them and the DDG steering committee. Arts coordination was principally effected by a total of eleven visits to Mackay Country and by an almost daily traffic of online exchanges over six months.

By the end of her first month in residence, Ruth Macdougall had mounted an enjoyably intriguing story-telling gathering for her local community in the Skerray studio. In early September, Joanne Kaar and Deirdre Nelson arranged a 'meet the artists' evening in Balnakeil and this was well attended by a responsive audience. As clearly stated in the project brief, the artists were required to ensure that young people of the area would be actively involved: and, once schools were back in session, all three made successful arrangements to conduct workshops in their own areas. Moreover, individual exhibitions were mounted in each community at the end of the residencies. Each was distinctive and appropriate to the area of study and all were well received by both local people and visitors from further afield. It is possible that a joint 'show' will be staged in 2007. Details of all of these aspects are available in the artists' own reports to the Durness Development Group and to the Scottish Arts Council.

## Mackay Country

The name Mackay Country comes from the Gaelic place name which is still used by older generations and Gaelic speakers of any age – Dùthaich ‘Ic Aoidh, more formally, Mhic Aoidh. This translates in English as Mackay Country and comprises the communities in the North West corner of Sutherland in mainland Scotland. The civil parishes of Eddrachilles, Durness, Tongue and Farr make up Mackay Country today. Historically the actual boundaries have varied and at times reached as far south as Lairg. Mackay Country is a beautiful wilderness.



The two coastlines – north and west – provide a stunning landscape of dramatic cliffs and golden beaches, backed by rugged mountains and barren moorland. Sparkling rivers, scattered lochs and an abundance of wildlife are set in a vast space filled with clean, invigorating air. Most of the area is above 200m in height and much of the land is only capable of use as rough grazing. Only a limited proportion of ground can be used for production of anything other than a narrow range of agricultural products. Peatland accounts for a good percentage and most of the remainder is held under crofting tenure.

Mackay Country, Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh, has always been within the medieval province of Strathnaver, comprising present-day northern Sutherland and was a focus for settlement through the centuries of Viking activity and Norse colonisation.

### Introduction

While working on projects associated with Durness it became very apparent that a small village with a low population density could not operate independently from the wider locality. There



was historical connections both recent and ancient that were impossible to ignore. An aspect of this recent link was the schooling situation. Until Kinlochbervie High School opened in 1995 secondary pupils from North West Sutherland all attended Golspie High or Dornoch Academy hostelling on the east coast. People knew others from around the county and life time connections were established. This ceased and obvious results ensued. Knowledge of others and the social interactions was leading to less coherent community interconnections. In early 2000 there was still many people throughout the area of Mackay Country that were linked and our projects highlighted this. As the years passed the remembered connections and the collective memory was beginning to fade.

Mackay Country today has a population of 2,600 people and, at less than one person per square kilometre, has one of the lowest population densities in Western Europe. In development industry terms this area is defined as 'fragile'. The average household size is 2.2 persons; 48.7% of the population is aged 45 years and over; total population and school rolls are falling and household incomes are c. 17% below the Scottish average. The nature of the local economy is well illustrated by the fact that Durness, the most northerly civil parish on the Scottish mainland, has a self-employment rate of 20% compared to an average for Highland Region of 10%.

It was recognised that the communities of Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh formed a natural and effective unit. The Mackay Country Project was the result. A start was made by creating a marketing project and a research project. Through the marketing work, marker stones have been erected at all the Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh gateways. The aim is to build the Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh regional identity for visitors and for local folk too. A video project has been carried out. This has involved taking video footage of key landscapes and events across Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh.

## **Language**

Mackay Country has roots steeped in the unique culture of The Highlands and much of that is founded in Gaelic, the old Celtic tongue of the Scots. Gaelic place names tend to give a description of the place and what went on there. Despite being Scotland's oldest living tongue and the region's historical mother tongue up until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Gaelic has undergone a series of repressive measures from medieval times. Despite this adversity, it has survived rather than flourished and it is only within the last few decades that a Gaelic revival has been to the fore and some progress has been made towards not only its rehabilitation as a national language but also the rich heritage connected with one of Europe's oldest tongues. There are still quite a number of Gaelic speakers in the area. The richness and vitality of Gaelic culture is amply found in music, song, poetry, oral tradition, visual arts and crafts and more recently in the media. There is no doubt English is the prominent language in the area today and it is spoken with different accents and brogue throughout Mackay Country as is Gaelic and discussions and debate continue about the different accents, pronunciations and intonations. Some proclaim Mackay Country has its own Gaelic. An interesting conversation was recorded between Dr. Ellen L. Beard and Dr. Alastair Mearns, about Mackay Country Gaelic.

Before 1600 the written language in Highland Scotland and Ireland was a strict standard called Classical Gaelic. The Gaelic language was present in western Scotland by 500AD and spread north and eastwards until, by the 11<sup>th</sup> century, it was the dominant tongue from Caithness to Cumbria. Since the reign of James VI (1567-1625) governments in Edinburgh and London have regarded Gaelic as 'barbarous' and threatening and sought to attack it in various ways, most notably through education. These policies have contributed directly to its decline. In 2001 the UK officially recognised Gaelic under the terms of Part III of the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. In addition to its linguistic importance, it represents a

distinct cultural identity and a way of life in many instances relating in particular to crofting. Recent years have witnessed a revival of interest in Gaelic as shown, for example, by the popularity across the country of Gaelic music groups such as "Capercaillie" and "Runrig". The revival of interest in learning language is reflected in the number of playgroups, schools and adult education classes. In March 2010 Mackay Country Community Trust Ltd commissioned a report and analysis by Dr. Isobel MacPhail, for exploring Gaelic past and present in the North West Mainland towards producing a local Gaelic action plan.

*Local Gaelic – some thoughts....*

*“When I left, in Kirtomy they spoke Gaelic. In Bettyhill they didn’t. Today they would have said it’s not cool, you know, to do that. So when you came to school in Bettyhill, oh, there was something funny about you because you spoke Gaelic. So, when you went home, they still spoke to you in Gaelic, you met the mannies and the wifies on the road and you answered them in English, and that became the norm – answering in English. It took me years to realise that it was so foolish to be like that, and then we had this thing of course because it was north coast Gaelic it wasn’t right. If it wasn’t Lewis Gaelic it wasn’t right.”*

*“I think there’s quite a good upsurge in it now, and schools are paying a bit more attention. It won’t die. It’ll be a different Gaelic here, it’ll not be the Gaelic of my childhood that’s already been talked here. There’s things I might say to some of these kids that are learning Gaelic that they wouldn’t know what the words meant, that we have lost, probably. The local Gaelic because even between Melness and Kirtomy there was a difference and Durness. But as long as it’s in it at all, that’s what’s important.”*

*“There’s been no Gaelic in Scourie since the 1872 Education Act. The teacher didn’t like Gaelic and he beat it out of us.”*

The arrival of the Norse, first as Vikings and later as settlers in the late first to early second millennium A.D., also must have affected the language, culture and perhaps well-being of the native Pictish population.

Northern Times April 29, 1966

*One “Gaelic only” in 1961. Is this man still alive?*

*In Sutherland in 1961 there was one person (male) who spoke Gaelic only, he lived in the parish of Eddrachilles. That is recorded in a leaflet (just issued by the Registrar-General) as a supplement to the Gaelic report of the 1961 Census which was published last February. Is this- Gaelic speaker still about?*

*The figures are for the population aged three and over, and the highest percentage for those speaking both Gaelic and English in Sutherland in that year goes to the parish of Stoer in Assynt— 77.6 per cent. Out of 103 males and 98 females the respective figures for those speaking both languages were 83 and 73. Next highest percentage was 50.1 for Eddrachilles, where 181 males and 168 females spoke in Gaelic and English. The percentage for Durness was 41.9, while that for Tongue was 45.4.*

*Golspie village, with 522 males and 585 females, had a percentage of only 9.5 speaking both languages. Of the east coast villages Rogart had the highest percentage 12.6.*

*The percentages for districts (for speaking both Gaelic and English) are:-Assynt 47.1, Dornoch and Creich 13.3, Eddrachilles and Durness 47.4, Golspie, Rogart and Lairg 10.8, Kildonan, Loth and Clyne 6.2, Tongue and Farr 36.2. For the county as a whole the percentage was 18.8 (1177 males and 1244 females), for the Burgh of Dornoch 5.6 (9 males and 42 females) and for the landward area of the county 19.8 (1,168 males and 1,202 females).*

Gaelic from Statistical Account by the Rev. William Findlater, Minister. 1845.

With the exception of eight families from the south of Scotland, all the natives speak Gaelic. Though a considerable proportion of the young can speak English, yet very few are able to follow out or understand an English sermon. Indeed, even those who speak and understand the English well, always prefer the Gaelic services. Whether this predilection arises from early associations, the influence of habit, or the greater ease, familiarity, and simplicity in the style of the speakers, they think themselves more edified by discourses in that tongue. It cannot be said, however, that the Gaelic language is spoken with such emphasis and purity in this country as in some parts of the western Highlands; and, though it has been a good deal corrupted by the younger people who now speak English, it has not lost much ground.

### **Literature**

The Highlands have a long association with literature. The earliest records of a sustained body of work are in Gaelic, including verse and devotional works. Gaelic prose developed as a direct result of the Bible being available in the language. Literature in English became available in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Gaelic poetry survives. The most noticeable from Mackay Country is Rob Donn Mackay. Vernacular Gaelic prose is based on biblical translations. The Highlands became popular as a location for literature through the work in English of Sir Walter Scott.

### **Highland Dress**

The kilt has its origins in the Feileadh Mor, the big kilt, otherwise known as "the belted plaid." It was formed from a single piece of material, pleated round the waist and tied with a heavy belt. This allowed freedom of movement for battle yet could form a cloak or blanket when sheltering. This has changed since it was the outfit of the clansman on the highland moor, to become a recognisable and respected symbol the world over. After Culloden in 1746, the kilt was banned in the Highlands until 1782, except in highland regiments. They won much acclaim through the bravery of their soldiers in service of the Empire. German soldiers in the First World War, dubbed Highlanders "The ladies from Hell". In 1822, Sir Walter Scott popularised Highland dress for King George IV's reception in Edinburgh. Highland dress became the national costume of Scotland. The idea of Clan tartan dates from this period.

Highland women, in this ancient period, wore an arisaid, a hooded full-length cloak, gathered at the waist and fastened by a belt. It was made of undyed wool.

### **Culture, Heritage, Tradition**

Scotland is a mixture of many cultural backgrounds, but it is the Celtic influence on its people that is perhaps the best well known. Celtic mythology and traditions can still be found today. Custom holds a deep fascination and people are drawn to Scotland by the image of pipers, fairy-tale castles, Highland games, misty mountains, tartan and heather, the presentation of Scotland to the outside world as an imaginative and dreamlike place. This imagery conveys the origins of Scottish heritage and the role it has played. There is no shortage of Scottish iconography. It is overwhelming. It appears in films, novels, poems, paintings, photographs, operas and music.

*“Heritage is bound up with culture and identity and heritage means all aspects of human life which contribute to make Mackay Country what it is. Heritage is thoroughly a modern concept, which belongs to the final quarter of the twentieth century and could be called the ‘cult of the past’.*

Strictly speaking, heritage refers to ‘*what has been or may be inherited, anything given or received to be a proper possession.*’ But the notion of heritage has been extended. The national heritage is no longer merely a matter of ‘*cold stones or exhibits under glass in museum*

*cabinets. It includes the village wash-house, the little country church, local songs and forms of speech and skills.* ' It comprises the valued legacy of previous generations, items from the past that embody tradition and which are an important source of national or local identity.

### **Mystical Beliefs**

Home to the world's most famous lake monsters, the Highlands' other paranormal aspects can sometimes be overlooked though much of the region's mythology centres on the lochs and their occupants, be they ghostly or crypto zoological. Myths and legends are as rooted in the Highland psyche as the mountains, straths, waters and stones are in the terrain. The land is something one reads, contemplates, and studies. Out of those studies comes folklore, a product of the climate, centuries of clan isolation, and oppression. These tales worked to explain sorrow and misfortune and equipped residents with power over their ever-changing foreign enemies, their own environment, and, too many times, each other. This outward search reflected an inward scrutiny of an interior geography: who and what is man, how to explain life's mysteries, and most important where to find power. The environment was explored for spiritual insight. Even with the advent of Christianity, the powers of the other world superstition, fairies, the gift of second sight, and the ability to control weather didn't evaporate; only the perception of these supernatural manifestations changed. Perhaps Christianity was readily accepted because the Highlanders already believed the invisible world more real, more powerful, than the visible. Much of Highland myth and folklore descended from the Celts and Picts who inhabited this part of Scotland. These deeply mystical people were guardians of sacred stories and traditions through which beliefs and supernatural gifts were transported from generation to generation. The Picts laid the foundation for the environmental sensitivity that is at the cultural heart of the Highlanders' past and present.

### **The People**

Modern-day Scots are the product of an age-old ethnic blend. The original Picts mixed with successive invaders, Celts, Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Scandinavians, Normans and each group has left its mark on the national culture and they cling tenaciously to the distinctions that also differentiate them region by region their customs, dialects and the Gaelic language. Scots can be dour but equally they can flash with inspiration. Most all Scots delight in self-deprecating humour and continue to honour their tradition of hospitality. Scots have long been noted for their frugality, which they have exaggerated and turned into jokes about themselves. But perhaps the best-known feature of Scottish society through the ages is that of the clans, groups of families sharing a common ancestor and the same name. Many Scots still feel strong kinship with their clan, and many Scottish traditions have their origins in that system. Scots are a gregarious people and enjoy company, whether this be in a small group in the local pub, or at a Ceilidh (which means literally, a "visit".)

## **Mackay Country Area Profile**

### **Fragility**

Across the Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Highland Region areas, a range of aspects characteristic of fragile rural areas are regularly examined to establish the relative fragility of each sub area.

The seven indicators used by Highland Council are:

1. Population density, by Highland Council settlement zone.
2. % population change between 1981, 1991, by Highland Council settlement zone.
3. % change in population aged 0-15 years, between 1981, 1991, by Highland Council settlement zone.
4. % people aged over 18 claiming income support, by 1996 Ward
5. % of long term unemployment, by District Ward
6. 10 minute drive time to 5 key services, PO; Food Shop; GP; Primary school; Petrol facility
7. Areas out with 1.5 hr drive time of Inverness

HIE uses a slightly different method of ascertaining fragility, but the same core areas emerge as most fragile. HIE uses the following to define fragility:

#### **Geographic**

- Islands which lie off other islands and are not linked by a causeway
- A distance of more than 50 miles from a population centre of 5000
- Over 70% of roads are single track

#### **Demographic**

- Islands with a population of less than 2,500
- Population density less than the HIE area average (9 persons per square kilometre)
- More than 20% of the population is of pensionable age
- Population loss between last two censuses
- In-migration of economically active below the HIE average

#### **Economic**

- Economic activity rate below the HIE area average
- High average and/or seasonal unemployment
- Long term unemployment more than 25% above the HIE average
- dependency on primary sector employment
- 

### **Demography**

At the time of the 2001 Census there were 1,187 households in Mackay Country and a population of 2,596 compared to a population of 2,717 at the time of the 1991 Census. About 57% of the population live in Tongue and Farr and the remaining 43% live in Eddrachilles and Durness. Durness and Eddrachilles have a population of 1,105 in 471 households while Tongue and Farr have a population of 1,491 in 716 households. During 2001 23% of the Mackay Country population were born outside Scotland and just over 10% of the population could 'speak, read or write Gaelic' compared to a Highland average of 7.5% and a Scottish average of 1.4%. In Tongue and Farr a slightly higher proportion – just over 12%, could 'speak, read or write Gaelic'.

The age structure in Mackay Country is older than the regional average although this is more marked in Tongue and Farr. The table and graph below show the pattern at settlement zone scale. Some 67% of the population are in the 'economically active' age range which is similar to the Highland pattern.

#### Population by Area

Area	Population 1991	Population 2001	Households
<i>Mackay Country</i>	<b>2717</b>	<b>2596</b>	<b>1187</b>
Eddrachillis & Durness	1120	1105	471
Tongue & Farr	1597	1491	716
Melvich	541	525	251
Bettyhill & Farr	553	516	253
Altnaharra	58	42	18
Tongue	445	408	194
Durness	353	353	154
Kinlochbervie	464	480	197
Achfary	53	64	22
Scourie	250	208	98

#### Age Structure (%) – 2001 Census

Age Structure 2001 Area	% in Each Age Group						
	0 - 4	5 - 14	15 - 24	25 - 44	45 - 64	65 - 74	75+
<i>Highland</i>	5.4	12.9	10.6	27.4	27.1	9.3	7.3
Mackay Country	4.5	13.8	7.8	25.2	29.7	10.5	8.5
Melvich	4.2	12	9	24.2	31.4	10.7	8.6
Bettyhill & Farr	3.1	10.3	7.6	21.9	32.2	12	13
Altnaharra	4.9	14.8	7.4	25.3	28.4	12.3	6.8
Tongue	2.9	11.7	6.8	22.4	26.2	15.9	14
Durness	4.8	13.9	8.5	25.2	31.2	9.1	7.4
Kinlochbervie	5.5	16.8	9.4	25.9	28.9	7.2	6.3
Achfary	5.6	17.5	7.5	26.3	31.9	6.9	4.4
Scourie	5.1	13.2	6.9	30.6	27.3	9.7	7.2

#### Housing

In Eddrachilles a very high percentage of the housing stock is second homes or holiday homes. Across Mackay Country the proportion is on average 18% but ranges between 24.4% in Achfary, 23% in Tongue and 11% in Melvich.

Percentage of housing stock which is holiday home or second home from the 2001 census

Area	% of Second / holiday homes
<i>Highland</i>	6.2
<i>Mackay Country</i>	<u>19.4%</u>
Melvich	11.2
Bettyhill & Farr	17.9
Altnaharra	18.5
Tongue	23.3
Durness	15.8
Kinlochbervie	20.7
Achfary	24.4
Scourie	23.6

## Economy

Figure 1 below shows the main categories of economic activity and the proportion of the economically active population working in each sector. Table 6.6 shows the percentages by settlement zone. In the region of 16% of people are self-employed in Mackay Country compared to a Highland average of 10%. This is typical of remote rural areas where people often make ends meet through a range of jobs and self-employment. In Durness over 20% of working people are self-employed. Many people have more than one job and incomes and employment in tourism related activities is very seasonal.

Eddrachillis and Durness are much more dependent on fishing and fish farming than Tongue and Farr. In Tongue and Farr the influence of proximity to Thurso and Dounreay can be seen in the proportion of people employed in energy, construction and health and social work.

## Crofting

There are 706 crofts and some 478 crofters in Mackay Country. About 40% of resident households have a croft but absentee rates are as high as 33%.<sup>88</sup> Returns from agriculture have been falling in recent years. It is likely that CAP reform will put further pressure on crofting agriculture since small scale production will struggle to survive under new market conditions despite production of good quality, hardy animals through low intensity methods. Crofting remains a mainstay of Mackay Country communities in terms of social cohesion, communal working and cultural contribution, including maintaining the Gaelic language.

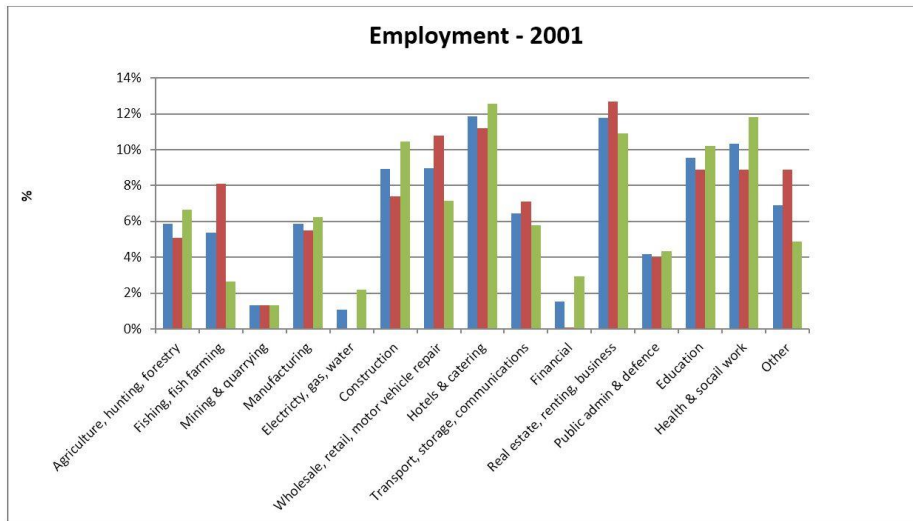
## North West Sheep and Cattle Numbers

Source: SEERAD – June Returns

Cattle & Sheep		EDDERACHILLIS		DURNESS		TONGUE		FARR		
		Units	Number	Units	Number	Units	Number	Units	Number	
<b>YEAR</b>		12	66	9	275	29	523	63	1,369	
	1985	Total Cattle								
		Total Sheep	71	9,300	37	19,400	76	15,228	156	50,072
	1986	Total Cattle	12	75	7	211	31	568	61	1,360
		Total Sheep	70	8,915	38	19,398	77	16,205	157	50,895
	1991	Total Cattle	24	173	18	365	45	923	120	2,868
		Total Sheep	154	25,395	90	42,139	167	34,317	335	100,562
	1995	Total Cattle	10	130	8	55	28	504	62	1,453
		Total Sheep	52	10,602	35	19,843	80	15,841	162	47,568
	1996	Total Cattle	10	112	8	176	29	475	59	1,424
		Total Sheep	52	9,828	36	19,654	80	16,479	155	49,126
	2000	Total Cattle	12	135	*	*	29	527	50	1,324
		Total Sheep	52	11,688	28	17,555	67	15,789	137	50,747
	2001	Total Cattle	13	154	*	*	28	529	48	1,244
		Total Sheep	53	12,757	28	16,546	66	15,613	128	46,313

<sup>88</sup> P1 I MacPhail 2001 NWCPA Feasibility Study

Figure 1 Employment by Category – 2001 census



Employment by Settlement Zones – (%) 2001

Employment	Agriculture, hunting, forestry	Fishing, fish farming	Mining & quarrying	Manufacturing	Electricity, gas, water	Construction	Wholesale, retail, motor vehicle repair	Hotels & catering	Transport, storage, communications	Financial	Real estate, renting, business	Public admin & defence	Education	Health & social work	Other
Highland	3.7	1.4	1.3	9.1	1	9.2	14.7	9.3	7.1	2	9.9	6.8	6.6	12.4	5.3
Mackay															
Country	5.88%	5.39%	1.31%	5.85%	1.08%	8.91%	8.98%	11.85%	6.45%	1.52%	11.79%	4.16%	9.55%	10.32%	6.90%
ED	5.10%	8.10%	1.30%	5.50%	0%	7.40%	10.80%	11.20%	7.10%	0.10%	12.70%	4%	8.90%	8.90%	8.90%
IF	6.65%	2.65%	1.32%	6.22%	2.17%	10.45%	7.15%	12.55%	5.80%	2.95%	10.92%	4.35%	10.22%	11.80%	4.87%
Melvich	3.8	2.3	1.9	11.3	1.4	13.1	2.8	6.1	2.8	4.2	17.4	6.6	8.9	12.2	5.2
Bettyhill & Farr	9.8	0.5	0.9	6.5	2.3	9.3	6	8.4	9.8	1.9	12.6	3.3	12.6	11.2	5.1
Almaharra	7.8	2.6	1.3	2.6	2.6	10.4	11.7	22.1	2.6	2.6	7.8	3.9	10.4	9.1	2.6
Tongue	5.2	5.2	1.2	4.5	2.4	9	8.1	13.6	8	3.1	5.9	3.6	9	14.7	6.6
Durness	6.8	4.9	0.6	10.5	0	10.5	8.6	11.7	8	0	10.5	2.5	12.3	9.9	3.1
Kinlochbervie	4.3	9.7	1.6	2.5	0	5.2	17.4	12.2	4.1	0.4	9.4	4.6	10.4	11.2	6.9
Achfary	3.6	2.4	1.2	3.6	0	3.6	7.2	9.6	4.8	0	22.9	4.8	7.2	7.2	21.7
Scourie	5.8	15.5	1.8	5.3	0	10.2	10	11.1	11.5	0	7.8	4	5.6	7.1	4



## Mackay Country Village Halls

Village halls are the backbone of many communities and without this facility many would have no village hub to run events. In September 2008 CVS North ran a village hall seminar for the halls in North West Sutherland.

### Armadale



IMAGE 261 ARMADALE VILLAGE HALL

The only public building in Armadale, the Hall was built in the 1930's, Corrugated iron box profile on new build, metered electric wall heaters. In 2018 moves were underway for restoration of Armadale Village Hall and a new hall was opened 2021.

### Tongue



IMAGE 262 TONGUE VILLAGE HALL

Tongue Village Hall was built in the 1950's/60's and is run by a committee of volunteers for the community of Tongue. It is situated on a side road off the A835, opposite the Primary School. Tongue Village Hall also hosts events and aims to be an important focal point for the local community. Recent costs showed around £150,000 to extend the building but this was very limited due to lack of ground nearby. Disabled access has recently been

installed. Annex to the school because of close proximity it includes the nursery which has its own room. The kitchen is in good state due to recent refurbishment but poor storage facilities.

## Melness



IMAGE 263 MELNESS VILLAGE HALL

The building is an old school leased from Highland Council. The building consists of a main hall smaller than single badminton court, toilets, kitchen, store, meeting room. The house attached to the hall is in disrepair but not owned by the same people. A structural engineer's inspection gave the building a sound report, however there is extensive renovation work to be done and demolishing of ruined outbuildings.

### **Melness Hall<sup>89</sup>**

*At present the building is used as a community centre where social events are held also Gaelic classes badminton etc. It has replaced the old hall which was used before then but has since been demolished. The hall was given to the people of Melness by the estate in 1912. It was built of good solid timber with an excellent dance floor although it lacked the amenities of the present day. However when functions were held the ladies of the community used their resources to provide tea they were favorite to have an American stove in the reading room which was used.*

*There was always an ample supply of sandwiches homemaking which ensured everybody enjoyed a good tea those functions were well supported from tongue scanner and durness when weather conditions were favorable. Music was usually supplied by the locals who contributed by playing accordion fiddle or a piper who usually opened the function. After the war when the men came home the late Donnie Campbell from Hope and Joseph Mackay Talmine formed their own band .the Melness Band as it was called was very popular in the neighboring villages as well and in 1959 they pleaded to ceilidh in Melness which was broadcast on the radio and*

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<sup>89</sup> This is information submitted by Christine Mackay in 1987 to a government sponsored project.

*a great success it was. One gentleman over 70 years of age sang a song his father had written about the islands.*

*Wedding receptions were also held in the hall until war broke out and food rationing began the last wedding reception to take place there was in 1950. Burrs of Tongue did the catering and made the wedding cake. Drink was not too easy to acquire in those but the bride and groom managed to get a barrel of beer from Tongue Hotel also whisky, port, and Sherry. Looking back I suppose it could be said that it was the last wedding where all the drink was free, the wedding proved to be a great success and was greatly appreciated in austere times. As time went on and not enough money for improvements the hall began to deteriorate and with the closing of Melness School it was decided to use the building for a community centre and demolish the hall. This saddened many villagers who had so many happy memories of the old hall but there has to be changes not always good. The down grading of the school in 1972 was a great shock to the parents and though they petitioned against it supported by a former master Mr. Birnie it was of no avail the school the church and the hall were the centre of the village life and it took some time to adjust.*

### **Bettyhill**



IMAGE 264 BETTYHILL VILLAGE HALL

Rebuilt in 1970's, well used despite school nearby. Bad acoustics, baffle boards fitted. Extension put on for storage. Hoping to build new enlarged hall on same site. Difficulty with parking. Temperance hall – written in constitution.

## Kinlochbervie



IMAGE 265 KINLOCHBERVIE VILLAGE HALL

The deterioration of the hall has been very marked over the last few years. The hall is an essential building to the community built over 30 years ago and in 2018 a refurbish and renovate project was undertaken to revamp, modernise and improve. The uses of the facility has changed over the years and to ensure this resource meets the need of a multifunctional hub.

### Scourie

The hall was built in the 1950's with house attached. Revamped about 25 years ago and the house sold. Meeting room and kitchen in good condition and old bank room now a store. Hall was brought to required standard for entertainments license. Recently bought new tables and chairs, toilets improved, new windows fitted, disabled access funded from Lotteries, still requires new doors. Cupboard space has been improved for storage.

<sup>90</sup>According to the school log book there was no public hall in Scourie in 1905 and dances were held in the school. Then the school board decided to close the school against dancing classes and when a concert is held the performance should be over by midnight. It was probably then that the people started to use the library for dances. People remember that the musicians of the time had to play two or three times for dances such as the eight some reel so that everyone who wanted to get a chance to dance. It was at such dances that some of the money needed to build the hall was raised. The late Mrs Muriel Homes nee McDonald of the Shieling and Mr Alexander Mackay spearheaded the fundraising activities and gathered donations. The hall which was opened about 1927 was built by masers Cowieson of Glasgow and cost about £500.

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<sup>90</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

Councillor Rory McLeod thought to be from Assynt was guest artist at the opening concert and he was said to have been resplendent in full highland dress for the occasion.

Scourie hall annex known as the library was at one time the parochial school of scary possibly



IMAGE 266 SCOURIE VILLAGE HALL

before 1840 and was still used as a female sewing school for a number of years after the present school was built in 1866. In the statistical report of 1840 there is reference to a reading club having recently been established in Scourie so it is quite likely that the one building was both school and library. Certainly from early the century people can remember it as a library or reading room Mr Morrison the keeper looked after the room and lit the fire every evening. In the early years some of the books had been gifted by Mr MacIver and his family and in 1929 Mr and Mrs Ashby gifted books to the library. No one is quite sure who Mr and Mrs Ashby wear by the general opinion as it were possibly regular guests at the hotel. By the time the hall was built and the committee looked after the library it is recorded in the minutes of the whole committee meeting of the 19th of October 1936 that Mrs Ross was appointed librarian. 100 books were ordered from books at 2 pound. However the wars saw the end of the library as such.

The first hall served the people of Scourie for over 50 years. The last function being a dance to end the Jubilee celebrations on June 6<sup>th</sup>. 1977. A new hall was built costing £32,000 and was officially opened by Mrs. Balfour in October 1977.

### **Melvich**

Built 1912 as a Drill Hall for British Legion. Owned by Hall Committee of 8 people for 15 years.

The Committee have plans for new hall on same site and engaged a professional fundraiser to this end. Estimate for re-vamp was £27,000 less than for a new build. Good kitchen, toilets, rifle range (used as a store) and some new tables and chairs.



IMAGE 267 MELVICH VILLAGE HALL

The Melvich Village Hall Association (MVHA) conducted a public consultation exercise in 2020. Early in 2021, Melvich Community SCIO (formerly Melvich Village Hall Association) received a report from a structural engineer and performed an options assessment in relation to the village hall. The result of this assessment was that the preferred option was to demolish the existing hall and replace it with another, either on the same site or elsewhere in Melvich. Melvich Village Hall has recently been demolished. Melvich Community SCIO are currently developing a plan for a new multi-functional multi-generational Hub facility for our community. The village hall had served the community well over for around 110 years however it was no longer suitable for use and it is time for a new facility. The old hall has been demolished

### **Centenary Tales of Melvich Hall**

By Tina Wrighton published by the John O’Groat Journal and Caithness Courier 19<sup>th</sup>. October 2012.

*What may now resemble a dilapidated blue tin shack in Melvich was once the heart and soul of a thriving north-coast community. Plans for building a new Territorial Army drill hall were passed in October 1911 with the hall officially opening the following year on March 22, reported by many to be the best social event ever held in the parish. The Groat reported on the hall opening, which was conducted by Colonel Morrison, MVO, Tongue, the following Friday. It said the hall, which was capable of holding 300 to 400 people and incorporated a shooting gallery and an ante-room, was "packed to its utmost capacity". Col Morrison said the setting up of the hall was due to the "patriotic spirit of the young men of the district".*

*Once the first and second world wars were over, it is believed local landowner Colonel Hartley donated the hall to the villagers. It's alleged when the army built the hall it was originally surrounded by decorative crazy paving but sadly this did not survive and is rumored to have disappeared "under a cloud"! The hall was used as the army cook house, where the boys would make huge slabs of Madeira cake for handing out to the villagers and when workers were staying in the village they used the sheds to the rear of the hall.*

*Melvich Village Hall was one of the key social venues dotted along the north Sutherland coastline, hosting many a lively ceilidh or concert. Dances were almost a ritual, with the local circuit stretching from Tongue, Skerray, Bettyhill, Armadale, and Strathy to Melvich and Halladale. Dances became even wilder when the construction of Dounreay started in the late '50s and early '60s as "atomic workers" from all over the UK arrived and buses were laid on to transport them west.*

*In the 1950s and '60s there were regular concerts, preceded by short sketches performed by the local drama group, with songs from the children's choir. Following an interval there would be a full play, after which the hall was cleared for the much-awaited ceilidh*

*Ground officer and master of ceremonies Jock Grant would often play the accordion, always well turned out and donning his favorite attire of tweed plus fours.*

*Many villagers have parents and generations before them who courted in the hall. Dances took the form of traditional social etiquette, where the men lined up on one side, with women forming a line against the opposite wall, waiting patiently to be invited for a dance. There was many a romance born on these evenings, as well as many a fight as warring clans settled their grievances. No alcohol was officially permitted on the premises, however, where there's a will there's a way and the thirst of the local lads was no exception. Men would carry half bottles stashed in their jacket pockets or they would hide them outside and pass the drink in through the windows.*

*However, it wasn't all about fun and frivolity. The hall served a crucial part in bringing the community together for important local events. The hall was home to a small-bore rifle range, a popular hobby for local men, both young and old. Darts and badminton were played and the local youth club and drama group would frequently meet. It housed the mobile dentist, sales of work, retail sales for local shop owners and stores selling their wares from further down the line. The church and football club sales of work were annual events and the Melvich and Portskerra WRI held its regular meetings. Melvich hall was also a monthly venue for the popular Inverness-based Highlands and Islands Film Guild, which toured Sutherland and Ross-shire and rural Inverness. A mobile projector and screen would be set up to show films of the '50s and '60s which were watched and enjoyed by local folk. The Pathe News, one of the oldest names in motion picture history, would also be regularly broadcast and, although slightly dated by the time it reached the north, it would be new news for villagers. It was also the resting place for bodies when lives were tragically lost at sea after boats crashed onto the unforgiving coastal rocks of Melvich and Portskerra. The hall was a training room for the Home Guard and the congregation point for the flag ceremonies for the nearby war memorial.*

*The small piece of land adjacent to the hall where the trees now stand was once covered in stock pens and used by local crofters for market fairs.*

*When the famous Pinder's circus came to town local men helped erect the giant tent on land opposite the school playing fields where houses now stand. Circus-goers were charged two shillings and six pence for entry and afterwards celebrations continued in the hall.*

*A lunch club would regularly meet in the hall where locals would gather for a scrumptious menu provided by the Dounreay canteen. Fundraising ceilidhs were very popular too, raising money for local senior citizens. Towards the end of the war there were dances to raise funds for loved ones and soldiers who were at long last returning home. The hall played a crucial role during Operation Snowdrop in the harsh winter of 1955 when it was used as a local food distribution point. The village was cut off following two severe snowstorms and RAF Shackleton planes were used to drop emergency supplies. Locals made drop-off points in the snow using sand and ashes and there are memories of tins of soup with a wick running through the middle which were lit so the soup was warm and ready to eat – as long as a box of matches could be found!*

*Melvich hall has survived many a big storm and has outlasted two of its neighboring halls at Strathy and Bettyhill, which were both destroyed in the storms of 1952 and '53 respectively. In the 1940s, Melvich became a bustling hub of modern industry under the charge of Willie MacAskill. It was taken over by hydro-electric workers from far and wide, with many coming from Ireland and moving into the village.*

*The installation of the first electric pylons, poles and lines began with the British Insulating Cable Company which operated from a wooden shed at the crossroads. The hall played host to a big celebration dance for switching on the power for the first time, with Melvich being one of the first villages in Sutherland, after Brora, to get electricity.*

*Travelling folk would often camp near the hall in front of Diamond Cottage and Nurse Keddie, a great aunt of Elizabeth Mackay, is known to have delivered a baby there.*

*Melvich hall was, until fairly recently, the polling station for the districts between Armadale and Forsinard and has housed many political addresses with political figures such as Sir Archibald Sinclair and Robert MacLennan. There are also reports former Prime Minister James Callaghan visited and addressed the community.*

*It's believed the original hall committee comprised the Fraser sisters from the Melvich Hotel; Lizzie Hamilton; Daggie and Dodo Mackay; Rena Mackay and Irene Fraser. John Mackay, Bighouse, and Miss Macintosh, the postmistress and owner of the Melvich Hotel, were the trustees, along with local schoolmaster William Macintosh.*

*In more recent years the hall has been home to whist drives, bingo nights, fun-filled kids' roller discos and birthday parties. On September 29, committee members organised a centenary dance which saw the hall filled for a night of dancing and fun, raising nearly £700 for the pot. In 2012, the new hall committee is doing all it can to revive use of the hall and is calling on locals to help support its survival. Claire Mackay, committee chairperson, explained: "It's a wonderful facility at the heart of our community, holding many wonderful memories of a time gone by, memories that so deserve to be kept alive.*

*"With having two brand-new halls recently built either side of Melvich it's difficult to justify dipping into the public purse once more for a new build, however, our hall deserves to be preserved for future generations to enjoy and we are asking the people of Melvich, Portskerra and the surrounding area to pull together to keep the hall going to be enjoyed today and for our children and grandchildren to enjoy another 100 years from now."*



## Strathy



IMAGE 268 STRATHY VILLAGE HALL

Opened in 1997, this well used hall was built thanks to the ten years of local effort to raise the £35,000 funds, a great achievement. Currently undergoing a program of insulation with funds from the Rural Services Priority Area Grant. Also upgrading of dressing rooms and kitchen. Hall is one badminton court size with fixed stage and storage underneath. Capacity for 300 people. Foyer/bar, toilets, meeting room, well used by regular groups. Managed to recruit younger people on to committee.

## Achfary

In 2003 Achfary celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Primary School and Village Hall. This is a very active community with all the activities centred on the village hall and the school. Very much part of the Westminster Estate.



IMAGE 269 ACHFARY VILLAGE HALL

## Strathnaver



IMAGE 270 STRATHNAVER VILLAGE HALL

Built in 1932 serving a population around 55 people. The Hall has lovely wood paneling however the hall's frame is beginning to rot. The kitchen and toilets also need attention. No disabled toilet. Oil filled radiators and walls have over-head electric heating. The committee of 8 or 9 are awaiting the surveyor for prelim survey to help decide on a new hall or preserve existing one? There is a Youth Room with computers. And the committee run Ceilidhs, sale of works, Christmas party and concerts and many other events.

## Halladale



IMAGE 271 HALLADALE VILLAGE HALL

Built in 1909, it is a structurally secure building. Trying to secure funding to make the building useable. Corrugated cladding on roof and walls, new windows, rones and downpipes, water ingresses and stove wall plates. Church, shared use for funerals and months with five Sundays for services. One of only fifty buildings in Scotland which is half house, half church. No one has lived on the premises for last three years. Applied to buy a 125 year lease. Listed B building with expensive renovation costs.

## Skerry



IMAGE 272 SKERRY VILLAGE HALL

Built in 1957. Recent improvements brought the facility to Public Entertainments standard. New curtains on the stage and windows. The kitchen has been recently modernised. Lovely comfy seating! Draft plans drawn to extend and improve toilets, storage and entrance area. Space is available. Main concerns, heating, insulation of roof and walls, storage, and electrical circuits. Asbestos and corrugated roof need to be changed

## **Community Buildings**

### **Farr Edge**

Farr Edge 2000 is a charity that promotes community and educational activities for young people of all ages. Our aim is to provide children of all ages a safe, warm and friendly environment to relax and socialise with their friends. This involves a number of community based initiatives including running workshops and groups for a range of young people of different ages, providing recreational and leisure facilities, kids clubs, youth clubs and sporting sessions and working with the youths to develop a local strategy that will meet their needs.

### **Bettyhill Swimming Pool**

Started being planned in the 1950's opened 1993. Now Operated by High Life Highland - North Coast Leisure Centre offers a state of the art fitness suite and swimming pool.

## **Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency**

During the winter (2009/2010), CVS North arranged for 17 community buildings in North and West Sutherland to be audited with a view to improving energy efficiency and incorporating renewable energy systems to provide heat or power. Most of the buildings are community halls, but the group included other buildings such as a pre-school building and a museum. A report was provided which includes recommendations based on an assessment of the building fabric; how the building is used; access to renewable resources such as wind and sun; and the practicality and potential costs and benefits that the proposed measures might bring.

### **Village Hall Seminar<sup>91</sup>**

From the sixteen village halls in North West Sutherland stretching from Lochinver to Melvich thirteen were represented at the Village hall seminar in Durness last Saturday. In March this year a national event was held in Avimore regarding the value and uses of Village halls in Scotland. It was apparent from this gathering that the different use standards and scales of halls throughout Scotland were vast. As there was only a very small representation from the North West CVS North contacted and visited all the halls in the area and estimated from the response that there was support for a North West Hall and community building seminar. The day started with an opening and welcome from the Chair of CVS North Kirsteen Mackay and was facilitated throughout the day by development Offers Frances Gunn and Ronnie Lansley. After a general introduction on the responsibilities of hall committees to fulfil the criteria for legislation, each hall was discussed in turn with their recent achievements, aspirations and concerns.

David Ingils gave a talk on his new post as licensing Officer for Sutherland and Caithness with specific reference to the guidance for voluntary organisations in the licensing (Scotland) act 2005. The alcohol licensing law in Scotland is currently changing, the process will be rigorous and applicants are encouraged to submit applications as early as possible especially for premises not recently licensed or where there might be public safety issues. David clarified many of the concerns and misunderstandings that have been created regarding the new Act.

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<sup>91</sup> Northern Times October 3<sup>rd</sup>. 2008

Guidance notes for completion of the application forms will shortly appear on the Highland Council's website. After lunch Mark Brennan from the Crofters Commission explained the work of Rural Direct service which will offers advice, support and technical expertise to help rural community access funding including the new Rural Priorities scheme. If communities want to refurbish village halls, develop new local services, or come up with a long-term plan for community development, then a new service run by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations and the Crofters Commission can help make the most of the funding programs that are available.

Jon Priddy explained the purpose in historical terms of the new company Community Energy Scotland. This agency is setting out to build confidence, resilience and wealth at community level through sustainable energy development. Its vision is of a self-financing community energy sector in Scotland underpinned by an extensive network of revenue-generating renewable energy projects. Jon explained in a concise presentation the process and assistance and service that can be obtained with funding for projects of all sizes.

The Highland Council were represented by Lawrence Jamieson Area Community Learning & Development Officer Caithness, Sutherland & Easter Ross and Andy Mackay ward manager for north and west Sutherland. Lawrence outlined the main source of Highland Council funding and 'Who's Who' in his department and where help can be obtained for village halls. An informative summary of a comprehensive handout entitled Capital Funding for Village Halls gave an informative insight into the process and requirements with sources of help for those seeking funds. Andy gave a synopsis of the ward discretionary budget held by the local councillors George Farlow and Linda Munro were present and apologies had been received from Robbie Rowantree, and the areas where help has been given and the priorities to the decisions on future funding.

Kirsty Bateson from K Bateson Consulting gave a presentation on effective fundraising covering how to present an idea to potential funders, writing a proposal and proper evaluation. The day was concluded with a demonstration of Funder Finder, an electronic software package that allows searching through grant giving trusts and organisations to match project proposals. This service is offered by CVS North. Christine Ross from Voluntary Groups – East Sutherland gave an outline of The Community Toolkit, a resource that has been developed for and with the help of community groups, to help improve skills and knowledge and bring benefits to local communities. There are guidelines on a range of topics, including setting up and running a community group, legal requirements, and good practice, planning and fundraising for a particular project and where to obtain useful statistical data.

Trina Hastings Development Officer from Voluntary Action Highland assisted CVS North by taking notes and information which will be used to further evaluate the day. It is planned to present the outcomes and findings in an information package that will be distributed to all those that attended and be incorporated in to CVS North website.

The first North west Sutherland Village Hall seminar, attended by forty people, was seen as very positive and gave opportunities to hear about everyone's plans and activities and despite the problems being encountered by the majority of halls – e.g. funding and committee recruitment, there was a very positive feel about the whole day and a willingness to work together, share information and good practice. There is a great diversity of type of building and state of the structures. It was clear that village halls in the area are all important assets to the communities and villages that they serve. Although changes in their uses have altered in recent years they were necessary for the ongoing stability of communities. Many were now identifying these new uses and how the facilities can be maintained and reorganised to meet the new demands.

## Mackay Country Community Trust



An organisation was created in the year 2000 by representatives from eleven key communities as a result of their work on cultural issues during The Dùthchas Project. The legal structure was established in 2007 and is a Company Limited by Guarantee registered in Scotland with Charitable Status. It was formed to manage the Mackay Country Project; an initiative started in Durness to bring together communities from across a wide region of over 1,200sq km formed from the 4 parishes of Eddrachilles, Durness, Tongue and Farr in the North West of Sutherland.

Seven community council areas were consulted and representatives from the areas formed the board. Board members brought a crucial set of skills and energy to the work of the organisation. Mackay Country's greatest strength was the large number of supporters and volunteers in each and every community. These were the people who come up with ideas about what they wanted to do and put their backs into making it happen. The group's formal aim as described in The Memorandum and Articles of Association was 'To provide a structure to allow the development of partnership between the communities and community groups operating in and comprising Mackay Country'.

Mackay Country encompasses some of the most fragile communities in the Highlands. The unique communities that inhabit Mackay Country share a pride in their heritage, a determination to build on the strengths of local culture, society and economy, and a desire to develop opportunities for viable community development. Mackay Country could be defined as a community of communities.

In 2020 discussion started to dissolve the charitable trust. Several factors made the company unsustainable. Mackay Country was operated solely by volunteers. There was no employed staff. Experts were commissioned during projects but no core funding was available. Profit making ventures were researched but none would allow an income to be produced that would be sustainable over a period. The ageing population and the commitment required was not viable. The structure had run its course and completed several successful projects leaving a valuable legacy. A partnership had been established with Strathnaver Museum and resources would be better directed to the foundation of ensuring Strathnaver Museum was continued to be recognised as the museum and heritage protector of Mackay Country. In 2021 Mackay Country Community Trust was dissolved and deregistered. The inherent challenges of succession, fund raising and ongoing overhead costs made the continuation unmanageable. The resolution was to transfer all the support and provision of the Mackay Country Trust to Strathnaver Museum.

### **Project Summary**

The projects are detailed in individual sections later in the publication.

**2002 Signage and Leaflet** A coordinated approach to identify and interlink the areas of Mackay Country. There are six road gateways into Mackay Country which we acknowledged with a subtle landmark that will in the first instance mark an entrance into somewhere that is conceived to be an area with an identity other than political and geographical. On Saturday May 8<sup>th</sup>. John Thurso MP agreed to unveil the first road gateway sign to Mackay Country on the Caithness and Sutherland border and a small buffet followed at the Strathy hall.

The first brochure was produced with a sample of what is to be found in Mackay Country, a wealth of diversity in culture, tradition and custom. Remote with a rugged beauty unspoilt by commercial development, a rich cultural heritage, internationally important habitats and wildlife in the open countryside come together in Mackay Country.

**2003 trip around Mackay Country** video and image gathering.

**2004 Back To the Future.** The aim was to find out what Mackay Country is today, what is was in the past and what local communities want it to be in the future. This work provided a way of shaping the future by looking at the past. A team of seven part-time staff and three core volunteers was created and given a year to gather together as much material as they could about Mackay Country. Their main task was to create a new visual and oral history record to complement written sources through audio recording, video, photography and the establishment of a Mackay Country wide photographic archive. A book *At Home in Mackay Country* is made up of contributions from a range of local people. Much of what you find here was also included in the events and exhibitions held right across the area. This book provides an account of some of the topics which have been explored in the course of the year.

Back to the Future represented a re-examination of the area's own history and landscape as "just as valuable as everyone else's". Seven researchers spread out across the townships of North West Sutherland gathering stories from communities across the region through archive searches, photo clubs, a photo voice project and oral history recordings, resulting in the creation of a digital archive incorporating 3500 images. What emerged from this research were the connections over the area throughout times of change.

**2005 Home Front.** This project ran from 2005 into spring 2006. It was focused on exploring the experiences of World War II in Mackay Country. The aim was to record the 'Home Front' memories of local men and women. We wished to record the memories of the part played by those on the home front during the war years, among them fire fighters, auxiliary services, Bevin Boys, estate workers, seamen, nurses and people in many other roles that were part of the community at that time.

**2005 MacKay Country Song** Wednesday the 27<sup>th</sup>. April the classes of primaries six and seven from the primary schools, Scourie, Achfary, Durness and Kinlochbervie were brought together at Kinlochbervie High School to record a song for Mackay Country. Words written by Mary Mackay were put to music by music teacher to the primary and secondary schools Brian Jones. The children have been practicing the song for several weeks and this was the first time they had been brought together to record the results. The children gave a stimulating performance and the finished result became part of the archive being compiled during the Back to the Future project.

**2006 Stories from the Flow Country** This work was commissioned by Scottish Natural heritage. The study provided a broad overview of the sorts of material available for use in interpreting the peatlands in Caithness and Sutherland. Some sources and stories are contemporary; others are very ancient and pre-date the Celtic church in origin.

**2006 Commissioning of 3 Artists** involved artists to work location specifically on three key sites of historical and scientific interest in Sutherland.

**2007 Summer in the Straths.** Within living memory men, women, children, grandparents, mothers, fathers, teenagers, toddlers, babies travelled across the north of Scotland making a living by pearl fishing, tin-smithing, horse dealing, buying, selling and bartering. Many people in Mackay Country can remember these visits when as children they all played together while the adults got together to do business, drink tea, talk, make music and barter food for goods and labour.

Up until the Second World War travelling families such as the Stewarts and the Williamsons brought skills, storytelling and a network of communication to the area. The arrivals of these families were remembered with fondness; greeted with celebration and anticipation. Summer in the Straths recreated the walks of travelling families in Mackay Country incorporating years of learning, of the crafts involved as well as the stories; willow and hazel cutting, tinsmithing and bough tent construction. Essie Stewart was a central part of the project and its authenticity, her childhood memories and life experience enabling these journeys in Mackay Country to be recreated.

The bough tent as a central space has subsequently been used for connecting with existing communities, cultural and heritage groups, holding ceilidhs, encouraging new and old stories to be told. Gaelic is used naturally and informally at these gatherings, as an integral part of the culture and heritage of Mackay Country. The bough tent has been invited to local galas, Highland Games and festival events further afield such as Belldrum, making new connections and promoting the area through stories, crafts and traditional skills. The Summer in the Straths project highlighted “*what people remembered, what they considered important and how this could be used*” to move forward.

**2008 Stories in the Straths.** In January 2008 we held the ‘Stories from the Straths events in Strathy, Achfary, and Lochinver. In each place we had an exhibition for a week showcasing the results of the work of the artists in residence who made The Summer in the Straths journey with us in May and June 2007. We had ceilidhs and storytelling and film nights. The schools from all around Tongue, Farr, and Assynt visited. The following elements were delivered in Durness and Belladrum in a series of activities over a total of 5 days:

Digital exhibition inside the bough tent

- Gaelic and English storytelling by travelers Essie Stewart (Belladrum) and Alec John Williamson.
- ‘The Original Recycling’ – tinsmithing demonstrations using old ‘bean tins’ showing that recycling was fundamental to traditional travelling tinsmiths and local households. Old tins are turned into tin mugs.

**2009 Roots and Boughs.** We were able to run a varied programme and maintain a profile.

- Held events in a range of very small communities which is important for the remote areas.
- Keeping people out with the area informed.
- We ran twenty two separate events from July to November, mainly in blocks of two or three days at a time with several different events.
- We provided seasonal exhibits to Strathnaver Museum.
- We collaborated on research and events with Durness Development Group on the Loch Croispol Project.
- We participated in Homecoming 2009.
- We experimented with merchandise sales and new products.
- New research on The Migrants – Armadale
- A total of 1,235 people attended events this year and a wide range of volunteers.



**2010 Exploring Gaelic Past and Present.** This work pioneered new action research methods, involved training a new fieldwork team to undertake research what was learned was being applied within other project work. An excellent paper was produced, a report and analysis by Dr. Isobel MacPhail. This research has revealed a far higher level of interest in Gaelic revitalisation in the North West than was anticipated. It has also revealed that there is a latent ability for Gaelic amongst lapsed native speakers and those who grew up hearing a great deal of Gaelic but have never used it to any great extent. Demand for access to Gaelic learning opportunities has been expressed by parents for their children but equally by the older generation keen to speak to each other or their grandchildren. Interest in using Gaelic for singing and exploring local poetry such as the work of Rob Donn was also mentioned frequently.

The questionnaire results showed that:

- 22 people in households and businesses were described as people who can speak, read or write Gaelic.
- 12 ‘native speakers’ were reported.
- 34 individuals were reported as wanting to learn.
- 9 were reported as being basic learners already.
- 4 were reported as learners at a moderate level and 1 at an advanced level.

**2011 To investigate the feasibility of social enterprise status** prepared by UHI Centre for Remote and Rural Studies. This study prepared a potential business plan and the ideas were cautiously put into practice but income streams with any dependency and availability of committed core funding was proving unachievable. Without a secure investment employing staff and initiating profit making ventures was to the directors unrealistic. Making large scale financial obligations with loans was not seen as a commitment they were able to undertake. The organisation has relied on Council of Voluntary Services North and its affiliation to a wider support network for both legal and financial advice, administration and management. With the move to becoming a social enterprise with trading activity and an expansion of delivery this would have to change. From this point Mackay Country Community Trust started to work more closely with Strathnaver Museum and integrate projects and actively support the plans for a major refurbishment of the Museum.

**2012 Moving Times & Telling Tales Education and migration in the north.** During this project we explored the history of hostel schooling, side schools and the positive contributions made by in-migration in this area principally focused on the period 1872 through to the 1990s. A book Research Matters was written and a DVD was created.

**2014 Cycling in the Straths.** Became an annual event. A weekend of cycling, highland hospitality and local entertainment. Arrivals enjoyed a relaxing evening sampling the hospitality on offer in the local hotels before the main event. Although the event was timed, it is not a race. Both routes will give riders a challenge with plenty of opportunity to demonstrate cycling skills and stamina. It is expected that both routes will be completed in five hours. Starting and finishing at Tongue Village Hall.

- Strathnaver Challenge – a 68-mile trip leaving Tongue towards Bettyhill, riders will then head inland through Strathnaver to Altnaharra, along Strath More and back to Tongue.
- Ben Hope Trial – a 48-mile route with riders starting and finishing in Tongue on a circuit via Altnaharra and Strath More.

Soup sandwiches tea coffees and plenty other light refreshments available on return. After the days cycling participants relax with live music in the local hotel. Cycling in the Straths wouldn't

happen without a wonderful team of friendly volunteers. From handing out food and drink at a feed station to registration, there are a number of volunteer roles.

**2015 Pibrochs and Poppies.** To mark the centenary of the First World War Mackay Country coordinated with Strathnaver Museum and Fèis air an Oir to explore the role of music during the Great War.



IMAGE 273 PIPER CAROL ANNE MACKAY FARQUHAR

**2016 Videos throughout Mackay Country** a series of twenty three short documentary type videos introduced and presented by Sarah Beveridge.

1. Alan Mackay on Eriboll
2. Altnaharra
3. Armadale
4. Balnakeil Craft Village potted history with an interview with Nicola Poole.
5. Bettyhill Gala
6. Broch
7. Cycling In the Straths 2017
8. Coldbackie
9. Durness
10. Introduction to Mackay Country filmed around the Gateways
11. Kinlochbervie
12. Kylestrome
13. Lotte Glob
14. Melness
15. Melvich
16. Sandra Munro on Strathnaver Museum
17. Smoo 1
18. Smoo 2
19. Smoo 3
20. Strathnaver Museum

21. Strathy
22. Tongue Fun Day
23. Tongue

**2017 celebration of renowned Gaelic bard Rob Donn.** Five Heritage projects were identified and received funding:

- **Threading Donn** created a community curated wall hanging. Volunteer participants created individual scenes from the life of Rob Donn which made up the final exhibits.
- **Re-Creating Donn** The project engaged ten diverse artists working in a range of media to celebrate the life and times of this talented poet.
- **Trailing Donn.** Nine interpretive panels in North West Sutherland at focal points on the A835 and a deviation into Strath More.
- **Tiling Donn** Lotte Glob and Martina MacLeod agreed to help in creating two ceramic wall plaques. Lotte directed five pupils from Kinlochbervie High and five pupils from Farr High Schools to join twenty invited adults to each produce a ceramic tile. Martina working with the art teachers of the six primary schools and asking every child in six primary schools to paint a ceramic tile 10x10 cms. based on their understanding of anything to do with Rob Donn.
- **Recording Donn** brought together several people with an interest and knowledge of Rob Donn. We have recorded some episodes on various topics related to the time, environment and work of Rob Donn in video and audio podcasts.

A bilingual book in Gaelic and English, The Rob Donn Trail: A Guidebook to the Past was written and published with chapters from,

- Dr. Ellen L. Beard, Rob Donn, his Neighbours, and his Editors
- Dr. Elizabeth Ritchie. Gaelic, Poetry and Music, Words, Ideas and Learning and Faith, Church and Morality.
- Dr. Malcolm Bangor-Jones, Cattle: An Economic Mainstay.
- Elizabeth Ritchie and Malcolm Bangor-Jones. Daily Life and Settlement History.

### **2018-2019 Accessing the Archive**

Mackay Country Trust and Strathnaver Museum have been working throughout the area known as Mackay Country amassing extensive and varied collections as they explore what life was like for people throughout the area. The groups plan to widen access to the vast research material. Practically all the material has been collected through photo voice events where over 40000 digital images, 2000 audio recordings and 2500 documents, 300 videos have been gathered.

Commercial alternatives have been researched and although there are different formats of database available they are not tailored to specific, most are adapted for particular uses, are held away from the locus on line, are expensive to join and high maintenance and fees and cater for specific as opposed to diverse. The small independent museum and community heritage trust with immense input from the general public as created a grass roots information source on a range of topics and this project will improve long-term sustainability and understanding of the collections.

A bespoke approach was required to structure a database and input the information in a retrievable form. The proposal was to recruit a team to evaluate the academic integrity, technical capability to structure a database, programming expertise to provide a cross reference

with secure access, computer literate personnel to input data with experience of working with the appropriate software for bulk naming, resizing, and scanning and assentation recording.

- To catalogue all the digitised material into themes.
- Database the material with appropriate metadata.
- Have academic scrutiny where appropriate of relevance.
- Build the technical aspects to provide front end searchable interface.
- Write computer programme to adapt Microsoft Access software for a bespoke use.

## Mackay Country Parishes

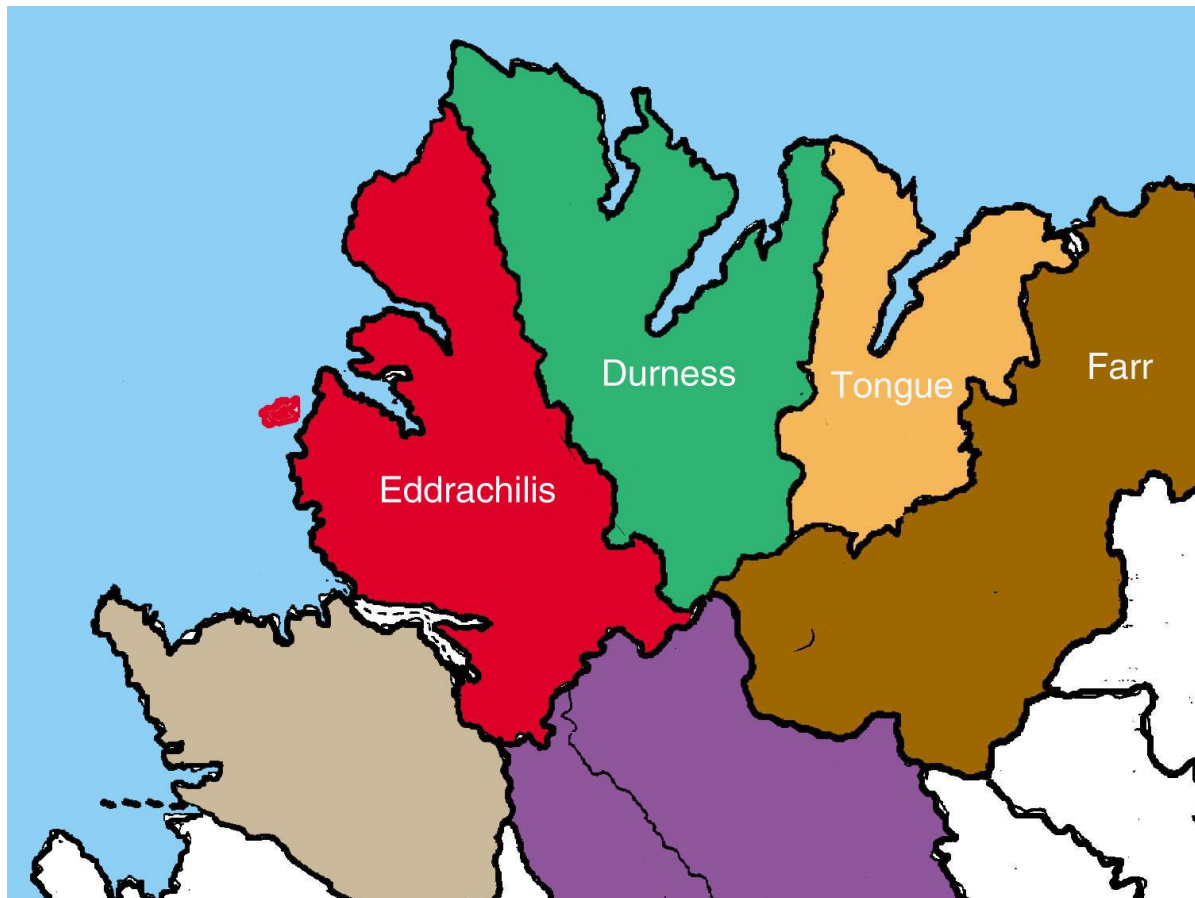


IMAGE 274 THE PARISHES OF MACKAY COUNTRY

<sup>92</sup>The country of Strathnaver in the shire of Sutherland lies on the N.W. sea coast of Scotland and is bounded on the East by Caithness by the ridge of a hill called Drumholiston and on the west by the Parish of Assynt which is separated from it by an arm of the sea of Killiscoug and is in length from east to west about 50 miles, the shortest way through the hills, but many more along the coast which shouts out in many places with many promontories. It hath four parishes Farr, Tongue, Durness, and Edderachillis and a part of a fifth, whereof the other part lie's in Caithness viz. the Parish of Reay. The part of the parish of Reay that lies in the country of

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<sup>92</sup> Country of Strathnaver Containing the Parishes of Farr, Tongue, Durness, Edderachillis and Part of Reay Sutherland. 1726. Geographical collections relating to Scotland made by Walter Macfarlane. 1698?-1767 Printed by T. and A. Constable for the Scottish History Society. Geographical collections relating to Scotland made by Walter Macfarlane : MacFarlane, Walter, 1698?-1767 : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive

Strathnaver is called Strath Halladale which is a valley of twelve miles long from the upper end to the sea, through which runs a considerable river taking its rise out of some Boggs and fountains among the hills, and is increased in its course by several burns. It runs north towards the sea, where it has a salmon fishing with nets and cruives: The places inhabited on the said Strath are as follows. Trontills Forfies, Craggie, Bighouse, Kirk town Golwale, Melvich and in Craigtown is a meeting house where the people convene, when the minister comes to preach to them which is every Lords day.

### **Farr Parish**

A very large parish of 417 square miles, is bounded on the north by the Atlantic Ocean, on the east by Caithness, on the south by Kildonan, Clyne, Rogart and Lairg, and on the west by Eddrachilles, Durness and Tongue. The coast consists of cliffs and sandy bays. Near the coast there are many bare rocky outcrops. Inland the land is hilly culminating in the south at Ben Klibreck (3154 ft.) and in the south-west in Ben Hee (2864 ft.). The rocks are mainly schists of the Moine series, granite in Strath Halladale.

The parish is for the most part moorland but there is arable land in Strathnaver.

### **Account Parish of Farr 1792. By the Rev. Mr James Dingwall.**

Name, Situation, Extent, Surface, and Soil. The ancient and modern name of this parish is Farr. It is situated in the county of Sutherland, in the presbytery of Tongue, and synod of Sutherland and Caithness. Its form is a scalene triangle. Its length is 30 computed miles, and its breadth 14. The general appearance of the country is mountainous and rocky. The hill of Clibrigg is very high; the south side is covered with heath, part of is green; and the other side is rocky. The soil, in some parts, is fertile and deep; but, in general, is very barren and shallow.

Sea Coast and Bays. The extent of sea coast is 11 computed miles. The shore is high and rocky, and consists of Strathy-head and Bay, Armadale Bay, Far-head and Bay, Sandy Bay, etc.

Climate, Diseases, and Mineral Springs. The air is generally dry and healthy; though occasionally otherwise. The most prevalent diseases are fevers and fluxes, owing to cold and wet. There are some mineral waters of the chalybeate kind. One is thought serviceable in fluxes. The principal lake is Loch Naver, the length of which is 4 computed miles. The river Naver runs from it. There are also some small lakes.

Fish. The fish caught on the coast are haddocks, whiting's, cod, ling, mackerel, etc. The ling and cod are sent to Aberdeen. Whales are found near the coast. Salmon are caught in the rivers Naver and Borgie. The greatest quantity, in a season, is 11 lasts. They are in the greatest perfection in the months of March and April.

Caves. There are some natural caves near Strathy-head, where seals are taken. There is one very large, and 14 small ones. There is also a natural arch below Far-head, where a fishing boat may pass with oars. In Rosal, 10 computed miles from the church, by the Water of Naver-where, there is an artificial cave, said to have been made by one William Munro, which, at the entrance, is wide enough to admit two men. The form of it is a curve. It is at least 100 fathoms in length, and about as much in breadth; and extends from Rosal to the river.

Population. The population of the parish now, compared with what it was 60 or 70 years ago, is supposed to have considerably increased; although the return to Dr. Webster, in 1755, was 2800, and the present population, in 1790, is only 2600: Of these, the males and females are about 1300 each.

Births, from November 1789 to November 1791, 60

Marriages last year, 18

Number of persons between 50 and 70, about 100  
 Number of persons between 70 and 80, 16  
 Number of persons between above 80, 8  
 Died last year a person aged 102.  
 Families (above 6 1/2 in each at an average), 386  
 Student, 1  
 Mill-wrights, 4  
 House carpenters, 4  
 Wrights, 12  
 Weavers, 34  
 Shoemakers, 24  
 Taylors, 20  
 Household servants (40 males and 60 females) 100  
 Labouring servants, 37

Small possessors do the work of labouring servants themselves. The population is not materially different from what it was 5, 10, or 20 years ago. Each marriage produces, at an average, from 4 to 5 children. In 1772, there were 77 persons who immigrated to North Carolina, and others have been going annually since to the south of Scotland. Some have left the parish for want of employment.

Cattle. This parish is well adapted for rearing cattle. In good seasons, most of the farms could keep a greater number; but a bad season carries them off. There are generally from 1000 to 1500 black cattle on the meadow of Mudale in a season; and sometimes 2000, betwixt 20<sup>th</sup>. June and 20<sup>th</sup>. August, besides about 200 horses, 660 sheep, and 200 goats. This meadow is two English miles in length, and half a mile in breadth.

Agriculture. There are 50 ploughs in the parish; but most of the farmers delve their land. The plough is drawn with 4 horses a breast. They generally sow in April and May, and reap in September and the beginning of October. Very little of the parish is cultivated, compared with what is lying waste and common. It is, therefore, by no means surprising, that it does not supply its inhabitants with provisions. In 1782, there were 1000 bolls imported. The situation of the people, in 1783, was deplorable. The few cattle they had, and eat their slesh without bread or salt. Many left the parish, and went to other places for employment.

Rent. The land rent is about 1255 L. The fishing of Naver is 100 L. and upwards. The average rent of farms is about 5 L. The parish, in general, is not enclosed; but such as have tried enclosures are convinced of their advantages. There has been no change of property in land here for these many years.

Church. The church was built in 1774. The manse was repaired last year. The stipend is 800 merks, or 44 L. 8 s. 10 d. Sterling, and 3 L. 6 s. 4 d. for a glebe. A process of augmentation is commenced. The Countess of Sutherland is patron. There are 2 heritors and a wadsetter; but none of them reside in the parish.

Poor. The number of poor receiving alms is 54. The annual amount of the contributions for their support is 6 L. 10 s. besides mort-cloth dues, which are about 1 L. 10 s. per annum, with the interest of 5 L. left by Mr. Skeldach.

Schools. There are 2 schools in the parish, the parochial, and Society School. The former is stationed at the manse, near the church; the latter in Armadale; neither of them well accommodated. The first is quite ruinous, and the salary is only 100 merks, or 5 L. 11 s. 1 1/4 d. with 20 s. as precentor and session clerk's dues, and one half of the baptism money, (which was, last year, 15 s.) and 1 s. for each marriage, of which there are about 16 at an average in a

year. The scholars are very few, 26 being the greatest number during the course of last year. In harvest there are not above 12 or 14, from which it is evident the schoolmaster's encouragement is not great. The quarterly dues are, for reading, 1 s.; arithmetic, 2 s. 6 d.; and Latin, 2 s. 6 d. A new school-house is expected to be built soon. The Society schoolmaster has a salary of 10 L. with a dwelling house and school house, (which is also to be rebuilt), a kale yard, with an acre of ground, for raising corn, potatoes, grass, and provender for one or two milk cows, gratis, from the proprietor, who formerly received a guinea of rent for it. He also has his peats cut, dried, and brought home free. In this school there have been 33 scholars during the course of last year, none of whom were taught gratis, except 5, who were really indigent.

Prices of Provisions and Labour. Meal and bear fell at 12s.per boll; 2 L. 10 s. or 3 L. is the price of a good cow; a wedder costs 6 s. 7 s. or 8 s.; a sow, 10 s.; a pig, 1 s. or 1 s. 6 d.; a goose, 1 s.; a hen, 4 d.; butter, 9 s. per stone, and cheese 4 s. 6 d. A married servant, in husbandry, gets 6 bolls victual, and 40 shillings wages annually, which enables him to bring up a family. The usual wages of male and female servants are as follow: A man, 13 s. 4 d.; a lad, 10 s.; a boy, 3 s. 4 d.; a woman, 5 s.; and a girl, 3 s. in the half year, besides shoes.

Roads. The state of the roads and bridges is very bad. After the statute labour was exacted in kind, they made pieces of roads in different places; but they have been allowed to go into disrepair.

Antiquities. There are 6 Pictish castles, or rather watch houses, wherein they raised lights when invasions happened. There are likewise the ruins of a sort on Far-head. There are several tumuli in the neighborhood. There is a figured stone at the west end of the church, under which a Dane of distinction is said to be buried. Several battles, or rather skirmishes, have been sought in this neighborhood.

Character of the People. The general size of the people, in this parish, is 5 feet 7 inches. They are rather indolent. No manufactures are carried on. They are fond of a military, but not of a seafaring life. Some hundreds have enlisted in the army in the course of these last 20 years. Their mode of living is rather expensive for their circumstances. The introduction of manufactures would operate as a spur to industry, and meliorate their condition. No person has been put in jail in the course of last year.

Miscellaneous Observations. Some parts of Strathnaver are subject to inundations, the most remarkable of which happened in 1761. A woman and 2 cows were killed by lightning 60 years ago, on the hill near Longdale. The distance from markets is one of the disadvantages peculiar to this parish. The language spoken here is Gaelic. The names of place seem to be derived from it. Some, indeed, near the coast, are said to be of Danish extraction. The number of houses employed in selling spirituous liquors are 6; viz. one in Armadale, and 5 in Strathnaver. The effect they have on the morals of the people, is certainly mischievous. It is greatly to be wished that proprietors, particularly in the Highlands, would take some method to stop this evil.

### **Statistical Account Parish of Farr 1845 The Rev. David Mackenzie Minister.**

#### **I.-Topography and Natural History.**

Name.-The parish appears to have been called Farr, for more than 400 years. The name is probably derived from the Gaelic word Faire, a watch or sentinel for, about half a mile north of the parish church is the ruin of a circular tower, or Dunn, the nearest to the sea-coast of a chain of these ancient buildings, extending for more than twenty-four miles into the interior. Not far from this Dunn, is the promontory called Farr Head, from which, in clear weather, there is a distinct view of that part of the northern ocean, which lies betwixt Orkney and Cape Wrath. From this promontory, a sentinel or watch could easily discover vessels approaching the coast, and, during the period of invasions from Denmark and Orkney, could speedily communicate

the necessary intelligence to the inhabitants of the interior, by means of the chain of towers, and such signals as were then in use. This, however, is only a conjecture as to the name of the parish, founded on the geographical relation of the place now called Farr to Strathnaver, where the principal chain of towers was erected, and which strath, in ancient times, was the most populous and most interesting part of the parish.

**Extent and Boundaries.** The parish is about forty English miles long, from Baligill in the north-east to Mudale in the south-west; and varies from eight to twenty miles in breadth, the narrowest part being in the middle of Strathnaver. It is bounded on the north by the Northern Ocean; on the east, by the parish of Reay in Caithness; on the south, by the parishes of Kildonan and Lairg; and on the west, by the parish of Tongue. Its figure is irregular.

**Topographical Appearances.** The principal mountain in the Parish, and the highest in the county, is Bein Chlibrig. It is near the south-west extremity, and not far from the Parliamentary road from Bonar Bridge to Tongue. Its height is 3200 feet above the level of the sea. Its form is conical, especially towards the summit, which is called "Meall'a'neuion," that is, the summit of the Bird, probably from its being the chief residence of ptarmigan in the parish. Towards the sea coast, to the north-east, on each side of Strathnaver, there are several hills, of various dimensions; but they are all far below the elevation of Chlibrig, and have nothing in their form or relative position deserving of notice. Near the coast, the low hills exhibit a greater quantity of bare rock, and are in general more precipitous. The greatest quantity and extent of low flat land is in Strathnaver and Strathrathy in the interior; and in Armadale and Mains of Strathy on the sea-coast. There are several farms along the shore, in all of which there is a considerable extent of arable land; but the surface is uneven.

**Straths.** The largest valleys are Strathnaver and Strathrathy. Strathnaver, a place from which the noble family of Sutherland have one of their titles, is a beautiful valley, extending from the sea-coast, in a south-west direction, distance of about twenty eight miles, including the ground along the river, the loch, and the Water of Mudale, beyond Loch Naver. Considering the extent of this strath, the beauty, and variety of the scenery, which almost invariably attract the notice of the traveler of taste, and the richness of the pasture it everywhere produces, this valley is undoubtedly the finest and most interesting Highland strath in the whole county of Sutherland. Strathrathy stretches directly south from the sea-coast, a distance of twelve miles; it is about ten miles north-east of Strathnaver. Between these, along the sea coast, are situated the valleys of Clachan, where the parish church and manse are built, Swordly, Kirtomy, and Armadale; but these are quite diminutive compared to those already described.

**Caves, &c.** There are several caves, natural arches, and fissures, along the sea-coast, and a few caverns in the interior. The most interesting of the caves are in the Aird of Kirtomy, Strathy, and Strathy-point. The finest natural arch is near Farr. It is described in Pennant's Tour, and referred to in the former Statistical Account of this parish. The largest cavern in the interior is in Carn a' Mhadi, in Bein Chlibrig, noted in the traditional history of the parish as the retreat of a robber named Chisholm from Inverness-shire, who, more than a hundred years ago, had taken shelter there, and for some time supported himself by the deer of Bein Chlibrig, and the flocks of the neighboring tenants. Any farther description of the caves and caverns in this parish is considered unnecessary in this work.

**Bays, &c.** There are about thirteen miles of sea-coast, from Naver Bay in the west to Baligill Burn in the east. With the exception of Kirtomy and Armadale, and a few more creeks where boats can land in moderate weather, the coast is either bold and dangerous to mariners, being composed of perpendicular or projecting rocks, from 20 to 200 feet high, against which the waves of the Northern Ocean break with awful fury; or there are shallow sands, on which heavy



surges are almost invariably rolling. The bays are Naver, Farr, Kirtomy, Armadale, and Strathy. The principal headlands are, Airdniskich, Aird of Farr, Aird of Kirtomy, and Strathy Head. From this Head, the Lights of Cape Wrath and Dunnet Head are seen in clear weather.

Climate. Considering the latitude of this parish, which is 58° 30 north, the temperature is on the whole mild; and there are no diseases prevalent that can be ascribed to any peculiarity of the climate.



IMAGE 275 LOCH NAVER

Hydrography. In every district, valley, mountain, and hill of this parish, there is an abundant supply of perennial springs of excellent water. So far as known to the writer, their chemical properties have not been ascertained; but it is evident many of them run on iron ore. The number of fresh-water lochs of various dimensions in the parish is very considerable; the largest of which are Loch Naver, Loch Coir-na-fearn, and Loch Strathy. But the most interesting of the whole is Loch Naver, in respect both of extent and scenery. It is 7 miles long, and about 1 1/2 miles broad. Its depth is ascertained, by sounding, to be in some parts 30 fathoms. Its shore is in some places pebbly, in other parts rocky and sandy. It is richly supplied from the adjacent hills, mountains, marshes, and valley ground, with large tributary streams, especially the rivers Mudale and Strathvagasty, which enter the loch near the inn of Aultnaharve. The scenery around it is very interesting, having Bein Chlibrig at no great distance on the south; several low hills and abrupt rocks nearer its shore; its banks beautifully skirted with a variety of indigenous trees growing to a considerable height; the distant hills of Kildonan to the south-east, and those of the Reay Country to the west, appearing in their grandeur from certain points in its vicinity. And there is an excellent road on the north side of the loch, from which the tourist can see the whole with ease and advantage.

The principal rivers in the parish are the Naver, the Borgie, and the Strathy. The Naver issues from the loch already described, near Achness, at which place it receives a large stream running from Loch Coir-na-fearn. From Achness it runs north-east, a distance of eighteen miles, until

it enters the ocean at the farm of Airdniskech. Besides its supply from Loch Naver and Loch Coir-na-fearn, it receives a number of considerable streams in its course through the strath, so that, when flooded in winter, it is the largest river in the county. The Naver is not rapid in its course, the declivity of the strath being very gradual. The Strathy flows from the loch of that name, and from the adjacent hills and marshes; and is, when flooded, a large stream. The Borgie runs from Loch Loyal in the parish of Tongue; and is, in some parts of its course, the boundary line between this parish and Tongue. But its salmon fishings have been for a long time the property of the Noble family of Sutherland. It enters the Northern Ocean within a mile of the Naver, at a place in the parish of Tongue called Torrisdale.

**Geology and Mineralogy.** The rocks and stones in this parish, of which immense quantities are to be seen in every direction, especially along the coast, appear to be chiefly coarse granite, gneiss, and sandstone. In Kirtomy on the sea-coast, there is an extensive deposit of old red sandstone, mixed with conglomerate. At Strathy, there is a large quarry of white sandstone, which takes dressing by the chisel; and near it, a considerable extent of limestone, from which excellent lime is manufactured for the supply of the parishioners. The most of the rocks and precipices along the shore exhibit a great variety of veins and fissures which cut across the strata, and greatly derange and alter them. But in many places on the coast and in the interior, the strata are distinctly and regularly arranged: and in such cases the inclination and dip are not many degrees from perpendicular. The most striking and marked exception is at Strathy, in the free and limestone quarries, where the strata are horizontal. The soil along the coast, especially near the bays, is light and sandy; on the banks of the Naver and Strathy it is composed of sand, gravel, and moss; and in the interior, at the base of the hills, and near the different lochs, except Loch Naver, the soil is a deep moss.

**Zoology.** It is reported traditionally, that bears and wolves at one period existed in this parish. But this must have been when those extensive forests of fir grew in this country, the remains of which are still found deeply imbedded in moss, and are raised by the parishioners for roofing their houses, and other domestic purposes. The only species of animals which existed in comparatively modern times in the parish, but which have now disappeared, are goats. About forty years ago, they were numerous, and serviceable to the inhabitants; but, by the introduction of the sheep-farming system, they have been entirely exterminated.

The sheep-farmers rear the Cheviot or white-faced kind of sheep. The lotters have a breed of small Highland cattle; a few ponies of a similar description; and sheep of the black-faced kind. On Bein Chlibrig, and the adjacent higher hills, there are considerable flocks of red deer. Hares and rabbits are found in the parish. Ptarmigan, black-cock, grouse, partridge, plover, and snipe, are numerous in the hills, moors, and inland glens. A great number of aquatic fowl frequent the sea-coast and fresh-water lakes; and the woods of Strathnaver are strongly tenanted by various classes of birds. The cuckoo, lapwing, and swallow pay their annual visits; and, so far as they escape the vigilance of game keepers and vermin destroyers, foxes, otters, wild cats, eagles, hawks, ravens, and carrion-crows, are to be found. In the larger rivers and lakes, there is abundance of salmon; and in the lesser lochs and streams, trout are found in considerable quantities. There is a rich supply of cod, ling, haddock, and herring, in their season, on the sea-coast. Turbot and mackerel have been taken occasionally, and lobster is caught for the London market.

**Botany.** The herbage of this parish is of a mixed character, varying according to the elevation of its mountains, hills, valleys, and shore ground: and, on the whole, the parish affords an interesting field for the botanist. If there be few rare plants, there is a rich profusion of those already well known in this country. The mountains, hills, and moors are generally covered with the common red heather, deer-hair, and a long tough grass, called Flying Bent. In the softer

marshes, there are extensive plots of cotton- grass. With a trifling exception, all the trees in the parish are indigenous. Of these, there is a considerable variety, such as the hazel or nut-tree, alder, roan-tree or mountain-ash, willows, and birch. The alder tree grows to a considerable size on the banks of the Naver and Loch Coir-na-fearn; but the birch is the most abundant, and, on the banks of Loch Naver, the most flourishing wood in the parish.

## II.-Civil History.

The only printed accounts of the ancient state of the parish, so far as known to the writer of this article, are to be found in Sir Robert Gordon's History of the Earldom of Sutherland, and in Mr. Robert Mackay's History of the House and Clan of Mackay, published in 1829. Any manuscript documents tending to throw light on the ancient state of the parish, which might have been in the possession of heritors, or wad setters, formerly occupying lands within its bounds, are supposed to be now in the archives of the Duke of Sutherland, the proprietor of the whole parish. The most accurate geographical description of the boundaries and localities of the parish is to be found in a map of the county, lately published by Mr. Busnet, from a particular survey taken by order of the late Duke of Sutherland.

Parochial Registers. The only parochial registers extant are a book in which the minutes of the kirk session are kept; and another, in which births and marriages are recorded. The earliest entry in the first is in the year 1754; and in the second, in the year 1800.

Antiquities. The antiquities of the parish consist of the remains of several circular towers or duns, built of large undressed stones without mortar; a number of barrows or tumuli; a few erect stones in the form of obelisks; and the ruins of a castle built with mortar. The remains of the circular towers are in Strathnaver. The principal field of tumuli is about half a mile east from the parish church, close by the public road to Thurso. The finest erect stone is in the churchyard of Farr; and the ruin of the castle is on a small peninsula about a mile and a half north of the parish church. The traditions connected with the more ancient relics are imperfect. It is reported, that the circular towers were built and occupied by an ancient race called, in Gaelic, Cruinnich, from either of two Gaelic words, cruinn, round or circular; or cruinnachadh, a gathering. The tumuli indicate fields of battle, on which foreigners, especially Daoes, and the native inhabitants, had bloody conflicts; and the erect stones are said to point out the places where chieftains have been interred. This is very probable, from the circumstance of these stones being seen not far from the fields of tumuli; as is the case at Dalharrold in Strathnaver, and in the church-yard of Farr. The stone in the latter place has been evidently brought there either from a foreign country, or from some other part of this kingdom. It is very hard, but differs entirely in its appearance and quality from any of the rocks in this neighborhood. It is about twelve feet long, more than five feet being above ground, and as many under it. There is a regular figure carved on the west front of it, evidently hieroglyphic. The ancient castle is supposed to have been the residence of the Mackays of Farr previous to their being created barons, and obtaining the title of Lord Reay. It is not known by who it was built.

## III.-Population

From the remains of antiquity mentioned under the former head, it is evident there must have been a considerable population, either occasionally resorting to this parish, or permanently residing within it, at a very remote period of the history of Scotland. About 400 years ago, the Mackays began to make themselves conspicuous. Connected with the antiquities of the parish, the writer may mention a few particulars regarding a loch in Strathnaver, about six miles from the church, to which superstition has ascribed wonderful healing virtues. The time at which this loch came to be in repute with the sick cannot now be ascertained. It must, however, have been at a period of the history of this country when superstition had a firm hold of the minds

of all classes of the community. The tradition as to the origin of its healing virtues is briefly as follows : A woman, either from Ross-shire or Inverness-shire, came to the heights of Strathnaver, pretending to cure diseases by means of water into which she had previously thrown some pebbles, which she carried about with her. In her progress down the strath, towards the coast, a man in whose house she lodged wished to possess, himself of the pebbles: but discovering his design, she escaped, and he pursued. Finding, at the loch referred to, that she could not escape her pursuer any longer, she threw the pebbles into the loch, exclaiming in Gaelic, monar that is shame, or my shame. From this exclamation the loch received the name, which it still retains, "Loch-mo-nar," and the pebbles are supposed to have imparted to it its healing efficacy. There are only four days in the year, on which its supposed cures can be effected. These are the first Monday, old style, of February, May, August, and November. During February and November, no one visits it; but in May and August, numbers from Sutherland, Caithness, Ross-shire, and even from Inverness-shire and Orkney, come to this famous loch. The ceremonies through which the patients have to go are the following: - They must all be at the loch side about twelve o'clock. As early on Monday as one or two o'clock in the morning, the patient to be ploughed, three times into the loch; is to drink of its waters; to throw a piece of coin into it as a kind of tribute; and must be away from its banks, so as to be fairly out of sight of its water before the sun rises, - no cure is supposed to be effected. Whatever credit might be given to such ridiculous ceremonies as tending in any respect to the restoration of health, while ignorance and superstition reigned universally in this country, it certainly must appear extraordinary to intelligent persons, that any class of the community should now have recourse to and faith in such practices, but so it is, that many come from the shires already mentioned, and say they are benefited by the practices. It is, however, to be observed, that those who generally frequent this loch, and who have found their health improved, on returning home, are persons afflicted with nervous complaints and disordered imaginations, to whose health a journey of forty or sixty miles, a plunge into the loch, and the healthful air of our hills and glens may contribute all the improvement with which they are generally so much pleased out in this district as a clan.

Farr and Strathnaver appear to have been the principal residence of the Mackays during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and part of the seventeenth centuries, and that clan is still the most numerous in the parish. After the Earls of Sutherland formed a marriage alliance with the Gordons, some of that clan came to reside in Strathnaver,-so that at one period, perhaps a hundred years ago, there were few in the parish but Mackays and Gordons. They are still the most numerous names.

In ancient times, the inhabitants were no doubt in a very barbarous state, living mostly by return. During the universal reign of Popery in Scotland, that system of belief found its way to this parish, and was long probably professed by all the inhabitants. The principles of the Reformation were, at an early period after this introduction into Scotland, embraced by the Earls of Sutherland, and the first Lord Reay, and disseminated among the people of this parish. In consequence of this happy change in religious principles and views, civilization a religious and moral population.

The census of 1831, compared with the return in 1790, shows a decrease of 400 in the population. This was owing to the introduction of the sheep-farming system. By its adoption, the farmers and tenants who occupied the straths and glens in the interior were, in 1818 and 1819, all removed from these possessions. Allotments of land were marked out on the sea coast for such as were thus removed. In these the greater number of the removing tenants settled; but several families quitted the parish altogether, and thus diminished the population. The tenants, or lotters, on the sea-coast, live on their respective farms or townships. In these townships, there are from eight to forty five houses, according to the quantity of land; and the houses stand at a considerable distance from each other, not in the manner of a regularly formed village.

The number of families in the parish is 418 of families chiefly employed in agriculture, 314 chiefly employed in trade, manufactures, or handicraft. 11, the average number of births for the last seven years, 55 marriages, 17. No register of deaths is kept. Average number of persons under fifteen years, about 740 from fifteen to thirty, 500. As there was no register of births and baptisms kept previous to the year 1800, it is impossible to classify the ages of persons above thirty years. It is certain, however, these are a number of healthy, active people in the parish from fifty to sixty, many from sixty to eighty; and a few vigorous and stout from eighty to ninety. The average numbers of children in young families, 5; the numbers of insane in the parish, 1; fatuous, a female, 1; blind, a male and a female, 2; deaf, a male, 1; dumb, a male, 1.

Language, Character, &c. of the People. The Gaelic language is spoken in common conversation, and it is in that language that the people receive religious instruction with most advantage. Their language has been rather improved of late by means of Gaelic schools. The English, however, is gaining ground considerably, especially among the younger part of the population. The people are more cleanly in their habits than they were forty years ago. They dress neatly on public occasions, and in the cloths and cottons of south country manufacture, make a more showy appearance than their ancestors in the more homely but more substantial garbs wrought at home. Their ordinary food consists of the produce of their lots, viz. oat and barley meal, milk, potatoes, and cabbages,-with fish, especially herring. Very little butcher meat is used by the natives; but considerable quantity of tea and sugar is consumed in the parish.

The people are social among themselves; kind and hospitable to strangers, according to their circumstances; acute and intelligent, according to their advantages; moral in their general habits; regular in attending on religious ordinances; and many among them decidedly pious. Smuggling is entirely abandoned by them, and poaching is almost unknown.

#### IV.-Industry.

Agriculture and Rural Economy. Except about 600 acres on the sea coast, which are kept in cultivation by the lotters, the whole of the land of this parish, formerly in tillage, is, with the adjacent mountains, hills, and glens, laid out in extensive sheep walks. From the great extent of the parish, and the nature of its surface, it is impossible to give its measurement in acres with any degree of accuracy. The different plots of trees in the parish cover about 800 acres; and of late years, considerable attention has been given to the woods in Strathnaver, by pruning and thinning.

Rent of Land. The average rent of the land occupied by the lotters is 16s. per acre, including their privilege of hill-common and peat-moss. The rent paid by the sheep-farers is moderate.

Rate of Wages. The allowance to day labourers is from 1s. 6d. to 1s. 9d. per day of ten hours; to masons 15s.; to carpenters from 9s. to 12s. per week. The lotters use the highland delving spade in labouring their land. To this they are forced, partly by being unable to rear horses for the plough, and partly by the very uneven surface of their lots. The greater part of the land in their possession is susceptible of considerable improvement by trenching, draining, removing heaps of stones, enclosing their lots, and turning them with the plough.

Husbandry. The sheep farms are in the possession of gentlemen, who are sufficiently attentive to every kind of improvement of which pastoral districts are susceptible, by draining, embanking, and burning heath. The leases of the sheep farmers are given for nineteen years: but the lotters on the coast are tenants at will, which is evidently a bar to the improvement of their, lots.

Fishings. The principal fishings are those of salmon and herring. Of late years, the rivers have been fished by the heritor, and the salmon sold at a certain rate per pound raw, to a company who have a curing establishment in the parish. In consequence of this plan, the present rent of the salmon fishings of Naver, Borgie, and Strathy cannot be ascertained. The fishings are kept up by proper guards in close time on the rivers to prevent poaching; and by having a sufficient supply of fishing and curing materials during the fishing season.

Produce. As very little of the raw produce is brought to market within the parish, it is not easy to state its amount. The following account is submitted, however, giving an average of the last three years

- Annual produce of the land occupied by the lotters, including oats, bear, and potatoes, being the only crops they raise, L. 2000 0 0.
- Annual produce of sheep-farms in wool, 3700 0 0.
- Annual produce of sheep-farms in wethers and ewes, sold to south country dealers, 5800 0 0, salmon-fishings, 800 0 0, herring-fishing, 1300 0 0, meadow-hay, 310 0 0,
- Miscellaneous, including dairy produce, black-cattle sold by the lotters, &c. &c. 420 0 0 Total annual produce, L. 14,330 0 0

The fishermen on the coast have from fifteen to twenty boats. About 22,000 Cheviot sheep are annually grazed in this parish, including old and young stock of fifteen and twenty tons burden. During the herring-fishing season, ships from the south ports of Scotland, from England and Ireland, come to the coast to land cargoes of salt and barrels, and to carry the cured fish to market. There are no ships belonging to the parish.

#### V.-Parochial Economy.

Means of Communication. The nearest market-town is Thurso, thirty-two miles from this place. There is a post-office here connected with that of Thurso; and a mail diligence, drawn by two horses, and carrying four passengers, which runs three days in the week from Thurso to Tongue, and alternately back; and there is a weekly carrier from Tongue to Thurso. There are no turnpike roads in the parish; but a considerable extent of the Parliamentary road from Bonar Bridge to Tongue passes through the heights, and about sixteen miles of the general line from Tongue to Thurso run near the sea-coast. On the roads in this parish there are two bridges of three arches each, twelve of one arch, and a chain-boat on the river Naver. There are no regular harbours. The safest landing-places for boats are Kirtomy and Armadale.

Ecclesiastical State. The parish church is conveniently situated for the population who are now attached to it, since the erection of the Government church. It stands close to the sea-coast, and is about thirty miles from some parts of the interior. But these remote parts are occupied only by a few shepherds in the employment of the sheep-farmers. The parish church was built in 1774, is a commodious and substantial building, and is kept in good repair. It is seated for about 750. The communion table is, on ordinary Sabbaths, free to the poor, and accommodates about 64.

There is a Government church and manse at Strathy, ten miles east from the parish church. This church was built in 1826, and its present minister was appointed to it in 1828. It accommodates about 350 sitters. Thus, in a parish, the population of which is about 2100, have church accommodation for 1160 persons. The manse was built in 1818, is a commodious house, and kept in sufficient repair. There are about six acres of arable land, some meadow-pasture, and a considerable extent of hill ground, with a right to peats, legally designed as a glebe. The value of these may be estimated at L. 25 per annum. The stipend is L. 166, 14s. Sterling, including L.8, 6s. Sd. Sterling for communion element. The trends are exhausted. There is a catechist appointed by the kirk-session, and paid by the people. There is no Dissenting chapel

in the parish; and, with the exception of one shepherd from the borders, who is of the Anti-burgher persuasion, and a shepherd's wife from Lochaber, who is a Roman Catholic, there is not a dissenter of any description in the parish. Divine service is generally well attended, on ordinary and communion Sabbaths, in the parish and Government church; and the people, old and young, are punctual in attending family and village examinations, are in general well acquainted with the Shorter Catechism of our church, and have regularly the worship of God in their families. The average number of communicants may be stated at 130.

There is no society for religious purposes established in the parish; but, for the last nineteen years, collections have been made, almost annually in our congregations, for missionary and educational objects in Scotland, and the average amount of these is about L.5, 10s. Sterling.

Education. There are at present four schools in the parish, viz. the parochial school; one supported by the Committee of the General Assembly; one by the Glasgow Auxiliary Gaelic School Society; and one on the Second Patent of the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge in the Highland and islands of Scotland. The parochial schoolmaster is qualified to teach Latin, Greek, mathematics, and the ordinary branches of English literature; and the teacher of the General Assembly's Committee is required to teach Latin, mathematics, English, and Gaelic. The branches generally taught, are English reading, and grammar, writing and arithmetic, and Gaelic reading.

The parochial teacher has the maximum salary; L. 3 Sterling, in lieu of a garden; L. 1 13s. 4d. of session-clerk dues; 4s. for proclaiming banns, and registering each marriage; 6d. for recording each baptism; and a house of three apartments. His rate of school-fees is, for beginners, 6s. per annum; for reading and writing, 8s. for arithmetic, 12s.; and for higher branches, 20s. per annum. The teacher employed by the Committee of the General Assembly has a salary of L. 25 ; three apartments; a croft of land, and a garden from the heritor; and fuel provided by the inhabitants of the district. He is allowed to exact fees, according to the rate demanded in the parochial school; only in cases of indigence certified by the minister and elders, a certain modification, or an exemption altogether, is permitted. The teacher employed by the Glasgow Society has L. 12 of a salary, and two apartments. He is furnished with fuel by the inhabitants, and is allowed to exact fees on the same principle with the teacher under the General Assembly's Committee. The teacher on the scheme of the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge has L. 4 of salary, a house, and croft of land, with fees.

Last winter, about 240 individuals, from the age of five years to twenty, attended the different schools in the parish. But owing to the general poverty of the parishioners, and to the circumstances that they are under the necessity of having their children, when they arrive at the age of ten or twelve years, employed, especially in the summer and harvest months, either in working about their own dwellings, or earning something for their support, in the service of others, education is very imperfectly acquired by a majority of the young. Of those, however, from ten to thirty years of age, the greater number do read either English or Gaelic; many read both, and a considerable number write, and can keep accounts. Even at the oldest age at which the people arrive, a considerable number are found who read the Scriptures fluently and with benefit. But it is among the aged that the greater number are met with who can neither read nor write. In 1832, it was computed that 870 persons of all ages above six were unable to read; and 300 betwixt six and twenty.

The people value the benefits of education, and would most willingly give their children greater advantages, did their circumstances allow it. A permanent school at Armadale, with those already established, would supply the inhabitants of the sea-coast with the means of education. It is impossible to place a school in the interior, so as to accommodate its scattered and widely separated inhabitants, consisting of a few families of shepherds.

Savings Bank. A savings bank was established this year for the benefit of the whole county of which the Duke of Sutherland is patron and treasurer; James Loch, Esq. M. P. president; and the three resident factors of the Duke of Sutherland in this shire, vice-presidents. There are trustees appointed in this parish, who meet every fortnight to receive deposits and give out money as occasion requires. The head bank is at Golspie, near Dunrobin, the seat of the Duke of Sutherland. All deposits are sent from this parish to it; for which the contributors have the receipt of the patron and treasurer, and are allowed four per cent interest on sums not exceeding L.20. Little can be said yet of the advantages of this bank, as the first deposit was made in this parish only on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of February last; but considerable benefit is anticipated from it to day-labourers, fishermen, and farm-servants, in the course of a few years. The Duke of Sutherland is deeply interested in its prosperity.

Poor and Parochial Funds. The average number of persons receiving parochial aid is 76; and the average sum allowed them is from 13s. to 3s. per annum, according to their circumstances, as certified by the elders of their respective districts. The annual average amount of contributions for their support, during the last five years, has been about L. 27 Sterling, arising from church collections, amounting to L. 20 per annum, and from donations by heritors, amounting to L. 8 on an average of the last five years. No other method of procuring funds for the poor has been resorted to, and in general they seem content with the existing system. The Marchioness of Stafford, now Duchess Countess of Sutherland, for more than twenty years gave, and continues to give, an annual donation of L. 6 to the poor of this parish. Occasional donations have been given, besides, by members of the Noble family when visiting this parish, and when important changes by marriages and births took place among them; and by such means, a small fund is at interest for the benefit of the poor.

Market. There is a market held at Bettyhill, near this place, on the first Wednesday of November, (N. S.) for general traffic.

Inns. There are three licensed inns, so situated as to be convenient to the parishioners and the public at large. Tippling- houses are entirely suppressed, and their extinction has a good effect on the morals of the people in general.

Miscellaneous Observations. When the former account was written, a considerable number of tacksmen, natives of the parish, occupied extensive farms in different parts of it; and with them, a dense population of subtenants resided in the interior straths and glens. Now, however, all the lands, both hill and dale, which they possessed, are held in lease by a few sheep-farmers, all non-resident gentlemen, some of them living in Caithness, some on the south coast of this county, and some in England; and the straths, in which hundreds of families lived comfortably, are now tenanted by about twenty-four families of herds. In place of the scores of highland cattle, horses, sheep, and goats, which formerly were brought to market, or used for domestic purposes, now thousands of fleeces of Cheviot wool, wedders, and ewes, are annually exported. The people who had been removed from the interior in 1818 and 1819, when these great changes took place, are thickly settled along the sea-coast of the parish, in some instances about thirty lotters occupying the land formally in the possession of twelve, and some of them placed on ground which had been formerly uncultivated.

This alteration in the locality of the parishioners has been followed by a corresponding change in the general system of their occupation. Instead of tending flocks, and following other avocations connected with the habits of an inland population, they are now partly employed in cultivating their small pedicles of land; but more vigorously engaged, especially the young, in preparing the necessary fishing implements, and prosecuting the fishing in its season. The females, in place of manufacturing tartans, and other woolen cloths, for their husbands, brothers, and other relatives, now use the spinning wheel in preparing hemp for herring-nets;



and the labour of the country weaver is considerably set aside by the knitting of the nets. The Garb of Auld Gaul is entirely superseded by the fisherman's habiliments; and our population, who in early life traversed the hills, moors, and crags of the interior, now cautiously steer their boats on the waves of the Northern Ocean, and actively carry on the various labours connected with the fish-curing stations.

The changes referred to in the locality and in the employments of the inhabitants have had the parish. Although there are greater facilities of communication than formerly with different parts of the kingdom, the manners of the resident population are not thereby improved. It is a well authenticated fact in this country, that the herring fishing is not conducive to the improvement of the morals of those engaged in it. The leaseholders of our large sheep-farms are, as was already mentioned, all non-resident gentlemen. But the former tacksmen resided on their own farms, most of them having respectable and numerous families. By their education and status in society, as justices of peace, and officers in the army, their example, in their general intercourse with the people, had an influence in giving a respectable tone to society, which is now almost gone. There is not now a resident justice of the peace in the parish, whereas there was formerly a most regrettable bench of such civil magistrates; and the permanent population being composed of letters, day labourers, fishermen, and herds, the people, in general, are much more plebian, than when the former Account was written. On the other hand, the improvements by roads, bridges, more commodious inns, neater cottages, and more regular and sure means of communication, form a most interesting and pleasant variety since the date of that Account. An increase in the number of those who read the Scriptures in English and Gaelic, and a more extensive circulation of the sacred volume among the families of the parishioners, are also among the important characters which have since taken place. The openness of the winters, the absence of those heavy and long- continued storms of snow, which in former times were so destructive to every description of stock, and the general mildness and fruitfulness of the seasons, ought not to be omitted under thickhead. Since the harvest of 1816, there has not been an extensive failure in the ordinary crop of the parish.

There is much room for improvement on the sea-coast, by a better system of husbandry, by rendering the landing-places for boats more commodious and secure, and by an increase of branch roads to some of the townships. It is much to be regretted that the inhabitants have not more permanent and regular employment during the winter and spring months; for by the want of such employment, a great portion of their time wasted in idleness and dissipation whereas, they would most willingly avail themselves of any additional opportunities of labour.

August 1834.

<sup>93</sup> **Geographical collections relating to Scotland made by Walter Macfarlane. 1698?-1767.**

The Parish of Farr borders on the said Strath-Halladale on the West and reaches on the sea coast westward to the River of Forisdale about eleven miles. It has several bays into which runs as many rivers or burns. The easternmost is the bay of Strathy formed betwixt Strathy-head a long promontory and the head of Portskerry Halladale and contains on its shore these farms viz. Strathy a gentleman's seat, Baligill a mile east of the former Carraig a quarter mile West of Strathy, Toutigan a mile north on the promontory Aldimhulin half mile further North. Boraal half a mile further. Into the bay of Strathy runs the river of Strathy, which rises out of a little loch of the same name of a quarter of a mile long, lying North and South. The river being

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<sup>93</sup> Country of Strathnaver Containing the Parishes of Farr, Tongue, Durness, Edderachillis and Part of Reay Sutherland. 1726. Printed by T. and A. Constable for the Scottish History Society. Geographical collections relating to Scotland made by Walter Macfarlane : MacFarlane, Walter, 1698?-1767 : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive

increased by several burns runs north, and after eight miles course, falls into the sea at the house of Strathy and has a salmon fishing by cruives. The places inhabited on the said Strath are on the east side of the water. Bocsaid six miles from the Loch Daltinn a mile below Daldibaig half mile further down: Balblare half mile further then Strathy. On the West side of the river Braerathy five miles from the loch, Dallanqual three miles below the former. Bailamhulin quarter mile further.

The next bay is Armadale distant about two miles, formed betwixt Strathy head and another to the westward called Runacraoibh into which bay runs two burns betwixt which the farm of Armadale mostly lies. This bay has a fishing port. The next bay westward is that of Kirtomy formed betwixt Runahiolair on the East and Runamoin on the West distant about two miles, has a fishing port and a burn runs into the bay, on both sides of which burn lies the farm of Kirtomy a gentleman's seat. Next is the little bay of Suardalie has a burn running into it, and a farm on the one side of the burn.

Next lie's the bay of Farr formed betwixt Runamoin on the East and the point of Ardaneiseich on the West, a miles distant from each other. At the bottom of this east point close on the rock stands the mines of an old castle called the Castle of Farr, where the predecessors of the Right Honorable Lord Reay, when Lairds of Farr had a residence. By this farm of Farr stands the parish church and the ministers' manse close by a burn that runs into the bay. The next bay west ward is that of Forisdale formed betwixt Ruardreissich on the east and Ruhorisdale on the West. Into this bay runs two rivers viz the river of Naver and the river of Forisdale which at a miles distance passes by the name of the river of Borgie.

The River of Naver comes out of a loch of the like name, of three miles long, lying southwest and northeast Out of the northeast end of it, the river runs north for twelve miles and being increased by many burns, falls into the sea at Ardaneiscich where there is a considerable salmon fishing by nets and cruives.

The places inhabited on the Strath of Naver viz. on the East side Rosal three miles from the loch, Riloise a mile further down, Riphail a mile further, Skelpig two miles further Rynavy quarter mile further, Achcaillnaborgin \quarter mile further Achunah quarter mile further Achuneiscich at the sea.

On the west side of the river stands Ceanncail two mile from the Loch, where the meeting house stands, at which the people of the upper part of the Strath, and that dwell about the loch hear sermon being far from the church. Next is Saoghar two miles further, Langdale joined close to the former, a burn only separating, on which is a mill. Scail two miles further which has a considerable wood of a mile, having plenty of birch and arn trees but dwarfish. Carnachu two miles further, Dallvigaibe two miles further. Dallhariskill quarter mile further. Apagil quarter mile further Achunaburin quarter mile further Invernaver at the water mouth.

Lochnaver, as we said before, is three miles long and about a large mile where its broadest. On the southeast side of it lies these farms viz. Achiness near the northeast end thereof Achuchuil quarter mile towards the southwest end. Rihealbhadh a mile from the former, Clibrig a mile from the last.

On the N.W. side stands Grumbeg a mile from the N.E. end Grummore a mile from the former, and Aldnaheirbh at the southwest end of the loch. Into which end there runs two river at half miles distance, the easternmost called the river of Bagisty which runs from its source of bogs and wells amongst the hills and runs eight miles N.E. and falls into the said Lochnaver. this water lies in the road between Sutherland and Strathnaver and is very troublesome when high the passengers that ride, being obliged to cross it upwards of four and twenty times in the distance of three or four miles, and all the adjacent ground is boggy and full of stanks. The

other river that runs into the Lochnaver is that of Mudil, comes likewise from wells and burns among the hills and runs from its source N.E. three or four miles, and waters a farm two miles above the loch, called Mudill. There are two or three farms more of the parish of Farr that have not fallen into the way of the above description viz. Dinachcorie two miles North from Mudil ; Corifuren two miles south from the N.E. end of Lochnaver and Trudarscaig miles S.E. from the said Lochend. Letterghunsary on the foot of the hill called Binstomnis by Lochlaghoill and lastly Borgiebeg a mile up from the bay of Torrisdale on the east side of the river of the same name.

The hills in the Parish of Farr are Binnchlibrig which is six miles in length lying southwest and northeast & stretches amongst the Water of Bagisty, and the Lochnaver at a miles distance from both. It's very high altogether, but sets three very high tops, it hath plenty of Red Deer. It has a considerable wood of birch and arns on the southeast side of it. The only other of any height is Binnstomnu about three miles long lying southwest & northeast . It stands west from Langdale on Strathnaver at three miles distance, there is on the northwest side of it a good wood of birchs arns and other timber.

### **Tongue Parish**

Bounded on the north by the Atlantic Ocean, on the east and south by Farr, and on the west by Durness it extends to 136 square miles. The coast consists of precipitous cliffs, some sandy bays and a long shallow inlet, the Kyle of Tongue. To the west of the Kyle lies the Moine, an undulating tract of bog and moor in the north of which rises Ben Hutig on which Arctous descends to some 500 ft. On the shores of the Kyle, Tongue woods contain many exotic trees. The chief river is the Borgie from Loch Loyal. *Equisetum telmateja* is found on its banks in its upper reaches, the sole locality. Above Loch Loyal stands the picturesque Ben Loyal.

This district, previous to its erection into a separate parish in 1724, and while it constituted but a portion of the original parish of Durness, was called Kintail, a term signifying the head of the sea. The name was derived from the arm of the sea, which, for many miles stretches inland into the parish from the Northern Ocean. The modern name (Tongue,) which at first was written (Tung,) is in all probability derived from a narrow neck of land jutting out transversely for a considerable distance into the Kyle near the House of Tongue, which with resemblance to a protruded tongue.

### **Statistical Account Parish of Tongue 1792**

By The Rev. Mr. William M'kenzie, And the Rev. Mr. Hugh Ross.

Name, Situation, and Extent. The parish of Tongue is situated in the county of Sutherland, the presbytery of Tongue, and synod of Sutherland and Caithness. it is in circuit about 60 miles, and resembles a spherical triangle, whose hypotenuse forms a capacious bay, from which the parish derives its ancient name, Kintail, (cean an tial), which, in Gaelic, signifies the boundary of the sea. It is in length, from east to west, 11 miles, and nearly the same in breadth from north to south.

Soil. The soil varies in different parts of the parish, but is frequently rich, and capable of high improvement. By a judicial rental, taken in December 1789, it appears there are only 89 5/10 penny lands in the parish, which, at 8 acres to the penny lands, is 714 1/2 arable acres; the rest consists of pasture, the extent of which is not ascertained, and much of which is entirely waste.

Hills, Lakes, and Rivers. A semicircular chain of mountains passes nearly through the middle of the parish, the principal of which are Knoc Rheacadon, (The Watchman's Hill), Ben Laoghal\*, and Ben Hope. Ben Laoghal is almost a perpendicular rock, deeply furrowed, and about half a mile high. As it declines towards the west, it is broken into several craggy points,

on one of which are seen the remains of a building, called by the country people Caistal nan Druidhich, the Druid's Castle. About 300 yards below Caistal nan Druidhich, the eye is relieved by a wood of birch, which seems gradually to descent to a lake, one mile in length, that lies at the bottom of the mountain. The north side is covered with heath, and the east with grass, which affords pasture to a number of cattle, horses, sheep, and goats. On this side lies Loch Laoghal, a lake 4 miles long, and one broad. The River Torrisdale takes from this lake, and discharges itself into the sea at Torrisdale, where the channel is about 20 yards wide, and the water 13 feet deep at spring tides. Ben Hope is more than a mile high from the level of the sea, and, except a few spots which are rocky, is wholly covered with heath. Its appearance, in a calm summer evening, when partly obscured by mist, is wonderfully grand, and infuses into the mind a sublime kind of melancholy. Ben Laoghal, and Ben Hope, make a part of Lord Reay's forest, in which there are supposed to be about 2000 deer. From the foot of Ben Hope to the Whiting Head on the west, and as far as Tongue Bay on the east, the Moine, a long tract of hilly desert, covered with dark heath, and interspersed with grayish rocks,

*\*Ben Laoghal is said, in the songs of the bards, as the scene of the death of Dermid, a young man of such extraordinary beauty, that no female heart, of that age, could resist; and withal of such prowess, that even Fingal, whose wise he had reduced, would not himself attack him, but found means to get him slain by a boar. He and the lady, or the boar, (it is not yet determined which), lie buried at the foot of the mountain.*

Impassable bogs, and stagnant pools of brownish water, presents a prospect uniformly rugged and dreary. At Tongue Bay, the prospect varies. An arm of the sea, skirted on each side with corn fields, enclosed pastures, and farm houses, stretches itself 5 miles into the land. On the west side is Melness, an excellent situation for a fishing village, or a woolen manufactory, either of which would be of vast advantage to this part of the country.

Mineral Water. The parish of Tongue abounds in mineral springs; but none of them have as yet been applied to medical purposes. The most remarkable is at Sculomy, about a mile from Knoc Rheacadan. It has a strong sulphurous taste and smell, resembling, it is said, the Moffat waters.

Coast and Cover. From Tongue Bay, the coast extends 16 miles to the north west, as far as the Whiling Head, to only promontory in the parish, and 6 miles to the east, as far as Torrisdale. It is in general high and rocky, and is intersected by several small creeks, in one of which (Port Vaisgaing), there is a quarry of grey slate, and another of excellent flags, both easily wrought, which are conveyed by boats to different parts of the country. The rocks along the coast are hollowed into caves, or formed into arches and pillars, some of them so regular, that they seem to be the work of art. Uaidle-Mbor Freisgill, the Great Cave of Freisgill, extends more than half a mile underground. It is about 50 feet high, and 20 feet wide at the entrance, and grows narrow by degrees, till at last a man can scarcely creep in it. Its sides are variegated with a thousand colours, which are lost in each other with a delicacy and softness that no art can imitate. Upon entering the cave, the mind is impressed with a pleasing sort of awe, which is heightened by the solemn gloominess of the light, the clang of the sea birds that nestle in it, and the mournful dashing of the waves against the adjacent rocks. Numbers of seals are found in this cave. The tides follow the direction of the coast nearly from east to west. There are no currents worth mentioning.

Antiquities. At Melness there are the remains of an ancient building; but so ruinous, and so covered with earth, that its' original form cannot be distinctly traced. It is called Dun Bhuidh, the Yellow Heap, and supposed to be erected by Dornadilla, king of the Scotch. The skeleton of two men were found buried near it some years ago. One of them measured in length above 7 feet. Upon being exposed for some time to the air, they moldered into dust. At the distance of about half a mile from Melness, there are several heaps of stones, and ruins of small circular

buildings, scattered at various distances, on a rising ground near the sea. The circular buildings are said to have been solds, erected to guard the younger cattle from the wolves, with which, it is supposed, the country was once infested. No account is given of these heaps, though, from the size and situation of them, it should seem a battle had been fought on the spot. On the east side of the bay lies Tongue, one of the seats of Lord Reay, a beautiful spot, laid out into gardens, surrounded with beautiful trees, which, in some points of view seem on the one side to wave their tops among the cliffs of Pen Laoghal; and, on the other, to lose themselves in the runs of Caistal a Bbarruich, a structure so ancient, that there is no consistent tradition concerning it. Perhaps it was possessed by John Mackay Abarach, the greatest name for heroism in this part of the Highlands; and, what renders this conjecture the more plausible, there is a cave in the rock upon which the castle is build, called Leabuidh Ecin Abaruich, i. e. them, it should seem a battle had been fought on the spot. On the east side of the bay lies Tongue, one of the seats of John of Lochaber's Bed, whither he is said to have retired in times of danger. A family of the Mackays are descended from him, and are reported still to have in their possession his banner, with this motto, wrought in golden letters, Biodh taun, Biodh treun, i. e. Be valiant.

Islands. The principal islands on the coast are, Ealan no Coomb, or Ealan na Navimph, i. e. the Island of Saints, Eilean nan Ron, or the Island of Seals, and the Rabbit Island. Ealan na Coomb had formerly a chapel and burial place in it, the traces of which are still to be seen. On the south side of the island, the sea, after passing for several yards through eight of 30 feet, through a hole in a rock, which in shape and size is like the moon at full, and a few records afterwards, there is a discharge of water from the east side of the island, with a noise and appearance resembling the explosion of a cannon. This happens only when it is half flood, and a smart gale at north-west. Eilean nan Ron is about 2 miles in circumference, and is inhabited by 4 families, consisting of 36 persons. It is formed of a mixture of sand, and a reddish kind of pebble, which appear as if baked together. About 7 years ago, part of the ground near the middle of this island, sunk in without any visible cause; and, to use Milton's words, 'left i' th' midst a horrid vale?' The Rabbit Island, which lies in the entrance of Tongue Bay, abounds in rabbits. It was formerly called Ealan a Ghail, from a combat (tradition says) sought upon it, between one Gaul and Torquil, in which Gaul obtained the victory; though it is as likely it was called Ealan nan Gaeil, the Island of strangers, from the Danes having landed upon it\*.

*\*Drum na Coup is famous in this country, for a battle fought there between the Mackays and the Sutherlands, in which the Mackays obtained a complete, though mournful victory; for their aged chiestam was accidentally slain by Jomhar Macmhathan, a poltroon, who had been spurred on, by the contemptuous carriage of his wife, to engage in the contest of heroes. Till he agreed to sight, she sed him with pottage, a dish which no person of spirit in this country will deign to taste, as it has been reckoned, since Macmhathan's time, loadh fir as diaigh seach, i. e. the food of cowards. It must place called, from that circumstance, Cnocan an Ceann, the Hillock of the Head.*

Fish. Ling, cod, haddocks, and skate, are caught on this coast, from May till February, and are mostly used by the country people. They are most in season in November, December, and January. Porpoises and otters frequent the coast, and seals in great numbers. The Bay of Tongue abounds with shell fish of various kinds. In the years 1782 and 1783, numbers of poor people, from all parts of the country, had scarcely any other subsistence, but the cockles and mussels they gathered in this bay. The cockles are in season during the summer, and the mussels during the winter months. Loch Laoghal and the Torrisdale, produce fine trout, eels, and salmon. The char (tar deargan) appear in shoals in October, and are caught with nets only. There is a salmon fishing on the Torrisdale.

Quadrupeds and Birds. The several kinds of quadrupeds in the parish are, black cattle, horses, sheep, goats, deer, roes, foxes, hares, and rabbits. The birds are, moor fowls, black cocks, heath hens, partridges, curlews, plovers, snipes, rock pigeons, wild duck, wild geese, swans, and various kinds of sea fowls. The black and grey eagles build their nests in Island na Comb and the Whiting Head. Hawks and owls are sometimes met with. The migratory birds are, wood-cocks, rails, cuckoos, and swallows.

Number of Black Cattle etc. - The number of black cattle, belonging to this parish, is supposed to be, 2142 of horses, 538 of sheep, 2846 and of goats, 714. They sell every year 200 cattle and 100 horses, which, at 2 L. 10 s. each, is 750 L.

Population. The return to Dr. Webster, from the parish of Tongue, in 1755, was 1093 souls. By an accurate enumeration, made, at last spring survey, in the course of catechetical exercises, it was found that there were, at that period, (anno 1791), 1439 souls in this parish, of whom about 200 were number 8 years of age; 23 between 60 and 70; 9 between 70 and 80; and 8 between 80 and 90. The principal cause of the increase of population, is the subdivision of farms, which, by affording employment and provision for a greater number of people, encourages industry and early marriage, and increases the natural attachment to their native soil. There are, however, about 140 more females than males in the parish. In regard that two populous districts of the parish, detached at the distance of several miles from the principal part of it, but adjacent to the neighboring parishes of Farr and Durness, receive baptism, etc. from the ministers of these respective parishes, on account of their vicinity, the dates of births, etc. in these bounds, have been neglected, from time immemorial, to have been given in regularly to the session clerk of Tongue for registration. Thus neglect is to be remedied in future, as it is determined that these ordinances shall not be administered, without certificates from the clerk, bearing, that the facts of births, contract of marriages, etc. have been duly entered in the records of session. In the body of the parish, for some years past, the births did not exceed 17 per annum. The number of baptisms, during last year, was 47, and of marriages, 17. It is difficult, at present, to ascertain the deaths that annually happen in the parish, as some, in the detached bounds above mentioned, bury their dead in the burial grounds of adjacent parishes; and of late, others have been so wise as to inter in ground within the district, recently set apart for that purpose. The number of burials last year was 21.

Food, Fuel, Diseases, etc. The principal food of the people, in general, is potatoes, of which they now raise great quantities. Along with these they have butter, cheese, milk, and fish; and such of them as are richer have sometimes mutton and beef. They are well provided in fuel, the mosses which cover a great part of the parish furnishing them with peats; and, in the winter nights, the moss fir, when dried and cut into stakes, affords a strong, though not a clear light, and serves them instead of candles. The most prevalent distempers are rheumatisms, fluxes, consumptions, and fevers of the nervous and intermitting kinds, all which may be attributed to the moistness of the air, the damp situation of the houses in general, and their low and confined structure. The small-pox used to make terrible havoc, till, about 5 years ago, a gentlewoman, by introducing inoculation, was the means of preserving many lives. She inoculated 99 with her own hand, and paid them such attention, during the progress of the malady, that, except one, they all recovered.

Mode of conducting Burials. Burials are conducted in this parish with very great decorum. None, even of the common people, attend without a particular invitation. After some entertainment, (for at the burial of the poorest here, there is a refreshment given, consisting generally of whisky breath, or some foreign liquor, butter and cheese, with oat bread), the friends of the deceased, and neighbours of the village, who come to witness the interment, are drawn up in rank and file, by an old sergeant, or some veteran who has been in the army, and

who attends to maintain order, and give, as they term it here, the word of relief: Upon his crying Relief! The 4 under the bier prepare to leave their stations, and make room for other 4, that instantly succeed. This progression is observed, at the interval of every 5 minutes, till the whole attendants come in regularly; and if the distance requires it, there is a second, a third, or a fourth round of such evolutions gone through. When the persons present are not inflamed with liquor, which is now seldom the case, there is a profound silence generally observed, from the time the corpse has been taken up, till the interment is over.

Church and Heritor. The church of Tongue was first built in the year 1680. It was almost entirely rebuilt in the year 1731, and repaired in the year 1778. The manse was built in the year 1787. Lord Reay claims the patronage of this parish. He is the only heritor in it. The value of the living, including the glebe, is about 54 L.

Schools. There are two schools in this parish. One of these was erected last year, by the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge, with a salary of 12 L. per annum. It is stationed at Melness, and was visited, in April last, by a committee of the presbytery, whose report bears, that there were then 30 scholars, 10 of whom were girls; and that the teacher is well accommodated, and the proficiency of his scholars considerable for the time they have attended. The other, the parochial and grammar school, is situated not far from the church, on the banks of the little river of Rhians, near the arm of the northern ocean, called the Bay of Tongue, which divides the parish into two distinct parts. It consists of a house 40 feet long, and 15 broad, built with stone and mortar, containing an apartment in one end for the master, and in the other, the school room, accommodated with writing tables, benches, and a desk for the preceptor, lighted by 6 glass windows. There has been lately a discreet of presbytery for its thorough repair. The stated salary is 11 L. 2 1/2 d. the one half of which is paid by the heritor, the other by the tenants. Forty scholars attended last winter and spring. The quarterly fee, for teaching Latin, is 2 s. 6 d.; for book-keeping, 10 s. 6 s.; for arithmetic and writing, 2 s. 6 d.; and for English, only 1 s.

Poor. The number of poor in this parish is 50. They are supported, partly by the Sunday collections; but chiefly by private alms. The crops of 1782 and 1783 failed considerably, as the frost set in the latter end of July, and continued in some degree throughout the whole months of autumn, which blasted the crops, and rendered them unfit to be cut down, till winter was far advanced. However, on account of the maritime situation of the greatest part of the parish, the mildew did not do so much hurt in it, as in parishes more distant from the sea. There was victual sufficient for the maintenance of its inhabitants, till the middle of the following springs; when, not only the poor on the session roll, but families of many small farmers, were reduced to the most deplorable situation for want of bread. In this alarming critical juncture, the session, with the resident gentlemen who were not members of it, met to take into consideration the state of the poor, and to adopt such measures as might tend to their immediate relief. Accordingly the meeting appointed one of their number in every district, to go to solicit the charitable aid of those who had some victual to spare, and to receive from them any quantity they might be pleased to give as a donation to the poor. In consequence of this appointment, some bolls of meal were collected, and distributed among the most indigent. Soon after, the late Hon. General Mackay, tutor to Lord Reay, sent 20 bolls of victual for the poor on the Reay Estate, which, with the government mixt meal, that soon followed, and was sold at the low price of 8 s. per boll, prevented the dreaded consequences of the failure in the crops. Not one person perished from want of bread.

Language. Gaelic is the language generally spoken, and from it the names of the principal parts of the parish are said to be derived. The instances given are, Skerray, from sker, a rock, and Iye, a man's name; Torrisdale, from tor, a tower, and dal, a valley; in which place are to be seen

the ruins of an ancient structure, on a plain between two hills; Kinloch, from cean, a head, and loch, a lake or bay; Acheistal, from achadh, a field, and caistal, a castle; Dalchairn, from dal, a valley, and carn a heap; where there is a Druidical temple built upon a plain. It would require considerable skill in the Gaelic to judge of the propriety of these derivations, and whether sker and dal be Gaelic words. Perhaps they are common to that language and the Danish.

Roads.

It is not many years since roads began to be made in this parish; they are now carried on with great spirit, and rendered as convenient as the nature of the ground will admit. Statute labour is still exacted in kind.

Rent and conversion of Services. The real rent of the parish is 525 L. 19 s. Sterling, in which are included 20 L. as the conversion of those services, which the tenants were formerly used to perform to the proprietor, as the remains of the feudal system. These services were thought a very great grievance, as the tenants were obliged to perform them, at the time they should have been employed in cultivating their own farms. To work without maintenance from their employers, from morning to night, at the distance of several miles from their respective homes, they justly deemed cruel and oppressive, and a violation of the precepts of religion, of justice, and the rights of men. They therefore applied, by petition, to the late Hon. and worthy Commander in Chief of his Majesty's Forces in North Britain, General Mackay, (tutor to Lord Reay, the sole proprietor of this parish), praying for a conversion of said services into money, which that humane and public spirited gentleman most cheerfully granted; and, in a letter to the minister of Tongue, reprobated, in very severe terms, every remnant of such barbarity. Thus the last vestige of feudal domination, and tyrannical oppression, in this remote northern corner of the Highlands, has been abolished, under the auspices and influence of an honorable military gentleman, whose patriotic character, and generous conduct, shall be perpetuated while there is a Mackay living in this country. The farms, in general, of which there are 130, consist of from 1 acre to 40 of arable land, besides pasture; and let at from 10 s. to 12 s. the acre.

Houses. There has not been one house of any note built within these 10 years, except the manse, and 2 convenient farm houses. Several cottages have been built, many old ones pulled down and rebuilt, and others have been repaired. For want of sufficient buildings, the generality of the small farmers employ a great part of every summer in repairing their huts, to the neglect of improving their farms, by collecting, in that season, materials for manure. The number of houses in the parish is 248, all inhabited; and the number of persons in each, at an average, is 5.

Servants and Cottagers. Hired servants are employed in agriculture; but as the wages in this country are low, many go to the southern part of the kingdom for service, and few of the young men stay at home, except those whose parents have employment for them. The number of male servants is 52; of female servants, 176. The wages of men servants, from 1 L. 4 s. to 3 L. yearly, besides shoes, and 6 bolls of meal for board wages; and of women servants, from 1 L. to 10 s. with shoes, and 3 bolls of meal for board wages. Such tacksmen as have sub-tenants, employ them in spring and harvest too frequently to cultivate their land, to the almost utter neglect of their own small farms. To abolish this species of slavery, (which is doubtless in the power of every proprietor, when giving leases), would surely be a patriotic act, by which a great number of worthy people would be emancipated from a degree of bondage almost equal to that of the natives in the West Indies. There are indeed some few exceptions. Some tacksmen are kind and benevolent, and support their subtenants in calamitous times; but the generality naturally prefer their own interest to every other consideration.



General Character. The people of this country do not eat their morsel alone. They open their hospitable door to the traveler; they make the heart of the widow to rejoice; and they grant to the poor his desire. Generosity, indeed, is the principal trait of their character; to this they add devotion to the Supreme Being. An illiterate countryman, while he contemplates the stupendous scenery of rocks piled one upon another, the long extended heath, the tempestuous ocean, and the like, will exclaim, with an expression of countenance not to be described, 'Justly is HE called Wonderful!' They are also fast emerging from their former habits of indolence. Many of them having been in the south country, in their younger days, employed in hard service, have returned to their native soil, with more skill to work, and more free of that Highland pride, which made the ancient inhabitants of the mountain disdain to submit to hard labour, or pursue any other exercise but the chance, or a military life.

Advantage of long Leases. Nothing, indeed, now is wanting to make them as industrious as the Lowlanders, but the introduction of commerce, manufactures, and long leases to the farmers. By the want of long leases, they are discouraged from improving their farms, and building comfortable houses on them. The dread of being removed, when an avaricious neighbour offers an augmentation, and an unfeeling master accepts the bribe of iniquity, ties down the hand of industry, and prevents its operation from extending any further than to labour the ancient fields, and patch up the old cottage. There are two respectable farmers in this parish, who have obtained tolerable long leases some years ago; in consequence of which they have built very commodious houses, enclosed considerable parts of their farms, and are employing every possible method to meliorate every pedicel belonging to them; from which it is evident, that it contributes to the interest of the proprietor to give long leases, as well as to the happiness of the tenant; for, at the expiration of such leases, a double rent can be afforded to be given.

Miscellaneous Observations. The sea weeds, commonly used as manure, are the tang and kelp ware, which are got in abundance. But besides these, there is another kind of ware, resembling kelp ware, of an unctuous appearance, so very rich, that it must be cut into small pieces, and spread thin, otherwise the crop would be too luxuriant. It is called, in Gaelic, semman nam portan, (crab ware) from the number of crabs that are found amongst it. Notwithstanding the great quantity of ware, there is but little kelp made in this parish. There are numbers of small stones, found in the Rabbit Island, of a rusty colour, which here and there emit broken rays of light, and are supposed to be garnet. Mr Mackay of Bighouse has got a specimen of them.

Thunder and lightning are frequent; but seldom followed with any pernicious consequences. About 60 years ago, there were two men killed by lightning near Torrisdale. As this is not a corn country, there is not one ale-house in the parish. There is only one inn, near the church, where good entertainment can be got. This paucity of public houses has most salutary effects on the morals of the people. It is now a rare thing to see a man drunk among them; whereas, in the memory of many, when the smuggling trade prevailed, and foreign liquor abounded in every district, outrages of different kinds were most daringly committed. During the course of the year 1790, no person has been committed to any jail from this parish; nor has any criminal prosecution been commenced against any in it, from time immemorial, one instance only excepted.

### **Statistical Account Parish Tongue 1845**

Topography and Natural History.

Name. This district, previous to its erection into a separate parish in 1724, and while it constituted but a portion of the original parish of Durness, was called Kintail a term signifying the head of the sea, (Ceann an fs\ail). The name was derived from the arm of the sea, which, for many miles stretches inland the parish from the Northern Ocean. The modern name

(Tongue,) which at first was written (Tung,) is in all probability derived from a narrow neck of land jutting out transversely for a considerable distance into the Kyle near the House of Tongue, which Wars it resemblance to a protruded tongue. The Gaelic as well as the English, name of that organ justifies this derivation.

Boundaries, Extent. It would seem by the record of erection that the boundaries of this parish extended from Torrisdale, in the east, to the water of Polla, in the west; from the Whiten head, in the north to the great deer forest, in the south. By use and wont, however, these boundaries are greatly contracted on the west, in which direction the parish is considered now only to extend to the top of the Moine or the Ben Hope mountain range. The parish of Farr is contiguous on the east and south-east, and the parish of Durness on the west and south-west. On the north, it is bounded by the Northern Ocean. Its figure is irregular, somewhat resembling, as is mentioned in the former account, a spherical triangle. The extreme length from north to south is 20 miles; average 15. The extreme breadth from east to west is 12 miles; average 8. As nearly as can be computed, its superficial extent is 140 square miles.

Topographical Appearances. The general aspect of the parish is mountainous. In topographical character, however, it is divided into two districts, distinct from-each other. The first embraces all that is peculiarly alpine, and is the principal part of the parish as to extent, population, culture, and beauty. It lies towards the west, and consists of the great valley of Tongue, formed by the arm of the sea already mentioned, with the streams which flow from the interior into the head of it. On either side of the bay, two mountain-ranges, rising abruptly and boldly from the ocean, stretch along its whole length, and continue taking nearly a parallel direction, till interrupted by a third range, stretching from east to west, which consists of the mountain of Ben Laogbal and its arms. The whole constitutes a semicircular chain of hills, apparently continuous, and gives to the valley the form of a spacious amphitheater. The western range, commencing with Ben Hutig, which is 1345 feet high, is for some miles of nearly an uniform height, and somewhat monotonous, till it reaches its southern extremity, when it suddenly terminates in the huge mountain of Ben Hope, 3061 feet high. The eastern range is a series of rounded bills, not very lofty, rising above the bay sometimes abruptly, but in general receding so gently, as to afford scope for considerable cultivation on their sides. The Ben Laoghal range is the most occupies the central point of the whole semicircular chain; therefore, from its position as well as from its romantic outlines, it is the southern extremity of a low extensive valley, it starts up majestically to the height of 2508 feet, presenting towards its base an expanded breast of two miles in breadth, and cleft at its top into four massy towering and splintered peaks, standing boldly aloof from each other. These gradually diminish in height, one after the other. The highest stands proudly forward to occupy the fore-ground; the rest recede a little, as if each were unwilling to protrude itself, from a conscious inferiority to its predecessor. As a graceful finish to its outlines, it stretches forth an arm on either side, as if to embrace condescendingly the other mountain ranges, which may well acknowledge it as chief, and which may readily be fancied as doing it homage. On a summer morning, or after a sweet summer shower, when the transparent mist is reposing on its bosom, or coiling among its peaks, the appearance of this hill is very beautiful, and often singularly fantastic. Within this great chain, there are various objects which constitute marked features in the scenery of the district. Amongst these, the Kyle occupies a prominent place, so studded with islands at its mouth that, from some points of view, its connection with the ocean seems wholly intercepted. Towards its centre, the point of Tongue and a small island adjacent thereto, tend farther to charm and relieve the eye, by breaking in upon the continuous sheet of water. Another interesting and conspicuous object is the promontory of Castle Varrich. It consists of a small hill range, running south and north, rising gradually from the low ground at the foot of Ben Laogbal, and terminating at its northern extremity in a bold rock of considerable altitude, which is washed

at its base by the water of the Kyle, and has its conical summit surmounted by a fine old ruin, which imparts a pleasing effect. Altogether, the scenery of this part of the parish is much and universally admired. The hand of man has undoubtedly done somewhat to embellish it; but little, very little, to what might be effected. Even Macculloch, with all his antipathy to the north, has admitted, that, were the Moine, on west side of the Bay, to some extent planted, this place would not be exceeded in beauty by many parts of the Highlands. The second or eastern division of the parish is rather tame and monotonous. In the interior, this is partially relieved by lochs of various sizes, which are scattered with profusion in every direction, and the ground, moreover, is of a softly undulating character; the rocks being clothed with an almost unbroken surface of verdure grey and fretted-like, uninteresting in its general aspect, and apparently barren. Yet in the midst of this district, when more closely examined, there will be found numerous little glens, bearing a rich soil and a large population.

The coast is in general high and rocky, and round the promontory of the Whiten-head exceedingly bold and picturesque. The rocks are frequently intersected by creeks, and formed into caves and arches. The caves of Freisgill, which are described in the former Account of this parish, have been noticed in the Account of the parish of Durness, in consequence of the modern ideas regarding the boundaries of the two parishes. The islands are Eilean na naoimh, (saint's island)-Eilean na roan (seal island,) and the Rabbit Islands. Eilean na naoimb, situated, close by the eastern coast of the parish, had formerly a chapel and burial-place on it, the traces of which are still to be seen. On the south side of the island, the sea, after passing for several yards through a 'narrow channel, spouts up into the air, sometimes to the height of thirty feet, through a hole in the rock, which, in shape and size, is like the moon at full, and a few seconds afterwards, there is a discharge of water from the east side of the island, with a noise resembling the explosion of cannon."

Eilean nann roan is of considerable size, and has the appearance of two islands, particularly at high water. Part of it is scooped out into the form of a basin, in which the soil is very fertile, and cultivated by a few small tenants. Its rocks are high and precipitous, and to the north side abound with deep narrow fissures, through which the wind rushes with great violence. As this wind, besides being sharp and piercing, is impregnated with saline matter, from its blowing across the ocean, or perhaps from carrying along with it the spray which dashes from off the rocks beneath, the natives take advantage thereof for economical purposes. In these fissures, they season their fish without using salt. On this north side also there is a spacious and elegant looking arch, about 150 feet span, and 70 feet broad. About the middle of the island, there is a large circular hole, which has fallen in many years ago, and is supposed to communicate with the sea by a subterranean cavern.

The Rabbit. Islands, three in number are further within the mouth of the, Bay. This island is well worthy of being visited by travelers who are desirous to see the natural curiosities of the country than the former, and so in some measure removed from the raging of the ocean. The rocks are not very high. The soil is sandy, though covered with verdure. The present name of these islands sufficiently indicates who their principal inhabitants are. The ancient name was Eilean na Gaeil, the island of strangers, from the Danes having been said to have landed upon it. The principal bays are those of Torrisdale and Tongue; the former is open and tempestuous, affording little or no shelter for vessels; the latter is the Kyle, or arm of the sea, already noticed. Its length is about ten miles, the average breadth about a-mile and a-half. Its depth is nowhere great, and, from the shifting nature of its sand banks, navigation is difficult and often perilous. There is, however, good anchorage for ships of any burden at the Rabbit Islands, where they may ride with safety in storms from most directions. A fine roadstead is also to be found in its neighborhood at Talmine, a pretty bay that branches off the west side of the Kyle. It has a smooth beach, and a fine bottom is much sheltered from the most tempestuous winds, and

commands a ready exit to the ocean. At present, it is one of the principal fishing stations on the coast. By the erection of quays, and by connecting the mainland with a small island lying close by on the north side, it might be made one of the most commodious harbours in the north. Almost opposite to Talmine, on the east side of the Kyle, there is the creek of Sculomy, which at present shelters a few fishing boats, but which an inconsiderable expense might render a safe station for many more.

Meteorology. Considering the latitude of this parish, its temperature is mild, and the climate is very salubrious, though the state of the atmosphere is in general extremely changeable. The heat is not so great in summer, nor the cold so intense in winter, as these seem to be in some of the southern parts of Scotland. Placed in a central position between the west and east coasts of the island, it is not visited by those frequent deluges of rain which are peculiar to the former, nor so exposed to those piercing blighting winds which prevail in the latter. The prevailing winds are the south-west and northwest. The severest storms are from the south-west, the most frequent from the north-west. The prevalent distempers, as connected with the climate, are rheumatism and inflammatory complaints; but more common than either are disorders of the stomach among the poorer-people, arising from a diet often too scantily, and sometimes unwholesome. Luminous meteors are frequent. The circle round the moon and the aurora borealis are sometimes brilliant in winter. When the latter is fiery and lurid, it is an invariable sign of stormy weather. The former generally prognosticates the same, so also does the fragment of a rainbow when seen in the north, called `` Boar's head."

Hydrography. The parish abounds with springs, which are generally perennial, but sometimes intermittent. Chalybeate springs are quite common. Sulphureous ones are found in several places, chiefly around Ben Laoghal, and there are some which seem to be a compound of both. None of these have been properly analyzed, but some of the sulphureous seem of such strength, that, were they more accessible, they might be found medicinally of considerable service. Lochs are so numerous, that from a single eminence, which does not command a view of the whole parish, I have counted more than 100. The most deserving of notice are the following:-

Loch Maedie, in the southern extremity of the parish, which may be about six miles in circumference. Its appearance is striking, from its margin being singularly indented by numerous little bays and projecting points of land, and from its bosom being studded with islands, on which grow trees of considerable size.

Loch Diru lies at the foot of the Diru rock, which is a part of the west arm of Ben Laoghal. The loch is two miles long, and the rock, which is nearly the same length, towers majestically above it to the height of 200 feet,-its brow adorned at pleasing intervals with solitary trees of birch and mountain-ash. This loch is one of the unobserved beauties of the parish, lying the east and south-east sides of Ben Laoghal, there is a chain of lochs of considerable extent, called Lochs Cullisaid, Laoghal, Craggy, and Slam, which communicate with each other by narrow fords or small rivulets.

Loch Laoghal is the largest of the four, and, indeed, the largest in the parish,-being five miles long and upwards of a mile, broad. There are two islands upon it, where wild-fowl nestle in great numbers. The verdure in its neighborhood is rich. A few trees fringe its margin on the west side, and on the opposite there rises a hill of considerable height, scree to the top, with a thriving birch-wood at its base. Loch Craggy is interesting, by commanding a fine profile view of Ben Laoghal. Were this chain connected by a road with Lochs Maedie and Diru, sweeping round the whole of Ben Laoghal, it would form a ride which, as regards loch and mountain scenery could, for the same extent, be rarely surpassed in beauty.

The rivers are, the Borgie, Rhians, and Kinloch; none of them of much consequence. The Borgie (called in the former Account the Torrisdale) rises from Loch Slam, and, after separating this parish from that of Farr during the greater part of its course, falls into the sea on the west side of the Bay of Torrisdale. The Rhians and the Kinloch, neither of them more than two miles in length, fall into the head of the Kyle of Tongue, former on the east side of Castle Varrich. the latter on its west. Cascades are numerous, and some of them pretty though on a small scale.

Geology. The principal rock in the parish is gneiss. It constitutes the mountain range of Ben Hutig and the Moine, likewise the smaller range of Castle Varrich, and prevails throughout the whole extent of the eastern division of the parish. Its mineral character seems to be the common ternary compound of quartz, feldspar, and mica; though not unfrequently hornblende is substituted for the latter. The aspect of this rock varies much from the component minerals, and, from the size of these minerals, as distinct concretions. It is regularly stratified, though in some places, as towards the east, this is not so evident, from the strata being intersected by quartz and granite veins, and disturbed and contorted by what appears, in some cases, the action of fire, and, in others, the action of water. The direction of the strata on the west of Tongue Bay is south-east, at an angle of  $20^{\circ}$ . On the east of the Bay their direction is west-south-west, at an angle of  $40^{\circ}$ , with the exception of a small district at Sculomy, where the direction is south-south-east, and the angle  $60^{\circ}$ . In various places garnet is found imbedded in this rock. Ben Hope is composed of mica-slate, being part of a very extensive district where this rock is developed. A stripe of the same formation is also found at the shore side, on the west side of the bay, stretching from a point opposite the village of Tongue to a place called Portvasgo, near the Rabbit Islands. It connects with, and conforms to, the gneiss of the mountain range above it, the strata being in the same direction and at the same angle. The rocks of Eilean nan roan are a fine specimen of the conglomerate, which rests upon red sandstone. The sandstone is only to be seen in the north side of the island, stratified in the direction west-south-west, at an angle of  $10^{\circ}$ ; at which point the junction of the two formations is very distinct and beautiful. The mountain-range, stretching along the east side of the Kyle from Coldbackie to Cnoc-Craggy, consists of conglomerate capping the gneiss, and resting horizontally on its fractured beds. The junction in this case is quite visible in some exposed rocks at Coldbackie. Red sandstone has also been discovered at one point in this mountain range, near Dalcharn. The whole mountain of Ben Laoghal is sienite, which consists of a light flesh-red feldspar, grey quartz, and black or dark green hornblende, with minute and sparingly disseminated crystals of brown sheen. In several places the quartz almost disappears the rock then becoming a binary compound of feldspar and hornblende. The structure of this sienite on the small scale is small granular, while on the large it is disposed in a deed, few localities can be pointed out in Scotland where this beautiful rock arrangement is more characteristically developed. From various parts of its summit the entire structure may be traced with the utmost precision, and the several tabular concretions followed, with little variation, throughout its whole extent. The lateral planes of the tabular concretions are in general nearly parallel, and exhibit an almost polished surface. This mountain might, if other circumstances rendered it expedient, be wrought extensively for building materials. Such would be attended with but little difficulty as far as the raising of the stone is concerned, while the tabular form is so regular, that, for many purposes, very little dressing would be requisite. Black manganese ore has been found on the top of Ben Laoghal. Bog iron ore is very common. Granite boulders are frequent about Tongue village. Whence they have come, is a problem not easy to solve. The principal alluvium is peat, which covers a great proportion of the parish: a quantity of fir-wood is found imbedded in it. The soil, which is, or has been, under cultivation, is in some places a black rich loam; in others a sandy loam; but, perhaps, the most common is a soil compounded of gravel and peat, with an admixture either of clay or sand.

Zoology. The zoology of the parish is such as is common to the whole of this north coast, on which the various species of quadrupeds, birds, and fishes are numerous. Game of almost every description is to be found in the parish, but not in such abundance as formerly, owing, it is supposed, to the extensive moor burnings upon the sheep farms. Fishing upon lakes and Cunningham's Geognosy of Sutherland, a work to which the writer is in much indebted in drawing up this article rivers has also fallen of; to account for which, many opinions have been entertained, which at best are more conjectures. The fresh water fishes generally used at table are, salmon, grilse, trout, and char. Those got on the coast are chiefly herring, cod, ling, haddock, whiting, skate, and flounder. In September, quantities of coal-fish are caught close to the rocks. Turbot and tusk are occasionally found. The upper part of the Kyle abounds with shellfish, which are easily gathered, as the sea ebbs a considerable distance. Mussels and spout-fish of excellent quality are to be had but cockles are the most abundant of all. These are of various sizes and colours. All of them, however, are rich and delicious when in season, which is from April to September. They are highly relished by strangers, who are loud in their praises; and they are an invaluable blessing to those within reach of them, who, during the summer months, use them daily as an article of food.

Botany. The flora of this parish is not known to contain any plants peculiar to itself, or such as are very rare in other places. Perhaps the following are among those most deserving of notice. Some of them, though rare in this parish, are common in other parts of this country.

*Betula nana*, *Fragaria vesca*, *Nymphaea alba*, *Carex hirta*, *Habenaria viridis*, *Oxytropi uralenais incurve*, *Hyacinthus non-scriptus*, *Primula Scotica*, *limosa Juniperus communis*, *Saxifraga oppositifolia*, *Cherleria sedoides*, *Lamium album*, *Silene inflata*, *Cynoglossum officinale*, *Listera ovata*, *Veronica serpyllifolia*, *Digitalia purpurea*, *Lycopodium clavatum*, *Vicia Cracca*, *Dryas octopetala alpinum*, *Festuca bromoides* *Melampyrum pretense*. None of the native plants are now employed for culinary purposes, though formerly mugwort and nettle were made use of in this way. Ragwort is sometimes used as an emollient; and the leaves of ribwort plantain are successfully applied to fresh wounds. Heather is employed to dye green; ragwort to dye yellow; the lichen obtained on stones, to dye red-brown; and alder bark, to dye black, which, by the addition of copperas, is effectually fixed, and made to assume a still deeper hue. The native arborescent species now to be met with, are not numerous, and for the most part rather stunted in their growth. *Betula alba* (birch) predominates. *Salix alba*, *S. cinerea*, (white and grey willow,) *Corylus Avellana* (hazel,) and *Pyrus aucuparia* (the mountain-ash,) come next, in nearly equal quantities. *Alnus glutinosa* (alder,) and *Prunus spinosa* (sloe,) fringe the water courses. *Ilex aquifolium* (holly) frequent in rocky burns and cascades. *Quercus robur* (oak) is to be seen in a few places; but, from its being exposed to be trodden down by cattle, it only attains the size of a thriving shrub. It may be mentioned, that *Ulex Europaus* (whin) and *Cytisus Scoparius* (broom) grow freely in several places; but both were probably introduced about sixty years ago. The natural wood, which, for a long time, was neglected and destroyed, and in consequence fast dwindling away, has of late years been well kept and thinned. The only plantations of any extent in the parish are those around the House of Tongue. There are specimens to be seen here of beech, elm, ash, and lime, which, for size and beauty, may vie with any in the north. The greater part of these plantations are of recent date, composed of a mixture of hard-wood, fir, and plane- tree, for all of which the soil seems well adapted. Larch and spruce fir thrive much better than the Scotch. Altogether the plantations are in a most flourishing condition, and prove beyond a doubt the advantages that would accrue to such a country as this from their greater extension. Besides beautifying the scenery, they would ameliorate the climate, and become a fruitful source of revenue. The ordinary fruit-trees thrive well when they obtain the support and shelter of a good wall.

## ii.--Civil History.

Distinguished Families. This parish is the birth-place, and was the residence of the most of the noble family of Reay. Some of these signalized themselves for prowess and skill in the military operations of their own times: among whom may be mentioned Donald first Lord Reay, who so distinguished himself in the wars of Gustavus Adolphus. Tradition ascribes to him most singular superhuman powers of body. There were other members of this family who, though not distinguished as public characters, devoted their influence to the welfare of their people, by whom their memories were cherished for several generations, for intelligence, patriotism, and exemplary piety. A full account of them will be found in Mackay's History of the House and Clan of Mackay.

Ministers. Though erected in 1724, this parish was not supplied with a minister till 1726, when Mr. George Mackay was appointed, who only lived two years. His successor was Mr. Walter Ross, a man of fine preaching talents, but whose reserved manners and, secluded habits were not calculated to gain upon the rough, frank Highlander. He occupied the parish till 1763, when he resigned. After his resignation Mr. John Mackay was appointed, who, being of a weak and sickly constitution, was unable to labour efficiently in the parish, and only lived in the charge for six years. In 1769, he was succeeded by Mr. William Mackenzie. As his incumbency forms an era in the history of this parish, his name deserves special notice in such an account as this. A native of Ross-shire, soon after his license, he came to officiate as missionary in the neighboring parish of Farr; and though possessing highly popular talents, a liberal education, and prospects of advancement elsewhere through influential friends, yet, having formed a strong attachment to his adopted country, he accepted a call to this parish when vacant by the death of Mr. Mackay. He found it in a deplorable state of religious ignorance. Scarce could one be found to repeat the Shorter Catechism. There was only one elder within the bounds, and it was impossible to fix on others, bearing the necessary religious character, who could be ordained to this office so as to constitute a session. The sanctity of the Lord's day was grossly violated by persons forming bargains, going and coming to the house of God. A general apathy to the means of grace was manifest; and several gross practices, the relics of a barbarous age, were common at funerals and festivals.

With these evils to contend against, he entered on his charge with zeal and energy, and an untiring devotedness to the interests of his flock. But, for three years, he seemed to labour in vain, and the feeling of his heart was, "Woe is me that I sojourn in Mesech." At last, the time to visit this portion of Zion was come. One day he took occasion from the pulpit to remonstrate plainly and faithfully with the people, for their several sins; declared his own ardent hopes of being instrumental in reforming them, when he entered the parish; the bitterness of his feelings in his disappointment hitherto, and his prayer to God, that were this to continue He would remove him from amongst them. Overpowered by his feelings, he could proceed no longer. For the first time, the congregation were seen bathed in tears, and overwhelmed with a feeling of shame and from that day there was the most marked change; a truly fruitful revival was the consequence. The people showed all docility in receiving the instructions of their pastor; the house of God was thronged by persons from the most distant corners of the parish; respect and attention were shown to the ordinances and duties of religion; barbarous usages were gradually laid aside; and under his affectionate, glowing, and faithful ministry, there sprang up a race of intelligent Christians, so that he was soon enabled to form a throng session of elders, who, considering their station in society, were ornaments in the church. Likewise under his fostering care, several young men were reared for the ministry, all of whom, with scarce an exception, he had the pleasure of seeing the instruments of extensive usefulness. This honoured servant of the Lord labored for sixty-five years among a devotedly attached people, being able to preach and administer the sacraments to the very last. He died in 1834, at the advanced age of ninety-

six. His people commonly spoke of him as "the great minister," and testified their esteem and affection by erecting a handsome monument to his memory.

Parochial Register. There was no register kept, previous to the year 1775. From that period till 1797 there was a record of births and marriages regularly made up; but the person who was session-clerk at that time became deranged, which was never suspected till it was incontestably proved, by his being found one morning busily employed in the churchyard distributing papers on the grave-stones, with the sanguine hope of raising an army from the dead. On examination, these papers were discovered to be the parish register, so torn as to be completely useless. From 1797 marriages and births were registered, but not in a permanent form, and many of the loose sheets have been lost through the carelessness of clerks. However, since 1816, a correct register has been regularly kept.

Antiquities. The most striking ruin is Castle Varrich, standing on the promontory already mentioned, bearing the same name. It is a square building, which originally consisted of two stories, the first arched with stone, the second covered with wood. Its dimensions inside are not great; the walls are thick, and still of a considerable height. Tradition is silent as to its history, on which subject its name has given rise to various conjectures; but most probably the name is merely derived from a Gaelic word signifying the castle on the eminence. The remains of several circular towers the circumstance of one being always in sight of another, are supposed to have been erected for the purpose of conveying telegraphic information when an enemy threatened to invade the country. Several subterranean caves have been found in the parish, long and narrow in their construction, with a small entrance. From various circumstances they appear to be artificial, and were probably occupied by the natives, in warlike times, as places of retreat. The only tumuli to be seen, are at a place called Druim na Coup, where, as has been noticed in the former account, a battle was fought between the Mackays and the Sutherlands. Upon the same ground, or nearly so, a party of French were seized in 1746, going south with gold to aid the rebels. The French vessel in which they were conveyed, being pursued off this coast, ran for safety into the Bay of Tongue, and the party, carrying their valuable treasure, landed at Melness, where for a night they were protected by a gentleman of kindred sentiments. Next day, his son went to conduct them by the safest route through the country, but, as soon as their character and object were known, they were pursued by a band of natives from several neighbouring places. When the French came to Druim na, Coup, finding that these were in chase, of them, and hearing the beating of a drum resounding from the cliffs of Ben Laoghal, indicating the approach of soldiers from the south, they at once surrendered. Much of the gold was lost, being probably thrown into a deep loch in the neighbourhood, but a considerable quantity was appropriated by those who led on the pursuit. A few gold coins have since been found at a considerable distance from Druim na Coup.

Population. In 1755, the population by return to Dr. Webster was 1093 in 1791, 1439 in 1831, by Government Census, 2030 and in 1838, 2080. Of these 956 were males; 1124 were females. In 1791 it is stated that the births were 47, and marriages 17. Since 1831, births have averaged 44, and marriages it thus appears that, in a population of 1439, there were more births and marriages especially the latter, than there are now in a population of 2080. The probable solution of this strange fact is, that the population, having increased till it has become a burden on, the land at present cultivated, the subdividing of crofts having been prohibited, and the ordinary sources of industry by sea and land having, for some time, either proved unproductive or being shut up, the young of both sexes felt that they could not marry without running the hazard of being soon exposed to hardships and want. When marriages decrease, births of course share the same fate. The Duke of Sutherland the only nobleman connected with the parish as proprietor, has a residence in it the House of Tongue, which he occasionally occupies for a few days in autumn, when visiting his extensive domains in the north. Part of it is indent sheep-



farmers; a medical practitioner, whom the proprietor encourages by giving a free house and, L. 60 annually; and a fishery officer. The peasantry reside in hamlets, and when a road passes through, the houses are arranged in a straight line on the one side, each standing on the croft of land attached to it. 244 pay rent. There are about 116 families, besides, who are, mere cottars, having no land, in the majority of cases without any trade, and depending for their sustenance on a little day labour and on the kindness of their neighbours, who often give them patches of their own small crofts for raising a few potatoes. There are 4 carpenters, 10 masons, 8 tailors, 9 shoemakers, 3 smiths, and 1 watchmaker. There are 6 fatuous, none insane, 2 dumb, and none who were blind from birth.

Language. The language of the peasantry is Gaelic; in it they invariably converse with one another, but, owing to the influx of persons, from the south, the influence of schools, and the frequency with which they go south in quest of labour, English is generally understood by the young, and spoken by many of them with considerable accuracy.

Character of the People. The young of both sexes are ambitious to dress well, so as to make a respectable appearance on Sabbaths and holidays. This is a laudable feeling, though it sometimes leads to extravagance, by inducing them to expend their hard-won earnings in sacrificing comfort to occasional show when dressed in their best attire they are allowed to be a fine-looking peasantry. At the late Duke of Sutherland's funeral, when numbers from the whole county were invited to attend, and directed to line the road, arranged according to their respective parishes, as the procession passed by, the men from Tongue attracted general notice for their superior dress and appearance. It might hence be expected that their comforts were also superior; but no. They are, indeed, not worse off than their neighbours in this respect. The general standard is, however, wretchedly low. No doubt a few of them are comfortable, but the generality seldom can rise above the commonest necessities of life; and it is painful to think of how some eke out a subsistence. The consequence is, that poverty is gradually manifesting its baneful effects upon the intellects and morals of naturally a fine and generous people. The taste for music, dancing, and public games, is much on the decline, and few or no traces are to be seen of the poetic talent and sprightly wit for which their ancestors, in common with most Highlanders, were distinguished.

The imaginative powers are crushed under the continued pressure of a poverty that impels the mental energies in the low direction of what shall we eat and what shall we drink; and the habits of reflection and deep-thinking are exchanged for a sharp-sightedness in looking after their little secular interests. It is impossible that circumstances which have thus operated on their intellectual character, should not also affect their morals and religious feeling. They have done so, though not so greatly as might be expected; and it is saying much to their credit, that there is so little amount of crime, and so much security for person and property. There were never but two from this parish tried at a judiciary court, one not a native, and the other only for a breach of trust. The people are kind and peaceable, patient under adversity, submissive to laws, and respectful to authorities. They possess a good deal of religious knowledge, and much veneration for religious ordinances and usages. It is rare now to find one who cannot repeat the Shorter Catechism, and the writer knows not that such a thing exists among the native peasantry as a family without the daily worship of God. Many among them are decided Christians. The generality, it is to be feared, rest satisfied, however, with acquiring vague ideas, and engaging in empty forms; while it is matter of painful experience that the downward earthly tendency of their thoughts, induced so much by poverty, has a fearful effect in deadening their minds to religious impressions. It is manifest, also, that intercourse with the ungodly when south, and at the herring-fishing in Caithness, together with the desecration of the Lord's Day by travelers from other places, (a sin till lately happily unknown), are very injurious to their morals and religious sentiments. Laziness is no other characteristic of the people. They are alive to the

advantages of industry. In proof of which many of them, annually go south, because so little encouragement is given them at home. Poaching is, unknown, and smuggling has been effectually put down through the exertions of the proprietor.

#### Iv.-Industry.

Agriculture. The number of imperial acres in cultivation is about 1000. It may safely be said, that three times this number might be added with a profitable application of capital. There are 200 acres of plantation, and fully 500 acres under natural wood. The extent of the latter is not easily ascertained, from, the irregular manner in which it is disposed.

Rent. The real rental of the parish is L. 22812, 13s. 11d. of which letters pay L. 757, 1 Is. 3d. and large farmers. L, 1525 2s. 8d. the average rent of arable land per acre is L.1.

Wages. Tradesmen are allowed 2s. a day, and day-labourers Is. 6d. in summer, and Is. in winter.

The raw produce which is offered for sale is trifling. Those who do sell, are regulated by market-prices. Very superior Cheviot sheep are reared upon the large farms, which are highly esteemed, and fetch high prices in the southern markets. The small tenants rear the black-faced breed, or more generally a cross between it and the Cheviot. From want of full feeding, their pasture being limited and generally overstocked, both their sheep and their cattle are stunted in their growth. A real Highland pony can now seldom be seen. The system of farming upon the crofts is decidedly bad. The tenants, besides endeavoring to keep more cattle than they can properly feed, employ a rotation of potatoes, bear, and oats, which the land, thus constantly cropped, is so exhausted, that in many places the force of manure cannot now make it yield an adequate return. Besides, it is seldom properly drained or fenced, so that in winter it is commonly very wet, and injured by the poaching of cattle. As a proof of the deteriorating effects of this system of husbandry, it may be mentioned, that while the land cultivated by the large farmers will yield on an average seven returns in grain crops, the small tenants seldom obtain above four returns of bear, and as to oats, they do not calculate upon more than double the seed. The potato crop is that alone which gives a really remunerating return. The large farmers have leases of nineteen years' duration. Small tenants have only one year's tenure of their land, which is certainly a discouragement to them in improving their lots.

Quarries. The only quarries that have been wrought are on the Melness, or west side of the Bax of Tongue, a flag quarry at Portvasgo, and a slate quarry at Talmine. Both are of the mica-slate formation. They, have been wrought to a considerable extent, and have been found very useful for several country purposes. The expense of quarrying, however, is too great to make this a profitable trade, or to admit of much export, and accordingly it has of late been almost discontinued.

Fisheries. There is a salmon-fishing upon the water of Borgie, where on an average 2000 fish are caught yearly. The herring- fishery is that which has been carried on most extensively in the parish. At one time it promised to be profitable; of late, however, it has turned out a ruinous speculation, as the annexed accounts will show.

In 1833, boats fishing, 30--barrels cured, 3538--average per boat, 118

1835, do.	64	do.	6304	do.	98 1/2
1839, do.	68	do.	1425	do.	21
1840, do.	68	do.	1233	do.	18

#### Raw Produce.

Produce of grain of all kinds, - - - - L. 3450

Potatoes and turnips, - - - -	1939	
Meadow and cultivated hay, - - - -	500	
Land in pasture, rating at 15s. per cow, and at 2s. 6d. per ewe or full-grown sheep,	3080	
Gardens, - - - - -	140	
Thinning of woods and plantations, - -	60	
Fisheries, sea and river, - - - -	1300	
Quarries, - - - - -	20	
Miscellaneous produce, viz. fuel, sea-weed, and cockles,	541	11,030

Manufactures. From twenty to thirty tons of kelp were annually manufactured in this parish until 1832; but since then, as its place has been supplied by cheaper substitutes, the price has suffered such a depression as to render it no object for employing labourers.

#### V.--Parochial Economy.

Means of Communication. There is no market-town in the parish; the nearest is Thurso, in the county of Caithness, distant forty-five miles. There is a post-office in the village of Tongue, and mails run three times a week to Thurso, and twice a-week to Golspie. There is also a post to Durness, whose days of arriving and starting correspond to those of the Golspie mail. The vehicle from Golspie carries three passengers; that from Thurso carries four inside and four outside. A lighter vehicle, however, runs on this latter line during winter, which only accommodates five passengers. The length of roads in the parish is  $39\frac{3}{4}$  miles. Of these, 11 are Parliamentary,  $14\frac{3}{4}$  county trust roads, and 14 private tenantry roads. They are kept in excellent repair. The bay of Tongue is crossed by a ferry 1262 yards broad. In 1830-31, slip quays were built, and proper boats procured. This ferry, which is a great annoyance to travelers, might be shortened to a fourth of its present breadth, by constructing a mound between the point of Tongue, and the island adjacent there to. As the water here is not very deep, nor the current strong, and as profusion of materials lie ready at hand, it is believed by many that such an undertaking would not be very expensive.

Ecclesiastical State. The church is so situated as to be nearly equidistant from the several extremities of the parish. There are, however, two populous districts on either side of it, so remote, that few of the people can attend public worship. The Skerray district to the east, which contains a population of 630, is from seven to eleven miles distant from the church. The Melness district to the west, with a population of 690, is from four to eight miles distant, separated, moreover, by the arm of the sea, the crossing of which is always expensive and often impracticable. Each of these stand much in need of the labors of a resident minister. Melness forms the chief part of a mission connected with part of the parish of Durness. The missionary is supported by the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge; and a church and manse were built by the late Duchess-Countess of Sutherland. The parish church was built in 1680, was nearly rebuilt in 1731, and repaired 1778. A few years ago, new doors were put in, and some of the pews a little improved. It is seated for 520, being just sufficient accommodation for the proportion of the people who can conveniently attend. There are no seat rents. The pews were originally purchased by the parishioners, and continue the property of their descendants while they remain in the parish. In winter, when the people are all at home, the church is well filled, and the people are diligent in attending the catechetical ministrations of their pastor. There is one catechist chosen by the people, and supported chiefly by a small salary from the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge. The number of elders are eleven, and of male heads of families communion with the church 45. Collections are annually made for the General Assembly's five schemes, and occasionally for other objects. There are no Dissenters, Secedes, Episcopalians, or Roman Catholics in the parish.

The manse was built in 1787, and has never got a thorough repair; a new substantial house is, however, to be commenced early this season, having been already contracted for. The stipend is L. 150, with an allowance for communion elements. When the present incumbent entered on the charge, the glebe was of little value; the hill-grazing was a share of an undivided common, and the little arable land was rig about with adjoining tenants. An examination being obtained, and quantity given for quality, improvements have since been carried on at great expense, and the glebe might probably fetch a rent of L.50 per annum.

Education. At present there are three schools in the parish the parochial, and two supported by the Educational Committee of the General Assembly. One of the Assembly's schools is at Skerray, the other at Melness. Last year there were three schools besides, two supported by private subscription, which, for several causes, have since been suppressed, the third was a Gaelic school, granted by the Gaelic School Society, which has been discontinued by the managers, though only two years in operation, and particularly useful. When the schools were examined last spring, there were nearly 400 children in attendance. The schools at present still in existence are efficiently conducted. The common branches of education are taught in them all. The parochial teacher is qualified to teach mathematics, Latin, Greek, and French, but there are very few now who prosecute these studies. His accommodation as to school room, dwelling house, and garden, is excellent.. His salary is the maximum, but fees are still paid. The people in general are more alive now to the benefits of education than they have been, though still there is vast room for improvement. Irregularity in attendance, and want of proper school books, formidability to buy them, are serious drawbacks to the proficiency of the scholars. There is one part of the Melness side where an additional school is decidedly required. It is removed at a considerable distance from the place where the Assembly school is situated, and is separated by a large rivulet, which, from want of a bridge, is, for the most part, impassable in winter. Were a school got for this locality, upwards of forty children might attend it.

Literature. Two years ago, a subscription library and a reading club were set on foot, through the strenuous and praiseworthy exertions of Mr. Horsburgh, the local factor. The members of the library exceed 100. These, however, do not all belong to this parish. Every member on admission pays 5s, and 2s. 6d. of yearly contribution. The number already amounts to 455, consisting of a choice selection of books in; biology, history, poetry, travels, memoirs. Many of them are donations received by Mr. Horsburgh from his acquaintances in the south, and sent by others who have taken an interest in this promising instigation. The gentlemen of the club purchase new standard works, and instead of exposing them to sale after year's end they gratuitously transfer them to the library, and thus, while the country people generally are benefited by them, the members of the club, who are all likewise members of the library, have still access to them. This plan since its adoption has been warmly commended. The noble family of Sutherland are so satisfied of its value that they resolve to patronize it. The Duke and Duchess, their Commissioner, and the Member of Parliament for entire county, have severally requested to be admitted members of both library and club, and each propose making a handsome donation to the former. The donation of the Duchess, consisting of 32 volumes, has been already received.

Savings Banks. There is a branch in this parish of the Sutherland Savings Bank, established in 1834, by the advice and under the direction of Mr. Loch, M. P., and Commissioner to the Duke of Sutherland. It extends over the whole county, and is divided into three general branches, which again are subdivided according to the parishes. The number of depositors at present is 35, composed chiefly of tradesmen, servants, and junior members of families. Four per cent interest is given for sums under L.20. When the amount exceeds this sum, only 2 per cent is allowed.

Poor. The average number of paupers for the last six years is 70. The funds for their relief are distributed year, and, as these are variable, the sum allotted to each cannot be permanent. The distributions to the different paupers range generally from 2s. to 10s., according to their peculiar circumstances. Church collections and an annual donation of L.6 from the Duke of Sutherland, which, united, amount on an average to L. 24, constitute the sole fund for their relief, at the disposal of the session. From this sum there are to be deducted small salaries for the kirk-officer and session-clerk, and disbursements for assisting in the burial of those who die quite destitute. It is thus evident that the poor are mainly indebted for their support, not to the session funds, but to the every-day charities and kind offices of relatives and neighbours. Yet trifling as the sum given by the session is, the demands on, them are increasing, and it is not considered now nearly so degrading to receive their aid as it was a few years ago. Besides those upon the poor's roll, there are a few who receive permanent in meal or otherwise, to the annual value of L.14, Is. W., granted originally by the late Duchess Countess of Sutherland, and continued by his Grace the present Duke of Sutherland. Her Grace's kindness to aged widows and to respectable persons in reduced circumstances, was very considerate, and a most 'commendable trait in her character. It deserves to be noticed that, in 1837, a season of great scarcity in the Highlands, she gave meal to the poor of the parish to the value of about L.60, and supplied the small tenants with a great quantity at the purchase price,-the arrears of which have lately been remitted, amounting to about L. 200. The object of putting this meal to the accounts of the tenants was, not so much the expectation of ever realizing the money, as the desire that they should not feel themselves therein treated as paupers.

Inns. There are only two houses licensed to sell spirits. One of these is a comfortable inn in the village of Tongue, which was considered a large house when built twenty years ago, though now it is frequently found deficient in the necessary accommodations.

Fuel. Peat is the fuel commonly used by all classes. From its long continued and rapidly increasing consumption, the labour and expense of procuring it is now very great; and the more comfortable inhabitants seem resolved to purchase coal in future, assured that it will be found less expensive. Free access to peat, however, is a mighty privilege to the common people, as it costs them nothing but their personal labour.

Miscellaneous Observations. Main changes have taken place in the parish, since the former Account was drawn up. The first and most important is the introduction of sheep-farming. The character of this change will be variously estimated, as persons are disposed to look at one or other of its effects. That it has rendered this country more valuable to proprietors cannot be questioned, for certain it is, that in no other way could a great part of it be laid out to such advantage it may fairly be questioned whether, by extending it too far, they have not injured themselves. If, however, we are to estimate this system by its bearing on the former occupiers of the soil, and by the circumstances into which it has brought their children, no friend of humanity can regard it but with the most painful feelings. When introduced here, several hundreds, many of them of a grade quite superior to mere peasants, were driven from their beloved homes, where they and their fathers enjoyed peace and plenty. Some wandered to Caithness, others sought an asylum in the woods of America, but most, clinging with a passion to their native soil, located themselves by permission in hamlets near the shore. In these places the land, already occupied by a few, but now divided among many, was totally inadequate to the maintenance of all, and fishing became their necessary resource. And thus, on a tempestuous coast, with no harbours but such as nature provided, and in a country inaccessible, from want of roads, to enterprising cutters, were these people often necessitated to plunge into debt for providing fishing materials, and to encounter dangers, immensely increased by their unavoidable ignorance of navigation, in order to obtain subsistence and defray their rents. The consequences were such as might be expected. Poverty soon overtook them, tending to keep

alive their lacerated feelings, and rents, which became gradually extravagant, accumulated into a mass of arrears.

While such was the condition of the people, the proprietor, under whose management these changes were effected, found himself under the necessity of selling the inheritance of his fathers and the late Duke of Sutherland became sole proprietor of the parish. This truly patriotic nobleman, fully alive to the evils which beset his new people, and the wants of this country, reduced the rents of the small tenants 30 per cent., and commenced a series of improvements, by opening up the country with excellent roads at an enormous expense, and inducing public vehicles to run in several directions; by which, at once work was afforded for the people, and a stimulus given for a time to the herring fishing. Likewise, with the laudable object of rendering the tenantry more comfortable, they were enjoined about the same time to build new houses, all being upon the same plan; and, encouraged by the prospect of work, they soon set about this undertaking, though the houses were upon a scale far too expensive for their slender means. These improvements were conducted, by Mr. John Horsburgh, late local factor whose business talents, sterling integrity, faithfulness to his employers and attachment to the people and the country, rendered him one of the most judicious and popular of factors.

In the meantime, the lamented death of the proprietor put a stop to improvements, and many of the people were, by the building of these very houses, more deeply than before plunged into debt. From this cause, from the failure of the fishing, and from a series of adverse seasons, arrears again accumulated to a great amount upon the accession of the present Duke of Sutherland, his attention was arrested by this evil; and, persuaded that, to reclaim these arrears, was impossible, without ruining his people, he determined to cancel the whole. In this parish, the arrears for ran alone amounted to L. 1582. This deed of princely generosity has not failed to make a suitable impression upon a people strongly susceptible of gratitude, and deserves to have a prominent place assigned it in any public account of the parish. After such conduct, everyone must feel that his Grace has the interest of his people deeply at heart. That their interest, however, may be really secured, it is absolutely necessary to open up for them sources of industry, to encourage such as are desirous to improve, and to introduce a different system of agriculture from the present among the small tenants. Some of the large farms are susceptible of being extensively and profitably cultivated; but the farmers, from the amount of capital they have already at stake, and from the shortness of their leases, in which there are no extensive improving conditions, are prevented from cultivating as they might, and as some feel inclined; and the people are deprived of much work which they might otherwise have. And certainly it would be more satisfactory to see our labourers thus employed at home, than going to the south, where their morals are endangered; where their expenses eat up a great proportion of their earnings; and where, very frequently, they are disabled for a length of time by diseases caught in the wretched lodging-houses, to which they must have recourse, and whence they often carry infection to their native country.

As to the agriculture of the small tenants, wretched as it is at present, it is capable of great improvement. The foundation of the evils now attending both it and them, is not the amount of rent, but the smallness of the crofts. This it is which debars a proper rotation, and which causes rents to be ill paid. And though, by the concurrence of favorable circumstances, and a powerful stimulus to the feelings, calling forth uncommon exertion on the part of the tenants, or twice, this cannot be expected to continue. For it must be evident, that when a people, depending mainly on the land for their sustenance, cannot be supported thereby more than seven or eight months, (which is the case in- most seasons with the tenantry' of this parish), they must expend whatever little money maybe collected in different ways, in providing the staff of life during the remainder of the year. Were, however, the crofts of the tenants enlarged to twice their present' size, and fenced in, so as to admit of a proper rotation, then they would be adequate to

their maintenance; and the sale of cattle, decently fed, would enable them with ease to pay a full rent; whilst the produce of any day labour would, as it certainly should, be at their own disposal. Now, there is scarcely a hamlet in the parish in which the arable land might not be doubled. That the people themselves, who have only one year's tenure of their land, and who can only liquidate their debts by work, for which they are paid in cash, should improve so extensively, is not to be expected. If done at all, the proprietor must pay them for their labour until a crop is efficiently laid down; then a rent may be exacted, which would bring in a handsome interest on the outlay.

There are many families, however, in great destitution, who have at present no land; who could not, therefore, be benefited by the foregoing plan. Were sources of industry opened up some of these might thereby be supported. But the most satisfactory method of disposing of these would be, to locate them in villages at the several fishing-stations; to build commodious harbours; to encourage enterprising curers to settle among them; and to secure a market for every species of fish: and thus, while the former depended wholly on the land, these should be made to depend wholly on the sea. Though the herring might occasionally fail, vast quantities of other fish could be caught on the coast, which are at present never brought to market; and, as there has a probability that a steamer will soon ply on this coast from Caithness to Liverpool a great inducement is held out to prosecute this trade with vigor. By this communication all the exports of the country could obtain a ready market in the south.

In conclusion, the writer expresses his full conclusion the result of long observation, and many anxious thoughts on 'the' subject that unless such, or some such plans are adopted regarding the interesting peasantry of this parish, the time will soon arrive when there will either of landlord or Government; a poor law assessment, or, worse than either, a summary and universal ejection. Yet, relying on the wealth and patriotic feelings of the noble proprietor, and on the skill, and intelligence of his agents, he confidently expects that these sore evils will be prevented, and that the next Statistical Account will have to record an improvement in the aspect of the parish, and an amelioration in the condition of the people, which will be alike profitable and honorable to all parties.

January 1841.

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The next Parish is that of Tongue which lies mostly on the seacoast, although a part also lies at some distance from the sea towards and amongst the hills which in this parish are pretty near the shore. The places of it on the east side lying on the bay and river of Torrisdale where is a harbour for large boats of burden & a sandy shore for a short distance from the river of Torrisdale to the river of Naver. Torrisdale has a salmon fishing the farms are Torrisdale at the water mouth on the west side and Borgie moor about a mile upon the same side, where also the river loses the name of Torrisdale and is called by Bogie upwards to its source which is three miles south above Borgie viz. Lochcraggie a mile long and half a mile broad lies north and south.

The greatest part of the parish of Tongue lies on the sides of a large bay called the bay of Kintail formed between the head of Torrisdale and the Whitanhead a promontory that stretches far out into the sea, they are nine miles distant and the bay runs up into the land about five miles south.

The farms on the East side upon the bay are Skerray a gentleman's seat, hath a fishing port, is a mile west from Torrisdale, Lamigo half mile further west Strahan Skerray a mile further west Skurlimy two miles further west hath a fishing port and keeps a boat. Coldbackie a mile south of the last mentioned. Strahan Tongue half a mile east of the former. Rihung a mile south of Coldbackie. Tongue a manor quarter mile south of the former and is the principal seat of the Right Honorable Lord Reay whose house lies close upon the bay at a place where the land stretches itself out westerly into the bay in formed of a tongue from whence the seat hath its denomination. Kirkiboll half a mile south of Tongue, where stands the parish church. Ardoch a mile south of the last mentioned, & at the bottom of the bay stands Kenlochs on both sides of a river that runs into the bay. On the west side of the bay are these farms viz. Achuntraan half mile from Kenloch north Aonstoppen a mile further north Bourscaig a mile further north Braranbill hath a fishing port and keeps a boat, a mile further North Melness a gentleman's seat keeps a couple of boats for crossing the bay to the church. Skinnet a mile further north Telemann more und beg a mile northwest from the former. Strahan Melness two miles further northwest which hath a fishing and keeps a boat.

In the mouth of the bay of Kintail, there lies three islands the furthest east is called Holy Island, lies a mile north of Skerray. Its two miles in circumference, has a deal of good grass in summer, whether the people of Skerray make their cows to swim to pasture till they have eaten the grass. It's a shelter for boats that sail alongst the coast when stormy, the next westward is Island Roan which is rather two islands joined at low water each one mile in circumference. On one of them dwells four families. It hath a fishing boat and they kill sometimes a good many seiches, the third is Island Ghail which is a grassing of the farm of Skiriad whether their cows go in at low water with a stream tide. It abounds with rabbits. The Islands of Roan and Ghail do almost close up the mouth of the bay of Tongue, wherein is good anchorage for ships of burden particularly at Island Ghail and at a small Isle off the Point of Tongue. The bay foresaid becomes dry at low water for four miles from the bottom seaward, only the river of Kenloch forms in the sands a deep and broad channel which is not fordable any further from the bay

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<sup>94</sup> Country of Strathnaver Containing the Parishes of Farr, Tongue, Durness, Edderachillis and Part of Reay Sutherland. 1726 Geographical collections relating to Scotland made by Walter Macfarlane : MacFarlane, Walter, 1698?-1767 : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive



than two miles. The sands when the sea is out, afford abundance of cockles, mussels' spout fish. The fish catch upon the coast are cod ling, haddock and whitens.

The places of the Parish of Tongue removed from the bay are Ribigill quarter mile south east of Ardoch Scrabster half mile from Ribigill Tallasaid half mile southeast from Ribigill. Cinisaid a mile south from Ribigill. Dirumeadie four miles southwest from Ribigill upon the side of a loch. About five miles south of the parish church there is a loch called Lochlaghoil three miles long and a mile broad lying northeast and southwest & hath to the northwest side of it, several farms of the parish of Tongue such as Letterlaghoill quarter mile from the southwest end of the loch then Torrantarve, next Aldnalouchart Rianleadan, Riannyan and from Litterlaghoil southwest two miles stands Cullisaid on the side of a loch of the same name, and two miles southwest thence stands Dinachcorrie separated only by a burn from another of that same name in the parish of Farr.

The hills of the Parish of Tongue are viz.

- The hill of Tongue a mile long, lies north and south
- The hill called Bennlaghoil three miles South of the former, lies north and south three miles long, sets up four high tops considerably higher than the body of the hill.
- The hill called Bennhope three miles west from the former, is three mile long, lies north and south it sets up two high tops.
- The hill called Dinnphutig five miles North from the former, lies close on the promontory of Whiten Head on the west side of the bay of Kintail. All these hills except that of Tongue abound with Red Deer.

## **Durness**

### **Geographical collections relating to Scotland made by Walter Macfarlane. 1698?-1767**

#### **Printed by T. and A. Constable for the Scottish History Society. Parish of Durness<sup>95</sup>**

The next Parish is Durness which lies westward from the former and separate from it by a piece of mossy and boggy ground of five miles length and as many in breadth stretching from the Whitten Head to the hill called Ben Hope. Its scarce ridable but either in a very dry summer or in hard winter frost and not then without a good guide having many small lochans and quagmires through it. The Parish of Durness lies much on the sea coast as the former, a few places excepted. It's bounded on the East by the Whiten Head and on the West with Farohead, or Cape Wrath five miles at least betwixt both; and the shore stretches in into deep bays by the intervention of a head further in than either of the other two, called Farrars head. The more easterly of the bays is called the Loch of Eriboll, and goes inward seven miles southwards where of old was a plentiful herring fishing but has failed: there is yet plenty of cod and other white fish to catch there, also oysters and other shell fish.

It has an excellent road for ships of the largest burden the British fleet might ride safely at the bottom of the bay, which is covered by an island from the sea, of which more afterwards. The farms on the east side of Loch Eriboll are

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1. Freisgill a mile South of Whiten Head, it has a fishing port but dangerous by reason of the swelling of the sea thereabouts when the wind is from the sea.
2. Inverhope two miles south of the former where there is a salmon fishing with nets & cruives.
3. Badillahamhise a mile south of the former.
4. Hunleim a mile south of the former.
5. Eriboll three mile of the former and Tilinn at the Loch end.
6. On the west side of the Loch of Eriboll stands Portchamill a farm three miles north of the Lochend.
7. Ruspinn a mile north of the former, which has a road and harbour where boats and bark may ride safely, or lay dry.
8. Keanbinn a mile N.WEST of the former.
9. Sangobeg a mile N.WEST of the former.

Sangomore two miles northwest of the former. Betwixt the two Sango's at the shore, there is a cave stretching pretty far in underground with a natural vault above ; It's called Smoa, at the mouth of it is a harbour for big boats, on the floor of the cave there is room enough for 500 men to exercise their arms, there is a burn comes out of the earth in the one side of the said cave and forms a large and deep pond there, where trout are caught and then runs out of the pond to the sea ; there is also a spring of excellent water in the other side of the said cave.

A mile north west of Sangomore stand the farms Baillamlulich and Durinn at some little distance from the sea. The other bay formed betwixt Faraid point and Cape Wrath is called the bay of Durness and is formed into two inlets of unequal depth into the land, the more easterly of the two is but a large half mile into the land south east at the bottom whereof stands upon a marble rock another Manor house of the Right Honorable Lord Reay called Balnacille. This manor having been church lands of old, there was to be seen, (till this last year that it was thrown down for building a new house) the ruins of an old wall about eight or nine foot thick and in some places thirty foot high, without any window thereon, it seemed to extend on the one side one hundred foot long, and in breadth forty foot; there is no tradition by whom it was built, or for what purpose; it seems to have been some old monastery: Within a bow shot of the house stands the parish church very near the sea a burn running between it and the house; the house and church are founded on marble rocks and most of the stones are of that kind. The church was built by Donald, Lord Reay, when laird of Farr.

Close to the Manor of Balnacille, stands the farms of Crosboll and Knockbreck; and near the church stands the farm of Uibeg.

The Inlet that's more westerly, goes in south three miles and is called the Kyle of Grudie and is for a mile and a half dry sand at low water except the water that runs into it of which after.

The farms on the eastside of the Kyle of Grudie

1. Slanes at the mouth of the said Kyle.
2. Borly a mile from the former.
3. Claisneach quarter mile further up the Kyle.
4. Kildal quarter mile further.
5. Sartegrim half mile further up.
6. Grudie at the Kyle end.

The farms on the west side are

1. Aldan half mile north of the Kyle end.
2. Geochreamh 2 mile north of the former.

3. Portover where there is a rock of fine marble, three mile further north towards Cape Wrath.

Belonging to the parish of Durness or rather to the heritor thereof the Lord Reay and betwixt the parishes of Durness and Eddrachilles, there are two large forests consisting of a great many several hills stocked with red deer in abundance. The one is called the forest of Dirumoar, esteemed to have greater plenty of red deer than any in Scotland and consists of these hills viz.

- The hill called Binnhee which borders with the parish of Lairg on the West parts, it sets up two high tops, and is three mile long lying N.E. & S.WEST
- Binndirach, which is joined to the former by a lower neck of ground called Bellach na mearlach it bears North of the former and is two miles long, lying east and west.
- The hill called Geaglaisea bearing west from the former and is two large miles long, and lies N.E. and S.E.
- The hills of Savoill bearing from the former north and is three miles long, setting up two high tops and by north and south.
- The hill called Arkill bearing northwest from the former at a miles distance and itself two miles long and lies south and north.
- The hill called Flinnbhinn bearing east from the former at a half a miles distance, and is itself four miles, lying northeast and southeast.
- The hill calf Binnsinn bearing east from the former half a mile and itself four miles long lying northeast and southeast.

The other forest mentioned above is called the Parph & consists of these hills viz.

- The hill called Farmheall bearing west of the last mentioned at a miles distance and itself a mile long lying north and south
- The hills called Binndeargmoar and Binndeargbeg bearing northwest from the fore mentioned at half a miles distance and itself three miles long, lying north and south
- The hill called Fashbhinn bearing east from the former at a miles distance and is half a mile long, lying north and south.
- The hill called Skryshbhinn bearing north from the former at a miles distance and is a mile long lying east and west.

The Rivers of the parish of Durness are these viz.

The river of Hope, which takes its rise from a little loch a mile in circuit by the hill called Glaisea; hath its course East two miles, where at a sheal or grassing place called Cobirnuiskeach, it receives two other large rivulets and then it runs north three miles in the middle of a pleasant strath called Strahuridale where it waters on the West side Ellanrighair and two miles lower on the East side a farm called Mussal, on which East side a mile above Mussall stands an old building made in the form of a sugar loaf & which a double wall and winding stairs in the middle of the wall round about, and little places for men to lie in as is thought and all built of dry stone without any mortar. It's called by tradition Dundornigil. Below Mussall a mile the river enters the Loch of Hope and runs through it three miles north the said Loch waters on its west bank the farms of Baddamheoir and Arnaboll and on the East bank Bregisgill & Hope the river runs at last at a miles distance from the Loch into the bay called Loch Eriboll where stands Inverhope. (On the East side of Strahiridale which is also the side of the hill of Hope and as far down as near Bregisgil there is a wood of birch and other timber.) Where is a salmon fishing with nets and cruives.

The second river is called the river of Strabeg, which takes its rise at Loch Stinisaid which is half a mile long near the hill of Savoil, It runs thence north three miles through Strathbeg, and falls into Loch Eriboll, at the bottom thereof, the said Strathbeg hath a wood on both sides of the river, of birches, alder &c particularly there grows there a parcel of large and tall hollies, whereof some have no prickles, hence their twigs and leaves are cut down in time of snow for food to cows.



IMAGE 276 RIVER DIONARD BACKED BY BEINN SPIONNAIDH

The third is the river of Dionard, which takes its rise from Loch Dionard which is half a mile long near the hill called Feinn- bhinn and runs thence north eight miles and falls into the bay of Durness, at the end of that part of it called the Kyle of Grudie, on it there is a salmon fishing with nets and cruives.

The Lochs of the parish of Durness besides these already named and from which their run several burns and rivulets to the sea, are viz. the Loch of Slaness quarrtear mile in circuit it stands by the farm of that name above mentioned, it hath plenty of eels, a little island in it where maws lay eggs. A little stripe runs from it to Loch Borely which bears southeast of the former a quarter of a mile and is half a mile in circuit stands by the farms of Borley and Claiseneach it hath plenty of red belly'd trout an island also where fowls lay their eggs; a burn runs under ground, out of this loch for a quarter of mile north and falls into another little loch a quarter of mile in circuit called Loch Crospuill, near to the church and the Lords Reays Manor house, and out of which there runs a burn into the sea. The third loch is called Loch Calladail, a large mile in circuit, and is about a miles distance from the Manor house last mentioned bearing southeast It has plenty of excellent trouts and a burn runs out of it to the sea at Sangomoar.

The forth is called Loch moadis a mile southeast of the last mentioned loch, about half a mile in circuit and hath good trouts, and sends a burn to the sea, at the Cave of Smoa where it comes out after having run a piece underground.

Durness is one of the most pleasant as well as profitable spots of ground in all the highlands for corn, grass, cattle, game and fishing. All its rocks and crags are either marble or limestone, there is also plenty of marl for gooding to the land. Its fresh water lochs abound with a variety of trouts and eels. Its forests abound with red deer. Its grazing with black cattle, horses and sheep and goat. Its sea's abound with cod, ling, and other sea fish.

### **Eddrachillis Parish**

226 square miles, including the islands of Handa and Scourie, is bounded on the west by the Atlantic Ocean, on the east by Durness, south-east by Lairg and Creich, and south by Assynt. The coast, much indented by fiord-like lochs, consists of precipitous cliffs interspersed by sandy and shingle bays. Inland the land is hilly, dissected by glens, and rises to 2980 feet on Foinaven and 2863 on Ben Hee. The rocks are mainly of gneiss, bare and hummocky, red sandstone hills and some limestone.

The Celtic name of this parish, Eadardachaolas, signifies "between two kyles or arms of the sea," and is descriptive of the situation of the main part of the parish between the Kyle of Scowrie, which separates Eddrachillis from Assynt on the south, and the Kyle of Laxford. Eddrachillis was part of the barony of Skelbo. It was disposed by Hugo Freskyn de Moravia, ancestor of the Duke of Sutherland, 1186-1203, to his brother, Bishop Gilbert Moray, who in 1235 disposed it to his brother Richard Moray of Culbyn, the property changed hands two or three times more and finally in 1829 it was restored to the Sutherland family.

Nothing is known of Eddrachillis as a parish, earlier than 1726, the date of its erection, except that, before that time, it formed part of the parish of Durness, and was disjoined on an application to the General Assembly by the heritor, Lord Reay, and Mr. John Mackay, minister of Durness, and endowed by a fund arising from the tithes, and a general subscription over Scotland. A native of this parish that is noteworthy is Lieutenant General Hugh Mackay of Scourie, the famous Commander-in-Chief of the time of King William and Mary. He was born in 1640, fought against Dundee at the battle of Killiecrankie, and fought in Ireland in the battle of Shannon.

### **Statistical Account Parish of Eddrachillis 1793 by the Rev. Mr. Alexander Falconer.**

Date of Erection, Name, and Extent. The parish of Eddrachillis was erected, together with the parishes of Durness and Tongue, by the General Assembly 1724, in consequence of a petition, in the name of the inhabitants of the parish of Durness, presented to the General Assembly 1721, which was seconded by the then Lord Reay, sole proprietor of it; representing the great need there was for its being subdivided into two or more parishes, on account of its vast extent.

The name of the parish, as of all other places in this country, is Celtic, being descriptive of its situation, and signifying literally, "betwixt two kyles, or arms, of the sea;" because of its lying being between Coahscum, which divides it on the south from Assynt, and Coahs-Luiffard, or Laxford, which, on the north separates it from Ashir. Caohs-cum signifies "the narrow kyle;" and is so called, because of a narrow part about the middle of it, near Island-Rannoch, where there is a ferry which is not above 60 yards broad, though it widens greatly above, and branches out into two considerable Kyles, or lochs, much frequented by herrings: it is also broad below this place, and incloses a green island, called Stirks Island; near which is good anchoring ground for shipping. This kyle runs up into the land 5 or 6 miles.- Caohs-Luissard, or, as it is pronounced in the anglicized way, Laxford, is a name compounded of two Celtic words, Lun and ard; epithets given it, and to the river which runs into the head of it from Loch Stack, from the rapid and high course of that stream. But, though these two kyles comprehend the country called Eddrachillis, the parish extends a great way farther north, and includes also the Davoch of Ashir, which is a country of itself, intersected by a considerable kyle, called Caolis-Inchard,

2 miles long, often visited by shoals of herrings; and it separates that very rugged piece of ground, called Kurrugarbh or "rugged quarter" from the north parts of Ashir, which are the best portions of it. Inchard is a contraction of two Celtic words, Innis and aird, signifying "high meadow," because of the highland rich pasture grounds, lying on each side of the kyle, and of the river, which runs into the head of it, and which go both by the same name. As for the name of this part of the parish, which the natives turn in English, Alshires, and sometimes more improperly Oldshoars, in Celtic, it is Ashir, or, which is its real meaning, Tifis; a designation relative to that more fruitful and cultivated place, of which it was once a part, called Durness, for it was the Fairber of old, or "waste pasture grounds," belonging to the ancient inhabitants of Durness.

The parish is bounded on the west by the Atlantic Ocean, and on the north by the North Sea, to Cape Wrath, that terror to mariners, which stands at the head of the line separating the parish of Durness from this; so that it is situated in the angle formed by the Atlantic and North seas. The length, from north to south is 20 computed miles, and the breadth<sup>10</sup>; Eddrachillis being 12 in length, and 10 in breadth, and Ashir 8 in length, and 7 in breadth.

Ecclesiastical State. Besides the parish church, there is a place appointed for public worship, and at the distance of six miles from it, on the north side of the kyle of Inchard in Ashir, where it is the incumbent's duty to officiate once in six weeks; but as the parish church is situated as commodiously as it possibly could be, and pretty centrally upon the coast, the attendance of the parishioners there, especially in good weather, is rendered quite convenient, as boats can convey them easily from almost the most distant parts of the parish. The church has undergone two several reparations within the last 20 years; has slated roof; is well-seated; and very way fit for the accommodation of the parishioners. The manse has also been twice repaired within the above time: it and some of the offices have also slated roof, as all the houses in the country ought to have, for nothing else can stand the violence of the weather. Upon the first establishment of the parish, the minister had 800 merks for his stipend, together with 40 merks for communion elements: but a reduction of it after wards took place on occasion of a contract, entered into by the Church of Scotland with consent of the then incumbent, with Lord Reay; in whose hand they settled the whole money collected, as a fund for paying part of the stipends of parishes of Tongue, Durness, and Eddrachillis, at the rate of 4 1/2 per cent. The portion of that collection assigned to this parish was 11400 merks Scotch; the interest of which sum being L. 28:10, together with L. 15 yearly out of Lord Reay's L. 1500 sterling. constitutes the whole stipend of Edderachillis at this or L. 43: 10 in all, communion elements included; being not only below the minimum of the law, but once of the=smallest in the church.-And what precludes the prospect of any augmentation of the stipend, out of Lord Reay's estate, is a special provision he made in his contract with the church, that his estate should, in all future time, remain unaffected by any further augmentation of the stipends, though a great part of that estate consists of church lands. But he and his successors have given the several ministers of this parish a small farm, ad-joining to the glebe, at the old rent, which is of considerable benefit for grazing.-The glebe, which lies upon the coast, and near the church, is of some extent; and has been valued at L. 40 Scotch.

**Population and Character of the People.** Upon a late survey of this parish, the number of souls contained in it were found to be 1024; but, about 12 years ago, they exceeded this number considerably. One of the causes of this decrease has been the rise that has happened in the price of black-cattle, which upon the shore of the glebe, which extends about 3/4 of a mile, grows a profusion of sea-weed, to this the present incumbent thought he had a right; and that he might convert this sea-weed to his own benefit, as a small addition to his small stipend; but in this he unexpectedly found himself opposed by the family of Reay, who thought fit to dispose of this very sea-weed, as well as the rest on their estate by lease to a Peterhead company; and upon

his giving interruption to them, he was obliged to defend himself in a process for damages before the Court of Session, who, after considerable expense and trouble to the incumbent, thought fit to decide the affair against him. He is thus deprived of the benefit of the whole sea weed growing on his glebe, which was useful to him for other purposes, as manure to his land, and pasture to his cattle in the cold season of the year gave occasion to some gentlemen, not residing in the parish, to take leases of extensive grazings in it, which they manage by a few savants. Other people of substance living in the parish have, on the same account, also taken leases of additional grazings, removing the old possessions. Several families besides, not satisfied with then circumstances, as well as several single persons of both sexes, have migrated to the south country, and to cotton mills. The return to Dr. Webster in 1755, however, was only 869 souls.

The number of baptisms in the year, as appears from the register, is at an average 35: but there is no record of burial, kept; because the people, experiencing great inconvenience in carrying their dead to one or two burial places, as in former times, on account of the great distance and the of the roads, have made choice of other places, the they could find, near their respective dwellings, not that purpose; so that, in this parish at present, there are no less than eight different burying grounds, though some of the old ones are presently in disuse.

The inhabitants, or natives, (who are all, except a very few, of three names, Mackays, Morrisons, and MacLeod, are all Presbyterians, and have been so, for so for a long time back, that the present generation have no remembrance of being in the country any resident of another persuasion. Not with standing their detached and distant habitations, they are remarkable for their attendance upon divine ordinances and public worship, for the sobriety and regularly of their manners and lives, without being addicted to any particular vice in any remarkable degree. Their character for peaceableness, and their harmony among themselves, is uncommon. For the last 20 years and more, scarce one instance has happened of any quarrel or fight among them, or so much as of any of them receiving any bodily hurt from another. From their practice of fishing, and nearly and constant acquaintance with the sea, they are excellent boatmen, as well as ingenious, and ready to learn any mechanical business; so that scarcely any artificers in the parish but are self-taught. And yet there are among them pretty good carpenters and boatwrights, dry-stone masons, coopers, and net-makers; and, as for shoe-makers, there is scarce a man in the parish but can make his own shoes. They love also to appear as decent and clean as possible; so that the sisters, who frequent this place, have declared they make the most decent and cleanly appearance of any Highlanders on the whole costs. The music too are partial to the natives of this place, as if the air of the Edderachillis Mountains had inspiration in it; for there have been, of late years, several poets in this parish, whose compositions, mostly of the lyric kind, have been admired by good judges, and have shown them to be possessed of uncommon parts and genius.

**Black Cattle, Sheep, Goats, and Horses.** The principal dependence of the inhabitants for their living is upon their black- cattle, and, by a late enumerations, they are found to have 2573 heads of the cow kind. The quality and size of their cattle are equal to those of any other place in the Highlands. The price of an ordinary cow for droving, is 50 s.-of a good one, L. 3;-and of the best, L. 4. An ordinary milk cow sells at L. 3;-a good one at L. 4; - and the best at L. 5. There are drovers, in the country, who buy up such cattle as are sent to market; and, after driving them to the south of Scotland, and sometimes to England, dispose of them commonly to English drovers. But, though the inhabitants deal principally in black cattle, yet, in the opinion of the most knowing people, the nature of the country seems more adapted to the raising of sheep; and it is thought, that it is owing to the inattention and carelessness of the farmers, about that most useful of all animals, that they do not thrive better with them.

Foxes, indeed, are numerous, and very destructive, and not easily destroyed, because of the rocks and numberless lurking places which the ruggedness of the country affords them; eagles, and other ravenous birds, destroy many lambs; but by diligent exertions persisted in, this country might be, in time, cleared of all those noxious creatures. Nay, it is more than probable, were Lord Reay to parcel out his lands in proper sheep walks, annexing sit parts of his deer forest to the nearest and most pro- per dwellings upon the shore, that none in Scotland would equal those upon his estate, and that he might treble his rent by it. The only inconvenience would be, that he would, by this plan, greatly depopulate his country.

The whole number of sheep, presently in this parish, is found to be 2629. The greatest part of them are of the Galloway breed, having black or blacked faces, and their wool is coarse. A sheep, with a lamb, is supposed to be worth 7 s. and a good wedder, 9 s. But there is also a mixture of an English breed with the common Galloway, which are polled, with white faces; these have rather finer wool, and longer bodies, than the Galloway kind. Sometimes butchers from Inverness, and other places, travel through the country, and buy what wedders are to be sold in those parts; and seamen have also a great demand for mutton, often greater than can be answered here.

Of all parts of the Highlands, this would seem to be one of the fittest and best for goats; yet it is the observation of the oldest and most judicious people, that they have not for some years answered here as formerly; whether owing to something unfavorable in the weather, to the increase of beasts and birds of prey, or both. The present number in all this parish, is 1307. The only market for them is selling them to sea faring men, when they fall low in provisions: they commonly give 7 s. or 8 s. for a he, and less for a she, goat. As for horses, the principal use of them here, is the rearing of them for sale, there being but little occasion for these animals in riding or husbandry. The kind bred here is the Garrons, which are never housed, feed themselves in the mountains in summer and harvest, and pasture near the houses in winter and spring. They are of a good size; and not inferior in quality to any in the Highlands. Some of the best are supposed to be worth 7 or 8 guineas. Here they are bought by dealers, in the country, at a year old, who carry them to the Orkney Islands, and prices: of late, purchasers from the south have found their way into the country, who buy all sorts at good prices. The number presently in the parish is 351.

Rent, Fishing, etc. - The present rent of the parish is L. 230 sterling; but the tack-duty, paid out of most of the different possessions, has been of late greatly augmented; that of some of them to double, or more, of what they paid 20 years ago: yet it is reported, that when Lord Reay became proprietor of Eddrachillis, properly so called, the whole of it was held by a gentleman for the interest of 6000 merks.

There are only two rivers in this parish where salmon are caught. One of them is at Inchar, which never paid any separate rent to the proprietor; but the tacksman of the neighboring grounds has the profits of it, which amount only from 3 to 6 barrels in the year. The other is Laxford, where there is a considerable quantity of fish killed, and of an excellent quality; but the fishing does not commence sooner than the middle of April, either there or on all this coast. The fishing of this river, and of others within Lord Reay's estate, is rented by a company of merchants in Peterhead, who cure and export the fish to foreign markets, without selling any of it in the country: they have an agent, in the country, for managing their affairs, upon a farm of Lord Reay's estate in Durness. This company have a lease also of the kelp-shores of his estate; which, if properly managed, would prove an object of great importance, as these shores are very extensive, and covered almost everywhere with vast quantities of the best sea-weed; but the small tenants, occupying the lands next the shore, are the only manufactures, who for their labour have but 30 s. per ton, paid upon delivery of the kelp. As they work only when



they can afford time from their other necessary affairs, the quantity of manufactured kelp falls far short of what it might, and would be, were a sufficient number of hands employed, and better encouragement given.

The rivers of this country abound also in trout, which are excellent in their season, as do also the less considerable streams, of which there are several. The most valuable of these is the kind called white trout, somewhat like salmon. Another kind, found also in plenty in these rivers, is the darker sort, with red and black spots. Some of these, as well as of the white trout, are found equal in size to grilises or young salmon. The lakes are stored with variety of trout of all sizes. Of these Loch Moir, at the distance of 7 or 8 miles from the sea, is 3 miles long by half a mile broad, and never freezes in the severest season. Loch Stalk is 2 miles in length, and half a mile in breadth. Both these locks are connected by a small stream; and out of the last mentioned runs the considerable river of Laxford. All these lakes and rivers form a pretty straight line, which divide Edderachillis from the lands of Ashir, and was formerly the march separating these properties from each other. Besides these great lakes, a vast number of smaller ones are interspersed amongst the mountains, most of them abounding with trout.

Surface and Agriculture. The face of the country, like the rest of the Highlands, is mountainous and rocky, and, to a stranger, shockingly rugged. The more inland parts, which constitutes Lord Reay's deer forest, are nothing but a vast group of dreadful mountains, with their summits piercing the clouds, and divided only by deep and very narrow valleys, whose declivities are so rugged and steep, as to be dangerous to travelers not furnished with guides. Yet these wilds, afford excellent pasture, in many places, to all sorts of cattle, being clothed, to the tops of the highest mountains, with clover and daisies, and other rich pasture. In many places numbers of deer are to be seen, very large and fat, especially in the harvest season; for looking after which certain persons, called foresters, are appointed with salaries, in convenient parts of the country. The bounds of the forest are very extensive, making a considerable, if not the greater part, of Lord Reay's estate; but that part of it which is reckoned the bell, and abounds most with deer, is that which belongs to this parish.

The inhabited places are only those next the sea, and some other on the confines of the forest, which happen to be somewhat level, and there by sitted for rearing cattle, or the culture of corn; and though, towards the coast, the ruggedness of the ground be less, and the mountains seemingly subside, or present a less awful and horrid appearance, yet rocks and marshes, lakes and mountains, though of less magnitude, are all along continually intermixed; so that, excepting pasture for cattle, it seems but very indifferently calculated by nature for any other purpose. It is matter of no small difficulty, even on the shore, to find a lot for a house to stand on conveniently, without under water, or some other remarkable disadvantage. And as for the villages or dwellings, where the inhabitants make a shift to rear some corn, they have so great labour in clearing their little plots (many of which are no larger than the floor of an ordinary room), by digging, turning out great stones, and grubbing up bushes and underwood; that, excepting the benefit of the straw, for saving the lives of their cattle in spring, considering especially their soil in cultivation, they would surely find their account in abstaining from agriculture totally, and spending their time in some handicraft employment; but this must be understood concerning such as do not work themselves personally, but must hire others to labour for them, for that makes very great odds in this country. It is true there are ploughs drawn by horses, no less than 10 in different parts of the parish; but there is so little ground for them to go upon, that 2 constantly employed, as in the low country, could easily perform all the work of the ten.

The instrument chiefly used for tillage, is called a Cascroim, or crooked foot; being a crooked piece of wood, the lower end somewhat thick, about two feet and an half in length, pretty

straight, and armed at the end with iron, made thin and square to cut the earth. The upper end of this instrument is called the shaft, whereas the lower is termed the head: the shaft above the crook is pretty straight, being 6 foot long and tapering upwards to the end, which is slender; just below the crook or angle, which is an obtuse one, there must be a hole, wherein a strong peg must be fixed, for the work man's right foot, in order to push the instrument into the earth; while in the meantime standing upon his left foot, and holding the shaft firm with both hands, when he has in this manner driven the head far enough into the earth with one bend of his body, he raises the clod by the iron headed part of his instrument, making use of the heel, or hind part of the head as a fulcrum, in so doing, turns it over always towards the left hand; and then proceeds to push for another clod in the same form.

To see six or eight men all at work with this instrument, as is often to be seen, standing all upon one leg and pushing with the other, would be a pretty curious sight to a stranger. With all its disadvantages the Cascroim of all instruments is the fittest for turning up the ground in the country; for among so many rocks, a plough can do little or nothing, and, where no rocks are, the earth is commonly so marshy, that cattle are not able to pass over it, without sinking deep. Therefore it is of pretty general use in the Highlands, and is of great antiquity. One man can turn over more ground with it in a day than four are able to do with a common spade. For a single man to delve as much ground as will require two pecks of bear feed in a day is nothing uncommon; nay, some have sown four in a day's work. There are many instances of single men in this parish, who with good seasons have reared as much corn as, with the help of potatoes, has subsisted families of 6 or 7 persons plentifully, by the Casscroim. But for this they have one advantage, denied to many others, that there is always plenty of manure; for besides what the cattle furnish, there is almost everywhere the greatest profusion of seaware, which makes the best manure, especially when cut early in the spring and mixed with earth lands. Lying on a coast well known to sea faring people, and frequented by shipping, any necessaries the place itself cannot supply are easier got than in most parts of the kingdom.

The crops raised in this country are only oats and bear alternately. The kind of oats which answers best, is found to be a large bodied grain of a black colour, and a thick coat, which ripens early, and meals well; and the bear is the kind commonly used in the Highlands. Potatoes, though less than 30 years ago scarcely known here, now constitute a considerable part of the food of the inhabitants.

Notwithstanding the ruggedness of the ground, and the wild appearance of this country, scarce any place affords a more commodious habitation to poor people, if there are any such in it. For upon a farm of 20s and sometimes only of 10s many families want none of the necessaries of life; having bread and potatoes, fish and some flesh, wool and clothing, milk, butter, and cheese, all the fruit of their own industry, and the produce of their farms. Their fuel they have also good, and on easy terms, every farm having plenty of peat mosses free to all. Travelling, it must be owned, is difficult and disagreeable, there being no roads, but such as the feet of men and cattle have made; yet, when one has occasion to come to it, and remain there, he will find it as convenient for the purposes of living as most parts of the Highlands.

Harbours, Fishery, etc. What Edderachillis had been, and still is, happy in, far beyond other parts of the Highlands, is the fishing upon its coast, and its many excellent bays and harbours, where shipping of all sizes can enter, and moor close to the land, at all hours of the day and night, in perfect safety. Of these harbours are, Loch Badeant, erroneously marked Badwel in some draughts of the coast; Loch-Calva, which signifies literally in the Celtic, "good harbour;" Laxford, having several good anchorages, of which Island an Erinich, or "the Irishman's island," is the best; Feaunack-Moir, near the entry, is a very safe place; Inchard has also a good harbour; and so has Kylescuin, near Stirk's-island.-There has not only been a greater quantity

of fish killed on the coast of this parish, for some years past, than on the coast of any other place in the Highlands, but more herrings than what have been killed on all the coasts of all the Highlands put together. Here there is no person whose sole business is fishing, consequently no fish is sold, excepting herring; yet every man is a fisher, and fishes for himself. Every village, and almost every house, has a boat, nets, and all sorts of fishing tackle, some householders have 2 or 3 boats, for answering different purposes. In summer, glassocks, or says, are caught in great plenty. In July, shoals of mackerel, the forerunner of the herring, appear. Soon afterwards, almost every creek and harbour are quite full of herrings; and sometimes they remain off and on the coast to about Christmas; at other times, they leave the bays all at once in September, and no more is seen of them that year. Haddocks are killed on this coast also, and in some years in great numbers, and they are commonly larger and fatter than in almost any other place; but again for some years, few or none of them are found. The uncommon goodness of them, and the other fish caught here, must be imputed to the proximity of the Atlantic and North seas, and that there are fewer in pursuit of them than in more populous places.

In the year 1789, there vessels from Murray, bound for Barra-head fishing, being forced into Inchard by stress of weather, and wind bound there for some days, thought fit to try their luck where they were, and met with wonderful success in killing both cod and ling; so that they were in suspense, whether to proceed to Barra or remain there. They declared that, from former experience, they could hardly expect so great success in so short a time, in Barra; that the cod here were larger and fatter than there; at the same time of the year; and, if the ling would come in their proper season, which was not then commenced in this place, in as great plenty as they used to do at Barra-head, they could not but think this a better fishing station; because what ling they had taken here, they found to be very good, and rather larger, as well as the cod, than those they used to find there; so that it is more than probable, had the joint stock company a proper representation laid before them of the fitness of this parish for a fishing station, they would consider it, (as it in all likelihood is), incomparably more deserving of being at the expense of an establishment for the purpose of fishing, than either Ullapool, or Tobermorie, or perhaps any other place in the Highlands.

Islands. In Edderachillis, and on the coast of it, there is a number of small islands of different sizes, many of them affording pasture to small cattle, especially lambs, in summer and harvest. In these spots they require no herding, and are safe from foxes. The only inhabited island is Handa. It is separated from the mainland by a narrow found, through which vessels pass with good pilots. Its name is Celtic, either Aon- da, "the island of one colour," or Aon-taobh, "the island of "one side;" in either of which senses the appellation is just and applicable. For viewing it from the sea upon the south it appears wholly dusky and green; and rises gradually by a gentle ascent from the sea upon the south side towards the north so as to consist of one face or side, and to have nothing upon the north but one tremendous rock of 80 or 100 fathoms high in some places. It is a mile square, having some fertile spots for rearing corn and hay, but the natural and proper application is the converting it to a sheep walk, as there no foxes could annoy the stocks, nor contagion find access to it. The present rent is L. 12 sterling.

Here once lived Little Fohn M'Dboil-mbich-Huisbdan, a gentleman of the Assint McLeod, who were a branch of the McLeod of Lewis, or Shiol Torquil. He was low of stature, but of matchless strength, and skill in arms; kept always a bierlin or galley in this place with 12 or 20 armed men, ready for any enterprise. Some alleged he practiced piracy; but of this there is no certainty. By him it was that judge Morison of Lewis, of whom several respectable families now living there are descended, was slain. This judge had King James VI's commission for maintaining justice and good order in that country; and though he was murdered by this McLeod, it was for no personal quarrel, or injury done McLeod himself, but in revenge of his

being instrumental in putting to death one of that family, who acted as laird of Lewis. The preceding laird of that place dying without lawful issue, but leaving a number of natural sons, (some say 60), a contention arose among them about the succession to the estate. The eldest being not so popular among the name, as one other especially, the son of gentlewoman whose parents were of considerable influence among the tribe, was obliged to leave Lewis, and live upon the mainland. Judge Morison being informed that there was a French vessel employed in killing fish contrary to law upon the neighboring coast, sent for the reputed laird, who lived near that place, and taking also a party along with him, boarded this vessel, and made her a prize; but whether by stress of weather or design, they came to anchor below the house of the eldest of the brothers upon the mainland, who in this way getting his rival within his power, had him immediately put to death by hanging him up, thinking no more was necessary to his succeeding to the possession of the estate of Lewis. But the death of the favorite young man so irritated the whole clan of McLeod, that they resolved nothing except the death of the judge should stone for it, and this Little Fohn M'Dhoilmhich Huisdan, being universally reputed the fittest person for this enterprise, it was committed to him accordingly. The judge, informed of his danger, thought fit to come and wait on the master of Reay who then lived in Durness, about the Christmas holidays, in order to prevail with him, to protect him, and to threaten John McLeod from attempting anything against him. But John McLeod being told of the judge's having left his boat at Inverchirkak in Assynt, waited for him there is his return, flew both him and his brother; and after this went to Lewis and married the judge's widow. On account of the barbarity and cruelty of these McLeod at this time, and their murder of a very promising youth who was the rightful heir of the estate of Lewis, immediately upon his coming home to his estate from Edinburgh, where he had his education under the King's eye, and this murder of judge Morison, of whose integrity his majesty had a high opinion, the king disposed of Lewis to a company of adventures from Fife and Dundee, whose history is well known.

Among the numerous islands on this coast is one called Elan a Bhrin, or, the Island of the Judge, from the above mentioned Judge Morison. After he had been slain, his friends in Lewis came in a galley to bring home his corpse; but contrary winds arising drove them with the body on board to this island, where they found it convenient, after taking his bowels out, to bury them; and the wind soon after changing, they arrived in safety at home.

This small island, which furnishes good pasture for lambs, being about 4 acres of extent, is possessed by the present minister of Edderachillis, as it has been by all his predecessors in office by the gift of the family of Reay physician, at his own request, by one of the Stewarts, Kings of Scotland, whom he had cured of some distemper. This Ferrhard was physician to the Mackays of Farr; and received from them, in exchange for his right to these islands, a piece of ground near Tongue, called Melness, where he lived himself, and some of his offspring after him; but the Mackays found means to recover possession of Melness long since; and yet it is said Ferchard's posterity remain still in the country under the name of Mackay.

There is yet one small island in a fresh water loch that deserve some notice, one account of memorable events that happened in it. It lies in Loch Stack, so termed from a mountain having the figure of a stack of corn, but of immense height, near it. In this small island Mackay Laird of Farr, chief of the name, had a hunting house with a small garden, which on occasion of his visiting the distant parts of his forest in the hunting season, he resorted to for some time, and not only he, but after him, other gentlemen have been in use to pass some days in the same place, when employed in the diversion of hunting. While Sir Hugh Mackay of Farr, the father of Donald first Lord Reay, happened to pass sometime in this island, it was the custom of the people in the neighborhood to make him and his company presents of milk, fresh meat, butter, and cheese; and in this way the wife of a man occupying the next farm or grazing called Loan, who seems to have been of the better sort, came to him with her present also; and being a young

woman, and as it would seem of uncommon beauty; Sir Hugh took a fancy for her person, wanting her to gratify his sensual inclinations; but she rejected his proposal disdainfully, telling him she would not live to commit such a base deed, while her own husband lived, and so wanting to return home she found she would not be permitted to leave the island. Next day Sir Hugh, with one or more attendants, took a walk towards the house, where the husband lived, and desired him to come along with them as they returned to the Island, which as he was doing, either Sir Hugh himself, or some of his company, stepping behind, all at once ran him through the body with a durk, took off the head, which they brought carefully along with them, and upon their return presented to his wife. Then the poor woman fearing, by persisting in her opposition, to meet with her husband's fate, was obliged to submit to Sir Hugh's inclinations, and of that commerce was Donald Mackay begot, who was the first laird of Edderachillis of the name of Mackay.

Migratory Birds. Island Handa is remarkable for being the resort of vast numbers of sea-fowl of different kinds, which about the end of April every year come to it to breed and hatch their young. Their numbers are so great, that the whole face of these tremendous rocks, and the sea in the neighborhood appear covered with them. There they remain all the summer and harvest till the middle of September, when they migrate nobody knows whither. Many of those who live nearest this island, as well as its inhabitants, make it their business, as often as they can, to come with boats to this place, and besides catching and killing great numbers of them, to the great benefit of their families in the way of provision, they make considerable profit of the feathers, bartering them commonly for an equal weight of wool. The flesh of the birds, (the young ones excepted), has a fishy isle, offensive to most palates. Three men, at different times, lost their lives by falling from the rocks, where they were unhappily rambling in pursuit of them and their eggs, in the memory of the present inhabitants.

Who the earliest inhabitants of Edderachillis of the name of Mackay. The earliest inhabitants of Edderachillis, is now easily discoverable. After the most diligent inquiry amount the oldest and most intelligent people, all that can be learned is, that two or three centuries ago this place was but thinly inhabited; and, that the inhabitants were such as held their possessions by no legal tenure, paid no rent, and acknowledged no landlord or superior. The first who are said to have held it in property were McLeod, a branch of the Lewis family, or Shiol Torquil: but prior to their establishment as proprietors, tradition reports that in the tune of the Norwegian kingdom of the western isles, these islanders made frequent descents upon the coast, and sometimes not without bloodshed, while they attempted plundering the few inhabitants of their cattle, and carrying them off in their boats. The last of the McLeod family, who died the acknowledged proprietor of Edderachillis and seems not to have been of the family of Assynt, was called Mache a Leister; probably on account of the first or principal man of the tribe being remarkable for skill in making arrows, for Mache a Leister is, literally, "the son of the arrow maker." He having no children by his wife, brought over from Assynt, a nephew of his wife, called James, the son of Roderick, the son, John Moir McLeod, to live in family with him, and succeed him in the possession of the estate at his death, which accordingly happened; but he, being of a turbulent and factious disposition, had quarrels with several of his neighbours, particularly the Morisons of Durness and Ashir, some of whom he put to death. The Laird of Fair also, Sir Hugh Mackay, having occasion to remit a sum of money to Edinburgh, the bearer of it one day's journey from his house, by a party of armed men having their faces disguised with black paint, whom every one supposed to have been sent upon that enterprise by James McLeod of Edderachillis. As the Morisons of themselves were not able to bring James to task for the injuries done themselves, they contrived a plan for it, by bringing the Mackays to their assistance. The principal man of the name Morison at that time in Ashir, had in his house and family, a bastard son of the Laird of Farr's (Donald Mackay) the same already mentioned, as

begot in the Stack; him he proposed both to the Mackays and to his own friends, to the Laird of Edderachillis, if by their joint efforts James McLeod was made away with; and all agreeing this proposal, the plan for effecting it was to engage a cousin of James McLeod's, one Donald McLeod, son to Murdow, son to John Moir of Assynt, to take away his life: this business, he was reckoned the likeliest, and fittest to perform, being a notorious Russian, and, in order to hinder James's friends from prosecuting revenge afterwards when the deed should be perpetrated by one of themselves. The reward promised Donald, induced him richly to undertake it, which was, that he should have the half of Edderachillis for himself, and his offspring, and that the mother of this Donald Mackay, the bastard, should become his wife. Here upon, a party of the Morisons from Ashir, headed by Donald Mackay the bastard, and Donald McLeod, who among other qualifications, was incomparably skilled in handling the long bow, marched in a dark morning for Edderachillis, though not directly towards Scourie, where James McLeod lived, but to some other places nearer them, where James's best friends, and ablest supporters dwelt, in order to dispatch them first; which having done, and three of four men, whom they surprised in their beds in their several dwellings, cruelly slain, they proceeded to Scourie; where, after slaying two or three more of the McLeod, they found James, upon getting some notice of their approach, had taken shelter in a fore built in the middle of a Lake in Scourie. But with arrows, having fire bound to them, this house, being thatched with straw or reeds, was soon made to blaze, when he was obliged to come out; whereupon Donald, his cousin, killed him dead with a musket bullet. And as James had a son of his along with him in this island, Donald did for him also; for after he had swam to the farther side of the lake, and endeavored to run for his life, he flew him with an arrow from his long bow. James McLeod, or M'Rory, being in this manner slain, Donald thought himself sure of possessing at least half of Edderachillis, according to agreement, by here he found himself mistaken; the Morisons now told him, he must be content with some other reward, for that Donald Mackay must have all Edderachillis: whereupon Donald in a rage declared that would not do, and immediately he taking himself to his friends in Assynt, in a short time returned with a body of men to take possession. But the Morisons, aware of his motions, prepared to meet and fight him upon his first entering the Sir Hugh Mackay of Far presented himself to them upon the top of a hill hard by with 300 men, and finding how matters stood, immediately called both before him to a conference in order to an accommodation, which none of them durst refuse. At this interview sir Hugh proposed to Donald McLeod, that he should resign his pretentious to Edderachillis in favour of his son Donald, and that he himself, in consideration of his doing so, would grant him other land near himself, called the Davoch of Hope, as also Donald Mackay's mother to be his wife; which proposal he at once agreeing to, the whole difference ended and peace and harmony took place. This promise Sir Hugh actually fulfilled, giving Donald the Davoch of Hope, where he lived to an extreme old age, with a family of six or seven sons, continuing the same to the last. He was buried in the kirk of Durness, where upon the south wall on the inside of the building, there is a monument of his with the initials of his name, and his arms cut out in the stone, and the year 1619. When became of the sons cannot be discovered, but the lands of Hope are in the possession of the Reay family, as a part of their estate.

In this manner came Edderachillis into the hands of the Mackays, or that branch of them who call themselves the family of Scourie; but of them there were only three proprietors before it became a part of the estate of Reay; the first of these was Donald already mentioned, the second his son Hugh, and the third his son Hugh, who was the famous general Mackay, commander in chief of the forces in Scotland under King William III. He was born in Scourie, this parish, and as George Lord Reay married his daughter, he gave him Edderachillis, as her torcher.

Next as to Ashir or Fashir, the northern part of this parish, which, as before observed, was the waste or uninhabited parts of Durness. It, as well as Durness, as far back as our information

goes, was church-lands, belonging of old to the bishop of Caithness, and they were disposed of by one of the Popish bishops of that see to a Lewis man, one Ay Morison, son of Norman, who coming by sea of a cargo of meal to Thurso, near the Episcopal seat, happened to fall in love with a sister of the bishop's and married her, and as her tocher received all Durness and Ashir, a good and extensive highland estate. What was the name of this country, prior to this event, cannot now be ascertained by any traditional account; but Morrison at this time gave it its present name of Durness, from the place of his nativity, so that it cannot be considered as local or descriptive; but upon being established in his newly acquired estate, he brought over with him from Lewis a colony of no less than sixty families, mostly of his own name, to whom he gave lands upon his own property; hence it is that the name of Morrison is so prevalent in these parts, for though the property be fallen into other hands, the stock of the inhabitants remains. Some generations after this, it happened that the descendant lineal of this Ay Morrison died childless, and left a widow, a Sutherland woman, daughter of one Donald Bain Matheson then proprietor of Sheerness. This woman, finding her lest all used by her late husband's relations, eloped in the night, carried with her the rights by which the Morrisons held Durness, went to Dunrobin, the Earl of Sutherland's seat, and delivered these papers into his hands. Possessed of these rights only, the Earl considered himself as entitled to claim Durness for himself, and consequently had great bickering with the Morisons to bring them to pay rent to him; but they continuing obstinate and refractory, and being encouraged in an under-hand manner by the laird of Farr and his agents, the Earl at length became tired of contending with them, and agreed with the laird of Farr, ancestor of Lord Reay, to give Durness to him for a feu duty of 60 marks in the year; and in this manner came the Reay family to be possessed of this estate, but the feu duty, though still continued, is now reduced to a taste.

Miscellaneous Remarks. In Edderachillis is plenty of all sorts of game; deer, roes, mountain hares, which vary their colour according to the season of the year, being white in winter, and brownish gray in summer; moor fowls, black cocks, and ptarmigans, wild-pigeons, partridges, and all kinds of small birds, with great varieties of sea fowls. There are in the parish considerable woods, in the more inland part, for building houses, and making farm utensils, mostly birch, and far from the shore: those which anciently grew upon the shore, of which there are still some remains in different places, have been destroyed.

There are appearances of mines in this parish, which have never yet been investigated by persons of skill, as well as white marble, particularly in Fomme bhein, a part of the deer forest. Near Island Hands, upon the main land, is found a kind of light grey coloured stone, heavy, and perfectly free of sand and gritty matter, and of so fine a consistence as to admit of being cut and fashioned with a kinse, and bored through with a gimlet, without these tools being hurt by it. It is used by many for sinkers to their lines in fishing.

The air is reckoned wholesome, though often damp from the vicinity of the ocean, and of very high mountain, but the frequency of very violent storms perishes it. The thatched houses, which all the houses here are to a very few, require a new cover every year to render them water tight; and the stuff used for this purpose is either straw, long grass, rushes, fern, or heath; but this cover must be bound artfully with new hopes made of either heath, straw, or the crops of trees twisted, all which occasions no small trouble and expenses to the inhabitants, yet without them, every house would unsuitably be unroofed, and destroyed in a short time. Rains here are frequent and heavy, but not quite so frequent as in most places to the south of this coast, and the weather is generally milder; for though snow falls deep sometimes, and remains long upon the highest mountain the exposure to the south west and the shelter from the storms of the north and east by the hills and rocks, render the habitations comfortable; so that many of the cattle, cows, and horses, as well as sheep and goats, lie in the fields without being housed at all the whole year, and look and thrive better than such as have been house fed. Vegetation also

commences early in these parts; but the ground for husbandry is never begun to be broke up till March, as rain and wet weather before that period is reckoned more hurtful to it in that situation. April is the feed time for oats, and May for potatoes and bear; and in August and September, all the harvest work about hay, bear, and oats, are performed, and these are all gathered in with favorable weather against the beginning of October.

There have been several instances of longevity in this parish; and at present there live in it two or more men betwixt 80 and 90 years, one of whom, with good weather, travels four miles to hear sermon, and returns the same day to his house., There are none living in this parish having any property in land, for, as has been already observed, Lord Reay is sole proprietor of it, though there are several families of considerable substance in the grazing way, possessing extensive pasture grounds; but by far the greater part of the parishioners are subtenants of the tacksmen of the family of Reay. And though Lord Reay exacts no services for his own particular behoove from the people of this parish, which lies at a great distance from his own feat at Tongue; yet that is not the case with respect to the tacksmen. They parcel out among poor people, as under tenants, such farms and out skirts of their possessions as they do not labour for their own immediate behoove, upon condition of paying the full rent of their different small holdings, and some other small items; besides these, the subtenant engages to perform such and such services, by sea or land, as their master affairs may require; especially in harvest and spring, they must be ready at a call, to do what work may be assigned them; and, as they have no lease for their possessions, the masters orders cannot be disputed, but at the risk of being turned out at the term, when, with the character of being refractory, no other tacksmen will be ready to receive them, and they must be set adrift, which is a dreadful situation to a poor man with a wife and family. A tacksmen, whose lands are extensive, has it in his power in this manner to ease himself of a good deal of expense in the way of hiring servants to do his work, which is a great advantage, especially in such a place as Edderachillis, where servants are scarce by reason of so many of them being employed in kelp, fishing, and the management of cattle. The rents therefore each of these subtenants will have to pay, must not exceed what will be barely sufficient for his circumstances, 20 s. or perhaps 10 s. and often nor so much, that the tacksmen may have as many hands to work for him as possible; but as he gives them commonly their maintenance when he employs them, to ease himself in this article he calls them out the seldom.

Servants being scarce in this country, some tacksmen have fallen upon a way of providing themselves, by giving a piece of land equivalent to the wages of a servant for a year to a man with a family, on condition of giving him his service for one half of that time, by alternate weeks, and paying half the rent of the land along with this service. But the fittest and best kind of servants for this country are the domestic kind, having no family of their own. About 30 years ago, and later, the best men servants here were hired for 7 or 8 merks in the half year; but now, they must have 20s with perquisites: best maid-servants then were satisfied with 3 merks wages in the half year; but now they get 6 or 8 merks, also with perquisites. Many servants of both sexes have of late fallen into a way of going to the southern parts of the nation, where menial service stands higher; and yet, when distress overtakes them there, they often make their way back to their friends in this country, and become a burden to them. Many also have entered into the army as recruits; and several and employment on board the bounty fleet in catching herrings; whilst women and children make some money by gutting, etc. There are but few in this parish that may be called real objects of charity. The native inhabitants are all connected by blood, and few strangers dwell among them, so that they assist each other, and scarcely any are in want of bread. The poorest, to a very few, have some cattle they can call their own; and if any go about for charity as beggars, they are commonly such as come from distant parishes, or perfect strangers. The only public fund for relief of the poor in this place, is the Sabbath



collections, which is distributed by the Session once in the year, or in two years; and its annual amount is commonly from L. 3 to L. 4; but in times of a great herring fishing it exceeds this sum, for many of the bounty fishers attend public worship, too often for information where the fish abounds most, than on account of devotion. It is to be regretted, that the toleration allowed by law to such men to prosecute their fishing upon Saturday evenings and Monday mornings, is too often abused by breaking the Sabbath rest. Yet there are among them who seldom or never send out any boats, either on the Saturday evenings or Monday mornings, and yet they are known to make out their cargoes as soon as the others, for, as they declare themselves, their men exert themselves more vigorously, in consequence of that rest, all the week over, so as to prove more successful.

The only monuments of antiquity in this parish are the ruins of four dry stone round towers, supposed to have been the work of the Norwegians. Two of them have been used as cemeteries for burying the dead down to the present times, which practice had its arise probably from their being secure.

It is pleasant to observe the progressive state of civilization in the Highlands of Scotland, and in this place in particular, compared with the ferocity and barbarity of the last century. Then, a Swedish vessel of considerable size, happening to east anchor in Kylescuin, attracted the rapacious attempts of some young men in the neighborhood; who, to the number of 12, boarding her in the night with blackened faces, shot the captain in his cabin, mastered the crew, wounding such as resisted, and then carried off all they covered of the goods, leaving the remaining part of the hands to sail off with their ship. Next year, another ship appearing on the coast, and continuing to hover nearer land than any of the beholders could understand the meaning of, a number of men from the shore, observing her motions, took a boat, and made towards her; but approaching pretty near, saw several men from the their weapons; and so, not liking their appearance, thought best to sheer off with all speed towards the shore; but, finding themselves pursued by the long boat, and ready to be overtaken, they landed upon the first island they came to, but in landing received the fire of several muskets, by which one man was slain, who cried out as he was dying, "I have got what I deserved," meaning his having killed the captain of the Swedish vessel, for he it was shot him. Upon this, the long boat returned, and the vessel failed off.

Disadvantages.-

1. The want of arable ground for producing corn. With the best seasons, the crops raised in this parish will hardly be sufficient for two-thirds of the inhabitants; from the ravages wolves, which were numerous and destructive in this country, and where they were not wholly destroyed till of late. Yet, by being situated at no great distance from Caithness, this disadvantages is in some measure obviated.

2. The want of roads within the country, and towards other places. Were the people called out, and make to work upon the roads according to the statute, travelling here might in time be rendered commodious and easy.

3. The want of schools. There is indeed a legal salary of 100 merks for a schoolmaster, but that, without other emoluments and school fees, is no sufficient encouragement for one properly qualified, and the great distances of the several habitations, and the want of fit houses for boarding, render it impossible for a school here to be of general benefit to the people. A few years ago, the Society for propagating Christian Knowledge gave a schoolmaster to this parish with L. 10 of salary, yet all at once thought fit to remove him, because there was no greater number of scholars than 17 attending the school; yet, had they duly considered the situation and circumstances of this place, they might have easily seen, that granting the means of

instruction to 17 scholars in this remote quarter, was a greater charity by much than giving a school to a populous inland parish, like Kiltearn in Ross-shire, which could so easily maintain a schoolmaster for itself, and yet that was the place to which they removed our schoolmaster.

4. The want of communication with post towns, which is not only grievous to the inhabitants, but also a public disadvantage and loss. This is a place of general resort for all kinds of shipping, on account of the many excellent harbours, where they ride in safety in all weathers. Here, therefore, before they face the North seas in their outward bound voyages, they are ready to put in, and desirous of acquainting their employers and friends with their condition; and also, in their return from these seas, they are in the same way willing to give information to their concerns at home. Besides, the sleet of herring fishers, who often spend more of their time upon the coast of this parish than anywhere else, because here they find most employment, have always great occasion to write home concerning their affairs; and, as early information of the state of the fishing is of the greatest importance, that information might be given was there once a regular communication established with the nearest post town: the want of this, last season, was attended with immense loss; for while this sleet were losing their time doing little in the bays to the S. our creeks and harbours were full of the finest fish, and there was none to take them; for, as the inhabitants had no salt for curing, and could find no buyers, they desisted from killing them. -The expense of a weekly courier from hence to Tain, which is only a distance of 40 miles, though too heavy for the inhabitants of this place, would be only a trifle to the public, and would be richly compensated by the benefit arising from it to the community. At present, a few of the parishioners are at the expense of a runner, once in the fortnight, from this place to Tongue, a distance of 22 miles and bad road, where there is a weekly communication with Thurso.

Statistical Account Parish of Edderachillis, 1845. The Rev. George Tulloch, Minister.

Extent. The parish of Edderachillis is situated on the north-west coast of the county of Sutherland, along the shores of the Atlantic, being a portion of the Reay country, commonly called Dathaich-mhic-Aoidh." Its extreme length, from north to south, is 25 miles, by an average breadth from west to east towards the interior of 1 miles making 175 square miles equal to 1 12,000 acres or thereby. In this is included the district of Kinlochbervie, some time ago disunited from the parish of Eddrachillis, and erected into a separate parish *quota sacra*, under act of Parliament. Edderachillis was part of the barony of Skelbo. It was disposed by Hugo Fmskyn de Moravia, ancestor of the Duke of Sutherland, 1186-1203, to his brother, Bishop Gilbert Moray, who in 1235 disposed it to his brother Richard Moray of Culbyn. About 1440, an heiress Eamidia. Moray carried it into the family of Kinnaird In 1515, Andrew Kinnaird disported it to John Mackay of Edderachillis son of Mackay of Strathnaver, the superiority remaining with the Earls of Sutherland. The Purchase of 1829 restored it to the Sutherland Family.

Name. The name is Celtic, the orthography and pronunciation belong Eadar-da-chaolus, literally signifying between two firths or inlets of the sea, which can be readily reconciled to its geographical position, Kyloska separating it from Assynt on the south-west, and the Kyle of Laxford, in the ancient division, on the north east, although in modern times it extends to Gualin Hill.

Boundaries. It is bounded on the south, by Kylesku, Loch Glencoul, parish of Assynt, and some of Creich; on the west, by the Atlantic Ocean; on the south by the parish of Durness; and on the east, partly by Durness also, and partly by the parish of Lairg.

General Appearance, and Natural Divisions, Its figure is irregular, intersected with arms of the sea and from the top of one of the mountains, presenting a checkered appearance of lakes,

glens, rivers, and ravines. To view it from sea, at the distance of some miles from the coast, it is allowed to be particularly like Norway, affording an unbounded field for contemplation to the admirers of nature, in consequence of its sublime scenery and striking alpine character. The parish is naturally divided by arms of the sea into the three following divisions,

1. Scourie division, situated between Loch Glendhu and Loch Laxford.
2. " Ceathramk-garbh" between Loch Laxford and Loch Inchard; and
3. Ashare. The name of the first of those divisions cannot be traced to any particular origin, whilst that of the other two may be ascribed to, the natural appearance of the localities, - "Ceathram-garbh," in Gaelic signifying a rough section of a country; A term applicable to in reality to this division; and Asbare, signifying arable land or land capable of producing corn.

**Mountains.** The mountains demanding particular notice are those of Beinne-Leothaid, Beinne-Stac, Beinne-Stroim, Arkle and the south-west range of the Reay forest to the summit of Toinne-Beinne, Meal-Horn, and Sabhal-mhoir,

**Lakes.** The most remarkable lakes are Loch-mhoir and Loch-Stack; but many others of considerable size might be mentioned.

**Rivers.** Inford and Inchard are the largest, with innumerable rivulets, all charging themselves into the Atlantic.

**Islands.** A number of islands, of about twenty, lies between Edderachillis and Assynt, and to the north of Scourie Bay, the island of Handa no less celebrated from its rising perpendicularly on the north a height of 600 feet or thereby; than for the myriads of sea-fowl which migrate to its precipitous cliffs in the summer season to bring forth their young. The tourist would be as much gratified by a visit to this island as to Staffa, the character of its rocks being more singular and striking. The basaltic columns of Staffa are to be met with in more than in one part, but those of Hands are peculiar to it only, lying as they do horizontally, and presenting an appearance as if all were built by the hand of man.

**Natural Harbours.** The whole line of coast is much favoured in respect to harbours. They are sufficient to afford safe anchorage to the whole and mercantile shipping Great Britain. Those of more note are lochs Laxford, Inchard, Badcall, Calva, Glendhu, and Sound of Handa.

**General.** Owing to the mountainous character of the country, the marrel capabilities are chiefly confined to the rearing of slidding the greater part is so appropriated. The sea coast is to be shewed of similar importance as regards the fisheries. The quantiles corch is limited, and, in consequence of the ruggedness and cover of the surface, it is raised by the force of manual labor with scarcely any aid from the plough. But what measure has denied in one way for the support of man is bestowed in other, by the unlimited quantities of fish which abound particularly the herrings: they formerly frequented it in autumn, and still not unfrequently in summer. They are of a healthy and sound quality. Such portions of the area under tillage are not of a bad quality, and yield fair rents. The rivers produce salmon, and the lakes are all well retness. The rivers produce salmon, and the lakes are all well stocked with trout, both of excellent quality.

**Meteorology.** The weather is changeable, and the prevailing winds are south and west. The temperature cannot be reckoned cold, but the atmosphere, owing to the vapors from the Atlantic, and the high hills attracting the clouds, is humid, and productive of rheumatic and scrofulous affections, the latter often proving fatal. Heavy falls of snow occur, but are of short duration along the coast, although the higher grounds partially retain their coats till June. There are instances of great longevity and retention of physical faculties. Small-pox made its

appearance last season, but its progress, under Divine will, was soon arrested by the immediate and general application of cowpox, attended to by a surgeon appointed for the purpose, at the expense of the Duke of Sutherland. Solar and lunar rainbows are not infrequent; and a most striking view is that of the sun setting in summer, casting its rays in crimson hue across the bosom of the ocean. The aurora borealis or Northern Lights occasionally show themselves, are extremely vivid, and, according to vulgar acceptance, "arrayed against each other in the order of a line of battle." Although we are not strangers to the terror of the thunder storm, seldom or ever any accidents are heard of; flashes of lightning are periodically common about the commencement of each quarter. A rare, if not an unprecedented, phenomenon in this latitude, occurred in winter 1838, by an avalanche destroying no less than a herd of twelve deer; and such was the force of that terrific body, that it not only killed the animals on the spot, but when the forester found them, their bones were crushed to pieces. The fury of sea storms is often the cause of great alarm and damage, particularly in winter, and to the observer on shore is magnificently grand when they are from the north-west; the noise of the billows of the Atlantic heaving against the rocks is tremendous, and only equaled by the height to which they are raised, known in some instances to be no less than about 600 feet against the precipitous rocks of Handa. Shipwrecks, however, are not so common as they were, owing to a lighthouse having been erected on Cape Wrath.

Hydrography. The most direct approach from the south to this parish is through a part of Assynt to Kylesku, at which there is a ferry between Edderachillis and Assynt, of 380 yards broad. The tide of this narrow inlet is extremely rapid, readily accounted for by the great expanse of sea on both sides; from it two extensive lochs branch into the interior, Loch Glendhu on the left, and Loch Glencoul on the right hand,-the former upwards of three miles long, by one and a-half broad, and the latter nearly five long, by one broad, both of great depth, and no less celebrated for the quantity and quality of their herrings than for their singular wildness and romantic scenery, the hills rising on every side to a great height, and interspersed with formidable cliffs. The great arm of the sea forming this inlet on the west, juts in from the ocean a distance of ten miles, and is commonly but erroneously called in the charts "Loch Assynt." To instance the importance of Loch Glendhu for herrings, so recently as the autumn of 1829, it was estimated that the value of herrings caught in it was L. 30,000 and it has been known that 100 herring busses have resorted to it at a time. The other harbours and sea lochs, already noticed, are productive of herrings and other varieties of fish, including shell-fish. To advert to the fresh water lakes, Loch Moir and Loch Stack are the two most conspicuous; not only from their inland position, and as giving rise to the River Laxford, but as they form the confines of the great Reay Forest on the south-west. The former is five miles long by one broad; the latter three long and two broad. Their water, rising from the bowels of the mountains, which are principally gneiss, quartz, and feldspar, is particularly limpid and free of impurities. Good wholesome water is to be had in all parts, principally from perennial springs.

Geology and Mineralogy. The characters and varieties that arise under those heads are neither numerous nor very important, as far as they have been yet discovered; and did we enter on particulars, too much space would necessarily be occupied. As a whole, Edderachillis is of the primitive and transition classes, and the ranges of mountains already mentioned, with little exception, consist of gneiss, various hornblende rocks, granite in veins, and quartz rock. Limestone is met with on the sides of Lochs Glendhu, Glencoul, and Loch Moir. Hornblende slates are to be found round Scourie and at Kylestromie. Handa Island is composed chiefly of red sandstone, the quality of which cannot be excelled for every description of architectural work.

Soil. The soil along the coast and in the valleys, principally recumbent on gneiss, is of various descriptions. The greater part of the arable is a mixture of gravel and moss, fertilized by the application of sea-weed for manure, which imparts to the land a considerable portion of organic matter, and its alkaline properties neutralize the acid which the moss contains. The district of Ashier is better soil than the rest, being dark loam intermixed with sand, and the features of that section of the parish convey a belief that it has been earlier inhabited and cultivated than the rest. The arable land of the island of Handa is of a similar quality.

Zoology. The domestic animals need not be enumerated under this head, as reference will be made to them in another part of this account. The wild animals common to the rest of the Highlands are to be met with. The first to be noticed is the red-deer (*Cervus elaphus*), and not inapplicable named the monarch of the forest. In this country, where so much is done for preserving and propagating this species, we are called upon to pay more than ordinary attention in delineating what has been done. The Reay forest, or Dirumoir, has had always a place amongst the principal forests in Scotland; a character in this respect it maintained for many generations, till within the last quarter of a century, when it gradually declined, owing to the introduction of sheep. Upon the expiry of the leases of such part of the forest as had been thus allotted for sheep, the Duke of Sutherland has restored the whole to what it originally was, excluding sheep, and placing the range in charge of foresters solely for the preservation of deer. This not only amply provides for the animal most characteristic of the country, and most conducive to the sportsman adventures, but also relieves the whole neighboring sheep-walks of the greater part of the deer that roamed over them, the maintenance of which was a considerable burden. The extent of territory so exclusively laid off for deer cannot be less than 60,000 acres, whereof the half is in this parish, and the rest in Durness, inhabited by some thousands of deer, and inferior as a forest to none in Scotland. Sir Robert Gordon, in his History of the Earldom of Sutherland, written in the year 1630, gives the following account of the forest, viz.-

"The half of the Dirimore, which lies toward the north and north-west, doth appertain of late to Mackay, by the Erle of Southerland, his gift and disposition. In the Dirimore, there is a hill called Arkill; all the deer that are bred therein, or hunt within the bounds of that hill, have forked tails, three inches long, whereby they are easily known and discerned from all other deer."

The description thus given of the deer having forked tails is still applicable.

It may be added, that the Laxford affords angling for salmon and trout, not to be surpassed by any river in the north. The quadrupeds and birds are thus described in Sir Robert Gordon's work of 1630, and have since undergone very little chancre, viz.

" All these forests and schases are very profitable for fielding of bestiall, and delectable for hunting, They are full of red deer and roes, wolfs, foxes, wild cats, brocks squirrels, whittrets, weasels, otters, martrixes, hares, and fulmars. In these forests, and in all this province, there is great store of partridges, plovers, capercaillie, blackwaks, murefowls, heth hens, swans, bewters, turtle-doves, herons, doves, stirlings, lairigigh or knag, (which is a fowl like unto a parakeet or parrot, which makes place for her nest with her beck in the oak tree), duke, draig, widgeon, teal, wild-goose, ringouse, routs, whaips, shot-whaips. woodcock, larkes, sparrows, snipes, blackbirds or osills, meiveis, thrushes, and all other kinds of wild-fowl and birds, which are to be had in any part of this kingdom."

From the above list, only the wolf and capercaillies need to be excluded, in order to make it nearly applicable to the present time.

Birds. These are, three species of the eagle, the royal, black mountain, and osprey or fish-eagle,-hawks, (various kinds,)- owls, cuckoos, black-cocks, ptarmigans, moorfowls, partridges, golden and gray plovers, woodcocks, snipes, starlings, sparrows, thrushes, wagtails, swallows, kingfishers, rock, and wood, and sea-pigeons, mavis, and landrails. Swans, wild-geese, ducks, (different kinds,) the great northern divers, scarts, solan-geese, cranes, gulls, and many other sea-fowls and birds of passage, frequent Handa in the summer months.

Fishes. These are, salmon, trout, char, herring, ling, cod, skate, turbot, flounder, haddock, halibut, mackerel, tusk, lithe, coalfish, dogfish, whiting, eel, silver-eyed fish, sunfish, and gurnards. In a country where the coast swarms with fish, some may have escaped notice, and others, perhaps, have not been discovered; for, so lately as December 1838, the writer transmitted to the Edinburgh College Museum, two very rare specimens recently found at Scourie. Professor Jameson gave them a place in the Museum, being presented by the lamented Duchess Countess of Sutherland, and describes them thus: "Two specimens of fishes; the smaller of the two is very rare, and is new to the fauna of Scotland; it is the poor cod of authors; the other, or larger specimen, is the Trimaculated Wrasse."

Cetacean. The cetacean frequenting the coast are, the whale and the porpoise: and the seal may be included. A very remarkable specimen as to size, measuring in length 8 feet 2 inches, was shot by Captain Granville Gower Loch, R.N. in 1837, in the sea between Assynt and Edderachillis. Neither the whale nor the sunfish are captured on this coast; the former seldom in any part of Scotland. The latter used to be taken in considerable numbers on the coasts of the islands of Harris and Barra, through the dexterity of the natives harpooning them at sea. The liver alone yields oil to the amount of 360 gallons at an average. Crustacea and Shell-fish are to be had in great varieties and of superior quality, consisting of lobsters, crabs, oysters, mussels, cockles, whelks, and limpets, also pearls in the rivers. The lobsters are brought in large quantities to London, and allowed to be the best exposed in Billingsgate.

Beasts and Birds of Prey and Vermin. On this subject it may be remarked, that wolves were at one time numerous, and to avoid their ravages in raising bodies from the graves, the population had recourse to the Island of Handa as their place of interment. This is the tradition of the country, and it is believed to be well founded. The destructiveness of the fox amongst the sheep is now most to be complained of. The otter amongst the salmon, and the common rat and mouse, could all be well dispensed with. No country produces finer specimens of the black mountain eagle, so hostile to lambs; ravens and crows also commit depredations.

Reptiles. These are, the adder (*Anguis Eryx*), lizard, toad, and frog. The first is injurious. The following instance is worthy of notice: Some years ago, Donald Morrison, tenant, Ashier, was stung; and the effects gave rise to apprehensions of immediate death. When in the greatest agony, the captain of a strange vessel landed on the coast, who prescribed the following singular cure: a young chicken to be split or cut up alive, and instantly applied to the stung part. After the same treatment had been replied indicating by its swelling that it had absorbed poison. The individual who underwent this treatment recovered, is still alive, and enjoys perfect health.

Botany. The field for the botanist is rather limited. Professor Graham remarks, that the *Luzula arcuate* has been found only in three stations in Britain, the summit of the mountains at the source of the Dee, Benmore in Assynt, and Fionaven, ranging into this parish.

There are appearances of the whole country having been at some period covered with wood, in the remains of trees, principally fir, which are found in the mosses. The natural wood now standing is limited to about 600 acres, almost birch, along the banks of Loch-Moir, Loch-Stack, and at Badna Bay. Wood has not been planted, with the exception of a very small portion round the factor's house at Scourie, and has given way owing to its proximity to the ocean. There can

be no doubt that all kinds indigenous to the British Isles would grow in the interior, if they were on a large scale, and properly attended to. Apple, also pear trees, and small fruit bushes, as also culinary vegetables, thrive well in the garden at Scourie.

## II.-Civil History.

Nothing is known of Edderachillis as a parish, earlier than 1726, the date of its erection, except that, before that time, it formed part of the parish of Durness, and was disjoined on an application to the General Assembly by the heritor, Lord Reay, and Mr. John Mackay, minister of Durness, and endowed by a fund arising from the friends, and general subscription over Scotland. The district, however, occupies rather a conspicuous place in the annals of the Mackay's Country. A branch of the Mackays, at so early a period as 1550, took possession of the territory of Edderachillis by displacing the MacLeod's, and planted themselves at Scourie, under the title of "Mackays of Scourie." The unjustifiable means to which they had recourse to procure this settlement, is defined in the last Statistical Account by the Rev. Mr. Falconer. A repetition of it here is unnecessary. Amongst the descendants of the Mackays of Scourie, were men eminent for piety and chivalry. The history of one of them in particular claims attention, whose character merits admiration for its many virtues. This was Lieutenant-General Hugh Mackay of Scourie, the famous Commander-in-Chief of the time of King William and Mary. He was born in 1640; the account of his life published by his descendant, Mr. John Mackay of Rock-field, is well worthy of a perusal. He fought against Dundee at the battle of Killiecrankie; and although the fortunes of that day proved adverse, he showed great military skill in his retreat, and fully regained any character it might have been supposed he had lost, by his great success in Ireland, particularly at the battle of the Shannon, where he displayed much military skill and bravery. Many other great exploits could be mentioned. He was to have been rewarded by a peerage, under the title of "Earl of Scourie;" but this was prevented by the alleged intrigue of his rival, Mackenzie of Coigach or Cromarty. This great man's career terminated in 1692; he fell shortly after the siege of Namur, where he commanded the British division of the grand army.

Parochial Register. There are no traces of a parochial record having been kept prior to 1819. From that period, births and, marriages have been carefully recorded.

Antiquities. Little can be stated on this head, at Kylestrome there are the remains of a Danish fort tolerably entire: and at Scourie there are still visible the remains of a similar building, as well as of tumuli. At Badnabay, also, there is the appearance of a Druidical circle of stones.

Land-owners. The Duke of Sutherland is sole proprietor of the parish, into whose possession, with the rest of the Reay country, it came in 1829: it was then almost in a state of nature, without a foot of road or other improvements, the most commendable thing about it being the excellent deportment of its natives as to religion, and in respect of moral and social order.

Roads, &c. The aspect of the country has been since changed, by the construction of roads, erection of inns, and farmhouses. These improvements extended over the whole county of Sutherland. In the aggregate, no less than 480 miles of roads have been made, greatly by the means, and wholly through the instrumentality, of his Grace. The portion of these roads confined to this parish is 32 miles in extent; and three inns have been erected in it solely at the Duke's expense.

Means of Communication. It appears from the former Statistical Account, that there was no regular post communication with the south, a circumstance which caused great complaint in these days; and the only way of receiving letter was by a few of the parishioners contributing to send a runner once a-fortnight to Tongue to which place there was a communication from

the south round by Caithness, the difference between the direct line and this route being at least 150 miles. Instead of this, there is now a post-office at Scourie, having intercourse, by means of a mail-gig twice a week, with Golspie, where there is a daily post to all parts of the kingdom. The internal communication was equally defective the, intercourse being-carried on by boating, and on unshod ponies which scrambled, over the precipices with wonderful safety and agility. Few accidents arose from either. The last was the case of Captain William Scobie of Ardvar, who was drowned in the Sound of Handa, exceedingly lamented on account of his many excellent qualities.

Buildings. In a country like this, almost entirely pastoral, many extensive buildings are not required. It is a marked feature in its character, since the succession of the Duke of Sutherland, that new farm-houses and inns have displaced the old, introducing a new era in this district, and illustrating the liberality and ability of the new landlord.

### III.-Population

The population in 1792, according to the last Statistical Account, was 1024; and the last census makes it 1965 giving the striking increase of 941, notwithstanding that many families emigrated.

Character of the People, &c. The population is domiciled along the coast in townships or hamlets, each family possessing a certain portion of land. Their houses are of better description than the ordinary run of Highland houses, and amongst them are a few slated cottages. The people are moral, hospitable, and very mindful of their poor. They are particularly honest; and hardly ever a case of theft occurs even when the wants of the population are great. For example; a ship laden with corn was stranded at Loch Laxford in 1838; and though the vessel and cargo, in the confusion of the shipwreck, was laid open to pillage, to the credit of the people be it told, nothing was stolen; a self-denial scarcely to be met with anywhere, under similar circumstances. Gaelic is the vernacular tongue, and generally spoken: the greater number of the young speak English also; and the few south county shepherds amongst them speak English only. Illegitimate births seldom occur, there having been only four within the last three years.

The names most prevalent are Morrison, Mackay, Macjeral, and Mackenzie. The men are athletic; and such of them are aware in the army made first-rate soldiers. Their features are marked, and although not particularly well favoured, indicate a bold and resolute character. The colour of the hair is generally light, and the complexion rather fair. In the article of dress, they are not extravagant. On Sundays and holidays, they are neatly and cleanly attired. The elderly people dress in cloth in their own manufacture. Such as repair to the south and Caithness herring fishing, adopt, to a considerable extent, the lowland dress and habits.

### IV. - Industry.

Agriculture and Fishing. The productive employments of the people consist in tilling the ground and fishing, with the various operations attendant on both. In a country where there is not an immediate market for the sale of fish, and for affording the necessaries of life, the combination of these employments is found to answer well. The operation of laying down the crop commences about the middle of March, and finishes in May. Harvest begins in August, and ends in October. The crops raised are, potatoes, bear or bigg, and oats. In the absence of the plough, the implement used in laying down the crop is the common garden spade, and Caschrom. A description of the latter having been so repeatedly given in other accounts of Highland parishes, it need not be presented here. Since the construction of the roads, many of the tenants have carts, which are in all about forty: these were unknown before the Duke acquired the estate.



Soon after the sowing is completed, the most enterprising commence the early herring fishing; and such as have large boats, in the latter end of July, on the Caithness coast, whence they return in the beginning of September. Their occupation in winter is promiscuous, thrashing corn, attending to their cattle, making, repairing, and trimming herring nets for the ensuing season, the females spinning and knitting. The rate charged for spinning hemp is 6d. per pound, but in the neighboring district of Assynt, 3d. ; and it not unusually happens that a reckoning is kept amongst the members of the family, between sisters and brothers, of the quantity spun for herring nets, and closed by payment. This exactness cannot be too highly extolled, as it inculcates economy, and value for money, so very desirable to be observed by all classes in the Highlands. Lobster-fishing is also carried on by a London company, who employ a number of the natives in procuring the lobsters, which they carry off alive in well-smacks to the Thames. This fishing commences in April, and ends in October. The last to be noticed is the salmon-fishery commencing in March and closing in August.

**Kelp.** The manufacturing of kelp in former years gave employment to a number of the people. Advancement in the science of chemistry disclosed substitutes for kelp which have entirely thrown it out of the market, a result not to be regretted, as the sea weed from which it was made is the manure that nature has set apart for the land. Although kelp yielded a certain revenue to a landlord, its manufacture retarded agricultural improvements, and thereby curtailed the quantity of produce which the land would otherwise yield for the maintenance and comfort of the population.

**Produce.** In order to bring all under one view, a table is here presented, showing the number of men employed, the amount of stock and capital invested, and annual returns; with a comparison betwixt the particulars of this and the last Statistical report of the parish.

**Live-Stock.** The breed of sheep on the large farms is a pure Cheviot, to which great attention is paid. The sheep, in the hands of small tenants is a cross between the native breed of small black-faced sheep and the Cheviot, and of late years has been much improved. The breed of black cattle, comparatively speaking, is not very good, and much might be done towards its improvement.

Before the hills were taken up for sheep stocks, the country was deservedly famed for the breed of Highland ponies or garrons, extremely hardy, and some of them living to the age of thirty. The present Orkney breed is in a great degree descended from them, having at one time been sold hence in considerable droves.

**Manufactories.** No establishment of this kind exists, and there is rather a scarcity of artisans and mechanics.

**Rent of Land.** The average rent of arable land per acre cannot be exactly specified, as each lot or portion has a share of pasture land attached to it, held in common by the tenants of the respective townships. The following may convey an idea of the extent, and nature of these holdings. The rents payable by each small tenant are from L. 2 to L. 5. To illustrate, we will advert to a L. 3 rent, which is a very common one. In a favorable sea- son, the crop produced, together with milk and fish, supports a family of four for eight months. Three small Highland cows, eight sheep, and one horse, form the stocking. These holdings, with their supply of fuel, however limited they may appear, in a country where fish is abundant, enable the frugal occupants to live moderately well.

**Wages.** The wages of carpenters, smiths, masons, and tailors are about 2s. 6d. per day. Farm-servants, besides board, receive- L. 7 yearly; maids, L. 3, 10s, Mr. Falconer states the wages in

1792 to have been, for a farm-servants, L. 2, and for a maid-servant, 17s. 8d. yearly- besides perquisites.

	1792			1839			Increase			Decrease		
	No	Rate	Amount	No	Rate	Amount	No	Rate	Amount	No	Rate	Amount
Population	1024			1965			941					
Real rent			290			2492 18			2262 18 4			
Black cattle	2573	60s	7717	1155	60s	3465				1418		L.4252
Sheep	2629	8s	1051 12	12900+	21s.	13545	1027]		12493 8			
Goats	1307	7s	457 9	417	7s.	145 19				890		311 10
Horses	351	L.8	2820	112	L.9	1008				239		1800
Potatoes	Not stated			About 2900 bar	3s.	435						
Barley				285 bolls	28s.	399						
Oats				95 do	22s	104 10						
Hands engag. in fish				200								
Large boats				24	L.30	720						
Small boats				89	L.7	623						
Tonnage of boats,				438 tons.								
Herring-nets				600	50s	1500						
Herrings caught				Early 350 barrels	10s	175						
				Late 2400 do+	10s	1200						
Lobsters				9600	3 1/2d.	140						
Salmon and grilse				4400	4 1/2d	408 0 4 1/2						
Wool	375 st.	7s	18 5	1554 stones	17s	1320 18	1179st.		1189 13			
						L. 27682 5 81/2			L. 15946 19 4			L.6363 10 0
									6363 10.0			
									L. 9582 9 4			

The census of 1831 included labourers at roads from other parishes who have since left; but it is estimated that the present population is much the same, also as to number, with that stated for 1831. With store farmers, 8650; with small tenants, 1900; exported annually, 2850=12900 on the Caithness coast weighing 21,761 lbs. being amount of increase in amount of real rent and live-stock since 1792.

It is to be regretted that the cod and ling fisheries are not more prosecuted; the natives are excellent herring fishers, but too lax as to the other: indeed, as yet, little or nothing has been done, in applying skill or capital towards the advancement of this important branch of industry.

The island of Handa is tenanted by twelve families. Besides fishing, they have recourse to other employment of a very hazardous character, by resorting to the daring enterprise of going a fowling among the precipitous rocks round the island, from whence they bring, at the imminent risk of their lives, a vast quantity of sea fowls and eggs, to be used by them for food, and the feathers to be disposed of to their mainland neighbours. In this perilous avocation, some have fallen over the rocks, and been instantly killed. It is curious enough, that they have established nothing less than Royalty amongst them, in the person of the eldest widow on the island, who is designed Queen; and her prerogative is recognized not only by the islanders, but by visitors from the mainland.

#### V.-Parochial Economy.

Ecclesiastical State. The whole population is of the Church of Scotland, and there are no dissenting or seceding families in the parish. There are two churches; one at Badcall, and another at Kinlochbervie, both commodious, and in excellent repair. The stipend is the minimum, L. 150, whereof L. 103, 6s. 8d is paid by the Exchequer, and the balance, L.46, 13s. 4d. by the heritor. The extent of the glebe is about 320 acres, and its yearly value L.30, or thereby. The manses and offices at Badcall and Kinlochbervie respectively are recent erections, the former built by the heritor in 1835, and the latter by Government in 1828.

Education. The schools are the parochial school at Scourie, and a school at Ashir, from the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge. There is no regular Sabbath school kept. The attendance at both schools is considerable. It is believed that a Parochial school in connection with Kinlochbervie church will be soon established. In some of the remote hamlets, there is private tuition in winter. The yearly amount of the parochial schoolmaster's salary is L. 35, 17s, 9d. The school fees and other emoluments are trifling. A reading club has been recently established at Scourie.

Savings Bank. There is one Savings bank at Scourie. The whole amount invested is L. 443, 9s, 6d. and the operations are very limited.

Poor and Parochial Funds. The average number of persons receiving parochial aid is about 40, and the allotment to each yearly is from 3s. to 15s. The average amount of annual contributions for the poor is about L.20, whereof there is from church collections L. 14, and from the heritor L.6. No legal assessment has been imposed.

Fuel. This article, so very necessary for the existence and comfort of man, nature has provided in great abundance. Tracts of moss are open to all, and at no other expense than that of cutting the turf, and drying it by exposure to the action of the atmosphere.

August 1840.

#### **Geographical collections relating to Scotland made by Walter Macfarlane. 1698?-1767**

**Printed by T. and A. Constable for the Scottish History Society.**<sup>96</sup>

The parish of Edderachillis lie's mostly on the sea coast, betwixt the promontory of Cape Wrath on the East and the Store head of Assynt another promontory southwest of the former at twenty miles distance betwixt them. The coast betwixt these heads forms itself into a large and deep bay with several creeks stretching within the land for several miles.

The first farm of the parish of Edderachillis to the west ward of Cape Wrath, is called Sandwood, which stands at the bottom of a little sandy bay, which hath always a prodigious

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<sup>96</sup> Country of Strathnaver Containing the Parishes of Farr, Tongue, Durness, Edderachillis and Part of Reay Sutherland. 1726. MacFarlane, Walter, 1698?-1767 : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive

strong breach upon the shore, the coast being high and rocky on both sides of the bay. There runs a burn into the bay from a fresh water loch within a bow shot of the sea. On the east side of the said burn there is a little wood of dwarfish hazels so low that the nuts hang among the sand, as they grow, the second farm is three miles southwest from the former on the coast, is called Oldshirebeg. It hath a fishing port covered with an Island of a mile long. The third is a mile distant from the other southeast and called Oldshire moar. It has a fishing port, but not accessible at low water. By Oldshire moar the sea goes in by way of a creek a mile wide at the entry and three miles in eastward. In this creek called the Loch of Inchard there is good anchorage for ships of burden, but by reason of rocks, of difficult entrance. On the north side of the Loch Inchard a mile from the entry stands the farm Kenlochbirsy. A mile further up stand the farm called Achughrisgill. On the south side of the Loch half a mile from the upper end stands the farm Achulanes and a mile further stands the farm Rimhichy.

From the south point or head that forms Loch Inchard the shore stretches south for two miles where the farm of Keansaly, which hath a fishing port stands. In a mile further south the sea runs in again in a creek of a large mile, wide at the entry, and about four miles inward easterly, this creek is called the Loch of Lussord there are many small Islands in this Loch on the sides thereof that form as many harbours for ships and there is good anchorage over all this Loch. On the north side near the entry stands the farm of Ardmoar, & near it Ardbeg, and at the Loch end stands the farm Dailachrackphuill. On the south side of this Loch a mile from the end thereof stands the farm of Badnabagh and a mile lower stands the farms of the two Fynadailes.

From the south head, that forms Lussord called Ru-an- tumpain the shore stretches south for three miles. A mile south of Ruantumpain, stands the farm of Tarbet which hath the best fishing port on that coast. Two miles south thence lies the Manor called Scourie, sometime past a gentleman's seat. Within half a mile of the shore between Tarbet and Scourie, lie's an island called Island Handa about three miles in circuit and inhabited by one or two families. It yields corn and pasture a great number of sheep. The side of the Island towards the sea is very high and rocky and abounds with a vast variety of sea fowls that lay their eggs and hatch them there. Going there in a calm day with a boat, and some fowling pieces is an agreeable diversion.

From the head of Scourie, the sea goes in by way of creek eastward for seven miles up, which separates the parish of Edderachillis on the south from the parish of Assynt this creek is called Kiliscoug, its four miles broad at Scourie, and as it goes further into the land forms a great many other creeks and hath a vast many small islands upwards of forty at least and near the bottom divides itself into two narrow creeks a mile deep, the land stretching out between them in from of a tongue.

On the North side of Kiliscoug a mile East from Scourie stands the farm of Badcall which has a commodious harbour for ships of burden, being covered with several islands. At this farm the parish church of Edderachillis is designed to be built with the minister's manse, the Parish being lately erected out of the Parish of Durness. A mile east of Badcall stands the farm of Gugil; a mile further east stands Duartbeg, and two miles further east stands Duartmore which is a harbour for barks, two miles further east stands the farm of Kilistrom. Close on the shore of this farm stands a little island called Island Ranich famous for the herring fishing that has been there in times past and for its being the station of many hundreds of ships that have loaded herring there, the fishing is much failed of late years; yet there is still some herring catch's there yearly. A mile East of Kilistrom stands the farm Maldy, & two miles east from thence at the end of the Kyle stands Glendie a farm, at the point that stretches out betwixt the two creeks mentioned above, stands a farm called Ardaloch and at the bottom of southernmost of the two creeks stands the farm Gleneul which is the nearest part of the parish of Edderachillis to that of Assynt.

There are some farms of the Parish of Eddrachilles that lie at some distance from the shore and near the hills such as the farm of Riroy five mile northeast from Badcall. The farm of Loan, three miles northeast of Riroy the farm of Achfary four miles east of Riro and the farm Aldinzmy four miles northeast from Achfary.

The hills of the Parish of Edderachillis are these viz.

- The hill called Aldermheally a quarter of mile northwest of Farmheall (one of the hills of Durness) and is itself a mile long lying northwest and northeast.
- The hill called Binnchivish a bow shot from the former northwest is a mile long, lying northwest and southeast.
- The hill called Binnstack south of the former seven miles, is a mile long lies south and north. On the east side of Binnstack is a wood of birches and other timber.
- The hill called Benn- dreavie, a quarter of a mile southwest of the former, is three miles long lies south and north.
- The hill called Binstrom half a mile southwest of the former is two miles long and lies east and west
- The hill called Binnleoid lies southeast and northwest.

The Lochs and Rivers of the Parish of Edderachillis are these viz.

- The burn of Sandwood, which rises at a little Loch called Lochscoir near the hill Aldermheally and runs thence northwest three miles, then falls into the Loch of Sandwood, which is a mile long and half a mile broad and then falls into the sea at the north side of the farm of Sandwood.
- The River of Insard which rises from the loch called Loch annessannain, which is a mile in circuit, and runs thence west three miles and falls into the Loch or Kyle of Insard at the farm Achulaines on the north side thereof.
- The River calld Lussord which rises from Lochmoar, which is three miles long and a mile broad and lies east and west thence it runs a mile northwest & falls into the loch called Lochstack by the hill of that name and is two miles long and as many broad and then runs into the sea at the bottom of Loch Lussard a litle below the farm Dalach-raephuil on the south side thereof where there is a salmon fishing with nets and cruives.
- The burn of Gisgill rises northwest from a loch called Loch an Aldamrevich, which is a large mile in circuit, whence it runs south three miles and falls into Kiliscoug at the farm of Gisgill on the West side thereof.
- The burn of Duartmoar rises from a loch called Loch Aninnaill half a mile in circuit and runs thence two miles and a half and falls into Kiliscoug half a mile west of Duartmoar.
- The Rapid burn of Maldy rises in Loch na creigadus two miles in circuit and runs thence southwest three miles and falls into Kiliscoug through the farm of Maldy.
- The burn of Glendu rises in Loch Straan Aisness a mile long, runs thence northwest a mile and a half into the sea or Kiliscoug on the east side of Glendu. (8) The burn of Glencull rises in the Loch called Fiannloch three miles in circuit, and runs thence northwest a mile and a half into the sea a mile east of Glencull.

There are other burns and lochs less considerable, such as these of Oldshirebeg and Oldshire moar, Kenlochbirfie, Achughrisgill, Scoury, Duartbeg &c.

There is woods in some places of the Parish of Edderachillis not named above viz. On both sides of Lochmore, there grows plenty of tall birches, elms, alders and other timber. Also between Ardaloch and Glencoul is a good wood of birch, sauches, rantree, and other trees. Also upon the water of Glendhu there is a wood of birch. In all the bays and creeks of the Parish of

Edderachillis, there hath been herrings fished and are yet at occasions fish and other sea fish, there is also oysters, muscles and limpets and spout fish and on a bank of sand that is more shallow then the sea about it which stretches between Cape Wrath and the Storhead of Assynt there is a great many cod and ling and sometimes turbot catch most in the spring quarter.

N.B. — The Lord Reay is sole heritor of the Parishes of Tongue, Durness and Edderachillis and superior of the lands of Strathalladale in the parish of Reay & of Strathy &c. in the parish of Farr.

## The Workhouse in Scotland

The earliest act of the Scottish Parliament relating to the relief of the poor dates from 1424, when a distinction was made between able bodied beggars and those who were unable to earn their own living. The latter could be given permission to beg by the authorities with the form of a badge or token to carry with them. The following year made able bodied beggars liable to be arrested and given 40 days to find work or else be put in prison. Over the next century and a half a series of further acts followed aimed at the staunching of beggars, none of which proved effectual. Provision for the deserving poor was formalised in an act of 1535 which made each parish liable for the support of its own aged and infirm, and poor collections to be made for that purpose.

In 1579, an act of the Scottish Parliament For punishment of Strong and idle beggars and relief of the pure and impotent laid, the bases of the system of poor relief in Scotland that was to continue for the next three centuries. Under the Act strong and idle beggars were to be branded on the ear with the death penalty for repeat offenders. Each parish was to make a list of its own poor. Those who had been born there or who had lived there for seven years or more, that the aged and impotent and pure people should have lodging and abiding places. Heritor's Landowners could take the children of beggars into unpaid service until they were 18 in the case of girls or 24 for boys.



IMAGE 277 THE POOR HOUSE, THE STREET, BETTYHILL IMAGE BY ANNE BUCK FROM STRATHNAVER MUSEUM

A further act in 1597 restated the 1579 act but added that strong beggars and their bairns effectively all the able bodied poor should be employed in common work implicitly acknowledging that previous legislation had been in effectively implemented by the civil authorities. The act also shifted the responsibility for carrying out poor relief directives to the Kirk session the church authorities in each parish.

The act of 1672 ordered magistrates to erect correction houses or work houses in which beggars could be detained and made to work. The Act of Union of 1707 had allowed Scotland to retain its own judicial system. By the 1840s, it became apparent that reform was necessary. The Commissioner's report delivered In May 1844 noted that poor relief in Scotland was generally confined to the old, infirm, disabled, mental ill, and so on, and the relief to the able bodied was rare. They therefore proposed to broadly keep relief organised at the parish level. Most of the earlier poor houses were erected in Scotland's more highly populated southern lowlands. The first poor house erected in the Highlands was in 1850 in Tain. After the passing of the Local Government Act of 1929, many poor houses were refurbished or upgraded and took on a role under the NHS. Others were condemned and sold off or demolished.

Poorhouse is a synonym of workhouse. In Scotland usually termed poorhouses. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, poorhouses were a reality for society's most vulnerable people. Durness parish had its own poorhouse from about 1854. In 1904, whose location is uncertain but could house eight men or women. In the 1870's Eddrachilles Parochial Board erected two parish houses able to house up to sixteen women. The parish of Tongue had a parish house from about 1897 believe to be located in Strathounge which could accommodate four men and four women. From around 1861 a number of Sutherland parishes began to discuss the setting up of a joint poorhouse. It was agreed that a poorhouse for eighty to one hundred inmates should be set up at Bonar. The Sutherland combination poorhouse was built in 1863-5.

### **Local Government<sup>97</sup>**

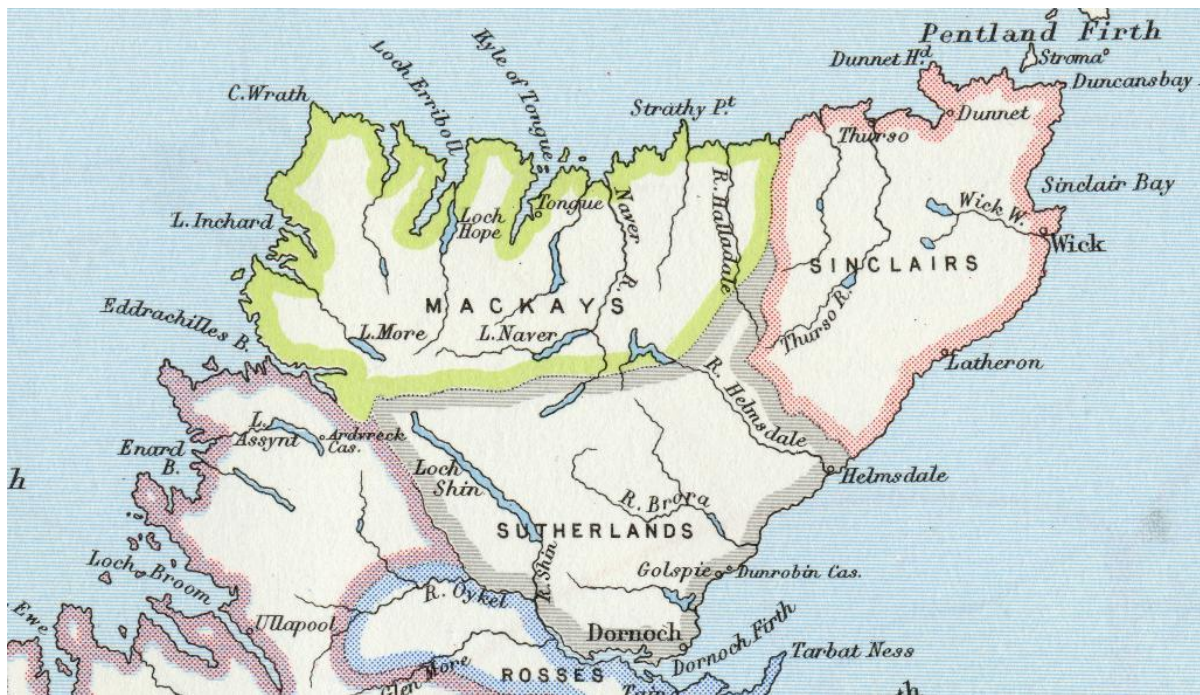
During the latter half of the 19th century and up to 1930 in the present century each parish had its parish council and school board. in 1930 the parishes of Tongue and Farr were amalgamated into one unit so far as local government was concerned and this body was called the District Council and local education matters were attended to by an education subcommittee. The County Council looked after the major issues and the District Council was more or less an advisory body along with having jurisdiction over unclassified roads and leisure and recreation matters within the Tongue and Farr district the County Council was an all-purpose authority dealing with education roads housing and planning in 1975 the local government went through yet another reshuffle and there emerged a top authority dealing with education roads planning etc. this body is known as a Regional Council and has its headquarters at Inverness. Only one representative is allowed to represent Tongue and Farr including Skerry, Melness and Altnaharra. This council deals with housing environmental health leisure and recreation etc. the third tier recently appointed consists of members drawn from Skerry Tongue and Melness known as the community council its purpose is to feed the information to the higher authorities both regional and district and act as an advisory or if necessary a pressure group. The consensus of opinion is that the new setup costs more and is less efficient than which was replaced namely the all-purpose County Council.

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<sup>97</sup> This was written by Joseph McKay of Melness and submitted by Christine Mackay in 1987 to a government sponsored programme.



## Mackay Country History



The district anciently occupied by the Clan Mackay, and known from the name of its chief as the Lord Reay's country, extended along some two-thirds of the broken north coast of Scotland, from Reay itself on Sandside Bay, some ten miles west of Thurso, along the wild loch indented coast to Cape Wrath, and as far southward as Eddrachillis Bay on the West Coast. The Mackay's at one time possessed the stretch of land known as "Lord Reay's Country" from Drumholiston in the east to Kylesku and southwards down the fertile Straths Halladale and Strathnaver to Altnaharra, and west to Merkaland south of Achfary covering approximately 1,200 sq.km. The Mackay land covers some eighty miles in length, by some eighteen to twenty miles in depth. It is what is recognised as the true Highlands of Scotland.

Lord Reay's Country, raised sheep, cattle, and goats; selling their surplus in the markets of the south. Their main crops were barley, oats, and rye, potatoes and vegetables were not cultivated until much later. The locality was once the home of great herds of deer. Sea fish were plentiful on the coast. Trout and Salmon, venison and wild game were all, at one time, in great supply. With these natural resources the people of the Lands of Mackay were almost self-supporting and independent of out-siders.

In 1829 increased debts forced Eric Mackay, 7<sup>th</sup>. Lord Reay to sell the Mackay lands to George Granville Leveson-Gower, Marquis of Stafford (made 1st Duke of Sutherland on his death in 1833) and Elizabeth, Duchess of Sutherland, proprietors of The Sutherland Estates. By 1834 almost all of the County's 1,297,803 acres were owned by Sutherland Estates. That pattern held throughout the nineteenth century. In the past one hundred years that dominance has fragmented very significantly.

Mackay Country has always been within The medieval province of Strathnaver, comprising present day northern Sutherland, was a focus for settlement from the early medieval period through the centuries of Viking activity and Norse colonisation, into the medieval period. Our understanding of the changing nature of that settlement from A.D. 500-1500 is poor over much of Scotland, and this area is particularly understudied. The Province of Strathnaver once stretched from the border with Caithness on the east to Cape Wrath and Assynt on the west.

With an exposed, rocky coastline, sheltered sea-lochs, fertile valleys and high mountains and moorland, this part of Scotland offered good ground for settlement and land for grazing, hunting, fishing and timber. The Norse referred to it in the *Orkneyinga Saga* as the ‘Dales’ of Caithness. Its big river valleys made natural route ways through the mountains to Helmsdale in the east and Loch Shin, Lairg and Oyckell in the south. The valley of Strathnaver (‘strath’ means ‘valley’) is named after the River Naver, which flows along and created it. It is an open, fertile valley with stepped shoulders leading up onto moorland and hills.

Documentary and place name evidence for medieval settlement is strong throughout the province. The place name evidence from Strathnaver suggests that some of its settlements were continually occupied from the period of Norse linguistic influence, before A.D. 1200, til the early nineteenth century. Thirty-six settlement names that are Norse in origin are known in the strath. Thirteen of the Norse names, or 36%, appear in charters throughout the medieval period, and 23 of them, or 63%, are shown as settlements on the late 16th- to early 19th-century maps. This suggests that they had long histories of use, though their precise locations might have shifted over time. Several of these township sites – including Klibreck, Grumbeg, Rivigill, Skail and Farr – have early Christian chapel sites or cross-incised stones, which hints that they were already settled before any Norse speakers arrived.

Exploratory work in the valley of Strathnaver and around Durness has also shown the potential for good archaeological evidence. There are large Neolithic chambered tombs and Bronze Age standing stones, Iron Age brochs (substantial stone-built towers) and round houses, early Medieval chapel sites and carved stones, and also the remains of more than 40 townships (or joint tenant farms) whose inhabitants were evicted in the early 1800s to make way for sheep.

### **Origins of the Clan Mackay – A Brief Summary**

The Mackays are thought to have their roots in Morayshire and come from the name Morgan (Moray Men). ‘Morgan’ comes from the Gaelic word ‘mor’ meaning ‘the sea’; Moray comes from the same root, meaning ‘seaside’.

So how did Morgan become Mackay?

Battles in 1160 led to the scattering of the Moray men in effect they became refugees made up of a mixture of different clans (Picts from Moray/Northern Ireland and Vikings from Norway) and became known as the ‘morganish’. They were led by the McEths (Earls of Moray until 1160) but around 1200 the name McEth disappears and is replaced by the name Mackay.

The Gaelic for ‘Eth’ is ‘Aoidh’. ‘Mac’ means ‘son of’ in Gaelic. The Gaelic for Mackay is ‘MacAoidh’ so it is thought that Eth was an old name for Mackay. This group fled to the north and west due to it being so sparsely populated it was safer than them trying to fight the stronghold clans to the east and west. They finally arrived on neutral territory in the Province of Strathnaver (now known as Sutherland) and were thought to have settled there between 1350-1450. ‘Macky’ became known as the name for ‘chief’ in the clan.

### **Mackay Country – Duthaich Mhic Aoidh**

In early 1600 Mackay Country made up over half of what is now the County of Sutherland. The main estates included Strathnaver, Scourie, Halladale, Strathy, Melness, Sandwood and Eddrachilles. The Mackays were great warriors so many of the estates were sold off to raise money to send the men to battle. There were always feuds between the Mackays and the Sutherlands. The Earl of Sutherland became a powerful landowner through land sales from the Mackays, and in turn the County of Sutherland was formed. However, locally the area is still referred to as Mackay Country and Strathnaver Museum represents the whole of it.

1807 saw the start of the clearances and people were cleared off the land for sheep on masse, sheep were deemed to be more profitable for landlords than tenants. The worst clearances occurred under Patrick Sellar (1814-16), a factor of the Countess of Sutherland. As a result, Mackays were scattered far and wide from the coastlines of Sutherland, to cities and to the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

### **The Clan Mackay Society**

The Mackay Society was set up in Glasgow in 1806 as a Sickness & Burial Club to help Mackays who had been cleared from their homeland with very little financial means. In 1888 the Clan Mackay Society was formed and the spelling reverted to the most commonly found spelling, 'Mackay'.

The clan flag is a white banner, 'Bratach Bhan' in Gaelic, and this is now the title used for the Clan Mackay Society annual newsletter.

### **Spelling of the name Mackay**

'Mackay' is the most common spelling of the name, used by the Clan Society in Edinburgh and the local communities in the Highlands where the Mackays originated. There are various spellings found across the world these are thought to have evolved through different clans merging or different interpretations of the word e.g. from hearing it spoken to writing it down and translation from Gaelic to English. Versions include McKay, MacKee, Mackie, Magee but all stem from the same Clan of Mackay.

### **Where are the Mackays today?**

The Mackays scattered across the world following the Sutherland Clearances, with the main resettlement countries being Canada, USA, Australia and New Zealand. Despite their dispersal the essence of being a 'Mackay' remains strong with Clan Mackay Societies being formed in respective countries. Many have taken time to trace their genealogical roots and make the long journey to return to search out their ancestors in Strathnaver itself. Strathnaver Museum is in the process of compiling contact and family history research details of Mackay descendants, with the aim of one day sharing information globally between the scattered clan.

### **Before the Mackays**

#### **The First Settlers**

The Mesolithic period is from 7000BC to 4000BC. These people were nomadic. They used simple bone and stone tools and lived as hunter-gatherers. As a result of the long legacy of the Ice Age, which ended 10,000 years ago, the Mesolithic people were the first humans who definitely lived this far north. The Mesolithic period covers 9,000 to 5,000 years ago. Traces of these people have been found in Sutherland and Caithness.

The Neolithic period covers 4000BC to 2000BC. These people were farmers and lived in permanent settlements. As well as stone implements, they had pottery. The Neolithic people lived in this area over 4,000 years ago. The evidence of their presence is plentiful. Strathnaver exhibits many signs of this – for instance, the chambered cairns at Achanlochy and Skelpick. These cairns were used as collective burial chambers.

#### **The Bronze Age**

The Bronze Age was from 2000BC to 500BC. Burial was in individual stone kists. Bronze was used and tools and weapons had been improved. So too had the pottery. The settlements were in groups of round houses, today the remains are seen as hut circles. A stone circle which dates from the Bronze Age can be found at Dalharral near the top of Strathnaver. A Bronze Age

artefact, 'The Chealamy Beaker', which is over 4,000 years old, can be seen in Strathnaver Museum. Bronze Age burials differed from Neolithic burials as they sometimes contained grave-goods. An earthenware beaker was found alongside skeletal remains in the burial kist.



IMAGE 278 THE CHEALAMY BEAKER AN ARTEFACT NOW IN STRATHNAVER MUSEUM

### **The Iron Age**

The Iron Age was from 500BC to 500AD. This is when the first Celts arrived. They were later known as Picts. At the end of the Iron Age, the Gaelic-speaking Scots arrived to settle on the south-west mainland.

Strathnaver would have been punctuated by 'Brochs' in the Iron Age – 100BC to 100AD. These were tower-shaped stone structures. They were impressive defensive buildings sited in strategic positions the length of the Strath. The ruins can be seen today. At this time, the Romans were in control of a large part of Europe. They recorded that the inhabitants of Scotland were a Celtic people known as the Caledonians, described as a war-like race, whose

mode of social organisation was tribal and who would fight amongst themselves. It is thought, despite their internal factions, a huge army was raised to face the Roman Legionnaires. Despite victory for the Romans, they did not try to invade Scotland again. The proud creators of the brochs in Strathnaver could well have been roused to join forces in this battle.

The Picts have been described as sociable people who enjoyed music and storytelling and lived from their land. Craftspeople and artists would have been integral in their community. These creative qualities were to remain as the centuries moved on.

### **The Columbian Church**

The area became home to Celtic Missionaries from Ireland. Their influence and presence is confirmed by the existence of place-names directly linked to this time. Eilean Neave, near Skerray, can be interpreted as Island of the Saints and Coomb Island is thought to mean the island of St. Columba. Near to Strath tongue is Loch Cormaic. This is named after a cleric of the Christian faith, much like the Red Priest in Strathnaver. These people or people like them brought Christianity to the north at around 600AD.

### **The Vikings**

The Viking Period was from 800AD to 1200AD. The Vikings came from lands to the north and west of Scotland. An aggressive campaign was conducted by these Norsemen, invading lands, pillaging and killing in order to expand their territories. Although evidence of the presence of these people on the north coast is scarce it is believed that they would have lived here for hundreds of years. Archaeological discoveries at Durness and throughout Caithness provide physical evidence and the influence of the Nordic language, particularly on place-names, is strong.

## The History of the Church in Mackay Country<sup>98</sup>

### The Arrival of Christianity

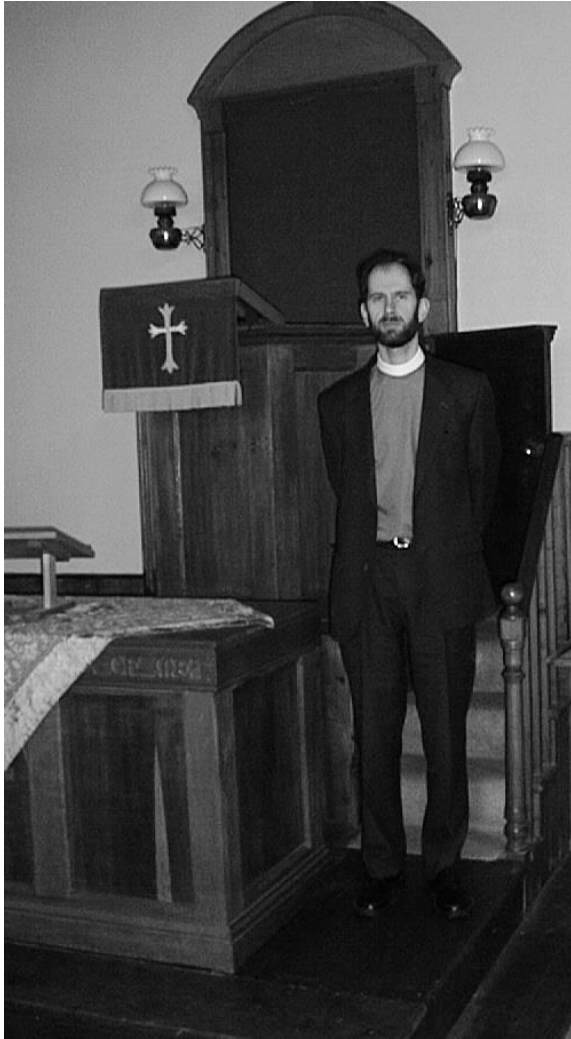


IMAGE 279 REVEREND JOHN MANN

Christianity was brought to the Mackay Country by the Columbian missionaries of Iona, and it is thought that the individual concerned may have been Maelrubha. Maelrubha was born in Ireland in A.D. 642 and came to Iona in about 671. Sometime later he settled at Applecross in Wester Ross, and used this as a base to evangelise the North of Scotland. According to tradition, his final journey brought him to Durness, where, at Balnakeil, “he erected the first Christian building on a site that has ever since been a centre for religious worship,” (Thomson) and on to Strathnaver, where he was murdered in 722.

In the Middle Ages, the authorities of the Catholic Church laid down the parish boundaries of Scotland. Strath Halladale became part of the parish of Reay, most of which was in Caithness, and the rest of the Mackay Country was split between the two large parishes of Durness and Farr. Each would have had a parish church (probably at Balnakeil and Skail respectively (William Mackay), but in addition, there would have been private chapels endowed by landowners. For example, there was apparently a church in Halladale. Nothing survives now, other than the place name ‘Kirkton’, but “In 1274 and 1275 it is recorded that the church at ‘Haludal’ or ‘Helwedale’ contributed around 9s 4d towards the expenses

of the Crusades.” (Bardgett)

In 1560, the Scottish Parliament adopted the Reformation. There is little evidence that this had much immediate religious impact locally, but Donald Mackay of Farr, later 1st Lord Reay, who succeeded his father Huistean Dhu as clan chief in 1614, was certainly a convinced Protestant, and in 1626 was raising troops to fight on the Protestant side in the 30 Years War on European mainland.

### The Bardic Minister – Rev. Munro

Munro’s solution was to write songs to instruct them in the teachings of the Bible. His songs achieved great popularity and were sung by people as they went about their work as well as in their homes for generations. These songs were not only to have a great impact on the religious life of his parish, but were also to be an influence on other religious poets in the Mackay Country, such as John Mackay of Mudale in Strathnaver, who wrote in the early 18th century,

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<sup>98</sup> By Reverend John Mann. Back to the Future Project 2004- 2005

and whose songs in turn are believed to have had a profound influence on Dugald Buchanan of Rannoch (1716-68). Buchanan, regarded by many as Scotland's greatest religious poet, got to know the songs from soldiers from the Mackay Country garrisoned at Dunkeld after the Forty-Five. (Grimble)

Following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, Presbyterianism was outlawed in Scotland, and persecution of those who refused to conform soon broke out. Around about this time (though no one knows when), one of the most mysterious figures in the history of the Church in the Mackay Country appeared on the scene.

### **The Strange Tale of George Squair**

George Squair, who had, apparently been a non-conforming minister in Warwickshire, arrived, for some unknown reason, in what was at that time part of the Parish of Durness (but is now part of Eddrachillis). He learned Gaelic, and, "with no ecclesiastical status and with no salary, he did the work of an evangelist in what was then a needy corner." (Macrae)

There was a need in those days for discretion, and meetings were often held in isolated places. One meeting that was long remembered was a communion service held between Rhiconich and Loch Garbat, attended by about 100 people, at which Squair preached with his Bible placed before him on the stump of a tree. George Squair, incidentally, was the grandfather of George Munro, who was minister of Farr from 1754 to 1779, and the great-great grandfather of Dr. Gustavus Aird, minister of Creich Free Church 1843-98, possibly the most eminent minister in Sutherland in the 19th Century.

### **A Want of Bibles**

An indication of the religious state of the area at this time comes from, Alexander Munro, (son of the Laird of Kitwell, Kiltarn, in Ross-shire) who became minister in Durness in 1623. He himself had come to faith through the preaching of Robert Bruce, who had been minister of Edinburgh and one of the foremost leaders of the church in Scotland. Bruce incurred the displeasure of James VI, and was exiled to Inverness where the young Alexander Munro was among those who heard his preaching. He found the people of his parish "grossly ignorant, having neither Bibles nor ability to read them" (John Mackay).

This is hardly surprising, since the whole area was Gaelic speaking, and there was no Gaelic Bible at that time. (Bibles in Irish Gaelic became available in the 1680's, but it was not until 1801 that the full Bible was available in Scottish Gaelic.)

### **Restoration and Reorganisation**

Following the re-establishment of Presbyterianism in 1690, it was soon thought that the parish of Durness, which at that time stretched from Skerray to Kylesku was too large for one minister to cover. In fact, in 1638, an agreement had been made between Donald, 1st Lord Reay, and the Bishop of Caithness for the Tongue part of the parish of Durness to be disjoined and become the Parish of Kintail. The plan was shelved, but in 1724, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland split the parish of Durness into three parishes: a much reduced parish of Durness, a parish of Tongue, and a parish of Eddrachillis.

In Eddrachillis, there had been no church building, so one was built south of Scourie. It was originally heather-thatched, but was later slated. (The building still stands, having been converted into a house c.1970.)

In Tongue, there was no need for a new building, since there had been a medieval chapel at Kirkiboll near the House of Tongue, which the chiefs of the Clan Mackay had maintained over the years as their private chapel and burial vault, and, in the 17th century, rebuilt as a place of

public worship. It has been repaired and altered over the years, but remains in use as the parish church in Tongue today.

The new parish of Tongue was not, initially, very fortunate in its ministers. The first minister, George Mackay, arrived in 1726, but only lived two years. The second minister, Walter Ross, was inducted in 1730, and ministered for 31 years in Tongue. He was, in the words of the Second Statistical Account, “a man of fine preaching talents, but whose reserved manners and secluded habits were not calculated to gain upon the rough, frank Highlander.”

His nephew, Murdoch Macdonald, who was minister of Durness at this time, kept a private diary, which came to light after his death, and he clearly did not have a high opinion of his uncle and “remarks freely on his worldliness and marked want of hospitality even to the brethren of the Presbytery.” (Morrison). Ross was succeeded by John Mackay, who had been minister of Eddrachillis (not to be confused with John Mackay of Mudale, or any of the other John Mackays in Mackay Country!). He was apparently a good preacher, but “being of a weak and sickly constitution, was unable to labour efficiently in the parish” (2nd Statistical Account), and died six years after coming to Tongue.

“In 1769” (according to the 2nd Statistical Account) he was succeeded by Mr William Mackenzie.” When he arrived, he found the parish “in a deplorable state of religious ignorance. Scarce could one be found to repeat the Shorter Catechism. There was only one elder within the bounds, and it was impossible to fix on others, bearing the necessary religious character, who could be ordained to this office so as to constitute a session. The sanctity of the Lord’s day was grossly violated by persons forming bargains, going and coming to the house of God. A general apathy to the means of grace was manifest; and several gross practices, the relics of a barbarous age, were common at funerals and festivals. With these evils to contend against, he entered his charge with zeal and energy, and an untiring devotedness to the interests of his flock.”

The 2nd Statistical Account, written, incidentally, by William Mackenzie’s son and successor, Hugh Mackay Mackenzie, goes on to describe how a change eventually came over the parish:

“The people showed all docility in receiving the instructions of their pastor; the house of God was thronged by persons from the most distant corners of the parish; respect and attention were shown to the ordinances and duties of religion; barbarous usages were gradually laid aside, and under his affectionate, glowing, and faithful ministry, there sprang up a race of intelligent Christians . . . .”

### **The Droving Minister**

Tongue, incidentally, was not the only parish to have unhappy ministries. John Skeldoch, minister at Farr from 1732, 1753, farmed one or two of the townships of Strathnaver, and bought the cattle of the common people. He was far from popular with his parishioners, who regarded him more as a drover than as their minister, and were always complaining about him to the Presbytery.

Murdoch Macdonald of Durness initially defended him, feeling that his opponents were motivated by malice, and were being too hard on the man, but eventually wrote in his diary “I find him continually involving himself in things that common prudence might make him shun, nay, when his worldly mindedness breaks out in such glaring instances . . . I must in all likelihood change sides.”

In 1748 Skeldoch’s case came before the Synod of Sutherland and Caithness. He was suspended for a time, but narrowly survived a motion to depose him.



Fortunately for the people of Farr, Skeldoch's successor, George Munro was much more popular. It was said of him that as a man he was distinguished by simplicity of character, frankness, sincerity, benevolence and hospitality, and as a minister, by an ardent zeal for the glory of God and the good of souls. (Munro was the grandson of the aforementioned George Squair, and uncle of Donald Sage, who was Missionary at Achness in Strathnaver, and whose *Memorabilia Domestica* contains a graphic account of the Strathnaver clearances.) During his time, in 1774, a new church was built at Farr. It is now the Strathnaver Museum, but Munro's initials, painted in big letters behind the pulpit, can still be seen there.

### **Murdoch Macdonald**

Minister, Diarist and Musician

Murdoch Macdonald, to whom reference has already been made, was minister of Durness from 1726 to 1763. He is not just remarkable for his diary, nor even for the fact that he was a well-loved and able minister, but for his interest in music and poetry. He was an accomplished musician, a fine singer, and the composer of numerous Gaelic airs. His son Patrick, became minister of Kilmore near Oban, and edited an important collection of bagpipe music, much of it gathered in Durness, known as the Macdonald Collection. Murdoch Macdonald was a voracious reader, and particularly enjoyed the poetry of Alexander Pope translating Pope's *Messiah* into Gaelic verse, and reciting it to his parishioners at fellowship meetings and in the course of his pastoral visits.

Macdonald is also remembered for his association with the poet Robb Donn (1714-1778) who was born and died in the parish of Durness, and who is buried in the old church at Balnakeil. Donn, in fact described Macdonald as the most important influence on his life (Grimble). Interestingly enough, many have detected a marked similarity in outlook between Donn's poetry and that of Pope. Could Donn have known Pope's writing through Macdonald?

Curiously, while Donn did what he could to spread the fame of Macdonald, in his fulsome elegy for him wrote

“ . . . If it could be a tribute or service to you  
To raise your fame on high for you,  
Who should do it more than I  
And who could deserve it more than you?”

Macdonald does not mention Robb Donn at all in his diary. Interestingly enough, however, (in the words of Ian Grimble) “we owe it to the ministry that the compositions of Robb Donn were written down in time to save them . . . , to the daughter of the Reverend John Thomson in Durness, to the Reverend Aeneas Macleod in Rogart, and to the Reverend Donald Sage . . .”

### **Church Expansion**

While the early 19th century is now known as the era of the clearances in the Mackay Country, it was also a time of expansion in the church. There was concern about the fact that many people in the Highlands lived a great distance from their parish church. Previously, there had been additional preaching stations in large parishes.

For example, in Durness, Murdo Macdonald was required to preach for four Sundays at the church at Balnakeil and the fifth at Westmoin. Later in the 18th century, missionary ministers were appointed in outlying areas. For example, a missionary based at Eriboll was appointed “to serve the districts of Westmoin, Melness, and Oldshores” (i.e. Kinlochbervie) and “a new mission church was built at Eriboll in 1804.” (Bangor-Jones) But now the situation led the government to fund the building of 32 new churches (with their own ministers) in remote Highland parishes.

Two of these were in North West Sutherland: Kinlochbervie, in the parish of Eddrachillis, and Strathy, in the parish of Farr. As the 18th century had seen two parishes become four, the 19th century saw two new ecclesiastical parishes added to the landscape to produce a total of six.

### **The Disruption**

However, an even bigger change in the ecclesiastical landscape was about to take place. For over 100 years, the Church of Scotland had a virtual monopoly on church life in the area. The Second Statistical Account for the parish of Tongue (written in 1841) states “There are no Dissenters, Seceders, Episcopalians or Roman Catholics in the parish.” Similar statements are found in the accounts for other parishes.

But in 1843, a large secession, known as the Disruption, took place, as people left the established church to form the Free Church of Scotland. The main cause of the disruption was the system of patronage, under which the people of the congregation did not have the right to choose their own minister. This was a long-standing grievance, but the situation came to a head when the civil courts of the land refused to allow the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to end the system, with the result that many people felt it was time to break free of the established church. Other issues were also came into play, particularly in the Highlands.

Ministers who were happy to live with patronage tended not to preach evangelically, and were often seen to care more about themselves than their flocks. The ministers that were militantly opposed to patronage tended to be staunchly evangelical. Attitudes of ministers toward the clearances probably also played a part. In Scotland as a whole, just over a third of the ministers and members left. In the Mackay Country, as in much of the Highlands, the proportion that came out was far higher, in some places only a handful of people were left in the Church of Scotland. There were now 12 congregations instead of 6 in the area.

In the late 19th century, there were enormous social changes in Scotland, and these had an impact in the church. These changes produced tensions, particularly in the Free Church. In 1892, the Free Church passed a measure (the Declaratory Act) designed to permit a greater breadth of theological outlook within the denomination.

### **Secession**

This measure had overwhelming support in the Lowlands, but in the Highlands, there was considerable unease, and the following year, two ministers and a number of people left the Free Church to form the Free Presbyterian Church. In Mackay Country, Free Presbyterian congregations were established at Scourie (Eddrachillis), Kinlochbervie, and Strathy.

More division was to come. In 1900, the Free Church joined with another body, called the United Presbyterian Church to form the United Free Church. For many of those who had been unhappy with the Declaratory Act, this was the last straw, and they refused to go into the United Free Church. While most of the Free Church people in the Mackay Country entered the union, in Strathy, Farr, Tongue, and Eddrachillis, Free Church congregations continued to exist beside the United Free Church congregations.

Subsequent divisions have occurred. In 1988, there was a division in the Free Presbyterian Church about church discipline which led to some Free Presbyterians leaving to form Associated Presbyterian Churches. This happened in Scourie, Kinlochbervie, and Strathy. In the year 2000, a split in the Free Church led to some people leaving to form the Free Church (Continuing). This affected the Eddrachillis congregation. However, it wasn't all division. In 1929, the United Free Church joined with the Church of Scotland.

## **Trends in 20<sup>th</sup>. Century Church Life**

There have been four other discernible trends over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in church life. One is the gradual disappearance of Gaelic from the life of the church. The Second Statistical Account for Durness (written 1834) states “With the exception of eight families from the south of Scotland, all the natives speak Gaelic. Though a considerable proportion of the young can speak English, yet very few are able to follow out or understand an English sermon. Indeed, even those who speak and understand the English well, always prefer the Gaelic services.”

English services were held regularly in the Mackay Country, even in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. For example a recommendation was made that one discourse at least should be in English each Sabbath at Durness. In Tongue, it was the practice to have a short English service in the middle of the longer and more popular Gaelic service. Over the course of the years, English came to take an equal place with Gaelic.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Gaelic services slowly disappeared. In Kinlochbervie, there was a weekly Gaelic as well as English service each Sunday in the Church of Scotland until the 1950s. By the early 1970's, Gaelic services had disappeared, except for occasional special services.

A second, and closely related trend, is the change in traditional patterns of church service, particularly with regard to church music. In 1900, the use of organs or other musical instruments would have been considered to be improper in churches in the Mackay Country. Over the years, however, most United Free and Church of Scotland congregations obtained organs. In places like Kinlochbervie, singing continued to be unaccompanied, even in the Church of Scotland, until the 1960s. Free Church and Free Presbyterian congregations, however, still maintain the old pattern of unaccompanied singing and the use of psalms only.

A third trend is growth of other religious groups. Increasing social mobility means that people come to settle in the Mackay Country from all parts of the country, and beyond. No longer could any parish minister say that there were “no Dissenters, Seceders, Episcopalians or Roman Catholics in the parish.” And this has resulted in occasional services by non-Presbyterian groups (particularly the Episcopalians) taking place in the Mackay Country.

And finally, there is the decline of the church attendance. This is partly due to shrinking populations, but more due to the decline in commitment to organised religion. And, it must be said, “Scarce could one be found to repeat the Shorter Catechism.” The situation in the whole of the Mackay Country at the beginning of the 21st century is remarkably like that which William Mackenzie found in 1769 in Tongue. One wonders what this century will bring.

## **Funeral Traditions<sup>99</sup>**

Memories from Tongue and Farr

People kept shrouds in the houses in them days. They kept the linen – that was kept specially for somebody that was going to die and, as I say, because there was so many older people in the homes in them days it was inevitable somebody was going to, you know, and then that sheets were kept and a shroud in the house, always. And women dressed the remains in the house.

The men carried the coffin. They had so many men. They walked in two rows, like single-file and somebody walked in front who did the call for the changeover. Again, there was a Gaelic word they used and they did a changeover.

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<sup>99</sup> This is information submitted by Terri McIntyre in 1987 to a government sponsored project.

At one period, they walked from Kirtomy to Clachan for burials. They walked from Armadale to Clachan or Strathy. They used to come in past the Farr Bay Inn – right in front of the FBI. It is a right-of-way to the cemetery, and apparently they wouldn't come across the bridge because they had already crossed a bridge and there was some superstition about crossing water twice. This was the way they came across, so that bit still has to be left open, at the FBI there, because it's a right-of-way to the graveyard.

Mostly the women stayed in the house and saw to the victuals for after the people came back. In the old days they would have had a service at the house. They still have that here, this service the night before or a couple of nights before the burial, and my mother said they didn't do it in Tongue when she was young ...that it was only when she moved to live down here that they did this.

I know they say "the kisting", that's one word that they use, "kisting", which is just putting you in your coffin, really, isn't it?

Women, not only have they started going to the graveyard, they've now started taking cords and, you know, being part of the thing. I think it's just the whole change with the whole feminist thing, isn't it, really? And it's quite good, I think. But some people are still, you know, "Oh, well, now, I don't think myself that that should be the way," but they can't give you a real reason why it shouldn't be, you know.

## **A Brief Military History<sup>100</sup>**

### **The Clan System**

The people of Mackay Country in medieval times had a society founded on family ties and group loyalty, honed by war, where wealth was measured first in men and then in cattle. The clan system itself is almost military in its organisation. A hierarchy existed where the leader or Laird is unquestionably able to order his people or clan to do as he wishes whether good or not. Subservient to him were tacksmen or local estate proprietors, tied by family and loyalty to their Laird. In turn the tacksmen had their wholly reliant retainers. Strangers were advised to make their wills before going into the north. Religion was responsible for social development and education with the Church bringing contact with the further world and opportunities. A Celtic church at Balnakeil could have been founded as early as the 8th century. There are records in the Vatican archives of a church here contributing to the third crusade in 1190. Eventually the Reay's laird of Clan Mackay became Protestant at the time of the Reformation.

### **Sworn Enemies**

The main enemy of the Mackay clan were the Sutherlands, constantly disputing for land and cattle. Between 1400 and 1550 the clans engaged in ten battles. The clan, like all families also had their internal disputes as illustrated by the Reverend Alexander Falconer in the entry for Eddrachilles in the Statistical Account for 1793. He was given to understand that the grandfather of Lieutenant General Hugh Mackay came into possession of the estate in Scourie by force and double-dealing.

### **Eddrachilles – Mackay & MacLeod Warfare**

The MacLeod's of Lewis were proprietors of Eddrachilles. The last one Mache a Leister, literally 'the son of the arrow maker' had no children to inherit and invited his wife's nephew James to live with them. Sadly when James MacLeod did inherit he proved to be a quarrelsome man and fell out with his neighbours in Durness killing many of the Morrison clan.

One day he over reached himself. Sir Hugh Mackay of Farr, Laird of Clan Mackay sent money to Edinburgh but a party of armed men robbed the messenger. James MacLeod was blamed for the theft and the Morrisons saw their chance to get revenge.

It was the custom at this time for a visiting laird to be brought gifts of food and drink by local clan members. Sir Hugh was staying in a hunting lodge on the island in Loch Stack when he was visited by the wife of a farmer from Loan bearing such gifts. He took a fancy to her, but she was not willing to betray her husband. So she was kept a prisoner while Sir Hugh had her husband murdered. To prove the point, she was presented with her husband's head. Not wishing to be killed too she gave in, with Donald Mackay as the illegitimate offspring of the union. Donald and his mother, however, lived with the Morrisons in Durness.

Sir Hugh Mackay and the Morrisons asked a cousin of James MacLeod, one Donald MacLeod from Assynt to help in return for half of the estate of Eddrachilles. Donald was a fighter skilled with the crossbow. Taking a party of men, the two Donalds killed several of James's supporters by stealth in their beds. James himself was in an island house in a loch near Scourie. Flaming arrows set fire to the house and James and his son were killed.

Donald MacLeod of Assynt however, was then double-crossed by the Morrisons who said that he could not have his half of the estate. He went home to Assynt for reinforcements and returned to seize his land. However the Morrisons met him at Maldy. Sir Hugh Mackay turned

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<sup>100</sup> By Cathy Wood Back to the Future Project 2004- 2005

up with 300 men and proposed a compromise. Donald Mackay should get Eddrachilles and Donald MacLeod of Assynt should have the Davoch of Hope instead. He accepted, married Donald Mackay's mother, and lived to a ripe old age despite reputedly being responsible for at least eighteen more murders. He died in 1619 and was buried in Balnakeil church, having bribed Lord Reay with a thousand pounds to have a special tomb built in the wall to safeguard his remains. This is the famous Domhnall MacMhurchaidh (Donald son of Murdo) whose inscription can still be seen. His lands eventually reverted to the Mackay clan under Lord Reay.

### **Succession**

So Eddrachilles came into the hands of the Mackays of Scourie. Despite this apparent savagery and feuding there was a structured society, whereby Donald was followed by his son Hugh, a Colonel then his son Hugh the Lieutenant General Commander in Chief of the army in Scotland for William and Mary. Meanwhile, Sir Hugh's legitimate son Donald Mackay of Farr was to become Lord Reay.

*All of this tale or none of it could be true but it does not matter. On such tales or truth the society and reputation of the people of Mackay Country was built. They were made for military service.*

### **Mackays in the British Army**

When Sir Hugh Mackay of Farr was the head of the Mackay Clan either he or his legitimate son Donald Mackay of Farr converted to Protestantism. Donald was knighted in 1616 in the presence of the Prince of Wales who later became Charles I. After the Reformation they were ardent supporters of the protestant cause and Sir Donald Mackay raised a regiment 'Mackays Invincibles' in 1626 to fight on the continent in the 30 years' war. The regiment were famous for their defence of the Pass of Oldenburg against overwhelming odds. Sir Donald was created 1st Lord Reay on 20th June 1628. However, he received no money from the King to pay for his help and had to sell part of his land to clear his debts. Gradually all the Reay (Mackay) lands were sold to the old enemy the Sutherland family. The final sale took place in 1829.

Over the years the reputation grew of the Mackays as the ideal soldier – sober, God fearing, disciplined, brave and physically hardy. The Laird could rely on his clansmen for recruitment, and military service offered the chance of improvement and adventure.

Lieutenant General Hugh Mackay was born in Scourie about 1640 and joined the army in 1660. He rose to become the Commander in Chief of the army in Scotland for William and Mary. Many other Highlanders remained loyal to the Catholic King, James VII and II and became the nucleus of a Jacobite party. In 1689 at Killiecrankie the government forces, led by Lieutenant General Hugh Mackay, were defeated by these Highlanders, led by 'Bonnie Dundee', who died in the battle. They in turn were crushed later the same year at Dunkeld.

The song 'Killiecrankie' is an account of this battle while the song 'Bonnie Dundee' recalls the 'Rebel' leader, John Graham of Claverhouse from a 'Rebel' point of view.

### **The Union of Parliaments**

The Act of Union unified the Parliaments of Scotland and England in 1707. In the same year the Mackays were described as one of the loyal clans, the head of which, Lord Reay, received a pension from the Crown of £300 until 1831. In the Jacobite Rebellions of 1715 and 1745 most of the Mackays fought on the government side, but seventeen Mackays found themselves prisoners of war after Culloden, nine of whom were transported to Barbados.

Some of Robb Don's work displays Jacobite sympathies which he was summoned to explain before Lord Reay. Attitudes and allegiances in these times were not as simple as they may seem

to us looking back. Individuals were strongly tied by the decisions of their Chief and tacksmen in times of war and dispute.

### **Jacobite Gold**

In his account of a tour through Sutherland in 1760 Bishop Pococke being entertained by a Mr Forbes was shown the grave of a Frenchman killed in an engagement which took place near Tongue three weeks before Culloden. The Sheerness man of war ‘Captain Obrian’ chased the sloop ‘Hazard’ which had on board 150 men and £13,000 for the Pretender. The sloop ran ashore accidentally and Forbes with eight local men held them at bay until the part of a regiment stationed nearby arrived. The rebels surrendered and were carried off on board the man-of-war.

To this day there are rumours that there is more gold to be found somewhere around or in the Kyle of Tongue – perhaps at Loch Hakon. The story is told in the book by Farr Secondary School pupils and Alan Temperley – ‘Tales of the North Coast’.

### **Sutherland Fencibles and ‘Highlanders’**

Men from Mackay Country made the bulk of the 1st Sutherland Fencibles formed in 1759 and the Reay Fencibles raised in 1794. Fencible regiments were home defence regiments formed to combat the threat of invasion by France and Napoleon. Eight hundred men of the Reay Fencibles stationed in Ireland on 26th May 1798 routed a force of 4000 rebels at Tara Hill. They were disbanded in 1802 and incorporated into the 93rd Regiment of Foot, Sutherland Highlanders which had been formed in April 1799. Much of the regiment came from Strathnaver and was recruited under the old clan system. At an assembly of young men those volunteering were called forward and given a dram of whisky and some snuff.

In their illustrious history until amalgamated with the Argylls in 1881 the Sutherland Highlanders had a reputation for discipline and loyalty. General Stewart of Garth in his ‘Sketches of the Highlands’ says ‘In the words of a General Officer by whom the 93rd Sutherlands were once reviewed, they exhibit a perfect pattern of moral rectitude’.

In Donald MacLeod’s *Gloomy Memories* he tells the story of the Sutherland Highlanders when stationed at the Cape of Good Hope. ‘Anxious to enjoy the advantage of religious instruction in the tenets of their national church, and there being no religious service available to the garrison except the existing one of reading prayers to soldiers on parade, they formed themselves into a congregation, appointed elders of their own number and paid a stipend (collected among themselves) to a clergyman of the Church of Scotland.’ They collected money for charitable causes and sent money upwards of £500 to Sutherland where the need was great.

The Sutherland Highlanders amalgamated in 1881 to form the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.

### **Clearance**

In 1829 Lord Reay sold the last of his estates to the Sutherland family. The clearances began in Mackay Country in earnest. Force was used to drive the people out of the straths and such as could re-settled around the coasts. Most left Mackay Country for the towns or cities or emigrated to Canada, America, Australia, or New Zealand. Soldiers returning from twenty or twenty five years’ service with the Sutherland Highlanders would return to their native land and discover that their families, houses and crofts were gone.

When the government required men for the Crimean War in 1854 hardly any could be recruited in Mackay Country. It is said that an old man told the Duke of Sutherland on his recruitment drive that: ‘I do assure your Grace that it is the prevailing opinion in this country, that should

the Czar of Russia take possession of Dunrobin Castle and of Stafford House next term, that we could not expect worse treatment at his hand than we have experienced at the hands of your family for the last fifty years.'

During the eighteenth century, the identification of 'the Highlander' (as male and) as a 'natural soldier' emerged. This transformed the 'threat' into a useful and 'loyal' commodity. James Wolfe fought at Falkirk and Culloden under Cumberland in 1746, as a boy of sixteen years. It is reported that when asked, in Canada, where Britain might find good, hardy recruits, General Wolfe replied:

"The Highlanders. They are a hardy and intrepid race, and no great mischief if they fall". [1] See p15 MacLeod J. 1993 *The Highland Experience* Mainstream Edinburgh – a book passed onto me by my grandfather, or a recent novel, MacLeod A. 2001 *No Great Mischief* Vintage London.

By 1759, Wolfe was a General, leading a Highland company – the 78th or Fraser's Highlanders – onto the Plains of Abraham in Quebec. The attack was a famous success for the British Empire, though General Wolfe was mortally wounded. A monument to General Wolfe was raised in Westminster Abbey. It includes a 'sculpted Highlander' to represent the 78th.[2] By the late 19th century this association, in terms of the management and mobilisation of the British Empire, was so strong that even 'Lowland' regiments were ordered to wear tartan and the trappings or symbols by then attributed to 'the Highlands'.[3]

[1] See p15 MacLeod J. 1993 *No Great Mischief If You Fall: The Highland Experience* Mainstream Edinburgh – a book passed onto me by my grandfather, or a recent novel, MacLeod A. 2001 *No Great Mischief* Vintage London.

[2] See p70 Hunter J. 1994 *A Dance Called America: The Scottish Highlands. The United States and Canada* Mainstream Edinburgh.

[3] p130 Withers C. W. 1992 *The Historical Creation of the Scottish Highlands* in Donnachie I. and Whatley C. 1992 *The Manufacture of Scottish History* Polygon Edinburgh.



## Mackay Country Estates 2021

**Following from who owns Scotland. This should only be taken as a guide.**

1. Scourie Estate Dr Jean Balfour & J.C. Balfour
2. Kinlochbervie Estate Trustees of Sara Neilson Barr
3. Keoldale Estate Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department
4. Cape Wrath Secretary of State for Defence
5. Balnakeil Balnakeil Estate is owned by pro indiviso shares as follows: Andrew Elliot 2/3 David Elliot 1/3
6. Durness Estate Vibel SA
7. Rispond Lodge
8. Eriboll Estate
9. Altnaharra Altnaharra Estate Ltd.
10. Clebrig Estate Andrew W Nicholson
11. Loch a Choire Estate Andrew H Joicey, James M Joicey, David R Knowles & David HM Leslie
12. Badanloch Executors of Philip William Bryce Viscount Leverhulme
13. Achentoul Estate Achentoul Estate Co.
14. Lochnaver, Syre & Rhifail Yattendon Estates Ltd. & Firm of Mynthurst Estates
15. Skelpick & Rhifail Firm of Skelpick & Rhifail Estates
16. Coille am Bodac Derrick & Beryl Frost and Ronald & Beryl Frost
17. Coille A'Chailleach Brian Lewis
18. Coille A Fhithich Dennis Martin Allin
19. Achrugan Christian Hindkjaer
20. Bighouse Estate AHG Group Ltd.
21. Sutherland Estates Elizabeth Janson, Countess of Sutherland, Charles Janson & Trustees of Elizabeth Janson, Countess of Sutherland
22. Achnabourin Ross S Peters and Elizabeth A Peters
23. Armadale Farm Joyce B. Campbell
24. Craggie Croft Janette Angela Morrison
25. Forsinard Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
26. Strathy East & Strathy South Fountain International Ltd
27. Forsinard No. 2 Holding Jean Margaret Mackay
28. Dale Neumann Estates Ltd. (dissolved)
29. Brig Anthony Carmel Lowrie
30. Forsinard 1 Holding John Campbell-Smith
31. Forsinain Danish Forestry Company Ltd.
32. Golval 218 James Ross
33. Ackron Michael R Stuart & Elaine S Stuart
34. Strathy Wood Chester John Kelly
35. Hope & Melness Braesgill Ltd.
36. Hope & Melness Crofting Estate Melness Crofter Ltd.
37. Kinsaile or Rhivichie Francis Christopher Buchan Bland
38. Merkland & Ben Hee Trustees of Sheelagh MG Garton
39. Rhiconich Estate Gerald & Richard Osborne
40. Sandwood Estate John Muir Trust
41. Westminster Estates Trustees of Hugh RA Grosvenor, Trustees of Gerald H, 4th Duke of Westminster and Gerald C., 6th Duke of Westminster
42. Gualin Estate David J Allingham, Rarick Ltd. & John F Bladon
43. Ben Loyal Estate Ben Loyal Ltd.

## **Wildland Sutherland**

From Wildlands web site

Encompasses Eriboll, Polla, Hope, Loyal, Kinloch, Braesgill and Strath More. It is a wild land full of potential, with a rich culture and storied history. There's something about these places, nestled between the dramatic peaks of world-famous Munros and the crashing waves of the northern seas. It's visceral, it pulls you in and never lets go.

### **Braesgill & Hope**

Hope is a very, very special place indeed. We have plans to overhaul and lovingly restore Hope Lodge to become a signature hotel destination, situated halfway around the North Coast 500. The property will be extended and will sleep up to 20 guests when completed, offering commanding views north over the famous Loch Hope and River Hope. This is an exceptional project, even by Wildland standards, resulting in a remarkable and significant hotel destination in the north. Commitment to conservation is never far from the surface of our projects and, working with West Sutherland Fisheries Trust, we have evolved a novel and now award-winning solution to ensuring safe construction close to pristine watercourses of trout and salmon through our watercourses. The River Hope courses its way from Loch Hope below the lodge to the sea.

Hope is home to the UK's most northerly birch wood and home too to nesting Golden Eagles which can be seen every day, especially in the summer months, soaring the warm air thermals. Also a part of the Northwest Geopark, Hope is home to the Mhoine Thrust; a wish-list destination for every geology student the world over. The Moine Thrust is a linear geological non-conformity in the Scottish Highlands which runs from Loch Eriboll on the north coast 190 kilometres (120 mi) south-west to the Sleat peninsula on the Isle of Skye. The discovery of the Thrust in 1907 was a milestone in the history of geology as it was one of the first thrust belts discovered.

### **Kinloch**

Kinloch – Wildland's first major restoration – is, by virtue of its remoteness, vastness and sheer beauty, moving and inspiring in equal measure. Once a private lodge of the Duke of Sutherland, Kinloch – in the Kyle of Sutherland – has been restored to offer a fabulously eclectic blend of the Highlands and contemporary Scandinavian style; a classic sporting lodge given a whole new lease of life.

With fields as far as the eye can see, rivers bordered by ever-increasing woodland, and set amidst some of Scotland's most dramatic landscapes, this is the ideal retreat offering solitude and comfort up in the rugged north. Kinloch's beautiful conservatory offers a view of the spectacular castellated north face of Ben Loyal, one of the Highlands' most challenging and rewarding Munros – a mountain of over 3000' – it's the perfect base from which to stalk Red Deer and keep an eye open for Golden eagles flying above. Kinloch is such a transcendently beautiful landscape it has already been designated a National Scenic Area (NSA). With space enough to sleep twelve, this magical place comes with its own housekeeper and chef, and a focus towards simple traditional fayre sourced locally and prepared fresh just for you. It's all about the simple things; a place to relax with family, friends, or even to surround yourself with silence and solitude if that's what you crave.

### **Strath More**

Strath More Estate is a truly epic landscape, boasting awe-inspiring ancient structures, the most northern Old Caledonian Pine Forest remnants, with rivers and a loch rich in fish. Strath More

is the gateway into the majestic Hope Estate with its iconic Munro Ben Hope and Loch Hope. It is a place to escape, a hideaway, deeply rooted to the land and connected with nature.

Whilst still in the design/development stages of the project, Wildland's longer term vision for Strath More cluster includes the restoration of four traditional dwellings providing self-catering accommodation for up to six people. The first of these, Strath More Lodge, is now ready offering three fine double bedrooms, a cosy living room with a feature cast iron fireplace and a truly lovely kitchen. It's a wonderful space and why don't you be amongst the first to experience its unique charm.

Strath More is the perfect base for those that love the outdoors and all of the traditional Highland's pursuits. The fishing here is exceptional. The Strath More River is renowned for its salmon runs and the south end of Loch Hope is rich with sea trout. Wildland keeps boats on this loch for the use of those that wish to fish here.

With an eye towards our conservation work across the whole of Wildland, it is interesting to note that the most northerly remnant of the Old Caledonian Pine Forest is on this estate. We shall be considering carefully the steps we can take to allow this forest to gain an ever greater hold on its landscape. Historically too Strath More is important. Dornaigil Broch is one of the most famous of these ancient structures. It's awe-inspiring and compelling in equal measure and makes one want to know more about what these stone monuments were once used for. Wildland is proud to have become its custodian and is committed to ensuring that it will still be a feature of the landscape for many more years to come.

### **Eriboll & Polla**

Including one of the Highlands' most dramatic deep water lochs, Wildland's vision for Eriboll is likely to lead to it becoming a jewel in the crown of this project. A beautiful house in an established yet derelict garden setting, vernacular steadings that could lend themselves to artistic, craft or other uses, the Church already under renovation, the extraordinary Tombolo of Ard Neakie, the renovated Fouhlin Cottage and a couple more with potential comprise the built heritage. Integrating farming with conservation is underway and the exciting Polla spate river rounds off this wonderful place.

Iron Age skull and bones found by workmen on a Highland estate.

Press and Journal November 7, 2020

An ancient human skull and other bones have been unearthed by workmen on a Sutherland estate owned by Scotland's richest man. Police investigated the find on billionaire Anders Holch Povlsen's 18,000-acre Eriboll Estate. The partial skeleton is believed to date back 2500 years to the Iron Age. Dry stone dykers came across the bones under a large boulder earlier this year while working on a major project to restore the estate's walls. Detectives from Thurso in Caithness investigated and sent the find away for analysis. They have now told Mr Povlsen's company Wildland Ltd that the bones date back to the Iron Age.

Andrew Adamson, estate manager for Wildland Ltd, said the dykers were not shocked at the find as they had worked on world heritage sites around Europe and Russia. The skeleton was found on a hill above Kempie Bay. "The skull and bones were placed under a large boulder at the bottom of scree. It was obvious from the start they were pretty old. "The stone dykers were pretty realistic about the find. They just said they had found a pile of bones. They were probably placed there all those thousands of years ago. "There is quite a lot of archaeology in the area, a quern stone (a stone tool for hand-grinding a wide variety of materials) believed to be from the same period has also been found."

It is hoped that a team of professional archaeologists will now explore the area's ancient history, an investigation triggered by the finds.

### **Westminster Estate**

Westminster Estates with offices at Achfary, (historically called the Reay Forest, an area, typically owned by the sovereign and partly wooded, kept for hunting and having its own laws) extends to some 96,000 acres and is situated in north west Sutherland amongst some of the most imposing landscapes Europe has to offer. Within the estate boundaries are the well-known and instantly recognisable peaks of Arkle, Ben Stack and the southern slopes of Foinaven. The organisation that can trace its history back hundreds of years,

The Trustees are the ultimate owners of the privately owned Grosvenor Estate. They are supported in the management of the rural estates – including Reay Forest – by the Family Office Board and Rural Estate Committees that provide more specialist support and focus.

The Reay Forest Estate, is a large, traditional sporting estate famed for its deer stalking and trout and salmon fishing as well as its wild beauty and remote landscapes.

It has six Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), areas which Scottish Natural Heritage considers to best represent the country's natural heritage. There are two internationally important Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) safeguarding rare habitats and a designated Special Protection Area (SPA) for endangered birds.

In addition to being a significant employer in the region, they are actively involved in promoting local interests and issues by contributing our knowledge and expertise to local and regional groups.



fought over. The roads we use today are new. The gateway markers are to ease the perception and welcome those inward bound to the Mackay Country.

On May the 8<sup>th</sup>. 2005 Lord Thurso MP agreed to unveil the first gateway marker for the identification of Mackay Country at the Sutherland Caithness border. Six signs were carved in



IMAGE 281 VALARIE MACKAY, LORD THURSO AND GRAHAM BRUCE AT THE UNVEILING OF THE EASTERN BORDER GATEWAY STONE

Caithness slab as depicted and the roadway entrances to Mackay Country. After about a year of organising and consultation the first Mackay Country gateway sign maker was unveiled slightly east of the ancient border of Dumolsten where the split stane stands. The last time that there was such a gathering of Mackays at this border was probably about 1746 when they gathered to keep the Jacobite's out of this strongly protestant land.

The design was based on a creation by Celia Wallis. The sign incorporates one of the decorative panels of the Farr Stone. The birds are young doves and symbolise friendship while the knot work lacings are particular to the Pictish. We chose the design as the Farr Stone is synonymous with North Sutherland and neutral with no relevance to any particular grouping. Mackay Country Trust and the identification of Mackay Country today is not regarded or commemorating the clan. We are about all the historical times and the people that have lived and live and work in the area. The clan era is only one part of this, a very relevant and important part and allows a distinctiveness to the locality identity to be forged. The gateway signs were designed to be sympathetic to the environment manufactured from natural materials.

In 2010/2011 some of those original gateway markers had to be replaced due to flawed stone. The new ones are guaranteed to outlast all of us. This was achieved through financial help from Commun na Gaidhlig and a generous donation from Edward Mackay.

Whether entering or leaving by any of the gateways this is a superb country. Communities here are generally small with wild rewarding places and a huge choice of hill lochs some seldom visited a satisfaction to those that love solitude. This is where the journey into the mysterious and land of legend begins, or ends should this be the exit from a journey that has inspired and motivated many.

### **Crask**

Set in the remote Sutherland landscape on the lonely single-track road between Lairg and Tongue, Coming north on the A836 from Lairg south of Altnaharra Mackay Country is encountered just north of the Crask Inn at the start of Strath Vagastie “*The Crask is possibly unsurpassed in Britain for a combination of large, open sky and absence of light pollution.*” Eight miles (13 km) south from Altnaharra is Crask, a settlement in Strath Tirry, with the Crask Inn that lies on the north side of the Strath a’ Chraisg burn. This is one of the southern gateways of the twenty first century to Mackay Country.

### **Dalvina**

On the B817 south east of Strathnaver Mackay Country is approached through Dalvina and Syre NC 706 412 at the Junction off Loch Palm.

## Forsinard



IMAGE 282 FORSINARD GATEWAY STONE

Just after the hamlet of Melvich, twelve miles east of Bettyhill, the A897 cuts south through strath Halladale, the flow country and the strath of Kildonan to Helmsdale on the east coast. About 15 miles south of Melvich, at Forsinard, is an RSPB visitor centre. The gate way sign stands at NC 884 406 one mile south of Forsinard railway station on A897 adjacent to the start of forestry plantation beside the RSPB cairn.

The peatlands here are a breeding ground for black- and red-throated divers, golden plovers and merlins as well as other species. There is a sizable hotel here. Strath Halladale is a gentle introduction to the area. A gradual passage into the wild and empty land of Mackay Country. The road runs alongside the Halladale River and the population make full use of this fertile land. There is no centre with shops or post office in Halladale. The old church and village hall are the central points but this is an active crofting community.

Just after the hamlet of Melvich, twelve miles east of Bettyhill, the a897 cuts south through strath Halladale, the flow country and the strath of Kildonan to Helmsdale on the east coast. Upper Bighouse lies on the western side of the Halladale River, 4 miles (6½ km) south of Melvich. Immediately to the west lies Bighouse Hill, which rises to 145m (476 feet).



## Kylestrome

The gateway from the South into Mackay Country



IMAGE 283 GATEWAY STONE AT KYLESTROME

One of the most beautiful and remote places in the Northern Highlands, where the narrows of Loch Cairnbawn, an inlet of the picturesque Eddrachillis Bay, are guarded by several small islands. The waters are crossed by a car ferry to Kylestrome, opposite which is the small island of Garbh. To the east, the waters of Loch Glendhu and Loch Glencoul penetrate deep into the wild and road less hills in the manner of Norwegian fjords. The distant peak of Ben Leold, 2,597 ft., overlooks the latter, and at its head is the little-known 658-ft. high waterfall of Eascoul-Aulin, the highest in Britain, descending to a valley beyond Loch Beag, and approachable only on foot or by boat. It is considered to be about thrice the height of Niagara when in full spate. South of Kylesku, the road to Inchnadamp follows the pass between Quinag, 2,653 ft. and Gi92asven, 2,541 ft. Westwards goes the picturesque, but rough, hilly and narrow road along Loch Cairnbawn southern shores leading towards Drumbeg and Lochinver, providing magnificent views, both inland towards the mountains and out to sea for the whole of the distance.

The sign stands at Kylesku NC 225 339 in the car park on north side of Kylesku Bridge.

The ferry ceased when The Kylesku Bridge was opened, in 1984, by the Queen. On the north side of the bridge is the plaque celebrating the opening. The bridge is a beautiful example of the bridge-builder's art. It is 276m long, and crosses a 130m stretch of water, but is transformed it into something very special by its wonderful curve, coupled with the stunning scenery. The crossing of this stretch of water started with a passenger ferry no more than a rowing boat and

was introduced in the early 1800s. Commercial traffic mainly comprised of cattle on their way to central Scotland, and they had to swim across. Over the years various ferries came and went, and small car-carrying ferries first appeared between the wars. It was only in 1975 that the Maid of Glencoul appeared as the first roll-on roll-off ferry on the crossing, and the first ferry capable of taking fully loaded commercial vehicles.

Kylesku stretches back along the road from the slipway that used to be the southern end of the ferry crossing. It is now by-passed by the main road heading for the bridge. In the village is the Kylesku Hotel overlooking the slipway. There are also opportunities from here to take boat trips to view the 650ft high Eas-Coul-Aulin waterfall, Britain's highest, and four times the height of the Niagara Falls. Boat trips are available from here to view the Kerrachar Gardens at the seaward end of the loch, only accessible by boat. Kylesku has a jetty for locally-based fishing boats.

Kylestrome, in the north west of Scotland, is on the A894, about 34 miles north of Ullapool and the southwestern coastal gateway into Mackay Country on the northern side of the bridge. This land is part of the Westminster Estates. One can imagine at one time traveling north following the coast this was a strategic and important entrance to the north west of the Scottish Highlands. Coming from Ullapool towards the north and Mackay Country the first encounter is Kylesku Bridge against the dramatic mountain backdrop and the spectacular scenery. All barriers appear to have been removed and the traveller leaves Assynt and crosses to Mackay Country without ceremony. The gateway still cannot be underestimated and a linger around this location is encouraged. In the car park on the northern side look at the memorial to the submariners who trained at Kylesku during the Second World War – it was a training base for two and four man midget submarines. The Village is at the meeting point of three lochs Loch Cairnbawn, Loch Glendhu and Loch Glencoul. Boat trips up the latter gives views of Britain's highest waterfall, 650ft Eas a Chual Aluinn. There are some excellent walks from and around Kylestrome.

The bridge carries the A894 road over Loch a' Chaim Bhain at the point where two smaller lochs, Glendhu and Glencoul flow into it. The landscape surrounding this bridge is nothing short of spectacular with a westerly view towards the coast whilst to the east remote mountains. The bridge was opened in 1984 by the Queen and was built by Morrison Construction Limited to a design by Ove Arup and Partners.

Prior to the bridge all traffic north on this coastal route had to be carried over by ferry. This was a process that caused long journeys north but added a unique experience to the visit. Now the crossing is quick and hold ups at the waterside have long disappeared.

### **Kinloch, Merkland**

As Mackay Country is approached from the south via Lairg on the A838 before reaching Achfary the territory is entered around Kinloch.

From Achfary south the road runs alongside and climbs sharply Kinloch brae from the houses at the end of the loch at Kinloch and drops again to pass Loch Merkland and Loch Shin before reaching the 20 century Mackay Country Boundary at Merkland.

A 836 Merkland on left side Of the road facing north NC 396 258

The area of Kinloch is at the east end of Loch More, from where a track leads to big house called Aultanrynie where the Alt an Reinidh burn enters the loch.

This dwelling set in magnificent scenery and a backdrop of cascading water was all but lost in 1949 when heavy rain caused a build-up of water and the busting of banks nearly engulfing the house with water, rubble and rock.

## Sutherland Caithness Border

### Eastern Gateway

This gateway to Mackay Country is in terms of the area flat and although holds a typical empty and lonely land is not as magnificent as the other gateways. As the west of the northern Highlands is approached from the east the scenery of Highlands becomes dramatic and the distant mountains become fully dominant. At the Sutherland Caithness border the introduction is distant and this is where the journey into the mysterious and land of legend begins, or ends should this be the exit from a journey that has inspired and motivated many.

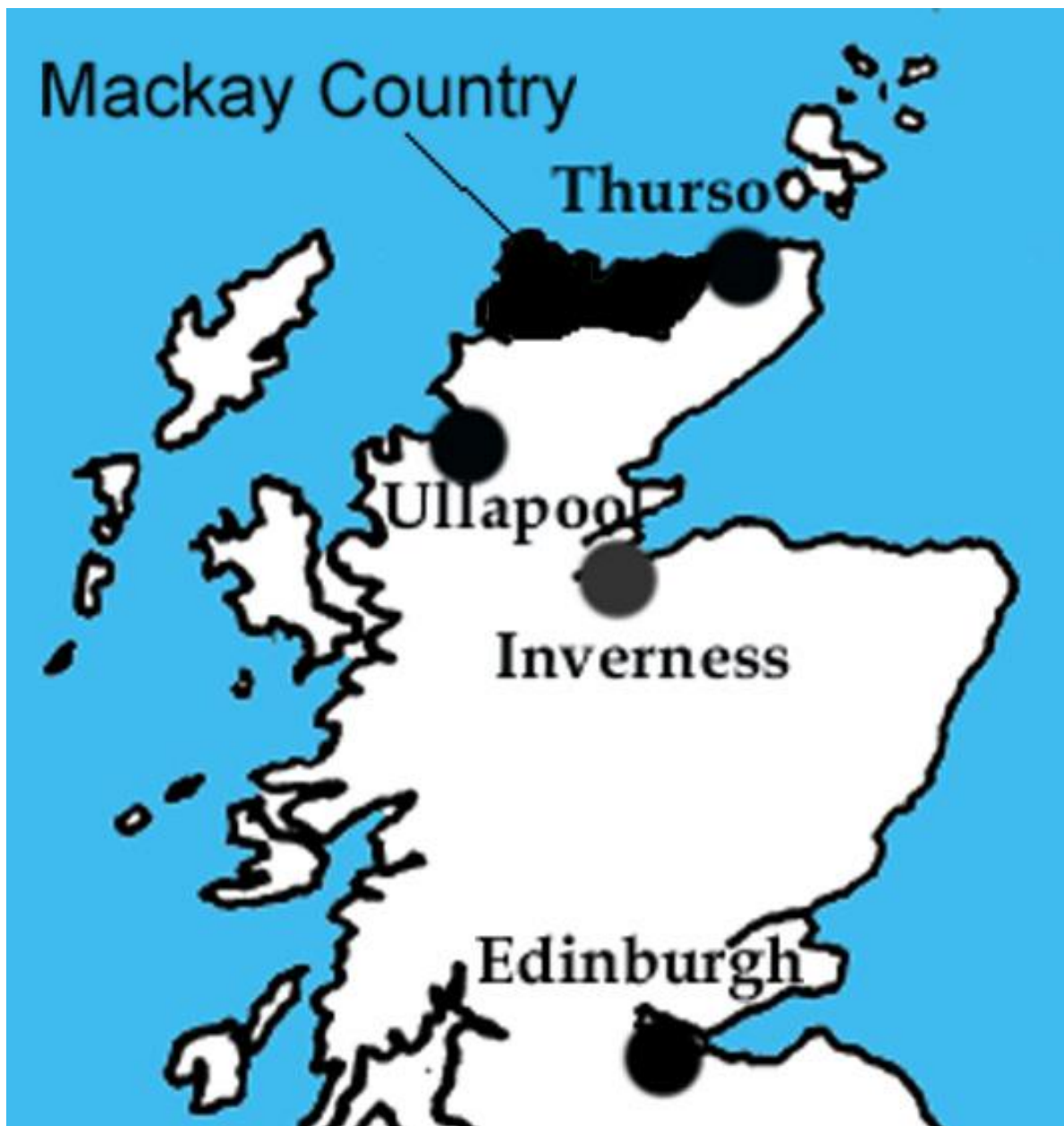
Reaching the A836 to the east is the county boundary and the gateway used to identify Mackay Country of the east today. In the past the border has been recognised at Drumholiston and at the “Split Stane” a cleft in the rock. One version of a local legend tells how the devil himself traveling along the road in a spiteful mood split the rock with his tail.

Caithness / Sutherland Border NC 919 645 on the A836 on the left facing west.



IMAGE 284 THE “SPLIT STANE” A CLEFT IN THE ROCK.

## A Trip through Mackay Country



North West Sutherland is one of the last great scenic secrets of Europe. It is a vast wilderness of extraordinary mountains set in ancient rock, moorland and heather-clad hill. It is where you will find the highest sea cliffs, the highest waterfalls, and many other extremes of the natural world. A spectacular coast road weaves its way around numerous sea lochs and mountains. It is a wonderful journey, known as the West Highland Tourist Route (recently become part of the NC 500) which takes you through a traditional crofting landscape and provides a fantastic insight into the nature of life on the edge of Europe.

The area stretches along the alternately sandy, rocky coast from Kylestrome in the southwest to Cape Wrath and Durness in the northwest to Melvich (Dromholstien) in the east and southwards down the fertile Straths Halladale and Strathnaver to Altnaharra, and west to Merkaland south of Achfary covering approximately 1,200 sq.km. Today, at the turn to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Duthaic Mhic Aoidh is home to less than 2000 people, and is therefore one of the most sparsely populated areas in Europe.



### **The Leaflet**

This gives a very brief summary as what to expect.

Producing a composite brochure was seen as a way of presenting the area as a whole and starting to give an understanding of the expanse as a joined up environment. A community of communities. A locality with a history of inter actions and relationships, inter-reliant but independent.

Mackay Country has some of Scotland's most beautiful and peaceful white sandy bays and beaches, these sandy beaches are magnificent, clean in quiet bays along this rugged rocky coastline and are scattered along the coast, mostly not to be seen from the main road but never far away.

The Mackay Country coastlines are liberally interspersed with steep cliffs, small villages and communities each with a character and charm all of their own. All of these villages and communities are unique and have their own story to relate. They have cultures and traditions that are specific to them with ways of life that have brought about a distinct and individual character. There are threads of similarity that they share, a pride in their heritage, a determination to build on the strengths of local culture, society and economy, and a desire to develop any and all opportunities for sustainable development.

The Mackay Country initiative arose from a consideration of what makes the area as a whole distinctive, and the recognition of the importance of treating heritage as a "living" thing rather than as a dead – albeit interesting – past. Mackay Country is the most remote area from the seat of government of any part of the Scottish mainland and has had the majority of its people moved from the area. Mackay Country is intended today to be inclusive, encompassing all the inhabitants of the area and their descendants throughout the world. The people of Mackay Country have a distinctive history and a strong sense of identity and pride.

Mackay Country, composed of many townships past and present, communities that have survived and those that have disappeared is not a formally recognised geographical division of Scotland. Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh became a locality when the Clan Mackay owned and fought for to keep the territories. Today, as we define the area, Mackay Country Community Trust acknowledges the area as a place where people have inhabited for millennium, before during and after Clan Mackay presence, and we look to explore the past to identify the present and give guidance for the future.

Our research projects gather information from many aspects and we attempt to understand the individuals and populations that have created life styles that have become established and communities that have survived and transformed for the various causes.

This is a superb country. Communities here are generally small with wild rewarding places and a huge choice of hill lochs some seldom visited a satisfaction to those that love solitude. Anyone who travels here will be struck by a sense of being somewhere different. The sheer atmosphere of these northlands makes a big impression. Ultimately, however, it is the wilderness experience of the far north and it's all but empty grandeur with the mountain landscapes and secluded beaches which will leave the strongest impression. Mackay Country is an ancient and culturally rich area, with a colourful, though often bloody, history. This turbulent and romantic heritage is reflected strongly in the breathtakingly varied countryside of the Highlands, in its old communities and villages, and in the people who live and work there.

The places described in this section give a physical description of the localities. Most of the communities in Mackay Country are spread out. Within those there are townships both only with historical significance and those that clearly have their thriving identity today even with a very small population. In many circumstances they are described and portrayed as one locality and included in the massive and vastly diverse area of the Northern Highlands. This area is only a section of the Scottish Highlands and has a wealth of diversity in culture, traditions and customs. We aim to expose these localities as exclusive and irreplaceable with common intentions.

Northwest Sutherland is the emptiest county in the UK and you do not have to go far from the main road to find large tracts of uninhabited spaces. This is a huge land with a small population. This area has a population density of less than 1 person per km and second to the people its' the unspoilt nature and diversity, the wealth of flora and fauna in the area; the natural environment, that is one of the Mackay Country's greatest strengths. Our distinctive landscape is very valuable. In our landscape we see that cultural and environmental values go hand in hand. Sheep have grazed much of the land for nearly two hundred years and this has had an impact of what you now see in the way of vegetation.

Most of Mackay Country is remote with a rugged beauty unspoilt by modern development with many using the area as an escape to the spectacular tranquillity, a perfect respite from the stresses of modern living. With scenery formed by glacial erosion and the passage of time the area has representation of a unique mixture of mountains, glens and moorland dotted with countless lochans and lochs, beautiful landscapes and a rich cultural heritage. Internationally important habitats and wildlife, the areas of the open countryside offers a wide range of walking for all abilities from a gentle stroll to challenging mountaineering. Many beautiful beaches found along the coast on the many small and secluded inlets. This is indeed a land of contrasts, from the austere majesty of the mountains to the subtle undulations of the valleys, and from the dramatic cliffs to the tranquility of the beaches. We explore Mackay Country here from the southwest coastal corner and along the north coast. We will divert to the southern borders from the appropriate junctions as they are encountered.

## Kylestrome



IMAGE 285 KYLESKU BRIDGE

Kylestrome, in the north west on the A894, about 34 miles north of Ullapool and the southwestern coastal gateway into Mackay Country on the northern side of the bridge. This land is part of the Westminster Estates. One can imagine at one time traveling north following the coast this was a strategic and important entrance to the north west of the Scottish Highlands. Coming from Ullapool towards the north and Mackay Country the first encounter is Kylesku Bridge against the dramatic mountain backdrop and the spectacular scenery, opened by Her Majesty the Queen in August 1984. It replaced the ferry service, which used to stop at 9pm in the summer, and 3pm in the winter. If you missed the ferry, a hundred mile detour via Lairg was the only alternative.

In the car park on the northern side look at the memorial to the submariners who trained at Kylesku during the Second World War. This was a training base for two and four man midget submarines and human torpedoes. Some were selected to train in Loch Chairn Bhain for the attack on the German battleships Tirpitz and Scharnhorst anchored in the Norwegian fjords. The village is at the meeting point of three lochs, Loch Cairnbawn, Loch Glendhu and Loch Glencoul. Boat trips up the latter gives views of Britain's highest waterfall, 650ft Eas a Chual Aluinn. There are some excellent walks from and around Kylestrome.

The bridge carries the A894 road over Loch a' Chaim Bhain at the point where two smaller lochs, Glendhu and Glencoul flow into it. The landscape surrounding this bridge is nothing short of spectacular with a westerly view towards the coast whilst to the east remote mountains. The bridge was opened in 1984 by the Queen and was built by Morrison Construction Limited to a design by Ove Arup and Partners.



IMAGE 286 MAID OF KYLESKU 1950S FROM MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

Prior to the bridge all traffic north on this coastal route had to be carried over by ferry. This was a process that caused long journeys north but added a unique experience to the visit. Now the crossing is quick and hold ups at the waterside have long disappeared. Kylestrome is accessed by pedestrians on the old single track road. From the bridge at Kylesku across the water, Locha Chairn Bhain, the road pushes northwards. The terrain is remote, bleak and rocky and the highway was reconstructed as a two-lane road some years ago. Large volumes of rock have been shifted to make way for the road as it cuts through hillsides in cuttings with almost vertical sides, and then sweeps high over the valleys on substantial embankments. Some gradients are still quite steep and the height gained gives some impressive views of the surrounding rocky hillsides.

The double track road and the remoteness is a sense of false security as this is just the beginning of a journey through the most remote and sometimes desolate part of Mainland Britain. Duartmore Forrest, planted by the Duke of Westminster in the 1950's covers about six square miles of land interspersed with small lochans. Three miles north of Kylestrome, the road through the forest, cuts across Loch Duartmore at the old Duartmore Bridge. A path goes northeast from here towards Ben Stack and joins the A838 at Loch Stack Lodge. The forest extends down to the coast. It is managed by the Forestry Commission and conifers thrive here. The River Duart drains Loch Yucal to the east of the Duartmore Bridge and then into Loch Duartmore and to the sea at Duartmore Bay. Just beyond the mouth of the river are two islands Calbha Mor and Calbha Beag at the entrance to Loch Cairnbawn. To the uninitiated it may seem wild but the hills around are gently rolling and the vast moorlands encountered in other parts are not visible here. As the drive takes some steep inclines and the summits reveal the distant and spectacular vast open landscape it starts to become apparent that a special place has been entered. The old road has been abandoned and often follows quite a different alignment as it strikes 15km towards the next village of Scourie. Prior to Scourie a loop in the road allows a visit to Duartbeg.



<sup>101</sup> Kylestrome Lodge was originally the farmhouse of Glendhu farm and was possibly built soon after the Duke of Sutherland bought the estate from Lord Reay in 1829. Kylestrome was the home of the Gunn brothers, tenants of Glendhu sheep farm from 1832 by Charles Clarke, the previous tenant, died at Glen do an 1831. William and James Gunn were joint tenants and the farm is said to have carried a stock of 8000 sheep. It is recorded that when William Gunn came to Sutherland Glendhu in 1832 he had £500 and when he died in 1864 he left £25,000. Two days prior to his death Mr William Gunn had attended church at Badcall and when he was returning to Kylestrome along with Mr. Wright the road surveyor the horse bolted at the top of Kylestrome Brae and as they turned into the farm steading at Kylestrome. Mr Grant was thrown against the wall and died from his injuries.

After the Gunns left Glendhu farm it was cleared of sheep and the Duke of Westminster became tenant of the farm which he turned into a deer forest. He immediately got an extension built to the lodge about 1866 improved the garden and offices built a larder laundry and gardeners house improved 3 shepherds houses for foresters meet paths erected fences and built piers at Glendhu and Glencoul. Kylestrome Lodge and the estate still belong to the Westminster Estate. Further extensions were carried out at Kylestrome Lodge between the wars by Alex Sutherland of Golspie and John McKenzie was one of those employed there while the work was being carried out.

## Duartbeg



IMAGE 287 LOOP ROAD TO DUARTBEG

An old road unsuitable for cars loops towards Duartbeg south of Badcall off the route following the A894. This starts off as a good single-track road as far as a little slipway beside a beautiful

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<sup>101</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

creek which leads to the sea. A very narrow clapper gate has to be negotiated. There then follows a superb section of path, which followed the old tarmac road which was now mostly covered by plants. This section had some great views out to sea over Loch Duartbeg, with the islands out to sea to the west highly visible in the glistening sea. The path ends at a minor road by Duartbeg Lodge, and the next stretch of road also had some great views out to sea and Eddrachilles Bay passing through the National Nature Reserve of Loch a Mhuilin Wood where oak trees grow at the most northern limit in Britain before rejoining the main A894.

## **Badcall**



IMAGE 288 FISH FARMING STATION IN BADCALL BAY

Coming to Scourie from the South and heading north, the main "coast" road steers inland only getting close as it crosses the Kylesku Bridge, and finds the sea at Badcall, just south of Scourie. Badcall is the home to the Eddrachillis Hotel, built in 1835 as the parish manse. It has been refurbished and extended while still retaining the character of the old building with stone walls and flagstone floors. A large fishing station was built at the old Salmon House on the bay. It is now used as a base for fish farming in Badcall Bay.

The village of Badcall is located 2 miles (3 km) south of Scourie. The village comprises Upper Badcall, which is on the west side of Badcall Bay and Lower Badcall to the east. Badcall Bay is an inlet of the larger Eddrachillis Bay itself an inlet on the northwest coast to the north of Kylestrome at the mouth of Loch a'Chairn Bhain.

The township of Badcall lies on its northern shore. A minor road leads southwest to the crofting township of Upper Badcall which overlooks the island studded Badcall Bay. From here there is a walk to Farhead Point.

At Loch an Daim Mor on the west side of the road are the remains of a hut circle. Just after this on the east side a track leads to the ruins of a chambered cairn and behind this in the valley is a circle of stones with large stone at the centre known as “Larach nam bard” the *Hollow of the Tables*. This is where the people of the Parish of Eddrachilles worshiped during the time the Covenanters were being persecuted. Badcall Bay is the site of the original Parish Church of Eddrachilles, now a holiday home; and the manse, now a hotel. The pier was constructed in the 1730s and was used by those attending church. They would travel by boat from Assynt before the road network was constructed. The buildings next to the pier were a salmon fishing station constructed in 1830s. Steam ships delivered almost all the goods for Scourie until the Second World War. At one time, there was a regular weekly service to Badcall from Glasgow on the ‘puffer’, immortalised in the ‘Para Handy’ books and television series. They dropped off supplies round most of the Hebridean and Northern islands, as well as the mainland. The salmon fishing ceased as did the deliveries, and so the buildings fell into disrepair but now form the headquarters of Loch Duart salmon farm, the largest employer in Scourie. This company have two hatcheries, one at Duartmore and a smaller one at Geisgill, and several sea sites. Local creel fishermen operate from the bay, catching lobster, crab and prawns for the home and overseas market. MacBraynes steamer that called Badcall carried passengers as well as goods it cost 1 shilling for the crossing from Badcall to Loch Nedd.

### **Badcall Manse Water Supply\***

The loch by the roadside of Badcall Brae is a man-made loch constructed to provide a water supply to drive a turbine for a power supply as well as running water for the Badcall manse and Eddrachillis hotel. Colonel Cuthbert employed men to dig stones from a nearby gravel pit. These stones were used to form a dam on a burn and eventually a loch was formed. Mr. John McLeod was the carter and some of the other men who did the digging were George McLeod John McInnis and David Thompson. This loch still provides the water supply for the hotel and the turbine can be used as an emergency power supply. The Colonel also had a type of railway line made with wooden rails to carry his peats to the roadside in wooden trucks.

### **Scourie**



IMAGE 289 SCOURIE 1886 FROM MACKAY COUNTRY PICTURE ARCHIVE

## The Gate\*

There was once a toll gate on the road at the entrance to Scourie from the south. It possibly came into existence when the road was constructed in the 1830's. But it is unknown how long this was in use. However the stone in which the gatepost was fixed could still be seen up till when the road was reconstructed. The house beside where the gate was is known as the Gatehouse. The map of a proposed road from Scourie to Lairg in 1794 showed a footpath from Scourie crossing over the shoulder of Ben Hee and joining the line of the existing road on the Lairg side of Fiag Bridge. The same map names the burn at the stables Allt-an-aibanach as the Scotsman's burn.

The name Scourie is from the Norse "Skaga" a copse and from the early Gaelic, a shieling and lies in a hollow that was once a marshy loch. \*(Scourie maybe Norse Scourie in Arran is Norse and said to mean robbers hold or Buccaneers Fort) At Scourie the traveler is presented with a wonderful rocky bay stretching North West towards Handa Island. On the south side of the bay, accessible from the road leading to the cemetery, is a stretch of sand bounded by rocks. From here you gain some nice views across the bay to Scourie itself and of the intensely rocky landscape that makes up so much of this part of north west Sutherland. From the right spot on the far side of Scourie Bay, you can also see the top of Ben Stack appearing over the intervening landscape to the east.



IMAGE 290 CNOC A'BHUTAIN VIEWPOINT, SCOURIE VILLAGE AUGUST 2013, SCOURIE DEVELOPMENT COMPANY MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

The crofting village of Scourie, once a Mackay stronghold lies in the centre of the parish of Eddrachillis. This is an area with good road connections in a locality dominated by the peaks of Fionaven, Arkle, Ben Stack, Quinag, and Suilven, Canisp and Ben More Assynt. The village of Scourie lies on the west coast of Sutherland district in Highland Council Area, at the head of Scourie Bay, 5 miles (8 km) west of Laxford Bridge. The village is famed for the palm trees that grow in the garden of Scourie House, a consequence of the warming effects of the Gulf Stream. The village is a popular centre for walkers and anglers, whilst trips to the nearby island

of Handa and the nature reserve there are popular summer excursions. Scourie is a popular staging post on the west coast and offers a shop, hotel and the camping and caravan site for visitors. By the entrance to the camp site is a lane that leads down to a slipway and a jetty, where until the Second World War all supplies for the area were delivered by steamship.

South of Scourie is Scouriemore and the primary School. At Scouriemore Headland from the beach car park this mostly unmarked route follows the coastline around the point back to the far end of the village. It is a geological site of Special Scientific Interest formed of the oldest rocks in Europe, with features such as "Scourie Dykes" evident as dark intrusions of molten igneous rock into much older formations (there is a good example behind the graveyard). Further round the coast is a site, which has some of the largest garnet clusters found. Apart from the rocks, there are outstanding views east across the Minch to Lewis and south to the Old Man of Stoer in Assynt. Although you may not see them this is an area where otters are very active and there are signs about. Beware for seals, cetaceans and seabirds. This walk has many shortcuts should you but it will reward you to walk to the cliffs at Mheall Deartj below, which are inaccessible caves.

The main roads leads you past a petrol station and just beyond it is another welcome sight, the white-painted Scourie Hotel. This offers accommodation as well as food and drink for the passing visitor. It was built by the second Duke of Sutherland as a coaching inn and stands on the site of an old fortified house overlooking Scourie Bay. Close by is the road that leads down to Scourie pier, at the east end of Scourie Bay, shielded from the pier by trees is Scourie House, built for the Sutherland estate factor in 1846. As you pass through Scourie, you pass on your left its camping and caravanning site. This well serviced site offers a superb location with pitches on a number of levels overlooking the bay. The facilities provided are modern and the site is popular with tourists. The village of Scourie, built around a sandy bay, is principally involved in tourism and crofting. There are hotels, bed and breakfasts, self-catering units and a campsite with licensed restaurant. The area is world-famous for angling for salmon and brown trout, with records at the local hotel going back to 1912. Crofting is still practised, usually as a supplement to paid employment. There is a pier in Scourie, built in 1902. From there a boat takes visitors to see the wildlife and scenery in the summer. In the garden at Scourie Lodge are some palm trees which were grown from seeds sent in a letter from New Zealand about 1860. They are the most northerly palm trees on the mainland, a tribute to the Mackay Country's mild climate.

## Scourie Village\*

At one time a loch covered much of the village area but it was drained to the sea to provide additional land for villagers. When this was done is not known but in 1846 the Duke of Sutherland applied for a loan of £50,000 under the drainage act to improve 195153 acres of the county. The drain is 350 to 400 yards long, stone built and 25 to 30 feet below ground level at the deepest point.



IMAGE 291 SCOURIE HOTEL

Part of what is now Scourie Hotel is believed to be the oldest building in Scourie. In 1640 general Hugh Mackay was born here. General Hughes grandfather was Donald Mackay the first of the Mackay line of Scourie. Having acquired Scourie in 1605 to 1606 it is possible that they had this fortified house built for a family home. According to old charters the mill burn Aut-a-Mhuilinnall and was the boundary between Scouriebeg and Scouriemore the earliest reference found to Scourie village was in the list of donations to the memorial to Duke of Sutherland in 1833.

Lord Mackay removed subtenants from townships south of Scourie as early as 1800 to make way for sheep. Recorded as early as 1800 fifty families had been removed from eleven places in Eddrachillis. Some of those removed were encouraged to settle in and around Scourie where they found employment in the kelp industry from which Lord Mackay enjoyed substantial profit. However it is unlikely that Lord Mackay would have been responsible for the construction of the “big drain”. The Duke of Sutherland who bought Scourie from Lord Reay in 1825 for £300000 applied for a loan under the drainage act to improve the county in 1846, so it would seem that the credit for the big drain is due to the Duke. The end result meant many more acres of land available for the crofters of the village and so it is quite logical to assume that few if any of the present village houses date back beyond that date but the buildings with the crow steps such as Rangoon and the Shieling are the older. Rangoon was for many years the home of the ground officer and one such ground officer was Mr. Morrison who had previously lived in India for a number of years and it was he who named this house Rangoon. Part of the building was an estate store it used to be at the estate house and after the potato famine of 1848 when meal was brought in to help alleviate the hardship stores were set up in each district and this is believed to be the Scourie meal store.

At various times during the last one 140 to 150 years there were a number of different shops or businesses in the village. The shieling shop and boarding house, Rowans hairdressers and beauty parlour, a smiddy, post office and shop were housed in adjoining buildings, this post office was possibly the first in Scourie about 1840. This building was also used in more recent times as a telephone exchange. There was also a Shoemaker and a tailor as well as another grocers shop. Latterly the exchange hardware store was a gifts craft shop. The bottom part of the village consists mainly of council houses, Moffat Square and Park Terrace. Moffat Square houses were built 1984 to 1988 and number 1 to 4 Park Terrace before World War 2. Numbers 5 to 8 just after the war and 9 to 12 in 1956. The present shop, post office was built in 1929 by ME Ross, the doctor's house was built about 1935. Gardeners of Orkney built a shop in Scourie beside the telephone kiosk about the beginning of this century along with the house known as Roseville. The steamboat the Cormorant called monthly with supplies up until the start of World War Two.

Today Scourie has only one shop a general store and sub post office the proprietor is Mr. McDonald. This shop was built for Ross of Scourie hotel about 1929 and after that it was taken over by SCWS and then sold to Mr. McDonald 20 years ago. Mr Ross also has a shop in Scouriemore Cnocnal at the same time as he had the one in the village. About the beginning of the century Gardeners of Orkney built a shop in Scourie. Supplies came by the steamer Cormorant about once a month until the beginning of World War Two period. During the war the shop was run by the Lochbroom Company. The building was empty for a number of years until it was again used as a shop by the late Mr. McPhail. After he left Scourie it was run as a cafe during the summer season for a few years but is now derelict. About 130 years ago a Mr. Donald McDonald opened a shop in the village. This shop continued in business until the early 1920s. The Exchange shop, part of the building was a telephone exchange, was a hardware store owned by Mr. Alec Mackay. He sold out to Mr. Morrison about 1970 and for a few years until 1985 it was the arts and craft shop of Mr. and Mrs. Phillips. Before Mr. Mackay bought the shop it was the post office with Mrs. Ross as postmistress. Mr. McDonald used the premises as a post office many years ago when his brother and father carried on as blacksmiths next door. At the turn of the century Mr. Mackenzie's father had a small shop beside his house at the end of the village and before that and Mr Matheson had a shoemaker shop in the village.

At one time there was a small shop in Badcall up until 1920 run by Mr. Macintosh. People also talk of hearing of a shop somewhere between Cardhu and Badcall and also had Camas-nam-Buth. In the history of the clan Mackay it is recorded that in 1816 Donald Mackay merchant in Scourie married a daughter of Lewis Mackenzie of Badnabay and emigrated to Canada.

Football. Before the Second World War the Scourie football team played their home games against Durness, Kinlochbervie and Lochinver in one of the parks of Scouriebeg farm at the end of the park in the village with the council houses of Park Terrace and Moffat Place are now. The latter park belonged to M.E. Ross of the hotel and at that time he was also the tenant of Scouriebeg Farm.

### **Steam Ships \***

Steam ships delivered with almost all the goods for Scourie up until the beginning of World War Two. In the middle of the last century according to Mr. MacIver he got his yearly supply of groceries on the annual coal boat from Newcastle but by the turn of the century there was a regular weekly steamer from Glasgow to Badcall. The boat by then came twice a year to Scourie pier with 120 tonnes of coal each trip to Mr. Ross at the hotel. Three or four local men were employed in the hold to shovel the coal into steel containers which were then winched onto the pier where another three or four men were employed as carter's to deliver any coal

already ordered. This call cost 18 shillings per half tonne about a cart load. The remainder was stored in the black shed and sold at £1 per half tonne these prices referred to were in the 1930s.

The steamer Cormorant delivered supplies monthly to Gardeners shops round the North West coast. People recall that if one was to ask for an item that was sold out the manager of the Scourie shop or was said did you see any sign of the Cormorant? Badcall call once a month and delivering such as supplies of goods to McDonald's shop in the village for the croft houses that were improved in the 1930 paraffin the groceries and clothes etc already ordered from Hamilton Murray cigarettes tobacco beer and spirits. MacBraynes supplied a boat known locally as the "red boat" which was used by the ferry man to take the goods from the steamer to the slipway. The late Mr Colin Morrison Badcall was the last ferry man and he was responsible for the goods from when they left the steamer until they were delivered to the customers. Some people went to Badcall to collect their own goods but any that were not collected on the day of arrival were stored in the storehouse. This was also the responsibility of Mr. Morrison. The late Mr. Mackenzie was one of the carters who collected goods at Badcall and then delivered them to the customers' homes. In olden times there were what people called the floaters. Floaters were boats from Orkney the plied round the coast selling goods like mobile shops do today. These boats called at Fanagmore, Badcall and Scouriemore in this area. The late Evander MacLeod Tarbet recalled that as children they frequented then very often. He is recorded as having said if we would sing a song they gave us sweets and clay pipes for our fathers. Local people also sold whelks to the floaters.

### **Hamilton Murray of Glasgow\***

Mr. Murray of the firm Hamilton Murray of Glasgow travelled around the area twice a year by bicycle. He collected orders for groceries and clothing and the goods were delivered to Badcall by steamer. Hugh Mackay recalls that when the children knew he was coming and was in the area they rushed home from school in case they missed the shilling Mr. Murray usually gave to every child who was in the house when he called. It was a great disappointment if one discovered he had called during school hours.

### **The Black Shed\***

When supplies of goods came to Scourie by steamship Mr M.E. Ross the hotel proprietor bought the whole load of coal 120 tons. The coal was stored in what was called the black shed and sold to the people of Scourie as and when required. This shed was built beside the pier. The pier itself was built in 1902 and took nearly two years to build because of scarcity of labour and cost over 1000 pounds. When it was no longer used for the storage of coal it was the boatshed for the Duke of Sutherland's motor launch. The shed was destroyed in a gale in January 1951 the day the Princess Victoria sank while making the crossing to Northern Ireland.

### **Hard Times\***

Neither the first nor second statistical report suggests a starving people as those involved in the clearances would have us believe. But certainly very many people left this area for their own good or to further the schemes of the landlord. If the landlords are to be believed conditions were not very good. Cattle seemed to be the people's only source of income and crops were hardly sufficient to meet the needs of the steadily increasing population. Bad weather and the resulting poor or diseased crops spelt disaster. So maybe the clearances or mass migration was necessary but surely not in the cruel and inhumane way it was implemented.

In 1829 when Scourie became part of the Sutherland Estates Mr. Locke came to visit and is supposed to have ordered the reinstatement of the people on the coast south of Scourie from which Lord Reay had previously cleared them to make way for sheep. Glendhu Farm which covered most of the area south of Scourie and across Badnabay was tenanted by Charles Clark.



By 1830 it would appear that the fishermen were rich for it was reported that the children were running around carrying sovereigns but the following year there was again suffering and poverty. The years 1836 to 1837 were again bad years crops had failed and the people were forced to eat the seed that should have been set aside for the following year. Severe weather in March 1837 multiplied the hardships.

Fishing was poor and the people were said to be fast approaching starvation yet Mr. Tulloch's statistical report states that there was an abundance of fish both in the locks and the sea and that all the men were skilled boatmen. The summer of 1837 saw a great improvement but over the next few years many families left Scourie to make a new life for themselves in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. 1839 was another bad year, apart from those who did go there were others who would have gone if it were not for the aging parents who were not fit to travel. By now the Duke ordered that any lot (croft) vacated had to be given to the adjoining crofter. This may have helped the plight of a few.

People were now being encouraged to immigrate the cost of a fair to North America was 48 shillings in his book of memoirs Mr. Evander McIver tells of twenty families who approached him at one time asking for financial help to enable them to emigrate. Scarcely a family had a shilling to pay for their passage he said. This emigration went on for seven years by when it estimated one in six of the people of Scourie left at a total cost of 5610 pound paid by the Duke of Sutherland it is said that they departed in despair not in hope. After spending all that money the Duke then tried to do something to help them that stayed here. In 1846 it was estimated that 10,000 balls of meal were needed for the Scourie factory ship which covered most of the North West. Meal stores were set up at various places and meal was given free to the destitute. Those who could work got meal as part of their pay period Mr. McIvor sent a ship to Norway to look for potatoes. Whether it was successful or not is not recorded but in 1847 a ship did arrive carrying Indian corn wheat and potatoes. Factors were given orders to shoot deer to provide soup and venison for the people.

Things seemed to go from bad to worse and Mr. McIvor came to the conclusion that the population must be reduced and that emigration was the only way. Free passages were on offer presumably by now they didn't have to go begging. Certainly studies tell of five boats coming to Loch Laxford and until recently the rings could be seen in the rocks at Weavers Bay where the boats tied up.

While the local people were living on or below the poverty line Mr. Gunn the tenant of Glendhu farm was doing rather well. For according to Mr. McIver's book he came to Glendhu in 1832 with 500 pound and when he died 32 years later he left £25,000 in his will. He met with an untimely death when as a result of his horse bolting down Kylestrome Brae he was thrown from the gig and died from his injuries.

The townships of Geisul Strathan and Duartmore were populated in 1821 but by the middle of the century they were empty. There is also some evidence to suggest that it sometime people lived places along the shore of Loch Glendhu. All that remains today are the foundations of their houses. A few years ago the ruin of a house at Geisul Point still had a briar rose growing by the doorway. It could be that the men were not aware of the plight of the people or maybe they were more concerned with their spiritual needs. Letters written from Scourie village to a brother who had immigrated to New Zealand gave a picture of great hardship when as late as the 1870s.

## **A Crofters life 180 to 200 years ago\***

The life of the Scourie crofter 180 to 200 years ago was very simple but no doubt hard. 26 families shared 150 acres of arable ground, but outside Scourie another 94 families had only one to two acres each according to an agricultural survey of the parish in 1807.

Every family had some black cattle which was the main source of income being sold to drovers at £2 to £3.00 each. Sheep are kept and the wool used for making blankets and clothes. Each sheep was valued at 5 shillings. Some of the families had got ponies valued at £2 10 shillings each. Goats were kept by every family for their milk and some were sold to fishermen from the East Coast for five shillings each and the skins fetched one shilling each however an epidemic of scab and wrought in 1907 almost wiped out all the goats.

Cultivation of the lazy beds started in February or March. The ploughing was done with cascrom an obtuse angle type of spade with a five inch wide blade. However another survey states that "Scourie is incomparably the best in the parish as to corn farms for here along with Honda island Oldshores and Sandwood are the only places where a plough can be used" from the history of the Clan Mackay, the same book claimed the few Islanders lived better or were more strong and healthy than this parish. The inhabitants have easy access to fishing. The Glens and hollows afford excellent pastures and shelter to cattle few of which are housed even in the most severe winter storms.

The shaft of the cascrom was about 5 feet long and made of wood the five inch wide blade was about 2 foot long. Where the shaft joined the head a piece of wood about 8 inches long projected to the right and served as a step. The plate was pushed diagonally into the soil. The person holding the shaft near the upper end, then gives it a jerk on the angular point which at the same time raises the lower point of it with the soil and throws it to the right. After the ground was ploughed in this manner it was covered with seaweed which was gathered on the shore with a shore crook and then left until May when it was harrowed ready for the sowing of seeds.

In 1807 a survey gives a list of the stock of Eddrachillis as 1300 goats, 2453 cattle, 311 horses and 2629 sheep. Every croft was said to have a flock of hens and a garden for growing cabbage and some potatoes but from a map of the area at that time it would appear that each group of a few houses shared a garden.

Each township had a head dyke which marked the boundary between the green pasture around the township and the more barren or healthy ground. An example of this head dyke can be seen at Weavers Bay and South of Geigue. The cost of building such a dyke was four pennies a yard. The cattle were grazed in the in pasture till the end of June when they were moved to the shielings and remained there until the end of the year. Crop rotation was bare and oats alternatively or maybe two years oats followed by one year's bear. On the poorest ground drivers rye was sown and manufactured into course meal. There were two mills in this county area one at Duartbeg and another at Scourie.

One boll of seat was sown to the acre with hopefully A7 boll return at 16 shillings to 30 shillings per boll. When seed had to be bought it had to come from Caithness. Some potatoes were grown in the lazy beds and families living close by the sea used fresh and salt water for cooking their potatoes in instead of using dry salt. Their diet was mutton, fish, potatoes, oats and barley, bread, butter, cheese and cream and a little goat meat. According to the abstract of small tenancy rent stock etcetera of the scary management eating 47 Eddrachillis had 221 tenants being a total rent of 747 14 shillings one penny. They had ten ploughs, 15 harrows, 22 carts, 75 horses, 305 cattle, 633 cows, 2755 sheep, 11 pigs and 212 dogs. The 59 cotters had only two carts, four horses, 63 cows, 224 sheep and 20 dogs. The only ground cultivated by the

cotters was some small plots used as gardens said to be just 10 acres altogether. Their cattle were allowed to graze with those of the tenancy agreement adjacent to the townships.

Such things as cattle floats did not exist and if a crofter had a car for sale the calf had to be sent to Lairg by mail bus and then by train from Lairg to Dingwall. The calf was tied in a 200 wheat hessian bag with only the head showing, a sugar bag was ideal. In one occasion a crofter only made enough an auction to pay for the carriage so the crofter got a bill for 10 shillings instead of the payment he expected. Live lobsters were also sent on their way south by train to London Billingsgate.

### **Shielings\***

One can find the remains of shielings in the hills around Scourie usually beside or close by a loch or burn. The names of some lochs show by their names the connection with the shielings. Every year until the start of sheep farming in the early 19th century part of the family spent about six weeks and in some cases much longer living at the shieling. At about the beginning of April a keeper called "the poindler" was hired to drive off any cattle that happened to stray on to the pasture around the various shieling. Then about the middle of June after the seeds were sown and the peats cut, the family along with the milking cows and the goats moved to the shieling.

This building were often constructed of dry stone or turf which measured about 12 foot by 12 foot became home to the family and there was usually another smaller room attached with a woman of the family made the cheese and stored the milk. At some of the shielings there was also a small pen for keeping the calves away from the cows for a while before milking time. The main returned to the crofts from time to time to weed the potatoes et cetera.

Remains of six of these shielings can be found around Scourie

- Between Loch a' Mhuirt and Loch na Mnatha possibly the easiest to find as it is close to the boundary fence which runs between the two lochs.
- At the edge of a tiny lochan between Loch Mhurh and Loch Gorm probably the best preserved.
- At the edge of Loch Mnatha the southeast corner.
- South of loch na T-seana Phuilner T Sina fool in a small valley north of Loch Auidh na Leisqe a bit away from the water's edge.
- Northeast of Loch Ishbel.

### **Peat Cutting \***

Years ago, peat cutting was somewhat different to what it is today in that then three or four families went together to cut each other's piece in turn, until the 3rd or 4th lots were done. On the evening before the woman of the house prepared the food sandwiches scones with fresh butter and cowdrie a cloutie dumpling and a big pan of soup. Apart from the soup everything else was packed in a laundry basket with a kettle cups et cetera and loaded onto the cart in the morning. Everyone travelled to the peat cutting by horse and cart and where possible the whole family went to the peats. When they arrived at the peat banks the first job was to light a fire while the menfolk set about their work. In between brewing up tea, some say no tea tastes like tea flavoured by peat smoke, and serving the food the woman helped the men by throwing out the peats, the hardest job!

They worked on till that family's peats were all caught may be as late as seven or eight pm. The younger children played about or maybe finished and then it was all about the cart for home with maybe the same routine the following day. On one occasion when the peat cutting was finished the people realised that the horse had already gone home. So Mr Mackenzie had to

walk to Scourie about three miles to bring old Tom the horse back to collect the cart all the gear etcetera and the people. Of course there were a lot more peats needed then than now all the cooking even in the early morning had to be done on the peat fire so in many homes the fire burned twenty four hours a day every day of the year.

### **The Old Fank\***

Before the sheep fank near the Scourie Free Church was built in 1951 by men of the Westminster Estate the crofters of Badcall and Scourie had a sheep fank at Loch Daimh near the hut circle. At that time a higher price was paid for washed wool, prior to the clipping the sheep were driven into the shallow end of Loch Daimh Beg to be washed. At one such clipping time in 1936 a dog chased alarm into Loch Daimh Beg and Colonel Cuthbert who owned Badcall Manse tried to save the lamb but lost his own life in spite of valiant attempts to save him his specially by Mr Donnie Mackay.

### **Crofters Park in Reay Forest\***

There is a piece of land of about four acres in Murray Forest which is said to belong to the crofters of Durness and Eddrachillis situated between the cattle grid at Stack and the small forestry plantation between the road and the river. Seems in olden times when shepherds walked the lambs to Lairg for the sale this is one of the places where the lambs were kept overnight while the shepherds slept in what is now known as Stack Byer. There is supposed to be another similar park about Overscaig.

### **Places of Worship\***

Some people are of the opinion that the open air church near Scourie free church was used by the covenanters, but the reverent T. Radcliffe Barnett in his book *Autumn in the Sky Ross and Sutherland* states that it was after the disruption in 1843 that the people built this tent shaped structure to worship in, until they could build their own church. Maybe this is so or maybe they used it because it was the site of a covenanters' church.

Just a short distance over the hills there is supposed to be a sight of another covenant or church called *Larach Nam Bord* the hollow of the tables. All that remains today is a large circle of stones with a large flat stone at one side which could have served as a communion table. However it seems very unlikely that there could have been two such churches so near one another in an area where the covenanters were not very active. People recall hearing of people gathering for communion at a place near *Loch bad Nam Mult* and insight of their names Holmes immediately before the clearances. Might it not be that this place was *Larach Nam Bord*.

The area or valley is called in Gaelic *Bealach Na-H-Imirch* valley of the flitting. Surely this could only appear to the flitting of the clearances. Maybe people hoped to get sanctuary there as they did at Croick or else the church site does not date back to the covenanters time.

The first established church alas now converted to a holiday home was built, it was thought, about 1750 overlooking Badcall Bay supposedly in the centre of the district which extends from Laxford to Glencoul and through the Reay Forest. The ruin of the first manse can still be seen nearby. The second manse built in 1835 is now the Eddrachillis Hotel. Close by the original manse is said to be where the first school was cited. In the first statistical report of 1793 the reverend Alexander Faulkner speaks of the want of schools. He goes on to say there is indeed a legal salary of 100 merks for a schoolmaster but that without other elements and school fees is not sufficient encouragement for one properly qualified "a few years ago the society for Propagating Christian Knowledge gave a schoolmaster to this parish yet all at once thought fit to remove him because there was no great number of scholars than 17 attending the school the schoolmaster was moved to Kiltrean in Ross shire at the beginning of this century".

both the true free Presbyterian and the United free churches were built in Scourie the latter is now called Eddrachillis parish church.

The Free Church was built some 50 years earlier. The cornerstones of the building are of red sandstone from Handa Island. The seating capacity of the church is 300 and yet it is said that at communion time so many people attended the services that some people sat on the window sills and went on the grassy bank opposite the church door. The following are the basic details of Scourie Free Church since the disruption in 1843.

1843 Rev. George Tulloch left the established or Church of Scotland at the disruption and all but four families followed their minister into the free Church of Scotland. The new congregation was refused a site to build a church and manse and they worshipped at the foot of the steep cliff visible from the present church, the worship stones, from 1843 to 1846 when they obtained the present site. Reverend Tulloch was ordained at Melness in 1829 and was transported faired to Eddrachillis in 1831 where he was minister from 1831 to 1875. He died in 1880.

1855. According to the doctor William Ewing the total numerical length and strength of the congregation for this year was 272.

1876. Reverend Donald Campbell was ordained and inducted to the congregation and continued there until his resignation in 1894. In the same year Mr. John Mackay probationer was ordained and inducted into the congregation but two years later he was translated to the congregation of Kinloch on the island of Lewis.

1897. The reverent Duncan McIntyre probationer was ordained and inducted in the 1900 he led part of the congregation into the church union of that year. Those that remained must have been in the majority since they retained both the church and manse. The manse were sold off in 1948.

1900. The congregation remained without a settled minister for 81 years.

1981. The congregations of Rogart and Eddrachillis were consolidated in to one pastoral charge by the act of Commission of the General Assembly in 1981 to be known as Rogart and Eddrachillis under one Kirk session and Finance Committee.

1982. Reverend Henry JT woods probationer was ordained and inducted to the congregation on the 26th of July.

### **Free Presbyterian Church\***

The free Presbyterian Church was built in scourie village in 1903 but there was no set of minister until about 1960 when the reverent DB McLeod came as minister of the joint congregations of Scourie and Kinlochbervie He was followed by the Rev. John Talloch and he in turn by his brother the Rev. Fraser Talloch the present minister. Before these ministers were inducted to the charge Mr Hector Morrison of Fondle was the lay preacher in the church for many years then Mr Alex McDonald a local man.

### **Reay Forest Buildings Around Scourie\***

The pier at Laxford is thought to have been built to allow the core boat to unload its cargo there. All the cool for the reforest was stored in the building at the top of the pier. The factor's house built about 1960 destroyed by fire in 1985 and rebuilt in 1986.

Bungalow at Laxford built in 1952 on the site of a house that had been the home of generations of Morrison's till the late 1920s.

Alltnasiulag Two semidetached houses built for forestry workers in 1952. Now used as holiday homes.

Stack Lodge designed by a Mr Byrne for the first Duke of Westminster and built in 1850 to 1851. At that time the Duke leased the land round Arkle from his uncle the Duke of Sutherland. Later the keeper's house was built adjoining the lodge.

Stack Byre. The shepherds who worked with the sheep and lambs to the seals and layered spent the night and the buyer while their flock grazed in the crofter's park opposite.

The memorial stone on the island of Loch Stack. Constance first wife of the second Duke of Westminster had this memorial stone erected on the island to mark the place where she picnicked when fishing on the loch. The shrubs were planted by the forestry workers in the early 1950s.

Ardachuinn Built in 1866 as a keeper's house near the site of the old Mackenzie hunting lodge.

Lone. Built by a Mr Taylor according to Gervas Huxley in his book Victorian Duke. However some people say it was a farm. In 1848 the first Duke of Westminster and a friend Lord Anson lived there while in a fishing trip. The house was built near a stream and during one night of heavy rain they were wakened by their dogs. They found that the stream had risen so fast that the room was being rapidly submerged. The last occupants of the house were a shepherd named Fraser and his wife. This man is said to have been a great songwriter and it is claimed that before he left Lone he buried all his writings near the house.

The roadside houses at Achfary as well as some up the street were built in the early 1950. The facing stone of the houses came from Salicraggie Lodge near Helmsdale which was demolished about then.

Achfary hall was built in 1952 to 1953 and is also used as a school during term time. Before that school classes were held in a building at the rear of Achfary house the home of Anne Duchess of Westminster. The lodge was originally built in 1887 as a laundry for Lochmore Lodge, possibly built there because of the nearness of the burn for water. One of the estate workers houses at Achfary also doubles as the post office the post mistress Mrs. Begg Morrison. The archway at the entrance to Achfary hall was built in 1954 to 1955 as a memorial to the Duke of Westminster the cost was met by donations from employees on the estate and Mr Neil McLeod estate joined her did the work. The stable on the village side of the road was built to house the horses when the mail gig went to Lairg from Scourie. This was the first changeover of horses. The farmhouse and farm buildings were also built in 1887 but the silo which is at the rear of the farm steading was built in 1884. The silo had a capacity of 20 tonnes.

Lochmore Lodge was built by a Mr Reed who owned the shooting rights of Glendhu farm sometime before 1886. A Mr Reid was mentioned as having donated money for the memorial to the first Duke of Sutherland. After Mr Reed died in 1886 the Duke of Westminster made Lochmore Lodge his summer home in Sutherland and extended and improved the lodge. From then on Stack Lodge was used as an annex to Lochmore Lodge. The two houses near Lochmore Lodge were built in 1887 just like most of the other buildings.

Lochside house Lochmore Lodge was built as a ploughman's house. The two daughters of a Mackenzie family who once lived there were said to have found a gold nugget in the small stream beside the house. The whole family immigrated soon after this and presumably took their treasure with them. The house has not been occupied for about 60 years.

Aultanrynie The original house here could have been built as long ago as 300 years as Mackay of Farr head forester was said to have lived here. However old maps show quite a sizeable Township from Aultanrynie Eastward's. The present house is probably about 100 years old.

Up until the summer of 1949 the burn Aullt-an-Reinidh followed down the hillside past Aultanrynie House and into Lochmore. However torrential rain or a cloudburst caused the steep sides of the burn to slip and eventually this formed a dam across the burn holding back hundreds of thousands of gallons of water. When the dam broke the water cascaded down bringing thousands of tonnes of rock and rubble with it which almost engulfed the house. Fortunately the occupants of the house Mr and Mrs McCauley were not hurt. The car which was parked beside the house was practically covered with sludge and the pet lamb was killed and its body swept across the loch. It took a few weeks for lorries to carry away the rocks and stones from about the house. These stones were used for part of the foundation of the road to the Corne-Kinloch power station.

Garvault house near the shore of Loch Merkland west through now a ruin was once a shepherd's house and was habitable in the 1920s. The shepherds who did the lambing stayed in the house during lambing time. Guggill House the grass keeper's house. It would seem that originally this house was built for the grass keeper who was employed to patrol the crofter's boundary fence to see that no deer or sheep strayed onto the crofters ground from the adjacent farm.

### **The Stables.\***

This bungalow was built in 1951 the building at the roadside was this table where the man who ran the passenger gig kept his horses hence the name. This was the only change of horses between scourie and layered. The burn which runs beside the house is called Allt-an-Albanach. However an old map names it Scotsman's burn presumably the map maker was unknown Gallic speaker. Governuisgach Lodge built 1846 to 1847 and designed by Sir Charles Barry the architect of the Houses of Parliament built by the Duke of Sutherland at the head of Strathmore valley. the Dukes brother Lord Ellismere chose the site with a view to accommodating the Prince concert in the event of the queen visiting Dunrobin. In 1886 the Duke of Westminster had the lodge enlarged and a road constructed to it.

### **Mackay's Foresters\***

Lord Reay employed four or five men as foresters in the Reay Forest the principal one lived at Altanrinie beside Loch More. The chief spent two to three weeks in the forest each year in August hunting. He stayed at the lodges built in different places, two were by the side of Loch Stack and at Loch an TighSheilg with his guests. These lodgings had "provisions and liqueurs in abundance".

### **Forestry\***

In 1840 the reverent George Tulloch stated that there were only about 600 acres of woodland in Eddrachillis mainly at Lochmore Loch Stack and Badnabay. Just over 100 years later the Duke of Westminster started a big afforestation project on the ray forest estate involving many thousands of acres. This work was an employment boom for the area employing just over 100 men and it is claimed caused a shortage of labour for roadworks trades and Gilly work et cetera. As well as a steady wage all year sometimes the main worked piece work on Saturdays when you are paid according to the amount of work you did. One man recalls that if you were prepared to work hard enough you could earn as much on a Saturday as you earned for the rest of the week. Apart from that every worker had free transport to and from their homes and they could have time off when necessary to attend to their Croft work. Some of the men known as the pulford workers who dug ditch is erected fences and planted trees Duartmore, Badnabay, Allt-na-suilag, Alltnanrinie and Kinloch recall the following:

On wet days the biggest majority of the men spent their time playing cards in their van or tea huts. Even on good days there might be an extended lunch break for playing cards. A

Duartmore if after lunchtime they could see a shower coming in over the point of store they thought it useless to go back to work. However the stakes were low just pennies when they played pontoon, brag and nap. One man always had to sandwiches etc. individually wrapped and always a piece of cake at the bottom of his piece box. One day by way of a joke a workweek remove the cake from its wrapping and replaced it with a date mole. Another man no into a big appetite always eat his pieces sitting in front of the forestry lorry. On one particular day his mates counted 13 crusts through and out of the lorry window. In winter time a man cooked chicken noodle soup on a Primus stove and sold it to the other men had 6 pence a cup.

One evening when the men were gathering together ready to go home the thermos flask belonging to one man was put in the branch of a tree. When the man arrived he was told it belonged to another man and that they were all to try to knock it down using stones. The rest of the main missed the target on purpose but they all soon had a flask dislodged and only then they discover that the broken flask was in fact his own. On another occasion the same man collected I bought a bike engine which he had sent for repair, from the mail bus at Loch More. Some of his mates replaced the engine in the box with an old rusty one on the journey home his mates managed to persuade him to open the box and show them the engine which the man claimed was as good as new. One of the Duartmore squad got a new lunch box and kidded some of the men that it was a camera supplied by the boss for taking photographs of people who were not working when they were supposed to be. One man in particular believe this story and every sign he saw the man with the camera got hard to work digging drains et cetera and sometimes even tried to hide in the drain.

Mr. Murray the head forester held woodwork classes in the evenings for anyone who was interested. After attending some of the classes one man decided to build the garage. He did in fact complete the building but when he drove his car into the garage he found out that in his calculations he hadn't allowed enough room to enable him to open the car door.

The man that worked and the far side of luck more were motored across the loch in a boat. However as the weather deteriorated during the day so that the boat couldn't safely cross a flag was raised at the roadside to let the men know that they would have to walk round the loch and they were knowing to start off at lunchtime to walk the two miles or so back to the road. I do to more a group of men decided to risk walking across a frozen lock instead of taking the long way around it. When they were just over half way across the ice cracked but fortunately they all managed to get safely across.

When the forestry started at Duartmore, Pulford's hired the hotel car driven by John MacLeod to take the men to and from Duartmore. Later the estate provided vans for conveying the main with George Thompson and John Angus MacLeod as the drivers. The hut to which the men from Duartmore used as their tea hut was previously used by the workmen employed on building the scary school canteen in 1950. Ainsley Thompson took all the fencing material used the shore end of the Duartmore plantation by boat from Badcall Pier. It was delivered to Badcall by lorry. The forestry plough driver was Sandy McLeod Forres. Saplings came from Forres with a few from Chester and Dornoch. Sometimes someone went to Rosehall where they gathered cones from spruce and fir trees. These cones were dried at Lochside house, the seed sown and the saplings tendered and a small nursery at Lochmore.

### **Fishing etc.\***

All the old surveys and accounts speak of an abundance of fish in our coastal waters but there isn't much evidence to suggest fishing was done on a large scale although the possibility must have been considered because according to the records of the British Fisheries Society the area around Scourie Bay and Laxford was rejected as a site for a possible settlement in 1787 because



there was insufficient flatland to accommodate a large village. However the agricultural review of 1812 said that the good anchorage in Loch Laxford would be a suitable place for a fishing station. The idea was that a moderate expense would recover about 200 acres of soil from the upper end of Loch Laxford.

The first statistical account in 1793 speaks of the abundance of herring and the second report in 1840 says that 2750 barrels of herring were caught and sold for 1375 pounds. Sources tend to suggest that the locals were not very industrious as far as fishing was concerned they were very remote from the main fisheries market and lack the capital to replace boats or nets and after the clearances it is possible that they also lacked the heart to do much about it. In a letter written by a Scourie man to his brother in New Zealand over 100 years ago he tells how he lost his boat and had no money to buy another therefore he could not go fishing and as a result of that was likely to be evicted from his home because he could not pay the rent.

By 1850 there was a steamer service from Stornoway to Glasgow but this was no use for the people living in Scourie. The Congested Districts Board tried unsuccessfully to get money to establish a steamer service from the Kyle of Lochalsh two Ullapool and West Sutherland.

In his book *A Tour of Sutherland Shire* Charles St John talks of his visit to Handa in 1848 seeing here as everywhere else round the coast is a fishing station of Mr Hogarth's. if a hut is the summer residence of two forlorn fishermen can be called a fishing station. Sometime about then two brothers for salmon fishermen were built at Fanagmore a room in one of them was used as a school for some years before the turn of the century. In 1899 the whole building was renovated for use as a school house at the cost of 68 pounds. Now the same building is a private residence White House Fanagmore. The other bothy has been a ruin since about at least 80 years. Presumably these two buildings were Mr Hogarth's stations. The census figures for Fanagmore 1881 list 74 people mostly all from Banffshire. Today only three people live there.

In 1861 seven people lived in the only inhabited house on the island of Handa the six fishermen and one female servant all belonged to Findochty Banffshire. Before this about 1780 Lord Reay formed a fishing syndicate with mercer's Arbuthnot of Peterhead and Mr. Anderson of Rispond Durness. Lord Reay was said to be a large shareholder and a boat slip and stores were built somewhere in Eddrachillis. In the statistical account of 1793 Reverent Faulkner mentions that a Peterhead company rented the salmon fishing of the river Laxford and that the company cured and exported the fish to foreign markets. The same company had at least of the kelp shores of the estate. Those who worked at the kelp manufacturer earned 30 shillings per tonne. A boat sailed regularly between Eriboll and Aberdeen presumably to carry the kelp away. On the shore of Loch Glendhu that is a rock known as the kelp house rock, this would suggest that maybe people who worked at the kelp lived there at one time. A family named Thompson were the first occupants of what is called the storehouse Badcall Pier. It was the headquarters of the salmon fishing from Clachtoll to Kinlochbervie and was built in 1882. All the fish caught there were taken into Badcall and kept on ice. Nearby is a small lock still known as the Ice Loch. Men took ice from here by horse and cart to the storehouse. One man remembers 2 great big boilers there so maybe some of the fish were boiled. Anyway boats called regularly to take the fish away. This fishing industry continued here till near the end of the first war. On the shore of a bay Camas an Fairidh near the school Mr. Hugh Macintosh Badcall built a house for the captain of the head salmon boat. The captain of this boat was called the Caner and so the house and in fact is still known as the caners. Between the wars quite a number of men gave their occupation as lobster fishing. This is still carried on today by a few men mainly as a profitable hobby. In 1840 9,600 lobsters were caught and fetched £140 at Billingsgate.

## **The Cruel Sea\***

The same sea that abounds with fish has proved to be a cruel sea on many occasions. In Loch Laxford there is an island called Eilean Eireannaich the Irishman's island said to be the burial place of some Irishman who lost their lives in a boating tragedy. Between Tarbet and Scourie is a spot called Geo na Skipper where the skipper of a boat is supposed to have been buried by members of the crew. Whether he was actually drowned is not known, they could have put ashore to bury the body of their dead skipper. Details for these are not known not for the burials of two bodies near the shore of Scouriemore and another at Duartmore thought to have been bodies washed ashore. The Irishman's island is mentioned in the first statistical report so this tragedy must have happened before 1793. This report also suggests that there used to be quite a number of shipwrecks along the coast before the Cape Wrath lighthouse became operational about the year 1879.

The following are people from this area who are known to have lost their lives at sea in the past 100 years but does not include those who are lost during the two world wars

On February 23<sup>rd</sup>. 1876 Mark Doe Rose 28 years old and William Morrison 34 years old were both drowned in Loch Laxford. 11 years later on 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1887 a sudden squall was thought to have upset the boat of fishermen John Munro 32 years old. He lost his life at Kylesku and was a son of Mr. and Mrs. Donald Munro Gailgaig. In August 1893 33 year old Mr Lachlan Matheson was drowned in Scourie Bay. Alexander Macrae was lost at sea on January 1898 he was 32 years old. The body of Hugh Ross son of George Ross a tailor was washed ashore on the island of Handa on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 1899. The following year George Mackay a fisherman from Scouriemore was lost at sea of Wick leaving a wife and young family. On 3<sup>rd</sup>. of January 1902 brothers James 33 years old and William 23 years old Thompson were drowned in Badcall Bay. A stone in Scourie cemetery marks the grave of 23 year old Percy Hendry who was drowned in Loch Laxford on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August 1909. The stone was erected by officers and crew of HMS Research.

The year before that on the 26<sup>th</sup>. of August 1908 Robert Simpson drowned just 40 yards from Scourie pier in March 1936 John Moffett and George Ross lost their lives in Scourie Bay. Cathel McLeod was ferrying two sailors to re-join the ship anchored at Kylesku in January 1943 the boat capsized and all three men lost their lives. Midsummer's day 1958 a lobster boat fishing out of Tarbet was lost and with it 47 year old Donald Ian Munro and his two schoolboy nephews John and Donald Munro. Just before Christmas 1968 Donald John McLeod and his son Christopher were drowned just a few 100 yards from Tarbet pier. In October 1972 Alistair Munro was drowned in the sound of Handa and two years later his son Angus 23 years old was lost overboard in Gunna Sound. Robert MacLeod a fisherman from Scouriemore drowned just off Kerrachar beach in April 1984. Yet another tragedy in the sound of Handa claimed the lives of Cathel Munro and his friend Ian Sutherland from Rogart on the 31<sup>st</sup> of July 1987. All the Munro drownings in the past 30 years were from the same family in Tarbet.

## **Salmon Fishing\***

About 1845 William Hogarth of Aberdeen got the lease of the salmon fishing from Cape Wrath to the Ross Sutherland border. Hogarth was unrestricted in any way as to the method or the number of nets used so that within a few years he had taken nearly every salmon on the coast and in the rivers and then gave up the lease. There was no more netting of fish until about 1870 when the Duke of Sutherland employed a salmon fisherman from Murray Shire as manager. A large ice house already existed at Badcall and this was filled with ice and a steamer built by Hall of Aberdeen was purchased to take the salmon packed in ice to the railway at Strome Ferry. After three years the Duke again let the coastal fishing to mercers Speedy of Perth at

£700 a year. In 1895 the total fish taken at the six coast stations were as follows; 1627 salmon 9711 grilse, 406 sea trout. On the 2nd of May 1882 Evander McIvor noted in his memoirs “lobster fishing is an immense help in this district. Lobster sold when I came here in 1845 at tuppence halfpenny each they are now 10 pence they are carted to lurk and 48 hours after they leave they are sold in London”.

### **Sheep Farms \***

After Eric succeeded Hue as Lord Reay in 1797 he terminated the existing leases of his tenants. George Brown a land surveyor from Elgin inspected the estate in 1799 and extensive grazings and farms were advertised to be late the following year. Lord Reay spent the summer of 1800 in Tongue to receive offers and a number of agreements were made but progress was slow. And 1801 Lord asked John from Ayrshire to take charge of the estate. Most of the sheep farms were taken by former taxmen on their state including Aultannirue by William Munro of Achany and Glencoul by Charles Clarke.

Between 1805 and 1809 a number of agreements were renegotiated to take in additional land either whole townships or hill grazing and also to place much higher rents on the farms. For instance in 1808 Charles Clarke was given possession of Maldy and Kylestromie in addition to the lands of Glencoul and Glendhu. His lease was still to terminate in 1815 but the rent was increased from £140 to £380 for 1808 to 1811 and to £480 for the remaining years. These extensions to the sheep farms were accompanied by clearances although it is claimed that some families were allowed to remain as sub tenants for some years. Lord Reay’s interest in the kelp industry demanded that most of those who were cleared were resettled in the crowded coastal townships around Scourie and on the northern shore of Loch Inchard.

In 1815 Charles Clarke obtained another nineteen year lease of Glendhu. The prices of meat and wool were at an all-time high so is thought to be a good opportunity to increase the rents still higher. Clarks rent went up to £1400 for the first five years and his new lease to £1600 thereafter.

Lord Reay went into partnership with Munro of Achany in the farms at Badnabay and Aultanrynie. Ralph Reed was appointed manager and he replaced the mixture of black face and cheviot with a whole cheviots flock. The agricultural depression which followed the Napoleonic war severely affected the Reay Estate. In spite of rent reductions a number of sheep farmers including Munro and Clarke went bankrupt.

Evander McIvor the Duke of Sutherland factor of Scourie Estate sold to the Sutherlands in 1829 and was given the tendency of Scourie sheep farm which contained a substantial part of the old Badnabay and Altnaharra farm, and was further extended by the clearance of eight tenants from Handa Island in 1848 along with some of the township lands.

### **Some Old Names of the Area\***

In 1606 what we now call Scourie was spelt SKOWRIE, in 1675 it had changed to SCOWRY and by 1714 to SCOURY (History of the Clan Mackay). This book also speaks of *Invernaclash Fiarn* the area around Weavers Bay and *Invernaclash Fleucherach* the area found round Loch Laxford. In 1675 a charter granting lands to Captain William Mackay of Borralie mentions Easter and Wester Tarbet and Fondle but no mention of Fanagmore. Another charter dated 1593 from James the 5<sup>th</sup> to Donald's Grandfather the first Donald Mackay of Scourie calls Honda Sandy. Sandy or Handa is said to have belonged to the Donald Mackays father John before 1539. *Achtagfarie* (Achfary) was said to be a rich grass farm. Loch More which never freezes is the source of the River Laxford which after passing through Loch Stack falls into Loch Laxford at *Dalacrackwell*. This river was said to have salmon of better quality than any of the other of Lord Reay’s rivers.

A marriage contract in 1615 of one of Donald Mackay's daughter says Donald Mackay of *Skowriemoir* is believed the Mackays lived in what is now the hotel so that at that time there was just Scouriemore and Scouriebeg (Big Scourie and Little Scourie) with the Mill Burn as a possible boundary. The village as we know today could have been a village of settlers at the time of the clearances although some people claim that at one time there was a township at the other side of *Cnoc a Bhuthain* from where the village is now but this is not showing on the map of the area of 1794. However one of the subscribers to the memorial to George Granville first Duke of Sutherland was a Lachlan Ross Scourie village proving that the village existed then in 1833.

### **Wartime Stories\***

According to doctor McFarland's report in 1953 the parish has a very fine record in the fighting services particularly in the Royal Navy and in certain highland regiments. Fifteen men from the Scourie district gave their lives in World War One in fact three families were bereaved twice. Mr. Alexander McKay son of Mr. and Mrs. George Mackay Scouriemore was awarded the DSM for bravery. Come World War Two and the men from Scourie again went away to fight for king and country and nine never came home. During World War Two a telephone call got one connected to the Scourie Coast Guard station positioned high on the Scouriemore hill. Colin Morrison was in charge and along with Alexander McLeod and Alexander MacDonald Scouriemore Ainsley Thompson Cardhu and William MacLeod Badcall the manned the station twenty four hours a day seven days a week. Every two hours they contacted Wick by telephone to report any sighting of suspect shipping or aircraft. The royal observer corps took over the Coast Guard station and used it for meetings until their own underground station was built alongside the cemetery.

Nearby to the Coast Guard station was the RAF "dugout" for the radio equipment for contacting their headquarters. This post was also manned twenty four hours a day. A wee bit south of this and opposite the present telephone exchange was the beacon. This as the name suggests was a guiding light for approaching aircraft, especially from America, like a lighthouse is for shipping. About twelve men were stationed in Scourie at any one time. There is a holiday home on the old beacon site but it is still known as The Beacon.

The entrance to *Loch a'Chairn Bhain* (The Ferry) was used as an anchorage for battleships such as Rodney, Nelson, Howe, Hood and smaller destroyers. After they had been anchored there for quite a few days a local lady writing to her daughter who had returned south after leaving home on holiday told her that missus hood and her brood had gone away. That was her way of letting her daughter know that the battleships had moved away. Midget submarines trained out of *Loch a'Chairn Bhain* and among the Badcall islands before going to torpedo in a Norwegian field.

Of course Scourie had its own Dad's Army with major Cuthbert of Badcall Manse in charge. Matthew Elliott Lochmore was a Lieutenant and Angus Mackenzie Seaview held the rank of corporal. They held meetings and drilled in the local hall. Rifle practice was on the beach from the boatshed to the cemetery, rifle grenade practice at the beacon and maneuvers in the Glen with thunderous flashes. Territorial Army rifle range at Laxford prior to 1939.

The pilot of a small British aircraft lost his bearings and was forced to land in a croft in Scourie soon after a funeral had taken place. So it is understandable how alarmed the pilot was when he saw that all the men who rushed towards him were dressed in black, this was thought the appropriate dress at a funeral then, luckily the pilot was uninjured and the aircraft wasn't badly damaged either. It was the duty of the men of the Home Guard to keep watch over it until transport arrived the following day to take the aircraft away.

Among the float stream washed ashore were two lifeboats one bearing the name SS Editor Seattle. Some of the foodstuffs reached the cupboards of houses in Scourie, condensed milk was especially welcome because of sugar rationing at the time. A drum of “wood alcohol” was used by the RAF boys for their motorbikes and it has been suggested that two alcoholics mixed it with a mixer and drank it. There was also a container of beeswax, some of which is still to be found in the village. During the war years there were three land army girls working on the farm belonging to Scourie hotel to one year and one the next in 1987 one of them came back to Scourie on holiday.

About 12 children were evacuated to Scourie during the war years and stayed with friends and relatives in the area. Mr. Angus Campbell gatehouse was the RP man and Mr. HMG Fraser schoolhouse was receiver of Rex. There was no official celebrations to mark V or V JD but from all accounts the men folk had a big celebration in the pub. It wasn't the done thing for the ladies to frequent such places then!

### **Celebration Picnics\***

Carnus an Fairidh was the place chosen for a picnic to celebrate the end of World War One. Mrs Munro remembers that everyone had to bring their own cup and that each child got a bag containing an apple an orange and a bun. I had my bag and cup I'm when I went to clicked it later it wasn't there so I cried all the way home. At the time of George the fifth's jubilee in 1935 all the children were taken to hand the island where they enjoyed sports and a picnic. They were taken there and Colonel Cuthbert's boat the flying spray by Angus Campbell the captain. Each child received a commemorative mug for the jubilee and another one for the coronation of George the sixth in 1937, only this time the sports were held in the park at Scouriebeg farm.

Picnics with a difference were given by Lady Mary Grosvenor to the children of the area and kind list room. Her sister's children and their friends held a gymkhana and there was sports for everyone and at the end every child got a prize from a lucky dip. Mrs. Angus Mackenzie recalls that every year she seemed to get a pencil case and another person recalls that they travelled to Kylestrome on the local grocery van.

### **The Spy Who Came In From the Sea\***

One dark winter's night during the second war a stranger called it a house in Scouriemore and asked for a cup of tea. The man of the house invited him in and gave him the cup of tea he had asked for. The stranger then asked to see the daily paper. As he was alone in the house the man thought it not advisable to ask any questions period the stranger carried no luggage except a small haversack and did not cross by the ferry or come by the mail bus. Neither was he seen by any other person in the area. So it was assumed although there was no proof that he was a spy who came in from the sea.

### **Mains Electricity\***

Was switched on in Scourie in time for Christmas 1956 and street lights followed in April 1971. Before 1956 most people used paraffin lamps for lighting and solid fuel for cooking. In most homes the fuel was peat so that meant that sufficient peat had to be cut to keep the fire burning all day every day of the year. In some houses the fire was never allowed to go out.

After World War Two most people changed to bottled gas for cooking and a few people used for lighting while some others had windmills to drive dynamos which in turn charged batteries for power for lighting. The hotel had their own engine which drove dynamos and at Kylestrome they used a water turbine for generating electricity for the lodge and employees homes. This turbine was set up at Maldie burn in 1931. The people who lived on Handa Island were said to have burnt the oil of fulmars to light their homes.

### **Mains Water\***

In 1935 to 1936 Scourie got its first means water supply. Before that the majority of the people had to depend on drawing water from the numerous wells. In the dry summer season many dried up and people had to carry water from quite a distance away. One lady was quite near home with two pairs of water she had carried for more than a mile when a young prankster crept up behind her and gave her such a fright that she dropped the pails and spelt the Lord.

In Scourie village there were two taps with water pipe from a small reservoir at the side of the hill nearby. It would seem that this was done before World War One. After the second war with the influx of tourists, new council houses and bathrooms being installed in any houses which didn't already have them the water supply gradually became inadequate for the needs of the community. After a very dry winter and spring of 1968 to 1969 the following article appeared in the Daily Express.

### **No Water for Whisky\***

Hotel barman Hugh Mackay has an extra chore these days. Every morning he drives a mile to get to a spring near the Sutherland village of Scourie to get water for the customers whisky. Because while most of Scotland is too wet Scourie is too dry we have had the driest winter and spring for years said a villager yesterday. District Council clerk at Scourie Mr George B Mackay said although we are not actually without water it has been dirty for several weeks. People have to boil it. Hotelier Ian Hay said our bar customers are very dubious about putting the tap water in their whisky so the barman goes to the well every day with a big four-gallon jar.

Before the time of mains water Scourie School had its own water supply piped from a well near Seaview. The name of the hill is *Cnoc-Clais-an-uisge* which means *knoul of the water drain*.

### **Blanket Washing\***

Before mains water was lead on the woman of Skyrim or carried their blankets to the two nearby lochs for washing. Obviously they picked a suitable day and a fire or fires were lit near the loch for heating the water in huge pans. The blankets were steeped in the big tubs of hot soapy water and then trumped mostly by the children. The blankets were then rinsed and spread on the rocks and grass to dry.

### **Scourie Hotel\***

Probably built in the late 16th or early 17th century as a home or fort for the Mackays of Scourie. It is believed that it is here that General Hugh Mackay of Killiecrankie fame was born in 1640. The second Duke of Sutherland built a coaching inn here in the early 1840s about the same time as the road was constructed from Skiag to Scourie and onwards to Durness and further north. And so the Mackay Fort became a hotel kitchen and that is where the meals are still prepared. Over the years the hotel has been modernised to a very high standard with 18 bedrooms all but two having private bathrooms, two spacious lounges a cocktail and a public bar and of course the wines are stored in the original cellar. The original building increased About 18 by 20 feet with three foot thick walls and the underground cellar 16 by 14 feet with walls 10 foot thick, a trap door or connected the two. The hotel controls 50 fishing beats in the 25,000 acres in and around Scourie.

### **Scouriebeg Farm\***

Most of the farm buildings were built about 1835 to 1845. Mr MacIver writes in his book *Memoirs of a Highland Gentleman* that none of the previous factors bothered with the farm so it's likely they were not used much before 1845 if they were built by then. The silo opposite

the steading was built as a silo but in later years of the last century this building was used as a slaughter house. Local people took their animals there to be killed and any meat that they didn't keep for their family was sold at 6 pence per pound. There was a mill in part of the steading in use until 1900. Before that there was a mill on the mill burn Alt-a-Mhuillin, the last Miller who worked there was Mr Morrison. The ruin of the mill were swept away in a storm during the winter of 1901 to 1902. Over behind the silo is the ruin of what was the home of Mrs Joanne Munro great grandparents of Mr and Mrs Hugh Mackay. The farm house stood on the bank overlooking the steading and was occupied up until about 1940. An early map 1794 shows a house on the site of what is now the cottage of Scouriebeg farm house but obviously it has been renovated or maybe reconstructed several times since then. When Mr McIver was factor his clerk Mr Simpson lived the cottage. What is now the caravan site was Mr Simpson's croft and the buildings opposite Greenhill were the byers. The most modern building on the farm are the gardeners cottage at the end of Scouriebeg and Clashfern house both built in 1876. The house at Clashfern was for the shepherd and replaced the original one.

### **Scourie Camping and Caravan Site\***

In 1971 Mr and Mrs Angus Mackenzie opened a camping and caravan site situated overlooking Scourie Bay. The bay is safe for both swimming and boating and with the sandy beach also nearby the park is ideally situated. The site also offers the best of services. Flush toilets, wash basins and showers with hot and cold water razor points, washing machines and tumble dryers for laundry. In 1982 the McKenzie's opened the Anchorage Restaurant on the site giving a full range of meals from snacks to full meals and carry outs. The restaurant also has a table licence and the stock a full range of wines spirits and beers. The site which is open from the 1st of April to the 31st of October is recognised by the Scottish tourist port, the caravan club, the camping club, the Sutherland tourist board, the Royal Dutch touring club and the Royal Automobile Club.

### **Scourie Pier\***

When the people of Scourie realised what the benefit a pier would be they tried to raise enough money to build one but despite a local collection and donations from both the Duke of Westminster and the Duke of Sutherland they still had not raised enough money. However eventually the Congested Districts Board undertook to erect a pier and the County Council did the work. The pier costing over £1000 wholly composed of concrete took about two years to build.

### **The Tigh-na-mara Restaurant\***

In Tarbet the old shore house specialises in seafood especially lobster and crab salads. The restaurant which overlooks Tarbet pier and be is open Monday to Saturday from Easter to mid-October. Pottery and needlecraft made by the proprietors are sold in the restaurant.

### **Scourie Lodge\***

Scourie Lodge overlooks Scourie Bay. This historic house and its beautiful walled garden were built about 1835. The lodge or Scourie House as it was first called was the factors house. The first occupier was probably Mr. Alex Stewart who was factor from 1837 to 1841. Mr. Robert Sinclair followed him and was a factor from 1841 to 1845. Mr. Barkley was factor before either of these men but he was thought to have been a hotel or innkeeper as well. In 1845 Mr. Edward McIver took over as factor, a post he held until he retired in 1895, but he continued to live in the lodge until his death in 1903. After Mr. McIver's death it was used as a shooting lodge for paying guests by the Duke of Sutherland. GM Barry was one of those guests and Lady Elizabeth Bowes Lyon the Queen Mother is also said to have stayed in the lodge. Between the wars the lodge was used as an annex to Scourie hotel well Mr. Ross was hotelier.

During the war years the lodge became a private house for a time then It lay empty for a number of years. About 1960 it was used again, this time as a farmhouse when Mr. William Patterson was tenant of Scouriebeg Farm. During a few years in the 1970 it was a hotel Mr. and Mrs. Donald Mackay were the hoteliers. Now it is a private residence once again. Some local people believe that the lodge is haunted by the ghost of Evander MacIver and his dog and some people talk of a presence or cold feeling in some parts of the house. I have lived in the house for several weeks and neither saw nor felt anything. However one story is that when the house was unoccupied after World War Two, the GPU rented part of the building for storage space, and employee who went there told of meeting a man in the house and his description of the man fitted with that of the late Mr. McIvor.

*<sup>102</sup>At the centre of the post-clearance Highlands were the estate managers, or factors, who were effectively responsible for the economic and social conditions on their employers' estates. They controlled the levers of Highland life and faced the realities of the post-clearance order. Prominent among this group was Evander McIver.*

### **Scourie Factors**

Mr. John Baigrie was factor at the time of the death of the first Duke of Sutherland in 1833. This was just four years after the Duke acquired the estate so it is quite possible that he was the first factor. Mr. Alexander Stewart became factor in 1837 followed four years later by Mr. Robert Sinclair. 1845 so the beginning of Mr. Evander McIver's 50-year factorship. He was the last factor to live in Scourie even after he retired he continued to live in Scourie lodge till his death in 1903.

Yet another story is of two holidaymakers who were supposed to have walked by the lodge and seen through the windows a lot of people having what they thought was a party. On returning to the house they were staying in they were told that the lodge was locked up and that no one lived there. Yet another man who when he was painting the outside of an upstairs window of the lodge during the time it was unoccupied heard the window below him on the ground floor being opened and then shut he could see no one about and he checked and found all the doors and windows locked.

### **Hugh Mackay**

c. 1640—1692, Scottish general, was the son of Hugh Mackay of Scourie, Sutherland shire, and was born there about 1640. He entered Douglas's (Dumbarton's) regiment of the English army (now the Royal Scots) in 1660, accompanied it to France when it was lent by Charles II. to Louis XIV., and though succeeding, the death of his two elder brothers, to his father's estates, continued to serve abroad. In 1669 he was in the Venetian Service at Canada, and in 1672 he was back with his old regiment, Dumbarton's, in the French army, taking part under Turenne in the invasion of Holland. In 1673 he married Clara de Bie of Bommel in Gelderland. Through her influence he became, as Burnet says, "the most pious man that I ever knew in a military way," and, convinced that he was fighting in an unjust cause, resigned his commission to take a captaincy in a Scottish regiment in the Dutch service. He had risen to the rank of major-general in 1685, when the Scots brigade was called to England to assist in the suppression of the Monmouth rebellion. Returning to Holland, Mackay was one of those officers who elected to stay with their men when James II., having again demanded the services of the Scots brigade, and having been met with a refusal, was permitted to invite the officers individually into his service. As major-general commanding the brigade, and also as a privy councilor of Scotland,

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<sup>102</sup> After the Clearances: Evander McIver and the 'Highland Question', 1835–73 Published online by Cambridge University Press: 06 March 2012 Eric Richards and Annie Tindley.



Mackay was an important and influential person, and James chose to attribute the decision of most of the officers to Mackay's instigation.

Soon after this event the Prince of Orange started on his expedition to England, Mackay's division leading the invading corps, and in January 1688—89 Mackay was appointed major general commanding in chief in Scotland. In this capacity he was called upon to deal with the formidable insurrection headed by Graham of Claverhouse, Viscount Dundee. In the battle of Killiecrankie Mackay was severely defeated, but Dundee was killed, and the English commander, displaying unexpected energy, subdued the Highlands in one summer. In 1690 he founded Fort William at Inverlochy, in 1691 he distinguished himself in the brilliant victory of Aughrim, and in 1692, with the rank of lieutenant-general, he commanded the British division of the allied army in Flanders. At the great battle of Steinkirk. Mackay's division bore the brunt of the day unsupported and the general himself was killed. Mackay was the inventor of the ring bayonet which soon came into general use, the idea of this being suggested to him by the failure of the plug-bayonet to stop the rush of the Highlanders at Killiecrankie. Many of his dispatches and papers were published by the Baunatyne Club in 1883.

### **Scouriemore\*.**

Scouriemore is mostly all croft houses many of them renovated by the board of agricultural grant in the 1930s before this they had thatched roofs. Handa Terrace council houses were built 1971 to 1976 while the parish church manse was built about 1900 about the same time as Eddrachillis parish church. Besides the private house called Seaview is what used to be the *poor hoose*. (Workhouse.) Handa sandstone was used in the construction of this building and in the Free Church and buildings at Cardhu. The public hall built in 1929 was replaced by a more modern building in 1977. Adjoining this is what was once the school then the library and reading room and now part of the hall and also a house for the Scouriemore gamekeeper. The present school was built in 1866.

### **The Kiln\***

Some people suggested that the kiln that is used to be in Scouriemore was used for drying fish. But as there was a mill on the burn running from lock about the car dark to the sea and no evidence of a killed anywhere else one must suppose that the kiln was at one time used for drying the grain. Such girls were social centres in each community where the young people made in the warmth of the oven and spent an evening singing and storytelling

\* This information in the marked sections was submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 - 1987.

### **Leaving Scourie**

Most of Scourie lies on the old road that appears opposite the Scourie Hotel, now by passed by the A894. Here is variety of charming cottages and crofts sheltering at the foot of the surrounding hills. On leaving Scourie the road heads north alongside Loch a' Bhadaidh Daraich, The Dukes Loch, overshadowed by Creag a Bhadaidh Daraich known as "The Dukes Mount" at just over 500 feet high. The landscape around Scourie is one of innumerable small lochans as is evident as the road proceeds into Mackay Country.

Opposite the turn off for “The Balkans” (This is marked for the Handa Island excursion) is Loch a’Bhagh Ghainmhidh, the A894 passes Loch na Claise fearna before turning east you can look down on Weavers Bay where in 1848 after the potato famine nearly 500 people emigrated by boat to America. There are the known remains of five prehistoric sites around Scourie. Experts say the group of standing stones at Badnabay are the remains of a Neolithic corridor-tomb and were originally covered by earth and rubble to form a mound. There are numerous cairns and it is thought that long ago, when men went to fight, each man placed a stone on the top of the hill to form a cairn. When they returned, they removed a stone and the remainder were left as a memorial to the dead. At Weavers Bay there is now a mussel farm. A little further opposite the layby at Badnabay, a tidal inlet of Loch Laxford are nine upright stones the remains of a Neolithic burial chamber.



IMAGE 292 THE OLD ROAD, NOW BY PASSED BY THE A894

## Balkans



IMAGE 293 TURN OFF TO THE HAMLETS OF FANAGMORE, FOINDLE AND TARBET

Half way to Laxford Bridge about 4km from Scourie a side road runs on the left that leads through one of the last true wildernesses in North West Scotland to the west coast hamlets of Fanagmore, Foindle and Tarbet from Tarbet boat trips can be taken to the nature reserve on Handa Island. From the moment that the traveler takes the turn off for the ferry at Tarbet from the main road it is comparable to slipping into a time warp the way most of northwest Scotland used to be, before good roads were built.

The area is known as the Balkans and fable retells the stories of constant fighting and disagreements between the residents in the three tiny communities. Apart from this and whether it is true today or part of folklore this area is outstanding in beauty. Massive structures rising from the skyline in what appears to be microcosms of sheltered but harsh surroundings with tiny small fertile spots distributed among a background of splendor, little lochans and sheltered coves.

From here you can choose to progress either way around a four or five mile loop, also of narrow single-track road. The landscape through which these roads pass is truly superb: a labyrinthine confusion of gray rock and grass, of lochans, mounds, short steep dips and rises, and unpredictable blind corners. Distributed around this five mile circular loop of road are three tiny settlements well worth the visit. Moving anti-clockwise these are Foindle, Fanagmore, and Tarbet. Drive on the very single tract road past Loch Gobhtoch and a step drop down into Tarbet and the ferry for Handa Island.

## Angie the Tailor<sup>103</sup>

Angie the tailor was the first postman delivering mail to Tarbet, Fondle and Fangomore. Like his father Mr. Mackenzie, was a tailor, so he was known as Angie the tailor. Angie had to walk to the Fondle Road end to meet the mail bus, collect a meal then walk round the Balkans and sometimes it could be as late as 1:00 am before he got back to Scourie. When he reached Tarbet he went first to the Shore house (Tighh-na-Mara) for his tea. The late Mr. D.A. McLeod was a young man then and when Mr. Mackenzie finished his tea he would not start the delivery of the meal until Mr. McLeod went outside and waved a green flag to set him off.

Fanagmore



IMAGE 294 OLD SCHOOL AT FANAGMORE

At Fangomore is an old school long out of use but from the outside in near perfect condition. A tiny little building in every respect typical of the Sutherland education establishments built around the county by the Sutherland Estates. At a guess after the education ceased in this building the Church used the structure for services and worship. Standing very close to but not attached is a converted croft house of considerable size. To enjoy a trip on Loch Laxford there are cruises offered from here. The cruises last nearly two hours and a variety of wildlife can be observed including common and Atlantic seals, otters, porpoises and sometimes whales. To access the “Pier” follow the grassy track around the back of the house down to a homemade and rather ingenious jetty to board the boat for the Laxford Cruises. Signs at the road end advertise the trip and there are posters around the area. This area is astounding in the splendid scenery. There are fish farms using parts of the loch where there is shelter and accessibility but

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<sup>103</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

this does not distract from the magnificent views. Fanagmore offers both limited parking and turning opportunities and a small harbour and slipway. With its scenic delights, plus white house and red phone box, there can be few more attractive spots in Scotland. From Fanagmore after a walk over rough and boggy ground to Rubha Ruadh or Red Point at the mouth of Loch Laxford, the entrance to Loch Inchar, Ardmore and Handa Island can be seen.

### Foindle



IMAGE 295 FOINDLE

The spur to Foindle is where there is lush fruit trees grow at the side of the road. Foindle lies at the end of a short spur dropping steeply to an inlet from the loop of road. There may seem little here for the visitor apart from the wonderful views north over Loch Laxford, but these are worth the retreat from a road even with limited turning opportunities and few if any passing places. Right at the end of the road what appear to be a little used holiday home stands. Two other homes are passed where the occupants can experience some wonderful scenery. There is an interesting little walled structure on the water front at Foindle and at a guess sometime in the past would have been a shelter berth for little boats. It is difficult to access the settlement and hard conditions to make a living. The sea would have provided the best opportunities, as there are very limited small areas of ground that would be able to support an attempt at growing produce for self-sufficiency or keeping grazing animals. This locality is likely to have been a pre clearance settlement. There are numerous ruined buildings and most of what was there now did appear to be unused and gave the impression of occasional holiday homes. The crofter in this part would have very hilly and difficult land to work. Fish farming is a small industry.

## Tarbet



IMAGE 296 TARBET FERRY DEPARTURE FOR HANDA ISLAND

This departure point is at the jetty at Tarbet and although it is not modern or high-tech it is operated efficiently and regularly transporting 12 people at a time over the water to Handa. While taking the trip to Handa it is well worth exploring this area. The community around Tarbet is well defined for the Handa excursion and the little boats that use the jetty for inshore fishing purposes. Tarbet is the most visited, and would speculate that most people turning off the main road come directly here without taking in the northern part of the loop. As a result it also offers a reasonably sized car park and a cafe to cater for visitors' needs.

### Handa Island

Handa, an off shore island with sea cliffs and one of the largest seabird colonies in North West Europe, is a bird sanctuary owned by Dr. Jean Balfour and managed for its wildlife by the Scottish Wildlife Trust. Handa Island (800 acres) is internationally famous for its sea birds, including the British Isles' largest guillemot and razorbill colonies. It is possible to view from the island some of the area's marine wildlife such as dolphins, porpoises, seals and the occasional whale.

It is situated a mile or two from the mainland opposite Scourie Bay. This tiny island, measuring about one mile by one and a half miles, was once inhabited by twelve families' home to 65 people in 1841, who appointed their own daily parliament to allocate the work that needed doing and queen, the oldest widow in the community. The islanders lived on potatoes, fish, and seabirds. It was also an important burial ground where the bones of dead mainlanders could be laid to rest safe from the wolves that wandered Scotland in those days. In 1846 the tradition died when the potato famine, food crops failed due to potato blight, and forced the islanders to leave for the mainland and migration to Canada and it has been uninhabited since. The ruins of their houses can still be seen.

<sup>104</sup>*The island was actually cleared at the outset of the Clearances by the landlord Lord Reay in the 1800s and became part of Badnabay sheep farm. It was subsequently inhabited by a shepherd. In 1839 there were 11 crofters on the island and one cottar. The population amounted to 75 and there were 58 head of cattle and 64 sheep. One tenant emigrated in 1841 and his croft was shared between three of the other tenants. Handa thus shared in the small scale emigration from the North West Highlands in the early 1840s. Most of the islanders bar two households subsequently left in 1847 or 1848 on three of the four ships funded by the Duke of Sutherland as part of the relief measures promoted in the district. A good number of the islanders found their way to Lot 21 of Prince Edward Island which had been settled by people from the North West since the early 1800s. (Malcolm Bangor Jones)*

After a welcome the group is taken on a short walk to the bothy where an introductory talk, with an opportunity to view the displays, about the wildlife and history of the Island. Follow the footpath around the island an easy and enjoyable walk taking in the north shore's Great Stack rock pillar and some fine views across the Minch. A detailed route guide is featured in the free leaflet, available from the warden's office when you arrive.

Handa rises to a height of 400ft. It is a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Over 170 species of birds can be seen on Handa, including the 100,000 resident guillemots, along with 216 species of plants and 100 mosses. The walk around the island is circular and although this does not cover the whole island the essence of the reserve and its sights are all taken in.



IMAGE 297 FOOTPATH AROUND THE HANDA ISLAND

Walkers continue at their own pace from the bothy on the track. The first encounter that reveals one time habitation is the ruins of dwellings. The ruined houses are all together some only

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<sup>104</sup> Mackay Country Archive Handa Island Census for 1841

foundations are apparent others have walls. What is most striking are the straight uniform lines they are built in and remind the traveler of the story of St. Kilda. There is no interpretation on the island only a printed leaflet for further explanation. The walkers around the island encounter some interesting and fascinating views with bird colonies on the stacks and rocks are abundant. The walking is made relatively easy on wooden walkways with an ability to watch the wildlife all around. The flora and fauna are apparently unperturbed by the visitors.



IMAGE 298 HANDA RESIDENTS FROM THE MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

The Great Stack or Stack an Seabhaig (the hawk's stack) is the best place to experience the sight, sound and smell of its guano-splashed cliffs during summer of some of Handa's 180,000 seabirds. The stack is a pillar of sandstone separated from the island by the sea a huge chunk of red Torridonian sandstone surrounded by sheer cliffs, carpeted with machair and purple-tinged moorland, and teeming with seabirds. The best time to visit is between April to July for guillemots, puffins, and razorbills. May to September for arctic skuas, fulmars, kittiwakes, and great skuas, if you're too close to the great kuas they'll dive bomb you and drop stones on you. June through to August is the best time to see the wild flowers.

Handa is also renowned for its magnificent Torridonian sandstone cliffs rising to a height of 400 feet (122m) along the dramatic northern edge. The rock formations of Mackay Country are fascinating and studied by geologists from all over the world. These are the oldest rocks in Europe, with evident features such as the 'Scourie Dykes'. These are dark intrusions of molten igneous rock into much older rock. In 2004, the parishes of Coigach, Assynt, Eddrachilles and Durness were awarded European Geopark Status and membership of the UNESCO Network of Global Geoparks.



## Handa<sup>105</sup>

Handa island just north of Scourie is renowned for its magnificent cliffs of Torridonian sandstone rising up to 400 feet above sea level period from the cliffs on the northwest the island slopes down through rough sheep pasture to a lovely sandy beach round the South East of the island. Up until the middle of the last century the island supported many families for its size it only measures 766 acres. The census of 1841 records the names of 12 families living there Falkner, Kerr, Ross, White, Lamond and seven families of McLeod, 63 people in all including the lady who had the title queen of Honda. This title was bestowed on the oldest widow living on the island.



IMAGE 299 SCALING THE STACK ON HANDA FOR BIRDS EGGS

The island worked their crofts growing corn, hay and potatoes. They fished and killed birds for food. The feathers were kept and exchanged for wool with the neighbours on the mainland. By 1848 there were only eight families still living there presumably some had already immigrated or moved to live on the mainland. This was the year of the potato famine and it must have been the last straw for the Islanders. The Duke of Sutherland help pay the fares of those who wanted to emigrate and it is believed that most of them did go to North America leaving behind them their homes, the graves of their loved ones and a cat of which Charles St. John mentions having seen the following year on his *Tour of Sutherland*. From then till the present time it has been a sheep farm and from 1962 onwards the RSPB have managed the island as a bird reserve with the warden living on the island during the season. The ruined crofts can still be seen, one of them have been renovated and served as a bothy for the warden and Information Centre all the inscriptions on the gravestone have more or less been obliterated bar one in memory of Peter Morrison. An old map shows a chapel site but if this is true it must be back very many years

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<sup>105</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

because the Handa people worshipped at Scourie coming to Scourie by boat. There is supposed to be a smugglers cave at the back on the north side of the island but the man who knew it's where about died without passing on his secret.

It would seem that Handa has always been a sanctuary and breeding ground for many sea birds maybe as many as 50 thousand in a year especially guillemots, kittiwakes, razorbills, fulmar's, puffin's and shag's. Birds of prey no longer breed on the island but several species are seen regularly of which the Buzzard is the most common. Of late Skuas have started to nest there also. The great stack 350 foot high of the NW corner of the island is a nesting ground of up to 12,000 birds. It is here in 1876 that a group of Lewis men collecting sea birds for salting passed a rope across the Geo an over the top of the stack and one man Donald McDonald crossed hand over fist along the rope to reach the summit. The Lewis man who crossed to the great stack of Handa did so at the request of Mr Evander McIver the factor to collect the eggs of the great black backed gulls which nested there. The birds were said to be coming destructive and increasing a numbers. Handa island was then part of Mr McIver farm and he had a flock of sheep on the island.

Round the western side of the island that is at one point a natural arch and further round a fearsome hole formed by the sea action called *Poll Ghulp*. The highest point on Handa Island *Sithean Mor* is 406 foot meaning Great Hill of The Fairies.



IMAGE 300 CLIFFS ON HANDA ISLAND

Rabbits were introduced onto Handa Island about 1870. A small plantation of lodge pine and Alder is now established by the bothy. The boggy interior of the island is brightened by the spotted heath orchid one of the island's common or flowers. During July and August the bright yellow bog add a touch of colour to the wetter area. The only really rare plant on the island is pyramidal bugle but among the several species that are classed as local our northern marsh orchid, spike rush, lovage, pale butterworth and royal fern.

In the Mackay Country archive (number AED1A & AED1B) Dr. Pennie interviewed Donald A Macleod Tarbet, Scourie. This is an interesting account of various aspects of Handa referring amongst other things some of the local names. This is an extract regarding birds and eggs.

*Well, I was on Handa as a young schoolboy with my father shearing sheep for MacIver when I remember it just as well as yesterday when three or four bearded men came down, came down by the fank and my father was telling me that that's when they were coming back from Handa. You see, they'd come over especially from the Butt of Lewis for birds and eggs. They were eating the birds, any eggs that were within reach they were taken out by the local people, but nobody ever looked at the stack. And they went up and stretched a rope from the both corners beyond the stack and just over the edge of the stack, like that, you see and this bold lad went over it, hands and feet like that, and then they rigged a basket or a box on the box – on the rope – and he was pouring in birds and eggs there, and they had then to take them down to the boat. Oh, that would be in the '90s, of last century. And I was 82 on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February.*

*I remember in 1905, they used to go out from the Butt of Lewis to a rock, oh, about 20 or 30 miles out Sulesgeir. And bad weather, they encountered bad weather and they had to go around Cape Wrath and they were held up there till their provisions ran short and now when a lull came in the weather they made for home, and they came up to Handa. That was in 1905. And one or two of the crew were among the people that went to the rock, to the top of the rock.*

*Now, they went up to the shepherd's house on Handa, but it's converted into a kind of a place for tourists now, but they went up to the house for the night, and when the tide turned it took the boat on the rock and when I came down there was nothing in sight but the rowing pins in it. Oh, she was a fairly big boat and she wasn't badly damaged at all, she'd just a little crack here and there, and they bailed her out and ran her down on the shore here. Some men went up and advised them to run her down on the shore and Alastair Munro's father was a bit of a carpenter – he wasn't building boats, but he could repair them, you know, a little. And he repaired, and they came down here on a Saturday and six of the seven houses in the village took a man each. And now they required tar and nails and these were ... this man that we had in the house was a John Campbell ... he ... I went to show the way to him, over to Scourie, to get what he wanted from the shop – nails and tar and that. And he was ... I could tell you he had the (???) he was telling me on the way the way they went to the stack. He was at the stack, so I got a first-hand account of it.*

### **Handa Sheep Farm**

After the people left Handa in 1848 the island became part of Scouriebeg farm of which Mr. Evander McIver the factor was tenant. In 1891 Handa was given as grazing land to the hotel keeper in exchange for the hotels rights to a share of the common grazings so leaving all the common grazing lands for the crofters. The hotel keeper kept a flock of sheep on the island and employed one or two men to look after the sheep at lambing time. The shepherds left on the island and had to take enough food to last the duration of their stay. They collected driftwood on the shore of the island to burn in the stove they used for cooking their meals.

### **Onward from the “Balkans”**

#### **Turnoff on the A894 to Laxford.**

#### **The whisky Loch<sup>106</sup>**

Just north of Scourie is a small loch known as the Whisky Loch. It is said that at one time there was a whisky still beside the loch and the exciseman got to hear about it and went to see for

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<sup>106</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

himself if it were true. As he approached the boatman appeared at the door and when the excise men asked him what he was doing there he replied “making whisky”. When the excise men heard this he said I don't believe you if you're making whisky you would not tell me and he went leaving the man to get home with his work.

From Scourie the road north actually heads only a little north of east. The A894 heads towards Laxford Bridge with the peak of Ben Stack and the sprawling bulk of Arkle filling the outlook. The main road continues to Laxford Bridge, a junction where the road from the south and the other southern gateway at Kinloch joins the west coast route having followed the wide valleys of Loch Shin, Loch Merkland, Loch More and Loch Stack. The name ‘Laxford Bridge’ printed on a map often leads people to think of a sizeable village, but they find only a bridge. This attractive stone bridge was built in the 1880s and crosses one of the finest salmon rivers in the country. Laxford means ‘salmon ford’ and comes from Norse. Unless the traveller is leaving by this gateway, to continue into the heart of Mackay Country join the A838. 4 miles (6.5 km) northeast of Scourie the road turns northeast toward the long sea-loch of Loch Laxford, a large sea loch and north on to Durness.

Before heading north we will explore the A838 to the Kinloch gateway.

### **South from Laxford**



IMAGE 301 LAXFORD BRIDGE

Travelling south from Laxford Bridge towards Achfary is the locality of Loch More.

Before the opening of Kylesku Bridge the main road to the northwest corner was the A838. Nearly all travel and deliveries were made along this road from the railway station at Lairg or Inverness. In 1897 the Highland Railway proposed building a line from Lairg to Laxford by Loch Shin and Loch More but this never materialised. This area could have been quite different today if this had occurred.



IMAGE 302 ISLAND WITH A STONE CROSS ERECTED TO THE MEMORY OF THE FIRST DUCHESS OF WESTMINSTER

The A838 single-track road follows the course of the River Laxford. About two miles from Laxford Bridge stand some cottages at Alltnasuileig built in 1952 for forestry workers. Further on, just over a mile, at a cattle grid there is a wooded area on the north side of the road which screens Loch Stack Lodge built for the Duke of Westminster in 1850. The River Laxford flows out of Loch Stack here under the shadow of Ben Stack and Arkle. At this western end of Loch Stack there is a small island with a stone cross erected to the memory of the first Duchess of Westminster who used to picnic here. The small community of Kinloch is at the east end of Loch More, from where a track leads to big house called Aultanrynie where the Alt an Reinidh burn enters the loch. This dwelling set in magnificent scenery and a backdrop of cascading water was all but lost in 1949 when heavy rain caused a buildup of water and the busting of banks nearly engulfing the house with water, rubble and rock.

Loch Stack has a long narrow western arm that widens out. The loch is approximately two and a half miles long and about a mile wide. In some places reaches a depth of one hundred feet. At the eastern end of Loch Stack a track leads to Airdachuilinn and Lone on the north side of the loch. From the bridge at Lone there are two circular walks.

There is a left path that follows the Allt Horn to its watershed and then round the shoulder of Creagan Meall Horn then either north to Loch Dionard or East to Glen Golly and Strath More. About two miles from Lone there is an approach to climb Arkle or continue by Loch an Easain Uaine, under the southern slopes of Fionaven round the North West corner of Arkle and follow a path to Loch Stack Lodge. The right path from Lone proceeds over a small ridge at Strath Luib na Seilich and follows the Abhainn an Loin burn to the watershed between Meall Garbh and Sabhal Beag through a small wooded area to Gobernuisgach Lodge. Both these paths are difficult and demanding but offer opportunities to see deer, eagles, and wildlife in a natural setting. They should not be undertaken lightly.

The journey between Laxford Bridge and the Mackay Country boundary at Merkland south of Kinloch is picturesque with grand and majestic views of Ben Stack and Arkle. The road winds along the side Loch Stack and through the heart of Eddrachillis and the Westminster Estate to Achfary at the head of Loch More.



IMAGE 303 LOOKING TOWARD BEN STACK ON THE LAXFORD TO ACHFARY ROAD

## Achfary

Thirty seven miles of lonely single track road from Lairg towards Laxford Bridge on the A838 just north of Kinloch and the welcome to Mackay Country the traveler encounters Achfary. Achfary lies on the A838 Lairg to Laxford Bridge Road, 14 miles east of Scourie and 14 miles south of Kinlochbervie. This strikingly village, is located at the head of Loch More noticeably, it also lies in the shadow of Ben Stack, and views to the north are filled by the bulky mass of Arkle. Achfary is part of the Reay Forest Estate owned by the Westminster family. Loch More is about five miles long, less than half a mile wide and in places is over two hundred and fifty feet deep.

The Dukes of Sutherland, and then the 1st Duke of Westminster, developed the settlement around a shooting lodge in the 1800's, the Westminster Estates still owning much of the surrounding area. The village was built to house families who work on the vast sporting estate that stretches from Laxford Bridge in the west to Kinloch in the east. Much of it was built between 1853 and the 1870s.

The area offers a great deal of fishing to enjoy. Loch Stack has long been a popular fishing venue for salmon, brown trout and sea trout with catches in recent years being the best for two decades. The village has a post office, open for an hour each day, and this forms part of a nice

little collections of house and farm buildings. These include an old-style phone box painted with special permission in black and white, to fit in with the rest of the estates buildings.

A stone tablet on the side of the farm was erected by local people to the memory of the First Duke of Westminster who died in 1899.

Its purpose was

*“To express their deep regard for his character... and for the courtesy and generosity exercised by him among them during his tenancy for about fifty years... He built lodges and dwellings, erected fences, made roads and paths... thus giving employment to tradesmen and labourers and adding to the comfort of many.”*



IMAGE 304 OLD-STYLE PHONE BOX AT ACHFARY PAINTED WITH SPECIAL PERMISSION IN BLACK AND WHITE,

<sup>107</sup>Regarding the memorial erected at Achfary this was originally erected in the church at Badcall to the memory of Hugh Lupus Grosvenor first Duke of Westminster. When the church was deconsecrated the memorial stone was moved to Achfary.

Achfary is the personification of the Highlands and any highland picture with monarchs of the glen and remote rivers with backdrops of vast straths and glens, deep black inland lochs among towering mountains looming with aura and mystery then the locality around Achfary supplies all this.

Strath Stack extends north westwards and to the west lies the Reay Forest. The Reay Forest is the name given to the large deer forest of Sutherland that stretches from Foinaven to Ben Hope and from Loch More to Glen Golly. The Reay Forest Estate is about 120,000 acres and is remote and ruggedly beautiful. There is splendid hill walking throughout the Estate although visitors' co-operation is required in the stalking season, which commences at the beginning of

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<sup>107</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

August. Ben Stack, Ben Arkle, and Foinaven all lie within the Estate. Just south of Achfary there is a small shallow loch, Loch nan Ealachan lying under the shadow of Ben Screavie (about 1200 feet high.) and Lochmore Lodge a track heads south west for six miles to Kylestrome.

There was a primary school in Achfary, and this along with the village hall, served as the centre of the local community. In June 2003 Achfary celebrated 50 years of hall and school. This vibrant and interesting community has many stories and legends to tell. Achfary School closed in 2013.

From Achfary a track goes up through the village and follows Strath Stack, under the southern slopes of Ben Stack for about three and a half miles where it forks. To the right pass two lochs on the left loch Eileanacir and Loch na Seitge before crossing the western shoulder of Ben Stack and dropping to Loch Stack Lodge. The left fork turns southwest and passes two lochs on the right, Lochna h-Ath and Loch Eileanach before crossing rough and peaty moorland to Duartmore Bridge on the A894. This is about four and a half miles. Walking straight ahead from the fork for about five miles across an area dotted with lochans and can be very boggy leads to the road end leading to Tarbet on the A894.

From Achfary south the road runs alongside and climbs sharply Kinloch Brae from the houses at the end of the loch at Kinloch and drops again to pass Loch Merkland and Loch Shin before reaching the 20<sup>th</sup> century Mackay Country boundary at Merkland.

### North from Laxford



IMAGE 305 THE A838 FROM ACHFARY AND TURNS NORTH TO RHICONICH.

From Scourie the A894 joins the A838 from Achfary and turns north to Rhiconich. The first half mile just north of the Laxford Bridge had been left in its original state as single track but the five miles to Rhiconich and the head of Loch Inchard is double track. At the south end of Loch na Fiacail uncovered when the road was improved shows a geological picture of different layers of rock of how the earth has developed in two hundred million years.

The road to Skerricha is about a mile further on. This road continues for about half a mile. A track from here leads to John Ridgway's Adventure School. This was set up in the 1960's and offers outdoor survival courses. John Ridgway has accomplished many exploration exploits. Just prior to reaching Rhiconich on the A838 there is a track to Ardmore. This goes two miles to Portlevorchy, which overlooks Loch a a'Chadh with John Ridgway's adventure school opposite. There is no road from Portlevorchy to Ardmore.



The road has reached just south of Rhiconich and passed through what has become known as the Ceathramh Garbh or “*Rough Quarter*” a bare barren, open windswept part of the country where there is more water than land with nothing higher than five hundred feet. About twenty square miles with at best half a dozen people. It lies between Loch Inchar to the north and Loch Laxford to the south with two sea lochs penetrating into the interior, Loch Dughail and Loch a’Chadh Fi. The largest freshwater loch, Loch Crocach, is about one mile long and about three quarters of a mile wide lying in the centre. All around this area are boulders on hilltops left by receding ice at the end of the ice age. Folklore declare that they were put there by giants during games of skittles.

On the south side of Rhiconich a road signposted to Achlyness leads along the side of Loch Inchar turning into a track at to Achlyness but continuing on to Rhivichie. This is a beautiful road with stunning views over Loch Inchar to the townships of Kinlochbervie. It is when the traveller visits this kind of locality that they are reminded of the spectacular beauty and ruggedness of the area. Views from the main roads can be wonderful but in the main do not expose the localities of outstanding wonder concealed in the many less accessible hamlets.

### **Rhiconich**



IMAGE 306 APPROACHING RHICONICH FROM LAXFORD

Rhiconich is at the junction with the main A838 four miles inland from Kinlochbervie. The services here include a police station and hotel, and the route into Kinlochbervie. The area has been altered dramatically through time although this has always been an area with rest and accommodation for travellers, at one time a busier centre as the ruins around show. The police station was once the hotel but burned down, the only remaining part is now houses the office and accommodation for the largest police beat in Scotland. The single manned station provides policing from Eriboll on the North West coast to Kylesku.



IMAGE 307 RHICONICH POLICE STATION 1940S

Police Constable David Ingles who patrolled the largest beat in Scotland from this office at Rhiconich was interviewed for a Mackay Country project and he notes on discussion,

*“Gaelic speakers variously claim that Rhiconich translates as 'Red Kenneth's Brae' or 'Mossy Hill' take your pick. Similarly, Inchard can translate as 'Meadow Loch' from the Norse 'Engi-Fjord' or as 'High Pasture' from the Gaelic 'Innis Ard'.*



IMAGE 308 POSTCARD OF THE FORMER RHICONICH HOTEL

*Postcard of the former Rhiconich Hotel before it was partially destroyed by fire. The fire-damaged hotel was acquired by the police authority and is now the Police Station and house. The current Rhiconich Hotel is on the opposite side of the road.*

Based on a map dated 1826 available on the National Library of Scotland website, there is evidence of three buildings dotted around Rhiconich, one of which he believes to be the original inn. The other two were probably homesteads, now long gone, but their foundations can still be seen, one uphill from the police station and the other down towards the sea below it. A later map dated 1846 shows only one building, referred to as 'Inn', on the site of the present police station and house. Davie understands that over the years the original inn had been extended a number of times in the usual west coast haphazard way, and ultimately formed quite substantial accommodation, much more extensive than what survives today. This is evidenced by a set of old sales particulars Graham Wild has in his possession. They are undated but do have a pre-Great War ring to them:

*“THE HOTEL OF RHICONICH Built 1850 Situated at the head of Loch Inchard, is of harled and slated construction, and contains the following accommodation. ON THE GROUND FLOOR Coffee room, two sitting rooms, smoking room, Inn Keeper's Room & Office, Bar and Store. On the ground floor is a bathroom with WC and lavatory basin, outside in a separate Bungalow are three bedrooms. ON THE FIRST FLOOR the bedrooms are eight in number for visitors and two used by the Innkeeper's family, two servants' bedrooms, WC and closet. THE OFFICES Comprise Kitchen, Scullery, Dairy, Pantry Store, WC, Underground cellar. Outside are Larder, Washhouse, Peat Shed and WC's.*

*The house is lit by Petrol Gas.*

*Near the Hotel are two Motor Houses, Byre for eight, stabling for six, Coach House, cart shed with groom's room and hay loft over. There is a two-roomed cottage belonging to the Hotel proprietor. On the Loch is a boat-house built to take a launch. Some improvements have been carried out by the tenant. The proprietor is under some obligation to pay compensation at end of tenancy for bathroom and office on ground floor. The hotel-keeper has right of salmon fishing in Loch Garbhet Beg. He also has fishing in a large number of lochs including Loch Garbhet Mor, Skerracha and Cullick. The exclusive right to the hotel-keeper to fish Lochs Garbhet Beg and Garbhet Mor will cease if this lot is sold. There will be a joint right in purchaser or their tenants to fish these lochs. The best fishing in this district is in the months of July, August and September. There is capital sea fishing in Loch Inchard.*

*A purchaser will take at valuation in the usual way the furniture and movables in and about Kinlochbervie Lodge, and the net fishing and keeper's effects. The use of the pier and shed at Badcall, Laxford is reserved."*

The walled park across the road from the present police station and house formed part of the hotel grounds.

Sometime before the First World War it appears that the hotel went on fire and was largely destroyed. The central core was renovated and it became the police house, police station and council meeting rooms. Electricity bills today still come addressed to 'Police Station and Council Meeting Rooms'. Davie has also been told that the dentist used the office and cell as a surgery many years ago. A new Rhiconich Hotel was then built to the south of its former site. Like its predecessor, it too has been extended and refurbished a number of times. It is also noteworthy that lengths of railway line were used as roof supports when the public bar of the current Rhiconich Hotel was built. Davie thinks they came from an abortive attempt to build a

railway from Kinlochbervie to the east coast, some remnants of which can still be seen at Achriesgill.

Prior to the acquisition of the damaged hotel, Davie thinks the original Rhiconich police station was the small white cottage with green paintwork on the other side of the river from the present police station and house. It subsequently functioned for a time as a post office.

The old maps on the NLS website are worth a look. Davie has seen one in which Loch Inchard is named 'Loch Gareroin' and Achlyness is called 'Caroo Garroo'! (He swears he is not making this up). He has also seen a reference to 'Sandwit Beg' which appeared to be a hamlet on the landward side of Achriesgill, from which a track led on to 'Sandwit'."

The Rhiconich River rises on the western slopes of Arkle and flows into Loch a'Garbh-bhaid Mor, (about a mile long and narrow) then into Loch a' Garbh-bhaid Beag, slightly smaller than the previous where it is joined by the Garbh Allt which drains numerous small lochans on the southern slopes of Foinaven. The river then falls sharply to Rhiconich and into Loch Inchard. Loch Inchard is a sea loch on the northwest coast lying to the south of Kinlochbervie with Rhiconich at its head.

David Ingles intended on retiring and remaining in the area and had a house built adjacent to the Police station. As providence takes its course David was employed to another job in Caithness and left the area.

### **West from Rhiconich to Kinlochbervie**

At the head of Loch Inchard, a side road follows the northern shore to the fishing port of Kinlochbervie, 4 miles (6.5 km) northwest of Rhiconich. Achriesgill a linear crofting township, lies at the head of Loch Inchard, 1 mile (2 km) north of Rhiconich set in a rugged rocky inlet lays Kinlochbervie, a major fishing village which sees its catch exported all over the world. The village was developed from a hamlet after 1947 for white fish and lobster fishing. Trekking around the moors is a good way of seeing the wildlife in this area.

### **Kinlochbervie**

At one time this part of the country was called "An Ceathramh Garbh," that is, The Rough Quarter. Sir Alexander Gordon, writing in the seventeenth century, said: *"It is all rough with wood, mountains, and trackless paths, and incapable of being tilled or bearing crops, except in a very few places."* As it was unsuitable for cultivation it was given up to the rearing of goats, cattle, and horses. (The area from Laxford to Rhiconich is referred to in modern times as the rough quarter.)

The little village that grew up at the end of the loch, between it and the sea, was called Ceann-loch-nam -buar-bhuidhe. English speakers, who did not understand the meaning of the word, were in too great a hurry to waste breath on so long a compound, and called it Kin-loch-bervie. We seldom find a Gaelic place-name improved by being anglicised, but in this case we have both the name and its meaning euphoniously preserved. The road sign welcoming people reads ***Ceann Loch Biorbhaidh*** A scattered village on the west coast of Sutherland, Kinlochbervie lies on the north side of Loch Inchard. Kinlochbervie is set amid spectacular Sutherland scenery. Beautifully situated on Loch Inchard, the B801, both single and double tacked is the narrow winding road leading north-westwards from Rhiconich with splendid views towards the lonely mountain Reay Forest, dominated by Foinaven, heads west to Kinlochbervie through the crofting townships of Achriesgill, Inshegra and Badcall Inchard. Between Achriesgill and Inshegra a minor road leads to Rhuvoult, a small crofting township. The land here becomes more fertile and less barren than the moors and crofted down to the water's edge.

Fish farming has become an obvious feature of Loch Inchard where several mussel lines of fishing nets are strung out in the loch.

Before the road drops steeply into Kinlochbervie a good view over Loch Innis na ba buidhe, *the meadow of the Yellow Cattle*, named from a golden yellow herd once bred on its shores, and the Kinlochbervie schools. The primary serves the local children and the high school, opened in 1994, serves the surrounding catchment area of Scourie, Durness and Achfary. This stopped the practice of children from the age of twelve years old being hostelled away from home on the east coast of Sutherland. The road continues for some four miles towards the open sea, fine views, and terminating beyond Balchrick at the fishing village of Sheigra.

The harbour is situated on Loch Bervie, on the sheltered eastern side of a triangular peninsula Cnoc na h-Eannaiche. Kinlochbervie became one of the country's major deep sea fishing ports



IMAGE 309 LOOKING DOWN TO MANSE ROAD KLB HIGH AND PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND VILLAGE HALL

in Scotland. Fishing boats, often based in east coast Scottish ports, land their catches here at the fish handling depot built in 1988. The fish is then transported in large refrigerated lorries to destinations across the UK and throughout Europe. The centre of life is very definitely the harbour. Engineering and mussel farming are also important. Kinlochbervie, until a few years ago was one of the busiest ports in Scotland and unemployment was unheard of because not only were the male population employed aboard the fishing boats but Kinlochbervie at the height of the “fishing industry” boasted four haulage businesses all involved in the transportation of fish both nationally and internationally, but sadly with the decline in the fishing industry Kinlochbervie is now a shadow of its former self.

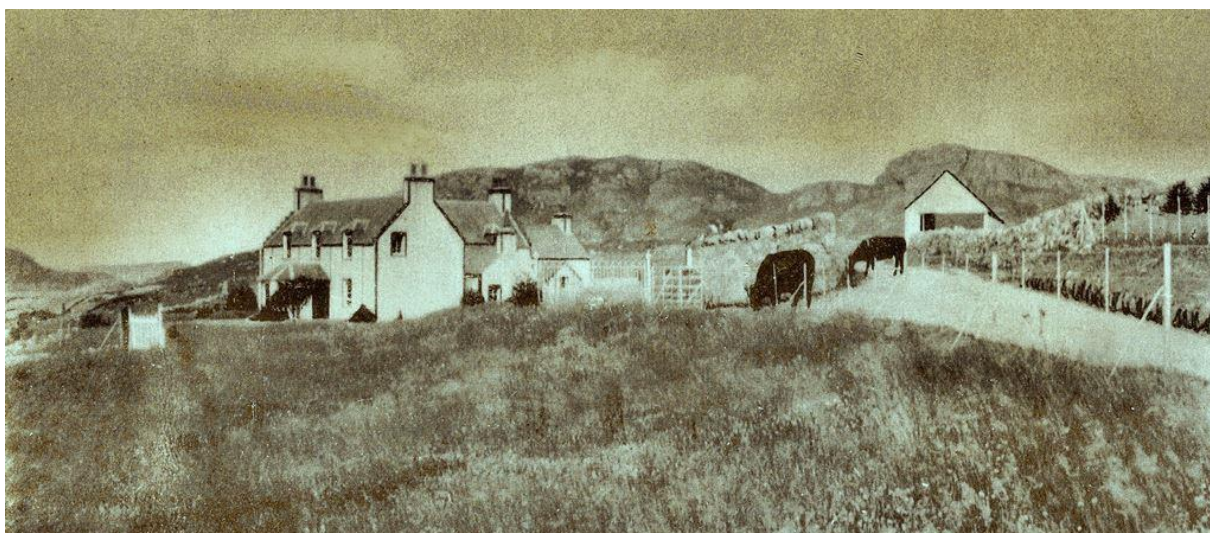


IMAGE 310 KINLOCHBERVIE HOUSE CIRCA 1903 FROM THE MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

A popular and historic hotel in Kinlochbervie is the Garbet built on the site of Kinlochbervie House.

### **Kinlochbervie Harbour.**

The old harbour is on the north side of the peninsula at Loch Clash. This was opened in 1886 and abandoned when the new one was completed in 1988 opened by Prince Charles.

The fishing fleet is made up of a modern class of vessel. The main species landed by white fish trawlers are monkfish, whiting, cod and skate, while the main shellfish fishery consists of lobster, prawns, crab and velvet crab. The fish is auctioned at the local market which tourists can visit. The harbour has excellent facilities for visiting yachts and cruisers and a new pontoon has been given the go ahead for the 2008 financial year.

In 2016 Sarah Beveridge interviewed John Morrison (Tiko) who had worked at the Kinlochbervie pier for 43 years. An extract from the conversation:

*“The old wooden pier was built in the 1960’s and moved from the pier at Loch Clash. The old market at the new site was built in the early 1970’s building the present market in the 1980’s. With the ice factories, and offices early 70’s. 2016 was the biggest year with fish since the 1980’s breaking all records. The boats are fewer but lager. Landing about 1000 to 1500 boxes a time catching mostly haddock, monkfish and cod. Some of the big boats going into deep water are catching blue ling, black halibut and scabbard, more for the Spanish and French markets.”*

Until recently, the Fisherman's Mission was situated down at Loch Bervie Pier. It was primarily there to serve the needs of the fishing fleet operating from Kinlochbervie. It provided a canteen serving reputedly the best fish and chips on the west coast and shower facilities for the men while visitors were warmly welcomed. In 2008 the Fisherman’s Mission was put up for sale. The greatest desire and need within the community is for a return of a focal centre point to the village that was otherwise lost following the closure of the Fishermen’s Mission in 2008.

Beyond the fishing port a narrow road continues west where there are magnificent beaches about three miles on from Kinlochbervie. At Oldshoremore, the sands are about half a mile wide backed by large dunes. Oldshoremore itself is worth a visit, with its beautiful beach and unusual rock formations. There's a well-equipped campsite at Oldshoremore. The road continues to, Polin and Sheigra and the start of the walk track to Sandwood. Between the beaches of Oldshoremore and Polin there is rough pasture, where there lies an unmarked burial plot believed to be of the crew and passengers of a ship wrecked on Eilean An Hatchie. The wreck lies adjacent to the beach and although no precise date attached to this maritime disaster. It is thought to have occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



IMAGE 311 THE OLD HARBOUR ON THE NORTH SIDE OF THE PENINSULA AT LOCH CLASH MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

The earliest known settlers in the Kinlochbervie area where the Mackays of Sandwood. Although in a roundhouse and ancient shielings there is evidence of prehistoric times. Today the most common surname is Morrison. Several families of Morrison having come here from the Hebrides about 400 years ago. Originally people built their homes in the coastal area of a Aisir, Oldshoremore where the best land was. Many croft houses there today have thick walls, though now they have slate rather than thatched roofs.

There are good grounds for believing that the district known as Oldshoremore was at one time well populated and cultivated. There can be no doubt the land was well wooded. The fir roots, preserved in the moss through centuries, afford ample evidence of this. The place now known as Strath Choilleach is simply Strath -na- Coille, the wooded valley. Then there is a little lake to the south of Sandwood, Loch Claise-na-Coille the loch of the valley of the wood. Though there is no wood there now, it is evident there was at one time. Loch-a-Mhuilinn (the Mill loch) tells of time of which we have now neither record nor even tradition, when the people of the district went there to grind their corn. Not far away is Loch-an-t-saic (the Bag loch) rather suggestive in that connection. There is also Loch-na-Larach (the Sites Loch) a late name. These give evidence of human habitation, cultivation and industry.

In 1846 there was an outbreak of potato disease which caused a great deal of hunger, and many people emigrated. Crofting and emigration remained a pattern for the community until the rise of local fishing industry during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*“The tenants of Strathnaver, Achumore, Strath More and Strathbeg fled, they knew not whether or when their homesteads were set on fire, under sheriff’s warrant of eviction. Those who did not go abroad or into the large towns were permitted to squat on the shores of An Ceathramh Garbh. They came carrying their household possessions in " crubags " on horseback, and leading their wives, children and cattle over road less hills and moors, poorly shod and clad and fed. When they came they had not where to lay their heads. "They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins being destitute, afflicted, tormented; they wandered in deserts and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.*

Referring to their sufferings, Mr. MacIver wrote:

*“The feeling created by the introduction of sheep in the early years of the century, and by the clearances in Strathnaver, which were carried out in a harsh and ruthless manner by some of the parties who acted for the Sutherland estate, and by removals of crofters to make way for sheep, had generated a strong rebellious tendency in the minds of the lower classes in Sutherland against their superiors.”*



IMAGE 312 KINLOCHBERVIE HARBOUR IMAGE FORM SUTHERLAND PARTNERSHIP BY MIKE ROPER

The population greatly increased in 1818 to 1820 when inland areas of Strathnaver were cleared to make way for sheep and many displaced people settled here mostly on the shores of Loch Inchar.

To cater for this influx of people, the government provided a church building near the present harbour T-plan 'parliamentary' Free Presbyterian Church. It was designed by Thomas Telford and is the oldest public building in Kinlochbervie.



## **Kinlochbervie Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland History.**<sup>108</sup>

The church was built in 1827 and opened in 1828. This was verified when the bell which was once in the west gable end of the church was discovered. The inscription on it is 1827 but apparently the bell was ready in 1827 but the Church was not opened until 1828. The story behind the construction of this Church is most interesting. In 1823 a Parliamentary Commission was set up, with a remit to provide churches and manses in 43 of the most isolated and thinly populated parishes of the Highlands and Islands. Architect for this grand project was Thomas Telford, the famous Scottish engineer who was responsible for constructing roads and bridges in many parts (including the old Bonar Bridge) and who, of course, built the Caledonian Canal.



IMAGE 313 FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH. DESIGNED BY THOMAS TELFORD

Working with a budget of £1500 - this was to cover the cost of both church and manse in each case - Telford's plan could not afford to be ornate. It was simple and functional, but it had a beauty answering to the wild and austere surroundings in which the buildings were put up. The master plan for all the churches had a gallery. This was not incorporated in the Kinlochbervie Church. This point apart, however, the Kinlochbervie Church conforms exactly to Telford's plan, and is a perfect example of his work. From the original Title to the Church, granted by Lord Reay, we gather that the date of entry was is "May, 1828. Not that a minister was settled over the congregation at um stage. It was not till 20<sup>th</sup> August, 1829 that an induction took place, when Rev Hugh Mackenzie of Tongue preached and presided at the ordination of Mr. David Mackenzie. There were apparently two sermons preached. The text in Gaelic was "Be watchful,

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<sup>108</sup> From "Religious Life in Ross", "The Covenanters in Moray and Ross," and "The Religious History of Sutherland."

and strengthen the things which remain.”(Rev-3:2) and in English, “For the love of Christ constraineth us.”(2 Cor.5:14)

### **Communion at Rhiconich.**

In Scotland between 1660 and 1668 zealous believers in the Christian Church were banned from public worship, because they held to the Presbyterian form of worship. It was particularly difficult to hold communion seasons in the church. The minister in the Kinlochbervie area at this time was Mr.Squair. It had been the habit to meet for communion services either in the open air in Oldshorebeg or at a spot above Scourie; but these were thought too dangerous so a more secret spot was therefore fixed on, between Rhiconich and Loch Garbet. There was a hollow there, and the surrounding rocks and birch trees were more of a help than a hindrance. Word of the planned service was cautiously sent round, and tables for the communion service were quietly prepared. These were simply made of turf, carefully stacked, with a smooth green surface.

When the Lord's Day came, about a hundred people gathered from different parts of the parish to that spot above Rhiconich. Mr. Squair arrived, and the service began. His pulpit was a birch tree, sawn off at a suitable height. There was great blessing there. The Spirit of God was present and the people as a whole were able to join in the confession of Thomas which was the basis of the sermon, “My Lord and My God.”

Many years passed, King William came to the throne, and the times of persecution ended. Mr. Squair had by this time been succeeded by a Mr. Bnodie. Again there was a communion service in Eddrachilles, though this time held in Badcall, Scourie. Again there was a time of great blessing, and the presence of God was known. Mr. Brodie, deeply moved, turned to one of his elders alter the service and asked if he had ever experienced such a wonderful time before. His mind went back over the years and the elder replied:

“Only once - at a remarkable communion at Rhiconich, where Mr.Squair preached with His Bible placed on the stump of a tree, and when those present - of whom I am the last remaining - sat down at the Lord’s Table exclaiming “My Lord and My God.”

### **Beyond Kinlochbervie.**

A minor road continues through Oldshore Beg that overlooks the uninhabited island of Eilean an Roin Mor and terminates at the small beach at Polin. Continuing from Oldshoremore to Blairmore (where there is a sign to access Sandwood Bay) that lies near Balchrack where the road forks; the south fork dropping to a little jetty at Droman. A footpath goes over the to the south to Ploin Beach and from the top can be seen the island of Eilean an Roin Mor and Eilean an Roin Beag just off shore. The north fork continues to Sheigra, the last habitation on the west coast and a small hamlet of the western coastline. Sheigra lies four miles (6.5 km) northwest of Kinlochbervie, which provides access to the coastal path to Sandwood Bay, what has been described as almost the loveliest in all Scotland where, in the present century, a mermaid is said to have been seen. Lofty cliffs, with detached stacks of red Torridonian sandstone, overlook the reddish sands of this little visited bay. There are semi-precious stones to be found at Sheigra and after approximately a four-mile walk there is a beach called Sandwood, which is steeped in history and mystery. There are stories of strange sights, eerie sounds, a woman on holiday, knowing nothing of the history of Sandwood, was sitting reading a book while her husband and children were down on the beach. On hearing voices, she looked up expecting to see her own family. Instead she saw children and adults dressed in period costume, who walked in front of her and suddenly disappeared! Others have seen a bearded sailor. There are stories of pirates who, by lighting a fire, would lure unsuspecting sailors aground, where their ships were plundered. One of the most terrifying of these pirates was a woman.

One of the most amazing sights at Sandwood is Am Buachaille (The Shepherd). It is a giant finger of stone, rising 60m out of the sea, separated from the land by a narrow, eight-metre channel which can be crossed at low tide. Neither the crossing nor the climbing is for the faint-hearted. The climb has a rating of 'Very Severe'. There is a walk from Sandwood to Cape Wrath which takes about seven hours and has some of the most spectacular cliff scenery.

### **North from Rhiconich**

The northern coast offers a rich variety of scenery, from tall storm-swept cliffs to gentle sandy bays. The interior offers equally dramatic contrasts between low-lying windswept bogs and dramatic mountain peaks. Fishing boats shelter in the area's many harbours and fish farm cages are tucked into sheltered corners. Numerous nature reserves protect the moorland's rich plant and animal life, with sea birds to the fore. It is also one of the few places in the UK with some remote pockets of the Scottish Highlands yet to be explored. Back at the Rhiconich junction, heading for Durness, there are a few short minutes of double-track road before it is closed in by high rocks to the right and a view of the General's Loch to the left, where many herons may be seen. Still on the left, there are two waterfalls which, in spring, are banked by dozens of bright yellow primroses. Before Loch Tarbhaidh (good for trout) there are worked peat banks and, looking ahead, Gualin Lodge can be seen.

On to Durness the direction taken is north east cutting across the northern end of Foinaven in a wide valley with the road climbing to Gualin and views over Strath Dionard passing Fionaven and Cranstackie. The road ascends towards Fionaven passing a winding twisting passage with lochans and rivers until the road climbs up towards the Guilin with mysterious inviting views into Strath Dionard.

Gualin Lodge is situated in this remote and beautiful country. Gualin House was built in the early 1880's as a hotel by the Duke of Sutherland and then became a shooting lodge. It means shoulder in Gaelic. At Gualin House a track runs into Strath Dionard, this passes along the side of Foinaven and reaches Loch Dionard. From around this point tracks can be followed to Loch Stack, Strath Beag, Glen Golly and Strath More. The interior of this land is "ancient highways" for walking around the land.

The image perceived is one of a land of great scale and the possibility of reality of stories from the Hobbit and Lord of the Rings, backed by the mountains of Fionaven, Cranstackie, Ben Spionnaidh, Meall Meadhonach and Beinn Ceannabeinne and is spectacular. This is very wild but beautiful country.

From the top of Gualin the roads winds and drops to Lawson's Well at Carbreck. Under the shadow of Fannheall on the west side of the road. It consists of an iron trough with a plaque and the inscription reads:

*'1883 As a mark of gratitude and respect to the inhabitants of Durness and Eddrachillis for their hospitality while projecting this road this inscription is placed over this well by their humble servant Peter Lawson surveyor'.*

Peter Lawson, a road surveyor, had the inscription placed close to the road he had been working on in the early 1830s. It may be because springs and wells are always flowing with fresh water that they are sometimes used as memorials. The plaque on the roadside well at Gualin was erected in 1833, not long after the opening. It looks likely that the first three of 1833 became eight when it was renovated. Lawson played a significant part in transforming the north and the people of the time we're grateful. Peter Lawson was the Sutherland County surveyor who is responsible for surveying and supervising the construction of the road to Tongue.

The road passes the lonely cottage of Carbreck sitting at the side of the road. Rhigoltar the isolated shepherds' cottage tucked under Ben Spionnaidh is about a mile and a half from the road. As the road descends the drive follows the course of the River Dionard, whose source is in the mountainous region in the south of Loch Eriboll. It drains the northern slopes of Creagan Meall Horn before entering Loch Dionard under the eastern slopes of Fionaven. At Grudie, where this river and the River Grudie, which drains the northern slopes of Creag Riabhach, Ffarmheall and Ghias Bheinn meet a small bridge accesses the shepherd's cottage. The road continues north and drops to the wide floor at the head of the Kyle of Durness at Sarsgrum, and this can an amazing and ever-changing scene before the road finds its way along to Keoldale and the green fertile area of Durness on the northwest corner of the mainland. With a full tide the mass and water expanse is dominating the foreground but when the water empties from the Kyle and leaves large sand bars and areas of rivers and channels the scene is dramatically changed. With the varying light this vision is a special one to be savored.

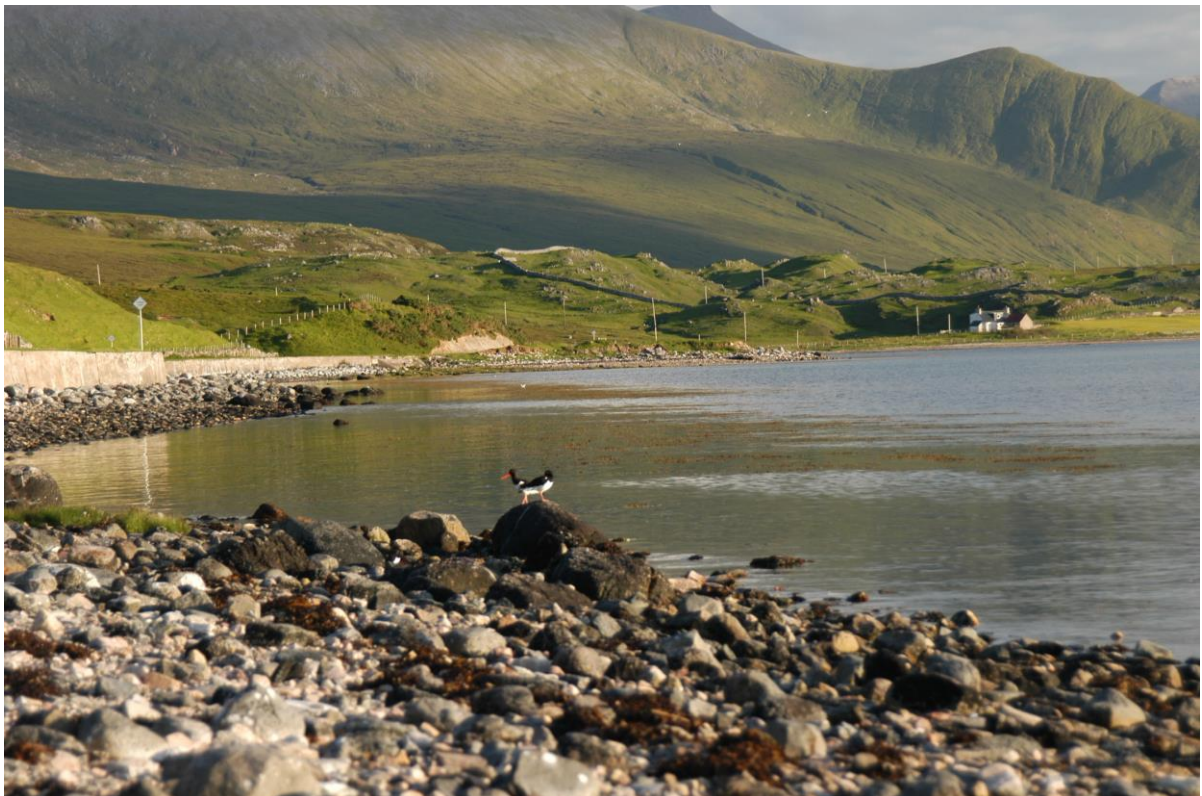


IMAGE 314 LOOKING FROM KEOLDALE OVER THE KYLE OF DURNESS TOWARD SARSGRUM

### **Keoldale**

One and a half miles south of Durness, where the road meets the shore of the Kyle of Durness is the road end to Keoldale and the ferry to Cape Wrath. The earth works of an Iron Age fort and numerous cairns can be found at Keoldale. The standing stone, erected as millennium project by the Durness Youth Club, is a recent addition close to the Iron Age fort site. (We were reprimanded for this by Historic Scotland but as no damage was caused after an inspection the stone was allowed to remain.)

Rubha an Tigh Shaille is Gaelic for 'Point of the Salt House' more commonly known today as Keoldale Green. The land here is an oasis of green in a barren wilderness, the weathering of the ancient Cambrian limestone creating a fertile soil, allowing agriculture to flourish. The mound beside the road, Cnoc na Cnamhan (Hill of the Bones) is evidence of past settlements. This Bronze Age cairn dates from 4000 years ago said to contain the remains of those who fell in battle, a small brass elliptical cockade and a small polished bone, supposed to be used for

fastening a military plaid, were found, as also arrow-heads of flint-like stone from two to three inches in length. A more recent monument is the standing stone overlooking the Kyle of Durness which dates from 2000 erected by Durness Youth club as a millennium memorial. The Cape Wrath Lodge and Keoldale Farm are situated on the north side of the minor road to the Cape Wrath passenger ferry. From Keoldale turn towards Durness. On the right is Loch Caladail, one of the limestone lochs that surround Durness and is noted for its excellent fishing.

## Durness

The most north westerly village on Mainland Britain It stands slightly proud from the sea with sandy beaches and rocky coves on the “corner” of Scotland. Over eighty townships have made up Durness parish in the past. The village today has several constituents that are identified from the ancient townships.

Entering the village from the south is Mackay’s, Rooms and Restaurant a shop and a filling station, a minor road turns off to Balnakeil passing Balnakeil Craft Village and terminating at Balnakeil Beach, the ancient church and Durness Golf Course.

Remaining on the A838 through the townships of Durness pass the shops and the area of Sango and Sangomore. Here is the campsite, restaurant and public bar. The headland between Sango



IMAGE 315 TOURIST SIGN AT THE JUNCTION IN DURNESS THE CORNER OF THE ROAD NETWORK

and Smoo is the township hamlet of Lerin. There are houses and the Smoo Cave Hotel. Also on this headland are many disused and abandoned buildings with the remains of a wartime construction. This was the site of a highly secret technology and a military establishment during the Second World War. Smoo Cave is located at the eastern edge of the village of Durness. Sangobeg is situated on the northern coast and lies two miles (3km) southeast of Durness and one mile (1.5km) southeast of Smoo Cave. The area of Ceannabeinne on the eastern outskirts of Durness was a thriving township up until the clearances about 1842. The clearance of Ceannabeinne by the Duke of Sutherland’s tacksman led to riots in Durness in 1841 and the prospect of the 53<sup>rd</sup> Regiment being sent from Edinburgh to quell the unrest, before the Ceannabeinne crofters and their families were finally forced to leave in 1842. The fallout from the riots and civil unrest heralded the beginning of the end of the clearances, but too late for

Ceannabeinne, nowadays best known for its lonely and beautiful beach facing out to the RSPB nature reserve on Eilean Hoan. Inland, scattered stones and overgrown foundations are all that remain of what was the largest township on the Rispond Estate.

The road passes the turn off to Rispond at Ceannabeinne Beach car park and continues along the western side of Loch Eriboll through Laid.

### **Port Chamuill, Portnancon, Polla, Strath Beag, Faoilinn**

At the top of the turning to Port Chamuill is an intact and unspoilt Souterrain, an Iron Age underground store marked by two cairns at the side of the road. It is not easy to access but has a curved stair and a long passage ending in a round chamber. It is mostly flooded. The souterrain is particularly well preserved described elsewhere. This souterrain, known locally as “leabidh fholaich” or hiding place is about 10 feet from the present road yet is completely obscured from view. It has a well-hidden narrow entrance with some steep steps leading down to a passage which opens up into a chamber at the far end. The chamber is approximately forty feet long, six feet high and six feet wide. Made from several large stones placed in a circular or elliptical form. Due to changes in the course of the adjacent stream the chamber tends to flood when the stream is in full spate.

At Port Chamuill, a ferry used to cross to Eriboll and travellers went from Eriboll to Cragan Soilliuir through Strath More to Lairg. After the Moine Road was built and the road and pier at Portnancon were constructed the route was to Heilam and by way of Hope to Tongue and south to Lairg.

A little further on at Portnancon a short road leads and to a house with an interesting history and a pier. The drive is past Rispond and Portnancon with Beinn Ceannabeinne, Meall Meadhonach, Beinn Spionnaidh, and Cranstackie towering to the west and Loch Eriboll on the east. The road now turns west along the top of Scotland, a large detour to get round Loch Eriboll, a sea loch that opens out into the Pentland Firth. This seemingly remote road passes through the strung out crofting township of Laid where little houses are backed by rough croft ground to the shores down the west side of Loch Eriboll. Created in the 1830s to house evicted tenants and overspill from other townships. The area also exhibits evidence of rather more ancient settlement, with good examples of a souterrain or earth house, an Iron Age wheelhouse and bronze age cairns.

The road turns around at the head of the loch after Polla. The settlement, Polla lies at the head of Loch Eriboll at the northern end of Strath Beag and Faoilinn. The River Polla flows down Strath Beag a distance of about five and a half miles from Loch Staonsaid. Creag na Faoilinn rises to nine hundred and thirty four feet and can produce an astounding series of echoes. This hill guards the entrance to Strath Beag and to the west stand the peaks of Cranstackie and Beinn Spionnaidh both more than 2000 ft. high.

There is a good walk up Strath Beag to a bothy and further to the old paths and tracks that were used to move around the interior of this land before the coastal roads were built. The many now cleared settlements within the interior were all linked with tracks through the Strath and many can still be followed. The old shepherds house at the head of Strath Beag about two miles from the road is now a bothy available for shelter to walkers. From the head of Loch Eriboll and the track into Strath Beag the road winds around the lonely house at Fouhlin. The house was originally to be built on a sit on the other side of the road but when builders started on the foundations a souterrain was discovered. The area is abundant with uncharted historical remains.



IMAGE 316 STRATH BEAG BOTHY

### **Kempie, Eriboll, Hope, Whiten Head and Freisgill.**

On round Loch Eriboll passed the house and souterrain site at Fouhlin the road follows the Eriboll coast to Whale's Corner, named because a large whale was washed ashore here, and Kempie Bay. The loch has increasing numbers of fish farms and associated sea food farming enterprises and the dwellings are occupied by workers for these. Some are small scale locally owned and operated and some are more commercial supplying local employment.

The Estate of Eriboll and Eriboll Farm occupies most of the coastal land which lies on the east shore of Loch Eriboll. The small church of Eriboll stands on the eastern side of the Loch.



IMAGE 317 ERIBOLL CHURCH ON THE EASTERN SIDE OF THE LOCH

As the road climbs up the east side and more fertile side of the loch the island of Eilean Choraiddh and the protrusion of Ard Neakie become focal points within the large water mass. Linked to the east shore of Loch Eriboll by a narrow sand and shingle spit is the extraordinary mushroom-shaped peninsula of Ard Neakie. In times past the Heilam Ferry sailed from Ard



Neakie to the Heilam Inn on the Portnancon side of the loch, and the Ferry House still stands on the peninsula. During the nineteenth century, lime was produced from Durness limestone in four large lime kilns at Ard Neakie. The disused kilns can still be seen today. Loch Eriboll marks the northern boundary of the Moine Thrust, a geological phenomenon by which older layers of rock were pushed up by powerful natural forces to overlay the newer layers of rock. This type of feature is more clearly visible in north-west Sutherland than almost anywhere else in the world.

As the road departs from the loch and continues east at Helium views of Loch Hope can be seen as the road twists around the hamlet of Hope. Just under the shadow of Ben Arnaboll on the north side of the road there is a group of hut circles and the remains of a broch between the two lochs Loch Cragaidh and Loch Ach'an Lochaidh.



At Hope there is walking access to Whiten Head and Freisgill. There is no road or defined track but this remote area can be accessed by careful walking along the cliffs. The rocks here are greyish in colour giving the name Whiten Head or An Ceann Geal to the headland at the eastern entrance to Loch Eriboll. There are caves under the cliffs around Whiten Head where the Atlantic Grey Seals breed the only known breeding place on the mainland. The caves are only accessible by boat. An exploration of this wild rocky coastline, with views out to the Orkney Islands and several saltwater lochs is spectacular.

There are two quartzite stacks here separated by a deep channel and a long way offshore. The eastern stack is known as The Maiden and has a cave at its foot giving the appearance of legs. Tom Patey fell to his death whilst abseiling from the summit after the first ascent. The western stack doesn't have its own name. The stacks now have a fine complement of climbs with Waterfront Wall being an outstanding severe. They can be reached either by boat or a swim. If by boat then a three mile crossing of Loch Eriboll is needed to reach Whiten Head and the stacks. Low tide is best for landing at the channel between the stacks whilst high tide is better for landing on the landward side. The plinth beneath the stacks can be reached by an eleven kilometre walk, descending the steep headland and swimming just over a hundred yards. This makes for a demanding day out. East Pinnacle, the eastern pinnacle gives an impression of overhanging rock and verticality. There are several routes on it.



IMAGE 318 FREISGILL STANDS CLOSE TO THE MOUTH OF LOCH ERIBOLL

About a mile from Whiten Head Freisgill stands close to the mouth of Loch Eriboll in a desolate, lonely but beautiful spot. A ghost is said to reside here. A shepherd called Nodaidh had a long and happy life there living alone after losing his fiancée. His prize possession was a chanter gifted to him from his girl, Marie, before she died. His dogs arrived one day at Melness Farm and the manager returned with them to Freisgill to find Nodaidh in a very poorly state. The doctor was summoned from Tongue but all Nodaidh wanted was to be taken to his sister at Sango. He was taken by ferry and car and became weaker constantly calling in delirium for his chanter. He died without being reunited with his chanter. The next two shepherds living at the house have left after reporting eerie incidents about their dogs howling and visions of an old man playing a chanter and disappearing before their eyes. Freisgill now stands empty for

most of the time but occasional accounts of dim lights and faint music are heard from fishermen.

### **Voyage of Remembrance**

27<sup>th</sup> July 1998

The Rev. Sydney Wilkinson was recently making a pilgrimage to the area in memory of a dear friend lost in a climbing accident on the “Maiden” off Whiten Head nearly thirty years ago. Dr. Tom Patey an internationally distinguished rock climber and medical practitioner in Ullapool had a fatal fall during a decent. Sydney’s memories of his late friend were rekindled after the current publication of a book “One Man’s Mountains” by Tom Patey consisting of contributions to the Scotsman Newspaper written while climbing the sea stacks around Scotland. The BBC presentation of the Old Man of Hoy, lately repeated twenty five years on, was inspired by Tom Patey and Sydney was a climbing Sherpa on that expedition. He has many happy memories and stories of expeditions with Tom to the region.

After the accident Sydney lost touch with the climbing world in the area where he regularly met up with now famous climbers. He accepted an appointment as a missionary in the Arctic to the Eskimos. Climbing and exploration have always been challenging and he has made many of the first ascents on single expeditions to peaks on the Baffin Islands. On returning to live in Scotland he was assigned an Episcopal Ministry at Peterhead before retiring to Blairgowrie.

Last Tuesday he and his wife Debby were taken by James Mather to the foot of the cliffs at Whiten Head and sailed around the spot where the accident to his companion occurred. The trip explained all the questions he sought answers for. He was astonished and moved to find Tom’s ropes still swinging from their positions.

Sydney is now getting on in years but is determined to return and spend a day fishing around the stack with James.

### **South to Altnaharra**

Just South at Hope Lodge the side road runs along the eastern side of Loch Hope and on to Altnaharra. This road gives access to Ben Hope and, slightly farther on, Dun Dornaigil Broch and Glen Golly and the Mackay Country gateway at Crask.

Loch Hope six miles long about a mile wide and approximately one hundred and sixty feet deep and lies due east of Loch Eriboll to which, it is joined by the River Hope. The loch is fed from the south by the Abhainn nan Strath Mor, which flows through Strath More. To the southeast Ben More rises to 927 m (3040 feet). On the west side of Loch Hope, at Arnaboll a cairn measures some eighty feet in diameter and this is accessed by walking the track at the bend in the road beyond the bridge at Hope. Glen Golly, from Gobernuisgach lodge the valley Glen Golly carries the waters of the River Golly south eastward to join the southern end of Strath More. This is one of the loneliest and most remote roads on the British mainland, exceedingly narrow and twisting in parts, there's grass growing through the tarmac and many of the passing places are grass covered. This is the interior of the lands of Mackay. This varied and dramatic landscape, from the remote interior of Mackay Country to the rugged coastline. The lonely and beautiful road from Hope joins the A836 from Tongue through Strathnaver slightly north of Altnaharra from another southern gateway at Syre.

### **Strath More**

The Stories of Strath More from a report on a study by Dr. Isobel MacPhail.

Until the late eighteenth century Strathmore was far more heavily populated than today, when only one family lived in the strath, at the keeper's house at the mouth of the strath and one other at Governuigach. Historically Strathmore provides the nerve centre of travel and communications across North West Sutherland. The many hill routes which criss cross the glens, bealachs and straths in the north link and intersect in Strathmore. It is not surprising therefore that what we might call the 'originary' stories of Mackay Country are all based in Strath More. The story of how the Beaton medical family came by their powers involves a young cowherd called Farquar Beaton (Fearachair the Leech) sent into Glen Golly to find six serpents in the roots of a hazel tree. The best preserved broch in the area, Dun Dornaigil is found there. The famed Corrienessan is at the head of this strath, on the route westwards. Rob Donn was born there and his best known song is in praise of Glen Golly, at the back of Strath More. Important pipe tunes and poems are associated with this strath and the routes through it. Today the road is metalled but little used. The passing place signs are the original wee metal ones with rusted but still stripy stalks. It is an enthralling place and perfect for a bike ride as a way of exploring. It is a good idea to park carefully in one of the larger passing places at the mouth of the strath and to spend the day exploring on bike.



IMAGE 319 STRATHMORE WITH BEN HOPE

### **Altnaharra**

Altnaharra lies at the western end of Loch Naver, thirteen miles (22 km) south of Tongue at the western extremity of Loch Naver in Strathnaver a popular angling resort. Dominated by the schist peak of Ben Kilbreck which rises to the South. There are numerous examples of former settlement in the area including hut circles, heaps of clearance stones and field terraces. It is situated inland on a large hunting estate. The main village is built on a linear pattern following the main road (A836) south to Lairg but is again quite dispersed over the huge moorland expanse making up the Altnaharra area. Settlement today consist of houses a church a school and a hotel the largest building in the village. Altnaharra has a population of about seventy four

and most of the activity is based around the hotel which was built on the site of a drovers inn built here around 1820 and by the 1840's the village had developed into a small angling resort. Altnaharra is a settlement, which has few inhabitants but is spread over a wide area of land.

Derived its name from the Gaelic meaning *the burn of the shieling* originally Altnaharra would have been a summer pasture where people took the cattle and sheep for better grazing situated on what would have been the drove road heading south. As numbers in the townships rose the shielings became populated. Altnaharra became popular in the 1800's for fishing. The school is currently "mothballed" with only one child who attends Tongue Primary. Unusually for Mackay Country this is an inland village, the population is generally concentrated in the coastal townships across the west and the north.



IMAGE 320 THE PILLARS AT THE CROSSROADS AT ALTNAHARRA

The crossroads at Altnaharra where the roads goes down into Strathnaver or up Strath More north to Tongue or South to Lairg is marked by two large pillars.

A story was told that the Duke of Sutherland sent ploughman Mr. MacPherson from Tongue Mains to Drumholiston over near the River Halladale After collecting the pillars discovered he could not get back across on the chain boat and could not cross the river because of bad weathers he had to travel down through Brora and back up to Lairg travelling about thirty miles a day with a horse and cart in terrible weather. He got ill shortly afterwards and died. The Duke gave the family a black house in Torrisdale.

People may be aware of Altnaharra because of the weather station Surrounded by an unattractive chain link and wire fence. In December 1995 the lowest ever recorded temperature in Britain was recorded at Altnaharra -27.2 degrees Celsius.

Altnaharra is the gateway to the twenty-one-mile long Strathnaver Trail which was opened to the public in 2003. This inspiring trail offers visitors way-marked footpaths and sensitive interpretation in order to explore the ancient and historical landscape between Altnaharra and Bettyhill. From Altnaharra you can travel up the famous Strath of Naver where the infamous Sutherland Clearances once caused such distress. Human history here stretches well beyond the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Strathnaver Trail will introduce you to the rich archaeological heritage along this strath. A strath is a long wide valley; a glen is a steep sided one.

Eight miles (13 km) south from Altnaharra is Crask, a settlement in Strath Tirry, with the Crask Inn that lies on the north side of the Strath a' Chrais burn. This is one of the southern gateways of the twenty first century to Mackay Country.

### **East from Hope over the Moine**

A further climb of the A838 east after the turn off for Altnaharra takes the traveler onto the Moine, a large table of peatland across some of the most barren land with distant mountains views. The Moine as it is known is the moor between Hope and the Kyle of Tongue, a bleak stretch of road on a winters' day. This is the most northerly road in the Kingdom and a grand and wild bit of Sutherland. It is also one of the loneliest stretches of road in the country and from its edge miles and miles of reddish, undulating moor sweep up to the flanks of the two fine mountains Ben Loyal and Ben Hope.

Moine House was built as a shelter for travelers and is the earliest known roadside shelter for travelers in the Highlands that was not an inn. Recently graffiti artists have added their painting to the interior.



IMAGE 321 RECENT GRAFFITI ADORNS THE INSIDE OF MOINE HOUSE

As the road twists traveling over the Moine the mountains look, as they are the moveable parts of the landscape. Ben Loyall with its turrets and castle features seems to appear in different parts.

This area was considered as a sight of a Dartmoor type prison and does contain some of the most interesting geology. As the approach to the Kyle of Tongue becomes apparent the scene changes and the mountain of Ben Loyall heralds the backdrop to the village and the Kyle of Tongue.

### North to Melness



IMAGE 322 SIGN TO MELNESS

Turn left at the road to Melness just prior to the Kyle of Tongue into a little labyrinth of townships. Melness, Midtown, Skinnet, Talmine, Strathan, Portvasgo, around the coast at the western head of the Kyle of Tongue. From the junction at the Causeway, a minor road takes you past one of Scotland's more scenic cemeteries and through the strung-out settlements. A visit to Melness comprises of many small old townships and a diverse mixture of dwellings, old, new converted, new looking traditional and modern. Much building work with houses clustered together making a hamlet with a distinct difference.

Melness is a community of small crofting townships, comprising of about seventy households (or about one hundred houses), stretching for about five miles around the beautiful Kyle of Tongue. Melness Estate extends to some 10,500 acres of generally poor hill grazings and crofts, sloping from Ben Hutig down to the Kyle of Tongue and the Moine. The estate includes a couple of burns, several beautiful beaches, a sheltered harbour and pier, several lochs, a couple of islands, and extensive peatlands.

The community of Melness has survived mainly as a close-knit core of indigenous crofters, many of whom are descended from the original folk who settled there after being removed from their holdings during the clearances. They have a close relationship with the land, which they have worked daily for generations, and their community was built stone by stone by their forebears. Melness crofters are very proud of their heritage and extremely proud and supportive of their own folk. They have a keen sense of belonging to Melness and like to maintain their roots there. Indeed, many folk who have left Melness return regularly to visit their relatives and friends and to enjoy the local hospitality, whilst many others retire to their roots in Melness. In short, as one local person rather aptly put it, "You can take a local person out of Melness, but you can't take Melness out of a local person!"

Particularly in recent years, the local economy in Melness has been characterised by a limited range of small-scale employment opportunities, mainly in public and local services, but also in crofting, forestry, shell fishing, fish farming and estate work. As in most other remote rural communities, there has been a disproportionately high number of retired residents, compared with younger working folk, many younger folk have left to pursue better socio-economic opportunities elsewhere, and many older folk have retired to Melness, attracted by the quiet and natural way of life there.

The Rabbit Islands, Bonnie Prince Charles was said to have lost a sailing ship, the "Hazard" on the Rabbit Islands! In 1745, a sailing ship carrying provisions and gold for the Prince ran aground here and the French troops sent to recover them were captured by the Scots! The islands are noted for their fine sub-aqua diving, canoeing and as a picnic spot. The islands are home to more stunningly inviting, if rather inaccessible, white beaches. Just off shore from Talmine itself is the tiny Talmine Island. If you would like a run out to the Rabbit Islands, the best thing to do would be to ask at the Craggan Hotel in Melness, where there is usually local entertainment. The Craggan Hotel often has theme nights, which are very popular, and also impromptu music sessions, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire Nights*, and quiz nights! The food is popular and locally recommended! "Hamish" the landlord is a mine of stories and local knowledge. Melness Church of Scotland Services are on Sunday at 12.30pm. with the Minister, Rev. J.E. Mackie and visitors are welcome.

The camping and caravan site at Talmine looks out over the sea. The harbour at Talmine has a slipway suitable for launching small boats but it is very long and very steep. You often see people fishing from the rocks and as the harbour is normally very clean and sandy, it has been known for people to swim there when it is quiet, often using the harbour wall as a launching site when the tide is in! The rocky outcrop that forms the end of the harbour is studded with black and ruby garnets!

The beach is a beautiful sandy beach with a couple of ship-wrecks, one much more modern than the other.

Talmine is one of a string of small hamlets looking northeast across Tongue Bay. It lies a couple of miles north of the main A838 road at the west end of the Kyle of Tongue. Talmine itself consists of two roads running around the back of an east facing bay, one at higher level, the other descending to give access to the beach and the small campsite behind it. Talmine is really all about its beaches and its bay. It also offers superb sea views to the northeast. These extend from the Sutherland coast east towards Bettyhill and include an intriguing collection of small islands in Tongue Bay itself. Largest and most distant of these is Eilean nan Ron, home to thirty people as recently as 1931 but now uninhabited by all but the spirits of the departed residents, inhabited now by large numbers of seabirds, and by the grey seals who mass here every autumn to pup.

At the far end of Talmine the two roads come together again, before a branch leads down to the pier connecting the mainland with the tiny Eilean Creagach, complete with another lovely little beach. Another road from the far end of the bay leads north to the even smaller settlements of Achinahuagh, Port Vasgo and Lubinvullin. At the end of the road is Port Vasgo. This is a natural harbour, set in amongst the wonderfully wild Sutherland landscape. In the 19th century it was once a very busy harbour in the export of high quality stone and slate.

One of the joys of traveling in Mackay Country is that it is still possible to take a turning off a main road and find at the end of it a gem that can still qualify for the title of "lost". Talmine and Melness are perfect examples.

On the Melness peninsula is Ben Hutig.

The Melness crofters have had control over their estate since it was gifted to them by absentee landlord Michael Foljambe in 1995. Ever since they were gifted their estate, the Melness crofters have been looking for ways to reverse the trend, to keep young people from leaving, and attract new families in. In the 2000s, a plan for a community wind farm fell through. Melness' history is one of displacement. Its population grew in the early 19th century as the Duke of Sutherland cleared his tenants to make way for sheep. Those who didn't immigrate to the New World were pushed to Scotland's coastal fringes. More recently the possibility of a spaceport on Melness Crofters land is hopeful of a new potential venture.

Eilean nan Ron. Island Roan<sup>109</sup>

The houses on Island Roan are now derelict but at one time nine families lived there. According to the records the first settlers arrived at the time of the clearances. They had great difficulty in building houses for their families as there was no transportation on the island and every item had to be carried. There was a cave which was called the quarry cave, the rock had to be blasted into small pieces, and then the stones were dressed in the quarry before being carried to the sites. The jabs and lintels had to be carried in a wheelbarrow by the men also the wood slate lime and sand had to be transported from the mainland and taken across in small boats and then everybody living on the island gave a helping hand to take them from the harbour which involved carrying them up a steep cliff.

The name "Eilean nan Ron" means the Island Of The Seals. There were hundreds of seals which could be killed at any time of year. The blubber was melted put into bottles and used for the cattle and sheep during the winter. The best of the island was cultivated to maintain sheep and cattle which were very few to begin with but increased later on as the Islanders were permitted to summer the cattle on the mainland and so they were able to increase their stock gradually, but the fishing was the island's mainstay but as the boats were small they could not earn a great deal of money until around the year 1870 when the Duke of Sutherland gave the Islanders a brand new boat they had to be paid for in yearly installments. They named the boat the Duke. Later they bought another boat of the same kind with bigger and better equipment. Their fishing prospered so that eventually they brought two new and much larger boats with a steam compressors for hauling their nets. A few years later the Islanders chartered a steam drifter which they carried on until after the First World War. They went after herring fishing all the year round first on the West Coast of Sutherland for a few weeks operating from the port of Stornoway and from Mallaig and then to the east coast from June to September. The

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<sup>109</sup> These excerpts are taken from the book "The story of Island Roan" by John George Mackay a native of Island Roan and they were submitted by Christine McKay in 1987 to a government sponsored project.



young woman of the island worked very hard looking after the cattle all summer, they milked the cows made butter cowdrie and cheese which they preserved for the winter months.

The people of Island Roan were God fearing, they often read the Bible and had prayers in the morning and evening. They lived close to nature, the sea which they're calling and they could often forecast the weather by looking at the sea judging the colour of it and at certain times. None of the Islanders could swim the main reason being the water was so cold it was nearly impossible to stay in it for any length of time before getting cramp. They had many narrow escapes at sea nevertheless over the 130 years of habitation on the island there was not one single cause of drowning.

On the rare occasion when the Tongue doctor was sent for a boat had to be rowed to Tongue pier which was miles away to collect the doctor and take him back again. if the weather was inclement the doctor had to travel to Lamigo which is the nearest point from the island on the mainland a horse and gig escorted him there which had to be paid for to the hotel.

During the summer months a lot of visitors came over to Island Roan. A visitor's book was presented to the island in 1883 by the Duchess of Sutherland, Duchess Millicent, it shows that from that year to the final evacuation in 1938 2000 people from all over the world had come to visit the island. up to the beginning of the First World War Island Roan was flourishing it increased in population so much that some of the younger married couples decided to leave and make their homes in the mainland then later the fishing started to decline and the population began to suffer. Whole families left at once some emigrating to Australia and America. In 1938 with only twelve inhabitants left it became clear that they would have to leave their island and live on the mainland so in December the 6th they made their final crossing.

Island Roan was once a busy fishing community but was finally deserted in 1952 the arrival of electricity to the mainland and other amenities made island living much more basic in comparison. The island has been inhabited at intervals for various reasons since the indigenous people left. At one time it was the home of a *Hip Ashbury Pie* commune but after a harsh winter on the island the inhabitants moved on. Today Scourie crofters use it for grazing their sheep which they takeover by boat. The croft houses still stand although in varying states of disrepair and the boundaries on the croft's can still be made out.

In 1950 Sir Christopher Andrews and scientists from Harvard University came to the island to use a field laboratory for research work in their effort to find a cure for the common cold. One of the students obviously taken with to the place composed a song as a farewell to Eilean nan Ron. On a recent visit to Island Roan this summer what impressed me most about the structure of the derelict houses was the size of the buildings and the buildings which in comparison to the houses on the mainland at that time were extremely modern a sadness remains among the ruined walls of these doomed houses they remain haunted by the memory of these fine men and women who had worked so hard to provide shelter for their families and evacuate them to take their place in the outside world and finally against the odds to leave their beloved island to its desolation which once had known the laughter of happy families and carefree children.

■ The following sections on Melness are from information submitted by Christine Mackay in 1987 to a government sponsored project.

### **Description of Melness**■

The name Melness means bent grass point or sandbank. It is a beautiful crofting village situated on the west side of the Kyle of Tongue. The crofts in Melness and Talmine, its postal name, originated from the evictions in Strathmore. The cemetery is situated at the entrance, the first person to be buried there was in 1803. Melness house or the laird's house used as a farmhouse but recently bought privately as a listed building category B it is situated one mile into Melness

and one of the crofts belonging to Melness house is the sight of a broch called *Dunn Buidhe*. Behind Skinnet there is a hill called *Cnoc an Airbhe* nearby are the remains of hut circles. The Craggan Hotel is situated in Skinnet.

Talmine has the post office and shop. The lower road takes you to the beach beside the sheltered bay is situated Bayview Caravan Site further along the road there is the pier which has safe anchorage for boats. Swimming in the harbour is safe if you can bare the cold sea. The burn which runs through Talmine starts at Loch a Muillon, Mill Loch, this loch was used as a dam to one of the four mills which is said were situated at different points down the burn. The ruins of one remaining mill stands in Talmine. The grinding stone still remains there.

The present church is situated in Talmine near the ruins of another church the services conducted by the reverend James Rettie from Tongue and since the causeway was built Melness and Tongue were joined together with the result that the old manse at Talmine was no longer required and is now privately owned. A picturesque old building it nestles at the bottom of the Cornhill near the bridge a short distance off the road at Talmine.

Portvasco has a narrow beach and has some of the most spectacular rock formations, there's a landing place for small boats and there is a salmon station based in the summer season.

West Strathan. The easiest way to claim Ben Hutig can be undertaken at West Strathan. Ben Hutig rises to 1338 feet a small but attractive mountain. the views from the mountain are spectacular panoramic views along the coastline on both sides around the coast of Whitenhead boasts spectacular cliffs *Geadha Nan Aigheann* is the second largest cliff on mainland Britain.

### **Village Of Melness ■**

The village of Melness is situated on the West side of the Kyle of Tongue 5 miles from Tongue village. Before the clearances there only a few houses but during the evictions at Strathmore the people moved to Melness where they were able to fish and eat their available shellfish around the coast. The main occupation used to be crofting and fishing the only local jobs for men are with the County Council and tourism in the summertime.

The doctor for the area is resident in Tongue. A new nurse's house and clinic was built in Talmine in the mid-50s. A large proportion of the cost for the building was donated by the daughter of a former minister Mr. James Cumming and one of the stipulations governing it was that it be built in Melness and not anywhere else. Apparently she had lived in Melness years before and could recall the hazardous and complications of calling a nurse or doctor to come across from Tongue.

Cala Sona meaning *Contented Heaven* is a sheltered housing situated beside the nurse's clinic. It was built a few years ago and became operational in 1975. It was designed to house elderly people who could look after themselves but obviously required some supervision without trespassing on their independence. A special care unit is attached to take care of people who are convalescent until they are fit to rehabilitate their own home.



IMAGE 323 CALA SONA

The most recent building situated at Talmine are six council houses which were completed in the 1982.

#### Postal services ■

In Melness the post office was in Skinnet within the building now known as Cliff View Guesthouse. It moved to Talmine during the early part of the century before World War One. a Telegraph office became available about the same time. Telephone communication was much later around the late 20s or early 30s. in 1968 the postmistress at Talmine who had given 50 years of service retired and the post office was moved once again to Skinnet it but not the previous location. An inaccuracy in the Melness address is that it is known as Talmine by Lairg whereas it should be Melness by Lairg. this came about when the post office was moved to Talmine and as a result of a misunderstanding, although repeated representations have been made to have it rectified, the post office would not entertain it or the grounds of initial confusion and cost.

During the early part of the century the Melness postman had to take his horse and spring cart to Tongue ferry and cross over by ferry boat and walk up to Tongue village with the Melness mail, await the arrival of the incoming mail, carry it down to the point, cross back over the ferry and then proceed to deliver mails as before except that in the winter months the deliveries were night and morning alternating from one of the districts to the other each week. When that postman retired there were two postmen appointed one for each end of the district and this continued until the retrial when it was decided because of the amount of mail that one postman and a bicycle could cope with in 1971 when the bridge was completed across the Kyle of Tongue and the then postman retired the scene changed again and the character was given the

postman's job collecting the mail in Tongue and delivering it throughout the district. he also took the Melness mail two Tongue each morning to connect with Lairg. at the present time all mail is collected in Melness and Tongue and taken directly to Lairg to be sorted there were always at least two postmen in Tongues and busy periods around the outlying areas of Tongue where visited twice or three times per week.

### Mail and passenger service ■

Previous to World War One the mail and passenger service was by Stagecoach from Melness to Lairg and Thurso. With the improvement of roads and advancing popularity of the internal combustion engine and all kinds of road transport were responsible for the replacement of the Stagecoach. Lorries took over and carried both mail and passengers. The service started at Tongue to Lairg and the Thurso service started at Skerry. The lorries which took over were Albions which were open but gradually they were improved and covered with canvas. They had two compartments one for the passengers and one for the mail. In August 1948 a bus service started from Tongue to Thurso and continued a vital link but in the past couple of years the service has been cut and the bus now runs from Bettyhill to Thurso.

### The Old Mill ■

Situated beside the bridge at Talmine there is a bridge which looks down towards the mill on your right hand side this mill was in use around 1890. Barley and wheat were ground for meal but with costs rising to keep the mill in operation and people not being able to buy meal it was left to go into a state of disrepair. About half a mile up the burn on the other side of the bridge there is only sparse remains of a previous mill. Half a mile further is *Loch Mhuillin* which means Mill Loch which was dammed to provide the power to operate the mill.

Going back to the fork road at the entrance to Talmine take the right hand road to lower Talmine Bayview Caravan site is situated on your left hand side beside beautiful sandy beaches. the road continues towards the pier a short distance away the pier was built about the late 1890s two men were killed in the process of building it Mr George Gunn and Mr Angus Gow. The pier was built to facilitate the discharging of cargo from the trading smacks but also to develop the fishing industry.

Continue back into the main road going South the Church of Scotland is located on the right hand side the minister Reverend J. Retty resides in Tongue. Beside the existing building is the remains of the free church another church lies at the entrance to Talmine but were struck by lightning in 1939 and because of the damage was closed it has since been done up and now used as a holiday home. further on you come to another fork junction the road to the right goes to Port Vasco more of a landing place for boats rather than a port, a narrow beach can be found and a salmon station is set up in the summer time there are spectacular rock formations and many years ago another slate quarry which were conveyed by boats to different parts of the country. Back to the fork in the road takes you to the beautiful beaches at Achinver further on at West Strathan at the road end there is an underground tunnel said to start at Achinyhalvin (the earth house) and continue under the river and come out on the near side of the road but the exact spot is vague.

### Melness Cemetery ■

The cemetery at Melness is situated at the west side of the beautiful Kyle of Tongue which lies within the shadow of Ben Hope and Ben Loyal. It was after the evictions that this place was used as a burial ground. Previous to that there was one at Strathmore. The first person believed to be buried there was a major Scobie tenant farmer at Melness House he died in 1804 although the grave is not marked. It is believed that in those days a vigil was kept at the graveside for nights after a burial as at that time the body snatchers were in the area they would sell the

corpses to doctors for research. One bit of evidence retaining this was found when an incident happened. When somebody died it was the custom for friends to dress the remains of the bereaved families in most cases two women were appointed who had more expertise than the rest. The procedure then was to wrap the corpse in our legging sheet rather than the traditional shroud used today. as the population grew in Melness houses had to be built further and further away from the cemetery so gradually men from the other end of the district were to travel as far as six miles in and more during the severe weather in the winter time this could be a very arduous job but it was a duty that they never shirked. The coffin was laid on a brier and supported by the men while one of the men usually an older man and an elder of the church passed out the straps for the men to carry the coffin in turn he walked ahead of the procession and called the relief for them to change over usually two men friends of the family dug the grave and waited at the cemetery for the cortege to arrive. which men dressed in their best suits and hats made a very impressive sight as they walked along the weary miles down the Melness breeze to the cemetery They must have been very tired walking home again but people were kind and on the way back home the people who lived farthest away we're usually taken in for a meal. Since the Second World War there has been changes and buses were provided to convey the people nowadays the population is smaller so this has been done away with so that there is only the hearse and private cars used also in the service takes place in the church whereas before people gathered around the House of the bereaved while the minister stood and delivered the service. The War Memorial can be found at the entrance.

Traces of the earliest human settlements of geological age about 6000 years ago was found near a grassy area south of the cemetery a few years ago. Archaeologists dug up fragments of crude pottery and primitive implements which were sent to the National Museum there still lies the remains of cockles mussels whelks and oysters up to four inches across which were also dug up.

Continuing along the main road into Melness about 400 yards on the left hand side in a croft are the remains of a Cairn. Farther along about half a mile on the right hand side Melness house a listed building category B was once a laird's house but used mainly as a farmhouse recently it had been more privately. In the croft below was the site of *Dun Buidhe* meaning yellow heap. it was the remains of an ancient building but so ruinous and covered with earth at its original form cannot distinctly be traced. It was supposed to be erected by Dornadilla king of the Scotch. the skeleton of two men were found buried near it many years ago one of them was said to be measured about 7 foot but upon being exposed for some time to the air they measured only dust.

Half a mile further takes you to Skinnet it where you will find the only hotel in the village the Craggan Hotel situated on the left hand side and there is access to beautiful sandy beaches

Talmine is one mile further on which is a fork in the road to take the road to the upper left about 300 yards is a post office and store. The public telephone is situated alongside the road to your left leads to the community centre which used to be the school it was built in 1843. There were well over a hundred pupils attending. Depopulation dropped numbers dramatically and in 1972 with one teacher of retiring age and only 11 pupils the school was closed. This coincided with opening of the Tongue causeway and pupils were moved to Tongue school. The building is now the community centre.

### **Underground Tunnels ■**

In West Strathan Melness there is known to be two underground tunnels. Nobody knows how they came to be there people have speculated but no real evidence has come to light. One of these tunnels was discovered by chance about 70 years ago. at that time a young man called

Robert John McKay who was studying to become a minister was on holiday from college with his parents at West Strathan, while he was there his family home was being repaired at that time stone used for buildings were quarried in the area and while Robert and his family were looking for flat stones they found a big flag which had difficulty in shifting when they finally managed to move it they discovered it was used for blocking up an entrance to an underground room which contains some kind of vessels, when these were removed be disintegrated. He then concluded the room must have been used as a Shebeen.. The situation was very suitable a remote area with the river running past fields were barley could be growing and the state of vessels suggested they must have lain there for a considerable time which could have ruled out the idea of a Shebeen. Robert John McKay with perhaps his religious principles or maybe a superstitious fear of what was unknown ordered the room to be walled up again so the mystery of the underground tunnel was never solved

A short distance from there was the scene of another tunnel. Mr McLeod who lives at arch the earth house told me how his uncle had discovered a tunnel near his house in a Croft he had walked the length of it until he came out near the river which I have already mentioned and a short distance from where the other tunnel was discovered. where the a means of escape from the invading Norsemen who came to these shores at that time as some people have suggested the mystery continues.

### **Comparing Old Days and Recent ■**

In comparison with the days before the Second World War elderly people in small villages like Melness are now well cared for. In Melness there is a special unit built for the purpose with a warden and staff to look after them also sheltered houses for those who have to leave their own homes and a home help service provided as those who require it. It is a far cry from the days in our grandparent's time when people die dependent on their families and neighbours to help them in their declining years. It is a different way of life entirely compared to nowadays standards and money was very scarce, jobs were few and usually the men would have to leave home during the summer months perhaps to do some seasonal gilling or draining. It was then that the woman had to do their part on the croft and work at the peats but as the children got older they usually helped. It made for a healthy happy childhood brought up in such a lovely area with plenty to occupy them. The woman folk worked really hard, they had cows to milk, made their own butter and coddie kept hens they also had to carry their water from a spring which they used for cooking. Every cottage had a barrel back and front to catch the water from their own pipes the water was used for washing.

After the sheep were clipped the fleeces were sent to the Brora mills to be manufactured into wool for knitting to provide the families with their socks and jumpers. It was a rare sight then to see women sitting down without knitting in their hands. In spite of other lack of facilities the people were very house proud and their clothes well looked after their best, Sunday suits were put aside for Sunday which was set aside as a day of worship and the church was well attended with a Gaelic service in the morning and an English service in the evening. People were God fearing and very self-disciplined their families were brought up to respect their parents their teachers and their ministers they also had a great desire to educate their children although with very limited means. They sacrificed what they could so their sons and daughters could attain a good position in life some of them getting their diplomas in university. Mostly the girls left school and went straight into service helping their parents when they could by sending money from time to time very often they got married and left home when they returned from the south to visit families and friends woe betide them if there were signs of an English accent although they could spend years away from home they were supposed to come back and behave as though they had never left. The villagers weren't all that bothered about their lives the

acquisitions on their place occupied most of their thought say that again the villagers went all that bothered about their lives, the goings on in their place occupied most of their thought. Gaelic was the language of the village and mostly the people could speak English as well except for the older people although they mostly misunderstood were not so fluent and their English was sometimes expressed with their favourite Gallic expressions much to the amusement of the English visitors.

The children however having had Gaelic when they were young were quick to pick the correct English when they went to school. Families were very caring about each other and about neighbours who were less fortunate than themselves. An elderly person living on their own depended very much on the goodwill of the people next door to them. During the peat cutting everybody rallied round to give a hand and ensure that everybody had a stock of peats at their door before winter set in. People were very independent as far as they could fend for themselves but in their declining years with ill health overtaking them their greatest worries was having no family of their own and they might have to go to the parish hospital referred to as the poor house. Death they accepted and money they were able to save was put away for them to get a decent burial when the time came. Neighbours always tried to share that the duties to tendering the old people at home but when this was no longer possible and the day arrived for an old buddy to be taken away there was much grieving among the locals because they knew they would never be able to visit them and the next parting would only be when the remains were brought to the ferry bridge where friends appeared to convey the remains to the cemetery. Although there was hardship and sadness people had a quick sense of humour and there was some very funny stories related to the older people which will be dealt with at a later date.

### **Trading Smacks ■**

Prior to the beginning of the century and for a quarter of the present one the only way of supplying cargo to different villages of the north and west coast was by sea transport. The boats used were called trading smacks, the boats used sails as a method of propulsion. Most of the trading smacks belong to local people who made their main livelihood from operating them. the men had to be superb seamen to be able to cope with the treacherous seas of the north and west coast. The cargo the boats carried consisted of groceries, oatmeal, feed for cattle, timber, and paraffin etcetera. One of the heaviest items which was carried on the trading boats was the base for the Melness War Memorial, it was said that the seamen had to be so careful as one wrong movement due to the waves could jolt the base and could crash through the boat. The base on safe arrival was taken to Tongue ferry and then transported by horse and cart to Melness cemetery.

One local boat from Melness was called *Band of Hope* which was skippered by a man called Sandy Gow. His crew consisted of his two sons as a lot of men were away fighting in the War. One occasion the boat ran into difficulties in the Pentland Firth and the crew were rescued by a Norwegian ship which happened to be in the area at that time.

In the 1890s Robert Garden an Orkney merchant started supplying goods to the north and west from Thurso in the east to Achiltibuie in the Wester Ross. One of Gardens first steamships *the SS Aberdeen* was a small puffer. He owned many stores on the North Coast one was in Bettyhill and is still called The Store although nowadays it has changed hands. The cargo for the shore had to be taken off at Skerray pier as there was no accessible harbour at Bettyhill the goods were then taken to the Skerray store and a horse and cart was used to carry the remainder to Bettyhill. The next stop for the trading boat was at Tongue Pier where the cargo was brought to Burrs shop which is still a thriving business today and then on to Laid and Rispond.

The most famous of gardens boats was the *SS Cormorant* which was larger than the *SS Aberdeen* and which traded from 1897 to 1932 as well as supplying the north she was the main link from Orkney to Inverness. With the improvement of road surfaces and increasing road transport gradually the smacks were put out of business. The store in Tongue still retains the original building although when Peter Burr took the business over much improvements were made. Vans were used as mobile shops to supplying goods to the more remote villages but sadly in 1936 the vans stopped running mainly due to the maintenance of them and the more people with cars.

## **Fishing ■**

During the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and right into the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a rich harvest of fish available around the North Coast, herring cod, haddock, plaice and valuable catches were landed at Skerray Scullomie and Talmine. The pier at Talmine was constructed at the beginning of this century in which two of the local men from Melness were killed in the process of building it. The pier was constructed partly to facilitate the discharging of cargo from the trading smacks but also to develop the fishing industry and the large house on the road going towards the pier which was the Talmine post office for many years was to have been a boarding house for fish buyers who set up a curing station in the vicinity of the pier. It started up all right but with the arrival of steam drifters and more sophisticated methods of fishing plus the fact that steam drifters were independent of wind and sail and could steam on longer markets at Thurso and Wick which were near a railhead had put an end to the plans for Talmine.

Between the wars fishing was pursued by the locals in comparatively small boats because there was no safe anchorage and the boats had to be manhandled up the beaches well above the high watermark when the weather threatened. Haddock and lobster fishing continued on a diminishing scale with the Second World War. Lobster and crab fishing and seasonal salmon fishing is still pursued in a small scale but again larger boats from distant parts come along with large fleets of creels from time to time and the result is overfishing. The pier at Talmine which was badly positioned and badly designed suffered tremendously from the effects of winter gales which very soon broke up the deck of the pier and in addition the front was silted up making it impossible to close in except at very high tides.

## **Boat Disasters ■**

### **The loss of the *Excelsior***

On a fine June evening in 1890, the ill-fated *Excelsior* went to sea accompanied by four other fishing boats, owned and manned by Melness fishermen. The largest of these boats was the *Excelsior* being about 60 ft. overall. Another was the *Johnathon Ritchie* skippered by John Munro of Skinnet an able seaman. Their experiences were often related by my grandfather. On that particular evening they all put to sea and shot their herring nets about 15 miles N.N.E. of Whiten Head with a light southerly breeze blowing. For some reason the *Johnathon Ritchie* hauled their nets and decided to make for port, as they saw crowds of spin drift approaching from the mouth of Loch Eriboll and the Kyle of Tongue. To their horror a terrible gale overtook them and before they could get their main sail down it was torn to shreds so they rigged two sea anchors, one on each side quarter and ran before it threatened every minute to be swamped by the mountainous seas around them. The wind was now blowing from the south west then veered to west and eventually North West, before the gale reached its height. By this time they were bearing down Bay Head, Orkney, a dangerous coast, which by evening they sighted.

After temporary repairs to the sail they finally brought their boat into Longhope, Orkney. At some time during that gale the *Excelsior* capsized, and it was reported by the boat the seven of her crew were seen hanging helplessly on to the upturned keel. Nothing more was ever heard



of the *Excelsior* or her crew all of whom belonged to the little township of Portvasgo and Midfield.

It was presumed that the *Excelsior* did not have time to haul her nets from which she broke away and this way she was sailing light, consequently more liable to be upturned. The *Johnathon Ritchie* crew knowing the anxiety of their folks at home, sent a telegram the following day to inform them of their safety. As there was no telegraph office at Talmine the message had to be sent to Tongue and conveyed on foot to Talmine.

### **The Wreck of the "Ashbury"**

The wreck of the *Ashbury* took place during the Second World War. This welsh cargo boat with over 40 of a crew drifted onto the jagged rocks of "Dubh "Sgeir" Black Rock near Talmine shore. On a night of appalling weather conditions strong winds, with snow and hail which is still very vividly remembered in the village. The tragic event was felt even more so as the vessel was so close to the shore at Talmine, and because of the weather conditions and extreme cold, it prevented any rescue attempts. Men watched helplessly as they could make out lights approaching the shore, where the doomed men were hassled by raging seas. Rumour has it that one young member of the crew was still breathing as his body came ashore but sadly none of the crew survived. When daylight arrived the local men, headed by the coastguard brought the bodies' ashore; from there they were taken to the local church at Talmine to rest until arrangements could be made for the remains to be taken south for burial.

The people of Melness were greatly affected by this tragedy, it happened at a time when most families had somebody serving in the war, and it brought it so near to their doorstep, as they lived in gloomy times with little hope ahead. Forty members of the crew perished that night. In 1982 members of the British sub Aqua club spent quite a lot of time examining the wreck but nothing of great interest was found.

This report from 1987<sup>110</sup>

On January 8th 1943 one of the worst maritime casualties not due to enemy action occurred at Talmine Melness. The *Ashbury* was a tramp steamer built in 1924 at West Hartlepool and was engaged in the general tramping trades. Two wards the end of 1944 the ash Berry was working in the Mediterranean but there was reported trouble with her condenser. Out of a total of 992 tubes 240 had been plugged and on the passage from Middlesbrough sawdust was used continually to stop leaks. The *Ashbury* loaded a cargo of iron ore at Melilla Morocco before returning to Britain for repairs. She was diverted to Workington. Unfortunately nor repairs were undertaken as it was thought she could make a safe passage round the north of Scotland to the Tyne and there to be repaired.

The *Ashbury* left Workington on Sunday December the 31<sup>st</sup> after loading 345 tonnes 8cwt. of extra ballast in the form of stone colliery refuse. The propeller boss was fairly deep but the tips of the blades wear about 3 feet 6 inches above the water. The *Ashbury* left along with other ships of the convoy because of deteriorating weather conditions. Her anchors failed to hold her in position and she received help from the tug empire the 4<sup>th</sup>. However the great strain on her starboard cable caused it to snap which left her with only the port anchor with five shackles of cable.

In spite of these problems the *Ashbury* sailed in convoy from Laque on January the 6<sup>th</sup> 1945. The following day the weather deteriorated further with a fourth nine northerly wind snow showers and poor visibility. In good weather conditions loaded the *Ashbury* maximum speed

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<sup>110</sup> Submitted as part of a government sponsored programme by Terri Mc.Intyre and presented to the Mackay Country Archive.

was only 8 noughts. Therefore it was not surprising that the *Ashbury* found herself struggling behind the convoy along with the Norwegian steamer "*Beastic*"

Finding herself becoming unmanageable the *Ashbury* sent out messages asking for tug assistance. Off Strathy point shortly after midnight both the *Ashbury* and the *Beastic* was having considerable difficulty holding her position both her anchors were down and she was steaming full ahead to ease the strain on the cables.

The frigate "*St. Therese*" answered the *Ashbury* distress call and tried several times between 2:00 AM and 4:00 PM to pass align to the *Ashbury* but all the attempts failed because the *St. Therese* was in danger over running aground herself. At 4:00 AM the *St. Therese* lost contact with the *Ashbury* and nothing more was seen or heard of the *Ashbury* until a retired merchant seaman on coast guard duty at Milne S saw a light from a small boat drifting into the Kyle of Tongue at 3:17 AM. Word spread fast through Tongue and Melness and before day break people were down on the Talmine Beach to offer assistance to any survivors but there were none. By 8:30 AM several bodies had come ashore and later some wreckage marked *Ashbury* was found on the beach.

Of the 42 crew members none survived. The *Ashbury* ran aground on "Dobh-Sgeir- Mhor At the mouth of the Kyle of Tongue. Her two masts stuck out above the surface of the water because although the resounding surrounding seas are about 15 fathoms deep at high water she had been driven up on her ledge. The local police recovered 26 bodies washed ashore at Talmine and Tongue. The bodies were taken to Thurso Mortuary and 14 of the crew were given a public burial at Thurso on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January. 300 people attended a funeral service held in Saint Peters Church. At a court of inquiry in Aberdeen held on July the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> 1947 the conclusion was that the loss of the *Ashbury* and her crew was due to her standing on Talmine skerries under heavy weather conditions further hampered by her light condition and having only one anchor with a short cable.

Over the years many divers have gone down to the wreck during the summer. One diver took some photographs and from these it appears both the superstructure and the hull are in fairly good condition.

### "S .S. Omega"<sup>111</sup>

The Dundee vessel "*S .S. Omega*" was shipwrecked on the shores of Coldbackie. All the crew lost their lives. The ship was on a return visit from Montreal when a storm arose. The captain decided to drop anchor in the shallow waters of the Kyle of Tongue. Unfortunately because of the high waves, the boat capsized. The people from Island Roan and Coldbackie watched helplessly, as the crews lifeboats were swept away and the men met their sudden deaths, the locals tried to launch boats but were forced back by the prevailing seas.

Early next morning the locals had the gruelling task of recovering the bodies washed up on the shores at Coldbackie and on Island Road. One story tells us how "Port Na Coinnle" the bay of the candles" got its name. "Port Na Coinnle" is a small cave situated near the south east corner of Island Roan. During the following morning of the shipwreck, bodies were carried onto the Island and were covered with a tarpaulin, for decency and to keep the seagulls away. During the night the wind arose again so two of the local men decided to go and check that the bodies were undisturbed. When they arrived they noticed lights coming from the water, the reason for the lights they soon discovered was phosphorescence which was draining from the bodies and

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<sup>111</sup> Difficult to get information on this ship. Story taken from "Tales of the North coast".

life, jackets of the dead sailors, it is said the water looked as if someone had lit candles all around them, hence the cave was named Port Na Coinnle" . It took several days before the sailors were transported to Tongue and buried in the cemetery. Later a song was composed called "The stately Omega".

### **H.M. Trawler "Tern"**

The H.M. Trawler "*Tern*" was an armed naval trawler which sailed during the First World War and said she was a minesweeper. It wasn't her first visit along the coast, she was familiar with the shores Talmine or so they thought! On stormy February night in 1915 the *Tern* was sailing along Whiten Head, making from Talmine Bay, but by some error the crew thought she was in Talmine, driving the boat too close to the rocks the propeller was hit and the boat ran aground.

The sailors managed to take to their lifeboats and the strong winds carried the "lifeboat" towards Midfield, but disaster struck a second time the lifeboat hit some rocks near the beach and capsized. The eight of a crew tried to scramble to the shore but the icy waters were too much for the seamen. Four of the eight were rescued. By this time the local people were alerted. One woman from Midfield had the presence of mind to take a rope with her. They threw the rope to the at the sailors and haled the skipper to safety she then carried the seaman back to her home in Midfield where they got food and warmth.. Incidentally the same woman had lost her husband on the *Excelsior* some fifteen years previously. Other survivors were taken to various souses in Midfield and Portvasgo.

The dead sailors were carried to the local hall. One of the seamen G. Green was buried at Melness cemetery on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. February 1915. It is said this man had no identity other than his name on him or he had no permanent home. At low water tide near Clietan T Seabhaig Whiten Head it is still possible to see the deck of the HMS Tern. It was felt with deep regret the people living near were unable to send out a warning light to guide the Tern in as she was so close to.



IMAGE 324 CAUSEWAY ACROSS THE KYLE OF TONGUE

## South to Kinloch around the Kyle of Tongue

Turn right before the crossing of the next sea loch; the Kyle of Tongue, although the old road around the shore can be bypassed by taking the causeway directly across the bay this road gives a classic view of Ben Loyal. The usual starting point for climbing this mountain is Ribigill, a short distance down the old road on the eastern side of the Kyle. Kinloch at the head of the Kyle of Tongue is scenic and majestic under Ben Loyal. This was the only road route to Tongue from the west until the causeway was completed in 1970.

## East and On By the Kyle of Tongue



IMAGE 325 HEADING EAST TO TONGUE OVER THE CAUSEWAY

Ben Loyal is best viewed from the parking place in the centre of the crossing. Alternatively, walk across the Kyle of Tongue's causeway, which will give you a terrific view of Ben Loyal. This road provides views to the Rabbit Islands and there's a pleasant sandy beach. Ben Loyal the Queen of the Scottish mountains with Tongue Bay and the Rabbit Islands to the north. The islands take their name from the fact that rabbits were first introduced there in the 1700's as a source of meat for the local Laird. At low tide seals, waders, and seabirds can be seen from the causeway, oystercatcher, dunlin, redshank and heron are common. A passenger ferry across the Kyle of Tongue remained until 1971 when a bridge and causeway finally replaced the narrow road that made its way around the southern end of the Kyle. The bridge is 201 yards long and linked to the eastern side by a heavily-engineered causeway.

Northern Times September 10, 1971

*Kyle of Tongue "crossing was 'a dream come true'*

*The official opening of the Kyle of Tongue bridge and causeways last Friday— "a dream come true after 100 years" —" was blessed with fine weather, and a large crowd assembled to watch the ceremony. Mrs Catherine B Mackay, the local county councillor, had the honour of declaring the £500,000 crossing open, and age and youth in the shape of 87-year-old Mr George Gow of Melness and Mrs Mackay's eight-year-old son Graham, the honour of cutting a ribbon of their own tartan to set the seal to the occasion.*

*Of course, it was a proud moment for Sutherland County Council and their supporters who had worked so hard to get approval for the project, and it was also a particularly proud moment for the contractors, Alexander Sutherland Limited, Golspie, who had completed the work four months ahead of schedule. Introducing Mrs Mackay was the County Convener, Mr Donald McBain. The crossing means cutting out a ten-mile road detour round the Kyle and bringing the former “remote” communities of Melness into much closer contact with the village of Tongue. At the luncheon in Tongue Hotel before the bridge ceremony, Mr Robert MacLennan MP said: “I think this is a very happy occasion for all of us in Sutherland and, indeed, in Caithness. indeed it is the culmination of many, many years of talking and planning and hard work to bring about this improvement in our communications in the north, which will be of inestimable benefit particularly to all those living in this area. “As soon as I became your MP, in 1966, one of my first priorities was for road improvements in the north because, I was struck by the problems posed by the comparative isolation of the community of Melness. This new bridge will be a great blessing for them and will remove many problems for them, particularly in winter, when people take ill and may have to go to hospital.”*

*Mr MacLennan then recalled a September day in 1968 when the then Scottish Secretary Mr William Ross was in Sutherland and stood on the west side of the Kyle “and nodded his approval of such a crossing.” Then came the announcement that the Government had approved the building of the bridge.*

### **Rabbit Islands<sup>112</sup>**

Rabbit Islands are situated at the entrance of Tongue Bay. At low tide it is possible to walk across from Skinnet beach. The name obviously came about because of the amount of rabbits inhabiting the island but its original name was *Gall Nam Gall* Island of Strangers. Different stories are told about how the name came about. One such story says its strangers came to the island who were wild and fierce, they were red headed men possibly Danes who had survived a shipwreck and were cast away on the island. Another story suggests it got its name from a combat fought upon it between a man called Gaul and Torquill in which Gaul obtained the victory. We do know for a fact that William McKay lived there about the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, his family later moved to Skerryay it is possible more than one family lived there.

*Sgeir An Oir* is a rocky island near to the Rabbit Islands. *Sgeir* rock and *Ore* gold. At certain times of the day when the sun shines it has a golden appearance.

*Eilean Nan Roan* is about half a mile from Skerryay. *Eilean Nan Roan* Island of Seals has the remains of several houses some of them still roofed. The first inhabitants were there over 130 years ago making their living from fishing and looking after sheep. Life would be hard and dangerous. When a doctor was needed the men went ashore by boat and from there had to walk to Tongue.. In more recent times the young families dwindled away from the island to the mainland and so in 1938 with only 12 inhabitants they too decided to make their homes on the mainland.

*Eilan Neave* or Coomb Island, Holy Island a small island close to Skerryay. Centuries ago it was a religious settlement. Coomb Island a translation of Columba and Calum. When St. Columbia brought Christianity to Scotland missionaries from Iona tried to convert the people on the mainland, they travelled to the north but found them rather fierce and wild so they retreated to *Eilan Neave* for safety. As there was no water there on the island the missionaries came ashore to collect their water from a well near the pier the well is still known as *Fuaran Chaluim Cille*, Well of Calum the Church Builder also close by is a patch of land known as *Iomair Chaluim*

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<sup>112</sup> This is information submitted by Christine Mackay in 1987 to a government sponsored project.

*Cille* -The rig of Saint Columba. On the island itself a chapel was built by the missionaries and they also had a burial place, traces of it may yet be seen, the marks of the priests cell a green circle in the grass with slightly raised edges now it has grown over with moss.

### **Kyle Crossing and Advance Routes<sup>113</sup>**

Sixteen years ago before the Causeway and bridge were built across the Kyle of Tongue the villages of Tongue and Melness we're very separate communities. However once the bridge was completed and opened by the then counsellor Mrs. A.B. Mackay in September 1971 the 13 mile trip was reduced to around 5 miles.

The approach roads to the bridge changed the face of the surrounding countryside. The old road into the village came across the Manse Bridge down past the old manse past Tongue Hotel and into the village it was a narrow winding road and not capable of coping with the increased traffic. Nowadays it acts as a shortcut to the school and local village hall. On the other side of the village the road was widened to double track and the old tree line road disappeared to be replaced by the larger approach road to the Causeway. The planners used the existing point road Island between the Tongue and Melness shores joining up on the Melness side beside the Melness cemetery. It was the last section from the island to the Melness side that was to prove the most difficult and in one case fatal. The water is extremely deep at this point and with the rest of the Kyle dammed by the Causeway the only section for the changing tide is underneath the bridge. At high tide the force of water churning through his fierce. It was whilst setting the concrete pillions into the sea bed walking in shifts as the tides would allow that one local man driving a crane was involved in a fatal accident. Another fatality occurred when an explosives man ended his life on the road at Altnaharra by detonating explosives in his van. Both tragedies were deeply felt in the local community. The influx of Workman in the area naturally had its effects on the local community both good and bad. Some of the incoming workmen married local woman and settled in the area. Something as major and as time consuming as the bridging of the Kyle has a large influence on the lives of the local people. Even today Melness has a stronger community feeling than Tongue but the bridge has changed Melness more than Tongue. It made access to local businesses much easier and tourism was helped. Also thankfully the design followed by the planners actually enhanced the look of the Kyle.

Crossing the Causeway after passing the turnoff for Melness and Talmine north, and south to Kinloch the road moves through green fertile land into the village of Tongue.

### **Tongue**

**Tongue is situated in the heartland of Mackay Country, one of the principal villages and the pick of the villages along the north coast. Situated on the sandy Kyle of Tongue, the village is an important junction where the road from Altnaharra, Lairg and the south meets the North Coast. Along with the next-door village of Kirkiboll, Tongue has many facilities and places of interest. Tongue is a green village and well wooded, a contrast to the surroundings. It's very small and quiet but sitting beneath the grand Ben Loyal that rises an impressive 2506 feet and predominates the skyline overshadows Tongue and nearby is Ben Clerbrig (961m / 3154 feet).**

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<sup>113</sup> This is information submitted by Terri Mc.Intyre in 1987 to a government sponsored project.

Being close to lovely beaches, it's in a great location. Tongue has shops, services and a youth hostel. Other facilities include a filling station, bank, and post office. The Kyle Gallery is an art gallery and dealers in fine arts. There are also two craft centres: The "Tongue Scottish Shop" based in the Tongue Hotel and the Weavers Craft Shop.



IMAGE 326 LOOKING INTO TONGUE FORM THE EAST

The village of Tongue sits on the northern coast, on the Kyle of Tongue, thirty one miles (50 km) north of Lairg. Tongue became something other than an island community relying on the sea for its communications in 1828, when Thomas Telford completed the road south to Lairg. In 1836 a road to Thurso followed, complete with a daily coach, and during the rest of the 1800s efforts to complete the road west to Durness continued, though as late as 1894 anyone making that journey relied on ferries to cross the Kyle of Tongue, the River Hope, and Loch Eriboll.

It is probably a historical accident that led to this significant settlement being called "Tongue" rather than "Kirkiboll", a name coming from the Old Norse for "Church Farm" and now applied to the uphill areas of the village. The name Tongue also has Old Norse origins, but more obvious ones. It comes from "tunga" or tongue of land projecting into the loch. But although the Norse probably lived here between the 900s and 1200s, nothing certain has been found of their settlement.



IMAGE 327 TONGUE YOUTH HOSTEL

The lochs, estuaries, rivers and hill lochans are always popular for fishing. The choice is wide and the rewards of a hill loch with deer, grouse and merlin for company can be truly satisfying. Boats and outboards are for hire for lochs and can be booked with the permits, which are available from the local hotels and the post office. Brown Trout fishing on many lochs, including Lochs Craggie and Loyal, also Salmon and Sea Trout fishing on the Kyle of Tongue.

The village has gabled church, built 1680. St. Andrew's Church is one of the most historic churches in the north. It is now 324 years since the rebuilding of St Andrew's Church by Donald Mackay, Master of Reay. In addition to rebuilding the church, Donald Mackay also rebuilt Tongue House, which was burnt to the ground by General Monk, one of Cromwell's' Generals, as reprisal for the Reay Family support of the Royalist cause in the Civil War. He also built a road from Tongue House to the Church. It is often referred to as "The Church of the Mackays". Others speak of it as "The Little White Church". The church has been built on the site of two former churches in 1680 and it is certain that during a further renovation of rebuilding which took place during 1729, that part of the 1680 aisle was preserved. The lintel over the vestry door bears the inscription 1724. It is interesting to note in the current inflationary times that the cost of the 1729 renovation was £208.78. During this latter renovation a vault was built over the graves of the earlier members of the Mackay Chiefs family. The Reay Family retains the right of burial there to this day. For several centuries a place of worship had, in all probability, been in existence on this site, initially under the egis of the ancient Celtic and then Roman Catholic Church. During the latter period it was known as St Peter's Chapel (Teampull



Pheader), and the adjoining Glebe as St Peter's Field (Machar Pheader).<sup>114</sup> Visitors will find an information leaflet giving a potted history of the Church.



IMAGE 329 SAINT ANDREWS CHURCH TONGUE



IMAGE 328 TOWER HOUSE TONGUE

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<sup>114</sup> From the information leaflet available at the church

Having always been in Mackay Country, Tongue became the seat of the clan in 1554 when their castle at Borve was destroyed by the Gordons of Sutherland. Although the clan home was destroyed, a new mansion was built in 1678 and Tongue House became the new seat of the Mackays. This House of Tongue the former home of the Lords Reay, Chiefs of the Clan Mackay, is on the coast of their ancient province of Strathnaver. It was burnt in 1656 by the Cromwellian English invader, but rebuilt by the Master of Reay in 1678, and added to in the eighteenth century. But in 1829 it had to be sold by the 7th Lord Reay, together with the vast Mackay Estate (the whole north-western corner of Britain) for debt to the Sutherland family. The countess of Sutherland, her husband and family worship regularly at the church during the summer and are regular supporters.

The Mackay's were undoubtedly responsible for the tower house built at the House of Tongue, a little north of today's village and overlooking the Kyle of Tongue. This dates back to the 1500s and was built by the Mackays as Lords of Reay to support their domination of much of northwest Sutherland. It was attacked and largely destroyed during the Civil War in the 1660s, and the House of Tongue that exists today was built by the Mackays in 1678 and 1750 on a more modern pattern nearby, leaving the ruins of the original tower house to be cleared away in 1830.

Perhaps Tongue's most significant moment in history came in early 1746 when the ship *Hazard*, en route for Inverness, fled into the Kyle of Tongue to evade the *HMS Sheerness*, a Royal Navy frigate. It was carrying over £13,000 in gold coins to fund Bonnie Prince Charlie's rebellion, and its' crew took the gold ashore in an effort to carry it overland to its destination. The Mackays were supporters of the government and their forces caught up with the crew of the *Hazard* next morning at Lochan Haken, near the southern end of the Kyle of Tongue. The gold was thrown into the loch by the crew before they were captured, though most of it was later recovered by the government. What adds significance to the story is that when word of this reached Bonnie Prince Charlie he sent 1500 of his men north in an effort to regain the gold, and they were defeated on route. Some believe that had these men still been available a short time later at the Battle of Culloden the outcome might have been different. It is more likely that Culloden was so one-sided the lost troops would have made little difference.

Tongue Hotel, the duke's former lodge and a former Victorian hunting lodge sit proudly at the northern end of a remote wilderness of distinctive and outlandish natural beauty, guarding the Kyle of Tongue and its eventual transition into the Atlantic, whose waves lap, sometimes crash into the northerly coastline. Tongue is one of the larger places and no exception, quite a simple, charming friendly little place and community in which the hotels play an important part.

The Ben Loyal did not start out with any aspirations to be a hotel. In fact the original buildings provided for some of the needs of the local community. What is now the staff cottage was once a post office, the beer cellar was one of the three local bakeries, this particular one being the only one on the north coast to use peat to bake the bread, and finally what is now the lounge bar was a shop. From at least 1910 there was a corrugated iron building, which sat alongside what was to become the hotel. Once it had been a lodge on the side of one of the local lochs. It was transplanted into the village and in around 1906 became the bed and breakfast known as Kyle View.

We know this date both from the visitor's book of the period and when the building was demolished in 2000 the insulation consisted of magazines and periodicals from the period! Over the years previous enterprising owners pulled the various buildings together and in the 1960's with the addition of the west wing the Ben Loyal Hotel was completed.<sup>115</sup>



IMAGE 330 BEN LOYAL HOTEL

### **Old Tongue Village<sup>116</sup>**

In earlier days of this century when horses were at their height of popularity Tongue was fortunate enough to have a Smithy with at one time three working Smiths. The Smithy still stands in the centre of the village, with Smithy house his next to the building to the Ben Loyal Hotel on your right as you go through the village and the old smelly now unused his attached to the house. It is a lovely old building even in its dilapidated state so it must have looked tremendous when all three blacksmiths were working there. Although it is not available to the public the inside of the Smithy is very interesting, a huge forge is built into the South wall with two larger leather belts on either side and a water trough in front of the fire beside the anvil. The floor is cobbled and the back of the room steps lead down to the stewing shade which also has a door leading outside by which the horses were led in to be shoed.

The last blacksmith to work there was called John Campbell. Latterly his work became more odd jobs then business. There was a time when he made and repaired work implements, peat cutting tools, ringing iron on cartwheels as well as farrier work. He was also a member of the Lovett scouts and every year attended camps as a farrier. He was not the epitome of a blacksmith not a large muscular man rather an average build gentleman with a love of fiddle music and instruments which he played very well. Many dances were held in the shoeing shed

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<sup>115</sup> From the web site of the hotel

<sup>116</sup> This is information submitted by Terri Mc.Intyre in 1987 to a government sponsored project.

behind the smiddy with the Smith playing his fiddle. But the noise remembered most on a lazy summer evening was the song of the hammer ringing on the anvil.

When Johnny Campbell began his life as a farrier after leaving school he joined his father and grandfather in the Tongue Smithy with Ribigill Farm keeping two working pairs of horses as



IMAGE 331 ROAD INTO TONGUE FROM EAST (SHOWING TONGUE HOTEL). CIRCA 1901 FROM MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

well as ponies for gigs and Tongue Mains farm also keeping around four horses work was plenty. In addition around that time Tongue Hotel had a farm which supplied their requirements and they also kept horses as did most of the crofters. Indeed the smithy croft worked horses, they also kept sheep and cattle. The centre of the village was then a different place than you see today and right in the heart of the farming, crofting community was the village Smithy.

### **Telephones<sup>117</sup>**

Before the advent of the telephone there was a telegram service run by the post office. At that time the post office was not in its present situation but was in the Ben Loyal Hotel, then called the “Bungalow”, in fact it was where there is no a bar. At that time the bungalow also provided accommodation and had a bakehouse situated at the rear of the building. The post mistress, Miss MacLeod was also the owner of the bungalow and it wasn't until the position of post mistress became vacant and the premises where are stipulation of the post that the post office moved to its present site. The building was formerly an annex too Tongue Hotel.

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<sup>117</sup> This is information submitted by Terri Mc.Intyre in 1987 to a government sponsored project.

The first or at least lowest telephone number is the post office itself at Tongue 201 then Burrs shop and the bank then Viewforlli these being the older established businesses in Tongue. The bank although installed with a telephone was originally a guest house until the afore mentioned Miss MacLeod sold the building to the Royal Bank of Scotland. Before 1938 the post office in Tongue was accommodated in the building which is now Ben Loyal Hotel. The previous postmistress resigned and the present postmistress took up duties in the same building as that used to day.

### **Electricity**<sup>118</sup>

Before means electricity arrived in the early 1950s people had various methods of lighting. Tongue Hotel had its own generator in an outbuilding. Others had gas wall lights. Various contractors wired up the homes one did so many he acquired the app name of bright lights. The arrival of electricity changed the village considerably as indeed it did to all places. It is understood the last house to receive electricity is Lochside on the West shores of Loch Hope. This was in 1983 when it was installed.

### **Television**<sup>119</sup>

Through the determination of Doctor Grant, then General practitioner in Tongue, a television club was formed and monies were raised for the cost of buying a mast this then bought was erected on Ben Tongue. The television club ran on a monthly subscription from its members to pay for its maintenance. When a new member joined the paid are a membership fee and then the monthly subscription. The cable was all underground so trenches had to be dug and the cable laid. The subscriber dug the trench and the local garage owner, G. Reid came and connected the user to the line.

This method lasted for many years and suffered many difficulties but overall it satisfied demand. From its concept and 1960 it lasted until finally in 1980 November due to the erection of a mast on top of Ben Tongue colour television finally arrived. Now the picture was excellent and dependable whereas previously weather conditions severely affected reception, after the installation of the large mast this was a thing of the past and the old television club was dissolved in 1987 Channel 4 was received and Tongue at last had complete viewing.

### **Education in the Parish of Tongue**<sup>120</sup>

Within the parish of Tongue there is now only two schools in Tongue and Altnaharra respectively. The schools in Melness and Skerray were closed around 20 years ago pupils from Skerray and Borgie now have to travel to Bettyhill and children from Melness are transported to Tongue. At one time Tongue had it school and there was another two miles away at Ribigill farm. The old school at Tongue is now our weavers shop and snack bar. The canteen is a holiday chalet and the old playground provides excellent parking facilities. A new school was built in 1968 much closer to the village. In the statistical report from the late 1700s it states that there were two schools one of which was built in the late 1790s. The school was built to propagate Christian Knowledge. On a visit to the school by the Presbyterian they reported that there were thirty pupils, ten of these being girls overall they seemed satisfied by both pupils and teacher. The Tongue or rather Ribigill school was known as the parochial and grammar school it is described as being situated not far from the church on the banks of the Little River called Rhian . The building was a house 40 feet long and 15 feet broad built with stone and mortar with a room in one end for the master. The other end contained the classroom with writing tables,

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<sup>118</sup> This is information submitted by Terri Mc.Intyre in 1987 to a government sponsored project.

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benches and a desk for the preceptor, the room was lighted by 6 glass windows. The salary for the teachers post was £11.1.2 ½ with 1/2 being paid by the Levitor, Lord Reay, the other by the tenants. The radical school in the late 1700s had 40 pupils. Fees for the subject where as follows: Latin 2 shillings and sixpence, book keeping 10 shillings and sixpence coma arithmetic and writing 2 shillings and sixpence, English only one shilling.

Fortunately education within the parish has altered greatly since these days. A play group is run by the mothers and it meets twice a week providing an excellent preschool service.

As recent as the 1970s children wishing to follow ah higher education had to leave home aged 11 and live in Golspie on the East Coast in our hostel provided. The managed visits home perhaps one or two or three times a turn. Nowadays the hostels are run on a Monday to Friday basis and the children are taken home by school transport every Friday night returning on the Sunday evening. Since Bettyhill school was upgraded to all level status children can remain there until their 4th year however they do have the choice to move to Golspie after the second year and many do.

Primary school today comprises 2 classrooms one general purpose room a canteen toilets for boys and girls and cloakrooms lastly a dining room and staff room. The children have two teachers plus visiting teachers for art, music, Gaelic and physical education.

### **Industries**<sup>121</sup>

The major industry to penetrate the Highlands on a large scale was the oil related industries. The yards are situated some distance from this area and a lot of local people have been employed from time to time as contracts allow. This means local men commuting and naturally losing a small piece of their highland local traditions. Because the oil companies pay large wages people are seduced away from their homes.

Around Tongue the main industry is tourism. Borgie has a small hotel which caters mainly for fishermen being situated near the banks of the river Borgie. Tongue boasts two hotels the Tongue Hotel which is the older of the two and the Ben Loyal which was originally named the bungalow and before massive alterations was a guest house. in Melness there is a small guest house called "Summerdale" but referred locally too as the Craggan.

In Tongue there is a small supermarket which supplies a large degree of local groceries with a reputation of being helpful especially in the past to the very remote areas when Burrs ran a grocery van service, unfortunately this ceased two years ago. Over the years Burrs has been a regular employer for locals. As well as a post office and bank there is a small craft shop in the village and a hairdressers. The old school is a Weaver shop and cafe with the old canteen converted into a chalet. Local employment is in the main County Council road men, forestry self-employed, a fair selection of artists, writers and other small businesses, teachers and some offshore fishermen dealing in lobsters, prawns et cetera. Over the winter months many work collecting cockles and whelks for a dealer who collects the weeks haul. In the mean people have two jobs one daytime and often a croft to run as well through all not under direct pressure the working day tends to start at breakfast and end at bedtime. The concept of better employment in such a remote area is tempting and didn't really does support some workers.

The area surrounding Tongue has many historical places of interest. As well as Tongue House and Castle Borge, there are the ruins of 14<sup>th</sup> Century Castle Varrich.

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<sup>121</sup> This is information submitted by Terri Mc.Intyre in 1987 to a government sponsored project.

## Tongue Hotel<sup>122</sup>



IMAGE 332 TONGUE HOTEL

Tongue hotel has been in operation since the last century to varying degrees of success always providing employment to local people and with living accommodation two workers from out West the area. From research it would appear to have been operating at its peak when under the management of Donald Iain Mackenzie early this century.

Originally the building was a lodge owned and leased out to tenants by Sutherland estates. The first tenant appears to have been a man called MacInnes. He was succeeded by John Mackenzie and in turn was succeeded by his son. It was John McKenzie son Donald Iain who bought the hotel and its farm from Sutherland estates. By Donald's Iain's time the hotel had been extended quite considerably and with the addition of the section facing Castle Varrich had then boosted 21 bedrooms.

The hotel was totally self-sufficient having its own farm, dairy, laundry, garage with a fleet of cars and fishing boats on various locks. The farmlands extended two bars on each side of the then gravel Rd. The farm had a herd of cows and milking cows supplying the hotel needs. The buyers were behind where the craft shop now is also in that area was the stable tack room and living quarters for a stable boy. Before the council built the housing Varrich Place that area was farmed by the hotel and called the stack yard as that was where that he stacks where annually built. There was a flight of steps leading down where the present steps providing access to the houses are, two hen houses were also there and our very large number of hens. Up on the roadside beside the shop was a cart shed.

There were many outbuildings at the hotel some housed farm implements others for the fishing boats during the winter months. At the junction beside the public toilets there was a large garage

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<sup>122</sup> This is information submitted by Terri Mc.Intyre in 1987 to a government sponsored project.

where the hotel cars were kept and repaired but also other cars were attended to their. At one stage petrol was sold there. Above the snack bar was the staff accommodation known as the barracks. A little further along towards the hotel where two little outhouse is wooden built with pointed roofs one was the gun room.

The hotel building itself has changed many times over the years some areas have been used for a variety of purposes. The lounge area of the brass tap bar was originally the sitting room with a bar more of an off licence at one end then it became the stillroom where all the dishes were washed, and eventually became as it is now the lounge bar. The original still room was where the ladies toilets for the bars are, it was a small room on the ground floor looking directly onto a stone wall its use changed to an office for a while then to the staff room that is now the toilets.

The decor of the hotel has remained Victorian until the present day unfortunately with the changes of ownership many of the hotels original pieces of furniture have been removed. At one time there were six fires to be cleaned and set every morning and coal carried up from the basement throughout the day as well as the larger rooms which have their own fireplaces. Unfortunately the design of the building had the kitchen on the ground floor and the dining room on the first floor even with the aid of the dumb waiter this meant waitress ING an exhausting task.

The gardens are now very mundane but at their height they were lavish. Apple trees, soft fruits all the vegetable requirements were catered for. The main garden was laid out for walks with little edged paths. Peacocks could be seen sitting and strutting around and near the kitchen area where grouse kept for the table but before reaching it also provided decoration. It is sad to see the Slough decline to our lovely building and business. In the early part of this century the hotel advertised that a guest travelled as far as Lairg on the train then our car and chauffeur would be waiting to transport their party to Tongue. The chauffeur was also the gillie. Again in Donald Iain's time the hotel owned various other properties in the village. The building that is now the post office was our part of the hotel. Loyal cottage next to the post office on the Ben Loyal side belonged to the hotel as did the house facing the junction and another house castle view which stands next to the wooded area opposite the hotel.

The McKenzie family managed Tongue Hotel for many years and after their selling of the property in 1971 has changed hands three times and has had various managers. A lovely building with an interesting past deserves an equally good future.

### **The House of Tongue<sup>123</sup>**

Tongue house stands to the north of Tongue village down on the shores of the Kyle of Tongue. It is the ancient clan seat of the Mackays although it is now and has been for some time the property of the Sutherlands. For part of the year it is the family residence of the Countess of Sutherland.

Apart from when the gardens are opened to the public for a day during the summer months the house is not available to the public. However as it is situated by the road our good view of it can be had by taking the ring road at the west side of the Causeway by the Roundhouse. The present building dates from 1678 although from an account by reverent Adam Gunn in Sutherland and the Reay Country he states "*in 1655 an effort was made by the Earl of Glencairn to liberate the nation of the English sectaries in which he was joined by Reay which ended in the capture of Glencairn by General Monk. Reay escaped but his House of Tongue was burnt.*"

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<sup>123</sup> This is information submitted by Terri McIntyre in 1987 to a government sponsored project.



The date of the sea side section of the house is 1678. The present building is an amalgamation of two houses one was the factors house. In the wall of the garden facing the Kyle is a large black prison gate which the present Countess of Sutherland's grandmother Duchess Millicent brought back from a visit to Lewis. The door leads into a passage, walled on each side direct to the back door of the factors house this was used by tenants when paying their rents.



IMAGE 333 TONGUE HOUSE

The architect responsible for Tongue house also has both Dunrobin Castle and the Houses of Parliament to his credit, Sir Charles Barry.

It is very difficult to trace a concise history of the house during the first half of this century because until twelve years ago when the present Countess and her family moved to Tongue the house had not been our family residence. For the most part it was leased out to various people, many famous names stayed or visited the Sutherland Estates in Tongue. One such visitor was a young 25 years old Winston Churchill who had taken the Duke of Sutherland then aged about 10 and his grandmother for a tour from Dunrobin to Tongue in his car a small red 10 horsepower Morris. The car was driven by Churchill's chauffeur who was not accustomed to driving on these roads and a great deal of the journey was spent up on the sides of the roads. He drove at full throttle in the centre of the road regardless of any obstructions, when nearing Tongue he drove too fast over a hump backed bridge that the Duke cut his chin his hat was thrown out onto the Heather. Once at Tongue the Duke went to have his chin attended to by the doctor but found the doctor suffering from a broken leg after his bike hit a sheep in collision.

Tongue House is now mainly of Victorian style inside and it is very difficult to find traces of the oldest parts of the building. Some year's previous three stone plaques were removed from

the outside and are now housed in a room named the Mackay room. One of the plaques is the Mackay Crest carved in stone, arms of Donald first Lord Reay in Tongue House.

### **The Churches and Ministry Of Tongue**<sup>124</sup>

The Church of Saint Andrews in Tongue is on the north side of the village laid out in the shape of a cross the church stands within high stone walls. It is thought to have been the site of a church as early as the Viking era although nothing of such an early building remains. Tongue church like so many others today host a much smaller congregation than in past times. But that does not alter the fact that for many generations the church and its work have been an integral part of community life.

The present building dates from 1728 although a previous church was built on the site in 1680. The old manse situated on the South side of the church, the present building was constructed in 1841 replacing a much older building which had been troublesome for many years and in our constant state of needing repairs. The building was probably the home of the catechist long thatched house. The old manse is no longer the property of the Church of Scotland but no belongs 2 Highland Council and is at present run as a guest house and adventure holiday centre called Loudies. Ask minister of the parish was called Loudy and as a child I often heard old folk say “you'll be big and strong when I'm down the back at Loudies” in other words once they were dead and buried.

The church and the old manse complement each other architecturally with lovely crew stamped roof edging. The church in recent years has been quite watched and this makes it our lovely little village church sitting as it does before a backdrop of trees and a small burn. When the church was renovated in 1728 in part of the 1680 Isle was kept but there is no evidence that any of “Teapull Pheader” Saint Peters church or Chapel survived. From records Kate it appears the cost of the work was £208.15.7d and took less and six months to complete. Some local building materials were used, the paving stones came from Portvasgo small fishing port at the north tip of Melness and the roofing slate came from Talmine.

The Mackay chiefs have always been in tired at Tongue, the family vault lies below what is now called the Duke's box this construction was added during the 1680 rebuilding for the use of Lord rays family originally it was named the re loft and had a carved wooden canopy but this was reviewed in 1951 and is now housed in the Museum of antiquities in Edinburgh. The reason it is now called the Duke's box and is upholstered in Sutherland tartan it is used by the Countess of Sutherland and family when residing in Tongue House. The first Lord ray interned there was conveyed from Bergen where he died to Tongue in 1649.

The present vault which was built in 1727 was built over the graves of predecessors of the Mackay family. Some years ago the vault was unfilled to cover some broken coffins in the vault however there is still a great deal of space within the vault.

The interior of the church is a lovely mixture of natural wood latticed windows and plain white walls. Nowadays worshippers have the comfort of carpets and wall heating although the church may not have a large weekly attendance at festivals, harvest, Easter, Christmas it is the epitome of a village church. Three main services people require of their church is baptism, marriage and funerals and at such times the church unites the whole community. More so at a burial than any other occasion. On the occasion of a funeral the small church often cannot hold all the mourners it is regarded as a deep mark of respect to attend a funeral of a friend or a neighbour and people will return home from great distances at such a time. Funerals have changed quite a lot over the years. At one time the small church yard shed housed not only the necessary tools

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<sup>124</sup> This is information submitted by Terri Mc.Intyre in 1987 to a government sponsored project.

of maintenance but also the grave diggers “dicky” and five minutes before the procession arrived he quickly changed.

Many stories used to be told about one particular grave digger who had a fondness for a dram and his many near scrapes. In those days the grave digger was paid by the family after the burial coma if this procedure was changed and he received payment before the burial then he would retire to the pub and the consequences were often luckily humorous. Today the work of the grave digger falls on the village officer, an employee of the District Council. Many funerals in the past were held at the home of the deceased after the ritual viewing of the remains was over a short service at the house then depending on the distance the coffin was carried by the mourners to the cemetery or as in recent times the coffin was taken in the hairs and following in double file went the mourners.

On reaching the cemetery the poll bearer's carried the coffin to the graveside where after reading the funeral is finished. Many people then consider the custom then is to retire to the local pub. To some this may be considered as disrespectful too many it is that a natural way of things and is the inevitable conclusion to a funeral.

Before the church bell was removed at midnight on Hogmanay it was always rung to welcome in the New Year. (The bell has been reinstalled). At Halloween the bell could be heard ringing through the darkness, children guising in the dense darkness with a turnip lantern to light the route the sound of the church bell tormented the imagination which was exactly the bill ringer's intention.

The present minister at Tongue is the Rev. J. Rettie who succeeded the Rev, A. Macintosh on his retirement, the Rev. McIntosh had been minister in Tongue for the previous 17 years.

### **Past Social Conditions in the Parish**<sup>125</sup>.

Extracts taken from Tongue village history compiled by the Tongue woman's rural institute 1966

After the rebellion by the Jacobite in 1745 and economic change occurred in the Highlands and landlords accepted as part of the inevitable order of things that rents such increase at each resetting. Between the years 1761 and 1792 the rent on the Reay estates were doubled. A crofter keen to make his living from the land had but two choices either he immigrated or he submitted to the increase and coped as best he could. Many taxmen were sympathetic towards their subtenants but not all acted in this matter.

The situation in dung came to a head on the 17th of May 1788 when the reverent Mr McKenzie petitioned on behalf of the subtenants on Tongue farm general honourable Alexander Mackay who was then the commander in chief in Scotland and who also administrated for the Reay estate To be paid for the duties the were ordered to carry out for the tax man. The situation at that time meant that the tacksman could have him subtenants working on his farm, cutting his peats, delivery letters many miles from home and be called upon to winter his cattle all for no remuneration. The tacksman not only had his land rent free but had a pool of free labour to work it also. The subtenants had to fulfil the tax Mans needs before they were free to work on their own land.

The conclusion was that his lordship ordered the termination of such oppressive practises by the tack man on his tenants and the reverent Mr McKenzie was instructed to see that these

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<sup>125</sup> This is information submitted by Terri Mc.Intyre in 1987 to a government sponsored project.

orders were complied with and furthermore should the tacksman attempt to replace subtenants at his whim his lordship was to be informed immediately.

Sea fisheries underwent a change towards the end of the 18th century. The sea fisheries along the North Coast were led to an Aberdeen company. In the hope of extra earnings local people entered into contracts with the company. As local crofters did not have the resources to purchase their own boats or Nets the agreement was that the company advanced the capital for the venture on the basis that the company received two cheers to the one share for the crew. However the crew were obliged to sell their catch at whatever price the company offered them. At the same time smuggling contraband was rife in the north and the company were in league with vessels engaged in unlawful practises.

A Lewis family were in charge of the business and captain hill seemed to have been master of one of the trading smacks, captain hill is referred to in rob dawn's "Drevgan Falanh". Large quantities of Gen and Brandy were discharged at various places along the North Coast and were bought by Inns and hotels as far as Inverness. The presbytery decided that the situation had deteriorated so much that they would act on the numerous request they'd received from a selection of the community. It was common practise for the drunken fights to occur even on the Sabbath and cattle deals were openly held outside the church as worshippers left. Mr McKenzie dealt strongly with this offenders and it is said that one of the worst offenders eventually became an elder in the congregation.

### **Early Community Life in the Parish**<sup>126</sup>

The people were of an industrious nature not in any commercial sense but purely in order to survive. The work on the craft an early this was hard and laborious. The craft were cultivated by a "Cas chrom" and soon seed throwing from a pail carried by the sword. It was fairly common to see both the crofter and his wife bent beneath the strain of wooden arrows drawn with ropes which were fastened over their shoulders this type of work was severe to say the



IMAGE 334 TONGUE FROM CASTLE VARRICH

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<sup>126</sup> This is information submitted by Terri Mc.Intyre in 1987 to a government sponsored project.

least. At harvest time the sites were the tool used for cutting the crops and the sheaths were carried manually on their backs. People were able to carry very large loads.

The dwellings were very basic indeed very few houses had chimneys instead the boosted “lums” which were basically our hole in the roof which the smoke vented through. In some homes the fire was not against the gable wall but placed in the middle of the floor and suspended from the roof was a large hook on which was placed the large cooking pot. The usual meal being a stew of venison or hare and potatoes. Eating utensils and cooking utensils were all manufactured locally. The man who made the horn spoons and wooden eating bowls would also be the local shoemaker mainly skin brochs made with the fir to the exterior on, completion they were reversed and the fir worn on the inside. The local postman carried more than just letters he delivered various goods whilst on his rounds. Shops were scarce and goods were bought by sailing smack from Thurso or from the Orkneys by the trading boat the Cormorant.

Such items as tea were considered a luxury but whisky was regarded as a cure for all ills somethings never change! Stills where in operation all over the area as indeed they were all over the Highlands. Entertainment was a homespun variety and was none the worst for that. Ceilidhs were held in people’s homes usually in the kitchen in front of a large peat fire which lighted the room. Armed with a warming whisky and a smoke many stories were told, songs and dances thus maintaining the oral tradition of the Highlands. Songs and poems were recited from memory in Gaelic and were probably composed by local writers such as Rob Donn or Ewan Robertson. Today these works are heard mainly at the mods and a few local children have not even heard of Rob Donn let alone read any of his writings. While it cannot be argued that his work loses something in the translation that in itself the work is a masterpiece in a window to social history of his time.

To this day the area maintains a community spirit although today the influx of new people is of a very high level. It is not the arrival of new faces that so worries Highlander it is a subtle diluting of his traditional way of life. However it is fair to see that the area would indeed be a lot less populated if it were not for incomers and if people love the place enough to live and work in it

### Castle Varrich



IMAGE 335 CASTLE VARRICH RUIN STANDS PROMINENT ON THE RHIAN HILL OPPOSITE VILLAGE OF TONGUE

The castle is on a local high point of rock, overlooking both the Kyle of Tongue and the village of Tongue. The castle's precise origins and age are unknown built on a promontory is a two-storey ruined tower house. The ruin stands prominent on the Rhian Hill opposite village of Tongue. At the Rhian Hill the castle occupies the front edge and has always been considered to have been a look out post. There is studies of the castle building being occupied by a Viking king "Origines Parochiles" but the other opinion more favoured is that the castle was a Mackay stronghold. The building materials and the style are argued that it is unlikely to have been of Viking origin.



IMAGE 336 CASTLE VARRICH

Caisteal Bharraich (anglicised to Castle Varrich) dating from the 14<sup>th</sup> century and is believed to have been built on the foundations of an old Norse fort. It had two floors plus an attic; the lower floor may have been a byre or stables. The ground floor was entered through the surviving door in the north wall, it was vaulted but has now fallen. There was no stair between this and the first floor suggesting it may have been used for cattle or as stables. The main first floor entrance was on the south side and would have been reached by a ladder or movable stair. There was a window in the east wall and a fireplace in the west but both have now collapsed beyond recognition. Recesses in the internal north and south walls were part of a type of roof more commonly seen in west highland cottages. There may have been a parapet but no trace of it survives.

It is believed that Bishops of Caithness used it when moving between Scrabster and Balnakeil House near Durness. Caisteal Bharraich is the oldest stone building in the north of Scotland and is built on the oldest rock in the United Kingdom, Lewisian Gneiss. The origins of the castle are unclear, but some believe it could be the "Beruvik" mentioned in the Norse Orkneyinga Saga. Others believe it was built as recently as the 1500s, by either the Bishops of Caithness or by the Mackay family.

The walls are generally 1.4 metres (5 ft.) thick, or thicker, and have been built from roughly squared blocks of metamorphosed sandstone rock of varying thickness, laid in rough courses of random depth. The stones seem to have been laid without the use of mortar, and have suffered little from weathering, considering that the building may be 1000 years old, and considering the local weather. From places where parts of the walls have fallen away it appears that the construction seen on the wall faces is consistent throughout their thickness; as distinct from the type of walling where the faces have been constructed in a tidy fashion, but between them is a core of rubble.

The castle has recently (2017) been updated to make it more accessible with a galvanized steel spiral staircase and viewing platform inside allowing visitors a higher viewpoint over the Kyle of Tongue. Varrich Castle is about one hour's walk away from the village of Tongue, and is clearly signposted from there.

## **South from Tongue**

### **To Altnaharra and the Crask Gateway on the A836**

As Tongue is left behind the road joins the A836 that comes from Lairg through Altnaharra and another south border of Mackay Country. The road winds its way southwards passing close to a number of small lochans and gracefully passes Loch Craggie and Loch Loyal.

Loch Loyal and Ben Loyal a few miles north of Altnaharra, the A 836 passes between Loch Loyal and the slopes of Ben Loyal to the west, it is often possible to see a variety of wildlife around the loch in spring and summer. Waterfowl including graylag geese breed here in autumn and winter. Large numbers of red deer can be seen on the slopes of Ben Loyal. These typical upland areas had also the breeding and hunting grounds of one of our rarest birds, the golden eagle.

All around are numerous small pools that break up the peatland and rock outcrops. Distant views of Ben More Assynt and Ben Hee to the southwest and Ben Klibreck to the east. Ben Loyal and Ben Hope to the west where the road arrives at Altnaharra. As you continue south with a gentle climb, the road follows the River Vagastie, before we leave Mackay Country at the Crask Inn, where the trees appear. Crask Inn, a settlement in Strath Tirry, lies on the north side of the Strath a' Chraisg burn, 8 miles (13 km) south of Altnaharra. Just prior to Altnaharra the B873 heads slightly northeast to Syre and joins the B871 from Strathnaver and B871 from the A897 and the Forsinard gateway.

At Syre is a small corrugated iron church with Gothic windows erected in 1891 as a Mission Station for the Free Church of Scotland in Altnaharra. The interior is lined with wood. There is a small porch, or vestibule, at the east end, and three Gothic-style windows in each wall of the main body of the church. The walls are white, the roofs red, and the window surrounds are black. The church is typical of the numerous prefabricated churches, sometimes called 'tin churches', erected in isolated areas of the Highlands during the Victorian period and beyond. Despite the fact that they were often called tin churches, these buildings were usually made of galvanised and corrugated iron. Galvanising was essential to preserve the building from the worst effects of the damp Highland climate. The church was originally lit by oil lamps, but these have now been augmented by electric lights.

The new church served the scattered community of Strathnaver, composed mainly of shepherds, ghillies, and gamekeepers in the employ of the Sutherland Estates. Before the Clearances began in earnest in 1811, the inhabitants of Strathnaver congregated at the church in Achness, a few miles south of Syre. After the Clearances had decimated the population, there was no need for a church.



IMAGE 337 SYRE

The population of Strathnaver increased in 1901 when a portion of Syre Farm was purchased by the Congested Districts Board and offered for rent as smallholdings. Twenty-nine parcels of land were rented out, some to descendants of families who had been cleared off their land over eighty years earlier.

The very simple church building is unaltered since it was erected, but the congregation has changed several times over the past century. In 1900 the congregation voted to join with the United Presbyterian Church to create the United Free Church, then in 1929, the UFC itself merged with the Church of Scotland to create a new Church of Scotland. Since 1962 Syre Church has been associated with the Church of Scotland in Bettyhill. A war memorial stands in front of the church engraved with the names of 16 local men who lost their lives in the First and Second World Wars. Twelve of the men were killed in WWI, seven while serving with the Seaforth Highlanders.

The church is generally open daily to visitors,

In addition to the church, there was a corrugated iron barn to the south (now demolished) and the farmhouse, known as Patrick Sellar's House after the Sutherland Estates factor who was

IMAGE 338 SYRE CHURCH





IMAGE 339 INTERIOR OF SYRE CHURCH

responsible for the worst of the Clearances in the area and later operated a large sheep farm on the cleared land. Patrick Sellar, built the house directly behind the church, recently rebuilt. Further along the road is Syre Lodge built as a sporting retreat in the late nineteenth century and enlarged in 1908.

Patrick Sellar was a sheep farmer and factor for the Sutherland estate. Sellar, with the estate commissioner, William Young, had more or less taken over the management of the estate by 1809. Sellar supervised the Strathnaver evictions in 1814, one of the most notorious events of the Highland Clearances. He was one of the most infamous landlords for clearing off the land tenants whose families had farmed there for generations. Sellar was in the front line of the duke's dirty work, and showed great enthusiasm and brutality in his ruthless evictions. He was subsequently charged with culpable homicide, real injury and oppression. The trial took place in Inverness. He was acquitted by a jury of his peers and subsequently became one of the wealthiest sheep farmers in the north of Scotland. He died in 1851. His name became synonymous with the Clearances.

### **East from Tongue to Coldbackie on the A836**

Coldbackie a small crofting township, the name probably means “the bank with the bump” from Norse. Coldbackie lies at the head of Tongue Bay, two miles north of Tongue. A Norse name from Backie meaning Bank and coulla meaning bump – The bank of the bump. Callbacaìdh in Gaelic is a crofting township. It is one of a series of crofting townships, running from Tongue, through Coldbackie, Strath Tongue, Dalharn, Blandy and Scullomie to the deserted township of Slettel that sit on the eastern fringes of the Kyle of Tongue.



IMAGE 340 WATCH HILL, CNOC AN FHREICEADAIN, COLDBACKIE

Coldbackie lies at the head of the Kyle of Tongue, two miles north east of Tongue and sits under the Watch Hill, Cnoc an Fhreicheadain, is modest in height at 1008 feet, but offers dramatic old red sandstone conglomerate cliffs, looking north over a spectacular beach to the Rabbit Islands and impressive views along the north coast. One of the few places on the north coast where sedimentary rocks can be found. The Coldbackie conglomerates made of particles as tiny as sand and as large as boulders all meshed together. They form the cliffs below the road to the beach and the peaks of the Watch Hill above and behind the road. They extend past the beach under the sea and out to Island Rhone.



IMAGE 341 VIEW OF THE RABBIT ISLANDS FROM COLDBACKIE

The drive continues on through Coldbackie to the turnoff for Skerray.

## Skerray



IMAGE 342 SKERRAY

Skerray is a spread out community of about eight three of a population, an active and vibrant group of people with a careful understanding of the needs and a gentle determination to approach the future with a positive attitude. Correctly, Skerray is just one of a number of small townships between Strathan Skerray and the Borgie River but the name is commonly used to describe the whole of this area. Skerray, or 'rock'.

Skerray lies on the minor road set on the bend of a large horse-shoe shaped road that meanders along through stunning scenery and that loops round and joins the A836 again.

The glen of Strathan Skerray has six croft houses in it, two still occupied by working crofters. Two foot bridges cross the burn, which runs through it down to the sea. There is a sandy beach with interesting rock-pools on its eastern side. It is a bit of a scramble down to the beach so boats have to be launched at Skerray Harbour. Canoes, surfboards etc. can be carried down. The harbour with the views over to the two important offshore islands, Island Neave *The Priest's Island* close to Skerray Harbour, and, one mile from the harbour, Island Roan, inhabited until December 1938. Skerray Harbour is set in a sheltered hamlet and at some time must have been a thriving locality. Two or three very small vessels are located here with a small lobster creel business working from shore.

There are several interesting walks in the area surrounding the glen. Just over a mile across the moor is the very lovely deserted township of Sleitel. To the northwest are sea cliffs, which have wonderful views and lots of Fulmars and other birds nesting on them. Half an hour will take you to a remote loch where red throated divers nest. All around are miles of open moorland. A chambered Cairns 688615 located by crossing the burn and about a twenty minute climb up Druim Chubie national nature reserve serves an area between the estuaries of the Borgie River

and the Naver with an area of about 1363 acres it was created in 1960. Vast supplies of fluvial glacier sand which mixed with shell sand forms the enormous beaches.

The Jimson Centre is named after former resident James Munro (known as Jimson) who owned the croft set in centre of the area. This consists of croft houses, which have been restored and has become famous for the high quality and diversity of the products it offers for sale. They now contain a Post Office and shop selling an excellent range of locally produced goods, a garden centre that features the unique chrysanthemum '*Highland White Dream*'.

Skerray is a small crofting community at the heart of the 'Land of Clan Mackay' and occupies a rocky promontory between Tongue in the west and Bettyhill to the east. The name 'Skerray' means, literally, "*between the rocks and the sea*". There are eleven townships scattered across the windswept moors and cliffs, Torrisdale, Achtoty, Lotts, Clashaidy, Clashlevan, Achnabat, Clashbuie, Modary, Lamigo, Stathanbeg, Strathan, and the deserted village of Slettel where he remains of several buildings and enclosures are clearly visible. All the little townships mostly lead from the strath towards the coast. The little roads lead to one or two houses and terminate at small crofts.

Peat stacks sit at the side of the road and the old mingles with the new designed tastefully to look old, a place where the past and the present meet, somewhere in the forgotten present, and with the future in clear view. The old ruined church and cemetery still used today at the foot of the brae to Aird must have stories to tell. The village hall that has seen and still sees a multitude of events and is constantly in use brings the scattered population of Skerray with diverse interests in the arts together for concerts, shows and performances of all kinds. The Skerray Village Hall is a small unspectacular building but it is renowned for its diversity of world-class entertainment many entertainers have played here and people come from all over to see them.

While the historical society busily reinforces the times gone by with chronicles, archives and records and plans to convert the old church this little settlement continues to maintain and live old traditions. Skerray residents have around the year 2000 built a 'ctannog' in Loch Crochach by digging a deep ditch to turn a small promontory into an island. In a community-wide ceremony they planted native species of trees on the island and dropped ceramic balls, made by the Balnakeil potter Lotte Glob (herself the daughter of Danish archaeologist P. V. Glob)



IMAGE 343 SKERRAY PIER

into the water around it. The Lockharts, artists and crofters at Lamigo, have recently banished sheep from their croft and are planting native trees on the land with assistance from Scottish Natural Heritage. They have also diverted the Modaridh Burn, which flows through their land, into a large Celtic knot that they dug out by hand; it can, they believe, be seen from aircraft passing overhead on one of the transatlantic routes.

Skerray pier is a picturesque small harbour built about 1890 a small man-made channel constructed to make it safer for the boats to reach the pier as the shoreline is very rocky *Eilan Neave* and *Eilan Nan Roan* nearby make possible access by boat in summer season. a plaque is erected on the pier in memory of the two local men lost at sea in 1973 while fishing for lobster.

### **Skerray Restoration Project<sup>127</sup>**

"There is a vast plain capable of cultivation through which a great ditch has been nearly completed, and which when done will make it one of the best settlements on this part of the Estate." Thus, James Loch, Sutherland Estate Factor described 'Loch Skerrow' in 1829.

The first houses alongside what is now the Skerray road were probably built about 1827 when Achtoty, or "Lotts", 'was settled. By 1831 loch drainage was completed and further crofts were created. In the early part of this century some extension work was carried out to the original dwellings followed by the building of larger, more substantial houses. Now only four of the original buildings remain standing, three of which have thatched roofs.

During the winter of 1991/92 the "newest" of these was renovated using the various skills of a local volunteer workforce and it is now entirely wind and water tight. The building will be used as an agricultural feed store during the winter but in the summer months it becomes "Skerray Studio" - a drop-in centre for locals and visitors alike, where paintings and local craftwork are both exhibited and created.

Few thatched settlements remain in the north of Scotland and when completed the refurbished buildings will become a tremendous community asset in many ways. Apart from their potential use as accommodation for various village activities such as the Art Group or the Video Group, for example, or as an exhibition centre for local history, they will represent a very important link with the birth of this unique crofting community.

***Text from Changing Places The call of the croft first broadcast Wednesday 11 October, 4.30-5.00 p.m. on radio 4. This programme featured the stories of the struggles of the long-established crofting township of Skerray on the north Sutherland coast of Scotland.***

*The romantic image of crofting is of fiercely self-sufficient individuals who live off the land in some of the most beautiful countryside in the world. Scotland is certainly very beautiful but, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, crofting is not an easy life. Crofting is not an economically viable lifestyle on its own, and both these communities are constantly experimenting with new initiatives to ensure that they remain viable.*

*The crofting township of Skerray is vast: including common grazings (2,200 hectares) and coastal grassland, it covers 2,600 hectares (6,422 acres). Each of the 68 crofts in the township has about 3 hectares (about 7.5 acres) of arable land of its own, usually beside the house. Skerray has a total population of 83 individuals, and they rear cattle and sheep (mainly sold as calves and lamb), grow vegetables and fruit (including specialist products such as blueberries), run a tree nursery, and produce honey, timber and crafts. Most crofters*

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<sup>127</sup> From an unknown author

*supplement their agricultural incomes from other sources such as forestry, working for the roads department, landscape gardening or whatever else is available.*

*Many activities are carried out communally. There is a local community enterprise called NORCELT (North coast Community Enterprise Ltd) in which crofters have a share. This supplies animal feed, co-ordinates a tree network, and is registered with the Royal Horticultural Society to produce a chrysanthemum called Highland White Dream. A major project for NORCELT has been the renovation of old thatched cottages in the middle of Skerray to house a workshop, a community office, a shop supplying some locally produced food, crafts and plants, and a small archive and exhibition. Skerray also has a thriving village hall which hosts many travelling shows and runs art and craft classes.*

*The success of the community in developing new cultural, environmental and business initiatives led to them winning the Crofting Township of the Year Award in 1997. The residents themselves believe that their success is due to a mixture of strong and committed individuals and their local sense of unity. Those strengths give them the confidence to move on to new projects and encourage young people to stay in the area, and to return if they have left to study elsewhere.*

## **Borgie**



IMAGE 344 RIVER BORGIE

The A836 road crosses the river at Borgie Bridge and the crofting settlement cleared for sheep in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was resettled c.1919. At Borgie NC715590 Coille na Borgie there are remains of two (possibly three) chambered cairns. The south structure is the best preserved. The north structure may be two cairns back to back a 72m long southern cairn, with the burial chamber in the foreground. Borgie lies on the Borgie River which flows 6 miles (10 km) north eastwards

from Loch Laoghal (Loch Loyal) to enter Torrisdale Bay an inlet of the Pentland Firth, to the west of Bettyhill. Borgie Forest occupies a vast tract of wild country well off the beaten track. Houses are few and far between. There is a chance of spotting some of Scotland's more elusive wildlife. Badgers, for instance, are known to live in the area. Deer, pine marten and wild cat may also be seen, and the small pools within the forest are home to countless frogs.



IMAGE 345 AN CRAOBH ('THE TREE') - AN ARTWORK

The River Borgie an attractive, Atlantic salmon river is a small river draining a loch system of four lochs where the fish head for spawning. The river is accessed by forestry road. The forest was gifted to the crown by the Duke of Sutherland, latterly however, much of the early plantings perished in the fire in 1942 and at present the growth is mainly post war. In the late 1970s some of the most horrific events took place in the history of Scottish forestry hundreds of hectares of lodge pine were destroyed by an unknown pest which were found to be the pine beauty moth which multiplied in great numbers due to the prevailing dry summers. To this day the affected trees can still be seen being used to shelter new plantations.

Borgie was the first managed forest in Scotland and was one of the Forest Commissions' original plantings in 1920. All but 20 hectares of this forest was destroyed by fire in 1942. Scots Pine and Spruce, which survived are now some of the tallest trees in Sutherland at over 100 feet tall. The Borgie Forest walks pass below some of these lofty pine and spruce giants and through the wide variety of conifers used to replant the burned forest, Scots Pine, Sitka/Norway Spruce, Japanese larch, Noble fir and Lawson cypress. The River Borgie, runs alongside part of the walk.

An Craobh ('the Tree') - an artwork consisting of a spiral pathway between the trees which make up the letters of the Gaelic alphabet. At its centre is a curved stone wall whilst a pathway branches uphill from the spiral to a viewpoint seat. This is a community project, which brings life to an ancient Gaelic Tree Alphabet.

Within Borgie Forest is The Unknown, an enigmatic sculpture by artist Kenny Hunter erected in 2012 the skeletal form cast at Hargreaves Foundry in the Calder Valley, West Yorkshire,. The Unknown is representative of the outcast figure that features so prominently in Scotland's history, people like William Wallace, Bonnie Prince Charlie and the families of the Highland Clearances curious and fascinatingly at one with its surroundings in this ancient landscape within which rich folkloric traditions have been kept alive by an oral storytelling culture. The artist's work here references these and other sources from both ancient and relatively recent times, situated as it is within an area that contains the remains of settlements from the most infamous and traumatic clearances in Scottish history, as well as numerous Neolithic chambered cairns, Bronze Age forts, roundhouses and Iron Age brochs. The sculptor himself has said: 'The Unknown defies the conventions of public art, being both ambiguous and remote. Yet still reminding us of what is now and what has always been. In a strange way, I would align The Unknown with the tradition of Land Art, where the journey to see the work is part of the experience, and you have to make an effort to see it.'

The Borgie totem pole was carved by the pupils of Farr School (and a few adult helpers) and was erected in Borgie Forest at the end of the summer of 2004. Motifs of animals, birds and insects have been carved into an 18 foot-long log felled from Borgie Forest. Henry Fosbroke (famous for his woodlands orchestra) was in the area over the summer helping put up the log building at Borgie, and finished off the carvings on the pole, treated it with natural preservatives so that it lasts for a long, long time. There was a ceremony in the Forest to dedicate the totem pole to which the children and their helpers were invited.

There are different marked walks within the forest, there is also a bike trail, but it is not always open.

## **Invernaver**



IMAGE 346 INVERNAVER AT THE MOUTH OF THE RIVER NAVER



Continuing on the A 836 west the turnoff to the hamlet of Invernaver that lies at the mouth of the River Naver a mile (1½ km) south of Bettyhill. The Invernaver National Nature Reserve, designated in 1960. Up until recently it was a national nature reserve but is now an SSSI. Between the mouths of the Rivers Borgie and Naver on the west side of Bettyhill is one of the most important botanical sites in Scotland with a wide variety of lime and acid loving species such as crowberry, mountain avens, moss campion and bearberry. Because of the severe exposure, uncommon mountain plants can be found growing almost at sea level. It is designated for its exceptional coastal geomorphology, sand dune, saltmarsh and upland habitats, and its botanical interest. The site shows a gradual transition from stable sand dunes through areas of windblown sand on a low, rocky headland, to heathland and peatland vegetation where the influence of calcareous shell sand disappears. The site is a classic example of the development of montane vegetation at low altitudes due to the high latitude and exposure of the north coast of Scotland. Interest of the site lies in the interaction between glacial landforms, shaped at the end of the last Ice Age around 10,000 years ago, and continuing coastal processes. The Rivers Naver and Borgie flow along narrow valleys that cut through sand and gravel terraces deposited by glacial meltwater. Superimposed upon this glacial landscape are the highly dynamic sand dunes, climbing dunes and machair, which demonstrate the diversity and stability of windblown features. The area is important for the study of coastal evolution through the ongoing processes of deposition and erosion.



IMAGE 347 THE WRECK OF THE SS JOHN RANDOLPH A LIBERTY SHIP TORRISDALE BAY 1952/53

The raised beach contains archaeological sites including a prehistoric settlement and burial complex. It is a peculiar landscape, not quite land, not quite littoral, but a bleak, windswept combination of the two. Mobile sand dunes cover parts of the plain, and the stretches of flat sand between them are littered with water-worn stones. In some cases these appear randomly spread, but some cluster in the shapes of hut-circles, walls, rectangular platforms and cairns, dating from the prehistoric. Its surface is constantly in a state of slow flux; shifting sand dunes

reveal some archaeological remains and cover others, so that the different views of the evidence through time have varied not only because the accumulation of knowledge generally has allowed more informed interpretations, but mainly because the archaeology has appeared in different configurations to different observers. The complex of remains show the intermittent re-use of this landscape with its access to the sea and the river. The wide mouth of Torrisdale Bay and the shelter offered by the headlands on either side of it have consistently drawn people who settled here whenever it was viable.

Unseen today but buried in the sand is the wreck of the SS John Randolph a Liberty ship built in the United States during World War II. She was named after John Randolph, a planter and a Congressman from Virginia who served in the House of Representatives at various times between 1799 and 1833 and the Senate from 1825 to 1827. He was also Minister to Russia under President Andrew Jackson in 1830. *John Randolph* was severely damaged after striking an Allied mine on the night of 5 July 1942. The forepart was salvaged but broke tow on 1 September 1952 and was wrecked at Torrisdale Bay on 5 September.

Torrisdale Trekking Centre is operated from a base at Invernaver. The centre provides an opportunity for everyone to experience the beauty and remoteness of one of Sutherland's finest beaches some three to four miles of golden sands on horseback. At the moment the beach is not easily accessed from the Bettyhill side and involves a walk of about a mile.

## Bettyhill



IMAGE 348 BETTYHILL

Continuing on the main road across the River Naver and into Bettyhill, This is a crofting community set among rocky green hills, straggles along the side of a narrow tidal estuary, and down the coast to two splendid beaches, which in the past had the functions of a small port. The village of Bettyhill makes a good stop. Bettyhill is a small and dispersed settlement on the

North Coast between the villages of Tongue to the west and Melvich to the east. Bettyhill sits on the northern coastline nine miles (15 km) south west of Strathy Point.



IMAGE 349 THE REMAINS OF THE ICE HOUSE AT BETTYHILL

Situated at the head of Strathnaver Valley, it was one of 64 communities that populated the area before the Sutherland clearances in the early 19th Century and was one of the few to remain after them. Bettyhill the Gaelic name is An Bloran Odor, The grey place. Once known as Bettyhill of Farr and founded originally as a fishing and agricultural centre. The original village is beyond the sands of Farr Bay. In the area was Farr, now a straggling crofting settlement and set in about moorland lying a mile east of Bettyhill. Bettyhill is a fairly recent creation. Bettyhill grew as a settlement in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when many of the tenants of the Duke of Sutherland were evicted from their inland straths to crofting plots on the coast. The centre of the village takes a nucleated pattern built around the school and post office with many outlining croft houses. Bettyhill has a population of about 492 and is both welcoming and interesting. The River Naver flows into the sea here from Strathnaver.

Elizabeth Leveson-Gower, Countess of Sutherland (1765, 1839) and wife of George Granville Leveson-Gower, 1<sup>st</sup>. Duke of Sutherland, donated the land at Bettyhill to evicted tenants and had an alternative village built near the coast on the east side of the mouth of the River Naver. (Folk lore says she named the new village after herself as Bettyhill. This is unlikely as she was not known to be called or call herself the acronym Betty from her name.) Most of the dramatic changes in Mackay Country occurred at the time of the clearances and Bettyhill was no different.

Bettyhill today has three distinct parts.

The modern housing and the Bettyhill Hotel, found on the main road as it ascends east above the River Naver, determines the centre. Bettyhill Hotel started in 1819, and has grown steadily. Its location is superb, giving magnificent views to the northwest over Torrisdale Bay.

East in a sheltered basin are the older parts of the village, the St Columba's Parish Church of Farr, now the Strathnaver Museum. Farr Church was built in 1774 and, at the time could accommodate 750 people. By 1882, clearance, emigration and splits in the church meant that the upper galleries could be removed. It was converted into a museum in the 1970s, is full of locally donated bits and pieces, and includes panels by local schoolchildren telling the story of the Strathnaver Clearances. The Strathnaver area abounds with archaeological sites and in the museum can be seen an early beaker, which was found in a burial kist close to the River Naver. The name Naver reflects the strong Norse influences which Sutherland has experienced in the past.

To the north is the rock framed sandy beach of Farr Bay and, to the west and beyond the River Naver, the still more stunning expanse of sand making up Torrisdale Bay. In the mouth of the River Naver and opposite a wide expanse of rock-backed dunes is the neglected pier. In the early days of the village this formed an important fishing station. Little remains, and even the name, Navermouth, have all but disappeared. The Ice house at Bettyhill is the remains of the once active salmon netting station that operated until recently. The rich salmon fishing in the River Naver has been exploited for centuries. A sweep net fishing station operated here and at various periods the icehouse and canning factory were in use to preserve fish for the sale in distant markets.

### **B871 South Through Strathnaver**

To Dalvina and Syre the B873 along Loch Naver, to Altnaharra and the A836 through Strath Vagastie to Crask.

The valley of Strathnaver runs for fifteen miles south from Bettyhill and was once heavily populated. From 1807 the Sutherland Estate systematically cleared the land of its inhabitants.

South of Bettyhill the B571 follows the River Naver down through Strathnaver and here can be seen the ruins of pre clearance villages. Rosal where Donald Macleod, who wrote "Gloomy Memories", was born is one of the old settlements with an interpretive trail of its own. The museum tells the story with graphics, artefacts and models. Rosal is situated near Syre in Strathnaver. It has one of the better preserved village layouts from the time the area was cleared to make room for sheep. Sutherland Estate records show that 13 families lived at Rosal, perhaps totalling just over 100 people. The ruins of 18 long houses can be found, but some may have been disused. In 1814 the village of Rosal in Strathnaver was cleared. There are eight other villages in the area, from Achadhan east in the south to Langdale in the north. Langdale was the largest with 18 families. This small section of the glen housed around 450 people, and the whole strath down to Invernaver supported some 1900 people. Beyond are the ruins of Grummore Broch.

Strathnaver is inextricably linked to the most notorious times of the Highlands, the mass evictions known as the Clearances that took place two centuries ago. The ruins of many villages that had to be abandoned have merged into the current landscape. At the time of the clearances Strathnaver was home to about three hundred and forty families having a total population of about two thousand mostly working communally and living in small villages. The twenty four miles of twisting and winding road from Bettyhill to Altnaharra through the spectacular Strathnaver, the broad fertile valley of the river Naver along the Loch of the same name, contains a wealth of remains extending back to the Neolithic Period six thousand years ago. In amongst the magnificent landscape there are burial cairns, standing stones, brochs and place names left by Norse invaders; chapel sites and burial grounds. This is a Strath steeped in history with the tranquility of unimaginable depth and an environment rich in flora, fauna and bird life. Strathnaver was the medieval province and was the area from Cape Wrath to Caithness. A trail

has been identified with interpretation and information about this area and it is well worth the trip. The Strathnaver Trail was officially open on Friday 30<sup>th</sup>. May at the Strathnaver Museum.

The importance of Strathnaver's archaeology and landscape has long been recognised and the £190,000 project has received a wide body of support from partners including the Heritage



IMAGE 350 STRATHNAVER

Lottery Fund, Entrust (Landfill Tax distributor), Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise, Scottish Natural Heritage, the Forestry Commission, The Highland Council, Historic Scotland and the local communities of Bettyhill, Strathnaver and Altnaharra. There are 16 sites to visit, ranging from Neolithic cairns over 5,000 years old to features of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Free trail maps are available from local outlets in English, Gaelic, French, German and Italian. A booklet has also been produced which covers the story in more depth for those who want to find out more. The text for the booklet and the on-site interpretive panels has been produced by Jim Johnston, the head teacher of Farr High School. The trail takes visitors through over 6000 years of history and landscape, showing how the area has developed. It links archaeology, history, landscape, and wildlife.

Strathnaver today could not really be regarded a settlement or village. It is rather the stretch of land between Bettyhill following the River Naver south to where it joins Loch Naver just before Altnaharra. Houses are scattered along the banks of the river beside which the main road also winds passing through the tiny village of Syre on its way. Most of Strathnaver's population will come under the figure for the area of Altnaharra although the people inhabiting the northern part of Strathnaver may come under Bettyhill's population. At the south of Strathnaver just before Syre the B871 from Kinbrace south of the Forsinard gateway at Dalvina lodge is another of the Mackay Country gateway signs.

### **Strathnaver: Before the Clearances**

*"The valley of Strathnaver is as green fold of earth, the richest in that part of the country, a narrow twisting glen down which the black water of the River Naver runs from south to north,*

*from the loch of its name to the Atlantic Ocean. The people who lived there in 1814 were Mackays, by name or allegiance, though the Countess was their Lord. The houses were grouped in a dozen small townships, northward down the strath to the sea and westward along the shore of Loch Naver.*

*Because of the mission there, Achness was perhaps the most important to the people. It took its Gaelic name, Achadh an Eas, the cornfield by the cascade, from the brown stream that still falls in noisy delight from hills where once the Norsemen buried their dead. There was Rhifail, the enclosure in a hollow, the smooth dale of Dalvina, Skail the sheiling, and Syre where the young men had been assembled in the spring of 1800 for service with the Sutherland Highlanders. Along the loch, toward Altnaharra at its finger-tip, were Grummore and Grumbeg. On these fell the evening shadow of Ben Klibreck across the water, and if one stands among the few remaining stones of Grummore today the mountain takes the naked shape of a sleeping woman, the milky smoke of burning heather for her hair, and her head turned away from Strathnaver. If Strathnaver were not the paradise some exiles believed it to have been when they remembered it in their old age, the words they used spoke of their love and longing for it.*

*I remember, said Angus Mackay, who was eleven when he was driven from the glen, I remember you would see a mile or half a mile between every town if you were going up the strath. There were four or five families in each of these towns, and bonnie haughs between the towns, and hill pastures for miles, as far as they could wish to go. The people had plenty of flocks of goats, sheep, horses and cattle, and they were living happy, with flesh and fish and butter, and cheese and fowl and potatoes and kail and milk too. There was no want of anything with them, and they had the Gospel preached to them at both ends of the Strath.”*

### **East on the A836 from Bettyhill**

The stretch of coastline heading from Bettyhill towards the eastern gateway is relatively flat as the hills of Sutherland begin to give way to the fields of Caithness. After the traveller leaves Bettyhill heading east the mountainous and rugged legacy becomes a flatter and somewhat less awe inspiring back to the present in time and the realization of looming civilization and the quickening pace of life. The road becomes double track and faster moving vehicles are apparent except for the little hamlets that forge the way from the roads to the coast and are all well worth exploring. Main road leads over two burns, Allt Beag and Armadale, both with twin stone bridges, old and new.

### **Armadale**

Situated on the north coast on a B class road north of the A836 between Bettyhill to the west and Melvich to the east is Armadale. The road marked to Armadale is a cul-de-sac but a trip into the community is rewarding. Armadale is a Norse name Dale meaning Valley possible Arma was a name, Armas Valley, or came from Oram meaning snake, or perhaps just means arm as the area is shaped like an arm. The present village of Armadale dates from 1790 when John Mackay of Strathy sold all of his land.

Armadale is a crofting and fishing township on the stormy northern coast. Armadale Bay lies between Ardmore Point to the west and Strathy Point to the east. The Armadale Burn flows northwards into the bay from Loch Buidhe Mor.

Armadale with a population of 51, 35% retired or unemployed Armadale's population 19 years ago was between 60 and 70 then fell to 34 and now slowly moving back upwards. A small communities housing trust Albion Housing is building two houses. The community is comprised of small crofts of an average of four acres. The village has the smallest post office in Mackay Country and no shop and no van deliveries. Provisions must be collected from Tongue or Bettyhill. Dounreay provides most of the employment and when this establishment started crofting and local work all but disappeared. The village hall is the centre of community activities. There is no school as it closed in the 50's and children attend Bettyhill. There is a doctor's surgery with 2.5 doctors practicing serving the area from Tongue to Armadale.



IMAGE 351 ARMADALE HAS THE SMALLEST POST OFFICE IN MACKAY COUNTRY

Moves are underway to develop an old croft structure close to the road for interpretation and a wildlife access to the beach. Kyle's Croft was identified after a successful summer of serving teas and coffee with sales of local produce. This coupled with the lack of proper access to Armadale beach prompted the community to pursue the purchase of the croft when it became on the market.

Armadale has a long stretch of sandy beach with vast expanse of flat sand when the tide is out. The township is scattered around the hill of the seas inlet and the bay. Accesses through rights of way on crofts and can be difficult to find and not really suitable for children. It requires a determined walk but offers excellent surfing. The building when converted will serve a diverse selection of community activities, old crofting display, local studies and archival information, youth recreation, wild flower meadow, vegetable garden, native trees. Armadale Beach can also be reached by walking along the burn from the road bridge. The bay empties a good bit revealing a huge expanse of level, golden sand. Two burns run across the sand. It is a great beach for walking and playing with many rocks to climb on and pools to look in. It is very good for beachcombing particularly after a storm. It is good for bathing and usually deserted.

Armadale has wild salmon netting and could be the last one in operation. Because of pressures from landowners and river board many of these once common stations have ceased to exist.

For the best part of two centuries, Scottish Fixed Engine (more commonly known as Bag Net Fishing) around the Scottish coast was a significant seasonal employer. During the winter, men would gather ice from the Lochs and store it inside underground icehouses, until the fishing season commenced in the Spring/Summer. Ice was used to preserve the Salmon and Grilse, between being caught, and reaching the market. In some areas, the fish was boiled or pickled to preserve the product. Working at a Salmon Station, due to the traditional techniques, remains a very intense and laborious job. Despite the introduction of modern technology, three to four crew are required to operate the fishery on a daily basis.

Legal netting companies such as Armadale Salmon Fishing, are the only source to purchase Wild Salmon in the UK. Armadale Salmon Fishing is a family firm. Owner James Mackay has built up the fishery over the past 25 years and the company is now entering its third generation of the family. The team consists of family and local crew. All rights of salmon fishing in Scotland, whether in fresh water or in the sea, are held as private, heritable titles. Originally all owned by the Crown, over the years many have been conveyed to individuals by written Crown grants, and may be bought, sold or leased.

Many people left the remote township of Poulouriscaig to settle in Armadale; last to leave was in 1930.

### **Poulouriscaig**

This is a small township which was created during the Clearance era. Poulouriscaig lies about 4 miles west of Armadale and can be reached by walking the track up into the hills there. Johnina Mackay was a teacher there. The township has been abandoned for many years now. To get a sense of what kind of place it was have a look at Will Sadler's lovely film about Poulouriscaig. Will made the film in 2012 in partnership with several local people during his Artists' Residency at Strathnaver Museum. The film is particularly important because it provides comment upon the fact that the word *ceilidh* has changed from a verb to a noun in living memory. 'To *ceilidh*' used to mean to go and visit and catch up on the news. Nowadays most folk think it means some sort of concert. The film is called 'A Part of Who we Are'.

### **Walk to Poulouriscaig**

Poulouriscaig, North Coast Walks

Drive down Armadale village to the white bungalow called the Salmon Bothy. There you will see a signpost to the deserted village of Poulouriscaig. Follow the track in front of the house and off up the hill. It is a steep and rough track. Look across to the horizon on your left during the early stretch of this path and see if you can see The sleeping beauty of Armadale. After about two and a half miles you will come to the ruins. It is lovely spot, very green where the inhabitants cleared the boulders and wrung a hard living from a reluctant land for over a century. It is very moving to see the fruits of their hard work, building their houses and byres, making bridges and shoring up the banks of the burn and having to bring everything to and from the place on their backs before eventually having to abandon it.

From the rocks above it, on a clear day, it is sometimes possible to see Soul Skerray, an isolated rock out in the Atlantic. There are also magnificent views of the rugged coastline to east and west. As you walk back down the hill, the village and the bay are laid out below you.



Poulouriscaig is a township settled by people cleared from Strathnaver sometime between 1815 and 1823. The 1835 Sutherland Estate Rent Roll for the parish of Farr lists seven tenants living there. It comprises the roofless remains of seven buildings, kale yards and enclosures, and areas of lazy-beds, all within an enclosing boundary wall. Most of the houses appear to date from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.



IMAGE 352 POULOURISCAIG

Poulouriscaig is a typical coastal post-Clearance settlement, where all the resourcefulness inherent in the Highland character had to be called on to ensure survival in a harsh, inhospitable terrain. Tenants were expected to augment their diet with fish but the coastal cliffs are very high and rugged and although Poulouriscaig is thought to mean “Pool of the Anchorage” fishing was not an easy option.

The A836 continues east and passes the turn-off to Strathy Point, another wee crofting settlement overlooking a lovely sandy bay.

### **Strathy**

A village of the northern coastline, Strathy lies a half-mile (1 km) southeast of the mouth of the River Strathy and a half-mile (1km) southeast of Strathy Bay. Strathy is a coastal settlement that grew to accommodate clearance villages mainly from Strathnaver. Until the clearances there had been just four crofters in Strathy. Strathy is a sparse and scattered community, spread across the wide valley of the River Strathy as it flows into Strathy Bay.

The village has four churches, all built between 1828 and 1910, two have since been converted to other uses. The earliest of the four churches was built to a standard Thomas Telford design in 1828 and is found in the base of the valley just to the west of the river. The best place to view Strathy is at the graveyard, high on the east side of the river. From here most of the village can be seen. This also provides the best access to the beach. At the west end of Strathy is the Strathy Inn. Nearby is the junction with a minor road that leads two miles north past straggling

croft to a parking area near the tip of Strathy Point. From here you can walk to the Strathy Point Lighthouse.

Strathy Point was the first Scottish lighthouse built as an all-electric station accommodating a major light and fog signal. It was sanctioned in 1953 and lit in 1958. It was converted to automatic operation in 1996. It filled one of the final dark blanks on the Scottish coast between Cape Wrath and Dunnet Head. Strathy Point Lighthouse is situated on the Sutherland coast. Its exact position is 58 degrees 36.9'N, 4 degrees 0¾'W. It has a low white tower of fourteen metres in height built on a white house. The lantern flashes white every twenty seconds and its nominal range is twenty seven miles. There is also a fog siren that has four diaphone blasts every 90 seconds. This was the last major light built by the Northern Lighthouse Board to be manned, and the first to be built since Esha Ness in Shetland, established in 1929. Like that lighthouse and Duncansby Head (1924), it has a square-section tower.



IMAGE 353 STRATHY

Strathy salmon station is operated by only one nets man Simon Patterson, Strathy is one of the most productive of the remaining wild Scottish salmon stations the only other being Armadale. There is concern that this one in Strathy may soon cease to exist. (The netting station closed late 2007 on expiry of the lease.) Following the expiry of the tenants lease in 2007 Strathy salmon netting operation came to an end. The prolific mixed stock netting station was located by a headland on the north coast on the main migration route for salmon homing in on rivers to the east and south. This landmark decision acknowledged that at a time of increased marine mortality for salmon it is more important than ever to allow as many salmon as possible to return to native rivers to improve future stocks. It was hoped that Strathy point would still be used as a research or other scientific facility to further understand salmon migration. The once-thriving Scottish salmon netting industry fell into decline in the 1970s and 1980s when the numbers of fish caught reduced due to environmental and economic reasons. In 2018, a three-year ban was imposed by the Scottish Government on the advice of scientists to try to boost dwindling stocks which anglers and conservationists blamed on nets men.

Close by is the Village Hall, This houses the Strathy Stone, probably an early Christian grave marker dating from about 600AD.

## The Priests Stone



IMAGE 354 THE PRIESTS STONE STRATHY

This display is a replica of a stone to be found on the hill about half a mile south of the Strathy Point road end. (NC 8310493). It would have marked the grave of a person who had high standing in the community. Local legend says it is the grave of a priest. After the foundation of the abbey of Iona by St. Columba and his Irish priests, other missionaries travelled the Highlands. The stone is either of the early Christian periods probably 7<sup>th</sup> century or dates from the much later period of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Though the stone once stood it has long since fallen. On the hillside to the east of the Priests Stone there are numerous hut circles and enclosures dating from the bronze or the iron age.

### Strathy and the Clearances

All over the north communities were cleared to coastal land such as Strathy and Armadale or given assisted passage to Canada and the United States. In 1790 Captain John Mackay of Strathy sold his estate to an Edinburgh lawyer William Honeyman later Lord Armadale of Strathy. Honeyman was the first to introduce the cheviot sheep to north Sutherland. He cleared Armadale of its tenants moving them to the current

village and leased the land to sheep farmers from Northumberland greatly increasing the value of the estate. In 1831 Honeyman sold the estate to the Marquis of Stafford husband of the Countess of Sutherland. By 1815 families living in upper Strathy had been cleared to the coast where they joined families moved from Strathnaver. Strathy mains the estates main farm was eventually divided into crofts forming today's Strathy East and Strathy West.

### Baligill

Baligill is a small village just to the east of and adjoining the croft lands of Strathy on the north side of the road. The settlement of Baligill lies 3 miles (5 km) south east of Strathy Point, nearly 2 miles (3 km) west of Melvich. It was once a centre of woolen milling. The Baligill is an area of beautiful stone ruins amongst a mixture of modern and old buildings. An area of agriculture with dry stane dykes of pleasant appeal. Stone and agriculture dominate and give the village a rare glimpse of a close working locality. Baligill Head is the headland and extends into the Pentland Firth near the township of Baligill to the northwest of Melvich. Baligill Loch lies to the south. If you take the Gaelic interpretation of the name Baligill "Baile na Gillean" it translates as, "township of the boys" and may have been the site of a summer shieling. The Norse interpretation as could be suggested by the "gill" element of the name is "ravine of the grassy slope".

## Geology



IMAGE 355 MILL RUINS IN BALIGILL IMAGE FROM MACKAY COUNTRY ARCHIVE

The underlying geology is an outer of the Old Red Sandstone basin that borders the extreme edge of the metamorphic rocks that make up the most part of Sutherland's geology. The sandstone was laid down in the Devonian period 419-359 million years ago, in the shallow water of the massive "Lake Orcadie", which covered an area from the Orkney's in the north to the Moray coast in the south and a large part of what is now the North Sea. This sandstone was laid down a little every year; the fine silts covering anything that drifted to the bottom of the lake. These layers made the sandstone easy to split and shape into suitable sizes for building. Some of the layers contain fossil fish. The gravel and boulder clay that was deposited as the ice retreated at the end of the last glaciations period can be seen where the land is slipping over the cliff edge. The different layers of the sandstone can easily be seen on the exposed rock faces and the cliff faces. Among the sandstone there are outcrops of limestone. There is one layer that is very peculiar as it is a mix of pebbles, gravel and sand. It has not formed the solid layer that you would expect to find in the middle of a series of sandstone beds. The layers have at some time in the distant past been subject to a tilting motion in the earth's crust, as they slope downward at roughly ten degrees in a northerly direction.

### Industrial Remains. (NC 855 661)

There are the ruins fan "L" shaped water mill, measuring 15.5M x 11.5M over all, built about the year 1800 beside the Baligill burn. It was originally a meal mill but was converted to a woolen mill in 1860. This mill has undergone some structural changes in its lifetime with extensions being added. The mill laid and the position of the dam can still be seen. The mill was last used in the late 1960's not as a mill but as a place for working with and dipping sheep. (NC 855 657).

If you follow the track down the burn you will come upon two old limekilns. The kilns were part of the Sutherland Estates measures to improve the quality of the soil in the area. One a round kiln 5M in diameter built c.1820, which has been strengthened with buttresses sometime after construction and the other kiln 5M square built about 1870. These kilns would have been fired with peat and loaded with the local limestone quarried a short distance away. After burning the quicklime (calcium oxide) would be extracted through the openings at the base of the kilns. The peat would have been cut on the moor on Clais nan Each. You can still see the old disused peat banks as you travel along the road. (Kilns NC 855 659, quarry NC 859 659, peat banks centering at NC 857 655) There are the remains of three other kilns about 500M WSW of the Baligill limekilns referred to as "Strathy Lime Kilns" and a quarry where fossils have been found up until the 1980's. (NC 851 656). This is one of a series of lime works situated along the north coast of Sutherland and working a limestone seam which outcrops there. These works primarily produced lime for agricultural improvements.

### Iron Age

On a promontory to the east of the Baligill burn is the site of one of two promontory forts to be found in the area. "An Dun" is roughly oval in shape, 13.5M x 9.5M, in the ruins there are some upright stones, some people think may be grave markers. Some defensive work can be seen, a possible rampart and ditch. It probably dates to the Iron Age. (NC 856 662) To the west of the burn on another promontory some 27 metres high sits "Dun Mhairtein" a promontory fort that dates to the 1<sup>st</sup>. century BC or slightly earlier. This fort encloses an area more than 250sq metres, behind what was a stone-reverted rampart some 4 metres thick, which may have had a timber stockade on top. The entrance is easily recognizable just right of centre. The approach to the fort has been made more defensible by digging away the earth on each side of the central pathway leaving a 2 metres wide access. The soil would have been thrown up on to the rampart to increase the height. Inside the rampart there is evidence of structures and a souterrain. The remains of what may have been a Norse type Blockhouse can easily be seen. (NC 853 663) To the south and west of the fort and at a slightly higher level there is what may be the remains of a field system from the same period. This area was not laid out for crofting at the time of the clearances but was set out as common grazing, and was not subjected to cultivation. There was a ditch and bank boundary to keep the animals out of the crofters' fields and on the common grazing during the growing season. This bank may not look very high and the ditch has filled in over the years but the old breeds of sheep and cows were much smaller than the modern breeds.

Between Baligill and Portskerra on a nearly inaccessible promontory are the remains of what is thought to be a monastic site “An Tomaidh Bhuidhe”. It is possible there may be a connection to Saint Donnan and his monastery on Eigg.



IMAGE 356 THE DROWNING MEMORIAL PORTSKERRA

### **Portskerra**

Take the minor road into Portskerra which lies 1 mile (1½ km) northeast of Melvich, overlooking Melvich Bay to the east. There is a monument near the pier to men from the village drowned while fishing over the years. The Drowning Memorial car park is down the road to the pier which is signed on the right hand side. From the parking area there are steps up to the memorial overlooking Melvich Bay; it commemorates the lives of 26 local fishermen lost in three separate accidents off the coast here. An information board relates a verse on the drownings by a celebrated local poet. Portskerra was the birthplace, in 1901, of Hugh Macintosh, a celebrated Gaelic poet who in later life also wrote in English.

On the A836 the north coast changes dramatically as the hills on the horizon recede to be replaced by fields fringed with flagstone walls.

### **Melvich**

A village of the northern coastline of Sutherland district, Highland Council Area, Melvich lies to the west of Melvich Bay, fifteen miles (24 km) west of Thurso. A small bay on the northern coastline Melvich Bay a mile (2 km) to the northeast of Melvich. Melvich mainly lies on the main road with Port Skerray the slip that covets the area of coast that allows access to the sea from jetties and harbour. A mix of old and new with a close affinity to the life of fishing.

Melvich Beach is reached from a track from the main road half way down the village, which is well signed. This leads to a car park above the dunes. The Halladale River is not so impressive as the Naver along its length but it makes a most majestic entry to the sea sweeping round the sand dunes and a small promontory where the Bighouse stands. You can walk down to the

footbridge then along the river bank to the shore. The rocks on the way show evidence of ancient boiling's and bubbling's. This is a more exposed beach than the others, very good for surfing, good for playing on gentler days, but very pleasant for walking along. A return through the dunes above to the car park makes a very pleasant short, circular walk. The area round the car park is good for wild flowers and butterflies. Seals are often seen off this shore.



IMAGE 357 BIGHOUSE LODGE, NEAR MELVICH

Bighouse Lodge, near Melvich is notable in the history of the Clan Mackay whose most powerful cadet branch built the house less than twenty years after the 1745 Jacobite rebellion. The large B-listed mansion house, rivals prominent houses built by Mackay chiefs at Tongue and Balnakeil. As well as the house, there is a large garden. Its walls and unusual pavilion, thought to have been built at the same time as the house, are A-listed. A house in the grounds known as The Barrocks Bighouse enjoys a fine setting on the estuary of the Halladale River. There are no signposts pointing the way, down a winding single-track road. Near the only junction, you can see a large stone pillar, signifying the start of an old toll road into Caithness. There are still coins in a stone bowl at its foot. The house, at the end of the road, is large and, according to architectural historian Elizabeth Beaton, “severely symmetrical”. It has twice been added to in the post Mackay period, which began in 1830 when it was sold to the Sutherland Estates for £58,000. It was to be the “end of an auld sang,” the last of the Mackay houses (and lands) to go under the hammer. By then it contained thirty-five rooms.

### **South through Strath Halladale**

On the A897 to Forsinard Just after the hamlet of Melvich, twelve miles east of Bettyhill, the A897 cuts south through Strath Halladale, the Flow Country and the Strath of Kildonan to Helmsdale on the east coast.

South from the coast at Melvich the A897 follows the river Halladale heads to Forsinard and the Flow Country, a vast expanse of bleak bog of major ecological importance. A landscape shaped by plants and scarcely touched by humans. The peat is built up into a blanket of bog by bog mosses, which still flourish here in a remarkable range of forms. Mysterious patterns of dark pools and small lochans dot the landscape which is home to wild birds such as the Greenshank, Diver, Curlew and Hen Harrier. On the border of Sutherland and Caithness Strath Halladale lies in a sparsely populated area of outstanding natural beauty. Strath Halladale is strung out down a landscape of more rolling and less rugged backdrop but still with the sense of remote and isolation. Strath Halladale is the spiritual home of the Mackay Clan. The Strath is mostly privately owned by large estates. There is some hill farming, mainly sheep but the principal focus of the estates and the local economy is field sports particularly deer stalking, grouse shooting and fishing in the rivers and many hundreds of hill lochs.



IMAGE 358 STRATH HALLADALE

The countryside comprises wild moorland and mountains. The mountains are relatively low. The terrain consists largely of peat bogs and heather and is covered in a myriad of lochs and lochans and is a haven for a wide range of rare bird life. It is also a paradise for botanists. Much of this high ground is known as the 'Flow Country', and is world-renowned.

Strath Halladale is a gentle introduction to the area. A gradual passage into the wild and empty land of Mackay Country. The road runs alongside the Halladale River and the population make full use of this fertile land. There is no centre with shops or post office in Halladale. The old church and village hall are the central points but this is an active crofting community.

### **Forsinard**

About 15 miles south of Melvich, at Forsinard, is an RSPB Visitor Centre. The peatlands here are a breeding ground for black and red throated divers, golden plovers and merlins as well as other species. There is a sizable hotel here. Entering Mackay Country from Forsinard south of



Strath Halladale gives the only opportunity to embark into Mackay Country by rail. The station at the RSPB nature reserve in the middle of Flow Country is the only rail gateway.



IMAGE 359 FORSINARD

Upper Bighouse a small linear hamlet, which lies on the western side of the Halladale River, four miles (6½ km) south of Melvich. Immediately to the west lies Bighouse Hill, which rises to 145m (476 feet). The Halladale rises 4 miles (6.5 km) southeast of Forsinard. It flows northwards through Strath Halladale before entering the Pentland Firth at Melvich Bay. The Halladale is a well-known salmon river. Along its 15 mile length there are some fifty named pools. Excellent wild brown trout fishing can also be enjoyed in the numerous hill lochs. Gillies (guides) are available on request to increase both the enjoyment of the sport and also its productivity!

### **The Flow Country**

The Flow Country is the name given to the blanket peat and wet lands which cover over 400,000 ha (988,400 acres) of Caithness and Sutherland. It is probably the largest area of blanket bog in the northern hemisphere and one of the most intact such areas in the world. 'Flows' is the local term for the intricate pattern of peat bogs and pool systems (or 'dubh lochans'), but the term 'Flow Country' was coined by outsiders in the 1980s when conservationists mounted a sophisticated campaign to halt afforestation. The controversy ended with a judgment by the Secretary of State for Scotland dividing the Flow Country between forests and conservation but by 1990 large scale planting had ceased. The arguments in favour of conserving the Flows highlighted their landscape value, their significance as a biological resource and their wider scientific importance.

South from Forsinard and exiting Mackay Country on the A897 leads to Kinbrace. From here the B871 heads northwest and reenters Mackay Country just prior to Dalvina Lodge.

## East from Melvich

### County Border and Drumholiston

This gateway to Mackay Country is in terms of the area flat and although holds a typical empty and lonely land is not as magnificent as the other gateways. As the west of the northern Highlands is approached from the east the scenery of Highlands becomes dramatic and the distant mountains become fully dominant. Reaching the A836 to the east is the county boundary and the gateway used to identify Mackay Country of the east today. In the past the border has been recognised at Drumholiston and at the “Split Stane” a cleft in the rock. One version of a local legend tells how the devil himself traveling along the road in a spiteful mood split the rock with his tail.

Anyone who travels here will be struck by a sense of being somewhere different. The sheer atmosphere of these northlands makes a big impression. Ultimately, however, it is the wilderness experience of the far north and it's all but empty grandeur with the mountain landscapes and secluded beaches which will leave the strongest impression. Mackay Country is an ancient and culturally rich area, with a colourful, though often bloody, history. This turbulent and romantic heritage is reflected strongly in the breathtakingly varied countryside of the Highlands, in its old communities and villages, and in the people who live and work there.



IMAGE 360 SIGN AT DRUMHOLISTON

## A Consideration of Mackay Country's Natural Environment

From Back to the Future 2004-2005

The landscapes of Dùthaich MhicAoidh are on a scale which brings perspective to human endeavour and history. Their beauty is breath taking; their diversity, from the offshore islands warmed by the Gulf Stream to the arctic tundra of the mountain peaks is intriguing. The effects of latitude are mitigated by the Gulf Stream. Communities at the same latitudes in Labrador and the Baltic have frozen seas and pack ice to contend with every winter. Altitude is equally important. Plants which thrive happily in our sheltered straths or coastal townships cannot cope with the effects of exposure and cold created by high winds and maritime weather patterns hitting the high slopes. In contrast to places like the Alps and the Pyrenees our mountains, the highest of which are not much more than 3,000 feet, would not be considered high at all. Compared to the 'young' mountains in the Alps and the Pyrenees this is a very, very ancient landscape. The peaks are lower because they are older and have been changed by earth movements and eroded down by glaciation. It is the combination of latitude and altitude in our hills, combined with their geological and geomorphological history, which has created this unique mosaic of microclimates, habitats, landscapes, seascapes and stories.

Among the high peaks are ptarmigan, eagles and the rare mountain hares. On the slopes below the quartzite mountain tops shrubs, dwarfed and resilient in order to survive the extreme climate, cling on in the face of habitually harsh winds. There alpine bearberry, juniper, cowberry and crowberry are found. On the harsher northern facing slopes an incredible range and abundance of slow growing mosses, lichens and liverworts dominate.

Red deer are very common in Mackay Country on the high slopes in summer and on the lower slopes and inbye ground in winter, the 18<sup>th</sup> century bard, Rob Donn was very keen on deer



IMAGE 361 RED DEER FROM CAITHNESS IMAGE ARCHIVE

hunting and often got into bother over his poaching. After one of his neighbours was evicted for poaching he composed a poem in the form of a debate over the issue.

### **The Flow Country**

The Flow Country sometimes called *The Patterned Lands*, is so significant and rare that it is now aiming to become the UK's next natural World Heritage Site, the most intact and extensive blanket bog system in the world. Blanket bog is a rare type of peatland which forms only in cool places with plenty of rain and covers the landscape like a blanket. Due to the global significance of the Flow Country it has long been suggested it should be nominated for World Heritage status (since 1988!) on the basis of the blanket bog environment and the species that call it home. From above the land is a mottled pattern of peat and pools, their colours shifting like an opal. But look a little closer and you'll find a world of amazing plants, rare birds, and a place to be inspired by peace and space. This vast expanse of blanket bog comprises a complex set of interlinked pool systems and micro features that not only host an eye-catching flora and fauna but also play a vital role in our defence against the effects of climate change. Indeed over 75% of the land in Mackay Country is covered by some type of environmental designation in acknowledgment of the importance of the variety of habitats and landscapes to be found there. The Flow Country is a very important breeding ground for migratory waders and wildfowl. These flows attract birds which usually breed in Scandinavia, Siberia and Iceland and birds which winter in West Africa. The greenshank and dunlin arrive each summer from West Africa. Redshank, wigeon and red-throated divers thrive here in the big open spaces. The Flow Country is the only place on mainland Britain where arctic skua breed while common scoters and wood sandpipers nest in very few other places.



IMAGE 362 SUNDEW FROM CAITHNESS IMAGE ARCHIVE

Much of Durness, Tongue and Farr is also covered in blanket bog. In these and other wet places in Mackay Country are found interesting plants like sundew and butterwort, both of which eat flies to get extra nutrients in this tough environment. Bog asphodel, bog cotton, heathers, heath-spotted orchids, tormentil and lousewort spring up in damp boggy ground. Deep sphagnum mosses grow slowly and quietly while dwarf birches and willows maintain bonsai proportions. The light flashing on the wings of a flitting dragonfly is a delight on summer days.

It's hard to grow crops on the wet bog itself, but in the wide, shallow straths that cut through it people have lived and farmed for thousands of years. To people here the blanket bog is so large and prevalent that it is sometimes hard to see why people elsewhere in the world consider it so exceptional. The harsh experience of the Clearances in Sutherland, and the hardships of the following century, have

made local crofting communities very suspicious of attempts by outside forces to control or influence the use of local land. In the 1980s, under the old Nature Conservancy Council, debate over who could do what with the Flow Country flared up and inspired a local song about the controversy.

Today more productive working relationships have been established with SNH as the important role of local knowledge has become more respected and practical management options like the Peatland Management Scheme have made real contributions to the finances of local Grazings Committees. Nonetheless the people of Mackay Country remain fiercely independent and individual, and will never take well to too much in the way of paper, bureaucracy or rules.

### **Cnoc and Lochan**

Between the high peaks and the low ground of the straths, glens and coast is a great patchwork of distinctive habitats. On the western seaboard of Mackay Country is the ancient Lewisian gneiss – one of the oldest rocks in Europe at 3,000 million years old and deemed to be part of the earth's crust as it was 3 billion years ago. Here, in what is known by geologists as the Foreland, the action of glaciers during the Ice Age has created the classic 'cnoc and lochan' landscape.



IMAGE 363 DUNLIN FROM CAITHNESS IMAGE ARCHIVE

These places are characterised by low lying, hummocky expanses with many little hills, small flows and numerous lochans. Here black bog rush, wild mountain thyme and ladies' mantle are common as are black throated divers and dunlin. The numerous little lochs provide brown trout fishing as far as the eye can see and in the shallows grow bogbean, an important plant in traditional medicine.

### **Ancient Oceans**

Gaelic place-names frequently provide a word-picture of the location to which they refer. Sometimes the description refers to past land uses, historic events or people from the past. Sometimes the place-name is as evocative now as it must have been when someone first

invented it. Ceathramh Garbh, between Loch Laxford and Loch Incharid still describes this ‘cnoc and lochan’ landscape perfectly – The Rough Quarter.

Standing on Cnoc Loch an Ròin (Hillock of the Loch of the Seals) today, the view westwards is of the Minch and the Western Isles. Six hundred million years back the lie of the land was very different. The Torridonian sandstone from which the hills between Loch Incharid and Cape Wrath (Pharpe) were formed was laid down in a warm sea, named The Iapetus Ocean by geologists after a Greek god. This sandstone lies on top of a bedrock of Lewisian gneiss. Inliers of Lewisian gneiss are also found around Loch Naver, Bettyhill and Skerryay in the form of low hills like Creag Ach nam Bat at Skerryay. Back then, in the Precambrian era Scotland was close to what is now the North American continent and separated from England by this ocean. This land mass which included Scotland and Northern Ireland, named Laurentia, passed through a great variety of climatic zones – tropical, desert and temperate. Due to plate tectonics, or continental drift, the Iapetus Ocean gradually closed about 410 million years ago, forming what we know as the British Isles today.

Inland from the coast of the parishes of Durness and Eddrachilles is the world famous Moine Thrust Zone. In many ways the science of geology was born in Scotland and some of the most significant complex geological discoveries were made in north west Sutherland.

### **The Moine Thrust**

The Moine Thrust and the Moine series of rocks get their name from that well know barrier to communications in Dùthaich MhicAoidh – A’ Mhòine or The Moine. The Gaelic means peat or peaty place or a moss. Dwelly gives ‘ris a mhòine’ as ‘making peats’. Historically The Moine was a significant barrier to communications between Tongue and Farr and Durness and Eddrachilles, much commented upon by ministers of the past trying to tend to their parishioners across Mackay Country. It is for this reason that the construction of a road across the Moine in 1830 was considered of such importance. At the same time Moine House was built as a ‘refuge of the traveller’.[1]

The series of rocks known as the Moine Supergroup is made up of schists and psammite and were first studied and identified in The Moine area behind Melness. The Moine rocks dominate in Tongue and Farr and underlie much of the Flow Country in Sutherland.

These rocks were also laid down as sediment in the Iapetus Ocean, in some places to an incredible depth of some sixteen kilometres. As Jim Johnson has noted that is ‘almost twice the height of Everest’.[2] As the Iapetus Ocean closed these sediments were put under unimaginable pressure – they were metamorphosed, folded and faulted. In addition to the Moine Thrust there are others in Tongue and Farr – most significantly the Kirtomy and the Naver Thrusts.

For 19<sup>th</sup> century geologists these thrust zones were a mystery. It was generally understood that younger rocks were to be found on top of older rocks. Before the days of plate tectonics the discovery of younger rocks underneath older rocks puzzled and perplexed geologists like Peach and Horne, who were in the area undertaking the Geological Survey for many years.

[1] From the plaque at Moine House commemorating the building of the road and the house by the Marquis of Stafford. The plaque was put up by James Loch Esquire MSP, Auditor and Commissioner upon his Lordships Estates.

[2] P29 J. A. Johnson 1997 Tongue and Farr 3rd Edition, Bettyhill.

### **Dykes and Plugs**

Among the Moine rocks which cover Tongue and Farr are also to be found dykes, formed by igneous material. As the name ‘dyke’ suggests these are thin bands of molten rock which were

forced into fissures and later cooled. The igneous rock is very hard and so resists erosion. Scourie also has significant dykes, visible on the shoreline.

Volcanic plugs are similar to dykes but instead of the molten material flowing along long, thin fissures which are later exposed by erosion, the igneous material flows upwards to 'plug' a particular vent. On the borders of Mackay Country Ben Griam More is an example. The area around Ben Griam Mor and Beag is made of Old Red Sandstones, the rock type which is most prevalent in Caithness and the Orkneys. Eilean nan Ron is made of the same type of rock.

Much larger flows of igneous material created the granites of Strath Halladale and the syenites of the Loch Loyal area. The difference that geology makes can be seen in the stark contrast of the rolling and fertile Halladale landscape when compared to the cnoc and lochan dominated Fiondle and Fanagmore in Eddrachilles. Sheets – or narrow bands, of Granite are also found running down Strath Stack and out to sea at Laxford and the Scourie 'dykes'.

### **Durness Limestone**

Durness has a band of rock running through the parish which produces very fertile soils and unusual plants for this latitude. This is of course the Durness Limestone where rare plants like mountain avens and globe flower are found. Balnakeil is a good place to see the rich plant life which thrives as a result of the limestone. Limestone weathers in a very particular way which creates cave systems like the famous Cave of Smoo. A smaller area of limestone is also found on the east shore of Loch Eriboll. That's the area where people were cleared from of course, since the grazing on that kind of ground is exceptional. It is well known that the western shore – and the township of Laid – has none of that rich limestone grazing. It is on quartzite and is a very hard place to raise a crop.

### **Water Features**

Water is as much a feature of Mackay Country as are its rocks. The rivers were once famed for the beautiful pearls fished there. Today they are protected and traditional pearl fishing families like the Davies have a license but no longer make their living in this way. In lochs, burns and rivers close to the sea otters are common and the water vole, now no longer found in most of the British Isles, still thrives in west coast burns. On the coast are another set of distinctive habitats and landscapes. The deep water mud of sea lochs like Eriboll, Inchard, Laxford and Eddrachilles Bay itself are home to starfish, sea urchins, sea pen, several species of crabs, prawns and burrowing shrimps and an amazing density and variety of seaweeds. At sea the rich feeding off the coast attracts not only seabirds but also porpoise, dolphins and whales during the summer months. Seals breed on the shoreline annually and every now and again a loan leatherback turtle, swept here along with the Gulf Stream, makes an unexpected appearance. The salt marshes at Kyle of Durness and Laxford Bridge are another a rich habitat.

### **The Coast**

The cliffs provide nesting sites for fulmar, kittewake, gannets, terns and gulls. Clò Mòr – Great Cloth or Web – is the highest vertical sea cliff in mainland Britain. Handa Island, cleared of people by Evander Maciver in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is an internationally known bird reserve where puffins can also be seen. In the last century local people collected birds and birds eggs for food by climbing down the cliffs on ropes. At times parties from Lewis arrived with the same aim.

At Sandwood Bay and Torrisdale Bay are impressive dune systems. Each year a great volume of sand is blown inland, enriching the soils in their path and creating unique habitat more usually found on limestone. The huge amount of sand comes from off-shore deposits created by past glaciers, mixed with shell sand.



IMAGE 364 MINKIE WHALE FROM THE CAITHNESS PICTURE ARCHIVE

### **Climate Change Is Nothing New**

Emerging from the last Ice Age some 10,000 years ago were the mountains, glens and straths which have been providing both shelter and challenge to local people since the first migrants arrived in the wake of that receding ice.

While the Ice Age held sway Mackay Country was home to polar bears, reindeer and lynx. As the ice receded and the climate warmed, birch scrub began to colonise the newly exposed slopes. The ice had scraped away not only the soils, but even more dramatically, the rolling hills and valleys. Although ice may look like a solid it is really a fluid so glaciers flow downstream eroding as they go. Some mountain peaks may remain above the ice. Where this happens the peaks are sharp and jagged, weathered and shattered by frost and ice. The Ice Age lasted for some 2.4 million years and during that time ice cover came and went periodically. Climate change is not a new thing though the reasons for modern climate change are different.

Ice gathered in north facing indents in the hills and created the classic corries to be seen today in the mountains of Mackay Country like Ben Loyal. The slow flowing glaciers gathered rocks and debris on their descent which helped to scour slopes and gouged out u-shaped valleys like Strath Halladale, Strathnaver, Strath More and Strath Dionard. On the coast the legacy of the glaciers can also be seen in the sea lochs like Eriboll, Inchard, Glen Coul and Glendubh. In Norway these would be called fjords while Loch Laxford would be referred to as a fjard. On reaching the sea the glaciers started to float a little so the fjords or sea lochs are deep, but often deeper close to the head of the loch and shallower beyond the coast.

When the glaciers began to melt they released huge amounts of meltwater. These rapid, fast flowing, debris-full burns and rivers were short lived but they made their mark. The deep gorge through which the Armadale Burn now flows was cut by glacial melt water. Many hundreds of tons of outwash gravels and sands were washed down the straths. Some went out to sea and the



remainder can be seen as a series of terraces by which it is possible to trace past courses of the river

### **Asher or Oldshoremore**

Land of the Morrisons.

Machair, raised beaches and dune system where over 200 flowers species bloom each summer. On the shoreline are more terraces and raised beaches about twelve metres above current sea level. Once the weight of the ice was lifted from the land as it melted, the land itself rose up creating raised beaches.

These flat, fertile places have always been crucial to crofting agriculture for crops and grazing. On the machair at Oldshoremore, Oldshorebeag and Sheigra over two hundred species of flowers bloom each year. The dune grassland at Strathy Bay is another place where a beautiful variety of flowers flourish. At Strathy and Faraid Head the rare Scottish primrose also grows each spring. Each summer on machair and inbye ground all across Mackay Country eyebright, vetches, yellow rattle, orchids, clovers and daisies cover the ground. Traditional crofting agriculture is important in keeping these species rich pastures intact.

### **Erratic Blocks**

Another mark left by past glaciers are the strangely precarious boulders seen perched on slopes all over Mackay Country. These are erratics. Often they are a different type of rock from that which they perch upon because the glaciers carried them many miles before leaving them strangely stranded when they melted. Some of the rocks and debris carried by the glaciers were frozen into its base, adding to its abrasive power. This scouring left scrape marks – known as striations – in the bedrock itself. These can still be seen today – a good place to look is upstream from an erratic.

### **Return of the Trees**

After the ice, the grasses and birch trees were followed by other tree species. At one time Mackay Country was much more heavily wooded than it is today. Human activity reduced this cover but so too did past climate change. The climate got cooler and wetter during the Bronze Age (2,000 BC to 500 BC) about 1,500 B.C. This was when the famous peat bogs began to form and human communities had to change their lifestyle by cultivating lower down the hill as soils became more acid and summers wetter. Now and again a pine-cone or root turns up in a peat, reminding us of the former extent of forest cover. Today remnants cling on in many corners. Strathnaver is an important area of birch, alder, oak and hazel. The most northerly oak wood is to be found at Badcall, Scourie – at Loch a’Mhuillin, where small, hardy oaks continue to thrive among birch, willow, hazel and aspen.

In ancient times trees were very important for daily life and for the Gaidhealtachd culture. In Alexander Carmichael’s collection of sayings, prayers and psalms used in daily life there is of course one for gathering wood.

### **A’Chraobh Ogam**

Each letter of the Gaelic alphabet is represented by a tree. This is called A’Chraobh Ogam and can be dated back to at least the 4th century AD in Ireland.[1] In Borgie Forest a spiral woodland walk was created for the Millennium by local children, members of the community and Forest Enterprise. This walk winds around all eighteen letters of the Gaelic alphabet. At each stopping place there is the tree to represent the appropriate letter and along the way are stones etched with a picture of each tree and its name in Gaelic and in English. The etchings were created from drawings of the trees made by local children. As Mary Beith explains:

*“Whether as forests, groves or as single examples, trees were of great significance in Celtic culture. Indeed there was a special word for a sacred tree, bile (pron: bee-ley). The most important sacred trees were oak, ash and yew, closely followed by hazel. All of these are represented in the Ogam Chraobh, and, given the ‘sanctity’ of trees, it is not perhaps surprising that they became associated with the phenomenon of the alphabet – the symbols representing sounds of the human voice and immeasurably capable of variation in depicting the ideas of the human mind.”[2]*

### **Life and Land; Trees and Treasures**

As we write the North Sutherland Community Forest Trust has managed to negotiate a management agreement with the Forestry Commission to take control of Borgie Forest on behalf of the local communities. Any engagement with the natural environment is never just about natural resources, environment and economy but is also culturally significant. Any culture and society is shaped and influenced by the natural environment in which it flourishes – by the rocks, lochs, winds, waves, plants and animals which shape daily life, and over centuries these in turn are sometimes shaped in small but significant ways by local cultures and communities.

[1] P21 M. Beith 2000 A’Chraobh Dornoch

[2] p23 ditto.

## Mountains of Mackay Country

The dramatic north-western scenery is where the mountains meet the sea, individual peaks each with great character are Scotland's most remarkable mountains. There is a haunting beauty to its mountains rugged mountainous terrain with superb panoramic views. Noted here a few of the larger and more known examples.

### Beinn Stumanadh

Meall nan Clach Ruadh. This is a very impressive viewpoint perched above Tongue, and gives a view of the coast from Cape Wrath to the north of the mainland to Orkney. To the south is a good selection of the isolated Sutherland hills dotted over a white sea of bog land. The contrast between the very hilly Reay Forest and the flat Flow Country is striking. Here and Stumanadh is the end of the big hills. From The Mull of Kintyre to here the West of Scotland is continuously rugged. Now that ends to be replaced by the wild and lonely peat lands of The Flow Country and Caithness. Beinn Stumanadh rises to a height of 527m (1729 feet) 1 mile (1½ km) east of Loch Loyal. To the north east lies the Borgie Forest.

### Ben Hee

A mountain rising to a height of 873m (2863 feet) 9 miles (14 km) west of Altnaharra and east of Merkland A remote and little visited mountain at the southern border of Mackay Country. A large mass of winding ridges and 4 distinct tops, rising from the east shore of Loch Merkland.



IMAGE 365 BEN KILBRECK

The summit overlooks a large corrie cut into its eastern slopes, and much of Ben Hee's eastern slopes are steep and rocky.

### Ben Klibreck Beinn Cleith Bric

A mountain massif set amidst the Sutherland moors, to the south of Altnaharra, Ben Klibreck rises to a height of 961m (3154 feet) forming a prominence on an otherwise featureless landscape. There are a number of tops on its summit ridge, Meall nan Con, to the south of Loch Naver, being the highest. The northern flank is steep in contrast to the south eastern flank, which consists of grassy corries. Its name is derived from the Gaelic for "hill of the speckled cliff". The Klibreck Burn flows north to join the loch just east of Klibreck at its western end. Ben Klibreck is the other Munro in the far north. It's not very inspiring to climb. Most routes are grassy and homogeneous. The ridge itself is broad and pleasant. The views are vast, no mountains

to get in the way and when you see Seana Braigh to the south in the far distance, you realize once again that Scotland is a big place!

### **Ben Loyal**

Stands at a height of 2506ft / 764m. The Queen of Scottish Mountains as Ben Loyal is referred to. This is an isolated mountain; and rising as it does out of a wide expanse of rolling moor, with no mountain nearer than its neighbour Ben Hope, six miles away, it shows up well from



IMAGE 366 BEN LOYAL

every direction. It is built of granite, and is particularly shapely in appearance. From Tongue, the outline of its four summits falls in cascade towards the Kyle; but from further west the lesser summits group themselves about the highest point almost symmetrically.

On one side of it the great moors on the other, the wide expanse of sea away to the north. The easiest and pleasantest approach is from Tongue, through the farm of Ribigill and across the moor; thence one tackles the rounded dome of an outlier of the main peak, and so up steep, sound rock to the turreted top. It is a lovely mountain to be on; with a vast amount of ground it covers, in spite of the comparative smallness of its appearance. Head north to the first summit Sgor Chaonasaid, then to Sgor a'Bhatain then the true summit An Caisteil. The form of its granite dome, divided up into an almost symmetrical cluster of peaks composes into a very substantial group.

### **Ben Hope**

Standing majestically at the southern end of Loch Hope and the head of the valley of Strath More, Ben Hope (Beinn Hòb in Gaelic) is Scotland's most northerly Munro at 3041ft/927m. To reach the foot of the mountain take the road from Helium, between Tongue and Durness to Altnaharra.

Park in the space near the cowshed at grid ref 477462. There's a sign at the bottom of the path saying 'Way up Ben Hope' it rises isolated above the desolate moorland. From the north, Ben Hope has a very steep and craggy outline and the cragged look extends to the western flank of Ben Hopes south ridge – the Leitir Mhulseil. The grassy southern and eastern slopes of Ben Hope ease off gradually into the moors. From the summit, on a clear day, you get stunning views of the Pentland Firth and can see Orkney.

Ben Hope is a particularly impressive sight towering over everything at the south end of Loch Hope. Viewed from A838 on the west side of Loch Eriboll it's wedge shape dominates the horizon with formidable looking cliffs, however it's most popular route, up the southwest facing side, is quick and reasonably easy with a few steep parts. The first part of the path climbs steeply past some nice little waterfalls but as it levels out it gets a bit boggier and muddier. The erosion here is bad and getting worse, this is a very popular hill. As the starting point disappears from view keep slightly to the right as the path widens and then splits. The leftwards path strikes north along the Allt a' Mhuseill burn towards the north ridge. Follow the path as it



IMAGE 367 BEN HOPE

alternates between rocky and muddy bits then climbs between a gap in the Leiter Mhuseill cliffs before veering slightly north.

Foinaven dominates to the west from early in the climb, with Ben Hee to the south. Arkle appears after a while, followed by Ben More Assynt then Quinag and eventually Ben Stack, but you will need a clear day to see them all. There's a distinctive blade of rock about three or four feet high which sits at the top of the path, then a short stroll across the relatively flat summit area to the OS trig pillar and cairn.

The view east looks over the Kyle of Tongue and Ben Loyal, across the Flow Country as far as Dunnet Head in Caithness and the Orcadian island of Hoy. A couple of hundred yards north gives the views over Loch Hope and Loch Eriboll with the sands of Balnakeil Bay and Faraid Head.

### **Fionaven**

Fionaven (915) is probably the most challenging climb in North West Sutherland, consisting of several peaks. The highest peak Ganu Mor is just short of the 3000ft required for Munro status, making Fionaven joint highest Corbett with Torridon's Beinn Dearg. Fionaven is not really a single mountain, more a long high ridge over 5 km in length and taking in five major tops. The mountain has also been a 'borderline Munro' with occasional rumours that it has been reclassified as being above the 3000ft contour. It is now confirmed as being just short of the figure and hence is not the most northerly Munro. Any ascent to the ridge and summit is a long day, the easiest approach being from the north; a full traverse is a major undertaking.

Strath Dionard provides a convenient approach to the east side, leaving the A838 road at Gualin House and taking the track heading southeast. Whether approached from the northwest or the south it's a long walk in. There's a parking space on the west side of the A838 a couple of hundred yards north of Gualin House. The approach from here is across bog and lochan, pathless and wearisome going. The ridge is made up of shattered quartzite and offers a long, high, steep and grey face to the main road on the west coast. The steep corries and side spurs



IMAGE 368 FIONAVEN

that give the mountain its unique character are hidden on the eastern side. The quartzite screes are loose and steep and, apparently, shifting continually giving a constant background sound of tumbling rocks on a still day.

From the highest point of the col between Cnoc a' Mhadaidh and Ceann Garbh the summit of Ceann Garbh can be attained after a short sharp grass and rock scramble. There are astounding views from either side of the ridge. To the north Loch Eriboll and Durness and to the west Loch Inchar, the whole of Sutherland is spread out. A wide grassy area narrows to a ridge curving upward towards Ganu Mor, It is best descended into the Glas Coire Grandha from the lowest point on the ridge between Ganu Mor and Ceann Garbh. It's pretty rough going but a wonderful corrie full of interesting and sometimes spectacular rock formations. The burns that spring up in the higher regions of the corrie run with incredibly clear cold water, eventually running into a second larger corrie, Coire Duail. From here a path of sorts can be found leading to the track in Strath Dionard which runs all the 6 or 7 kms back to Gualin House.

An alternative starting point is at the southern end of Loch Stack, following the approach to Arkle and then onto the southern end of the main ridge.

### **Ben Stack**

A mountain to the west of Loch Stack Ben Stack rises to a height of 721m (2365 feet) 3½ miles (6 km) south east of Laxford Bridge and 1½ miles (3 km) North West of Achfary, not a particularly high mountain but giving splendid views in every direction. Ben Stack is a wonderful cone-shaped, pointy little mountain when seen from the north west or from the south east, at the north west end of Loch More. Its structure is complex and interesting and has been described as oddly reminiscent of a Norman castle. There are sections that feel a little bit exposed but never dangerous and the ridge at the summit could test the nerve particularly in a

strong wind. It is approached on the road from Laxford to Kinloch at Achfary. If approaching from Merkald this mountain is the first welcoming structure to Mackay Country.

The start of the walk is at a reasonable parking area a hundred metres east along the private road towards Lone from its junction with the A838 a short distance north of Achfary. This is also a starting point for the climb of Arkle.

Park by the low stone stable at NC265437. 30 yards north along the A838 an all-terrain vehicle track strikes off up the hill in westerly direction initially. Follow this track until just before a stream above Loch na Seilge and turn left to follow a path south easterly beside the wire fence going up the hill. As the fence takes a right angled turn south westerly follow the same line to a rocky hump. Then a short drop followed by an increasingly steep climb towards the summit. By far the most challenging part of the climb up Ben Stack is that formed by the first, flat, few hundred metres between the A838 and the point at which you start to ascend. This looks pathless in ascent, and is exceptionally wet and boggy. But this is soon behind you and you can then follow the reasonable path up the main body of the mountain, or range freely and be guided by the line of rocky outcrops running up its spine. It is only later that the likeness to a Norman castle becomes clearer. The summit ridge is cleft in two, giving two parallel ridges and a choice of possible highest points. To the North stands Arkle with Foinaven beyond to the south Quinag features prominently.



IMAGE 369 BEN STACK

Alternatively start by the telephone box in Achfary 10 kilometres southeast of Laxford Bridge. A track leads westwards past a set of well-preserved old cottages to a gate into the Reay Forest. Beyond the gate a tract climbs gently providing occasional views of the gorge through which the Allt Achadh Fairidh flows. The track leaves the forest and becomes a path. About a mile

after the last trees and level with a waterfall leave the path and climb north by a burn. Continue to the west ridge where rock scree can be scrambled or bypassed to reach the summit. Follow the narrow ridge to the trig point and mast. Climb a knoll before descending the broad and uneven flanks of Leathad na Stioma, aiming for Loch More and boggy moorland to reach the road. Walk south to Achfary.

A great little mountain that is easily overlooked both because of its size and because it lies a little east of the main coast route, but a gem, and not to be missed.

### **Arkle**



IMAGE 370 ARKLE

Arkle rises to 787m (2582 feet) 4 miles (6.5 km) east of Laxford Bridge. If starting from the wooden bridge NC296402 the route is to walk along road for 3km to the bothy at Lone. Then track to the left to the gate between two boulders through the pine plantation. As the track levels slightly take a left to head northwest up to the south top 757m. After this the terrain changes dramatically, after a sharp drop follow the ridge that is quite narrow in places to the summit. To return either follow same way or south follow the line of stream towards Lone.

Arkle is a large and distinctive mountain that features in many classic shots and calendars. Arkle dominates the skyline from the road with this classic view as you venture down the A838. The large band of quartzite tilted at a slight angle viewed across Loch Stack gives an unmistakable profile. The slopes to the mountain are clearly steep and covered by shattered rock. What is hidden from the roadside view is the extensive curved ridge extending for one and half kilometres and enclosing a much steeper sided corrie on the eastern side. The southern ridge of the mountain swings round eastwards to join the southern extremities of Foinaven, making a very long and rough connection between these two classics of the north.

Climbing the bulk of Foinaven, the semi-circular fortress of Arkle and the elegant bleed of Ben Stack hold sway from Loch Eriboll in the east to Edrachilles Bay in the west. The height of



these three imposing mountains is truly appreciated as they rise virtually from sea level. Around them man's best efforts at road building creep by respectful of their prevailing tranquillity and the secret joys of their high corries. Here, within the cusp of these brooding giants hinds led by stags can be seen moving in line over a high gap in the ridge. Sit on Fionaven summit ridge and listen to the quartzite blocks tumble in the northern corries be amazed at the hollow amphitheatre of Arkle or overawed by the summit of Beinn Stack.

### **Sabhal Beag**

Sabhal Beag is 732 metres high. Lies 3 miles (5 km) south of Loch Dionard and 4 miles (7 km) east of Loch Stack. The top can be identified by the flat-stoned cairn. A craggy west face lies to the north of the Bealach na Feithe, the route is by an old pass across the watershed from Loch Stack to Allnabad in Strath More.

**Cranstackie and Beinn Spionnaidh** are neighbouring hills connected by a col (565m). These two quartzite-topped Corbetts are the most northerly mountains in Britain. Together they give a rough but enjoyable hill walk, the views are every bit as good as might be guessed from their position. Cranstackie is the more distinctive of the two peaks, whilst Beinn Spionnaidh has the most open outlook of the north coast. Access is from the A838 at Carbreck to the north west where a track leads to the slopes below the col. An ascent is also possible from the A838 at the head of Loch Eriboll to the south east.

### **Cranstackie**

2625ft/800m. The long south ridge from Cranstackie runs the length of the valley and forms the eastern side of Strath Dionard. Cranstackie has a more dome-like appearance topped with jagged rocks, Cranstackie is nowadays translated as 'the rugged hill', but older references clearly state the name as Crann Stacach, where crann is 'tree', and stacach can mean 'rugged, peaked, or rocky'. It seems the name might actually refer to the presence of the juniper trees.

### **Beinn Spionnaidh**

Beinn Spionnaidh rises to a height of 772m (2532 feet) located west of Loch Eriboll and northeast of Cranstackie and Foinaven. A whaleback ridge of quartzite scree, running southwest to northeast, is covered with loose, broken quartzite. A steep spur to the northwest, Cioch Mhor, provides one route to the top, and good views of the Kyle of Durness; the gentler slope to the southeast is tiring due to the loose rock on the upper section. Initially it is a fairly easy ascent of its north-west ridge on grass and some stones but higher up is the boulder field which makes for slow going. At the summit a trig point and the actual highest point, a nearby rock.

### **Meall Meadhonach**

Meall Meadhonach lies 3 miles (5 km) south of Durness and rises to a height of 422m (1384 feet). This name Signifying the "Middle Hill" is Applied to an Eminence Situated on "Beinn Bhreac" and between "Meall nan Clach Ruadha" and "Meall Leathad na Craoibhe." Meall Meadhonach is a high point on the hills to the south of Durness, and really the final, smaller Marilyn on the long Cranstackie and Beinn Spionnaidh ridge. A track ascends between it and subsidiary Beinn Ceannabeinne.

### **Ben Hutig**

Ben Hutig is the high point on the Whiten Head peninsula. The summit was one of the original OS survey stations. Ben Hutig, located to the north-west of the village of Tongue. During WWII Ben Hutig was the site of a lonely RAF bomber crash during a snowstorm. The crew of

the 612 Squadron Whitley bomber based at Wick were rescued and taken to nearby crofts in March 1943.

Driving around Mackay Country the road is surrounded by mountains and Lochans.



IMAGE 371 THE ROAD TRAVELS THROUGH MOUNTAINS AND LOCHANS

## Beaches of Mackay Country

Mackay Country has some of Scotland's most beautiful and peaceful white sandy bays and beaches, these sandy beaches are magnificent, clean in quiet bays along this rugged rocky coastline and are scattered along the coast, mostly not to be seen from the main road but never far away. Some are very easily accessible and obvious others are secluded and some are difficult or require different levels of determination to access.

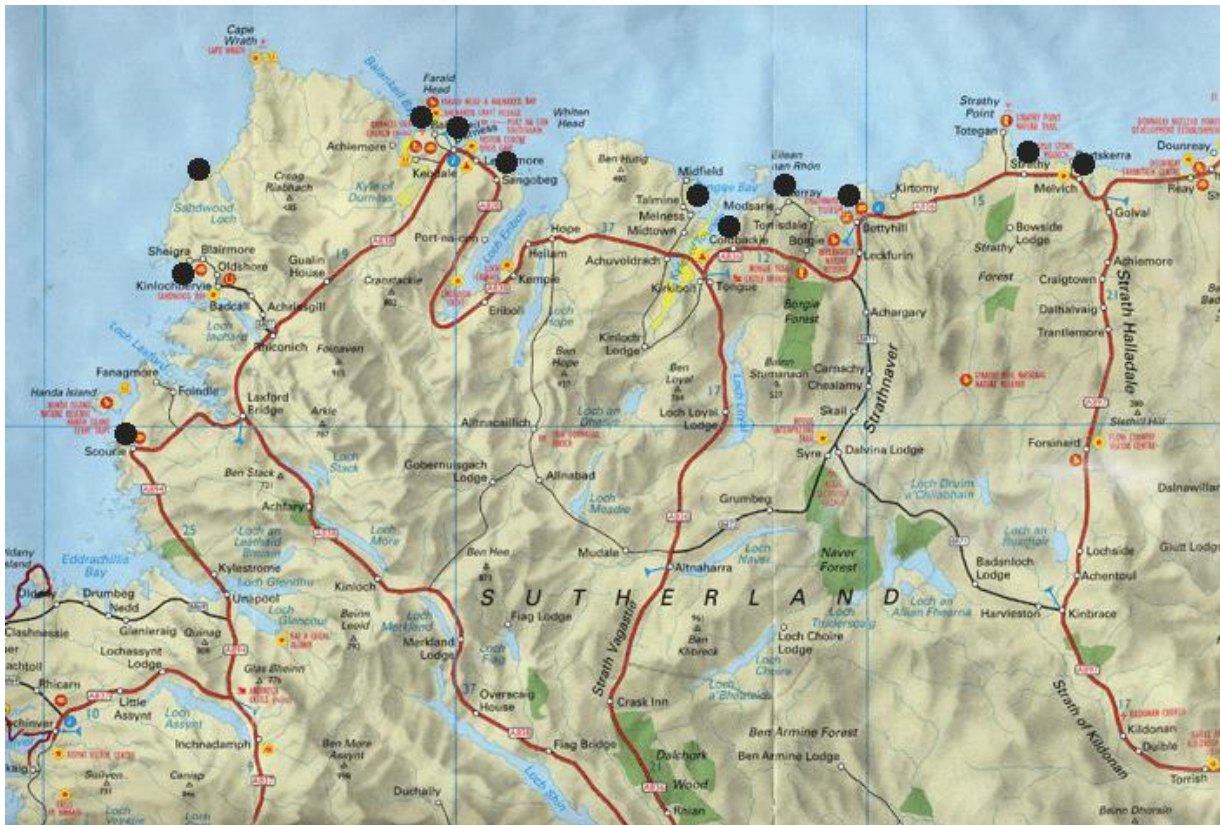


IMAGE 372 BEACHES OF MACKAY COUNTRY

Beaches are constantly changing. Tides and weather can alter beaches every day, bringing new materials and taking away others. Beaches also change seasonally. During the winter, storm winds toss sand into the air. The landscape has a very strong link with the underlying rock type, but also clearly shows the influence of glaciation and coastal erosion. The coast presents outstanding scenery. Some beaches are composed largely of finely crushed shell fragments and are backed by machair. This gives the sand its distinctive colour and purity, with the calcium carbonate supporting a rich flora. The rocky shoreline is also famous. Dozens of sea stacks and geos dot numerous headlands and inlets. As well as being of geological interest, the cliffs and sea stacks are an important breeding ground for thousands of sea birds including razorbills, guillemots, great skuas, kittiwakes, arctic skuas and puffins. The North West Highlands possesses a long and dramatic coastline with many pure white sandy beaches. Noted here are the beaches recognised as simple and worth a visit.

This section which is both informative and technical is taken from *Beaches of Sutherland. A survey of the beach, dune and machair areas of north and west Sutherland*<sup>128</sup>

<sup>128</sup> Ritchie W. and Mather, A. June, 1969. *Beaches of Sutherland*. Department of Geography, University of Aberdeen, for the Countryside Commission for Scotland. Reprinted 2001 by Scottish Natural Heritage as a Commissioned Report.

This investigation was thus stimulated by a realisation that the beaches of Sutherland were valuable resources, the more so because of the relative paucity of most other resources in the county, on which a considerable sector of the tourism industry depended, and by a wish to conserve these resources for future, as well as present use. Reports were made about camping and caravanning which although relevant to 1969 would be worth reading if a comparison were to be undertaken. I have omitted these reports here.

The mainly rocky north and west coasts of Sutherland are broken at intervals by small areas of beaches, frequently composed of sand of a high shell content. These beaches are scenically very attractive, offering contrasts of texture and colour to the generally rather harsh but spectacular mountain and rock scenery. They thus prove attractive to tourists, not only because of their visual quality, but also because of their recreational potential. Certain of the beach areas have become popular caravanning places, but unfortunately there is evidence of overuse in some places in the absence and difficulty of planning controls.

The landforms of Sutherland of which the beaches form but a small part are developed on a geological framework as varied and visually exciting as anywhere in Europe. The great Moine thrust plane separated the varied Moine series of ancient metamorphic rocks from the Lewisian, Torridonian and Cambrian rocks of the west.

On the north coast, particularly east of the Kyle of Tongue, enormous thicknesses of outwash deposits are found. No account of the Scottish coastline can begin without some reference to sea level change since Late- and Post-glacial times. The combined effect of rise and fall have given rise to a complex series of raised and submarine features in the landscape. Many of these raised shoreline features although small, are of considerable local importance as for example where they provide strips of level arable land or sites for township development. Indirectly the changing sea level has altered the erosive and depositional regimes of all the rivers in Sutherland. The clearest expression of this is to be found in the multiple terrace levels of the lower river courses: terraces which are now used for agriculture and communication purposes or as in Strath Halladale as a ready source of sand and gravel for constructional use.

Down through the ages the coastal zone of north and west Sutherland has proved more attractive to settlement than has the desolate moorland interior of the county. In the last two hundred years, this relative attractiveness has grown, and continues to grow as tourism develops on the well-endowed resources of mountain and coastal scenery. Although much of the coast of the north and west of the county is bleak, inhospitable and inaccessible, at intervals patches of blown sand occur. These sand areas are originally marine in nature, or originate in glacial and fluvial-glacial deposits reworked by marine action. Invariably these areas are of higher potential for agriculture than the surrounding rocky knolls or peat filled hollows, whether the use be for cultivation, or as is more frequently the case, for grazing

Tourism has become extricable linked to the beaches.

The recreational use of beaches is rigidly controlled by the existing road pattern, especially by the north coast and west coast roads. On the north coast, the main road runs parallel to the coast although some distance back from it in places. The sea is usually in sight, although not always the shore. Occasionally, for example just to the east of Durness and again at Coldbackie, the beaches are close to but well below the road. Elsewhere, although the beach may be visible from the road, access is not easy or direct either for pedestrians or for vehicles, so that in such places tourist use is usually slight. Where the road runs close to but above the beach, the pattern of use is usually a short visit during a break in the drive along the coast; camping or caravanning is not usual except at Durness where access from the road to the clifftop overlooking the beach is very easy. On the west coast, the main road runs much further inland than in the north, except

for a short stretch near Scourie. This means that “passing” visits to the shore are much rarer than if the road closely followed the coastline.

### **Scourie**

The shingle and sand beaches of Scourie lie in the hill girt innermost part of the bay which leads out to the open Minch and the well-known seabird reserve of Handa Island. The beach areas are almost completely enclosed by a prominent reef of Lewisian rock which runs out from the west headland. At low tide the wide western sand beach dries completely and water of less than 1 fathom is found in the remaining part of the bay which fronts the shingle beach and small pier. The area is thus more akin to a tidal strand than a true coastal beach and is the result of sedimentation in a protected basin-structure in the Lewisian country rock. The type of sedimentation in the two beach areas has been quite different since one beach is of sand, the other of shingle and cobbles. The east beach is of cobbles and shingle and faces due west to the narrow sea entrance through which passes strongly convergent wave action. The strength of the waves in spite of the shallow sediment filled offshore ground has resulted in a large shingle bar to be constructed across the east end of the bay. This bar has blocked the drainage from Loch a’Bhaidh Daraich and impounded a marshy pool which drains by seepage through the shingle bar.

The road to the almost disused pier uses this natural causeway. Storm thrown cobbles on either side of the road show that the ridge is still active at times when westerly gales and high tides coincide. The west bay is entirely different. It is subject to gentle, much refracted wave action



IMAGE 373 SCOURIE BEACH

and the beach is of very low gradient. The shallow water and low gradient make this a very safe beach and as the area is very well protected by its ring of hills the area has some advantages over other beach areas in this northwest coast. The source of the beach sand and shingle can only be suggested as having come from a glacial or outwash source since no sediment source is found in cliff erosion or drainage.

The landscape, in general, consists of the characteristic ice-worn Lewisian plateaux, hills and ridges but pockets of angular, stony till are visible in several localities nearby as for example in the steep hill slope north of the pier. In spite of the constriction of the area and the protection offered by its general setting some sand blowing has occurred on a very local scale from the west beach. This has resulted in the rock peninsula (already referred to) being covered in undulating and broken machair topography. A ledge of sand borders the upper part of the beach and in the extreme western angle of the beach a small sand hill complex has developed. The seaward edge of this sand ledge is subject to slumping and undercutting but inland the machair ground is quite stable since it is fenced off and still under arable agriculture.

The area is small and the parking so restricted. The peaceful, sheltered beach at Scourie is the perfect place to spot many seabirds. Set within the shelter of Scourie bay is the long sandy beach of Scourie. The near white sand here is divided by rocky inlets and the sea is a clear blue. A well signposted beach with plenty of accessible paths, Scourie Beach is a great place to spend the day. Visitors can enjoy the wildlife and bird watching hides, with plenty of information on local animals and the surrounding area. From the car park there is an interesting walk out to the cliff point with spectacular views of the Handa Island. The sea views, particularly from the cairns near the point, are spectacular.

Scourie beach is easily accessed and is a lovely spot to spend some time relaxing, taking in the scenery and watching the abundant wildlife. Just a short boat trip away is the nature reserve on Handa Island with its magnificent sea cliffs and huge seabird colonies. This peaceful sheltered beach, next to the cemetery, is signposted off the A894. It can also be reached by a path along the shore from the Scourie campsite and past a birdwatching hide with information on local wildlife.

### **Oldshoremore**

Oldshoremore beach is located about two miles northwest of Kinlochbervie on a northwest-southeast trending section of the coast. The beach is about 700 yards long, and has an intertidal zone of 200 yards, with the upper beach between high water mark and the dune front 35 yards wide. It occupies a depression in the Lewisian gneiss basement, with small remnants of Torridonian sandstone in the axis of the depression, offshore in Eilean na h-Aiteig and in a number of reefs and skerries. The depression trends southwest and is asymmetrical with a steep south-eastern edge and a more gently sloping northwest margin. It seems very likely that a fault line marks the south eastern edge, and indeed faulting may be responsible for the existence of a number of minor but important ridges within the depression. The most striking of these ridges is the one of Lewisian gneiss on which the graveyard stands, and which in effect forms the southeast headland to the bay. To the northwest another gneiss ridge occurs on the margin of the main depression, while a small remnant of Torridonian sandstone survives in the form of a small ridge occupying the axis of the depression.

One of the most beautiful beaches in Sutherland, Oldshoremore was formed from eroded sandstone and seashells. Oldshoremore beach has golden sand surrounded by a barren landscape and sand dunes. Known locally as Am Meallan, Oldshoremore Beach is a spectacular, narrow beach with clean white sand. A rocky peninsula of land known as Eilean na h-Aiteig separates this beach from its neighbour, Polin Beach. There is a small parking area and a narrow footpath along the rocky coastline. With rocky outcrops and vast, clear blue sea, the beach is a stunning and tranquil spot. A beautiful quiet beach, well off the beaten track, it is linked to two other smaller beaches. The machair here is well known for its special wildflowers. The small car park and campsite is signposted from the minor road beyond Kinlochbervie. Oldshoremore (Gaelic: Àisir Mòr, 'large passage') is a scattered crofting hamlet

in the Eddrachillis parish. It incorporates around twenty houses, though several of these are holiday homes.

Marine erosion is most active on the strongly exposed northeast headland, on Eilean na h-



IMAGE 374 OLDSHOREMORE BEACH

Aiteig. Here the sandstone beds dip towards the northwest, and a cliff has been cut around the south and east sides. Cliffling has also taken place on the reefs of sandstone in the northern part of the beach, and in the sandstone remnant occupying the axis of the depression, although the latter is at present above high water mark and is protected by an accumulation of sand. The Lewisian sections of the headlands have not been cliffed, except on part of the inside of the southeast headland where the rock has apparently been weakened by faulting. Part of the source of supply of material to the beach will be from the erosion of nearby cliffs.

The material accumulating on the beach is a fine shell sand, except on the northwest where shingle and cobbles occur under conditions of greater exposure. Most of the sand is of a finer calibre than that which should be liberated by erosion of the Torridonian sandstone, so that there must be other supplementary sources. The small stream entering the bay is unlikely to contribute large quantities of material, as it flows over ice scoured Lewisian gneiss, although it may be able to acquire a small quantity of blown sand which it will return to the beach.

Inland from the upper beach lies the frontal dune ridge, broken by the stream exit but otherwise continuous. The ridge appears to be fairly stable, with only a few small blowouts. Behind the dune ridge however, a complex of old deflation hollows and sand hills occurs between the Torridonian sandstone and Cemetery ridges. Between the Torridonian ridge and the northwest margin of the depression, this thin veneer thickens out in a zone of flat machair, where once again the underlying topography is of little influence, although the bedrock is at a higher level than further east. This flat machair area is stable and little affected by wind erosion, although on the sand veneered slopes of the rock ridges a large number of small erosional scars are in evidence. On the dune front, young marram communities are colonising, while in the complex of old blowouts and sand hills behind the dune ridge a much closer and more mature community of marram together with other grasses and mosses exists.

Further inland still, on the flat spreads and veneers of blown sand a typical machair sward with a close turf occurs. On the headlands and on Eilean na h-Aiteig the vegetation communities are adapted to exposure to salt spray, while further inland beyond the limits of blown sand and salt spray the maritime communities give way to moorland or croft land. Most of the area affected by blown sand is common grazing, a sheep stock is carried most, but not all of the year, on the common grazing.

A tarred road leads from the Kinlochbervie-Sheigra road down as far as the cemetery on the east side of the beach, but does not lead on to the dune area itself. At the end of the road there is a small turning and parking area. The pattern of use seems to be one in which visiting rather than residential tourists predominate. One or two very small areas of slumping and blowing of sand occur along the line of the footpath leading from the car park past the cemetery to the beach.

Oldshoremore beach is fairly stable both in terms of physical processes and recreational use. Some scarring is occurring mainly associated with rabbit burrows, and does not seem connected with tourism developments.

### **Oldshore Beg or Polin**

Oldshore Beg or Polin beach is located immediately to the west of Oldshoremore, and has a similar orientation and boundary characteristics. The beach is about 300 yards long and has a very wide intertidal zone of almost 300 yards, with 30 yards of upper beach separating the dune front and high water mark. Like Oldshoremore, Oldshore Beg beach occupies a southwest trending depression in the Lewisian gneiss basement, but unlike Oldshoremore, no remnant of Torridonian sandstone has survived. Again there is a slight asymmetry, with the southeast margin much steeper than the northwest one, and faulting again being likely. The depression is fairly narrow however, and does not contain the small ridges of the type which complicate the morphology of Oldshoremore. Off the northwest headland is the island of Eilean an Ròin Mòr, which is a continuation of the ridge from of the headland. This island is of great importance in increasing the shelter of the beach from the west quarter. Also deep water does not come so close inshore as in the case of Oldshoremore. Although the depression is continued offshore the ten fathom line is three-quarters of a mile out.

The rock ridges forming the margins of the depression are ice scoured and present the typical appearance of bare Lewisian gneiss topography, with a very thin or completely lacking cover of weathered material or glacial deposits. It is likely that the offshore ground is of similar nature, being for the most part rocky with some sand in the inner bay. The beach is moderately well sheltered except for the southwest quarter which is very open and exposed.

The morphology of the blown sand area would suggest that winds between south and southwest are most important in its evolution. Marine erosion is mainly confined to the headlands. The Lewisian gneiss does not readily yield cliff forms, but some cliffing has occurred on the insides of the headlands where the rock has probably been weakened by faulting. Most of the material accumulating on the beach is a fine shell sand with no shingle or cobble deposits, in contrast to the exposed cobble beach at Droman immediately to the west. The stream which enters the bay might be expected to supply small quantities of sediment to the beach, but for the most part it flows over gneiss so that its load will be very limited, and certainly will be insufficient to account for most of the material accumulated on the beach area. The ridge is stable with very few blowouts, and quickly gives way on its distal side to a zone of very gently undulating local topography, in which faint ridges run inland at right angles to the dune direction. This zone in turn gives way to machair, which is very stable except for a few subdued traces of blowouts and accumulation ridges.



Exposure to the south is severe, while the gneiss ridge affords shelter from the west. The vegetation pattern is simple. Active colonisation is occurring on the landward part of the upper beach, while the open marram community of the front part of the dune ridge rapidly gives way to more fully developed turf forming communities on the lee side of the ridge. On the blown sand inland from the dune ridge, typical machair communities have developed, while along the stream sides freshwater marsh communities exist in the poorly drained hollows. The headlands are uninfluenced by blown sand but salt spray is an important modifying factor on the vegetation. The greater part of the machair area is common grazing.

Vehicular access to the beach, dune or flat machair areas is not possible. A road leads from the Kinlochbervie-Sheigra road to Oldshore Beg Township, but does not extend down to the beach, and the parking of cars in the township and pedestrian access from there to the beach seems to be discouraged. Another road runs to Droman pier, to the west of the gneiss ridge forming the boundary to Oldshore Beg Bay. A small area close by the pier is used as a parking space, and indeed in a small way as a camping place, but again there is no vehicular access to the beach, although the ridge is not fenced and walking is fairly easy. Thus because of the difficulties of access, the beach and beach area is comparatively little used for recreational pursuits. This relative inaccessibility might allow it to be retained as a sort of “wilderness beach” without any of the trappings of tourists.

### **Sheigra**

Sheigra beach is located at the turning point between the northwest and north trending sections of the coast at the mouth of the Loch Inchar embayment. It is about three and a half miles northwest of Kinlochbervie and is situated near the end of the Kinlochbervie-Sheigra road. The beach and beach area are fairly small. The length of the beach is about 200 yards and the intertidal zone is about 60 yards wide. Like the other Loch Inchar beaches, Sheigra occupies a southwest trending depression in the Lewisian gneiss basement. Unlike the other beaches, however, the eastern headland is not of gneiss but of Torridonian sandstone, and the depression is excavated along the contact between the gneiss and sandstone. The eastern margin of the depression is bounded by a steep scarp of north-westwards dipping sandstone, while the western margin and headland present a typical Lewisian landscape of bare, ice scoured rock with occasional perched boulders. The line of the western headland is continued offshore in a submarine ridge appearing occasionally above the water surface in the form of small skerries. This ridge will have an important effect in modifying wave action on the beach. The depression also continues offshore, but it is very narrow between the Dubh Sgeir and Eilean an Ròin, and the 10 fathom line is almost three quarters of a mile offshore.

A small stream drains into the bay, but it is short and filters through a marshy depression immediately behind the machair, which will act as a sediment trap, so that very little material will be delivered to the beach from this source.

Inland from the machair lies the croft land of the township, a track leads from the Kinlochbervie-Sheigra road over flat terrain almost right to the machair front. A car track has appeared from the end of the “made” track near the fence separating the croft land from the common grazing. It is stressed that much of the erosion occurring on the Sheigra machair is a process resulting from natural conditions.

## Sandwood Bay

Sandwood Bay is situated between the headlands of Rubh' an t Socaich Ghlais and Rubh'a Bhuachaille, the bay lies 6m (10km) southwest of Cape Wrath one of the wildest, loneliest, loveliest and least inaccessible bays on the British coast. It is best accessed from Kinlochbervie



IMAGE 375 SANDWOOD BAY

on the shore of Loch Inchar, the last three miles being over a typical Highland bog which takes a good deal longer to cross than the distance would seem to warrant. The bay itself is bounded on its southern arm by immense cliffs of dark red Torridon sandstone; and standing aloof from the headland is a tall columnar sea-stack, a portion of the cliff detached under the ceaseless attack of the sea. At the south end the stack Am Buachaille, The Herdsman and off shore the rocky islet of Am Baig.

The bay is floored with that same exquisitely coloured sand, the ground-down fragments of the coast, and is backed by dunes of the same material. Northward, headland after headland stands out defiantly, culminating in the majestic ramparts of Cape Wrath. The sea pours into the bay tumultuously and climbs to breathless heights up the walls of the cliffs on either hand, while the wreckage lying about bears eloquent testimony to the destruction wrought by these tremendous waters. In the manifold richness and beauty of the grandest mountain district in Britain, this is one of the gems.

Sandwood Bay contains the largest beach and dune area in west Sutherland and although situated at the end of a major valley – Strath Shinary – is also the least accessible. The beach, dune and machair complex separate Loch Sandwood, which is the flooded lower part of this glacially modified depression from the sea. The southeast to northwest trending depression also corresponds to the junction of Torridonian grits and conglomerate to the south and Lewisian gneisses to the north. At its width the peninsula of sand and shingle stretches for three quarters of a mile out from the crumbling Torridonian cliffs to the loch outlet which has been forced against the Lewisian headland which forms the northern limit of the Sandwood area. Further north, however, the beach is extended by two smaller embayments corresponding to minor depressions in the otherwise almost continuous cliff rampart which extends north to Cape Wrath. Bedrock in the form of skerries on the relatively steeply inclined lower beach and three

other exposures of Torridonian and Lewisian origin within the dune complex suggest the existence of a discontinuous sill of rock which has formed the core of the land bar across the loch. In effect the physiography resembles a raised fiord or sea loch being filled in by and drift from the north and deltaic sedimentation from the Shinary in the south.

The importance of different resistance to erosion can also be seen in the marine and inland cliffs which form the margins of the region. The rectangular north and northeast facing Torridonian cliffs rise steeply, in places nearly vertically to over 300ft but are visibly crumbling to form great scree and talus cones. The coastal cliffs thus provide abundant materials of a wide textural range to the inshore zone. The rate of this retreat can probably be judged from the separation of the 170ft stack of Am Buachaille to the west which could not have withstood intensive ice erosion. The massive Lewisian is generally less active being more resistant except where fractures or lines of lithological weakness have been picked out by climatic element.

Apart from building dunes, windblown sand has also extended machair-type landforms high onto the Lewisian ridge to the north and infilled the northern part of Sandwood Loch although the evidence of cliffing on its northern and western shores indicate how local wave action across the loch is gradually cutting back the machair and dune area. Sand influence also extends in a southerly direction along the sides of the loch and into the depression through which the access track passes. A major area of bare sand is found above high water mark in the western corner of the area where several large blowouts have coalesced. Undoubtedly the funnelling effect of the ancient sea cliff is of major importance here. Bare sand is also found in the wide tidal pool between the line of fore dunes and the main dune and machair foreland. The flooding of this area is mainly due to fresh water being impounded by the tide but some salt water now breaks through at the west end of the dune ridge. The main dune area is covered in vigorous marram tussocks and only locally gives way to the lower grasses of the machair association. The immaturity of the vegetation is related to the continuing activity of blowing sand.

Erosion scars are frequent and have probably been initiated by sheep or rabbit grazing. Because of their exposure and the thin cover of sand such erosion scars are quick to spread and in the relative absence of colonising species such as marram will probably continue to extend. Because of its isolation, reached only by a 2 mile footpath after a rough but motorable 4 mile peat track off the Kinlochbervie-Sheigra road, the human impact on this area is slight. There is no settlement nearer than the township of Sheigra.

Existence of a clachan at Sandwood can be seen in the shape of a crumbling house, field boundaries and sheepfold and there is additional evidence in the form of old lazy beds. The area is lightly stocked with sheep and is apparently used as common grazing by several townships. Rabbit stocking is also low except on the margins of the area where the sand tends to be thinner but the machair-type vegetation richer, and unfortunately these areas are quick to erode and slow to heal. Thus the sand area of Sandwood Bay is naturally unstable and dynamic. Human impact was probably greater in the past but does not appear to have been a major influence in landscape evolution. There is no question of the area being opened up to increased pressure without considerable investment in roads and footpaths, and given the evidence of natural instability it would be very unwise to promote any form of tourist development. With its variety of rocks, landforms, plants and wildlife the area does offer an ideal area for the naturalist, field scientist and hill walker and the area may well be a suitable one to conserve for these and similar users.

The approach route is well back from the coastline and a low ridge hides any views of the sea for most of the way. Two thirds of the walk is along tracks but the final sections are over some very wet and eroded peat bogs. The path crosses rough, and at times boggy moorland, past Lochs Meadhonach and Clais nan Coinneal, then down on the right Sandwood Cottage is

visible. Follow the obvious route round the shoulder of Druim na Buainn towards the sea. Sight of the bay and long white sand curved around a deep blue sea is obscured until you are virtually on top of it, a steep crag protects a direct entrance onto the southern end of the beach and you descend to find yourself in the middle of a long sandy bay. Behind the high beach dunes lies Sandwood Loch, nearly 2 km and obviously isolated from the sea by the deposits of sand laid down by the sea.

The bay is one of the largest on the west coast; it is comparatively remote; there are high cliffs on both the north and south headlands (both over 400ft) which add drama to the view; Am Buachaille stands 200 ft high in splendid profile off the southern headland; the sand dunes are enormous, topped with coarse grass, and showing no signs of human intervention. In this northerly location the Atlantic comes crashing in unhindered by any land mass, on a stormy day it is an impressive sight. Swimming in the bay is not advised.

The river Shinary, drains Sandwood Loch and breaks the beach in the centre. It rises in the Parph and flows down Strath Shinary, a spate river with merely a trickle in dry weather.

Off shore are remains of several ship wrecks carried by currents prior to the Cape Wrath Lighthouse. A spitfire crashed here on a training exercise during the Second World War and still some parts are uncovered.

It is possible to walk the coastline from Sandwood Bay to the Cape Wrath to the north, at the extremity of a cliff-bound stretch of coast, is the lonely lighthouse at Cape Wrath however the terrain is very rough, trackless, passes over high cliffs and drops into the coves, and there are two sizeable river crossings. You also need to coordinate your arrival with a pre-arranged meeting for the summer mini-bus service that will take out back to the ferry at Durness – or add a further 16 miles of walking along the road; the bulk of the road walking is through Ministry of Defence land and there is no alternative. The Ministry of Defence uses the Cape Wrath area and there are access restrictions to the coastline and the interior.

There are numerous tales of mermaids and phantoms from this remote place and a popular tale is about the ghost of the Bearded Sailor. Several tales have been told of walkers who have sought shelter in the cottage, being terrified by a bearded sailor appearing at the windows, resplendent in tunic and brass buttons. One report tells of a violent shaking of the whole house during the night, with two terrified walkers who were sheltering there leaving at first light and running for their lives to civilisation. The most intriguing tale concerns an Edinburgh lady who had never been to Sandwood Bay. A friend who had been there gave her a piece of the cottage's broken staircase as a souvenir. Since then, several uncanny experiences befell her. Crockery tumbled inexplicably from the table. Knocks and footsteps were heard throughout the night. On one occasion she smelled tobacco, and turned to see the Bearded Sailor in her doorway. He watched her for a moment, and then vanished.

## Kyle of Durness



IMAGE 376 KYLE OF DURNESS

(Cape Wrath Hotel to Balnakeil Bay) NC 370675

The Kyle of Durness is a shallow, sand-encumbered inlet characterised by a number of right-angled bends which reflect the influence of fault lines in its configuration. Wide sandflats are exposed at low tide, but active beaches, where the sand can dry out sufficiently to be able to be blown, are few and small, some very small cliff-foot beaches occur on the west side of the Kyle near Achiemore, but the main concentration is on the east side between Keoldale and Balnakeil. Here a number of small, short beaches have accumulated against the edges of the low limestone plateau which forms the shore of the firch, and very extensive but mainly thin blown sand deposits have been laid down on the limestone plateau itself.

There are three main beaches, with a total length of approximately 500m, together with some smaller sand patches such as the one near Eilean Dubh at the north-west tip of the area. The most northerly of the main beaches is strongly influenced by an outcrop of east-dipping limestone which forms the lower part of the beach. The upper beach is broken by spreads of boulders, and the backshore is only 10m wide. The beach is thin and wet, and is poorly nourished, there being little continuing supply of sand to it. The middle beach is distinguished by the probably temporary growth of a sand spit out from the point where the coastal edge of the limestone plateau changes direction. This spit extends to about 200m in length and its surface is very gently sloping. Behind it lies an area of wet sand built into a series of ridges and runnels. At its root, the spit is hinged onto a 10m limestone cliff, and south of the root a line of jagged low (2m) east dipping limestone reefs occur just below high water mark, impounding some tidal pools. The backshore behind this beach is very narrow, and is broken by rock outcrops in places. The southernmost beach consists only of a small area of mobile sand which has accumulated at the cliff-foot near the point where the coastline changes direction from northeast/southwest to northwest/southeast. In all three beaches, the quantity of mobile sand is very small; the beach forms only a narrow fringe between the wet sandflats and the limestone plateau edge. Although the area of inter-tidal sandflats in the Kyle of Durness is large

(approximately 65ha in the section currently under discussion) the effective area, from the viewpoint of supply of sand for dune and machair building, is very much lower.

Most of the east shore of the lower part of the Kyle of Durness takes the form of low limestone cliffs, rarely exceeding 10m in height. Behind the beach sectors, rock frequently outcrops, but on the two more northerly beaches a sand cliff, as high as 15m in places, has been cut. This erosional nature of the coastal edge, where it consists of sand, is in keeping with the thin wet nature of the beaches; there is clearly an inadequate supply of sand for dune-building at present. The main development of dunes is behind the central beach. Here a fore dune ridge, averaging between 12 and 15m in height, has been built up parallel to high water mark. Both the seawards face, which is partially cliffed, and the landward slope are steep and the crest line is sharp. At the north end of this beach, a large blowout has been cut into the dune, and together with its redistribution zone, gives an appearance of a parabolic, south facing dune. The dune ridge is also broken by the stream which issues via a dune slack towards the north end of the beach. Behind the north beach, a maturely vegetated Marram-clad ridge has been built up against the limestone scarp which approaches closely to the shore at this point. This ridge, which averages 8m in height, is not a free-standing dune, but is simply composed of blown sand banked against a steep slope. The cliff-foot south beach has given rise to a number of small climbing dunes. Much of the 8–10m cliff which lies behind the beach is sand free, but on the 20–30° slope above the cliff several small dune forms are visible and appear both to be mobile and growing.

The machair is very extensive, but is mainly only 1–2m in thickness, and it has been almost completely deflated over large areas. The main supply point appears to have been from near the southwest shore, rather than from the west coast where most of the present beaches lie. The machair appears to be almost completely fossil, in the sense that there is now no continuing sand supply. Topographical influences from the underlying limestone have controlled both the main deposition areas, and also the areas where deflation has been most vigorous. Most of the higher parts of the undulating limestone plateau have now been swept clear of their machair capping, and limestone pavement has been exposed in places. The depressions, on the other hand, still carry machair, whose edges take the form of erosion faces which are now mostly grassed over. Also the more northerly part of the machair, where the blown sand thins out, has been much less affected by deflation and the machair there is relatively intact except for a few deflation fingers which are almost invariably fixed. Small areas of bare sand are still visible around some of the deflation edges, but activity is very slight. Comparison of 1946 air photographs with the present day shape, size and position of the erosion faces shows that there has been very little change, and the scars are probably kept fresh only by sheep rubbing.

The blown sand accumulations on the east shore of the Kyle of Durness are complex both in their form and in their evolution. The present day sandflats in the Kyle would not have given rise to the extensive dune and machair area, and it may be that the main period of formation was during a phase of slightly lower sea level, when the sand flats would have dried out more frequently and more completely, thus enabling sand to blow landwards. A great diversity of habitats is presented by the combination of a limestone substrate and blown sand deposits, and the area is of very high ecological interest. *Dryas octapetala* is widespread, usually occurring on sloping surfaces with only a thin veneer of blown sand, while *Primula scotica* also grows towards the northwest corner of the area. The existence of dune slacks and a range of hydrological conditions in the machair adds to the ecological interest of the area, while the habitat diversity is enhanced by the existence of a plantation of pine in the central part of the limestone plateau. The area lies within a Site of Special Scientific Interest defined on botanical and geological grounds.

Most of the area between the Cape Wrath Hotel and Balnakeil Bay is part of the Keoldale sheep stock club, owned by DAFS and managed collectively by Durness crofters. There is no evidence that agricultural use is detracting from the stability of the beach complex. Recreational use is very slight. Although there are no physical barriers to pedestrian access, vehicular access is not possible. The beaches are not visible from the A838, and only a few visitors penetrate from either the Balnakeil end or from the road end at the Kyle of Durness ferry.

### **Keoldale**



IMAGE 377 KEOLDALE BEACH

Unlike the other inlets on the north coast of Scotland, the Kyle of Durness is not straight, but contains two major bends, the more southerly of which is a right angle. At the outer edge of this right angle, a sandy beach has formed, and behind it a machair slopes up to the 50m limestone plateau which lies between the Kyle and the village of Durness. This beach complex differs from the other beaches in the Kyle of Durness, and although its machair coalesces with those of the other beaches, it is considered worthy of separate treatment since it is more intensively used for recreation. The beach is thin, flat and wet, with only a very narrow backshore not exceeding a few yards in width. The sand of the beach is broken by numerous immobile cobbles, and the quantity of mobile sand is very small. The sand is largely of mineral origin, with a relatively low lime content of 30%.

The coastal edge is mostly in the form of a low sea wall, behind which runs the road serving the Kyle of Durness ferry and the Cape Wrath Hotel. Some blown sand is banked against this low sea wall, but the combination of the thin wet beach and the seawall barrier means that there is very little continuing supply of sand available for dune or machair building. Dunes are completely lacking, and the machair appears to consist largely of old, well humified sand of ancient rather than recent origin. Most of the machair is under 2m in thickness, and the thickness decreases rapidly landwards. In plan the machair is asymmetrical, being much wider towards the east end, where southwest winds have blown sand along the slight depression occupied by the A838. The machair is almost invariably smooth, forming a thin blanket over the underlying topography, and erosion scars are few. Indeed the main characteristics of the beach complex are its subdued forms and processes.

The machair forms part of the Keoldale Sheep Stock Club. Much of the machair is enclosed by dykes and fences, and has been improved. Crops of hay and silage are still taken from the enclosed fields. Recreational use originates from the Cape Wrath Hotel, which lies behind the beach near its west end, and from the car park at the end of the unclassified road serving the Kyle of Durness ferry. Most of the visits to the beach are of a short term nature, and camping and caravanning are prevented by the low wall and fences which separate the machair from the road. At the extreme east end of the beach, at the junction of the unclassified road with the A838, an area of unfenced grass heath is used for wild caravanning and camping, but blown sand is almost completely lacking, and little physical damage is done, although the site is visually exposed. Neither the scientific interest nor the scenic quality of the beach are high, and the attractiveness of the beach is reduced by discharge of pipes onto the beach.

## **Kervaig Bay**

NC 290727



IMAGE 378 KERVAIG BAY

General setting Kervaig Bay is a spectacular but rarely visited bay on the north coast some 3km east of Cape Wrath. The cliff coastline in which the bay is set is composed of Lewisian Gneiss to the west, with characteristically rounded cliff profiles rising to 80m, while to the east higher cliffs, rising to 200m, have been cut in horizontally bedded Torridonian Sandstone. Two valleys carrying sizeable streams issue at the bay; the east valley follows a major fault line separating the gneiss from the sandstone. Despite some shelter from two small skerries, the beach is very exposed to the northwest, and is a typical high-energy unit, set in coastal scenery of some grandeur. The beach, composed of sand with a lime content of around 50%, extends to 250m in length, and its exposed situation is reflected in the steepness of its profile. The steepness, combined with the apparent irregularity of the nearshore zone and the turbulence generated around the stream mouth and the skerries, mean that the beach is most unsafe for bathing. At the time of study, during a long spell of fine weather, a large berm had built up, with a distinct reverse gradient of 2°. This berm was defined on its landward margin by the



stream which enters the east side of the bay, and which had been deflected westwards across the beach to share the outlet of the west stream. The wet sand and standing water along this stream course act as an effective barrier for movement of sand landwards. Behind this wet channel there is a backshore of approximately 30m, leading up to a cobble ridge. This ridge increases in height from west to east (from 2-4m above high water mark, and is composed of cobbles of Torridonian Sandstone mixed with gneiss at the west end). The ridge is flat topped, and extends to about 25m in width. Formerly, much of this ridge was probably overlain by dunes or machair, which have subsequently been stripped off by wind erosion. Partial recolonisation has occurred, but the vegetation is still very discontinuous.

A feature of Kervaig Bay is the absence of a clearly defined coastal edge separating the beach from the machair. The front edge of the machair has retreated several tens of metres under attack from wind erosion, and an undulating area of humified blown sand, probably representing a former soil surface, leads from the fresh deflation edges of the machair to the cobble ridge. Machair retreat has been greatest at the east end, where exposure to the northwest is greatest, and has occurred along a face originally parallel to high water mark. This long face is broken by a few short deflation fingers almost at right angles to it. The machair edge is mostly under 1m in height, but is still very active. A large part of the machair, together with any dune zone which may once have existed, have already been removed, and there is no evidence that the erosion has been checked. The Kervaig machair is unusual in two respects. Firstly, erosion appears to have been solely from the coastal edge backwards: there is no sign of significant blow outs having been initiated in the landward part of the machair and then extended seawards. Secondly, the deflation floor exposed on the retreat of the machair scarp is highly irregular; it is not defined by the water table or by a level shingle floor. As has been stated, the deflation floor takes the form of a surface of humified sand. This surface is highly irregular and is probably associated with old habitations and refuse deposits. The area of the machair to the landward of the erosion edge is triangular in shape, tapering to a narrow point at the west end, and becoming wider eastwards. At the west end, it terminates sharply against a hill slope which is but thinly veneered with blown sand. Further east, the machair thins out more gradually along the valley of the stream entering the east side of the bay. Most of the machair is thin and undulating; its topography probably reflects that of the underlying rock and drift.

The beach complex is typical of high energy conditions, with a steep profile, a massive cobble ridge, and a severely eroded machair. Streams strongly influence the geomorphology of the beach, both as agents of sediment supply and as factors influencing the relief of the beach complex. The beach complex appears to be at an advanced stage in development; the dune zone has been completely removed and erosion has extended well back into the machair. The rate of erosion may well now be slowing down, but it is unlikely that it will be halted while a significant area of uneroded machair remains. Vegetation backshore pioneers, other than some seasonal growth of Sea Rocket, are almost completely absent from the sandy beach. But on the sand-filled interstices on the cobble ridge which has been progressively exposed as the machair has been eroded an unusual development has occurred in the form of colonisation by Sand Couch. Towards the inner (landward) parts of this cobble ridge, the Sand Couch is joined by silverweed, and eventually the whole area may be expected to revegetate. The deflated area behind the Sand Couch shows little signs of grassing over yet, despite the locally high humus content of the sand. When colonisation begins, however, it will probably be rapid. Landwards of the machair edge, most of the machair is enclosed in fences, and has at least partially been improved. Its floristic composition is undistinguished. Land use at Kervaig Bay lies in part of Balnakeil sheep farm, and the whole area of the machair is given over to sheep grazing. Formerly, a shepherd occupied the now abandoned house which overlooks the beach, and parks

are enclosed by still-maintained fences on the machair and its immediate environs. Sheep are now normally excluded from these parks in summer, and thus the vegetation is able to recover from grazing at other times. The abundance of ragwort in the machair suggests that overgrazing has occurred in the recent past. There are few rabbits. The abandoned house, together with the severely eroded machair combine to lend an air of dereliction to the landwards part of the beach complex. This air is emphasized by the remains of rude shelters of cobbles and rusting corrugated iron near the machair edge. It is believed that these shelters were constructed by campers from a local adventure school.

Refuse from the now abandoned house, and a considerable quantity of broken glass, further detract from the attractiveness of the area landwards of the cobble ridge. Indeed the untidiness is very disappointing, particularly in such a remote and isolated beach. In contrast, however, the view seawards is magnificent, with high but contrasting cliffs on either side of the beach, clean beach sand and complex and ever changing wave action. The usual means of access to Kervaig Bay is by the Cape Wrath minibus service, which runs between the Kyle of Durness ferry and Cape Wrath lighthouse. The beach is not visible from the road used by this minibus, and in any case most of the bus passengers wish to visit the Cape. Therefore visits to the beach are most infrequent, and recreational use is extremely slight. Under such circumstances, it is unlikely that Kervaig Bay will figure highly in priorities for recreational management. Nevertheless if it is contended that a number of 'wilderness' type beaches should be maintained for recreational use as well as more intensively used ones, then efforts should be made to conserve the quality of the environment in such beaches. Little can be done to control the machair erosion (short of heavy expenditure), but the removal of debris from the zone between the beach and machair would be very welcome. Perhaps such a project could be carried out by a body such as the conservation corps or by an adventure school.

### **Balnakeil Bay**



IMAGE 379 BALNAKEIL BAY

Balnakeil Sands occupy the west side of the isthmus joining the Faraid Head peninsula to the mainland just to the north of Durness. The setting of the beach differs from the rather confined position of many of the Sutherland beaches in rather narrow inlets, and the long sweep of the

beach is unique in the north and west of the county. The beach is nearly 1.25 miles long, with an inter-tidal zone averaging over 200 yards wide. Half way along, the line of the beach is broken by a rocky protuberance washed at high tide, and further north the reef of A'Clèit, which is exposed at low tide, exerts an important influence in the beach orientation. Structural influences are very strong in the orientation and morphology of the beach area. Faraid Head peninsula consists of a block of gneiss tilted towards the southwest and terminating on its north and west sides in high cliffs. It is connected on its southern margin to another tilted block, this time of schist. Both of these blocks appear to be fault-bounded, and another fault-line runs west-east across the south side of the bay separating the metamorphic rocks from limestone. Thus the structure is simply that of two blocks tilted towards the southwest, presenting an inclined plane up which large quantities of sand are progressing in a north easterly direction.

The Kyle of Durness opens out into Balnakeil Bay at the line of the fault marking the northern limit of the limestone. The Kyle is very shallow, with very extensive sandflats exposed at low water. Much of the material composing these sandflats is of glacial or fluvio-glacial origin, and it is likely to be the source of most of the sand on the isthmus. Occasional patches of drift are exposed on the east side of the isthmus, but for the most part the blanket of blown sand has obscured all underlying materials. Off the east side of the peninsula the ground appears to be mainly rocky, although an extensive sand bank stretches from off Aodann Mhòr headland almost to Eilean Hoan. On the east, north and northwest sides of the peninsula, deep water approaches closely to the land, while in the bay the submarine contours are practically parallel to the coastline and the ground shelves gently outwards. The protruding configuration of the peninsula means that conditions are fairly exposed especially from the northwest quarter which is very open. The skerries off the north beach will lend some protection from wave attack, but the beaches are completely open to the wind. Marine erosion is active around the headland, but on the east side of the peninsula a wide abrasion platform has formed which gives a measure of protection to the cliffs which are now mostly inactive. On the short east-west section, coinciding with the faulted block edges, however, active cliffing is still proceeding, and the existence of stacks, such as the Clach Mhòr na Faraid testify to the cliff recession which has occurred. On the southern boundary of the beach, the land is much lower and is composed of limestone, so that the cliff morphology and erosional processes in operation differ from those on the peninsula. The rocky protuberance midway along the beach (the west end of the Meall a'Bhuic ridge) is bounded by a cliff, which if not actively being eroded at present is at least being washed clean of any weathered and slumped material at high tide. Some erosion of the dune front is taking place, especially on the north beach and on the northern part of the south beach. There is very marked undercutting and slumping of sand on the dune front, even behind the skerries, but this erosion is to some extent balanced by accretion at the south end of the beach.

A short stream drains Loch Croispol and is controlled by a sluice. The land is part of Balnakeil Farm, and is used as rough grazing for cattle and sheep. The grazing potential is not high, and there are no signs of overgrazing on the part of domestic stock or of rabbits, which are not very numerous. A military installation exists on the top of Faraid Head, to which a tarred road has been constructed. However, this road has suffered from submergence by sand, and access along it is not possible for normal vehicles. The pattern of recreational use tends to be one of short visits during which the tourists walk some distance along the beach and then return to their cars parked at the road end between the churchyard and Balnakeil Farm. Caravanning is not possible because of physical problems of vehicular access, except to a very small extent close by the road end. Thus there are few signs of tourist damage to the environment, and it is particularly noticeable that erosion is concentrated at the little visited north end of the beach, rather than the more fully utilised south end. In terms of the physical conservation of the beach and blown

sand area, there seem no reasons why fuller use could not be made than at present. In particular, it could be suggested that pressure at Sango Bay might be reduced by the provision of caravanning facilities near Balnakeil Bay, whose south, and potentially most used, part should be sufficiently resilient to withstand more use than is made at present.

### Sango Bay



IMAGE 380 SANGO BAY

Sango Bay (Sangomore) is situated on the root of the Balnakeil peninsula very near to Durness and is close to, and readily accessible from, the main north coast road. The beach is over half a mile long, although it is divided into three parts by rocky protuberances. The inter-tidal zone is nearly 150 yards wide, with a small area of upper beach between high water mark and the cliff-foot at the extreme southern end of the beach. The general trend of the coastline is northwest to southeast, although a number of fairly small indentations, usually connected with the geological structure, complicate the trend. The geological structure is very complex. The north headland of the beach, Creag Thairbhe, is of limestone, and marks the fault-bounded northern limit of the limestone outcrop. Immediately to the north of this headland, another small beach, Geodha Brat, occupies a depression in the down faulted schist block. The Sango Bay itself coincides with an outcrop of gneiss and schists which have been weakened by movements associated with the Moine Thrust, and the small rocky headlands jutting out into the bay are explained by local variations within this metamorphic outcrop. The south headland is of limestone, which is separated from the metamorphics by another fault which trends in a north easterly direction and which forms the southern boundary of the beach. Inland the depression in the metamorphic rocks is continued in the gently sloping Sangomore valley, but the valley hangs above the beach from which it is separated by a cliff of 50 or more feet high. The offshore ground shelves out very gently. The five fathom line is almost half a mile offshore, but further out the depth increases more rapidly. Glacial till has been deposited in the Sangomore valley right up to the cliff edge, and the deposits probably continue offshore. In the inner part of the bay the ground appears to be sandy, although further out there is much rocky and weedy ground. To the northeast there is a large stretch of sand extending from off the Aodann Mhòr headland almost to An Dubh-sgeir immediately to the northeast of Eilean Hoan.

Exposure is very severe to the northeast quarter. The inner bay is littered with many small stacks and fragments of a now buried abrasion platform, which lend some protection to the cliff-foot but there are no large reefs or skerries offshore to refract the wave pattern and to give rise to atypical beach plans such as those of Sangobeg and Traigh Allt Chailgeag. Likewise there is no shelter from winds blowing from the north or northeast, and this very strong exposure to these winds has meant that sand has been able to surmount the barrier of the cliff and spread out over the cliff top. Despite the strong exposure, comparatively little marine erosion is taking place. Active cliffing is no longer occurring at the back of the beach, although occasional undercutting of the blown sand accumulation protecting the cliff-foot still occurs. The narrow headlands jutting out across the beach are still subject to erosion, and the stacks and skerries immediately offshore testify to cliff recession that has gone on. The north headland of Creag Thairbhe is being eroded, especially on its north side where the cliff line coincides with a fault, while the limestone on the south headland is also being attacked by the various erosional processes affecting that rock. In terms of marine processes, the beach is moderately stable, with a c/p ratio of 8.50, although the presence of the small headlands trisecting the beach complicates the calculation of the ratio. The beach is tending to rotate in an anti-clockwise direction, with material being swept into the southeast corner of the bay, where the groyne-like headland prevents further movement. This tendency towards accretion in the southeast corner of the bay is further evidenced by the formation of small offshore sandbanks at the limestone cliff-foot. Comparatively little of the material of the beach is derived from local cliff erosion, especially since limestone erosion is unlikely to yield sand. Most of the beach sand must be derived from offshore glacial deposits, although a certain proportion of it may be reworked material which has been blown right across the Balnakeil peninsula and into the sea once again. Another source of small quantities of sediment will be the small stream flowing into the middle of the beach. The blowing inland of sand from the upper beach and inter-tidal zone is greatly restricted by the cliff backing the beach. The presence of this cliff means that the area affected by blown sand is confined to a narrow cliff top zone and evidence of accumulation forms and sand-modified vegetation disappears very rapidly inland. However, quite large accumulations of sand have built up against the cliff-foot, particularly at either end of the beach, and these accumulations act as inclined planes facilitating the movement of sand up the cliff and onto the flat cliff top. On the cliff slope a few erosion scars have appeared in the extreme southeast but the main process in operation is slow soil creep. Active marram colonisation is taking place on the mounds of sand piled up against the cliff-foot, but further up on the straight slope relative stability is evidenced by the presence of machair swards. Likewise on the flat spreads of blown sand on the cliff top, where sections show evidence of a number of periods of active blowing followed by long periods of relative stability during which soil formation occurred, the main form of vegetation is the machair sward. On the central parts of the cliff top, severe wind erosion is proceeding, which has completely stripped the layer of blown sand in places and exposed the underlying till. On the north section, near the headland at 407680, a long sand face has developed orientated parallel to the cliff line and facing northeast, which is presumably the direction from which the most damaging winds have occurred, although it seems that southeast winds have also had an influence in extending the face. The method of advance of this, and many other scars, is for fresh sand accumulation to occur on the lip of the scar, and unless vigorous marram is present, kills off the protective vegetation cover and so promotes the collapse of the undercut upper layers of sand. In the central part of the cliff top, stripping has occurred right back to the line of the road, and sand accumulation and recolonisation by vegetation is beginning to resume. The exhumed till provides a relatively hospitable medium for vegetation development, however, so that the stripped surface is less unsightly than would have been the case had the till not been present. Wind erosion is also proceeding rapidly on the southern section of the cliff top, the area most used for caravanning and camping at present.

Here again most of the scars are linear features orientated roughly in a northeast to southwest direction, although in places, particularly on the small protruding headlands, there is a strong southwest to northeast element in the orientation. The extreme northern section of the beach, between the narrow headland at 407680 and Creag Thairbhe is backed by a steep cliff of 70ft or more in height, and no blowing inland of sand has occurred so that here the cliff top is sand free. Unlike most of the machair or blown sand areas investigated, the blown sand zone of Sango Bay is very narrow. Nevertheless, this blown sand or machair zone has been separated in terms of tenure and use from the croft land and is part of the common grazing, with sheep being grazed all the year round. Sheep rubbing appears to be closely associated with the extension and enlargement of erosion scars, and rabbits probably played a part in the past. The locational attractiveness and ease of access from the road of the cliff top machair means that the main use at the present day, at least in summer, is for caravanning and camping. The completely stripped area is not used by tourists, who tend to concentrate on the more southerly section to the southeast of the stream. Here extensive tracking has occurred, with multiple track formation and the destruction of the vegetation cover in places. This practice can only serve to aggravate the natural erosional processes already in operation and lead to the further run-down of the environment. Indeed there is an atmosphere of great untidiness, perhaps temporarily accentuated by constructional work on a new sewage outlet. It is suggested that efforts be made to improve the visual amenity of Sango Bay, as well as to try to ensure physical conservation, and an important first step in this direction would be the prevention of caravanning. It is suggested that the provision of caravanning facilities at a nearby more resilient beach such as Balnakeil might help to alleviate the pressure, and it is to be hoped that eventually Sango Bay will be able to revert to a natural beauty spot free from all signs of recreational squalor.

### **Sangobeg Sands**

Sangobeg Sands occupy a small embayment in the northwest to southeast trending coastline about two miles to the east of Durness. The beach is nearly 300 yards long and 150 yards wide, with a very narrow upper beach a few yards across. The nature of the terrain backing the beach restricts the blowing of sand inland, and maritime influences are confined to a very narrow zone. The underlying rock is Cambrian Piperock, but the headlands are composed of different rock types, and structural influences are strong as in the other beaches of the Durness group. The western headland is composed of limestone, which is separated from the Piperock by a fault, while to the east lies Cambrian quartzites. Along the shore of the eastern part of the beach, however, there is a narrow outcrop of gneiss, which also occurs in a knoll backing the middle of the beach. Inland a depression bounded by steep margins occurs, with a veneer of glacial till of variable thickness.

Offshore this till deposit seems to thin and become discontinuous, most of the ground except for the inner part of the bay being rocky or weedy. About two miles out, however, there is an extensive bank of sand parallel to the coast. The water offshore is shallow and gently shelving, with the underlying rock platform, cut mainly in limestone, appearing above water in the form of skerries and the fairly sizeable island of Eilean Hoan. These offshore skerries protect the beach area and neighbouring headlands from wave attack, and the fetch is very short except for a narrow sector to due north, and an equally narrow sector to the east-northeast. The relatively sheltered position of the beach behind the offshore skerries means that little marine erosion takes place. Some erosion occurs on both headlands however, but especially on the western limestone one. Here there is evidence of attack by sea levels higher than that of today, in the form of caves, wave cut notches and abrasion platforms all standing above present high water mark. However these features grade into similar ones still evolving today, although the ledge vegetation on the limestone cliffs might suggest that retreat of the cliffs is slower than formerly. The limestone is close bedded, and dips very gently seawards, so that conditions are conducive

to cliffing. On the eastern side of the headland, an entirely different type of rocky coast occurs on the gneiss, where the massive structure does not readily form cliffs and the profile tends to be convex and rounded.

Neither of the headland areas or nearby sections of coast are likely to yield large quantities of sand for beach nourishment. The limestone will tend to dissolve rather than form sand, and the material eroded from the gneiss would tend to be large clastic fragments which would be in the cobble rather than sand calibre. A second potential source of very limited quantities of sediment



IMAGE 381 SANGOBEG SANDS

is the small stream which flows into the centre of the beach. The gneiss knoll behind the beach deflects one branch of the stream far to the west so that it flows through a marshy depression parallel to the beach and this marsh will act as a sediment trap and reduce the already small quantity of transported material. The other possible source of sand is from the offshore ground where glacial deposits have been laid down, and there is strong evidence to suggest that a large proportion of these deposits lying above wave base have already been swept onshore. In terms of marine processes, the beach is relatively stable.

Calculation of the  $c/p$  ratio is not possible, however, because the beach is convex seawards in plan, a repercussion of the influence of the offshore skerries. There is no marked tendency of the beach to re-orientate itself, although undercutting by storm waves of the machair front is most noticeable on the eastern part of the beach. This undercutting has exposed deposits of shingle under the blown sand, and it seems likely that this shingle, which is mainly of fairly angular quartzite fragments, is a raised beach. The shoreline of this raised beach is represented by a subdued cliff cut in till a short distance inland, and it is significant that the boulders with which the surface is strewn are completely lacking seawards of the till cliff. The shoreline was not levelled but is only a few feet above high water mark. Sand has blown inland over this raised shingle beach to give a very narrow zone of machair parallel to the shore. There is quite a steep reverse gradient of about  $10^\circ$  on the machair, which is little affected by erosion scars. Some marram colonisation is occurring at the eastern end of the beach where sand has accumulated against the undercut machair front, but otherwise the dune zone typical of the area found between the beach and machair (Figure 4) is lacking. The influence of blown sand on the vegetation is confined to the narrow machair fringe, and quickly dies out inland where the

vegetation is typical of reverted croft land and moorland, although some bracken exists on the freely drained cliff cut in till backing the raised beach. Along the stream sides freshwater marsh communities occur, while on the limestone cliffs of the western headland a rich flora occupies the ledges. Croft land approaches close down to the beach and although most of the land is under a rather poor form of grazing it is not cultivated. Grazing is fairly intensive, both by sheep and by rabbits which are numerous, and the sward is close cropped. Rabbit burrows are very numerous on the reverse gradient of the machair, but since there is shelter here from strong winds the burrows have not been enlarged into erosion scars. Vehicular access to the beach for cars and caravans is not possible, and the beach and machair areas are consequently unused for caravanning. Nor is pedestrian access particularly easy, since it is through croft land. The beach is thus little used for any recreational purpose although it is scenically attractive and a good view of it is obtained on driving eastwards along the road from Durness. Physical factors probably preclude the utilisation of the beach on any large scale in the foreseeable future, but the sands are relatively stable in terms of both marine and aeolian processes and there would appear to be no conservation drawbacks to development.

### **Ceannabeinne Beach**

Traditionally known as Traigh Allt Chailgeag is an attractive cliff-foot beach easily visible from the main north coast road about three miles east of Durness. The beach is about 400 yards long and is gently shelving, the inter-tidal zone being nearly 300 yards wide. From the cliff top backing the beach an attractive view is obtained across the mouth of Loch Eriboll towards Whiten Head. The rock underlying the bay and headlands is Lewisian gneiss, which has been fractured by a northeast trending fault line along which the inlet has been excavated. The cliff wall backing the beach is broken by three steep-sided valleys separated by minor headlands. The most easterly of the valleys is graded down to sea level, but the other two are perched high above modern sea level. For the most part the gneiss is ice scoured and lacking in a layer of weathered material or drift, but in the valley depressions deep weathered rock has survived in places and there are also patches of thin, discontinuous till. Offshore there appear to be fairly extensive stretches of sand which probably represent reworked glacial deposits. The beach area is very sheltered from the west and south by the high cliff backing the beach, as but exposure to the northeast quarter is strong. Not only is the beach fully open to winds from this direction, but the fetch is very much wider than for most of the other beaches of the Durness group. Eilean Hoan gives some protection from the north but the wide sector between it and Whiten Head is fully exposed, and deep water comes closer in than further west. Despite this strong exposure, however, comparatively little marine erosion is taking place. To the west of the beach the gneiss is finely foliated, but the dip is almost vertical, while on the east headland the rock is much more massive and dips landwards. Hence in neither case are conditions particularly conducive to cliffing. The cliff line at present is eroding only very slowly, presenting the typical convex appearance of a Lewisian gneiss cliff line, although in the past, possibly during a period of higher sea level, much more active cliffing must have occurred. The age of the cliff-line is evidenced by the plug of glacial till in the geos to the west of the beach, indicating that the cliff-line must have been cut in pre-glacial times.

The present slow progress of marine erosion on the neighbouring cliffs must mean that the beach material has not been derived from this source. Some of the material, which is mainly a fine sand, may be derived from the removal of till plugs in the cliff forms but this would only be a minor source. Another possible source of limited quantities of material is from the three streams which debouch onto the beach. In their lower courses where they flow through narrow, steeply graded valleys containing pockets of glacial till and deeply weathered rock, they will be able to acquire considerable loads of material which they can supply to the beach, and at the extreme west of the beach the stream has built up a sizeable fan of material. There is evidence



that the regime of the streams may be liable to quite large fluctuations, and when they are in spate the rates of supply of material will be correspondingly augmented. However, material coarser than sand, derived from either marine or fluvial erosion, is almost entirely lacking on the beach, although in the past, during a period of higher sea level, a raised shingle bar was thrown across the mouth of the Allt Chailgeag at the east end of the beach. This raised shingle bar is roughly at the same height as the one at Sangobeg and would have been formed during the same period. The convex shape of the beach plan, a reflection of the protective influence of Eilean Hoan, means that the c/p ratio cannot be calculated but the beach appears to be fairly stable with no marked tendency to change Scottish Natural Heritage Commissioned Report – Beaches of Sutherland 51 its orientation. The beach functions together with the Traigh na H-Uamhag beach as a single unit, with a certain amount of seasonal movement of sand around the headland of Rubha na Griosaich which separates the two beaches



IMAGE 382 CEANNABEINNE BEACH

The high cliff-line behind the beaches prevents the blowing of sand far inland. In the minor re-entrants, such as that of the stream following the Clais Charnach, accumulation has occurred in the form of broad dune like ridges which probably rest on raised shingle bars. Most of these ridges are slightly undercut by waves on their seaward edges, and wind on their other sides, but marram is actively colonising the undercut faces. Behind these small marram clad dune ridges, a reverse gradient slopes against the cliff-line and the vegetation is a typical machair sward. On the cliffs a thin layer of blown sand has accumulated, the thickness and inland extent of which are inversely proportional to the cliff height. Where the cliff is vertical or near vertical practically no sand accumulation has occurred at all, and nowhere does the sand thickness seem sufficient for erosion scars to form although soil creep is in operation. That several periods of sand blow, separated by long periods of stability, have occurred in the past is shown in a section above the raised shingle bar near the outlet of Allt Chailgeag. Here a vertical section through the blown sand overlying the shingle shows alternations of peat and organic material with fresh sand lacking in humus content. At present, although fresh sand occupies the topmost layer, there appears to be a period of relative stability with little sand accumulation occurring.

Most of the cliff slope behind the beach is strongly influenced by blown sand and salt spray, although the influence begins to die out above the road. On the near vertical sections of the cliff, where frost shattering occasionally rives off large blocks, birches and other forms of shrubby growth have obtained a foothold, while on sheltered sections bracken has established

dominance. The area is intensively grazed by sheep, and rabbits are numerous, but there are no signs of biotic damage. Vehicular access onto the beach area is impossible because of the steep cliff between the beach and the road, and in any case there is no flat ground on which caravanning could take place. Thus the pattern of use is that of the short visit. The beach, being an attractive one close to but some way below the road draws many tourists on the course of their journey along the north coast. Most of the visits are, however, very brief; the tourists just walk down to the beach from their cars, go a short distance along it and then return. Little damage results from such tourist use and there are no conservational reasons for suggesting that the type of use should be modified. If greatly increased numbers of tourists visited the beach, the descent down to it might have to be improved and litter disposal facilities provided, but at the present level of use there appear to be no problems.

## **Talmine**

NC 588625



IMAGE 383 TALMINE BAY

General setting of Talmine, lies at the west entrance of the Kyle of Tongue. There are three beach areas; the northern-most is in the form of a patch of sand near the old pier; the central beach is adjacent to the township of Talmine, and the eastern-most gravelly beach is near Talmine Island. Access to the north and central beaches is easy, and is gained from a metalled road which runs along the shore.

The beaches have built up in sheltered locations in the lee of the Rabbit Islands and offshore skerries. The main accumulation is near the stream mouth, and has a lime content of 24%. There are no dunes, but a small triangular area of thin machair has formed near the stream outlet. This area of machair is thought to overlie raised shingle and cobbles.

The machair area is used as grazing for cattle and sheep. Recreational use of the two more accessible beaches is relatively high, and is reflected in car parking, caravanning and camping on the easily accessible machair, which is held as common grazing. The area lies within Melness Estate. The machair appears to be resilient and there is little obvious sign of physical damage resulting from recreational use, although at present it receives little management for recreational purposes.

## Melness

NC 585615



IMAGE 384 MELNESS BEACH

General setting Melness beach complex lies on the west shore of the Kyle of Tongue, and is about 500m from the township of Midtown. Access on foot is gained by crossing fields; vehicular access is not possible. Beach, dunes and machair The inter-tidal beach area is very large, extending to nearly 25sq km. Composed of medium sand with a carbonate content of 18%, this inter-tidal beach is subjected to a complex pattern of tidal and drainage movements. Its drier upper part has provided sand for two main dune and machair areas. The south area is the larger and consists of a curved promontory or foreland. The dunes reach a high of around 20m, and form a main coastal ridge with subsidiary lines and hollows inland. The more northerly area is less clearly defined and is best described as a hillside veneer of blown sand with dune-like edge accumulation. A topographical hollow south of the promontory of Ard Skinid has allowed the sand to move up to 300m inland and to a height of over 35m O.D. In both areas the coastal edge is complex; in places it is eroding but is mainly accreting. Land use Sheep grazing is the main land use. The intensity is highest in the north, and in places grazing has led to the development of some erosion scars. Recreation in both areas is minimal or absent. The land forms part of Melness Estate.

## Strathan

NC 574650

Strathan or Achininver, beach occupies an inlet a few kilometres west of Tongue Bay and the Kyle of Tongue. This inlet is the seawards extension of the valley of the Strath Melness Burn. The beach complex is readily accessible on the east side from the metalled road linking Melness and Achininver, but there are no convenient parking facilities. Beach The beach is composed of medium sand with a carbonate content of 42%. It is extensive, and at low tide resembles a broad infilling of a parallel-sided structural valley trough. The Strath Melness Burn winds sinuously across the beach, before finding an outlet (at the time of survey) against rocks on the northwest corner of the bay. At high water the central part of the beach is flooded, creating a broad shallow lagoon, and offering an attractive site for bathing. Dunes and machair. There are no dunes. Machair consists of a thin cover on the low river flood plain in the south, but on the east side there is a much more extensive hillside machair reaching as far as the road (35m OD).

It is close grazed by sheep and cattle (with some rabbits) and there are some erosion scars. The machair, which slopes at angles of between 10° and 18°, appears to be an old surface with relatively thick humified layers.

The main form of land use is grazing on the hillside machair, with grazing and occasional cultivation on the low flat enclosed machair river terrace. Recreational use is of a very low intensity, and is largely confined to informal day recreational use (there is one static caravan on the hillside). The area is unspoilt and extremely attractive. It lies within the Melness Estate, and is partly croft land and partly common grazing.

### **Coldbackie**



IMAGE 385 COLDBACKIE BAY

The small embayment of Coldbackie is on the east side of the Kyle of Tongue where a small strip of basal Old Red Sandstone conglomerate is found resting on the Moine metamorphic country rock. The conglomerate forms the greater part of the 1,009ft high Coldbackie hill which dominates the landscape of this local region. Along the coast, however, the conglomerate has formed a zone of relatively easy excavation and the beach and dune area occupies this re-entrant in the coastal outline. Metamorphic rocks form the largely fossil cliff-line which rises to over 250ft O.D. and which forms the southern boundary of the area. To the north the conglomerate and the succeeding metamorphic beds form a series of benches stretching north eastwards towards the now little used rock-girt harbour of Skullomie. At its greatest extent the beach is 600 yards long and 120 yards deep with a flat upper beach and relatively steep gradient of 4° between mid and low tide marks. The beach materials consist of medium-textured, reddish sand which is at least partly derived from the erosion by both marine and fluvial action on the Old Red Sandstone beds. Rock reefs occur on the east side of the beach and can cause wave action to build temporary berms which retain relatively deep rock and sand pools. The essential dynamic nature of this beach area and its sheltering hooked-spit is best represented in the rapidly changing beach forms of the more exposed easterly corner of the bay. The great sandspit and beach form a coastal entity created by the interplay of strong ebb-tide currents

flowing north eastwards out of the Kyle, refracted and subdued wave action from the northwest quarter which has passed round or sometimes over the sand bars linking the Rabbit Island group and the stronger north to south running waves coming in from the open fetch to the west of Eilean nan Ròn. The beach and spit complex of Coldbackie are, in effect, the outermost coastline of the sediment-filled Kyle of Tongue. With this abundant source of sand, winds from the northerly quarter have piled sand into the depression offered by the conglomerate beds. A depression which contained topographic diversity in the form of an old conglomerate cliff-line surmounted by an 80ft bench covered by glacial till. On top of this cliff, stream discharge and scree from the amphitheatre on the north side of the Coldbackie hill mass have formed a 20–30° sloping apron of drift. With this mantle of debris a stream is incised, and it reaches the sand dune area over a waterfall created by the abandoned marine cliff already described. The reception surface for incoming sand is thus highly variable and a broken relief pattern is found. Vigorous, marram and agropyron clad dunes rise to over 40ft O.D. in the western side of the area where the sand has been piled against the sheer cliff wall of the metamorphic hill mass. These dunes are dissected by deep blowouts trending in a general northwest-southeast direction and thus emphasising the role of the cliff face in channelling local wind patterns. Some sand spreads onto the cliff face and enriches the till capping of the upper slopes. Because of its inaccessibility rich vegetation forms are found here, and there is considerable tree and shrub cover. The sand also spreads onto the steep slope stretching up to the line of the main road. A machair sward, subject to bracken invasion, has formed in this relatively thin sand cover. The main or central area is occupied by one major transverse dune, two blowouts, several corridors of bare sand and a marshy, boulder-floored area between the old cliff-line and the dune area where the stream, already described, seeps into the sandy floor of the depression. Scottish Natural Heritage Commissioned Report – Beaches of Sutherland 53 The third area affected by sand drift is the gently-sloping, till-covered area east of the stream which stretches from the edge of both the fossil and active cliff edges southwards to the line of the main road. Apart for the machair-covered bevel of the cliff edge the area is well-fenced and still under arable agriculture. The sand cover of this area has been mixed into the soil by ploughing but appears to be very thin and fades out rapidly upslope. The area is still grazed by sheep but there was no sign of rabbits. There were no caravans, since the steep slope down from the main road which is 200ft above the beach precludes any access, and only one or two tents pitched on the dunes. Nevertheless the human modification of this area is considerable. Car parking is provided for about twenty cars along the side of the main road and the day-to-day use of the beach is relatively heavy. Unfortunately by the nature of the terrain only one access path is used and the steepness of the slope, particularly where the path goes over what is in effect the old cliff-line, has led to the development of incised sand corridors. These sand-paths are difficult to ascend so considerable branching of the track has occurred in the steeper sections. Moreover the material beneath the soil is unconsolidated drift and this access track is undoubtedly a potential axis for gully erosion or even a landslide. At the bottom of the slope the configuration and height of the dunes cause visitors to take only two paths to the beach and both of these are now corridors of deep soft sand. Coldbackie poses a problem for conservation. The beach, the cliffs and caves have an intrinsic attractiveness and a large carrying capacity which is readily apparent to anyone driving along the main road from Tongue to Bettyhill. The beach area is also well sheltered from the west, south and east. The access to this large beach area, however, can only be over a steep, constricted and potentially unstable zone. In the absence of any feasible alternative to the present path the only solution would appear to be the strengthening of the present path, perhaps even with the introduction of steps and thorough maintenance of the existing drainage system to avoid the possible danger of gulying or slope wash.

## **Torrisdale Bay**

Torrisdale Bay, 3 miles (5 km) west of Bettyhill dominates this locality and the settlements are around the bay. Accessed from the road through Skerray and again at Bettyhill. The rivers Naver and Borgie both flow into the bay. To access Torrisdale Beach from Bettyhill walk across the bridge over the River Naver and into the hamlet of Invernaver. The beach can be accessed by walking along the river- tide dependant or over a field on to sand dunes, parking at the lay by at bridge.

The diverse assemblage of beach and dune landforms at Torrisdale Bay, is of national geomorphological importance. The dune landforms, which demonstrate various stages of development and dynamism, lie landwards of a wide intertidal sand beach and sit on top of the high, central, glacially scoured rock ridge and the terraces of the River Naver that drains into the east part of the bay and the River Borgie that drains into the west part. The site is also of importance from an archaeological perspective because the river terraces contain numerous cairns, hut circles and cist burials that may allow minimum dating of the landform surfaces. Despite the enormous research potential, which is enhanced by ecological and archaeological interests, the site has failed to attract detailed geomorphological research although several descriptive accounts highlight the site's significance. The two rock headlands that enclose Torrisdale Bay (Creag Ruadh on the east and Aird Torrisdale on the west) are formed of highly resistant metamorphic rocks of the Moine series (Ritchie and Mather, 1969). The wide and flat sandy beach of Torrisdale Bay extends over 1 km in length from the mouth of the River Naver in the east to the mouth of the River Borgie in the west. At low tide the beach at Torrisdale Bay can be as wide as 950 m, with about 40% of the total beach area lying above high-water mark. In summary, the Torrisdale Bay site is of great geomorphological importance on account of the diversity of the landform assemblage and the juxtaposition of glacial, glaciofluvial, and coastal landforms. The combination of dunes that have been blown onshore onto glaciofluvial terraces and, blown to considerable altitude on the central bedrock ridge where dune grasslands have formed, is of considerable interest.

The Torrisdale Bay area contains every landscape element which brings complexity or interest to the coastline of Sutherland. Strong structural elements, extensive ice action, meltwater deposition, changing sea levels and vigorous dune building and sand drift combine to make this area a bewildering mélange of landform and landscape elements and the area has rightly been made a Nature Reserve. Yet the macro-patterns of the area are simple – a high glacially scoured flat-topped ridge of ancient metamorphic rock jutting northwards into the sea and flanked by major river depressions which have served as important corridors of outwash deposition during the closing stages of the Ice Age – and fringing these a great apron of beach and sand hills which climb to the top of the ridge itself. The central ridge of Druim Chuibhe dominates the area and consists of strongly foliated Moine schists with a wedge of injection complex of pelitic schist forming the west side of the Naver River. Ice has scoured and etched the rock in a south-north direction leaving the relatively flat ridge-top broken into a series of ridges and marshy hollows. Numerous erratic boulders some of which are over 20ft high dot the ridge crest and lower slopes.

Glacial debris also forms the greater part of the screes found on all sides of the ridge. Equally important, however, are a series of parallel fractures running in an east-west direction which tend to subdivide the ridge into a series of steps descending northwards. On the sides of the ridge these weaknesses seem to have been enhanced by the plucking action of ice passage so that there is an alternation of bare relatively smooth rock with a shattered face pointing northwards and shallow depressions into which the screes and bare sand have been funnelled.



IMAGE 386 TORRISDALE BAY

The most significant of these lines of structural weakness has been used by the stream flowing out of Loch Drium an Dùin and eastwards into the lower Naver. This narrow steep valley has had an important role in channelling sand drift up onto the ridge top. Similar metamorphic rocks to those on Druim Chuibhe form the valley sides of the Borgie and right bank of the Naver. The two headlands which stretch out almost a mile on either side of the bay are also formed of high resistance metamorphics of the Moine series. Meltwater in the latter stages of the Ice Age also provided the great aprons of sand and gravel which dominate the lower Borgie and Naver valleys. At least three terrace levels corresponding to different sea levels can be picked out on the east side of the lower Naver valley. Two similar platforms of sand and gravel form extensive surfaces at between 50–70ft O.D. on the east side of the Borgie estuary and the west side of the Naver. Sand dunes and machair have developed over and against these outwash features. The Naver “terrace” contains several archaeological sites of great importance including cairns, hut circles and cist burials and is of greater extent than the analogous Borgie “terrace”. The Naver “terrace” has been modified by ice-contact and local meltwater action so that it has an undulating surface: the Borgie “terrace” is relatively flat. Remnants of outwash gravels and shingle are also found on the northwest side of Druim Chuibhe but like the main terraces have been partially removed by higher sea levels in late- and post-glacial times. These large terrace features and other outwash phenomena in both the Borgie and Naver valleys indicate the enormous volume of sediment which came out of the two river valleys towards the close of the Ice Age. This has undoubtedly provided the sand and shingle for the huge inter-

tidal expanse of beach. The curious feature of the morphology of the bay is the relative absence of shingle forms since shingle is the dominant grade of material in the outwash and kame terraces of both valleys.

Torrisdale Bay is the fusion of two great estuarine zones of deposition – the Borgie and the Naver. The scale of the beach is vast: at one point the distance from dune to low water mark is over half a mile with more than half this distance being a dry sand area above the reach of high tide. With a wide inter-tidal zone and exposure to northerly winds the sand is driven up the valleys and onto the sides of the ridge in the form of dunes and machair. Sand also forms the main material of the areas of saltmarsh. Most of these saltmarsh areas are old and eroding, often revealing a basement of water-worn shingle which might suggest that shingle could be found at some depth beneath the present beach. The largest area of saltmarsh occurs at Torrisdale on the west side of the Borgie estuary, where it forms a protective platform for the narrow strips of raised beach, arable croft land fringing the west side of the bay. The main area of deposition on the west side of the bay occurs in the angle between the outwash terrace and Druim Chuibhe. A large area of vigorous marram dunes form an approximately triangular area characterised by very irregular topography and steep-sided sand hills and dunes. No preferred orientation is evident and the few deflation areas are also aligned in arbitrary directions. Shingle is exposed at the base of some erosion scars and appears to be a lag deposit from the outwash terrace. The sand from this area has spilled over the retaining stone wall onto the outwash platform and irregular, hummocky, marram-clad ground extends for up to 50 yards southwards before giving way to smooth machair. This continuous tableland of machair extends over most of the terrace but thins out in a south and south easterly direction. More spectacular are the climbing dunes and cones of scree and bare sand that are found on the north and west facing slopes of Druim Chuibhe. In the northwest corner these are particularly impressive and merge into the 30–40ft high coastal dunes. The drainage of the outwash platform, the ridge slope and part of the dune area follows a channel running along the foot of the ridge. The water soaks into the sand dune area but re-emerges as seepage outlets along the north coast. The northernmost limit of the outwash feature in the Naver valley reaches the same point as the Borgie terrace and the features are clearly contemporary. The angle between terrace edge and the rocky side of Druim Chuibhe contains a much smaller area of dunes and sand hills. There are lines of dunes, including embryo dunes, and high sand hills which are pressed against the ridge foot zone but the volume of sand available has been distributed in other ways – as discontinuous dunes on the outwash platform and as deep sand deposits on the sides and top of Druim Chuibhe. Climbing dunes, open screes of sand and rock debris and patches of heath (including *Dryas*) or machair developed on sand are found on the north, northeast and east facing slopes of the ridge especially where depressions in the rock structure has permitted deeper accumulation. Possibly northerly winds have a freer access here to Druim Chuibhe since the ridge has an orientation which is more N.N.W.–S.S.E. at this point; possibly too the Naver estuary is, or has been, more unstable and the stage of development is more advanced than is the situation on the Borgie side of the ridge; nevertheless the contrasting morphology of the two sides of the ridge is one of the outstanding features of the area. Sand influence extends to 360ft O.D. on the east side of the ridge and erosion scars and terraces are features of the ridge top. This is ecologically extremely important as it is one of the 56 main factors giving floristic richness to the Nature Reserve, which in this area includes associations of *Dryas*, *Calluna*, *Empetrum*, *Carex* and *Juniper* along with rarer individual species of which *Primula Scotica* is best known. An important source of sand drift, however, is east to west via the valley formed by the stream flowing out of Lochan Druim an Dùin. This corridor allows sand to spread into the south-north depressions already described. This valley axis is characterised by deep sand and debris screes especially on the northern side where visitors scramble up to the relatively well preserved broch on its rock spur. Much of the beach sand is carried against and over the



outwash terrace. The pattern of sand hillocks is discontinuous although many of the dunes and hillocks follow depression axes in the outwash surface which are relics of kettle holes and local meltwater drainage. The largest of these depressions is an old ice-contact slope between the terrace and the base of the rock ridge. Bare gravel and stone areas colonised by open maritime heath separate the marram hillocks and the contrast between the stable machair grazing of the analogous Borgie terrace is striking. The frequency of cairns, cist burials, grave mounds and other archaeological features may offer a partial explanation in terms of antiquity of use, but it is necessary to use caution with this hypothesis since similar undiscovered sites may well lie beneath the machair and dunes of the Borgie terrace. The remaining sand dune area of the Torrisdale Bay area lies more than one and a half miles from the low water mark of the bay although it is close to tidal water in the Naver River. This complex of sand hills and machair at Invernaver is separated from the area previously described by a wide tidal sand flat bordered on the west by a discontinuous apron of shingle, machair, dunes and sand-covered talus slopes. The sand hills and undulating machair are developed on ridges of fluvio-glacial material. The blown sand is of similar composition to the sand of Borgie (dunes) or Naver (dunes), ie median diameters Invernaver 268 microns, Borgie 303 microns, Naver 254 microns, but is better sorted than the two exposed dune areas. In spite of its distance from the primary source the soil is quite deep reaching an estimated 5–6ft on the lower slopes of the fluvio-glacial hills. Flatter machair is found where a small stream flowing out of Loch Mer reaches the tidal flat but even here with the stability created by a high water table erosion is evident. Unlike the Borgie and Naver dune and terrace areas Invernaver is subject to severe human modification. The land use, as in the entire area of the reserve, is common grazing with sheep being the main stock animal. All three areas are grazed by sheep and cattle owned by crofters of the Invernaver township although the land is owned by two estate interests – the Countess of Sutherland west of the watershed and the Nagus estate to the east. The Borgie terrace which is also known as Melvich park is enclosed by stone dykes and appears to have been under arable cultivation but, according to local information, has been in sheep and cattle grazing for the last thirty years. Although there is no camping or caravanning nearby or in the Reserve, Invernaver suffers from being the only road or track access to the Reserve and the machair is heavily tracked. In summer more than twelve cars have been seen parked on the small central machair area. Car parking provision would appear to be an important improvement in this area. Even with a car park access to the beach or the features of interest, as for example the archaeological sites, requires a long walk over exposed tidal flats. A footbridge could easily be built across the lower Naver using one of the islands in the river but whether this is in the best interests of the Nature Reserve is a debatable point and would probably conflict with the fishing interests on this well-known salmon and sea trout river.

### **Farr Bay**

Farr beach occupies a northwest facing, U-shaped bay which is strongly confined by schist, gneiss and injection complex cliffs. The east cliff is generally higher and vertical cliffs are found rather than the stepped cliffs and abrasion platforms of the west side. The structural trend is the same as the axis of the bay, ie southeast to northwest but important subsidiary depressions occur transversely to the main structure. The most important of these is the shallow depression leading to Clerkhill Township and the inland depression now followed by the main road from Bettyhill to Armadale. The rear wall of the beach, dune and machair filled depression is formed by the ancient cliff of Creag Clachan which is formed of tightly foliated schist dipping here at an estimated angle of 75° or more. Three elements fill this initially simple structural depression; a ridge of glacial till, a complex dune and machair system and a beach, and a fourth landscape element is added with the considerable spread of blown sand onto and over the 250ft high ridge which forms the western rim of the area. Glaciation, meltwater, changing sea levels, and the

meander and flood of the Clachan Burn all combine with the variety of materials available to create a subtly complex array of depositional and erosional forms. The beach, although having a c/p index of 6.0 and a slight tendency to clockwise rotation, is characterised by its width – it is 450 yards long and 300 yards wide from fore dune to low water mark. The beach gradient is therefore very low and were it not for the convergence of the wave fronts to produce some of the finest surf conditions on the north coast, little wave derived activity would disturb the beach area.

Activity is largely confined to the northeast corner where a bank of shingle is being reworked and to the southwest corner where the interplay of river water and wave action has cleared the veneer of beach sand to reveal a shingle and cobble basement. At both ends of the beach, therefore, there is evidence of intermittent erosion and movement of materials. The central part



IMAGE 387 FARR BAY

of the beach also bears signs of undercutting along the dune face but this can only occur rarely when high tides and suitable winds coincide. The dune and machair complex is dominated by an east west asymmetric ridge of till reaching to over 60ft O.D. and terminating at the footbridge where an undercut riverbank section shows how thin the veneer of wind-blown sand is at this point. The back slope of this ridge slopes at 5–7° southwards to the Clachan Burn. Similar sloping machair is found south of the burn. Much of this area near the outlet of the burn and especially in the arable machair ground northwest of the footbridge lies below the 25ft contour and is backed by an old cliff-line of the late- or post-glacial higher sea level. The north-facing slope of the central till ridge is steep and often identified by lines of blowouts and deflation scars since the underlying spine of till has formed an effective limit to wind erosion. The lower ground to the north is an undulating mosaic of old and new deflation and depositional sand features. It is generally covered in vigorous marram tussocks as is the lower level to the north and west which is the zone of present day dune growth and activity.

These dunes form a continuous front to the beach and are generally over 20ft high except in the northeast corner where the relief patterns are more subdued. The zone of dune and general sand deposition is thus wedge-shaped, and it is suggested that the present topography may well be related to earlier times when the Clachan Burn took a more northerly course to the sea, possibly at a time of higher sea level, before being diverted to its present southerly route

between the till ridge and the cliff of Creag Clachan. Although the focus of drainage of a wide region is into Farr Bay, and the beach is for a large part wet even at low tide, sand blowing appears to be still active. Much of the mobile sand, however, is being reworked from earlier landforms and a considerable proportion of this is carried westwards onto the side of the “Clerkhill Ridge”. The entire side of this ridge and much of the crest is covered in relatively deep sand. Moreover, two corridors, the one already described leading to Clerkhill township and a similar one further east, have allowed considerable volumes of sand to spread not only onto the crest of the ridge where it rests directly on ice-roughened and frequently shattered bedrock but down the north side into a valley-like depression where it finally fades out in the marshy valley bottom. This large area of short grass machair sward is heavily grazed by sheep, cattle and rabbits, and with the presence of steep slopes it is hardly surprising that Farr Bay repeats the pattern of having most erosion and instability on the margins of the dune and beach area proper. Large erosion scars and slips expose the rock basement over wide areas of the hillside, trench-like corridors occupy minor depressions in the metamorphic structure and together these provide dry fine sand (192 microns) for further sand spread, not it must be stressed as dramatic dunes or waves that choke ditches and block roads but as imperceptible additions to the veneer of sand in areas further inland. Thus if we add the area of gently sloping machair spreading south-eastwards along the middle course of the Clachan Burn on the south side of the main road, the total area influenced by blown sand is far greater than is first realised, being an estimated ten times the total area of the beach.

Being near the important settlement of Bettyhill (which has a moderately large caravan and camp site in the village) and the main trunk road (A836), Farr Bay is relatively well known and used. At present, however, it can only be reached via a footpath (with stiles) and footbridge. The beach can also be reached from Clerkhill and it is here that future erosion might be expected since cars can be parked directly on the thin ridge-crest machair at the top of the downhill path to the north corner of the beach. Another access point for vehicles is found east of the village of Clachan but this is fenced off and marked private. This latter point exemplifies an additional feature of the area – land tenure. The area around Clerkhill and much of the side of the hill is common grazing for Clerkhill and Crask but the lower ground near the beach is divided up and fenced by several “owners”. Some of the land, especially south of the till ridge is arable and a proportion is enclosed as Church ground or for owners living in the township of Clachan. The unusual tenure system of the area is a result of its being glebe land owned by the Church of Scotland. The trustees of the Church have let out parts of the area to three or four tenants. As previously described the area is used for agricultural purposes but it is not clear if the terms of rental exclude other forms of commercial development. Farr Bay is thus mainly stable, well-used in both recreational and agricultural senses but bearing in mind its location and potential accessibility this most attractive sheltered beach and surf-swept bay could become an area requiring far-sighted planning decisions sometime in the future.

### **Armadale Bay**

Armadale beach occupies the head of a fairly deep, narrow bay on an east-west section of the coast just to the west of Strathy Point. The beach is about 600 yards long with an inter-tidal zone of about 200 yards and a very wide upper beach above high water mark of nearly 100 yards. The underlying rock is Moine schist, with metamorphosed igneous intrusions (epidiorites and hornblende schists) forming either flank of the bay. There is a strong north-south orientation in the rock structures and the bay is excavated along the strike of the rock. The bay depression does not extend far inland in the form of an open river valley as happens further east in the Strathy and Strath Halladale valleys, but instead bifurcates into two fairly short, narrow valleys. The more easterly of the two valleys opening out into the bay is occupied by the Armadale Burn, and is a very narrow, steep-sided trench. The present stream occupying

the trench seems quite incapable of carving such a valley, and there is strong evidence that glacial meltwater was initially responsible. The valley to the west is more open and gently sloping, but here again there is evidence that the whole valley was not excavated by Allt Beag, and again meltwater is likely to have operated. At the mouths of these meltwater valleys, a large fan or delta of coarse fluvio-glacial material was deposited, when the sea level stood well above its present level. This raised delta of sand, gravel and cobbles has been extremely important in the evolution of the subsequent beach. The material extends along both sides of the bay as well as occurring in a dissected fan at the head of the bay. On the flanks, the gravels lie on a rock-cut platform a few feet above present high water mark, which may represent a marine abrasion platform cut during a period of higher sea level. The bay is very open to the north, and exposure to winds and waves from this quarter is severe. However, there is little evidence of erosion occurring at present on the rock sections of the bay sides. The waves and their splash have, however, been able to remove part of the fluvio-glacial deposits from the flanks of the bay, leaving a rather complex cliff profile in which there is a low vertical or convex rock section, a narrow horizontal ledge or platform, and then a steeply sloping upper part cut in gravel. Higher sea levels may be partially responsible for this two-storey appearance, but there is evidence to suggest that some evolution is occurring at the present day. Some undercutting does occur on the dune front during northerly gales and spring tides, but the beach is reasonably stable although the c/p ratio is rather high at 10.0. The strong northerly exposure is likely to make the beach liable to considerable seasonal and other short term fluctuations.



IMAGE 388 ARMADALE BAY

There is a very slight tendency for the beach to rotate in a clockwise direction, seeking a more easterly component in its orientation. The limited amount of marine erosion proceeding on the nearby cliffs means that little sediment is being supplied to the beach from this source. Greater quantities are likely to come from the two streams debouching at the bay head, especially from their lower stretches where they cut down through the fluvio-glacial deposits. Most of the beach material is medium sand, except at the mouths of the streams where there are spreads of shingle representing reworked material from the coarser fraction of the gravels. A third, and very important source is in the bay immediately offshore, where the finer fractions of the fluvio-glacial load carried by the meltwater would have been deposited. These fine sediments have been washed ashore to form the beach and blown sand areas, but there still appears to be large quantities of sand in the bay, so that there does not appear to be any imminent danger of

the supply of material ceasing. Blown sand has accumulated against the steep front edge of the raised delta in the form of a dune ridge, which lies against the delta front in the middle of the beach, but is some distance seaward from it at either end. The marram-clad ridge is fairly stable with little evidence of blowout formation. In the area between the dune ridge and the delta front towards either flank of the bay, hummocky sand hills have accumulated with a few blowouts mostly orientated north-south. The sand thins out very rapidly against the terrace edge of the delta whose top is practically free of sand. On the east side of the bay, however, winds from the northwest quarter have distributed sand onto bare rocky slopes, and here a type of thin machair occurs. The thickness of sand varies with the micro-relief of the rock surface but is nowhere more than 2–3ft. As is the case in so many other areas where a thin veneer of blown sand has collected, scarring has developed and erosion is at the present proceeding rapidly. As elsewhere, aspect, depth of sand, and underlying rock topography all influence the rates and types of erosion, but there is a general pattern in so far as most of the blowouts, which are mainly fairly small, are linear features orientated in a northwest to southeast direction. In some places, however, this orientation is complicated by small second generation blowouts trending off the linear northwest to southeast features in a southwest to northeast orientation, suggesting that winds from the southwest as well as from the northeast can be damaging. A third type of blowout is the small crescentic type with the concave face pointing upwind, generally in a southwest direction, and it is possible that this crescentic type may evolve in time into the linear type by unequal rates of movement of the two horns of the crescent. Although the area of blown sand over rock is extensively scarred by blowouts it is stressed that only a relatively small area of such sand does occur. The direction of sand blow is confined to a narrow sector, and the sand does not spread out widely. Also it is emphasised that little erosion is occurring on the dune area of deep sand. The vegetation pattern is the typical one, with machair swards occurring on the limited areas of blown sand. The cliff-top vegetation is modified by salt spray, while on the top of the raised delta the natural vegetation has been replaced through cultivation. The blown sand area to the southeast of the beach is part of the common grazing of Lednagullin Township, which carries a heavy stock of sheep.

Indeed the opinion was expressed locally that overgrazing was practised, and it is quite possible that there may be a connection between the overgrazing and erosional scarring. Rabbits are also numerous, and undoubtedly contribute to erosion. Behind the beach and dune ridge the land, which is part of Armadale Farm, and is not under crofting tenure, is cultivated, while on the west side of the beach is the croft land of Armadale township. Tourist use of the beach is restricted by the difficulty of access from the main north coast road which runs a quarter of a mile or more back from the beach. Vehicular access is not possible, so that there has been no development of caravanning and hence no environmental damage has resulted from this source. Pedestrian access is not particularly easy, as there is no obvious short track from road to beach. The little use that is carried on, however, falls into the pattern of the very short visit, during which little damage occurs. Indeed in terms of tourist use Armadale beach is practically untouched. However, the beach is reasonably stable in terms of both marine and aeolian processes, and should be sufficiently resilient to withstand very much more use than is the case at present. Certainly the beach would appear to be one admirably suited to small scale recreational use, and perhaps in time might prove an attractive alternative if Farr Bay to the west were to become over-utilised.

### **Strathy Bay**

A small sandy bay of the northern Sutherland coastline Strathy Bay lies a half mile (1 km) northeast of Strathy and 3 miles (5 km) south east of Strathy Point. The River Strathy empties into this bay. At Strathy East a beach is easily assessable from a small car park near the burial

ground and walking down the dune path overlooking a fine stretch of sand. There is a magnificent stretch of dunes to be crossed before reaching the beach.

The beach with views out to Strathy Point is encapsulated in these high dune formations. The wildflowers here are wonderful. On the east side of the beach there are many caves and stacks to explore. There is a tunnel through the rock leading to a further small beach. The cave on the right immediately after the tunnel is Captain Ivy's cave. At the back right hand corner of this cave is a big flat rock with a crack leading to a further hidden cave reputedly once occupied by the eponymous pirate. It is quite a spiracle to get in. There is enjoyable walking and climbing on the flat rocks where flowers and seabirds of various kinds are abundant. The Strathy Burn runs to the sea on the west side of the beach and it is fascinating to see the mixing of the peaty burn water with the clear sea water. This is a marvelous beach to walk and to play on but the sea quickly gets deep so take care if bathing especially with little ones.

The steep grassy slopes and dune grasslands that surround Strathy bay are rich and wild flowers and a number of uncommon plants can be found here. Purple oxytropis, spring squill, Kidney vetch, Scottish primrose and some rare eyebright species flourish here. From Strathy point, there are extensive views of the northern coastline and on a clear day, it is possible to see Cape Wrath, Dunnet Head and Orkney. The impressive cliffs of Strathy Point with rare and variety of sea birds, whales and dolphins are all features.

At the car park close to the cemetery is the locally named Log Bog, the environmentally friendly loo with a long history before even opening. Built for over 2 years because of the concern regarding human excrement around the area from visitors to the beach the construction has yet to be opened for business because of problems with the health and safety.

Strathy Bay occupies the angle between the north pointing promontory of Strathy Point and an east-west trending section of the north coast. The beach is nearly half a mile long and 300 yards wide, with an upper beach between high water mark and the dune front tapering towards the east. The mouth of the River Strathy is at the west side of the bay head, and the river plays an important role in the morphology and supply of material to the beach. The west headland of Strathy Point, which protrudes from the east-west trend of the coastline like a giant groyne, is composed of granitoid rocks incorporated in the Moine schist complex, while the more subdued eastern headland is composed of the Caithness Flags of the Old Red Sandstone. The latter beds dip northwards at an angle of about 30°, while the strike of the rocks of the western headland is north-south. The valley of the River Strathy, which trenches the low plateau of the north coastlands, follows this north-south strike, and has been excavated along the contact of the metamorphic and sedimentary rocks. The solid rock of both headlands are overlain by glacial deposits.

On the west side, glacial till overlies benches cut in the rock, while to the east there is a layer of fluvio-glacial outwash material 100ft or more thick. This very thick, flat-topped, outwash deposit merges on its landward side into a massive ridge of sand and gravel more than 200ft high. This ridge trends across the valley, forcing the River Strathy outlet to the west, and is parallel to the shore. It is very important in the overall beach morphology, and in particular it serves as a barrier tending to limit sand blow inland. These glacial and fluvio-glacial deposits in all probability once continued offshore, where the ground appears to be sandy. The bottom is gently shelving, the five fathom line being nearly half mile out. The bay and beach are not strongly exposed except from the northeast quarter, which is fully open to winds and waves, the latter augmented by refraction round Strathy Point.

Marine erosion is largely confined to the eastern headland, which is not only more open but is also composed of more easily eroded sandstone. In addition to clear evidence of erosion during periods of higher sea level, especially in the raised abrasion platform on which the outwash deposits rest and in cliff notches above present high water mark, there are signs that the cliffs are still receding, although perhaps at a slower pace than formerly.



IMAGE 389 STRATHY BAY

Above the rock section of the cliff profile is the more gently sloping section cut in the outwash gravels. Here slumping and other subaerial mass movement processes are responsible for the ultimate morphology of the cliff rather than directly marine processes. In addition to the strong coastal slope cut in the outwash deposits, there are also deep, steep-sided valleys eroded by minor streams. On the west headland where the rock type is less conducive to marine erosion, there is less evidence of the present-day occurrence of cliffing, and the coastal slopes are largely vegetated and indeed veneered with till in places. Evidence of past erosion is testified by a till-covered bench at about 60ft O.D., and a much lower abrasion platform, on which rests occasional lag boulders, a few feet above high water mark.

Although the cliffs to the west of the beach are no longer being cut by the waves, they are still evolving under slow mass movements of till and weathered material. There is also some evidence of gullying by streams.

The contrast in terms of marine erosion between east and west headlands of the beach are continued on the beach itself. On the east side of the beach, there is very marked undercutting of the dune front, the upper beach being very narrow. On the west side of the beach, towards the mouth of the river, there is no sign of undercutting, but accretion is taking place instead. This would suggest that the beach is tending to rotate in a clockwise direction, seeking a greater easterly component in its orientation, although there is no confirmation of this in the form of asymmetry of the plan of the inter-tidal zone. Indeed the normal curvature of the low water line is almost totally lacking, so that the  $c/p$  ratio is very high at 48.33. Usually this would mean that the beach was very unstable, but it is suggested that the rapid deposition of material near low water mark was responsible and that consequently the  $c/p$  ratio in this instance gave a misleadingly high index.

The sand of the beach tends to be rather coarser than on many of the beaches investigated but the shell content is still fairly high. Material is supplied from a number of sources, including the erosion of the sandstone cliffs to the east and from the slumping of glacial and fluvio-glacial deposits on the upper parts of the cliffs. In addition to these sources, a supply of material is to be expected from the offshore deposits, and also from the River Strathy. Shingle is generally lacking on the beach except at the mouth of the river, suggesting that the river is responsible for the supply of the large calibre beach material. The finer fractions of the river's load will be incorporated with material from the other sources and distributed across the beach by marine action. That there is a copious supply of sediment to the beach is testified by the sand banks and berms on the beach, suggesting that accretion is occurring at the present day. It seems likely, however, that in the past coarser calibre material was more important than at present, for blowouts between the frontal dune ridge and the fluvio-glacial ridge have exposed traces of a shingle platform, perhaps constructed during a slightly higher sea level on which the dune complex rests. The dune complex consists of two separate dune ridges parallel to each other. The inland, and older, ridge hinges onto a point on the fluvio-glacial ridge, and probably signifies an early phase in the infilling of the bay head. The larger and younger dune ridge which is evolving at the present day is hinged not onto the fluvio-glacial ridge backing the beach, but instead on the cliff to the east side of the bay. This outer ridge is still growing rapidly westwards, although as has been mentioned it is subject to undercutting at its eastern end. This pattern of accretion and erosion is in accord with a general westerly drift of material which the overall coastal configuration might suggest. A number of small blowouts are developing near the western end of the ridge, but they appear to be of purely natural origin and are not likely to prove dangerous. Larger circular blowouts have developed on the inland slope of the eastern part of the ridge but again there is no evidence that the erosion is other than a natural phenomenon. However, at the extreme east end of the ridge, and in the blown sand occupying a deep, dry gully followed by a footpath from the cliff-top, a number of linear blowouts have formed, which may be connected with pedestrian use although the evidence is inconclusive. Inland from the dune ridges, blown sand has been distributed on the fluvio-glacial ridge up to and across the summit. The ridge has exerted an important influence on the pattern of sand blow inland by tending to confine the spread of sand. A few small blowouts occur on the sand on the ridge summit, but they do not seem dangerous nor do they appear to be associated with tourist activity. To the west of the end of the fluvio-glacial ridge, blown sand extends inland in the form of flat machair overlying shingle but soon gives way to a marshy zone along the river banks. The vegetation sequence differs with the absence of a wide flat machair zone. A very large part of the area affected by blown sand is under machair type communities containing marram, rather than the typical short machair sward. Inland from the area affected by blown sand fresh water marsh communities occupy the floodplain of the lower part of the river, while on the cliffs the vegetation is modified by salt spray action.

Although most of the sand-affected area is common grazing, the quality of grazing is not high since marram is so abundant, and no grazing animals were observed during the investigation. Vehicular access is possible as far as a point to the west of the graveyard on a col in the ridge summit. Here the road terminates in a patch of machair where there are some signs of picnicking but otherwise little evidence of tourist use. The nature of the terrain precludes large scale development of caravanning. Some pedestrian use is made of the beach, access being possible both by a path leading from the road end and one leading down to the eastern side of the beach. However, although the beach area is visible from the main north coast road, the means of access is not immediately apparent, and is in fact off a very minor road. Hence there is little attraction for tourists to break their journey along the coast and visit the beach, and it is thus very little used. From the viewpoint of physical conservation there is no reason for precluding more intensive use, since the beach area seems to be reasonably stable. If such



intensified use is to take place, however, much better signposting will be required on the minor road leading to the beach, and also better turning and parking facilities.

### **Melvich**

Melvich beach forms the terminus of the prominent south to north corridor of Strath Halladale. The beach is almost semi-circular in outline. The total length from Portskerra pier in the northwest to the outlet of the River Halladale is approximately 750 yards long and up to 180 yards wide. The beach is very stable being strongly supported by the granitic rocks of the western headland and the flagstone of the Old Red Sandstone on the east. The pier is built where the boulder beach of the west side of the bay meets the prominent rock abrasion platform which terminates in Sgeir Ruadh although within this boulder beach, occasional bedrock exposures are found near high water mark. On the eastern side, however, the inter-tidal rock abrasion platform with its characteristic “stepped” appearance forms the east bank of the tidal discharge section of the river. The unconsolidated beach therefore faces northeast towards the maximum fetch whereas the bay itself faces due north and is simply a continuation of the depression axis of the strath.

Apart from lithological differences the east and west cliffs are quite different in so far as the 100ft cliffs of the eastern side are cut in very deep glacial till and are fossil whereas the east cliffs only attain 100ft O.D. on the most prominent northerly exposure and are cut partly in bedrock and partly in till. The easterly cliffs are clearly more subject to marine action in spite of the protective barrier of the abrasion platform. The cobble beach contains very large water-rounded and sub-angular boulders derived from the erosion which led to the retreat of the cliff. Similar ill-sorted morainic material can be seen in the severe slips and gullies which are found especially in the southwest angle of the cliff. Some of these gullies appear to be related to the presence of field drains but if the present is a guide to the past then the retreat of the cliff line would appear to be due to sub-aerial rather than marine processes. The implication of the distribution of the beach materials is that the drift is west to east and the boulder beach is a residual feature whereas the sand and, to lesser extent, shingle beach to the east is the dynamic component which has built out a spit across the river exit and forced its channel hard against the east cliff.

This beach also contains fine examples of beach cusps which are again features of considerable beach activity on a local scale. The river must also play a part in the supply of sediment to the beach as its bed and banks are of gravel and shingle of a similar calibre to the shingle found at the distal end of the spit. Further upstream the river flows between terraces up to 100ft thick of fluvio-glacial sands, gravels and shingles now exploited by the construction industries and these materials would undoubtedly be carried to the sea in the past. Strath Halladale is similar to Strathnaver in so far as it was a major corridor for the deposition and passage of outwash materials in enormous quantities. The thicknesses of glacially and fluvio-glacially derived sands and gravels in the general region are quite spectacular and it is surprising that so little of the material has been reworked to form beach and dune sand, but it would appear that great banks of material still lie offshore beneath the reach of effective wave transport.

The morphology of the area contains other problems in the existence and shape of the river bed where it meanders sharply to the west at the sand-covered spur on which is sited the large residence of Bighouse. No evidence is readily available to suggest whether or not this is a raised shingle spit pointing west, or a rock-cored bar across the river. Upstream from this bend the river is still tidal and its bed is wide, shingle and sand floored, and edged with marshy flats which give way in turn to low banks representing either flood stages of the river or banks constructed when the river was flowing in adjustment to a higher sea level.



IMAGE 390 MELVICH BEACH

On the west bank great terraces of sloping fluvio-glacial deposits form the arable croft land of Melvich township but these fade out northwards under an encroaching mantle of blown sand. The area of sand dunes and machair is relatively small but of high relief: most of the dunes and sand hills reach to over 50ft O.D. Over most of the area the beach is accreting and vigorous marram is the characteristic vegetation. The area has a vegetation pattern in general. There are, however, two major areas of bare sand which have completely breached the dune barrier. Some attempt has been made to seal these openings by the relatively expensive means of erecting fences and covering the bare sand areas with brushwood. It is too early to judge the success of these efforts but some sand accumulation has occurred against the fences. The north-south trend of the sand hills is important, however, and is repeated throughout the rest of the area and clearly represents the strong funnelling of winds from the north by the deep penetration of the bay axis and from the south by the corridor of Strath Halladale. A conspicuous break of slope runs within the sand hill complex in a generally northwest to southeast direction and begins at the first elbow-bend of the river. Although covered by variable depths of sand it appears to be composed of till and or outwash materials. It has an important effect on the morphology of the machair and machair croft land transition zone but its origin may well be due to its having been the ancient left bank of the Halladale at a time when its mouth was much further to the west and at a time before the build-up in sand dunes. To the west of the river the area was once under grazing which gave way to fenced-off sheep folds and arable or grazing fields in the southwest part of the sloping machair. But there is little or no evidence of grazing today.

It is difficult to assess the influence of the estate in this area. The footbridge appears to be maintained by the owners of Bighouse who also appear to be responsible for the attempts to consolidate the areas where sand-drift is occurring. The evidence available suggests that all the

area west of the river is undercrofting tenure whereas the area east of the river belongs to the estate and was formerly a farm, the large rectangular fields of which can still be seen rising to head dyke at approximately 150ft O.D. on the east side of the bay. In general, however, the area is more or less inaccessible to vehicles approaching from either side of the river. Pedestrian access is relatively easy as there is a footpath from the north end of the village of Melvich which leads downslope, skirts the southern edge of the dunes and reaches the footbridge. Another path reaches the dunes via the edge of the west cliffs. Both these paths involve a relatively long walk and are far from conspicuous. Accordingly the area is very little used. There is no evidence whatsoever of camping or caravanning in the immediate area. Day-to-day use is very slight in spite of the considerable scenic attraction of the area and its relative proximity to the population centre of Dounreay. Vehicle access can still be had to the pier at Portskerra but from there it is a difficult half a mile scramble across the boulder beach to the sand. In general, therefore, this coastal area consisting not only of Melvich Bay, but the peninsula of Portskerra and the magnificent cliff-girt embayment to the west is truly unspoilt.

## Back to the Future

Funded by Heritage Lotteries, Communities Scotland, Highland LEADER and the Highland Council 2004-2005.

Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh was the phrase which best conjured up the strength, dignity and diversity of the people and landscapes therein. In the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, representatives of those northern communities took steps to build on that past in order to secure a better future for everyone who lives in Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh, and for generations to come. The question we were asking was

*“How much information, where is this information and can we coherently assemble this information into a local archive that can be accessed by any interested parties. Can we use this information to plan a coherent and coordinated approach to further research that would be relevant and valuable to the group, the community and any other academic institution that may wish to further research the fields of study uncovered. Furthermore is this research information relevant to our other development plans for the Mackay Country”*

This scheme was community-led research to develop knowledge about the community and improve skills and community aptitude. As the research was being conducted it provided evidence on community engagement as the knowledge and skills at the local level was uncovered and the local experience, awareness and understanding was realised. This was a new area of work that we investigated and we endeavoured to produce indications of the resourcefulness the area has supplied to others but been under represented in the area of origin.

We were initiating a community research not just about needs assessment or evaluation but an “appreciative inquiry” that looks at the positives and the assets of the community and has the potential to enhance our community identity and develop a more positive image, both within the communities and externally, and build on what’s already there. Community research is also not just about communities of place; communities of interest can too easily be overlooked in the regeneration agenda. This co-ordinated gathering of information will highlight areas of interest.

The project was in two stages

Stage 1 was setting the research agenda: this is what drives the research and where the research questions are generated. It is probably the most important stage to ensure participation. Identifying what is known and from what sources. Making local contacts.

Choice of research methods: this was an informed choice. Many novice researchers only know about surveys. We need to identify where the documents are.

Stage 2 involved more active practical actions.

- Contacting individuals & agencies outside the locality.
- Data collection.
- Data analysis.
- Presentation and action on findings.
- The project plan as submitted to the funding partners.
- Report.
- Study Trip.
- Press Articles.

This work and the Back to the Future research project were carried out with the full support of the following community organisations:

- North Sutherland Community Forum
- Scourie Community Council
- Kinlochbervie Community Council
- Durness Community Council
- Tongue Community Council
- Norcelt
- Comunn Eachdraidh Sgeiradh
- Bettyhill, Strathnaver and Altnaharra Community Council
- Strathnaver Museum
- Strathy and Armadale Community Council
- Strathy and Armadale Local Studies Group
- Alltbeag, Armadale Trust
- Melvich Community Council

Significant and enthusiastic support was also offered by the late Charlie Mackay on behalf of the Clan Mackay Society. Back to the Future was seeking to create an account of Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh people and places, past and present.

In May 2004 an intrepid team was assembled to begin work in Mackay Country. Working in the parishes of Eddrachillis and Durness were Isobel Patience, Rhiconich; Gail Ross, Achriesgill and, Badcall, Scourie Cathy Wood. In the parishes of Tongue and Farr were Sarah Beveridge, Melness; Shona Munro, Bettyhill; Rachel Skene, Tongue and Meg Telfer, Skerray. Dr. Issie McPhail was commissioned to direct the project and ensure a professional and academic worthiness to the practices. They all shared a commitment to the area and a drive and passion for the subject. In a very short time they had to learn to use a range of equipment, laptops, scanners, digital cameras, minidisk recorders and microphones. Since minidisk recorders are designed with sharp-eyed and nimble fingered teenagers in mind this was far from easy. There were four main areas of work.

#### The Photo Archive

By holding photoclub events to which people brought photos old and not so old, an archive covering the whole of Mackay Country is being created. The aim was to include contemporary photos which give a flavour of local life as well as old photos which provide a record of days gone by.

#### Photovoice

Disposable cameras were given out to a whole lot of different people in Mackay Country communities. Some cameras were given to primary school pupils and others to 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year secondary students to men and women working in different jobs locally. These include keepers, posties, crofters, fish farmers, shopkeepers and families. All of these people had been asked to take photos illustrating life here today and showing the things they like and the things they dislike about life here. These photos and comments will also be archived and turned into a local display. Oral

#### History Recordings

A cross-section of people of different ages and backgrounds were recorded to give a good picture of local memories and of working life now. Collections of 'traditional' songs and stories started as long ago as the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Early collectors who worked hard to write down songs and stories were motivated by the belief that they were witnessing the last days of cherished oral traditions in their local area.

It is true that the sort of blessings and incantations recorded by Alexander Carmichael are rarely heard today. Carmichael referred to the insights provided by his collections as “*Far away thinking come down on the long stream of time.*” In the course of the twentieth century, not least through the work of Hamish Henderson, many people began to realise that traditional songs and stories are reworked, reformed and reinvented in each generation and in each community across time and space, centuries and geographies. In the Gaidhealtachd it is still common practice to use old tunes and write new words to celebrate a special occasion or a special person, make satirical comments about local events or make political points about current affairs. This approach was as much appreciated in Rob Donn’s day as it is today.

This flow of songs, stories and cultural traditions across the generations is often referred to as ‘the carrying stream’. The flow of culture and passion down the ages. Some interests are everlasting love, land, death and parting. Others are very much of the moment, a particular birthday, the mysterious man who left a bicycle in Melness and a wad of five pound notes in an adjacent rabbit hole, differing attitudes to wind power and forestry.

Often we overlook the everyday things. Many children today don’t know what a skylight is or where to find the lobby. As we all grow older we can get lonely for the company of folk who can share the same memories of fashions gone by and words which were once current. Everyone plays a part in that carrying stream not just singers, storytellers and musicians but everyone who touches our lives. People brought up in an oral tradition must make an extra effort in today’s changing world to ensure that the unique insights afforded by their cultures and communities are recognised, respected and accorded an equal status alongside a more forceful or powerful global ‘majority’. The work of the Mackay Country staff and volunteers follows on from these fine traditions established by past collectors, though with just a year at our disposal, we have perhaps only guddled for a little while in that stream.

Archive the material

The primary schools have composed the longest poem ever about Mackay Country. There are seven primary schools in the area. Different schools have done their own projects on historical topics. This too will go into the archive to describe life today and life in the past through the eyes of local children. Work has been done in other archives to identify material which is useful for local research. These are the Highland Council Archive, the National Archives of Scotland and the National Library of Scotland. It is to be hoped that this archive can continue to grow. Access to archive materials will be arranged right across the Mackay Country communities. Materials with special local significance will be kept with that local community. This archive is for use by local people, local groups and local schools. Achieving appropriate and effective access to materials will take a little time to sort out with the range of local groups, but it will be done. A system for signing out things to borrow – like the Dunna Bull video, will be put in place. Since this is a big area it sometimes takes a bit of time for items to make it from one community to another, so a little patience will be needed from time to time!

This project had several other threads connected by the intention to gather information on as many significant topics as workable from as many sources as possible. Identify academic studies from disciplines that have been carried out and be able to comprehend what information has been collected in the past. To better understand the area in the past, to appreciate the present and maintain a record for the future and hopefully have a place to help guide into the future.

Articles of their interest were researched and written by the assembled team and these are disseminated throughout this book appropriately and acknowledged. A very limited print run was produced of *At Home in Mackay Country* a history and profile of the communities of North West Sutherland edited by Dr. Isobel MacPhail which provides an account of some of the topics

which have been explored in the course of the year. The variety of this selection may seem somewhat eccentric, but this is not an attempt to give a definitive account. Each contribution merely serves to give a small insight and a brief excursion into the vibrant miscellany which is Mackay Country past and present. This selection does not begin to do justice to the range of research interests in Mackay Country it is only a brief flavour of that diversity. This volume is made up of contributions from a range of local people. Much of what you find here was also included in the events and exhibitions held right across the area during April and May 2005.

### **The Kinlochbervie Shipwreck<sup>129</sup>**

By Isobel Patience Back to the Future 2004-2005.

When Roy Hemming and his fellow members of the RAF Lossiemouth Sub-Aqua Club discovered a piece of sixteenth-century Mediterranean pottery on the seabed off Kinlochbervie in 1997, the find sparked excited speculation that it had arrived there on a ship forming part of the Spanish Armada, the magnificent fleet mustered by Philip II of Spain in 1588 to invade and subdue England and its reigning monarch Elizabeth I. The Armada was made up of over seventy armed galleons accompanied by fifty-seven support ships, and epitomised the power, ambition and international influence of Spain, hampered only by the activities of England under Elizabeth's rule.

Spanish galleons were glorious ships, built both as warships and merchant vessels. During the latter half of the sixteenth century, galleons sailed all over the globe with cargoes of luxury goods. With piracy commonplace on the high seas, galleons armed themselves with heavy-duty brass muzzle-loading cannon to such an extent that merchant ships could be almost indistinguishable from warships. Although the galleon was descended from the oar-driven galley and the bulkier, Spanish 'nao', it was propelled by sails and cut through the water with greater ease of handling than its predecessors, and became the benchmark for shipbuilding all over the world. Its characteristics included colourful paintwork featuring heraldic devices, an elegant, high stern and, on the bow, an extension of the forward deck and bulwarks known as a beak-head, providing an advantageous position for handling the spritsail.

For all its size and style, the galleon was no match for the stormy weather that drove the Armada northwards up the east coast of Britain after engaging only briefly with the English navy at Gravelines. The fleet sailed with the wind, following the Scandinavian trade route around the north and west coasts of Scotland into the Atlantic Ocean, with the intention of then returning to Spain. Once again the weather proved to be a mightier foe than Elizabeth's navy, and many Armada ships never reached home, instead coming to grief off Irish and Scottish coasts. Indeed, it seems that every village on the north-west coast and in the Hebrides has a tale of shipwrecked Spanish sailors settling in the area to marry and raise families of dark-eyed, olive-skinned children.

Documentation charting the fate of the Armada suggests that though up to 67 ships failed to return to Spain, only six remain unaccounted for, and it has been postulated that one of these, a supply ship named the San Gabriel, may be the luckless Kinlochbervie wreck. The challenge of finding out more was taken up by Channel 4, St Andrew's University and RAF Lossiemouth, culminating in the underwater dig which was filmed in July 2001 and broadcast as part of the popular 'Time Team' television series in January 2002. A reasonable day greeted the arrival of the Channel 4 broadcast unit, divers from the Archaeological Diving Unit (ADU) of St Andrews University and from RAF Lossiemouth Sub-Aqua Club, nautical archaeologists,

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<sup>129</sup> Photographs courtesy of the Archaeological Diving Unit, University of St Andrews, used in the Back to the Future exhibition and in the Mackay Country Archive.

assorted academics and support personnel at Kinlochbervie in July 2001 but, like the sailors of the Spanish Armada, the underwater dig participants were soon to witness the capriciousness of the north-west weather.

The wreck site, which lies in unstable conditions at depths of between five and thirty metres on a series of rocky outcrops around four miles south-west of Kinlochbervie, is a protected site



IMAGE 391 A BOATLOAD OF DIVERS ARRIVE AT KINLOCHBERVIE, READY TO EXPLORE THE WRECK SITE.

in terms of the Protection of Wrecks Act 1973, requiring divers to apply for a permit before accessing it. It is a dynamic environment and presented what Martin Dean, director of St Andrews University's Archaeological Diving Unit (ADU), referred to during the Time Team broadcast as a "classic case of rescue archaeology" – a race to find and recover artefacts before they fell prey to the destructive power of the sea.

To access, work on and excavate from the wreck site, the team had arrived laden with sophisticated dive technology and equipment, including:

- a specially-equipped diving vessel, the Scimitar, owned and operated by the Archaeological Diving Unit (ADU) of St Andrew's University
- a remotely-operated vehicle, affectionately named Eric, equipped with a video camera, lights and propellers, for scanning the seabed and relaying pictures back up to the Scimitar
- diving kit featuring a surface supply system of nitrogen-based gas fed from tanks on board, underwater video cameras and umbilical communications links with the Scimitar
- a sonar acoustics system for pinpointing the location of finds
- an underwater metal detector and
- a magnetometer to chart the surface of the seabed.



Coupled with the collective expertise of the team, the outlook for recovering a fascinating variety of finds was an optimistic one, despite the ever-present threat of bad weather closing in and, for the television crew, the knowledge that the marine environment and the paramount need for safety would effectively double the time required to complete and film the business of the dig. All in all, a very different ‘Time Team’ from the norm.

Settling in, the team based itself at the Harbour Office in Kinlochbervie, and made careful preparations for the strictly controlled programme of diving ahead. With all preparations, surveys, measurements, checks and the morning’s team briefing complete, the dive programme could begin in earnest.

Two distinct diving styles were employed during the exercise. The professional divers of the ADU operated using sophisticated suits and apparatus including a helmet with a video camera attached and a surface supply system for breathing, whereas the RAF Lossiemouth recreational divers used traditional scuba techniques. Each diving method offered advantages, the enhanced safety and the benefits of communication enjoyed by the ADU divers were complemented by the military-style speed and flexibility of the RAF team. Both sets of divers worked according to exacting safety standards, precise schedules (each dive was restricted to a maximum of 28 minutes) and within a structured plan to locate and bring the maximum number of artefacts back for examination. In fact, around 100 finds were recovered during the exercise.

Divers were firstly tasked with locating and recording the exact position of objects of interest and attaching numbered tags to them, with Eric the ROV keeping an eye on them as a safety measure. In terms of the surface recovery license obtained under the Recovery of Wrecks Act 1973, the team divers were only permitted to take small finds which would be lost or damaged if left on the seabed.

Next, at the collection stage, materials were placed in finds trays which were then sealed and raised by rope to the surface. At this stage it was endearing to see among all the impressive gadgetry that finds bags were held together with humble wooden clothes-pegs. Even in the makeshift headquarters set up in the Kinlochbervie Harbour Office, ice-cream cartons and cotton buds sat alongside powerful microscopes, monitors, analytical GIS software and other serious pieces of kit as finds were subjected to the first stage of examination on the road to determining their provenance.

To speed this process, ‘diagnostic pieces’ – those considered most likely to be indicative of a particular time, place or culture and so likely to provide the most valuable information were raised and examined first.

By the end of the first day of operations, even the non-divers had had a good wetting as the rain fell steadily, and the team retired to bed with hopes of better weather in the morning. On the morning of the second day, forecasters warned that weather conditions may take a turn for the worse within the next twenty-four hours, thus racking up the pressure to bring in a good haul of finds in the limited time available.

At the end of the second day, although visibility on the seabed was still very good the weather was worsening, casting doubt on the third day’s dive schedule. When the third day of the dig dawned, a fierce westerly gale was rapidly closing in and as a consequence only a limited number of dives were carried out. These were hampered by poor visibility and the swell of the water, even at depths of twenty metres. This proved enormously frustrating for the team, fired by the significance of the materials already recovered.

So, what were the end products of all the activity – and how did they help to solve the mystery of the unidentified shipwreck? The catalogue of finds (not all of which were removed from the seabed) included:

- Cannon and cannon balls.
- Anchors of generic sixteenth and seventeenth century design.
- Four cast-iron guns and shot.
- A depth-sounding lead weight for measuring the depth of water.
- Iberian red micaceous ware including a tripod cooking pot with some residue still present.
- High-quality Italian majolica ware including a near-intact wine ewer and a large fragment of a boat-shaped salt cellar.
- North Italian red earthenware shards and stoneware shards.
- Seville courseware including an intact olive jar with a stamped rim.
- Galley bricks used for building a fire on board and
- Lead sheeting possibly used to patch up the ship's hull.



IMAGE 392 THIS ORNATE MAJOLICA WINE EWER WAS A 'STAR' FIND FROM THE WRECK SITE.

Despite the quantity and quality of the finds, some aspects of the wreck were still a puzzle – such as the absence of significant metal finds. This may be explained in part by the theory that the ship may have broken into at least two pieces, and the wreck site comprises only one of these, most likely the bow section.

Initial opinion on the age of the finds seemed to favour the possibility of an Armada wreck. However, subsequent dating of the guns and the 'star' finds of the underwater dig appear to indicate that the unfortunate vessel was of a slightly later period than the Spanish Armada possibly a lost Mediterranean trading ship, but the evidence is not conclusive. The lack of bronze cannon further tips the balance against the Armada theory.

Although further investigations took place at Kinlochbervie in 2002 and 2003, there may still be materials from this turbulent period in European history lying on the

seabed waiting to be found. Permits under the Protection of Wrecks Act 1973 and associated regulations are readily obtainable and diving enthusiasts will be sure to find a welcome considerably warmer than the weather from the people of Kinlochbervie.

In all, approximately 100 finds were located and recovered in July 2001, each one helping to provide answers to the questions the dig team had set itself. Arguably an almost-intact wine ewer was the 'star' find of the excavation, a luxury item exquisitely made and lavishly decorated, part of "*the best collection of Italian renaissance pottery excavated from an archaeological context in this country,*" according to pottery expert Duncan Brown in his *Time*

Team interview. The wine ewer, made of high-grade Italian majolica (tin-glazed pottery) of a type created to order for the great and the good of Mediterranean society, features ten fluted panels bizarrely decorated with a depiction of female satyrs, flowers, snails, insects and cameos, painted in orange, blue, black and yellow against a background of white. Its remarkable state of preservation may be due to its having been transported in a wooden packing



IMAGE 393 THIS INTACT OLIVE JAR WAS A 'STAR' FIND FROM THE WRECK SITE.

courseware with a stamped mark on the rim, a 'star' find principally by virtue of the excellent condition in which it was found. The stamped rim hammers another nail into the coffin of Armada romantics, as it is noted that stamped rims were not present among the jars from the 1596 San Pedro wreck, but did feature in those from the 1622 wreck of the Nuestra Senora de Atocha.

In the 'Time Team' programme, the jar is shown being picked up from its position on the seabed and packed in a specially-constructed container by a nervous Phil Harding, supervised by perhaps an even more nervous Martin Dean as the pair nursed their precious find to the surface. The wine ewer and olive jar, together with the entire collection of finds, are now in the care of the National Museums of Scotland.

case which slowly broke up on the seabed but nevertheless protected its precious cargo for many years.

Initially, it was suggested that the piece originated in the workshops of the Patanazzi family of Urbino, Italy, but further research identified Tuscan workshops at Pisa or Montelupo as the more likely source. Disappointingly for adherents of the Armada hypothesis, it has also been suggested that the ewer dates from no earlier than 1590. The intact olive jar recovered from the wreck site provides a sharp contrast to the self-indulgence of the majolica ewer. The jar was a basic workaday item, an example of Seville

## The Emigrants

From Back to the Future 2004-2005

William Bell – Australia Writes on 14th March 2004:

*“One branch of the tree came from Armadale, Parish of Farr via Edinburgh in 1854. The head of the family group was Donald Munro, who was married to Georgina Ann Sutherland MacKay, immigrated to Australia using funds for their journey supplied by the Duke of Sutherland. One of Donald's sons, James Munro, became Premier of Victoria in 1890, while my great great grandmother was a daughter Johan McKenzie Munro. Please find attached some information on my family tree and the career of James Munro. The above information may be of interest to your project of how a family that was part of the clearances made their way on the far side of the world in Australia”.*

I also hope that this would be a way of introduction to researchers who are looking at family histories about people in the area. My research effectively stops with Alexander McDonald Munro who was Donald's father and a cryptic remark that Donald's mother Barbara McKay was a relative of the Chief of the McKay's in Burkes Colonial Gentry, an extract can be found attached. *“One thing I can say about my ancestors they were a tough lot. On my mum's side one line has the matriarch of the family, Johan Munro coming down the gang plank after sailing into Port Phillip Bay eight months pregnant, having her baby and then walking with babe in arms and a little girl in hand with her husband up to the gold diggings in 1854. Another ancestor missed the hangman's noose, but was transported for life to Tasmania. By the time he died he had 1000 acres under cultivation as a dairy farmer up around central Victoria”*

Amanda's [William's wife] ancestors are as tough. One was a son whose father, Robert Reid, went bust in Scotland around 1855, and immigrated to Victoria. The ship the family was on struck an ice berg and it was all hand to the pumps. The experience killed the boy's father as he died three months later, so at thirteen Robert junior went to work to support not only his dying father, but his mother and four sisters. By the time he died he was the Honorable Robert Reid, late Senator in the first Federal Parliament, and the owner of a wholesale business that had branches in all states of Australia and a Head Office in London. For services rendered to the Paris Exhibition of 1889 the French Government awarded him the Cross of the Legion of Honour. There is not much to tell about the modern decedents of Donald Munro and Georgina MacKay. There is a lot of. Starting with their daughter Johan there is a little over 4,000 individuals in the family tree with the usual doctors, lawyers, church ministers and people earning a crust. All have, in some way, been involved in building Australia. Curiously no politicians, except for James Munro, for politicians you can find them on Amanda's side of the tree.

Lynette Mackay Matheson – USA Writes on 21st September 2004

*“My ancestor was Thomson Mackay born July 27th 1845 in Durness to John McRitchie Mackay and Jean Mackay and their other children were Hughina who wed William Manson , Donald, Margaret and Augustina- I think [well records are hard to get]. Anyway Thomson and Hughina and her husband migrated to New Zealand on the "Blue Jacket" in 1866 to New Zealand. I think about how long and hard that journey by ship must have been for them and how far away they were going from their family to an unknown country. I myself left New Zealand in 1967 [married an American] and have lived here in the USA since then. Once a Mackay though always a Mackay and nothing stirs me like the sound of the bagpipes [always makes me cry]. Again a great web site “- Lynette Mackay Matthiesen.*

Talbot Former gold mining town with historic buildings. Talbot is a tiny former gold mining town located off the beaten track 159 km north-west of Melbourne, midway between Clunes

and Maryborough. The first European settler in the area was Alexander McCallum who established a pastoral property in 1839 which he called 'Dunach Forrest'. The nearby towns of Amherst and Daisy Hill developed on the 'Glenmona' run which was in existence by 1840. It is said that a shepherd discovered gold at Daisy Hill (7 km north of Talbot) in 1848 but the first rush to the district did not occur until 1852. The township of Daisy Hill emerged in the 1850s due to its location on the main route from Adelaide to the goldfields around Castlemaine. Two km south of Daisy Hill, and five km north of Talbot, is an intersection where the east-west road joining Amherst and Craigie meets the north-south road from Maryborough to Talbot. At this junction the Emu Inn emerged after the 'Emu rush' of the mid-1850s.

Gold was first found at Back Creek in 1854 and a settlement began to emerge on the diggings which was also known as Back Creek. After the 'Scandinavian' rush of 1859 a survey was carried out. After a visit by the governor of Victoria in 1861 the name of the settlement was changed in honour of an English peer named Talbot. There were initially 15,000 people on the field with five banks, possibly 49 drinking establishments, a brewery, and numerous stores and businesses scattered along six streets. The population dropped to 3,000 or 4,000 by the mid-1860s by which time more substantial brick and bluestone structures had begun to replace the canvas and timber. At that time there were 16 hotels, a courthouse, a town hall, soap and candle factories, flour mills, a theatre and a gas works. Cohn Brothers soft-drink manufacturers of Bendigo was founded at Talbot in 1861.

After the gold rush died down and the railways connected up the various mining towns the cartage business fell away and so the entire family moved to Yarraville, a suburb of Melbourne, where the family found work in the Sugar Refinery and the Woollen Mills along the Marybinong River. My Great Grandfather worked as a Steam Roller driver for the local council. It was while in Yarraville that the MacDonald's of Yarraville started the clan of that name. The Clan has been recognized as being an official offshoot of Clan MacDonald and every so often we have get together where family business is discussed and Scottish traditions like piping in the Haggis are enacted. My Great Grandfather George Alexander MacDonald, son of Johan Munro and Norman MacDonald, was born in a Gold Rush town called Daisy Hill in 1859. It is believed that Norman and Johan had set up a cartage business for transporting the miners to the nearby diggings as this short extract on the history of the area shows, Daisy Hill was ideal for this type of operation.”

### **A Migrant's Life Today**

William Bell, Victoria, Australia

“I am a Technical Officer for a company that has the contract for operating Victoria's Mobile Speed Camera program. They bust 'em and I fix 'em. My wife Amanda is a Telemarketer. We live in a three story townhouse in the inner suburb of Moreland 3 kilometres north of the centre of Melbourne. Moreland is the classic multicultural Australian suburb. Each wave of migrants to Australia are represented here. From the anglo-celts of the 1850s to the Greeks of the 1950s and 60s, the Turks and Lebanese of the 1970s to the refugees from Somalia and Eritrea of the 1980s.

A trip up Sydney Road, the main road through the suburb, gives you a smorgasbord of food shops and small general stores. Within 10 minutes walking distance you can try Nepalese, Chinese, Japanese, Italian, Lebanese, Thai, and North African food. Along the same walk you can buy cheap household goods from small Chinese/Vietnamese general store or blow \$10,000 dollars, or more, on a wedding dress that has won first prize in the annual Australian Fashion Week. Once a year Moreland Council closes Sydney Road and holds a street party and a photograph of this event is attached. Here is a picture is of the old Brunswick Town Hall. It

can be a bit confusing about place names in Melbourne since the amalgamation of a lot of city councils about ten years ago. People tend to use the old place names. The new amalgamated council is Moreland of which the two old city Councils of Brunswick and Coburg were folded into, but every one still identify themselves as living in Brunswick or Coburg. Those two names should give you a hint of when the suburbs were first named.”

“Grandma is the daughter of George Alexander and so is the Granddaughter of Johan Munro. The photograph was taken in about March 1916, just before Granddad sailed for the Western Front. The two little girls are my Aunties: the eldest was called Sadie and the baby Isabel. Here is a remarkable fact, the entire military force from Australia fighting in WW1 was volunteer. So here is my Grandfather, who was 26 at the time, volunteering for active duty, even though he was married with a two little girls. And it’s not as though he was ignorant of what he was getting himself into. His brother-in-law Donald Munro MacDonald returned in May 1916, after being in the Gallipoli campaign, after surviving being shot in the back and shoulder. Donald had been in the second wave that had stormed the beach on the 25 April 1915. He was wounded on the 26th, but his military records show that he didn't get medical attention until sometime between the 28th and 30th of April such was the shambles of the landing. No doubt something of what had occurred would have been in his letters home and definitely in the newspaper reports.”

My Grandfather survived the war, starting as a private on enlistment, corporal on embarkation, a sergeant by the time he got to France and finally commissioned lieutenant by November 1918. I wonder what Grandma was thinking when this photograph was taken

After the war Grandma and Granddad opened general store in Yarraville and later at another suburb further west at Tottenham. Granddad finally had to retire in 1947 and become a TPI (Totally and Permanently Incapacitated) pensioner as his experiences in the trenches caught up with him. I believe it was mustard gas that affected him. Granddad died in 1956 just after I was born so I never knew him, but I do have a photograph of him with me and my cousin Jimmy lying on the front lawn of his house in Tottenham during Christmas 1954. All my great uncles who served in WW1 were wounded, and while they all lived a number of years after the war the wounds they received in some way hastened their early death. Grandma, bless her, lived to be 95 and died in 1985.

## **From Armadale Sutherland to Armadale Australia**

### **First Settlement**

This area once formed part of the territory of the Wurundjeri people. The Aborigines were nomadic and, prior to European settlement, used the water from the spring on the site of the present Malvern Gardens. Land in this area was first sold in 1854, when the roads now known as Glenferrie Road and High Street were surveyed. From the first settlement in the 1850s, market gardens, nurseries and a few houses on large allotments lined the rough bush roads. Around this time, the Armadale Hotel in High Street started life as a four roomed ‘beerhouse’.

1880s:

The Boom Years Prior to the introduction of public transport, commercial development was slow. However this rural atmosphere changed in 1879, when the first trains ran through Armadale. This new method of transport to the previously isolated district, stimulated land subdivision and development of both commercial and residential areas. Land values rose and High Street developed into a thriving shopping centre.

## Malvern Shire Hall

With the land boom of the 1880s, the area prospered and the completion in 1886 of the Malvern Shire Hall was an indication of the district's prosperity. Opposite the Shire Hall, at the south-west corner of High Street, the Town Hall estate was sold by auctioneers Donald Munro and William Baillieu in 1888. The same year, the E.S. & A. Bank was erected on the south-east corner. (This early bank building was replaced with the present building in 1959).

## Traders and Storekeepers

From around 1890, High Street was lined with a variety of traders and storekeepers, including bootmakers, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, tailors, dressmakers, milliners, upholsterers, ironmongers, saddlers, tobacconists, butchers, grocers, produce merchants, greengrocers and fuel merchants. A bank had been established on the corner of Gooyong Road, not far from Emma Baker's Mission Hall in High Street.

## 1900s

Following the arrival of Malvern's first tram in 1910 and the subsequent increase in population, Malvern was proclaimed a City in 1911. High Street, with its variety of traders, manufacturers and retailers in the 1920s, including the Malvern Buick Taxi Service, a Masonic Hall, Miss Williamson's School of Domestic Economy, a Christian Science Library and in 1938 a Sustenance Office, changed in the 1940s when a few antique dealers began to appear.

## Malvern City Square

The Malvern Boys' College was established on this site in 1891. From 1900 The Tradesman's Club, renamed the Malvern Club in 1918, occupied the building from 1900-until 1922. Two years later, eleven shops, designed by prominent architect Walter Burley Griffin, were built with frontages to High Street. By 1971, Council had acquired most of the site and the Malvern City Square was opened in 1989.

## High Street Today

Today High Street continues the tradition of serving local communities and visitors with its sophistication and elegance. Renowned as one of Melbourne's distinctive strips it boasts a range of designer clothing stores, bridal boutiques, cafes and restaurants together with the largest number of galleries and antique shops concentrated in any one place anywhere in Australia.

Donna Fearne, Australia Writes on 23rd March 2005

"Our Mackays had been in the area for some time but the most accurate we have is that Robert & Eliza Mackay had at least one son George Scobie Mackay who married Isabella McLean daughter of Archibald McLean and Ann Craib. They were married in Aberdeen but George was from the highlands and returned home where they were the first tenants and probably the last tenants of Moine House. George worked as the gamekeeper for the Duke of Sutherland for the area of the Moine and a good bit else. He was succeeded by his son William. His wife died young but George lived to a ripe old age. William had 5 children. His only son died as a young man and so there was no successor (it seems) although we haven't tracked down ALL of George and Isabella's families. One of the children of George and Isabella (who died and was buried in 1863, we have the headstone inscription for this because George wrote it in letter. The headstone itself cannot be found). He was James Patterson McKay who married Margaret

Campbell of Golval and later Portskerra and who worked as a domestic. They left the highlands after the wedding having listed the Tongue Inn as their residence on the marriage records.

Armadale, Australia

A history of High Street Armadale Victoria from the local website. It was around this area that William Bell's great, great, great grandfather James Munro and his son Donald developed a business during the boom years of the 1880s. Was this Armadale named after our Armadale?

"Yes it is Armadale Sutherlandshire that Armadale, Melbourne is named after. Funny thing is I always thought it was named after Armadale on the Isle of Skye, since that is where the MacDonald's came from. Actually they came from the little island of Scalpay off the north coast of Skye. It wasn't until I understood the importance of Parishes in Scottish and English place names that I realised I was a couple of hundred kilometres out. I suppose it was the large picture of Flora MacDonald my Grandma had in her living room and the her romantic view of Bonnie Prince Charlie reinforced the idea that it was Armadale Skye. Grandma once told me that if I got involved with a Campbell she would disown me. To her the massacre of Glencoe was only yesterday and not 200 years before."

William Bell.

### **From Armadale, Sutherland to Geelong, Victoria**

The journey of Donald Munro and Georgina Ann Scobie Mackay who emigrated in 1854 on 'The Hornet'.

Donald Munro built a house in what became one of the suburbs of greater Melbourne. He called it Armadale House and that is why the Melbourne area has a place called Armadale.

Donald and Georgina's son James followed his parents out to Geelong, taking his own family with him.

James Munro became Premier of The State of Victoria and Attorney-General in the late 1890s.

As a politician and local worthy James was committed to the Temperance movement all his life. James suggested and promoted the incredible idea of an 8 hour working day -8 hours work, 8 hours leisure and 8 hours sleep, which was adopted in Victoria.

James created the first Building Society and Bank.

"The Victorian Permanent Building Society was founded by Mr. Munro in 1863, and for 17 years he was secretary of that institution."

Great financial crisis followed the boom years of the 1880s during the 1890s. This ruined the Bank and the family for a time. The economic crisis resulted from the 'land boom' and what in today's global economic crisis might be called 'overheating' fueled by land speculation. The newspapers of the time were full of analysis of the causes and consequences -and the matter was personalised in terms of the Munro family involvement.



## Musicians and Bards of Mackay Country<sup>130</sup>

Music and storytelling has been a tradition in Mackay Country spanning hundreds of years. In a time when television and computer games were unheard of people would ‘ceilidh’ with one and other, visiting each other’s’ houses and continuing an oral tradition through conversation, stories, songs and music which would be passed down to the following generation. Each village would boast various musicians who may not have had widespread acclaim but were accomplished musicians and kept old traditions alive. Singing in Gaelic was an ideal way of expressing love songs, sea-ballads and the general way of life of the time and the Dùthaich MhicAoidh possessed a wealth of talent to convey these songs. Listening to recordings of the Melness and Kirtomy ceilidhs you can capture the sense of happiness and emotion after a singer had performed, wishing somehow you could have been there with them.

Peggy and Josie Munro, Midfield, Melness sung in the local Gaelic MODs. They came from a Gaelic speaking background (as did most of Melness round about the 1930-40’s) and there was a lot of music in their family, perhaps mainly kept for playing beside the fireside of an evening. Their brother Nigel also sang in the local MODs and at many a local ceilidh. Singers Neil Munro and Georgie Mackay attended these ceilidhs. Tot Burr and Morag Macleod were singers in Tongue, Edie Mackay in Strathnaver and Alla and Georgie Matheson in Swordly. It is said that Georgie had a great style for delivering a Port-a-Beul. In Kirtomy were brother and sister, Angie and Ella Mackay, Magnus (Bain) Mackay, well known skipper of his fishing boat the Sealgair, and also Willie Robert Mackay who still lives in Skerray. Each performer would have a signature song that they would be asked to sing time and again as they probably added their own unique style to it.

Sadly most of these singers are now gone and so too the songs. Not all of them were recorded and I do not suppose they imagined that these songs would cease to be sung and consequently never heard of again.

### Piping in Dùthaich MhicAoidh

Piping has played a big part in Mackay Country’s History. Achness in Strathnaver was home of the Aberach Mackays. One of the works of piobereachd was the ‘Mackay Banner’. This is an ancient banner possibly originating from the end of the 16th century or before. Custom connects it with Iain Aberach the Mackay chief who led the way for the Mackays into winning the battle at Drum Na Coup which occurred in 1433. The banner came to represent the Mackay’s fighting dexterity. Nearly two hundred years later Sir Robert Gordon sent a letter to the Earl of Sutherland, his nephew, insisting that Donald Duaghal Mackay should never display the Bratach, the banner, while the Sutherland’s was displayed.

In piping today the times are much more peaceful although the reverberating sound from the pipes can still leave the hairs on the back of your neck standing on end and the sound of a Gaelic air can leave you quite emotional if played competently.

Willie and John Macdonald were two brothers from Mid-Town Melness. They were both accomplished pipers and very well known in piping circles. John MacDonald was one of the best pipers of the early 1900’s. His piping coincided with the reign of George the V’s and as the King was an enthusiast of piping he became the ‘Kings Piper’.

Willie MacDonald left Melness at the age of twelve to become herd boy in Strathhalladale. However he was more interested in practicing the chanter and the fiddle. This earlier interest

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<sup>130</sup> By Shona Munro from Back to the Future 2004-2005

for piping led him to becoming a piper in the Scots Guards. As a result of injuries incurred whilst serving in the First World War Willie returned home and then took up employment in Inverness where he pursued further knowledge of piping. He went on to win many competitions. He was also Pipe Sergeant with the Lovat Scouts.

Another prominent piper was Johnny Mackay, Trantlebeg Strathhalladale. During his lifetime he composed over three hundred tunes. When he was working on the croft a tune would enter his head so he would abandon whatever he was doing and run home to put down on paper the tune. One of his 2/4 Marches was composed after the Lairg Games when he thought he would have to judge the Highland dancing. He was relieved when Edith Macpherson turned up to adjudicate so he composed the tune 'Edith Macpherson's Welcome to the Lairg Games' in appreciation of this.

Johnny had ownership of a very old chanter. It was used by a Pipe Major in the 93rd Highlanders. It can be viewed in the Mackay Room in Strathnaver Museum where there is an exhibit of his work.

### **Seannachaidh agus Taigh Ceilidh**

Willie and John MacDonald's mother, Grace Sutherland, was a Gaelic storyteller (seannachaidh), singer and in addition composed poetry. She was brought up in Melness. While keeping house for her brother in Glasgow she met Hugh MacDonald, Melness whom she married. They then returned to Melness. Her house was described as a 'ceilidh house' where family and friends would gather to hear stories, music, songs and even dancing. With music playing such an integral part of their lives it is little wonder that the brothers became such prestigious pipers.

One of Willie's pupils was Willie MacLeod a native of Melness. He actually came to live in the house of his former tutor. Willie was known locally as 'The Cannister' and had a playful sense of humour. This was evident at local dances when he would play for lengthy periods of time, watching to see when the first dancer would start to tire.

## Pipe Major Charles Mackay O'Brien



IMAGE 394 PIPE MAJOR CHARLES MACKAY O'BRIEN

Piping tutor Charlie O'Brien lived in Strathnaver and for numerous years taught pupils from all over the north coast, introducing a much welcomed boost to piping in the area. Charlie was born in Inchkinloch, Tongue, in 1920. His first job was as kennel boy in Borroboll. There Bob Mackay, a brother of Johnny Mackay, Trantlebeg, started him on the chanter. Colin MacDonald, whom he was sharing a bothy with, gave him a Lawrie chanter. Charlie served in the 5th Seaforths during the war and before he was demobbed he became Pipe Major. He kept up his passion for piping when he returned home by competing in the Highland Games and helped structure the new Thurso Pipe Band. Later years saw his involvement in forming the Bettyhill and District Pipe Band. He was the schools' piping tutor in the north for several years.

Pipers whom Charlie instructed in current years were Kenny Mackay and Allan MacDonald, Altnaharra; Brothers Richard and Allan Wilson, Strathnaver; Shirley Mackay, Melness; Yvonne Mackenzie and Shona Munro, Bettyhill,

and sisters Valerie-Joan and Carol-Anne Mackay, Strathy.

All these pupils did well in junior and senior competing and were certainly a credit to Charlie. Carol-Anne still participates in competing and has an encouraging number of pupils where she is piping instructor in Ullapool and district. Carol-Anne is also piper and accordionist in up-and-coming, all female band, Dochas. The girls' repertoire consists of a wide variety of traditional songs and tunes with a very uplifting feel to them. They have travelled all over Britain and abroad, keeping alive the spirit of traditional music with a contemporary style.

For his dedication to piping in the north Charlie was granted the MBE in 1992. A function was held in Melvich Hotel attended by his family, friends and pupils, past and present.

### Bettyhill and District Pipe Band

Charlie was instrumental in getting the Bettyhill and District Pipe Band up and running. The inspiration behind this was Nanny Allen who was proprietor of the Farr Bay Inn. Nanny's husband James was an enthusiastic piper and together with the direction of Charlie they set about forming the Bettyhill and District Pipe Band.

There were enough pipers at that time but nobody could play the drums and the pipers needed their apprentices!! With Nanny's vivacious personality she managed to round up potential drummers, perhaps cajoled along by the odd free dram, and finally the band was complete.

In its early years the band was led by Drum Major Carol Ross and Pipe Major Charlie O'Brien. Its founder members were pipers Shirley Mackay, Melness; Kenny Mackay and Allan MacDonald, Altnaharra; Alasdair, Richard and Allan Wilson Strathnaver; Shona Munro and Catherine Rudie, Bettyhill; Murdo Gordon, Bettyhill; Willie Mackay, Naver; James Allan, Bettyhill; Mabel Bannerman, Skelpick; Ragnar Celli, Farr; Valerie and Carol-Anne Mackay, Strathy and Heather MacDonald, Portskerra. On the bass drum was Andy Munro, Bettyhill and on the side drums were Fiona Gordon, Bettyhill; Billy Mackay, Bettyhill; Nikki Munro, Bettyhill; Julie Murray, Bettyhill; Michael Mackay, Swordly; Magnus Celli, Farr; Christian and Susan Rudie, Bettyhill and Nicholas and Lisa Macdonald, Bettyhill.

Over the years the line-up has changed and sadly last winter saw the retirement of the Pipe Major, Donnie Mackay, Helmsdale. Over the years he never missed a practice despite driving all that distance even in the winter. He was supported by Bettyhill's Minister, John Wilson, whose drive and enthusiasm for the band kept it going, even as numbers steadily decreased. With these two valued members of the band retired unfortunately the band had to cease leaving only Shona Munro, Eilidh Munro and Mabel Bannerman pipers, and Andy Munro, Ross McIntosh and Joan Brennan drummers with Lucy Drennan as Drum Major. Hopefully they can build a resurgence of recruits over the next few years. They are very proud of producing a band that hails from Mackay Country and would hate to see it disappear.

### **Gaelic Song – Cannan nan Gael**

During the mid-1980's Gaelic singing was greatly encouraged for the youngsters of Farr School by Head of the Primary Department, Jeanette Mackay from Strathy. She had produced many choirs up until this time but after a successful local MOD she decided to take the Farr Junior Gaelic Choir to the Royal National MOD in Edinburgh. The choir was entered in the rural choir's competition and were the smallest choir in the competition. The choir was delighted when they were declared the winners by twelve clear points ahead of the runners up. This was a great achievement and a credit to Jeanette who had worked diligently with the youngsters. The choir went on to win this competition for several consecutive years. Popular acclaim was brought to the north due to the choir.

The choir comprised Catriona Macleod and Marsaili Macleod, Strathnaver; Carol-Anne Mackay, Strathy; Dawn Mackay, Bettyhill; Elspeth Fraser, Skerray; Shona and Nikki Munro, Bettyhill; Alison Jappy, Bettyhill; Roddy and Yvonne Mackenzie, Bettyhill; Eilidh Dibble, Strathnaver and Bernie and Roisin O'Hagan, Strathy. Melvich Gaelic choir, an adult choir, has also achieved much success at national level. Following the retirement of Myrtle Gillies as conductress after many rewarding years they were taken over by Raymond Bremner, formal MOD Gold Medallist.

### **Feis Air an Oir**

Music is still encouraged in Mackay Country. Feis Air an Oir, "Music on the Edge", was founded a few years ago by Sandra Munro, Jeanette Mackay, Joan Ritchie and various other valued helpers to promote education of music to all ages, although the majority of participants are children. The sessions take place every alternate Saturday and the children have come on in leaps and bounds. The workshops are all very promising as the children clearly enjoy it, and the big children too!!

### **Ceol Cinn t-Saile Dùthaich MhicAoidh**

If you enjoy getting out on the social scene Ceol Cinn t-Saile Dùthaich MhicAoidh (Music of Mackay Country) hold monthly sessions in various venues where you can enjoy local traditional music. There are boxy players, fiddlers, singers, and guitarists. Local groups such

as these are imperative to the continuation of traditional music and the enthusiasm for such ventures is very encouraging

### **Bands and Ceilidhs**

Many a ceilidh dance was held in village halls in Dùthaich MhicAoidh. One of these earlier bands was the ‘Melness Ceilidh Band’, comprising Donnie Campbell, button key, Willie-John Barnetson, piano accordion, and Joseph and Bally Mackay on fiddle and piano. Joseph was also well known for his singing of Gaelic songs and would be a worthy when it came to performing at a ceilidh or concert. More often than not he would take the part of Fear an Taigh.

Meanwhile in Bettyhill ‘The Bettyhill Boys’ played many a foot-tapping tune that would have revelers dancing till the wee small hours. The line-up was Alick-John Mackay, Swordly, on the button key; Dona Munro, Kirtomy, on the button key; Geordie Mackay, Naver, on the fiddle; Hugh Mackay (Teedy), Bettyhill, on the accordion; Jackie Craig Skelpick, and Ian Mackay, Inshlampie, Strathnaver, on the drums.

More recent times have seen such bands as ‘Tongue Ceilidh Band’, formed by John Barlow, take to the circuit. They comprised John Barlow as keyboard player; Tommy Mackay, Melness on accordion; Joseph Mackay, Melness on fiddle; Donnie MacDougall, Durness on accordion and Richard Wood, Bettyhill on the drums. They were a popular band and produced tape recordings.

‘Keldie’ is the name intended for people who come from Kirtomy. In view of that Hamish Carney, Andy Munro and Shona Munro, whose mother came from Kirtomy, decided that ‘Keldies’ was a fitting name to christen their band. Andy and Hamish play the accordions joined by Shona on the guitar and vocals. ‘Strip the Willow’ is always a favourite request at a Bettyhill dance and the ‘Keldies’ oblige happily though it has been known to resemble more of a war dance but the heuching and teuching just adds to the merriment.

Another great band perhaps with a more modern swing to it is ‘Blue Ridge’ from Durness. They play anything from ‘The Gambler’, an often requested song to ‘The Banks of Ben Lomond’. When requested to play ‘The Gambler’ for the fourth time one night in Bettyhill, lead singer Marty said, “I thought the Scourie lot were bad”. Front man is lead singer and guitarist Marty Mackay along with lead guitarist Ian James Campbell, bass guitarist and accordion player Donnie MacDougall and drummer Darren Mackay. Blue Ridge certainly have the ability to keep a party going we hope they keep going for a long time to come.

‘Corra Glas’ has done wonders in the Kinlochbervie area in recent years. This group has provided opportunities for music tuition for young people and created a band of high quality which has toured on several occasions, made a CD and delighted local audiences.

Contemporary music features more often now along the north coast with acts such as the ‘North Coast Jazz Band’ and more Modern music is produced by younger bands such as ‘Novo-caine’, ‘Crimson Tide’ and ‘Broken Chord’. Although different to Scottish traditional music it is always good to have the diversity of styles of music that can be appreciated by all backgrounds.

### **Bards and Bardesses**

Joan Campbell was a Keldie before she settled in Melvich. She is a singer-songwriter and although she doesn’t spend as much time singing as she used to she can be heard on the tape she produced – ‘My Home Sutherland’. On this tape she sings the renowned song ‘Naver Bay’ which celebrates the beautiful Naver Bay and surrounding area. The song was written by Jackie Craig, Skelpick, and is as popular today as it was when it was first written.

The most popular Bard of the eighteenth century was Robb Donn. He was born in Strath More in 1714 and later became a cattle drover. He had the ability to compose and recite poetry from the age of three. Robb Donn was illiterate and in later life had to rely on friends to scribe for him. Perhaps one of his most celebrated songs was Gleanna Gollaidh- a glen in Strath More, the Bard's birthplace. This is a much requested song at ceilidhs and concerts today and the vocalist takes much delight when the audience joins in throughout the chorus.

In more recent times there was the Bard, Hugh McIntosh, Portskerra, who compiled over two hundred poems and Hugh Macleod, Achininver, Melness, who comes from a family known locally for their lyrical skills. 'Boideach bhaisguil', bicycle man describes the curious disappearance of a stranger who came to Melness during the war. He rode a bicycle with a light, a rare sight in Melness at that time. A couple of days later the bicycle was discovered and more peculiarly two little boys who were out ferreting were amazed when they found rabbit holes full of five pound notes, a large amount of money for that time. It is very cleverly constructed and well worth reading for it records an important part of local history.

Currently Bettyhill has a "Bardess" of her own by the name of Irene Ross. Her work takes the form of odes and I would not like to hazard a guess as to how many she has written. She now only writes her famous Odes if requested, which is fairly often as they are a must at birthday parties, Christmas parties, and latterly at the retirement do of our local Minister. She must have created an Ode for just about everybody in the place. Her work is brilliant I wonder what her next piece will be!

Concluding this look into Musicians and Bards of the Mackay Country it has to be said we have a wealth of talent which has been a bedrock for many years. I have only mentioned some of the artists and hopefully I will be able to research many more in the future.

## Stories from the Flow Country

2006

### Peatlands

Covering about 200,000 hectares, it's more than twice the size of Orkney. Altogether, this corner of Scotland holds more than 400,000 hectares of blanket bog, making it the largest expanse of this remarkable, wild habitat in Europe a vast expanse of blanket bog. Blanket bog is a rare type of peatland which forms only in cool places with plenty of rain and covers the landscape like a blanket that comprises a complex set of interlinked pool systems and micro features.

### **The Peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland: Stories and Anecdotes**

This was an oral history project being carried out by Assynt Research & Consultancy (Isobel MacPhail,) and The Mackay Country Project (Shona Munro; Catriona Macleod and Isobel Patience).

The work was being done for SNH. The recordings were given to SHN but copies were also be placed in the Mackay Country Archive.

The purpose of the recordings is to provide local stories for use in future interpretation. This might mean using quotes and stories in leaflets or interpretation panels. It might also mean using voice recordings in the future so that visitors can hear an edited version of the stories.

### Themes

- Place names in Peatland, flows meaning, memories, stories, spelling and location on a map.
- Past uses of the bogs, the land itself and plants, animals and birds e.g. peat cutting, herbal remedies, shepherding, cattle, stalking, fishing, illicit stills, heather beds; sphagnum; arighs and the location to which memories relate if possible.
- Current uses stalking, fishing, birdwatching, grazing, art, craft, etc.....
- Past attempts at improvement e.g. drainage.
- Views on afforestation.
- Views on and stories about muirburn, how it was done in past; how it is done now; what are the benefits; how have the bogs changed?
- Energy, peat, turbines...
- Peatland plants, birds, animals, insects (eg dragonflies)
- Myths and legends, e.g. kelpies; ghosts; battles; poaching stories....
- Change due to mechanisation use of quads instead of walking or ponies for use of the Peatland.
- Management of inbye croft ground and changes in this, some birds need the traditional inbye and the Peatland e.g. the golden plover.
- Weather in the peatlands – describe the weather and seasonal change e.g. summer and winter.
- Current condition of the bogs – have they changed in living memory? Maybe the impact of deer fencing; changed use; drainage and trees, visitors is relevant?
- What do people like about the bogs?
- What do people dislike about the bogs?

There is a vast amount of information gathered from oral stories gathered in interview some have been included under the chapter on Peat.

Broad topics covered in the narratives which are split into sub categories include, the Beauty of the Bogs, Nature and Culture, Peatlands and Art, Writers in Caithness and Sutherland, Weather, Peatlands as a Resource: Emotional and Spiritual, Crofting and Agriculture, Reclaiming Peatlands, Travelling through the Peatlands Ceardannan, The Summer Walkers, Cutting Peats, Landownership, Deer and Sporting Estates, Conservation Challenges, Peatlands Plants, Peatlands Wildlife, Rivers and Lochs, Using the Peats Bogwood, Peatlands – The Other World, Burning Heather, Changes in the Peatland Landscape, Heritage or History?





## **Scarcity and School Dinners**

Well, as war progressed, food became scarcer, definitely. It was a job to get food on the table, really, apart from if you'd be able to kill a sheep and maybe get a bit venison from the estates – some of the estates were quite good; they would give bits of venison out at certain times of the year. But I think the estates could have given a lot more than that. In the winter-time, they only would give one hind to the school, and when you think of all the deer that's on the hill!

“Crofters were quite lucky, really, because having cows, we had butter. You only got two ounces, was it, or four ounces of butter for a week, of your ration, but we had our own butter. And then we had eggs from the hens. All these things - town people didn't have that. Rationing went on for, well ... The war was from 1939 to '45 ... and our daughter was born in 1953 and I still had to get a ration-book for her. So they were still rationing in 1953. Just the same rations as we got during the war. It went on for years after the war.”

## **Scones and Bannocks**

“It was always scones and bannocks. We used to make them on the slourie - that'd be hanging down in the chimney. And put the fire on the top. And then they would put the fire on the lid ... and that was the way that the bannock was cooked. You kept the fire going slightly – not high ... in the bottom. And then that was your bannock. Your scones, your ordinary scones, you made on the girdle. And oatcakes. They were made on the girdle and then put in front of the fire, after they were cooked. There was a thing they had, made with wire and whatnot, and it sat just where the ash-pan used to come out a bit. It used to sit there, and it sort of dried them off ... and half of us would be pinching them before they came off!”

## **Meat and Soup**

“Mostly it was soups - it's very seldom we would have a pudding. It would be semolina or that kind of puddings – sago. They used to kill sheep and the meat was all put in - they were just round, things, round like jugs and salted and that was kept for the winter. According to the things today, we should be dead by now, with all the salt!” We used to have a butcher that used to come round from Dornoch, once a week, but that was it, more or less. I remember one time, it was Sacraments time, and my auntie was at home – she lived away down in Kinlochbervie. We went to church, we all went to church, and she was left making the soup. And she dropped a peat on it! Well, she got it out, and there wasn't one bit of peat on it! She never told us, mind you, till afterwards. She dropped the peat in the soup, and she took it out that quick that there wasn't one bit in it!”

## **Food and Housework**

“A bannock was something similar to a scone, but made in this pot. I think it rose higher, than a scone did. It was made in a ring, a round ring, and they would put the marks in it, you know, just for cutting it. You put the lid on the top, and the hot peat on the top. We had an oven in the side of the fireplace, but it was very, very seldom ever used. There used to be a wee square bit like that in the bottom, where they used to put the fire into it for the oven. Pancakes, oh, yes, yes, pancakes too. They made all that things and fairy cakes, as time got on. They went in the oven. That was the rare occasion the oven was on. It was good, too, when you think back on it, but I wouldn't go back to it now. And then filling your lamps, or cleaning your lamp-glasses and ... and whatnot. And you'd do that on a Saturday – they had to be all done on the Saturday night, everything. All the water had to be taken in and all the lamps filled up and ready for Sunday.”

## **Shopping**

“We used to buy butter in the shop, at times, but we used to always make our own butter and crowdie. I used to love, when they were half-way through making the butter – that creamy, buttermilk, and you put oatmeal and a wee bit of sugar in it. You’d be pinching it, and Mother used to be chasing us! Oh, it was good!”

“What sort of things were rationed? Oh, the butter, and sugar, most of the things would be rationed. And bread there was so much used to come in of bread, in the big, square boxes. Milk, everybody had their own. There was no milk coming on the buses then.

Cheese ... more or less the things that you’d be using every day were rationed. The flour and the things like that used to come in by boat to the pier and everybody was going down with their horse and cart. Somebody would be up for orders, like, before the boat came, and you used to go down to the pier and get whatever you ordered, we used to get it in the tea-boxes.

And tea, that’s another thing. Aye, tea, and sugar, I think we used to get sugar and that, in that boxes as well. That must have been after the rationing. There’d be everybody be off down there with their horse and cart to the pier, taking it down empty and coming back full. But just what they ordered, mind you.”

A lot of household goods used to come in by steamer.

## **The Victory Garden**

People were encouraged to grow their own food at home. In October 1939 the 'Dig for Victory' campaign started. This encouraged people to use every spare piece of land, including their gardens, to grow vegetables.

## **Wartime At Home**

Anderson shelters, blackout curtains, gas lights, mangles, washboards....

## **Mend and Make Do**

During the war there were shortages of clothes due to the lack of imports from abroad. The government also needed the fabric that was available for making uniforms and parachutes.

Clothes rationing was introduced in May 1941. Everyone was issued with a ration book that had 66 clothing coupons that had to last for a year. Each item of clothing was worth a certain number of coupons. People had to give the correct number of coupons when buying clothes. For example, when buying a dress, 11 coupons had to be given.

The 'Make do and Mend' campaign was introduced by the government to help people get as much use out of their existing clothes as possible. Information was made available about how to do this and how to make new clothes out of worn out old ones, instead of throwing them away.

## **Everyone Doing Their Part**

The government wanted to make sure that everyone did their part to contribute to winning the war on the Home Front. Publicity about food and clothes rationing and salvaging materials such as aluminium was produced. Sacrifices were encouraged to make sure that there would be enough to go around. Salvaging was encouraged so that all spare resources would go in to the war effort. It was not easy to keep to the rationing requirements, and there were many complaints about how difficult it was to get certain types of clothes. Substitute foods such as dried egg powder, and liquid paraffin instead of cooking oil, had to be used instead of the real thing. People hated these substitutes. Housewives were advised to tell their families what had gone into their dinner only after they had eaten it!

There was a certain element of people that did try to get round rationing, buying extra clothes and food on the 'Black Market' from people known as 'Spivs'. Forged ration coupons were also sold on the Black Market at high prices so that some people could get more than their fair share.

### **Salvage**

At the start of WW2 most of the fuel, food and raw materials used in Britain was imported via ships. This caused big problems at the start of the war. German submarines and aircraft tried to weaken Britain's defences by attacking the ships and destroying essential supplies as they were being imported from abroad. Campaigns were used to encourage people to make better use of resources at home. These campaigns were similar to the ones we have today to encourage us to be environmentally friendly by saving electricity and recycling. The government tried to make the country as self-sufficient as possible – the fewer imports required meant that there would be fewer sailors risking their lives.

'Saucepans for Spitfires' was one of the most famous campaigns. People were asked to give their aluminium pans so that they could be melted down to make parts for aircraft. In doing this people felt that they were making a valuable contribution to the war effort and this helped to keep up the nation's morale.

### **Children of WW2 – Evacuation**

When Hitler came to power in 1933 there was concern that a war might begin. The government was concerned that Britain's cities and towns would become targets for bombing raids. Secret plans were made to move children and some vulnerable adults to the countryside and smaller towns if war began. In September 1939, evacuation started a few days before Britain entered the war. Evacuation was to be voluntary, with parents deciding whether to send their children away. From the cities and big towns, schoolchildren, their teachers, mothers with children under five, pregnant women, and some disabled people were moved to small towns and villages. One and a half million children and adults were moved within 3 days, including 600,000 from London. The government was disappointed however, as it had hoped to evacuate 3 million people. More than half of all schoolchildren stayed in their homes in the cities and towns.

With no large bombing raids on Britain in the first months of the war, many children had returned home. Another large evacuation took place when heavy bombing raids started in the autumn of 1940, the Blitz. It was not originally the government's plan to evacuate children to other countries although, early in the war, some overseas countries offered to receive children from Britain.

In June 1940, when France was defeated and occupied by the Germany, the government feared a German invasion of the island. British Dominions, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa made offers to take evacuee children. The US offered to take up to 200,000 children. At first it was believed that children moved overseas would be safer and public support was high. Also it was thought that moving children would reduce the numbers to be fed in Britain, which was now an "island fortress" under siege. Overseas evacuation began. The government soon changed its view as it realised that passenger ships were needed to move troops, internees and prisoners. And warships were required to defend Britain's seas and shores against invasion. There was the risk of attack to the evacuees in transport by sea.

The number of children evacuated overseas was relatively small compared to the huge numbers evacuated to the countryside. Approximately 3,000 children were evacuated overseas during the War. 10,000 other children were sent overseas privately.

## **The Blackout**

The Blackout was introduced in September 1939. To stop lights on the ground showing enemy aircraft where to drop their bombs. To make sure that no lights could be seen from house windows, Air Raid Wardens patrolled the streets after sunset. People took a long time getting used to the Blackout. Post boxes were painted yellow, white stripes were painted on the roads and on lamp-posts. To stop light escaping from windows in ordinary houses black out curtains were put up. Even though steps were taken to make the streets safe, without proper lighting thousands of people died in accidents before the bombing even started. When men went out in the evening they were advised to leave their shirt-tails hanging out so that they could be seen by cars with dimmed headlights.

## **Air Raid and Gas Raid Precautions**

Nearly everybody in the country had been issued with a gas mask (38 million) by September 1939. Everyone was instructed to carry their gas masks at all times in case of attack. Adults masks looked like a pig-snout and the children's masks were soon given nicknames such as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck.

The government was genuinely afraid that the Germans would use gas, launched from airplanes or boats. Gas had been used on the battlefields during the First World War with terrible results but had not been used on civilian populations. In the end gas was never used against the British, so the effectiveness of the preparations was never tested.

## **Bomb Shelters**

Plans were made for the construction of large public shelters, and the erection of small units in private gardens ("Anderson" shelters) and inside houses ("Morrison" shelters). Experts said that bombing would kill hundreds of thousands of people.

People developed a false sense of security and were not keen to have shelters. Bombing of Britain did not start immediately, although the War began in September 1939. Shelters became more popular once heavy bombing began, from the summer of 1940 onwards. Railway arches and basements were also used and, in London, people slept at night in the underground stations and tunnels.

The shelters saved the lives of many people, but there were deaths when large bombs fell directly on shelters. In total German bombing had killed over 60,000 people in Britain. The experts had over-estimated the strength of the German air force, and the amount of bombs that it could drop. However, many more would have died if shelters had not been provided.

## **The Blitz**

Germany prepared to invade Britain in June 1940, after the defeat of France. German leaders felt it was essential to destroy the British air force to stop it sinking the ships that would carry German soldiers across the Channel. Bombing raids on Britain started in July. The Royal Air Force fought back hard in what was later known as the Battle of Britain.

German losses of aircraft and aircrew were very high, and the invasion of Britain was postponed. The attacks were switched to other targets, such as docks, factories, and railways to force Britain to surrender. Because bombing was not exact, and because most of these targets were in cities and towns, many bombs fell upon streets and houses, killing people. German bombing did not stop war production or force Britain to surrender, although much damage was done during the Blitz. Over 30,000 British people were killed during this period, over half in London, which was bombed almost every night.

When much of the German air force was sent east to prepare for the invasion of Russia in mid-May 1941, the Blitz came to an end. The immediate threat of a German invasion of Britain was over, although bombing was to continue at less intensive levels in 1942 and 1943.

## **WW2 Women**

As men were called-up to join the Armed Forces more and more women were needed to replace them. There was a big increase in women working in factories after war began in 1939. Although women could not do the heaviest of lifting jobs (e.g. working in the mines for example) they soon proved that they could do most jobs equally as well as their male counterparts. Women did all kinds of work. Over half the workforce in the chemical and explosive industry was made up of women; one and a half million worked in the engineering and metal industries. Women made shells and bombs, electrical cable and wire, uniforms, clothing, barrage balloons, tents, parachutes and flying suits. Many became skilled welders. Others played a crucial role in aircraft production. Altogether, about seven million women were employed in the war effort.

Working long hours and night shifts, women who had never worked outside of the home before had to make major adjustments. Some had to make long journeys to and from work. Others had to work part-time so they could look after their children. The work was often dangerous and accidents were common, especially in the explosive industry. Women also had to face was the attitude of other workers and employers. Many men did not like working with women and most women were paid less than men often only half for doing the same work.

## **Women and the WVS**

The Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) began in June 1938 to prepare women for civil defence work.

The WVS recruited women for Air Raid Precautions services (ARP). The WVS also ran field kitchens and rest centres for people made homeless by bombing; escorted children being evacuated; running clothing centres for those who had lost all their possessions; helping people salvage their personal belongings from bombed-out houses; and doing domestic work in hospitals and clinics. The WVS was also the official 'sock darter' for the Army, darning 38,000 pairs a week for British and American soldiers!

The women who joined the WVS were those who had their own domestic responsibilities, such as looking after children or relatives, and could not work in a factory. The WVS was a voluntary organisation and no one was paid wages or a salary. The women of the WVS even had to buy their own uniform, a grey-green tweed suit, red jumper and felt hat. The women carried out vital war work, helping Britain to run as normal. The work could be dangerous and some members of the WVS were killed on duty. The WVS is still in existence today and is known as the Women's Royal Voluntary Service (WRVS).

## **Codes and Ciphers**

The Enigma Machine/Bletchley Park

Bletchley Park was the top secret headquarters used for breaking German codes, providing the allies with vital information. Bletchley Park is 50 miles North-West of London, and played host to a large variety of code breakers. Among the ciphers that were broken were Enigma and Lorenz.

Amazingly, the code breakers devised methods of reading enemy codes, often within a few hours of the messages being received. Technology was invented to automate the deciphering of messages. Colossus, the world's first semi-programmable computer was invented at Bletchley Park to aid the decoding of Lorenz ciphers. Lorenz ciphers were used by the Germans

to send their most highly-classified and important communications. The German military used the Enigma cipher machine during WW2 to keep their communications secret. The machine was available commercially during the 1920s, but the military potential of the device was quickly realised and the German army, navy and air force all used a more technically enhanced model to encipher their messages believing that they would be secure.

With the help of Polish mathematicians who had managed to acquire a machine prior to the outbreak of WW2, British code breakers at Bletchley Park exploited weaknesses in the machine and cracked the Enigma code. Breaking the Enigma ciphers gave the Allies a key advantage, which, according to historians, shortened the war by two years thus saving many lives.

## **Interviews around Mackay Country**

### **Active Service**

#### **Home On Leave**

“Most of them – a lot of them were in the Navy. I always remember them coming home on leave. We’d be all down at the mail bus, meeting them. They were hardly home when they were off again.”

#### **Father’s away at the War**

“He worked on the American ducks – what they called the ducks, that amphibious things. He was a mechanic, and he did maintenance work on them. I always remember a story that sticks in my mind. He said, you can sleep quite comfortably out in the open, he used to sleep below his duck, I think it would have been probably in France – as long as you made a hole in the ground for your hip-bone to go into.”

“So many lives were sacrificed – it is important to remember”

A friend of Sandy’s, Bruce Ross of the 4th battalion of Seaforth Highlanders – was captured at St Valery in 1940. He spent 4 years as a POW. In 1945 these POWs were forced to march 1,200 miles on foot ahead of the advancing Russian troops. He recalls that they arrived at a farm one night. The German soldiers wanted to put the POWs in the byre. They forced the farmer at gunpoint to put the animals outside. There was no food for the prisoners. They scraped the wheat seeds from among the cobbles. Between them they collected enough to wash in boiling water to clean the wheat. Then they ate them to keep off the hunger pangs but some men didn’t make it.

### **Clothes**

#### **Make Do And Mend**

#### **Blankets and Knitting**

“We got our own wool from the mill in Brora. We had to send the sheep’s wool, the fleeces as they came off the sheep. They were sent to Brora to the mill, and you could get it spun into blankets, it was all mill blankets we had then, or wool, for knitting. And then the women were knitting during the war. And sending socks to the Army and the Navy and the Air Force and all that. If you hadn’t wool of your own, you could get wool, but that had to be knitted and sent away to the Army and it was khaki wool.

#### **Dances and Dresses**

“I’m sure we had the same dress for every dance, ‘cause you didn’t have two dresses. And I’ve seen us swapping dresses, wi’ somebody else. I would put on somebody else’s dress if it fitted, and they would put on mine. Just to be different.

Very seldom we had a band, because the men were all scattered. But, you know, a few years after the war, bands got together again. That's what we called 'trampies' dances' – we called them 'tramp', in wartime Dr Hunter had a dance every second Friday. We had a wee hop up there in the hall. Just to the piano; that was the only music. And they was fun, and then we would all be singing wartime songs, for the waltzes and that."

"Oh, eightsome reels and waltzes and strip-the-willows. We had a variety of dances. Very seldom, they used to have a Lancers and Quadrilles, but we were the young ones - it was the old ones that used to do that.

And, of course, they used to have quite a good band from the barracks. They used to go up and play in the nurses' home.

All the dances were very well-supervised. The Matron sitting there in her long evening dress. It was good fun. We never had evening dresses. It was just the Matron and one or two of the Sisters. She was a very stately person, and carried herself ... We were frightened to death of her."

### **Made to Last**

"The clothes you used to get then, would last, not like the sort of rubbish you get today. We used to wear that Burberry coats to school. Burberry coat, and my bag on my back and wellies on, going to school. Well, it was passed down, in our family, and then somebody else maybe had something that they grew out of and it was passed to somebody else, and that kind of thing.

It was all skirts – trousers were yet to come. When you were in the hotel it was the black-and-white ... the black dresses with the white collar, the long sleeves and then you had this white cuffs coming up on your sleeves. And they were hard! And that's what we wore. And I suppose that saved our clothes in the summertime, our own clothes."

### **Trying on Shoes**

"We used to wear tackety boots or wellie boots. It's not shoes that you see today that we wore. Sensible shoes that we wore in them days. When we were in Altnaharra, we used to send to Ross's, in Lairg, and they would send out, on the bus, whatever we asked for. Then what wasn't needed went back on the bus in the morning. They would send us a few things, you know, just to try them on, and what fitted us we paid for and the rest was sent back.

It was black shoes and laces on them. It was very seldom you got one with a strap on it, unless it was a posh thing, for if you were going dancing or something like that. You'd get a posh one then. But, more or less, it was just ordinary – you don't see them now. You don't see them now."

### **Wartime Dances & Fashions**

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## **Wartime Food**

### **Scarcity and School Dinners**

Well, as war progressed, food became scarcer, definitely. It was a job to get food on the table, really, apart from if you'd be able to kill a sheep and maybe get a bit venison from the estates, some of the estates were quite good; they would give bits of venison out at certain times of the year. But I think the estates could have given a lot more than that. In the winter-time, they only would give one hind to the school, and when you think of all the deer that's on the hill!

“Crofters were quite lucky, really, because having cows, we had butter. You only got two ounces, was it, or four ounces of butter for a week, of your ration, but we had our own butter. And then we had eggs from the hens. All these things, town people didn't have that. Rationing went on for, well ... The war was from 1939 to '45 ... and our daughter was born in 1953 and I still had to get a ration-book for her.

So they were still rationing in 1953. Just the same rations as we got during the war. It went on for years after the war.”

### **Memories from a Nurse**

Princes Margaret Rose Orthopedic Hospital, Edinburgh

Memories from a Nurse who worked there between 1940 and 1943. Minnie Jean Macleod (nee MacDonald) of Kinlochbervie was a patient for a year.

“There was not much to do during the night after we had thoroughly cleaned everything: we had our supper and tea on the ward, then settled down to mending the laundry. At midnight, the junior Pros went in twos to the plaster room where for one hour, with our bare hands, we scrubbed plaster of paris into gauze bandages for splints etc. When hunger overcame us, we would make what we called ‘chocolate blancmange’ with MOF (Midlothian Oat Flour Baby Food) and flavour it with cocoa, then leave it to cool, hidden on the veranda till the Night Sister had been round. “We had one day off a month and were paid the princely sum of £19 a year. During each three months on Night Duty, we had no nights off, but once a week we were allowed a ‘late evening’; we were wakened at 4pm and had to be on duty at 10pm. On my second night duty, my boyfriend, now my husband, was coming home on leave. I had not seen him for a year. He stood outside the Caledonian Hotel waiting for me from 5pm to 8pm ... the maid did not call me at 4pm.”

We were always hungry; food was strictly rationed and never enough to satisfy our hunger, as we worked in the open-ended wards. A weekly dinner dish was ‘Woolton Pie’ (Lord Woolton was war time Minister of Food). This delicacy was pastry made with flour and water and, underneath in water sat chunks of carrot and turnip – not even an onion. There was a war on!”

### **Nursing during the War**

Memories from a Trainee Nurse in Perth

“I had quite nice fun with some of the soldiers! Taking us to the pictures, which we couldn't afford with what we were getting twenty-seven and four pence a month. There was a barracks in Perth.

I hadn't much money, so I didn't have an awful lot. We were in uniform most of the time, and when you had your nights off, well, I never wore trousers then, it was always skirts.

Of course, patients were always giving us coupons. We were never short of coupons. Some of the old men they used to say, “Oh, I'll give you some coupons.” We used to feel so guilty, and said, “No, no, no,” but they insisted. So, we were never short of coupons. Again, you didn't

use an awful lot of clothes, except when you were off on holiday and we just wore what we had. We always had one or two skirts and a few blouses and jumpers. I used to knit, of course, then. Jumpers and cardigans.”

### **Medical Student in Glasgow**

“They were so short of men you see, all these jobs had been male jobs before the war. The whole attitude is different now; women do every sort of job now, but in these days you never saw a female conductress on a tram or bus. They were all men!

Things changed so much. None of my friends mothers’ ever worked but some of them who had younger parents – their mothers’ had to go and take a job. But they were allowed to take jobs in shops locally, doing jobs where the men had been called up. It was a complete change socially and it never went back.

The change came so quickly and suddenly but was irreversible. A lot of the men didn’t come back of course, but even then, the women had had a taste of work. The things the women were doing! They were working as engineers and all sorts of things. It slid back a wee bit but it never went back, from after the war a lot of women were employed, your mum wasn’t at home to make your dinner every day. It opened all new doors for women really. And at even University there is this change, when I went to University a very small proportion of women got places in medicine. And they increased the number during the war.”

### **The Home Guard**

#### **The Home Guard in Scourie**



IMAGE 395 HOME GUARD AT LOCH STACK IMAGES DONATED AT PHOTOVOICE EVENTS DURING BACK TO THE FUTURE PROJECT. MACKAY COUNTRY PHOTO ARCHIVE

I remember the men that were in the home guard were mainly some of them that were in the First World War; they were in the home guard, and also I remember Emslie Thomson, he wasn't called up; he was in the home guard. And there was a lot of the keepers and people who worked on Westminster estate; they were in the home guard. And they did their firearms training down on Scourie sands, there. I'll always remember that, you know, with their rifles. Maybe once a week or something, or once a fortnight, they would have a firearms training down there. And they were all in uniform, too. And Fraser, the schoolmaster, he was in it, too. But mostly all the men, really, were in the Home Guard, that weren't away at the war, you knew. The few men that weren't away at the war.

I remember two Land Girls, yes, they were sent up to work, I think, it would be through the hotel – the hotel owner, that got them up here, because he worked a lot of the vacant crofts about here at that time, too. And they used to work the land as well.

### **Achriesgill – Memories of The Home Guard**

“They used to go out, well, practising –like firing, and they used to go to the school to do some of their practising with their rifles and all the rest of it. If they weren't inside they were out. They'd be behind a hill or something, practising with their guns, but they were never used.

It was a bit funny, seeing them coming down with their khaki thingummies on them – coats, and whatnot. Well, they would have got a coat out of it! And a pair of boots. And I can still see them walking down the road. A man down the road from us used to do all the shouting.

Folk had radios - I think mostly everybody had one. Listened to the news and whatnot, and if anybody hadn't got one, they would be in the house that had one, you know, listening to it. When people used to come in to listen to it, it was mostly for the news. And it's more or less the same time as what the news is on the radios now. You know, it was one o'clock, six o'clock, kind of thing. And then there was one at midnight.”

### **The Scourie Plane crash**



IMAGE 396 HOME GUARD AT LOCH STACK IMAGES DONATED AT PHOTOVOICE EVENTS DURING BACK TO THE FUTURE PROJECT EDDRACHILLES & DURNES MACKAY COUNTRY PHOTO ARCHIVE

“It crashed on our croft, actually! In fact, I was at the pier gate with a friend of mine when we saw it circling. It went to circle round and its landing gear was down, so we took off and we ran round. And by the time we came running up at the road at the other side of the doctor’s there, it had crashed into the croft. And it had stopped in practically its own distance, and the pilot got out of it.

He wasn’t hurt. That – I think that was his second or third crash-landing. Spitfire, it was. And Colin Morrison from Badcall came down, and he ordered everybody to clear away. He was on the Coastguards, then. There was a hut up there, of course, and that was manned full-time during the war. Twenty-four hours a day. It’s razed to the ground now, but it was away up at the highest point, just out the back of Scouriemore there. It was manned twenty-four hours a day, watching out for passing ships and that. They had to report on the ships that were passing. Sarah’s father was on that, and Colin, that was another. Emslie Thomson and, I think Alex MacDonald. I think there was four or five of them and they were fully full-time employed on that. Radios, oh, aye. Be all radio, then, I think, aye. I think it would be the Coastguard – would it be Coastguard?

He was a hardy man, Colin. He had been years in the Navy in the First World War. He had been over twenty years in it, I think, anyway. He was a regular. He certainly appeared down there, ‘cause we were all boys at the time and we were running around, but he kept everybody back, you know, from the crash. And a couple of days later it was all dismantled and taken away on a wagon. The pilot was all right. Hopped out. It didn’t go on fire or anything.

But he intended, I think, making a run along, but the nose just sort of caught and it sort of went up like that and down, you know. But, apart from that, he ran out of fuel. Oh, there were a lot of devil-may-care ones during the war, you know – the pilots. Probably didn’t have to get much training. Hadn’t the time to train them. I think it was his second or third crash-landing, he was saying, aye.

A lot of the debris that was coming in on the shores was tremendous, and the oil ... you know, all the ships that were sunk and all that, the thick oil that was coming in on the stones. It was black, just round the shores, there. Terrible, aye. And there were bales of rubber coming in at the time. I always remember that. It had to go for processing, you know, it was just in the raw – bales of it.

There was mines; odd mines, coming off, too. I remember D.A. Macleod, they had to be evacuated out of their house in Tarbet one time, when the disposal crowd came up to put the mine ... They would come up and shoot – fire at the mine and explode it. There was odd mines, right enough, exploding on the shores round here.

Mind you, a lot of big ships were up in Cairn Bhain during the war. The Rodney was up there, and they had a boom defence across there, actually, as you’re going up to Kylesku by sea ... They had it right across from roughly about Duartmore to the other side. In fact, there’s some sort of debris yet, about – lying about the Calbha Islands there, ... evidence that shows that ... Oh, a lot of the big ships were up there, right enough, during the war. The Rodney was certainly up, I know.

They would go to Kylesku Hotel for, maybe, drink. They didn’t come down to Scourie at all. In fact, there were two of that mini-submarines that went to the ... Tirpitz; I think it’s from here they went, if I recall it right.”

## Watching for Ships and Planes

Scourie

“We used to go into the hut up there with the boys, and sit in there with them at times and have a blether. They’d be watching for ships. They had to report aircraft, as well that were flying over, and identify them. There were things up on the wall to identify each plane, if they could identify them, and phone in, or whatever they did. And, of course, the Air Force were here. They had what they called a beacon light, and it was situated as you’re just going out of Scourie there ... at what we call the Beacon. Well, that’s how it got the name; there was a beacon, a big motorised thing, and it gave the dash-dot-dot or whatever code it – that was flashing every night, opposite to the telephone exchange. The machine itself would have been probably situated on the road coming up from where the fish-farm garage is. And then their hut was there. Their hut was where that existing hut is. That’s where they slept, the RAF. Oh, they were here for a number of years. Some of them had been here for quite a while, but they would change, right enough, some of them would change over. It’s funny, I near forgot about that, right enough, the RAF.

And in those days, there would be the mail bus come in from Lairg ... later Alex Mackay, that was in the First World War, he was on it. He was the only man in Scourie that had served in the two world wars. When he came back from the war, he was on the mail bus for a while, and then he packed that in and he ran a little shop down there. I think in the Second World War he used to come round recruiting, and I remember him on a big van wi’ a loudspeaker on it. Trying to get them to join up. Before conscription I think. Before National Service came in. National Service came in after the war. You just got called up, you had to go, during the war. Of course, you had to go for your National Service, too. Packed away to Wick for your medical, and if you passed it, then bang! Off you went. That’s where the medicals were done for all National Service, from this the county of Sutherland. From 18 years old.”

Achriesgill – Memories of The Home Guard

“They used to go out, well, practicing –like firing, and they used to go to the school to do some of their practicing with their rifles and all the rest of it. If they weren’t inside they were out. They’d be behind a hill or something, practicing with their guns, but they were never used.

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Loch Eriboll captured German subs- one was 20 miles off Cape Wrath and the other way past Stornoway. John Macleod, Coldbackie was on a ship trying to take a shortcut home late at night and they gave quite a chase.

Johnnie was on HMS York City at Aultbea. Subs went to Londonderry after the war and were then scuttled in the Atlantic. Prisoners were removed at Kyle of Lochalsh and taken to the train south.

Swastikas were removed at the mouth of Loch Eriboll and the Union Jack was hoisted, which can be seen in photos.

## **Loch Eriboll**

‘I mind us meeting the McPhees up at Laid, on Loch Eriboll, at Eriboll Farm. It’s deep water in the loch. We went to sleep in our tents and when we woke up there were battleships there, cruisers, destroyers anchored in a great row down the loch. That was 2<sup>nd</sup>. September 1939. They’d come in to hide, waiting for the war.

The Williamsons were camped not far along. ... We were boys then and we cheered and waved our bonnets at the sailors. They must have wondered who the hell they were fighting for!’[1]

[1] Page 35 – Quoted by Timothy Neat in his book ‘The Summer Walkers’, published by Canongate, Edinburgh – 2002.

## **Memories from Skerray**

“There was a crisis warning, we had gas masks, identity cards and rations. Burrs of Tongue shop used to give my mother some treats from the traveling van: tins of plums and thin red wine biscuits. We sold our eggs to Burrs to cover the bills and we had our own crowdie, butter, milk and eggs so we weren’t so badly off. There were extra rations given at lambing time, depending on how many sheep you had and also we got extra sugar since we kept bees. I remember that we all had to stop taking sugar in our tea or get any cakes or puddings.

I remember hearing about the “Jericho” a special services train taking troops to Thurso. I was in Golspie High school at this time and coming home for holidays the train got stuck in the snow. I had to share a bed in a guest house in Thurso with a WAF and I remember being very much in awe of her. We had drills in the school time as well as being allocated gas masks.

My Dad went to Orkney to work on the aerodromes and brought home points for soap and sweets. He had been in the First World War in the navy reserves.

There were evacuees from London coming to stay but mostly it was people with relatives in the area. The evacuees were mostly older than me. The school in Skerray did have kids who were evacuees, the relatives from London and places like that usually were there with their children.

The war had an effect on our ability to get new clothes. I remember having to have a coat ‘made down’ because there wasn’t enough points to get a new one. My mother knitted jerseys for us and we had Brora tweed skirts. “Jack Brothers” came and took measurements for new clothes like lumber jackets for school.

There were posters up in the school with phrases such as “Every penny helps to make a pound”.

My older sister left school to work in the post office; it was becoming more usual for girls to leave school to work, especially as part of the war effort.

There was a local home guard and I knew all the ones here; they all used to laugh about them. “It tended to be the older men in the home guard who had been in the First World War”. But I remember the terrible threat of invasion, everyone sat round and listened to Churchill at 9.00 a.m. and 1.00 p.m.

Older teachers who were left in the schools when others went off to war. I remembers the science teachers giving them mercury balls to play with.

After school I went to the Royal Infirmary to train as a nurse and I remember getting a round of butter for 2 rations coupons, which were still around after the war for a while.

Every time somebody came home from leave there would be a “do” on in the hall. There was a few locals killed during the war.

When the war ended everyone went out, there wasn't much food but everyone was overjoyed. Everyone united when it came to the war effort and hearing about the constant danger of invasion. They heard about the camps and Jews fleeing. The paper had pictures saying "Every little helps" and "Mums the word". I recall the terrible loss of life and think that people just wouldn't fight today. There was nobody objecting and conscientious objectors was a dirty word. A lot of men were called up but most had been in training already. A lot of the local men were in the Lovat Scouts. In a picture taken back then, "five rows from here were in the scouts". Volunteers came from abroad and food parcels were sent from relatives abroad. One relative sent a wonderful cake from America.

I remember someone with local connections who had married out in India and was there with her two nieces. She had two young kids and was pregnant and her husband arranged for them to sail home. There was a hoax bomb on board the boat; they all took to the lifeboats and drowned, it is memories and stories like these which stick in the mind forever."

### **"We Are in a State of War"**

"I'm sure it was a Sunday, and one of the men from further down the place came and told my father, because there was very few people had a wireless then, or a radio, and he must have heard that war had been announced ... I always remember that, because my father was very thrown, 'cause he had come through the First ... the Great War. He had come through that and had been wounded three times. I remember us being issued with gas-masks and things when I was still in the school. Gas-masks and the blackouts on the school and that sort of thing.

And then we all had to do our bit gathering all the rubbish we could find around the place that was tin or iron or old, rusty stuff and that was all collected and taken away for the war effort. We didn't like to hear planes going over at night, you know, in the dark, because we were always thinking they were Germans."

### **A Memory from Scourie**

"A lot of people had relations who actually had gone away and were working abroad ... and they were writing back. You kept up-to-date with all worldly affairs. They could see it coming, right enough."

### **An Achlyness Memory**

"My brother and my future husband and another lot went off with the Lovat Scouts at 3 o'clock on Sunday the 3rd day of September at three o'clock. And we were all seeing them off at the crossroads at Achlyness. The tears that were shed was terrible. They were all in the Reserve and they had to go straight away.

They went to Achfary the first night and they got horses. Then they took their horses to Lairg and their horses went on the goods train and they went on the train to Beaully and from there they trained more and more and then they went ... I think it was to the Faeroes, learning their activities. And they were in Italy during the big war there. Then they went to Canada, to the Rockies.

I got the shock of my life when war was declared. I was on night duty, actually, and we were all, oh ... thinking of home."

**VE Day** 8<sup>th</sup>. May 1945

### **VE Day – Scourie**

"Oh, yes, I remember when the war finished, they had a big do in the hall down there, I wasn't at it, but aye, they had a big night. It was organised by Dr. Hunter, I think, who was here at the

time. He was one of the main organisers too, for the ex-servicemen who had all been demobbed by that time. For the ones that had gone through the war, you know?”

### **VE Day, Achriesgill**

“We had a bonfire after the war was finished and I suppose, there’d be plenty drink at it, likely. Oh, I can’t remember, but there would have been. There was food and all. Everybody made something, you know ... Oh, there would be sandwiches made. Well, in them days, there wasn’t an awful lot of sandwiches, ‘cause everybody ate scones, you see. And there would be scones, and if you were lucky, a bit of venison, you’d have that. I can remember the bonfire right enough.

We were days carting the bits and pieces that we could find for the bonfire, because we weren’t quite sure it was going to come off! Aye, a couple of days or so before it was announced that the war’s going to be finished and, of course, the kids, you see, we were all delighted and going picking up every bit of wood we would get and whatnot. The fellow across the road he used to make coffins and his shed was just on the corner, and when we went to the well for water we had to go past the shed. We used to be terrified of what, I don’t know! Just the idea, I suppose, of the coffins being in the shed. We would be chasing him to see if he had any wood.”

### **VE Day – Achlyness**

“It was VE Day, we called it. We were up on the hill above our house – ‘the hill of the net’. And everybody that was there could move – that could move – was on that hill. The whole little community. Big, big bonfire.

And I remember an old woman, she was a Miss Ross. She was the last one to climb up. It wasn’t a steep hill, but anyway, she climbed up and she had a bundle under her arms, which was more sticks for the fire. Somebody said, “Is that Hitler you have, Kirstag?” Oh, yes,” she said, “and I’ll throw him on the bloody top of the fire!”

### **VE Day – Perth**

Nursing Student, Marjory Campbell:

“Oh, yes, There was great jubilation when the war ended. There was parties. There were still quite a few soldiers left in the barracks. If I remember rightly, they had booked the dance floor in one of the hotels, and had a party, I think I was at two parties. And, of course, mind you, there was quite a lot of activity outside in the streets and that. There was a piper one time, playing, and there was kind of dancing – it was just quite frivolous and there was a few drams going, I suppose, round about Tay Street and right round.”



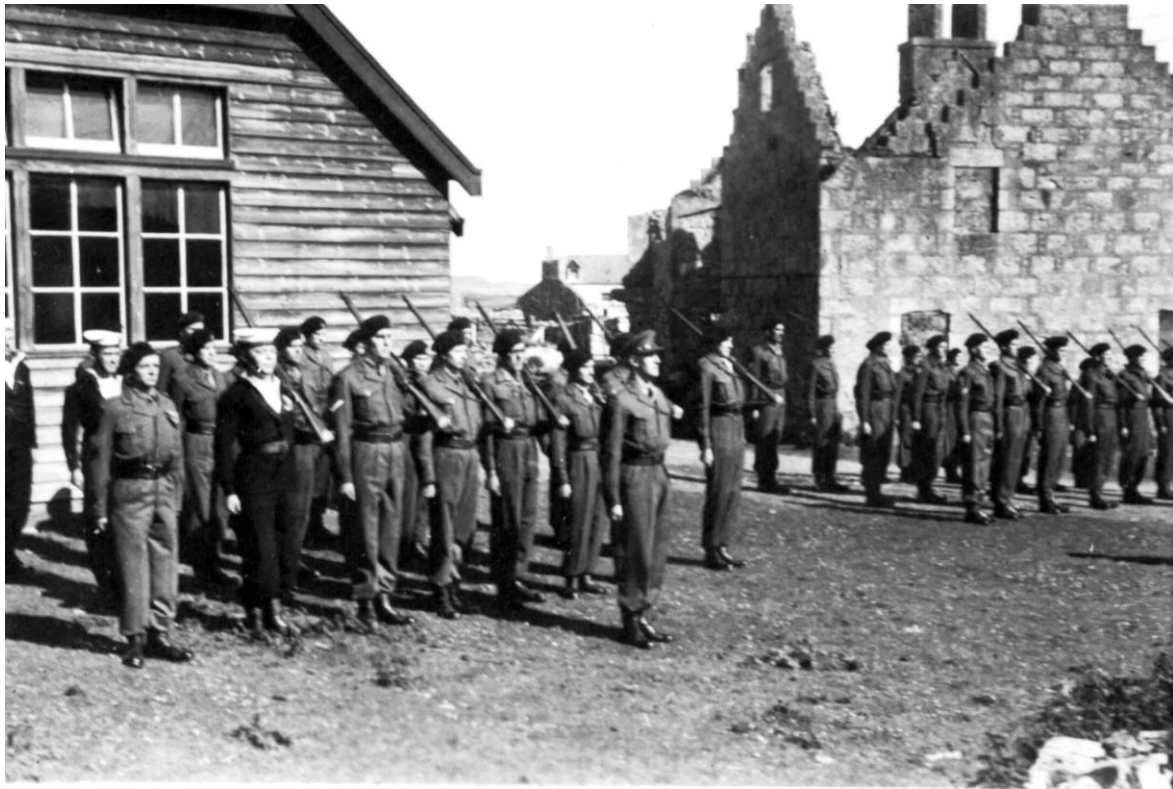


IMAGE 397 DURNESSE SOLDIERS POSSIBLE VE DAY IN VILLAGE SQUARE

## Ceardannan. The Summer Walkers

From Summer in the Straths 2007

*“The Summer Walkers” is the poetical name that the crofters of the North West Highlands give to the travelling people the tinkers, hawkers and horse-dealers who, for centuries have passed through their villages buying, selling and entertaining. These Scottish nomads are not Gypsies. They are indigenous, Gaelic-speaking Scots who, to this day, remain heirs of a vital and ancient culture of great historical and artistic importance to Scotland and the world beyond.’*

Timothy Neat



IMAGE 398 MACKAY COUNTRY SUMMER IN THE STRATHS BANNER

people. Arriving with their horses and carts, sleeping in bough tents, cooking over a campfire, singing songs and telling stories, the Summer Walkers' visits brought a different spirit and

### Summer in the Straths

In summer 2007 the north-west of Sutherland saw its past come to life through the evocative re-creation of what was once an eagerly-awaited annual fixture on the calendar for many townships and communities. As a result of collaboration between the Mackay Country Group and Comunn Eachdraidh Asainte, the Summer Walkers took to the roads, stopping at their traditional campsites, making music, telling stories and meeting friends old and new.

The steady beat of horses' hooves on a lonely road; echoes of an old Gaelic song carrying across a loch at dusk; the scent and glow of a peat-laden campfire. Sensations from another time, a time when the travelling people made their way along the single-track roads of what is known as Mackay Country and the parish of Assynt, bringing goods, services, entertainment and friendship to the local

culture into what was often a sombre and hard existence in the mountains and moorlands of this part of the Highlands.

The Summer Walkers trip began at Altnaharra on Saturday 19<sup>th</sup>. May and took in Syre, Apigill, Torrisdale, Braetongue, Melness, Hope, Foulín, Ceannabeinne, Keoldale, Kinlochbervie and Achfary, before pitching up at Stoer on Friday 15<sup>th</sup>. June. On the way, the travellers together with guest musicians and other artists hosted ceilidhs, open house evenings, schools fèisean and other activities with a focus on life and work on the road.

At the reins of the horse-drawn cart, Mackay Country was delighted to have Essie Stewart, a member of one of the last of the Sutherland travelling families. A consummate storyteller herself, many of Essie's tales were passed down to her by her grandfather, Ailidh Dall (Blind Sandy), a master raconteur whose spellbinding tales by the smoky light of a campfire at dusk were recorded by renowned folklorist and collector Hamish Henderson for Edinburgh University's School of Scottish Studies. This time round, the music, stories and poems, together with the matchless scenery of the route and all the emotional highs and lows of the journey were the subject of filming by BBC Scotland, whose cameras accompanied the travellers.

### **Travelling Families in Mackay Country**

Within living memory men, women, children – grandparents, mothers, fathers, teenagers, toddlers, babies – travelled across the north of Scotland making a living by pearl fishing, tin-smithing, horse dealing, buying, selling and bartering. Many people in Mackay Country can remember these visits when as children they all played together while the adults got together to do business, drink tea, talk, make music and barter food for goods and labour. One of the best known and best loved of these families in the far north was that of Essie Stewart and her grandfather Ailidh Dall (Alexander Stewart, Lairg) – tinsmith, piper, soldier, singer, storyteller – a man remembered with love and respect.

### **On the Road**

The aim was to follow part of the old route used by the Stewarts. The traveling was in horse and cart, using the traditional campsites. At each key site the bough tents were put up and there was feis and ceilidhs. Musicians, an artist, an oral historian and a film maker travelled in the group. Other visiting artists and musicians were invited to the local feis and ceilidhs along the way. Essie Stewart led the way. Events, recording, filming and art work was in Gaelic and English. The core stories were the ancient Gaelic tales told by Ailidh Dall; new stories emerged from the trip, the events, and art work,

### **What's In a Name?**

In Gaelic the Travelers were known as the 'Ceardannan', the Black Tinkers, and recognised as a tribe, separate to the settled population. In ancient times there was 'a caste of itinerant metal-workers whose status in tribal society was probably high. One of the trades associated with them from early times was that of tin smith, and it is clear that to primitive man the ability to use metals seemed very close to magic; consequently both 'black' and 'white' smiths for long enjoyed immense prestige, not only as craftsmen but also as wielders of secret powers'. [1]

## Travelling People

The word 'Tinker' has sadly come to be a term of abuse or insult and is no longer used by the Travellers. It's' use today constitutes 'fighting talk'. Its' use in the past referred to an important part of the Travellers' work – metal working and tin-smithing. Today these important tradition bearers prefer to use the term 'Travelling People'.



IMAGE 399 HORSE AND CART USED FOR SUMMER IN THE STRATHS AT BELLADRUM FESTIVAL

## Pearl Fishing<sup>131</sup>

The Braham Seer is credited with having prophesied that there is a peril in the Laxford River valuable enough to buy the Sutherland Estate. Every summer for a number of years a family of peril fishers pitched their tents at Laxford and fished the river for oysters. When they got perils they tried to see that sell them to the guests at the hotel or the nearby lodges period to see the oysters they used a glass bottomed books and they had a long pool with a V shaped wage cut from the end to pick up the oysters.

## Tinker's Green<sup>132</sup>

Groups of gypsies used to camp regularly on a flat piece of ground opposite Handa Terrace. The group was made-up of as many as three families. Sometimes they stayed only one night but on some occasions they might stay as long as a fortnight. When they did stay the woman went from door to door selling from their basket while the men remained in the tents making basins peels and jugs from sheets of tin. The place where they camped is still called the tinkers green. The gypsies or tinker's travelled from place to place by horse and cart.

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<sup>131</sup> This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

<sup>132</sup>This is information submitted by a government sponsored project. 1973 -1987

## **Beurla Reagaird or The Cant**

The Travelling People in the Highlands and Islands are native Gaelic speakers – though as in many communities, use of Gaelic has fallen away in recent decades. Traditionally the travellers also have a language of their own, sometimes called a ‘cover-tongue’ or cant. In Gaelic it is ‘Beurla Reagaird’ – the lingo of the cairds.

## **Working and Travelling Lives**

Until the last decades of the twentieth century the Ceardannan in Mackay Country still made a living buying and selling horses, working tin or ‘white metal’, hawking and working as seasonal labourers. Individuals from well-known travelling families like the Stewarts also served in the army, made music and told stories.

Essie Stewart says “the Stewarts kept to a traditional route each year ‘From Altnaharra we travelled north, in convoy, to Brae Tongue, down to Coldbackie sands, on through Naver Bridge, Armadale, Bettyhill, Strathy, Melvich, to Caithness. We hawked, traded, tinsmithed and ceilidhed our way through Sutherland to Janetstown – where we turned back. The Stewarts never went further east than attendance at the horse fair there in Janetstown.’[2]

[1] From ‘A Companion to Scottish Culture’, edited by David Daiches, Edward Arnold 1981. Quoted on Page 229 in Alec Finlay (editor) 2004 *Alias MacAlias: Writings on Songs, Folk and Literature* – Hamish Henderson. Polygon, Edinburgh.

[2] Page 74, Quoted by Timothy Neat in ‘The Summer Walkers’, published by Canongate, Edinburgh – 2002.

## **Pearl Fishing in Mackay Country**

Eddie Davies and family lived by the ancient trade of pearl fishing in rivers like The Naver and The Laxford. Eddie Davies recalls fishing Mackay Country Rivers.

### **The Rivers**

‘The Tay gives you the big white pearls, but they don’t have the lustre we have on the rivers up here in Sutherland. The Oykel is a beautiful river, it’s there you get the coloured pearls – salmon pink, rose-pink, beautiful, beautiful pearls in the Oykel – but they tend to be small.’

‘The Laxford was always a great river for me like. There’s less colour in the Laxford, beautiful white pearls, satin-white, sliver-grey, moon pearls I used to call them.’

‘The Naver is a great river for pearls, the river ‘of the great cleared Strath’. The colours you get are white, the satin grey and sometimes a soft pink/grey. And the Mallard, Borgie, Inverkirkaig, they all have their different sheens

### **The Fishing**

‘A pearl-fisherman needs a “rod” and a “glass” and that’s it. We always made our rods of hazel wood. One wood we never used was rowan, a rowan tree must be left to stand in the ground where it grew. The travellers would never cut a rowan bough for a bow-tent; hazel or ash, yes, but not for us the rowan tree. It’s a superstition, goes way back. It’s a beautiful tree.

My rod would be hazel, maybe four, maybe six, maybe nine feet tall – an inch and a half to two inches thick. I like to have a slight bend two thirds along the shaft, a kink – for luck and for balance – for the pleasure of the hand. You slit the thick end with a knife, as though you are making a clothes peg. Then you bind the upper end of the cleft with binder-twine or string, to hold a spring in the ‘claw’ and stop any splitting of the shaft. Firm, with just a hint of give, the claw should be. I pared my claws to a beak shape, to grasp the mussel. They stand up, feeding in the sunlight, among stones in the bed of the river, and they come away easy enough. There’s a knack to it.

My “glass” is just a wooden box, with a glass bottom; it cuts out the side-light and allows you to see deep in the water. ... Some people use a big jug with a glass-bottom, like a foghorn; but I’ve always used a box. I make them myself; just three in all my days I’ve had, I’m very superstitious.

Waders, or bare legs, is what we’d wear. Good waders can be very expensive! Bare legs it was when we were young – and the stones could be very hard on the toes. It’s shallow water we mostly fish but sometimes in a river with deep pools we use a boat.

Pearl-fishing, of course, is prohibited today, illegal by Act of Parliament. The river-mussel is a protected species. You see, we pearl fishers had to open up the shells, and so the fish were killed. Now when the number of pearl fishers was small, that was OK, but when they came up here like an army – that was it! We would know which shells to open but they would open every shell – wee shells, smooth shells – and that was that! They wiped the rivers clean. Something had to be done. Now you have to have an official permit. I have a permit. And you have to use a special tool, which opens the shell without killing the fish. If there’s a pearl you have to run the flesh out, but otherwise every shell must be kept alive and thrown back into the water. The law’s right enough, difficult to enforce like, but right by me. Because what the cowboys did was kill the goose that laid the golden eggs! As a trade for local men, pearl-fishing up here is dead – but maybe in ten or twenty years the pearls will come again.”[1]

Eddie Davies

[1] Quoted by Timothy Neat in his important book ‘The Summer Walkers’, published by Canongate, Edinburgh – 2002.

### **Tinsmithing**

“Six years I was tinsmith on the road. It was my uncles, Brian Stewart and Peter Stewart who learned me the craft. But mainly it’s a thing you learn by doing, and most of all you learn by your mistakes. The first things that I made were the cups the crofters would leave behind at the well. And I used to make mugs for the children; from Tate and Lyle syrup tins, green and gold, with the lion and bees all round. I’d just turn the lip and fit a handle on. Going to a party, the children would take their own mugs, and syrup tins were just the thing. The mothers used to keep them for us, for when we came round, and old corned beef tins: we’d burn them to get the solder out.

By the age of twelve, I was near enough as good as Brian and Peter, and the womenfolk started selling everything I made. One day the orders would come in, the next day the women would take the orders back. We made three different kinds of milking pails, we made big pails for water, small pails, skimmers, milk-basins, creaming bowls, steamers for cloutie dumplings, sieves, basins, baths for babies and for washing clothes. Those were the big things. Then we made jugs, cups, ladles, spatulas for the frying pans. I’ve known us at it from half-past seven in the morning till late into the evening, when a rush was on. Work like that was hard on the eyes.”[1]

[1] Page 95, Quoted by Timothy Neat in his book ‘The Summer Walkers’, published by Canongate, Edinburgh – 2002.

### **Essie Stewart A Traveller’s Childhood**

‘Every summer we would set out for five or six months on the road with the horses, dogs, one to three carts, our big bow-tent, and two or three bantams for eggs.

By that time Ailidh Dall could no longer make tin, so everything depended on my mother selling round the doors. She took whatever was wanted and needed bringing in – overalls, trousers, shirts, socks, underwear, needles, pins, brushes, combs, frock-coats for women. All the Highland women wore them – with the flower patterns on. She would take orders, or know from years of selling what particular crofters, shepherds, keepers would be wanting. Most of the women were so pleased to see her. They would meet perhaps two or three times a year and many of them would see few other folk. There was real isolation in the Highlands then. We were friends and very welcome – we were travelling shops ahead of time! There were still very few cars in the forties.



IMAGE 400 DAVID SHAW AT BELIDRUM DEMONSTRATING TINSMITHING

On the road I normally had to stay behind at the camp to look after my grandfather, do the washing, tend the horses, prepare the food.’ [1]

Essie Stewart

[1] Pages 6 and 7 Timothy Neat in his book ‘The Summer Walkers’, published by Canongate, Edinburgh – 2002.

### **Travelling Families in Mackay Country**

Within living memory men, women, children – grandparents, mothers, fathers, teenagers, toddlers, babies travelled across the north of Scotland making a living by pearl fishing, tin-smithing, horse dealing, buying, selling and bartering. Many people in Mackay Country can remember these visits when as children they all played together while the adults got together to do business, drink tea, talk, make music and barter food for goods and labour. One of the best known and best loved of these families in the far north was that of Essie Stewart and her grandfather Ailidh Dall (Alexander Stewart, Lairg) – tinsmith, piper, soldier, singer, storyteller – a man remembered with love and respect.

The Stewarts kept to a traditional route each year.

From Altnaharra we travelled north in convey to Brea Tongue down to Coldbackie sands on through Naver bridge Armadale, Bettyhill Strathy, Melvich to Caithness. We hawked traded, tinsmithed and Ceilidhed our way through Sutherland to Janetstown where we turned back. The Stewarts never went further east than attendance at the horse fair in Janetstown.

### **Tradition Bearers**

Like the people of our Mackay Country communities, Ailidh Dall and Essie Stewart were brought up in the oral tradition. Over the years history has tended to be written by powerful, literate classes. The stories and experiences of people brought up in an oral tradition were written out of these kind of histories. Over the years a few people with great foresight have challenged this through recording and publishing stories and experiences from all sorts of people who are important tradition bearers in Scotland. In Sutherland and in Scotland, the Stewarts are important tradition bearers. Hamish Henderson was a very important advocate for this ‘carrying stream’. Recordings of the Stewart family, particularly Ailidh Dall, were made throughout Mackay Country in the summer months during the 1950s. These recordings were made in Tongue, Skerry, Borgie, Naver Bridge, Bettyhill, Kirtomy, Armadale, Strathy and Altnaharra.

### **Ailidh Dall – My Granfather**

Essie recalls her grandfather for Timothy Neat:

‘Alexander Stewart, Ailidh Dall, that means Blind Sandy, was born in 1882. He was my grandfather but he was more like a father to me. He came from a family of seven. He had no schooling. As a young man he was a tinsmith, and a much respected horseman, he did four years in the artillery, he was a very good piper and a singer. He couldn’t read or write. He, and the Williamsons of Ardgay, were the last of the real old style Travellers in the north west and they were very well though of.’[1]

[1] Page 6 – Quoted by Timothy Neat in his book ‘The Summer Walkers’, published by Canongate, Edinburgh – 2002.

### **Ailidh Dall, Storyteller**

Hamish Henderson described his first encounter with Ailidh Dall in Timothy Neat’s book:

‘The first song I recorded from Ailidh Dall “The Sweet Sorrow”, Am Bron Binn, is one of the oldest songs in Europe. It tells of Arthur, “King of Britain” and makes a unique and direct link between the worlds of P Celtic and Q Celtic, the two great branches of Celtic language and history. To start at the beginning is always good but to get started in 500 AD was the stuff of dreams! Needing mains electricity, I set up my first “studio” in Tongue Hotel.’

Calum MacLean, who was responsible for work in the Gaidhealtachd when the School of Scottish Studies was created in 1951, called Ailidh Dall ‘the best Gaelic storyteller ever recorded on the mainland of Scotland’.

Hamish Henderson said of recording him:

‘Ailidh Dall was a piper too of course, and a singer. But it was his stories, told with Homeric gravitas, that take the biscuit. I have never heard the haunting, slow, deliberate rendition of Ailidh Dall equalled for archaic authenticity. I held a bucket there, as it were, beneath the sky, a rusty can – to crystal water cascading down the cataract of day!’

### **Overscaig in a Blizzard**

‘It’s wild mountain country to the west of Loch Shin and we went out into the wind. At Fiag Bridge it started to snow. It was so cold no-one could sit for a rest in the cart, we had to keep



moving – the old man was getting on and I was just seven or eight. Michie was leading the horse, Granda holding on to the back of the cart and me walking behind him, holding his coat. I remember our fronts plastered thick with snow. We got to Overscaig – that’s about eight miles. We uncoupled the horse and brought it round by the cart with its back to the wind and mother scraped the snow as fast as she could, so we could heave up a lean-to against the back end of the cart

### **Arriving at Achfary**

Two days we were stuck at Overscaig, then we went on to Achfary – we knew we’d get help there. We were in quite a bad way – so when I saw the flag flying up over the castle, I shouted to Grandad, “The flag is up!” and he said “It’ll be alright now”. The flag meant the Westminster’s were in residence. And before the tent was up Hughie Morrison, the chauffeur, came down to the camp in a Rolls-Royce with a box full of dry clothes and food! And we asked how he knew what was needed and he said that the Duchess had seen us come into the campsite and asked who we were. “I told her”, he said “It must be Mary Stewart and Blind Ailidh Dall, and she said ‘I’ll make up a box – and you take it down when you’re passing.’” “And in ten minutes the box was there by the front door and Hughie brought it down straight away. There were even chocolates in it. That was the kind of people they were. The Achfary kitchen was ordered never to refuse food to the Travelling People. There was a French chef who would heap up our baskets full with delicacies. Coming back in the autumn I’ve seen our carts leave Achfary with the venison tied on with ropes. So much.’[1]

Essie Stewart

[1] Page 12 – Quoted by Timothy Neat in his book ‘The Summer Walkers’, published by Canongate, Edinburgh – 2002.

### **The Achfary Horses**

‘We got a lot of horses from the Duchess of Westminster at Achfary. They had horses up on the hill just running wild. She’d Alec Ross out to bring the horses down to a big fank where we’d take our luck with four or five – some young mares, but mostly stallions, young colts, because up on the hill, at eighteen months or two years, they’d be mounting the mares and serving them and the Duchess wanted rid of them – she didn’t want inbreeding in her stock. She was a good woman to us like.

The Traveller men would go down to the fank and look them over. We’d lean over the wall and watch them round: then we’d lay nooses down, and whip them tight like a lasso – capture each horse by a front leg. Then we’d take them by the nose and put a bag over their heads; after that we’d get a halter and a rope on. “A devil rope”, we used to call it, one man on either side. It would soon slip tight down round the nose, to close the nostrils. The horse would kick and rear but soon get winded. As it got weaker, we’d slacken the rope. That was it! After a few days they’d be calm enough to be tethered behind the cart and on we’d go.’[1]

Gordon Stewart

[1] Page 95 Quoted by Timothy Neat in his important book ‘The Summer Walkers’, published by Canongate, Edinburgh – 2002.

### **Memories from Kirtomy**

“Oh, yes, the Ceardannan coming. Oh, I loved it when they used to come! There were the Stewarts and the Williamsons and they were quite admired. The Williamsons used to come for the pearl fishing, the freshwater pearl fishing. Very good-looking people, they were, and so were the Stewarts, and very clean. The Stewarts would have beautifully-painted carts and everything.

And then on the other side from Caithness we had the MacPhees. They didn't speak Gaelic but they had a cant. It wasn't the same as the cant that the Stewarts had, they had different one. They were very humorous, they had a lot of humour in them.

We got quite friendly with some of the Stewarts and would play with the kids. There was a lot of them very musical too, and we used to go along to listen to the accordions and that. You knew when they would come, and then one morning you came past and they were gone, and everything was gone with them as if they'd never been there.

And the Stewarts and the Williamsons, they settled, kind of, and you don't see them now, you know ... there's a sadness about that people going.”[1]

### **Memories from Strathy**

“That's where they put their stance, just right beside the river, and they had the camp there. You'd hear them playing the pipes and the accordion and dogs barking and bairns yelping, you know! It would be the Stewarts from Lairg. There'd be maybe two carts, and horses and they'd spend some time there, a week maybe, before they'd go off to the next place. It was great. A lot of music. Pipes and accordions, and they had great ceilidhs down there. We were just that bit in awe, you know. I suppose my mother would be afraid, there was a lot of us, young girls. She wouldn't want us at the river anyway, for a start. You were told not to go near the river. I'm not sure when they would have stopped coming, but I remember them in my primary school days.”[1]

[1] Mackay Country Oral History Recording 2004 – Janette Mackay, Strathy West.

### **Melness and Kinlochbervie**

‘Out on the road, ceilidhs would break out every time several families met up at a big campsite. The local people would come and join in, especially up at Melness, and at Kinlochbervie we had huge ceilidhs. Ailidh Dall would play the pipes, there would be signing, melodeons, tin-whistle sometimes, dancing, stories.’ [1]

Essie Stewart

[1] Page 13 – Quoted by Timothy Neat in his book ‘The Summer Walkers’, published by Canongate, Edinburgh – 2002.

### **Summer Walkers in Durness**

The summer in the Straths walkers arrived in Durness last Thursday. On a glorious sunny afternoon the pony and trap made its way rough the village being greeted by residents at their doorsteps with memories of the travelling families and their experiences. It was apparent that the summer walkers as they were affectionately known had played a significant role in the lives of the community in years past. With camp set up at Keoldale overlooking the Kyle of Durness visitors started to arrive. The school children were introduced to the horse and heard stories from Essie Stewart before being given a demonstration of the craft that the travelling families were renowned for tin smithing. There was a tour of the camp and explanations of how the travellers lived on the road and made their temporary but sturdy accommodation. In the evening a line-up of musician's, story tellers and singers entertained a local crowd introduced by MC Graham Bruce. Carol Ann Mackay and Shona Munro, two very talented pipers, opened the show followed by Donnie and Katy on the accordions. Angus Nicol gave a poetry reading and some thoughts on the summer walkers, Donnie was joined by Marty and John for a few tunes, and Alek John Williamson translated an old Gaelic story to the appreciative audience. Shona Munro and Carol Anne gave separate performances and Andrew Mackenzie sang a selection of songs delighting his core of followers. Andrew has taken time of work to travel with the group and has been giving performances at all the evening events. His rendition of local songs,

some of his own composition, has always been greeted with full praise. After a projection of the ongoing video, being compiled by Gavin Lockhart, Blue Ridge took to the stage and gave a selection of their popular tunes into the night. The evening was quite ethereal, a beautiful evening on the Kyle with music floating around while people gathered and talked bringing back emotional memories and making new ones.

### **Summer Walkers in Achfary**

Opening the final stages of the yearlong Mackay Country *Back to the Future* program Essie Stewart gave a talk to nearly fifty people at Achfary last Thursday night. A “Summer Walker”, the poetical name given to the travelling people of North West Sutherland. In Gaelic the Travellers were known as the ‘*Ceardannan*’, the Black Tinkers, and recognised as a tribe, separate to the settled population. Until the last decades of the twentieth century the Ceardannan in Mackay Country still made a living buying and selling horses, working tin – or ‘white metal’, hawking and working as seasonal labourers. Individuals from well-known travelling families like the Stewarts also served in the army, made music and told stories. Within living memory men, women, children – grandparents, mothers, fathers, teenagers, toddlers, babies, travelled across the north of Scotland making a living by pearl fishing, tin-smithing, horse dealing, buying, selling and bartering.

Many people in Mackay Country can remember these visits when as children they all played together while the adults got together to do business, drink tea, talk, make music and barter food for goods and labour.

One of the best known and best loved of these families in the far north was that of Essie Stewart and her grandfather Ailidh Dall (Alexander Stewart, Lairg) – tinsmith, piper, soldier, singer, storyteller – a man remembered with love and respect.

Essie was the granddaughter of Alexander Stewart, blind “Ailidh Dall” a well-known story teller, a Homeric Ossianic figure much loved in Sutherland. He was the first storyteller recorded to be included in the School of Scottish Studies archive and was renowned for his ability. Calum MacLean, who was responsible for work in the Gaidhealtachd when the School of Scottish Studies was created in 1951, called Ailidh Dall ‘*the best Gaelic storyteller ever recorded on the mainland of Scotland*’.

Essie did not recognize herself to be in that category but for two hours she maintained an audience hanging on her every word. The old story telling atmospheres of round the camp on a dark starry night or sheltering from the elements in blizzard conditions were far removed from the village hall but she encapsulated the ethos of the moments as she related personal accounts of her memories on the road and retold, in English, the stories her grandfather related in Gaelic.

## Stories in the Straths

In January 2008 we held the *Stories from the Straths* events in Strathy, Achfary and Lochinver. In each place we had an exhibition for a week showcasing the results of the work of the Artists in Residence who made The Summer in the Straths journey with us in May and June 2007. We had ceilidhs and storytelling and film nights. The schools from all around Tongue, Farr and Assynt visited.

The following elements were delivered in Durness and Belladrum in a series of activities over a total of 5 days: Digital exhibition inside the bough tent, Gaelic and English storytelling by travellers Essie Stewart (Belladrum) and Alec John Williamson (Durness)

‘The Original Recycling’ – tinsmithing demonstrations using old ‘bean tins’ showing that recycling was fundamental to traditional travelling tinsmiths and local households. Old tins are turned into tin mugs.



IMAGE 401 DIGITAL EXHIBITION DURING STORIES IN THE STRATHS

Artists, writers, musicians were asked to focus on the theme of Movement and Identity in their work. The history of the Gaidhealtachd is a history of movement. In the earliest times people settled on these shores. Wave after wave brought a range of settlers and cultures over the centuries. Until recently the sea was the main transport route and the settlements on the northern and western edges of the mainland bordered that trunk route, linking Scandinavia and the Baltic with the Mediterranean and Africa. During the 18th and 19th centuries out-migration became the dominant theme as individuals and sometimes whole communities left for southern industrial cities or for what they called the ‘New World’. In the late 20th century in-migration once again became significant. At the same time awareness of the global aspects of Gaidhealtachd culture have been strengthened through Modern communications. The Gaidhealtachd diaspora has resulted in communities in Canada, USA, Australia and New Zealand which share language, music and oral history. Over time these cultural groups have diverged and yet they continue to share common themes and a sense of connectedness.

## **Moving Times & Telling Tales**

During 2012 Strathnaver Museum and Mackay Country Community Trust ran projects that were separate but intertwined funded by Heritage Lottery and Highland LEADER. They examined areas of specific interest and commissioned artists to interpret and research Mackay Country and artefacts. The administration, organisation and execution of the projects along with venues and themes within the overall scheme were shared.

A small bi-lingual team conducted audio and video interviews with people who stayed in the hostel or lodgings for schooling and with people who have moved into the area or whose folks did so in the past. The history of the side schools was explored via site visits, local memories and archive work on school board minutes and school log books. Fieldwork interviewing across the north was carried out by:

- Isobel MacPhail, Assynt; as lead consultant on the project Issie produced much of the findings in her written accounts and reports. There can be no doubt that this section is largely due to her effort.
- Catriona Macleod, Strathnaver.
- Alda (Alasdair) Macleod, Strathnaver.
- Shona Munro, Bettyhill.
- Rosemary Mackintosh, Skerray.
- Sarah Beveridge, Melness.
- Iain Copeland, Skye.

During this project Mackay Country explored the history of hostel schooling, side schools and the positive contributions made by in-migration in this area. The research work ran from April 2012 for a year.

Mackay Country Moving Times work was augmented by five artists in residence, Iain Copeland, George Gunn, Fiona J. Mackenzie, Patricia Niemann and Lotte Glob.

### **Iain Copeland**

Iain is a prolific artist and producer in Scottish music. He has appeared on over 30 albums of Scottish based music and has been responsible for producing over 12 albums of nationally recognized musicians, these include Peatbog Faeries, Session A9, Blair Douglas, Andy Thorburn and many others. Iain also runs a recording studio and has been responsible for the recording of some twenty CDs in the Highland area. These have included many community based projects both within the Gaelic, and English mediums. His principal current musical endeavors are his own band Sketch and as drummer with Babelfish.

“This was the first artist residency that I have ever been awarded. My experience can only be described as a revelation. Being able to concentrate on my own creative thinking and being allowed the artistic freedom to explore avenues of thought without the constraints of having to be constantly aware of earning money has actually allowed me to grow considerably as both a writer and a producer. I think the Mackay Country Board are to be congratulated for having the foresight and wherewithal to award a residency to an artist such as myself, an artist whose work is the creation of music as a facilitator and ‘producer’. This is an often used but little understood word in the music business. Suffice to say that it has allowed me to explore this side of my talents to an even greater extent than even the commercial work that I am known for.



IMAGE 402 IAIN COPELAND

As part of my residency for Mackay Country I undertook to research the area and its' musical heritage. I took part in and oversaw an audio recording project in two schools in the area, Kinlochbervie High School and Farr High School. As a professional producer in many different musical forms I hosted an electronic music production workshop in Skerray on the north coast. I recorded fellow artist George Gunn for inclusion in the CD that I am producing. I also recorded local storyteller Essie Stewart and spent a day with her travelling around the area discussing and recording anecdotes about her experiences as a traveller. I interviewed various people and gathered anecdotal evidence relating to the main thrust of the project: attitudes and perceptions of the experience of hostelling. Throughout the residency I provided technical support and advice to the oral history and research team. I have written many new pieces of music inspired by the area and the project.

Some of the new work that has emerged from my residency is a video collaboration with George Gunn on his poem 'A Walk In Strathnaver'. George originally asked for a backing track for an appearance at 'Nue! Reekie!' in Edinburgh. It became obvious that audio was not going to be enough and in keeping with the creative juices that were flowing I set about gathering video of Mackay Country for projection during the performance of the poem. It was received to tumultuous applause at the event. 'Nue! Reekie!' is a very prestigious monthly arts event which delivers an arts programme in Central Scotland and enjoys the involvement of the big names in Scottish cultural production and creation. Co-ordinator Kevin Williamson states 'With Neu! Reekie! myself and co-curator Michael Pederson try to showcase some of the finest



IMAGE 403 GEORGE GUNN AND IAIN COPELAND

and most cutting edge Scottish culture, although not limited to Scotland, as we fuse poetry, theatre, animation & film, with live music. This is in fact only one ‘new work’ that has emerged from the residency, inspired by my research and the interviews I conducted with Mackay Country inhabitants. I have considerably more material than I would need for the production of one CD and suspect that this material and the inspiration for it will continue to appear in many of my future works.”

### **George Gunn**

During the autumn and winter of 2012 and 2013 I spent many days travelling all across north west Sutherland meeting people, discussing their experiences and listening to their stories. These voices and lives mingled in my mind with the landscape I moved through. They became the ground-fuel which both grew and drove the sequence of poems which emerged as a result. There may not be many but I could not have written them they would not have been written at all if it was not for the residency and the opportunity it afforded to be in Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh.

Somehow, if you write about Sutherland, whether you have cultural connections with the place as I have or not, whether you are native born or not, if you are a writer and the place is your subject then you have a duty to put the people’s voices back into that landscape. Your work has to bear witness to the people’s historical experience, be it of the late 18th, 19th or 20th century – and for all of us who read the work, we are alive now, in the early 21st century. The Angel of History as painted by Paul Klee and described by Walter Benjamin, moves constantly, with her wings outstretched, backwards through time into the future. At her feet is piled all the chaos and catastrophe of human endeavor. A poet moves alongside the Angel of History but must occasionally escape the chaotic pile and stride out in front of her to view the approaching host of time.

With the building of Farr and Kinlochbervie High Schools in the 1980’s and 1990’s the need for hosteling was reduced. Some provision was still supplied at Golspie but that was for students on Technical College courses. So the memory of the “inward migration” is fading, although it is still vivid in many people, yet the social structure, both educational and economic, of Sutherland is ever-developing, constantly changing. In working with the musician Iain

Copeland, recording poems and writing poems for him to put music and film to, I attempted to chart, albeit impressionistically, the “now” of Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh in as much as it is not a theme park, a “wilderness” or a museum, but a beautiful and ancient place filled with people living useful and fulfilled lives –or at least attempting to, which is normal. To live in Sutherland is to be blessed. On the other hand to live and work in Sutherland is to constantly meet and overcome challenges, some of which are topographical, environmental and others which are social, economic and political. This is what contributes to cultural activity. It is what defines the arts which signify that culture. It is what gives the people their character.



IMAGE 404 GEORGE GUNN

Working with pupils in schools is where you see The Angel of History close up with her doppelganger, The Angel of the Future, which only they can paint and describe. My passion is always to get the children to look at the “now” of their lives and their place and to describe it in order to give it both reverence and respect; and meaning and beauty if they transcribe those observations into a poem. All art is a process of transference, so what a child sees at a specific time on a certain day in a particular place is the record of that moment and the resultant poem or whatever it is, is the captured artistic spark of that observation rendered into words and transformed into art. That they look out over the Highland fjord of Kinlochbervie or the Atlantic croft parks of Bettyhill adds lived luster to

the work. To engage with their place is to extract meaning and value from their experience. Whatever the result the practice is the reward. Children soon move on to other things which is their necessary genius. A residency such as this can only activate certain ways of doing a creative writing workshop with a class of energetic pupils. It would take years of attention to bring things to fruition through various methods and exercises. Some kind of continuity in this regard with both Kinlochbervie and Farr High Schools would be something a writer-in-residence, for example, could develop.

One other development which is a direct result of the residency is my on-going work with Iain Copeland and his band Sketch. I have assembled a collection of poems – many written during my residency period – entitled “A Northerly Land” which will accompany a CD of music of the same name which Iain is producing and a tour for the autumn of 2013 is proposed. The book of poems will be launched at the Ullapool Book Festival and the CD at the Edinburgh Festival in 2013. This, from my point of view, is a very unexpected and exciting extension of the work I have undertaken during the residency but one that is logical. It proves that by bringing artists together to co-operate you can never quite predict the results.

One of the other reasons I wanted to undertake the residency was Rob Donn Mackay. To be among his mountains and his sheilings is always a pleasure: it is as if I am inside his poems. This is important for me as a poet. My grandmother’s people came from Durness and as much as they share Balnakeil church-yard with the bard of Strathnaver I can share his world as I see it now. I am always conscious that Scottish poets are products of history, ancestry and cultural



tradition as well as accident and design so to be close to Rob Donn Mackay is to be close to the source of my art.

One of the principal pieces of work I managed was to work with Iain Copeland on a film and soundtrack for my poem “A Walk In Strathnaver” the result being a ten minute multi-media performance piece which was premiered to a great reception at Nue! Reekie in Edinburgh on Saint Andrew’s Night in 2012 and is now a living advert for Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh and the Mackay Country Community Trust.

### **STRATHY**

Venus huge & the lemon slice Moon  
shine over Strathy  
& low in the star slung sky  
a silver trail across the sea  
leads to Orkney then  
I heard your gypsy laughter  
saw your flashing eye  
how it sought out the sea-road  
back to your domain  
so I hold you close beside me  
until some time after  
the Moon has gone  
& the lemon slides from the salt rim  
of the world into the September sea

### **WELLINGTON**

It is as if they wear red coats  
the regiments of lodge-pole pines  
which guard the banks of the River Borgie  
because they are casualties now  
twisted & broken in the rough artillery  
of commercial forestry  
as if Wellington has used them  
to cover a hasty retreat  
during the close run thing of Waterloo  
I see as I walk battlefield smoke  
beneath the castle of Bheinn Loaghall  
I hear the screams of dying soldiers  
& witness the commoditized blood  
of timber & men soak into the peat

### **BURNED**

The last day of November  
breaks yellow over Kildonan  
the river is pale silver  
like the colour of moonlight  
everything is frosted snap-white  
the hills wear dream-bonnets of mist  
an occasional yellow light  
like a fallen star  
burns out of the mirk

the petrified birch trees  
fold out the flame-paper of their bark  
everything is a still as the Moon  
once the people burned with life here  
& were burned out of it by power

### **FACE**

Time creeps across the floor  
& climbs onto my face  
“Why be alone” she says  
softy beneath the slow air  
I first heard in Balnakeil  
the year everyone danced on the beach  
& then lay down to listen to the tide  
wash in & out between the centuries  
& I feel the lost years of the tide-lines  
draw up the map of who I am  
on the new residue of sand  
on the old shelf of rock  
in the music ageless on the tongue  
in the sound of the voice & the breath over the reeds

### **Fiona J Mackenzie**

MOD Gold Medallist and songwriter, Fiona J Mackenzie, is popular both for her performing and teaching of all styles of Gaelic Song, in the Highlands and overseas and she constantly strives to reach out and touch new audiences with her own classic style of both traditional and contemporary material. A winner of the prestigious International Burns Song Competition, which encourages new song writing in Scotland, she is a member of the new band to emerge from this initiative, The Kilmarnock Edition and has been developing her song writing extensively over the last two years. She has 3 CDs on the Greentrax label: Duan Nollaig, the only Gaelic Christmas double CD; A Good Suit of Clothes, released to celebrate 2009 Year of Homecoming in Scotland and most recently ‘Archipelago’, Songs of the Scottish Islands in Scots and Gaelic. She is currently the Gaelic Associate Artist for the National Theatre of Scotland.

I decided to entitle my residency “Dachaigh” or Gaelic for “Home”. “Home” in the wider sense. Keeping the school hostel system of past days in mind, the project examined, through new Gaelic song, what “home” means to different people. Drawing inspiration from people’s experiences, I decided to compose a ‘Song Cycle’, creating new words on an older subject, but on something which is as relevant today as it was in the last century. Song is a universal means of communication and conveys a multitude of emotions in its notes and inflections.

In order to draw inspiration from the landscape in particular, I spent time in Dùthaich MhicAoidh, watching, listening, imagining, thinking, writing – and singing. Workshops with primary school pupils produced some wonderful images on the theme of “Home” and what the children believed it to mean to them. Images of rainbows, open fires, cats, dogs and trees emerged suffused with a rosy glow, and glitter... Songs were sung of the land which is home to them; songs were sung of the things around them that make up their home. Pictures were taken of their home, their school, their land, their sea, the trees, all to make a home... even an opportunity, and space, to create a piece of Gaelic new song work which in turn made me think

of my own perceptions of what Home means. In a time when Community is fluid and Family is fickle, it is good to focus on what has been, what is and what may be.



IMAGE 405 FIONA J MACKENZIE

A workshop of waulking songs and puirt a beul also drew some lovely community feeling a real home feeling, with all sections of the Sutherland community participating, from babes in arms to grannies and grandpas. Even those with no Gaelic can feel part of something which comes from home. All of these activities inspired a 4 song “Song Cycle”, in simple form, covering a lifetime, from babe in arms to the reminiscences of someone thinking of home.

Crònán an Eilthreach (Lullaby of the Exile) is perhaps as simple as mother singing to her baby, on the dawning of a new age or life, or perhaps a lament from an Exile from Home.

Litreachan (Letters) was Inspired by a chat with a veteran of the school hostel system who told me of the pain and delight of seeing – or not seeing, letters from home, on the board at school.

Na Maraichean Sior-Mhaireannach (The Eternal Mariners) is inspired by an afternoon on the beach at Stoer, watching all the different types of boats and sea faring vessels. Where was their home? Where was their master’s home?

Dhachaigh (Home). Remember the days gone past, remember where your home was and take it with you in your heart.

### **Patricia Niemann**

#### Portraits in Place

My career started – and does continue to this day – as a trade goldsmith. I was trained and certified in Germany. After a time as journeyman and workshop manager for a German

goldsmith I studied Gemstone and Jewellery Design and went on exchange to Edinburgh College of Art (ECA). A ‘second subject’ policy existed there at the time. I landed in the Glass Department, and proved hard to get rid of: Very quickly, I had become addicted to ‘Hot Glass’, especially glass blowing. Whereas a jeweller’s mind tends to be fixed on the miniature world of minute perfectionism and ‘micro-sculpture’ (while sitting at a work bench), glassblowing is totally physical. Good glassblowing is akin to dancing with hot molten material, fluid movements, lots of heat, a sense of danger and very considered interaction with a furnace, space and people.



IMAGE 406 PATRICIA NIEMANN

I finished my studies in Germany, embarked on a Master’s degree in Glass at ECA and have been a glass addict since. Glass also has been the main reason for me to move to Caithness about 10 years ago. Since 2003 I live and work in Lybster and Latheron, working as a self-employed goldsmith in a studio and showroom open to the public, which is shared with the potter Jenny Mackenzie Ross of North Shore Pottery and as a sometime studio glass teacher and ‘tourist guide’ for North Lands Creative Glass.

I am passionate about body adornment or in other words different forms of wearable sculpture. My work is all about the human body, human expression and fears. My increasing interest in anthropology, anatomy and

funerary archaeology is a driving force, along with the constant inspiration of Caithness and the whole Far North, that tough, wild, dramatic and fascinating location I work from, complete with the deteriorating and forming effects of its harsh weather.

#### Patricia’s Residency

Drawing always underlies my work and is hugely important to me. Drawing is necessary for the quick recording of sudden ideas, for explaining things, for design and to show customers what their new piece of jewellery will look like. The drawing of the human form is excellent practice and exercises eye, mind and hand constantly. I have been doing life drawing regularly since 1992.

For this Mackay Country residency my focus was portrait drawing. This autumn has been busy and immersive! Alongside my normal work as goldsmith and maker, I have been travelling through and learning about North Sutherland during this residency. During this unique experience I was mainly drawing individuals young and old at interviews, Photoclub events, a whist drive, a lunch club and at High School workshops with poet George Gunn and musician

Iain Copeland. The drawing from life is one of my most important disciplines. Normally I do not get to do enough of it, because it is not really a commercial activity. I am interested in anthropology, the human condition, the study of the human body and the uniqueness of people and characters. Every person is different, in their own way special and fascinating to me.

I have learned here about the local demography and the social interaction between people. How surprising that in spite of vast distances and remoteness people in Mackay Country all seem to



IMAGE 407 PATRICIA NIEMANN

know each other or of each other. Learning about the history of local hostel culture and the effect it had on the people has been changing my understanding of the region. I live in Caithness, but if ever I thought it was remote, after this experience it feels rather ‘urban’ in comparison. The population density is higher in Caithness – and with it the feeling of ‘anonymity’ as well. Sutherland let me experience a so far unrivalled social collaborative and supportive spirit.

Mackay Country has helped me to understand issues within remote communities’ better, also region-dependent issues in culture, changes in tourism, coastal erosion, resources, and resulting problems and also the importance and mission of the John Muir Trust. Indeed, Mackay Country’s stunning landscape and many new discoveries like its Modern and ancient history, archaeology, geology – and lichens, has been a revelation to me. Yet – it is not an unconnected island in the world, but loved by everyone who has ever visited. It is a unique and amazing place, rich in natural beauty, heritage, history and human friendliness and it needs to be advertised and supported in a sustainable way in the future. I enjoy giving regular illustrated talks (as I did during my last stay at Borgie), sometimes also on international level. I will try and advertise the area and Mackay Country as much as I can in the future and that will include my talks.

So, apart from lots of new knowledge and new drawing work, I have also taken away a new enthusiasm. The concentration on ‘characters’ and also the ‘elderly’ – drawing and talking to them, has had an effect on my work – it is something I would like to concentrate more on in the future. Also, especially during my latest week-long residency stay at Borgie Cabin, I had more time to explore the landscape and especially focused on detail like patterns in the sand, tree-growth and local species of lichen and their almost otherworldly beauty. Lichens are

hugely important for biodiversity and only grow where the air is clean and human environmental interference is limited. They grow in the Far North in manifold abundance. I have already started a body of lichen-inspired jewellery work in precious metals and this will be an ongoing project.

## **Lotte Glob**

### Ceramic Histories

Lotte is a renowned artist in her field working in ceramics for over 50 years. Her work is displayed in museums in Denmark, Scotland, and in the Victoria and Albert museum in London. A documentary has been done on her life and work. Her art is expressed in sculptures, ceramic books, large dishes, bowls, tiles, wall panels and fountains. She has produced photo journals of her travels and art installations.



IMAGE 408 SCHOOL WORKSHOP AT LOTTE GLOB'S

For this project the children from four local primary schools in Mackay Country, Durness, Tongue, Bettyhill and Melvich, with teachers and helpers were invited to visit the workshop and create a tile depicting a vision from Highland history. The teachers discussed the project with the children and visited Strathnaver Museum to gain inspiration. The finished tiles will form a permanent display at The Museum with each school receiving a poster picture of the children's work. The children were also given a lump of clay to fashion a sculpture of their imagination.

# MELWICH

I enjoyed making my  
tile. Tia Mackay P4

I enjoyed today very much  
Heather Grant P6

It was very fun making  
the tiles Mollie O'Brien P6

I had great fun making the  
tiles. thank you Alex Mackay p6  
I liked the models  
Craig

I enjoyed Making the tiles  
fallon p4

I loved the sculptures  
Fi'lay # p5

IMAGE 409 THANK YOU NOTE FROM MELVITH SCHOOL

## **School Hostel System**

The idea of the ‘Hostel’ project came about – an oral history about the experiences of Hostel schooling, conceived by two of the last generation to receive their secondary education in this way. The Hostel system was a form of state boarding school used as a way of providing secondary education for pupils from the remoter parts of Sutherland once the school leaving age rose to 15 years old. At this point, a significant number of teenagers were entitled to secondary education at The County Council’s expense.

The Hostel system ceased to be used in Sutherland in the late 1990s but is still an essential part of schooling for children in certain parts of The Westerns Isles, The Inner Hebrides and remoter parts of the mainland in those catchment areas. Calum and David are in their mid-thirties and have seen at first hand the different kinds of educational experience encountered across the area. They very particularly felt that this was a great topic because it united all the age groups in exploring their own story about access to education – and because, already, they can see that those in school today have little inkling of how very different the possibilities were in their mothers’ and their grannies’ day.

### **The Hostels: Happy or Hellish? Part 1**

In 1959 The Sutherland County Council Education Committee initiated a new approach to Junior Secondary education in North West Sutherland by opening hostels in Dornoch, east Sutherland. Their aim was to enable pupils to attend one of two secondary schools in Dornoch or Golspie. This was a system of state run boarding schools in effect. Pupils from most of the County lived too far away to travel. They boarded during term time and got home in the school holidays. All of the public schools in the five parishes in question at this point were changed into primary schools. Until that point at least one school in each parish was designated to have a ‘secondary’ department. Pupils from the ‘side schools’ in that district came to that school if they sought to sit the exam for the Leaving Certificate or aimed to take ‘higher’ classes with a view to advancing into a university education. Before the Hostel system was created some children were sent into lodgings in east Sutherland in order to attend secondary school if their parents were able to arrange that.

Work over the previous year has explored the hostel based school system from 1950s until the 1990s through archive research and oral history interviewing. In the 1990s local secondary schools were created and equipped in west coast locations and the Hostel based system was discontinued. This represented a huge change in the way of life for villages and townships which had seen all the children leave at 12 years old for generation after generation. Most of those children never returned to live at home.

Many people found the hostel system to be a damaging experience. To this day there are those who will not travel back to Dornoch or Golspie on account of that. Some parents chose to move away or never return in order to avoid sending their children away to hostel. As each pupil got older they tended to find their way more easily. The first two years at Hostel were particularly tough. For others, particularly those from very isolated locations, being with other people of the same age, being able to play football, loiter in Boots The Chemist hankering after eyeliner, or simply making friends for life, ended up being a really positive experience. The Hostellers look out for each other to the end of their days. The improved access to out of school activities was greatly appreciated. In some cases, where household means were meagre and the family large, some interviewees said that Hostel gave them decent meals and the chance to grow up to have choices. No matter what their experience – hellish or happy – the Hostellers felt that once they left school they were better equipped than others of their age to manage money, share living space and live anywhere in pursuit of work, apprenticeships or further study.



## **Hostel Memories 1940s**

Before The Hostels – The Lodgings

Melness memories Nellie and Nana remember.

“We were twelve. It’s 72 years ago that we left, 72 years ago this summer, we were sitting, full of excitement, preparing to go away to school, and the first school we went to was Lairg – aye, Lairg High School. We stayed with Willie MacDonald in Gruidl’s. You see, there was no hostels and we went into this lovely family ... they were so good to us. And then in Golspie there were boarding-houses which were more formal. There weren’t many pupils went to Lairg School, so they just welcomed us in. The daughter was four years older than us, and we were going into first year, she looked after us. I remember how she had a timetable written out for us before we went into the school and, of course, we’d never seen a timetable before that! And we weren’t hungry at all – it was wartime, but still, we weren’t hungry, and we were warm, and Willie was always teasing us and having fun with us; he was very jolly.

Well, Lairg was very different in those days because all the mail buses came in from Durness, the North, Lochinver, Scourie, Tongue, and full of passengers. And the Sutherland Transport garage was alive then; apprentices there, and everything was just – Lairg was very busy. And there was soldiers in Lairg, stationed in Lairg, and airmen in Crask ...

Lairg School must have been fairly Modern besides other schools at that time; it had a big gymnasium, but we weren’t allowed to use that because the soldiers were in the gymnasium. And the school, Lairg School, was primary and secondary all in one building, and the primary classes down to the right, and the centre of the secondary had only three main teachers: the headmaster, Mr Henderson, who taught Latin; the science teacher ... That Dr Mackay started me off on my French, and I’ve loved it ever since. And Mr. Henderson, who was so strict, if you didn’t have 100% in your exams, you weren’t on. So, both those teachers, although Lairg was just a little, small school, they were the two that started me off on my career in teaching. I never even thought about it until I had to come and see you, but that was how I started with my French and Latin and went to study at university.

And what about the disaster when we used to get home just at Christmas, Easter and summer – there was no cars to take us, no buses or anything. One Easter, we were all excited ... Our first Easter, we were all excited about the holidays. We looked out the window one morning, and the snow was level with the dykes. Every day, soon as we wakened up, we were out, looking out the window, and it was still there ... and in those days, they only cleared the main roads, for the buses and but the side roads, like ours to Gruid’s weren’t cleared. Because the men were just doing it with shovels, there was no snow ploughs in those days. The roads were impassable. And we never got home at all, never got home at all. Just in summertime. The snow came the very day we were to drive home, and the day before the snow came we were telling Jimmy Henderson ... we’ll be with you tomorrow. It wasn’t snowing. Next day, right up the dykes, it was ... and we were heartbroken. I was terrible homesick. It’s an illness, homesickness, if you don’t know about it. We didn’t have half-term holidays like they have now, so when we went away in September we didn’t get back until Christmas, and the school holidays were longer, the summertime. So, we would go back – we’d take off back to school about the 1st of September, and you didn’t get back home until the just before Christmas – about the 22nd. So that was a long time.”

### **The Early Hostellers**

1959 – A wee lassie leaves Skerray Primary School to go to Dornoch Academy...

“Let me just think, I was born in 1948 so I was eleven so let’s do our sums – ’59 say, I was looking to go to secondary school. I suppose because I suppose when you are in a small school and in the top of the class with only two of you, you would feel that confidence and feel capable and then to suddenly go from that....I don’t suppose I ever really considered my own intelligence, if you like. But when I found myself in that situation when I went to Dornoch, I know I felt a complete failure. It’s possible that if the children in the class with me had been different – I think there possibly was a pattern. I would say that the majority of them were all from in and around the school area itself, Dornoch, Bonar Bridge. I don’t actually remember any of them being from – the term they liked to use for us in those days ‘backcoasters’! I don’t remember anybody from the west coast or up round here.

It was a shock to the system. But the hostel, once you got used to it, was fine because there were so many of us. And not everybody could accept being there and there were girls who must have been heart-broken with home sickness. But myself, I made friends very quickly and I had very good friends and because we shared accommodation there would be a minimum of four to a bedroom, for example. So you had pals and we had laughs and everything but initially going into that and finding your way around and learning the rules, what you could and couldn’t do – and there was a lot of what you couldn’t do! It was hard, there’s no question.”

### **Hostel Days, 1950s**

Scourie no more...

“Well, when I started school in ... I don’t know when – early ’50s? – There was – you could still leave at fifteen and do all that time in Scourie. If you wanted to progress beyond that, you had to go to the east coast. The Education Committee hired a bus. And it took you away in the summer, back at Christmas, and then back after Christmas, and then Easter, and then home for the summer. I can’t remember the October break at all. I think it might only have been a few days. You weren’t allowed to ... staying in a hostel, some people could get home if they could get transport, and some in their wisdom decided that this was upsetting the people that couldn’t get home. So nobody got home. Apart ... twice a term, you were allowed to go home. You were a prisoner there.

I didn’t particularly like it, partly through being at school and partly if anything went wrong, you know, like windows being broken or something – ‘Oh, it’s the hostel boys.’ So you got blamed for everything that... it was more talk, you know, than anything else, you know. ‘Och, it’ll be a hostel boy.’ I always got the feeling that they didn’t really want us there, but they needed us to keep the school going ...”

### **Hostel Memories 1950s**

Hostel Days: Heaven or Hell? Written by Mary Wood

I was allocated a place in Ross House Hostel in Dornoch in 1951 at the age of 11 after passing the infamous 11+ exam, a necessary requisite to hostel admission. As my older sister was already a hosteller the transition to hostel life was comparatively easy for me but many girls were, understandably, initially homesick.

We caught the mail bus from Tongue to Lairg, another bus to the station where we boarded a train for the Mound. There we dismounted and joined a very old train which belched out black smoke and travelled at snail’s pace to Dornoch. This train was affectionately, if derogatorily, known as The Coffee Pot. You could have walked faster than the train travelled but with a whole term’s wardrobe in your suitcase walking was not an option! We had to carry our luggage from the train station to the hostel, a considerable distance.

There we were met by the matron, a Miss Alexander, known to us all as Lexie. Lexie ran a very tight ship and was very strict, though always fair. Responsible, as she was, for 29 girls, mostly teenagers she probably couldn't afford to grant us much leeway. She was generally respected by her charges. Rules were laid out and had to be adhered to. First thing every morning beds, in shared dorms, had to be made, hospital style. Every Saturday morning beds had to be stripped, mattresses turned and beds made again with clean sheets. (Apple-pie beds were an occasional hazard if your bed was left unattended for any length of time on a Birthday or other special occasion.) We were only supposed to wash our hair once a fortnight and matron occasionally insisted on combing it for us with a fine toothcomb in case of nits.

Each girl was put in a group for dishwashing on a rota basis. Each spell on duty lasted a week and was obviously very unpopular. Washing up had to be done in strict order, first glasses, then cutlery followed by small plates and finally larger items. Water had to be changed between each course. I was unfortunate to be on house duty when hostel numbers increased to 42. My group had to wash up after 42 breakfasts then rush to the Academy, a long way off, in time to start the school day. Fortunately this duty was soon found to be untenable and domestic staff took over in the mornings. A town girl was employed to do general domestic work and she was popular because she was always willing to shop for us. Davy Duff was gardener.

Each weekday evening we were obliged to sit in collective silence through an hour of preparation for next day's lessons, homework as we would now say but then just called "Prep". I remember dutifully learning lists of short dates to pass the time which always seemed interminable. Dirty clothes were sent home once a fortnight and returned parcels were eagerly awaited as they contained our pocket money and usually an edible treat. Food was good but growing girls would have liked more generous portions. My outstanding memory is of roll-mop herring on toast for Sunday tea, not much use to a hungry child who hated fish but it had to be eaten — or subtly extracted from the dining room!

Hostel pupils were obliged to go to Church on Sunday. For some reason, now forgotten, my older sister opted to go to the Free Church and other family members were obliged to follow suit. I would much have preferred to go to the Cathedral as Free Church services were long and boring, though very erudite, relieved only by the surreptitious passing of pan drops supplied every week by Murdo, County Roads Foreman and the only Dornoch resident I got to know in my 6 years there. We also were sent to Free Church Bible class, taken, latterly, by J K Bell who went on to become a popular warden at Earls Cross Hostel.

Hostel girls had to be within the grounds by 5pm in the winter and 7pm in the Summer. There was no organised entertainment to counteract such restrictions though a small, bumpy tennis court was available for the sportier. Occasionally Lexie took small groups to her room to listen to classical music. To this day Schubert's 'The Trout' rings in my ears!

Romantic liaisons were forbidden and usually consisted of a surreptitious stroll on the Links or beach on a Sunday when you had to be careful not to be seen and reported. The annual school party at Christmas, with an 11pm curfew, was the highlight of the romantic year but I still picture a very large group of girls huddled in the shadows at the hostel gate waiting for the last girl to arrive at 1 minute to 11!

Ross House backed on to the grounds of the Dornoch Hotel which held an annual Ball. Envious faces were pressed to hostel windows after lights went out at 10pm to try to catch a glimpse of the women's exotic ball gowns and, no doubt, to "spy" on the occasional courting couple!

Dornoch must have benefited financially from the presence of 2 hostels but no attempt was made to integrate hostellers into the town. No doubt restrictive hostel rules didn't help. Nor did the school – which pitched Hostels against The Rest of the School at its annual Sports Day.

How divisive is that! We were given free transport home for the three main school holidays but parents had to organise and finance a bus for the October break. Permission to go home at any time outwith official holidays had to be applied for in writing.

Hostel life, Heaven or Hell? The simple answer is “Neither”, though shades of both must have intermingled from time to time. Parents were separated from children and vice versa but at the time, a child had to leave home to receive an academic education which was only available on the East coast and a secure, sociable hostel must have been preferable to unsupervised, individual lodgings. Hostels were of their time, part of a genuine attempt to make education more easily available, at least to the academic child. Possibly they were educationally elitist but that was the norm in the 50s. I am the last of 10 children and each of the 3 youngest members of my family earned a place at university and went on to become professionals. I don't believe that we were any brighter than our older siblings, we simply were lucky enough to be part of a more enlightened educational system and hostel pupils.

Nowadays with wider and ever more enlightened choices hostels have become redundant, rightly so but that does not diminish the important part they played in the lives of pupils and parents in the North and West of Sutherland.

### **Hostel Memories 1960s**

Ross House Hostel 1962 – 1967... more hellish than happy...

Although a tenuous camaraderie developed because we were ‘all in the same boat’, it did not compensate for the deep-rooted homesickness which was felt by many. Being thrust into hostel life at 11 years of age after growing up in a stable, loving home was a shock to the system on many levels. The pain of homesickness was physical and emotional. Wanting to sob my heart out, and yet knowing that I would be ridiculed if I did, hurt. Listening to others crying also hurt, because I felt as they did, and never knew when my dam might burst.

People were not in the business of talking about feelings or having empathy in those days – it was sink or swim. When my parents had dropped me off on my first day, I turned round for a last wave and caught sight of my mother crying. This was something I had never seen before and it troubled me. I was aware that if I had told her how unhappy I really was, that it would be distressing for her, and so I learned to pretend that hostel life was bearable.

The matron, seemed to us to be a cold, unfeeling person. It seemed at times that she derived pleasure from humiliating us. She seemed to enjoy having the power to allow or refuse us permission to get home for a weekend (a maximum of twice a term). Our parents had to write a letter to get permission from her and the school rector. I remember my parents being in Dornoch unexpectedly on business and asking if I could get home for the weekend. As there has been no request in writing, permission was refused. The assistant matrons, Mrs Grant (Granny Grant) and Barrie Mackee showed more compassion and were friendlier.

I spent 5 years in the hostel from 1962 to 1967, and was very glad to see the back of it. By the time we got to 5th year, we had earned some respect, and had also learned how to play the system to a certain extent. We would sometimes be invited to the Matron's sitting room to put rollers in her hair. We were also sometimes invited to the sitting room of a cook, Mrs Ross, who was great fun and treated us more like adults. We also had our own study for doing our homework as there was so much to do. Up to 4th year we had 2 hours of homework each week night in silence - ‘prep’. We did get a lot of homework but also learned how to lip read, and of course how to pass notes without being caught. It was hard to evade Matron's eye. There were horrible cloths on the tables and we expressed our artistic talents on them! We liked when Granny Grant was on duty as she loved Gaelic songs and would sometimes ask us to sing for the last half hour of ‘prep’.

If we were very good, we would get to see Top of the Pops and Thank Your Lucky Stars (Janice Nicholls ‘Oi’ll give it foive’). This was the debut of The Beatles and The Rolling Stones etc. and fans screaming manically. Of course we copied them and would start screaming when they came on to the television. This did not go down well with the matron, and the television would be switched off. Sometimes this would be accompanied by the favourite punishment – lines. I must have written ‘Improper behaviour necessitates appropriate chastisement’ tens of thousands of times. My major misdemeanour was giggling. I also remember getting lines for taking a short-cut up the ‘private stairs’ which were for the sole use of staff.

Matron’s sitting room was on the first floor beside the stairs and the phone where we received phone calls from home was at the bottom of the stairs – and we were well aware that conversations were listened to. Before ‘prep’ we had to gather for ‘Prayers’. There would be a Bible reading, a hymn or psalm sung and a prayer. I seem to think this was led by senior pupils.

Another favourite punishment from the head girl or prefects was writing out Chapters 10 and 11 of Genesis. (The ‘begats’). As if we didn’t have enough of Church! In our early years we were made to attend Sunday school and then the main service every Sunday, and the evening service once a month. It was the same routine as we got older, with Bible class instead of Sunday school. The girls sat in the back rows of one side of the church, and the boys sat opposite. Needless to say, our attention was not always focussed on the minister, Rev Fulton. It seemed a cold dreary place although I did like the distraction of looking at the stain glass windows. The content of the services went completely over my head. We would sometimes put nail varnish on our nails on a Saturday night, and then pick it off in church to pass the time. I also remember at one stage keeping a diary, and would take that to church and surreptitiously fill it in. By the time we got to 5th year, we had developed a rota for people who wanted to ‘skip’ church or Bible study. It took careful planning and depended on whether a member of staff came to church with us or not. When we ‘skipped’ church we were normally to be found in the café, which had a juke box and the possibility of ‘talent’. We could also buy cigarettes there, even singly if we didn’t have much money.

If the intention was to make good Christians of us, they did not succeed in my case. It all served to put me off church for many years. By 4th and 5th year I began to object to the fact that we were forced to go to church, especially when I was not forced to do so at home. This usually resulted in more lines for being argumentative.

Hostel life during the week was pretty regimental with set times for getting up, meals, duties, school, prep and going to bed. The weekend could be very boring, although we could get out more in good weather. Occasionally we would play in hockey matches, which I did not enjoy. On Saturday mornings we had to take turns of preparing the vegetables. There was not a lot to do in Dornoch, apart from going to the café, so we tended to wander round the town. We did find that there was quite a lot of hostility from Dornoch people towards the hostellers. We were negatively referred to as ‘the back coasters’ as if we were some kind of lesser mortals to them. Some of the teachers were also very unpleasant and seemed to take great pleasure in disparaging us. Some seemed sadistic in their use of the belt and I remember being terrified in some of the classes in the early years.

We did not have much money. We were given pocket money from home – I think it was 5 shillings a week. Of course, we were expected to put something in the church collection plate every visit. We also had to pay postage to send our washing home to be laundered. I remember the excitement of getting the return parcel with the clean clothes as there was always some ‘tuck’ in it too. The hostel food was generally good and we did not go hungry. I was particularly fond of a pineapple dessert which was cooked pineapple in sauce with meringue. We looked forward to the delicious ‘Goodies’ (Cakes and biscuits).

I had several incarcerations in the ‘Sick Bay’ which were unpleasant. On one occasion, I was very scared as the doctor and Matron were discussing the fact that I was ‘delirious’, and weren’t sure what to do. I didn’t know what delirious meant and thought I was going to die. It was a great relief to get better and my first task when I got out was to find a dictionary. Apart from the misery of being ill, there was the strict isolation rule. A day felt like an eternity, especially when no-one would explain what the problem was, or how long we might be kept in there. It was an almost claustrophobic feeling. I remember being sorry for someone who was in the Sick Bay and a friend and I devised a pulley system of dropping sweets down to the window from the window above. We were also able to exchange notes. When we had bad coughs and the doctor was summoned, he thought he was very funny by telling us ‘It’s not the cough that carries you off, it’s the coffin they carry you off in’. We were not amused.

We were allowed one bath per week, although this was increased to 2 as we got older. After the hair washing, we had to queue up to have our hair bone-combed over a bath. That was not a pleasant experience but I do not recall anyone ever having head lice. The toilets and bathrooms had the most horrible smell – a combination of Jeyes Fluid, thin slippery toilet paper and the obnoxious smell of the incinerators.

Someone came round each night to make sure we were in bed and to put the lights out. We usually waited up as long as possible and would jump in to bed at the last possible moment. Sometimes we would have problems getting in to bed as there would be an ‘Apple Pie Bed’ awaiting. More giggling, more lines.

We thought it was safe to smoke out of the windows, especially at the furthest away point from Matron. Another girl and I were caught in the act one day – we were on the top floor as far away as possible from the kitchen and she said she smelled it from there. She was raging and said she was going to tell our parents unless we promised never to do it again. My fellow smoker was in floods of tears and promised she would never smoke again. I knew I would smoke again and would not make the promise. My parents were duly informed and hers were not. Interestingly, my parents did not let me know about this for some time and were not unduly upset. I was 16 by this time and they were both light smokers.

In 1st year, the older girls were still wearing flared skirts with stiff petticoats. The starch to make the petticoats stiff was expensive, so they used a solution of sugar and water. Smuggling sugar out of the dining room was difficult but we seemed to manage it. As the years went by, the mini-skirts appeared on the fashion scene which created a lot of conflict with authority, both in hostel and in school. All sorts of make-up had to be experimented with and hair styles changed. As today, the girls with straight hair wanted wavy hair and the girls with curly hair wanted straight hair. My earliest memory is of using ‘wavers’, metal clamps which gave a wavy effect, and were torture to sleep in. Then came sponge rollers, followed by prickly ones. Back-combing and sticky hair sprays were all tolerated in the name of fashion. We thought we were very grown up when we got our first ‘slip-on’ shoes and progressed from socks to nylons. For a time there was a fashion for white knee-length socks, as worn by the ‘MOD s’. We were supposed to be a MOD or a Rocker, like Cliff or Elvis, the Beatles or the Stones etc. It was a revelation when tights appeared on the scene as nylons and miniskirts just did not work. Getting, and learning to walk in, our first stilettos was a sign that we were really ‘with it’. It was not good to be a ‘Square’. Many a time we set off to go out all dolled up and would fail to meet the approval of Foxy. We would have to go back in and change and pass inspection if we wanted to out again.

By 5th year we had transistor radios, our ‘trannies’, and would listen to Radio Luxemburg and the pirate stations like Radio Caroline. They were not very loud but we still seemed to get into

trouble for listening to them. Reception was not very good, but we discovered that putting them close to the hot pipes improved the volume.

The music, fashion and ethos of the early 1960's was an exciting time to be young. The criticism and disapproval of those who thought they had power over us, just added to the zeitgeist. It helped to forge bonds among the hostel children and that took a bit of the sting out of the feeling of being torn from our parents. However, I cannot condone what was a very bad system, especially for the younger children. I am glad that the parents of the north, including my mother, campaigned and finally got a school in Kinlochbervie so that the youngsters of today do not have to endure what we had to – a system definitely more hellish than happy.

### **Hostel Memories 1970s**

We used to get home every weekend. In the summertime, the bus would pick us up at 6 o' clock at night on Sunday, and then, obviously, on a Friday, I don't know, at about 4 o' clock in the afternoon when we'd finished school. The wintertime bus would pick us up at one o' clock in the afternoon, just for the bad weather ...

In Earl's Cross, there was only the light in the centre of the room. In Mackay House, you actually had the light with the wee pull-switch above your beds. So, it was the usual. The light would go out and then you'd wait for five or ten minutes and then start speaking, a light would go on and you'd hear the warden and everyone would switch their lights off. I remember one time, or more than one time, when we were in Mackay House, the warden used to come in. She'd put the main light on and then she'd go right to all our beds and she'd feel the bulb ...to find out who'd had the light switched on, like. And then, obviously, the next morning you'd be called into the Headmaster's office in school, and just ... she didn't belt you, she just passed it on.

The Headmaster said, well, you did something wrong, blah, blah, blah, you get the belt. And, in fact, it ended up – the room I was in there – the four of us that were in that room, we had the light-bulbs taken out. Whether they were trying to save energy, I don't know, but .... There was another thing, too. We were in Room 1, which was on the first floor in Mackay House, but we figured out that the dining-hall was just in front of it. And it wasn't that far out – you could actually go out that window and climb onto the flat roof of the dining-hall. And then go down the down-pipe and you're outside. And I can't remember why were out one night, but we actually got – this was after the hostel was locked, something like 1 o' clock in the morning, trying to get back in. We got caught doing that. So, we went away for the weekend, came back and there had been bolts put on the window and they could only open that much ... All the windows on the ground floor had been bolted, and that was to stop us from getting out of the windows.

Every time we did something wrong in the hostel, we were just sent to the Headmaster in the school. We used to get this standard lecture about how people from the west coast were unruly ... We used to get a lecture for five to ten minutes and then get belted. Everyone. It didn't really matter who ... the ringleader or ... you know, half the time in the hostel no-one would admit to anything.

Well, when I went to school there seemed to be this kind of fighting mentality. And it was the east coast against the west coast, apart from the fact that the people in Golspie and Brora didn't like each other so the ones from Brora were on the west coast side ..... which seemed a bit odd. But I tried to avoid an awful lot of that 'cause I actually got on well with a few people in Golspie.

In Dornoch, we were more kind of isolated, I would say, because of where we were. We weren't really in Dornoch, in the town, as such, like. We didn't really have to go into Dornoch itself. I

mean, by the time we got back on a Sunday night, we were only really there four nights, I suppose. There was no school uniform at all. Just had to be tidy.

To me wasn't a bad experience. Some people my age hated it; some loved it ...I was kind of quite neutral. It was just something you had to do. You know, it's like a means to an end, or ...You know that you canna leave school until you're sixteen, so you may as well just get on with it, sort of thing, you know. We were in the hostels for four years and then it was the same thing again as what happened to us in the first year. There was too many kids for the hostels so we actually had to go into lodgings ...And that was great. That was just excellent; it was ...Nae rules! Oh, it was great, like, you know. Excellent. You know, we never caused any hassle with his folks, 'cause ...we were just ... come and go, but just be sensible. That's what they said to us, like. And I think half the time some of the things you used to do in the hostel – it was like, you were breaking that rule just because it was there. If that rule hadn't been there, you wouldn't have ...; it was more devilment for the sake of it. And yet – or maybe the fact we were a bittie older by then. There was only three of us lodged in this house. There was probably about twenty, altogether in lodgings in the town. Like I say, it was just that there was too many kids ...to fit into all the hostels. So the Education had to just find a few spaces.

But, then again, there wasn't much in the way of rules, so ... but at the hostels, you've got all these rules and it's almost like you're trying to rebel a wee bit against everything, just for the hell of it, at the time. But yeah, it was certainly good for us. It was almost like being home, in a way, the lodgings. I suppose, looking back on it, it was just a big adventure more than anything else. Good days and bad days. Half the problems – half the trouble we got into was our own doing – it was more fun than malicious, the things we got up to. And sometimes it was just for a laugh, more than anything else ..... because the thing was, once you'd been to the Headmaster and got belted once or twice, you knew what was coming, so ...And even the young ones, even though – they knew fine who had been up to no good, they could have told on us, they never – they never did. And they'd been warned not to, so maybe that was enough. But they used to think it was a good laugh as well.

Dornoch was a very good hostel. Not so much from the food point of view and that but just the freedom of being on the golf course ...I'd say, getting home every weekend that was a real bonus. I mean, when we were doing our exams and that, if we had an exam on the Monday, we'd go back on the bus on Sunday night, do the exam on the Monday and if you didn't thumb home or manage to get a lift they'd have had to stay in the school, you know.

Aye, different from when they weren't getting home at all – that is a totally different experience from the older ones where they were really stuck there for the whole time. No, ours was definitely freedom relative to them. But, then, compared to the kids you see now, that are getting home at night – but that's a difficult one to say, too, 'cause, I mean, the kids from Golspie and Brora and Lairg and places that did go home every night ...They didn't seem any different to the way that we were. So them getting home at night and us having to stay in the hostel ... it didn't do them any harm getting home at night. I think it's just attitudes that have changed, full stop.

The parents of kids just seem to have more power in general. We got belted or we ended up with a thousand lines, and that was 'I must not ..... And they'd have ten, twenty pages of this ... and half-way down one page – I forget the name now, but he'd do Mr Whatever is a complete b\*\*\*\*\*. And you'd actually write that in, and then carry on and finish your lines and say 'Right, sir, I've done my lines' and they'd just flick through the pages, rip them in half and throw them in the bin. And that was probably more annoying than anything ..... because you'd just spent the last hour doing this. We soon cottoned on that he wasn't actually reading them ..... and just made sure you'd written on every page. Never got caught. I stopped doing



that – ‘I must not’ – ‘cause we used to be, like, ‘I’ – one long stroke right down the way down the page, instead of doing it on every line, like ... so that ‘I’ was never used in your lines. That was too easy.

### **Hostel Memories 1990s**

The Last of The Hostellers

Andrew Mackenzie, Clashmore, Stoer – 1990s

“We were going to a much bigger school – a school of 700 at the time, and that was a great experience, because it meant that I was meeting people from all over the county; so, west, north and east coast. And hostel life was tough to start with. Leaving home at eleven to go to the scary east coast was tough but school itself was great. I particularly enjoyed the social aspect of school. I wasn’t so keen on the academic side, and ... but I certainly gave it a go at Standard Grades. I got enough credit grades to get a few Higher options. I think that’s important about high school; that it’s not just about the academic side of it; it is about interaction. We were all together in Golspie. Sometimes I’m vaunted as this great success story but I was actually suspended from the hostel for drinking, so, you know, so there is good and bad. But I managed to get a few ‘A’s, as I said, and I can remember a teacher saying to me, ‘Well, yes, you got two ‘A’s and a ‘C’ and three ‘B’s’, (???) and he said, ‘Well, Andrew, what would you like to do?’ And I thought, well, I’d quite like to be a lawyer.”

We Don’t Want To Go To Golspie

But Then We Do

George Gunn wrote a new poem in 2012 during his artists residency with the Moving Times project.

We don’t want to go to Golspie  
not from our goram Bheinn  
not from our Moine dhu loch  
to be hosted out  
in flat còmhnard nan Dornoch  
far from blood & far from comfort  
not to see our family  
to always fear the bully  
when will we ever be happy?

They spit at us  
& call us a Backcoaster  
we look too strange  
& we talk all funny  
they take our pride  
& they take our money  
we are the slave  
the system master  
we don’t want to go to Golspie!

Tin side school  
or distant hostel  
who said this was the gospel?  
How can we ever learn  
when at night our eyes burn?

Down our cheeks the tears are falling  
the surf at Torrisdale is calling  
from Tongue we come & from Kinlochbervie  
we don't want to go to Golspie!

We can't wait to get to Golspie  
free to live our teenage years  
changing shape & changing gears  
& at the weekend catch a bus  
to the West coast  
Ullapool or Lochinver  
then over Kylesku to Kinlochbervie  
free to make our own life  
all of us all together  
we can't wait to get to Golspie

a mighty crash in the nineteen nineties  
our parents hardly saw us  
& if we tell them they won't believe us  
each day is like a river-line  
flowing into the sea of time  
all of us will make our way  
we can't wait to get to Golspie

George Gunn 2013. It is based on listening to lots of different people recount their thoughts on hostel schooling. Some loved it; some hated it.

### **Hostel Days: The Schools Audio Story**

Drawing on oral histories of hostel experiences, Isobel MacPhail, and Iain Copeland worked with S1 – S4 in Kinlochbervie and Farr High Schools to understand more about the history of Hostelling and ways in which sound and audio recording can be used to indicate and evoke actions and feelings in work involving film, radio, schools project work and events about history.

Each school was provided with samples from oral history recordings about Hostel memories. The content included material which illustrates home sickness, pranks, daily school and hostel life and experiences of bullying. Isobel MacPhail, provided an introduction in the schools about The Hostel research. She talked about the ways in which people use skills such as oral history interviewing, audio recording, video recording, transcription and research in their working lives. Iain Copeland provided an introduction to how sound as a medium is used in the film and recording industry. He then demonstrated how small snippets of sound created using everyday objects can be worked on to change them into specific sound effects for a story or a film.

This kind of sound work is called Foley in the film and audio industry and is a specialist activity. Iain and Issie demonstrated how to create sounds for Foley use with a pile of old, dry bracken, some stones picked up in Strath Naver and a box of pencils in the classroom. Foley sound effects are added in post-production and include things like footsteps, doors creaking and Hostel bus gears screeching.

The school pupils worked in groups. By drawing on this introduction, oral history audio samples and their own access to Hostel memories within the community, each group in the

school created a short script about Hostel days and sound effects to go with that script. The stories and associated sounds that the school pupils created explored topics such as moving into Mackay Country during school days, arriving at Hostel knowing no-one, the fine line between pranks being funny or cruel, skiving out of the Hostel for the weekend by forging mother's signature on a letter, experiences of bullying and dramatically eventful bus journeys to and from the Hostel. Farr High School is now keen to continue this audio work with Iain Copeland by next exploring sound and environment. What noise does The Moine Thrust make? What does Early Purple Orchid sound like when it's growing? How will we mimic the sounds of weathering on rocks and mountains as ice and rain cracks open solid rock ever so slowly? Who can hear the grass grow?

During each session the school pupils used stills and video cameras to record the workshops in which they were participating. In this way, they were also learning about oral history field skills. The photographic record is their own. One group from each school performed and explained their audio story at The Moving Times events in March 2012. Their scripts are provided in the side panel. A total of 52 school pupils and 6 teachers participated in this aspect of the project in five workshops sessions and two Matinee events.

### **The Sutherland Technical School**

A very influential option for education for boys was provided by The Sutherland Technical School which opened in 1904 and operated until 1968. In the 1950s, 'The Tech' began to admit girls for courses such as typing and secretarial but they were not boarders.

This school was the idea of Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland, and was a pioneering experiment in technical, craft and academic education. The building was specially designed and its building and operation were paid for by the Duke of Sutherland, the Duke of Portland (Caithness) and Andrew Carnegie, by then owner of Skibo Castle near Dornoch. Duchess Millicent's education project enjoyed support and advice from the Scotch Education Board, Professor R Meldola FRS of the City and Guild of London Technical College, Lord Balfour of Burleigh, Professor Magnus Maclean, Glasgow, and the Right Honourable R. B. Haldane, KG, MP, amongst others. In her explanation about the motivations for this school at the ceremony for the laying of the foundation stone in September 1903 Duchess Millicent declares:

*"To aspire to be sons of Empire – to learn to think imperially – by the nature of things at the present time, grows to be the platform advice of half our orators.*

*And within proper limits, good advice it certainly is, provided that the youth of the country can be educated to follow it.*

*The old days of "a shilling in your pocket and luck go with you, my boy," are past; a man needs the full equipment of education if he is to hold his own in the neck-to-neck race between peoples and policies today.*

The losses experienced during The Boer War had caused debate and concern about the fitness of British young men to serve and to fight. Baden-Powell created The Boy Scouts Association in 1908 as a result of his experiences and concerns about the future of the Empire. One reaction to that debate was a new focus on technical and athletic education. This school provided academic and technical education for crofters' sons from Sutherland and Caithness. Their fees were paid through a Bursary system for which they had to qualify via their elementary school. The Sutherland Technical School was run as a boarding school and had four dormitories each accommodating twenty boys. It was located at Drummuie in Golspie, east Sutherland.

## **The Early Years of the Tech**

The Tech was a tough and regimented form of education organised along Boarding School and Army lines. It would appear from the research that, in its early years, it achieved exceptionally high standards of academic and craft based work.

This school provided academic and technical education for crofters' sons from Sutherland and Caithness. Their fees were paid through a Bursary system for which they had to qualify via their elementary school. The Sutherland Technical School was run as a boarding school and had four dormitories. It was located at Drummie in Golspie, East Sutherland. The 'Tech's rules and articles drawn up in advance of opening state:

The chief aims of the School are declared to be:

- To provide training in relation to small agricultural holdings.
- To provide training in handicraft industries, especially in such industries as can be usefully cultivated by the resident population
- Instruction in navigation for boys looking forward to the fishing or other sea-faring occupation; and
- Along with these technical branches a good general education will be given.
- The governors shall have the power to make such MOD ifications as they may from time to time deem expedient.

The first cohorts of those attending, such as Angus Macleod, Tarbet, Scourie, who was amongst the first pupils arriving in 1904, spoke very highly of the experience. Angus spent his working life in Lewis and Harris as the Agricultural Officer there. He is mentioned by Frank Fraser Darling in the acknowledgments to his book *The West Highland Survey*. In Stornoway he was known as 'Page 28' on account of the frequency with which he quoted Page 28 of *The Board of Agricultural Handbook* in the line of duty.

Magnus Mackay from Bettyhill also attended in the early decades of the Tech. His daughter Christine sent the following from her home in Canada:

'This is my favourite photo of his Patagonia days, I'd guess mid to late 1930s. He lost all his possessions in the Atlantic, coming home to join up in WWII. Torpedoed twice was the tale; lucky he somehow had a few negatives. They must have been in his pocket. Dad managed the livestock side of the Vestey estate from 1955 to 1976, farming at Farness on the Black Isle and travelling to the west every couple of weeks. I used to go with him and tramp over the hills. He wasn't easy to keep up with. Mr and Mrs Alastair Ross were in charge on the ground, in later years. There was a parallel hierarchy looking after the gamebird and sports interests.'

## **Mid-20th Century Memories**

Although Sutherland Technical School was much admired in the early decades of its existence our research shows that by the mid-twentieth century the approach and methods were not working as well as they had.

"I think you'd be definitely better to have the school as it is now, there's absolutely no doubt about that. I mean, people used to run away from the Tech. They'd take off into the hills just to run away to get home. And how they got captured was – the boys that were left were rounded up and told to go up the hill and capture this poor sod, it was just too much for him. And march him back and that was it and we kept an eye on them so they wouldn't run away again."

"Well you did eleven plus. And you either went to Dornoch, well, the lassies had Dornoch or Golspie because there was MacLeod House in Golspie where the lassies' hostel was and that's at the Dunrobin end of Golspie. It became the boys' hostel eventually when the Tech shut down

because after the Tech finished and became an annexe of Golspie, it became the trades – a lot of pupils from along this coast and right round the coast would do their third and fourth year in Golspie to go on to do trade or whatever.

When I went there the Tech was where you went to, it was first year to fourth year. They didn't do 'O' levels or anything like that; it was agricultural and tended to be for trades. If you wanted to do 'O' levels, you had to do them on night school. They did night school in the school and all so you had people, more mature students, coming into the school to do 'O' levels. So if we wanted to do 'O' levels – and they gave you some amount of encouragement and help within your normal class. It certainly wasn't set up for doing anything academical, as I say, it was more to do with... the old Tech, the old building, there was an annex out the back where they had painting and plumbing and all these different trades. They used to have tradesmen come in and do a day a week – they used to come in and do brickwork and subjects like that. But when you went away to school... I was still eleven when I left here to go to the first year and you went and stayed in the hostel and it would be about twenty odd of us in the class, first year, from Stoer, Inchnadamph, all the way round to Melvich. And there was a few from Caithness.

There was the farm. They used to have a lot of hens. When you were in first year, you'd be hauled out of class thinning turnips, ten acre park which supplied all the schools with turnips. So you'd be thinning turnips for a couple of days. Good education. Tattie lifting time you got all out of school to lift tatties, things like that. They had about twenty odd cows and a dairy, there were – we had (Poulag) cows, and they had a reasonably Modern milking parlour at that time. So you sort of got involved with that.

The school was run, the whole of the school was run by the pupils and there was a pecking order. When I was there in my first year there would be about sixty pupils that lived in it, and that was in three dormitories. There was twenty odd in the lower dormitory and twenty odd and then twenty-four or something like that in the upper dormitory.

Discipline was by older looking after the young. Say you had about sixty pupils and if they were left to their own devices then ... so the older guys looked to the discipline of the younger. Sometimes they could be a bit harsh. They meted out punishment as they thought fit. There was iron beds and he used to catch the bottom bar and stick your head below the bit that went over the top and you'd get six of the slipper around your arse. That was quite a common punishment. And when you came up he got the back of your head on the steel bar that went over the top. And you'd be going to sleep lying on your belly because your arse would be that hot. Just for any misdemeanour. Or sometimes people didn't particularly like you, there was a bit of that."

There was girls came in on days and they were all to do with secretarial work. But they were completely separated from us, we never got near them. They had their breaks at different times, they had their lunch at different times so you just did not get near the lassies at all. But they did shorthand and typing and that type of thing.

We used to get up at seven in the morning and there was four houses and one house was on kitchen duty and that revolved once a week. So every fourth week you were on kitchen duty and the rest of the time you cleaned, from seven till eight you cleaned the whole school. You looked after the whole place and cleaned it. And then eight o' clock was breakfast and then from half eight until quarter to nine you cleaned the dormitories and made your bed and did all that sort of carry on. Kitchen duty, when you were in first year, your whole hour before breakfast was peeling tatties. You had pans because that was for lunch and for all the day people, whatever, they got fed there and all and then we got fed again then at five o' clock at night. So a lot of tatties to peel. Good job by second year you started the porridge. That was

quite a good job because you were right in the kitchen and a lot of time it could be freezing cold in the wee pantry where you peeled the tatties. But that's what you did, and then you went to school at nine and you went through your normal school.

The school day finished at four. And you sort of kicked about, football or whatever from four till – five. I think we got fed. Half five. And then you had a bit of time then till seven, prep was seven till nine and then you got a cup of tea and piece made with jam at nine and a piece made with jam would be made at six o' clock so the jam would be well through the bread by the time you got it! And then you got two slices of bread and a cup of tea. Then you went to bed. Half past nine you were in bed, half past nine until quarter to ten was for supposedly reading the Good Book and lights were out at quarter to ten.

You were allowed out on a Saturday afternoon, you could go down the village, Jimmy Millar's café was the sort of favourite hang-out place. They used to have a picture house and they used to have the movies in it and you'd get a matinee on the Saturday, believe it or believe it not. Queuing up to go and see Summer Holiday with Cliff Richards, for goodness sake, when you think of it! But the café had a juke box and sometimes you'd go into KG5 and watch the football and then when Brora Rangers went into the Highland League at that time we'd thumb through to Brora but that was a bit of a hit or a miss because if you didn't get a lift back and you weren't home and back at the Tech in time for your supper then you'd be on detention."

The dining room – it was spotless. The dining room had to be spotless. You cleaned it after every meal. You shifted all the tables to one half first of all, chairs, cleaned that whole area, shifted them all back to the other side and then I think twice a week you mopped the whole thing and cleaning in the kitchen was, oh, a nightmare. (sighs) Gosh – pots and pans and... the old cook was terrible for burning stuff in pans and you'd be scrubbing for hours with pot scrubbers, pot scrubbers, you see.

Oh gosh, yes. But she was awful good to us, she was very, very good to us. She was a very big woman, she was from Brora and when I went to work in Brora after that, of course she was dead but her two sons were living there and I remember them, they were just my own age – children, two boys, and we used to reminisce a lot about old times in the school. But she was a big, big hefty woman but could she cook? Oh, she was good at cooking, she was excellent at cooking. But every now and again – likely the poor woman was going flat out trying to make meals for fifty people in a, not what you would call a Modern kitchen. It was coal-fired, like big Rayburns, like or Agas, big things like that – they were very, very big but they were coal-fired. That was another job you had to do; carry coal in every day that was somebody else's job. Then there was a big boiler room which heated the whole school, central heating. And it was coal-fired so somebody had to go down and shovel coal on there, help the janny to shovel coal on there.

Aye, she used to make, well what we would call casseroles now. She made brilliant stews, everybody loved that, everybody loved that. Everybody loved mince and tatties. The meals were very ordinary meals but probably very wholesome meals like casseroles, which was stews, like, you know? Plenty vegetables in them, all fresh vegetables grown in the gardens. Soup, yes, you got soup, soup. The day you had soup you didn't get a sweet, you see, and it rotated as the week went on. Now, the meals changed every day for a whole week but then next week you went on to the same meals again. You had seven different meals in a week but you would have the same seven the next week but they might be staggered about a bit in a different rotation. But she used to make chicken, different things with chicken. It was like a chicken casserole but she did different things with it. And she used to make fantastic puddings, oh, her cluttie dumplings were just absolutely beautiful. And homemade custard. I don't think I was ever really hungry, there was always plenty as long as you would eat what you got. Because

there was some people that came there to begin with that – ‘oh, I never tasted stuff like that before.’ I said, ‘well if you were living in our house you had to eat what you got or you’d get it for breakfast next morning again!’ And then you got breakfast in the morning. Now, breakfast was probably porridge, I think there might have been some type of cereal in that time. But most people took the porridge because the porridge was excellent and she had it simmering away for ages, and it was beautiful porridge (didn’t like cleaning the porridge pot the day I was on kitchen duties) but the porridge was absolutely beautiful. Fresh milk from the farm, just fresh in from the farm. You would probably get maybe a bacon sandwich or something like that.

Now, lunch – if it was a day that there wasn’t soup on the menu, you’d have soup at lunch and something else with it, it could be cold meat or something like that but there was always food. Quite a lot of fruit, there was always fruit for anybody that wanted fruit. Normally apples and maybe the odd pear but lots of fruit. And there was always stuff to eat but you just got on with it and that was it. You were there for a whole term and you just got on.

I liked mathematics, I was, I don’t know how but I was absolutely brilliant at algebra. I think I got near a hundred out of a hundred out of every exam at algebra. I don’t know much about it today and I don’t know what good it did me but I was good at that. Geometry that was another thing. I was never an expert at the technical side of the school thing but I did well in all the other subjects, in history – I liked history. I think I did well in all the other subjects but I was never a real –Hugh was the professional in the technical side of it but I wasn’t. I liked the mechanical side, we had an old car and it was a fellow from a garage in Golspie, Campbell, that had the garage in Golspie and they came up and taught – I think he only came once a week or something like that. And he taught the ones about a car, we had an old, old car there and it was in a shed and he taught us all about that. I liked that, I liked that bit of it.

I realised how it set me up in life. When I went to Hong Kong, it didn’t bother me being away in Hong Kong for eighteen month. It was just a slightly longer period than I was in... but there was some people there that were terrible, they had never left home. I know when we went for basic training to (Rill), we went for a fortnight to Owestry to a camp there where they decided where they were going to put you and oh, they were terrible. They were just – eighteen year olds certainly but they had never been outside Manchester, London, hadn’t seen anywhere and they couldn’t understand how it didn’t bother me. ‘Were you in the army before?’ I says, ‘No, never but I almost was...’ And when I explained that them, then – ‘Oh’.

If you were very academic you would probably go to Dornoch, if you were just not very sort of... you would probably go to Golspie or the Tech. But the Tech was originally by the Duchess Millicent for the sons of crofters and fishermen. That was its original... Well it was – taught all different subjects, you see. It was actually a boarding school in the true meaning of boarding schools that the very rich go to, actually. But that’s what it actually was, it was a boarding school, because you were there for the full term. And just one matron and a janitor, that was all.

You did everything in the school – everything. You weren’t only taught everything you actually did everything in the school. Four houses: Rosslyn, Sutherland, Portland and Carnegie and you all took turns – one week you would be on kitchen duty, you did all the work in the kitchen with the matron. You set the tables, served the meal, peeled the potatoes, vegetables, helped to cook certain meals. There would be another one on the farm, they went out early in the morning to do the milking and there would be another one cleaning the school, it was all swept every morning and everything polished. Now that was all done before breakfast which was breakfast at eight o’ clock and then there would be another lot in the garden, they had their own garden – very self-sufficient they were, as far as that went. They grew a big lot of their own vegetables and you just did everything in the school and then went to your class.

There was a lot of people that did very, very well that had left there, did exceptionally well. Got into very good jobs and did very, very well for themselves. It was probably a very good education because you were taught and the discipline was so much that you did what you were told and every night there was an hour of prep which was you doing your homework, every night – it didn't matter what job you were on or anything. Seven o' clock till eight o' clock was prep and you all went in to what was – we called it the day room and you all did your prep for one hour. And it had to be all done because there was a teacher on duty every night and they all took turn of being there to see that you did all your homework. So probably education was – well I found it was very, very good, it was a very broad education.

You did woodwork, a type of engineering, making things with metal and all that. But it was also you had physics, maths, Algebra, English, History – all the subjects. But probably how it's called the technical side because that was one of the things probably at the very early days; that, if they came from fishing and crofting, technical things would be very, very handy for them. But there's lot of people left there and went to Glasgow to the shipyards and worked there and did exceptionally well for themselves, exceptionally well.'

You want to know about the Tech now, do you? Three years of purgatory. The thing that I remember most was the bullying. It was every night in your first year. There was twenty in each dormitory – ten on each side. You'd to bend over these old style army bunks – beds ... Bend over and you got whacked across the backside with a gym shoe. Six times, every night. Seven days a week. That's what was done to you in first year.

And the food was atrocious. Absolutely atrocious. It took me years to eat the jam. And they used to give you sandwiches – there was no butter on them – this was as a snack at night. Just bread and jam. We had burnt toast. To this day, I hate burnt toast. Och, aye. If it hadn't been for the chippie in Golspie, we'd have bloody starved. On the Saturday there was films in the afternoon, in Golspie. So all the boys from the Tech and all the girls from the hostel, from the north coast or from the west coast, they would all be in there. And the chippie, he made a fortune out of these guys from the west coast. Absolutely. Starving hungry. In my first year, there was a lad from the backcoast, he was a big, big guy .... must have been nigh on six feet when he was fourteen, and he organised – well, petitioned – we were all going on a hunger strike. And if the food didn't improve – well, I had my case all packed and I was walking down to Lairg and home. And then the food did improve a little bit after that ..... but it was still terrible. I mean, you knew the days of the week by the menu. One in particular I remember was a slice of fat – it was meant to be cold ham, but it was fatter than ham, a dollop of spuds and some kale. That was it. It really was atrocious, you know. Your tea was was a pie or a sausage roll. That was your tea, on a Saturday. I think it was a pie, or a sausage roll, and a wee cream cake. That was your tea, at night. That was at six or five o'clock. It's a wonder any of us was bloody lived to tell the tale.

As I say, it wasn't luxury. The farm was on the go. That's where the kale was coming from, and probably the potatoes ... you had the milk from the farm. One of the jobs I had was going across to the farm to get these big churns of milk. There was one time I was coming back up, and it was icy, slippery roads, like, and it was a wee buggy with two wheels. And I slipped when I came down. I've still a scar in below there somewhere; I was lucky it didn't knock me out, like ... but being a west-coaster, made of sterner stuff, you see.

They improved the food because everybody signed the petition. This big fella – he threatened everybody and they were only twelve years old. He threatened them with violence if they didn't sign it, you know. I signed it straight away. But, another thing they used to do – you had four different houses. There was Portland, Carnegie, Rosslyn and Sutherland – that was the four houses. And I was in Portland House. On Sunday night, you used to get the – you know, the



six-inch, one of the big service spoons, across the backside ..... on the Sunday night, after you'd finished your week. I was probably about fourteen at the time, and this guy says, right, bend over, and I says, no, – no way you're hitting me with that. So he took a swipe at me with the spoon, and I grabbed the spoon out of his hand and I wrapped it right around his head. 'Course, then he threw a punch at me, and I dodged, and he went straight into a concrete wall! So, he didn't know what to do, jumping about with a sore fist, and that. There was no more spoon for me, for the third year. I was there from 1959 to '62. I was big enough to stand up for myself, you know.

It was a big issue, really. And the thing is, the Headmaster knew it was going on. And, I mean, it had been done to them as well... the older ones. He would have had the same thing three years previously, you know... So it was just purgatory. I suppose they had this idea it was supposed to toughen you up. But it didn't. All it did to me was made me anti-authority. And I've been like that ever since.

Another thing it bugged up for me and my family was, we were all shipped out. I had three sisters all older than me, but I went to the Tech and they were in Dornoch Academy. And we only seen each other during the holidays, so we missed out on an awful lot. We were basically – we were strangers. You just met up, you know, for a long weekend in October, you got ten days at Christmas, OK, maybe eight weeks in the summer, then ten days at Easter.

That's all we seen of each other for a whole year. Every one of us was like that, I suppose, really. I was seven when my sister went away to Dornoch Academy. You know, when you should be growing up and tumbling about with your sisters. You didn't – you'd missed out.

But in some respects, some of the things you learned was, you know, I suppose it was, when I went away to sea myself I was the about the only guy that could sew a button on my shirt. That was because we had to do that. You know, the matron, she was a teacher herself so she made sure that you learned to do things for yourself. Well, I suppose you had a lot of fun, too, when you think about it, but the bullying was the main thing and the starvation.”

### **The Tech Graffiti Gallery**

A very poignant sort of 'Tech' memorabilia is available to view at Golspie Heritage Society.

These are pictures of the graffiti from inside The Tech which were taken in November 2006 just before renovations began. By 2008 the whole building had been converted into the new Highland Council offices.

Today the old Tech building serves as the Headquarters for Highland Council's Sutherland offices. The sensitive renovation has maintained the elegance of this quite remarkable building. Inside and out, the original features and fittings have been restored. Old photographs from its days as The Tech are on display in the corridors and a copy of the original school prospectus is available at Reception. The outdoor swimming pool has gone and the farm buildings are in a very poor state but, for all that, an amble around this building is well worth the effort. In the siting of the school and the care that was taken over every detail of its design, one can still get a sense of the energy and aspirations which were once invested so heartily in this place, not just by the school Governors but equally by successive generations of Island and Highland boys journeying away from home for the first time at twelve years old.

## **Side Schools**

The second theme to be included in this Mackay Country work was linked to the first through personal stories and the establishment of state responsibility for the provision of primary, or as it was then called, elementary education. Mackay Country Board members Janette Mackay, Strathy, and Sandra Munro, Bettyhill, proposed that it would be a good idea to investigate the history of the side schools in the area. Side schools were very small schools provided to make education accessible to children in the most remote straths and glens. They came and went according to shifts in population. In addition, many people have expressed a fascination for the fact that the built heritage, and its crumbling remains, clearly indicates that there were far more schools in Mackay Country in the recent past than is the case now. Why is that and what are these schools' stories? (Side Schools are outlined in a dedicated section under education)

The third theme which we have tackled in this work looks, at first glance, to be a rather odd companion to the topics outlined above. It is the wish to make a celebratory study of the impacts and reasons for in-migration past and present. This topic emerged from a concern amongst the thirty to fifty-something activists involved in running the organisation – Mackay Country Community Trust Ltd (Mackay Country). They wished to make it clear that this organisation and its work was for and about everyone who lives in the place called Mackay Country, not just folk called Mackay.

## **Ebb & Flow**

The third theme but we're exploring in the project Moving Times and Telling Tales has to do with the positive impacts of immigration. Highland history tends to be dominated by a lot of talk about movement as loss and trauma, the clearance of out migration, the global diaspora of people looking for better opportunities and indeed often taking other people's land in the countries that they were migrating to. There is very little in terms of research of the archives that we have within local history in our own areas and communities, in the stories and songs we share there is very little is said about the positives of migration, about the people that have come in generation after generation during the era of the 18th century and 19th century, during the era of improvement in the Clearance. That would include people coming into work on the new model farms, shepherding the sheep walks all had a whole new set of people with particular skills, building skills, different kinds of curing for the for the fish trade that was developing slowly during the 18th and 19th centuries which when the herring became a boom item in the 19th century. Little is said to the positives of this end migration and right to the present. In fact so many people in each generation have come into the northwest Sutherland to do a job of work be that teaching, nursing, roadbuilding, electricians, plumbers, fishermen throughout different generations or have come in to set up a business. this is a very important aspect of the community and society we have today and indeed the survival and growth of the economy and the diversification of the economy and we feel it's been terribly overlooked so that's one of the reasons we're including the positives in migration that ebb and flow of people into the area within this research.

## **Dr. McPhail's Report**

Moving Times was reported to the directors and funders with an accompanying unpublished book Research Matters by Dr. McPhail. An intention was to have this published but due to unavailable funds for completion and printing this was not carried out.

During this project work we have attempted to trace the differences that initiating and conducting research can make. We have considered in detail how we approached the task of research and provided an account of how Mackay Country has equipped volunteers and contract staff to be oral history fieldworkers.

Our principal aim is, firstly, to achieve an effective and ethical research process and, secondly, to deliver training and education in ways which make it as possible as possible can be to facilitate skills transfer and peer group learning. This is the motor of meaningful and sustained capacity building, a process and aim which, through some sort of complicated ripple effect, then contributes an uplift in skills and confidence in myriad third sector groups and tiny little vulnerable businesses in the region. It is perhaps obvious, but nevertheless worth stating, that this is also in sum how we ‘produce knowledge’ through a project like Moving Times. The knowledge produced is not just the research ‘outputs’ in the formal sense – things like audio and video material, photographs, transcripts, exhibitions, events and encounters. The legacy is in the doing and rests with the ‘doers’. It is through them and at their hand that skills transfer and capacity building occur. This is perhaps a good example of ‘the carrying stream’ in action and motion.

In the Moving Times project, we have principally focused on the period 1872 through to the 1990s. The historic period on which we have focused our Moving Times research begins and ends with crofting agitation over ‘The Land Question’. The 1880s is the classic period of ‘The Crofters Wars’. It was in 1882, on their return from the fishing season in Ireland, that the men and women in Braes and Glendale initiated new forms of rural protest by adjusting the new Irish tactic of the rent strike to their specific needs and demands. They were asking for the return of grazing lands and associated rights which had been removed from them in order to create sheep walks. These were the first steps which led to the creation of the Highland Land League, an organisation with local branches but national reach.

Academic commentators have frequently wondered aloud about why organised, collective, region-wide protest came so late in the wake of so much social change dating back into the previous century. It seems to us that they overlook how very difficult it is to organise and communicate across vast geographic distances. Even today, with easy (if not exactly cheap!) access to the internal combustion engine, e-mail, mobile phones and Facebook, it is still a constant and exhausting struggle just to operate across and within the 2,000 square kilometres which constitute Mackay Country. How much harder was that in the nineteenth century? It also must be stated that people on low and insecure incomes are not best placed to organise and act. Hence in every instance where such groups of people come together to act and think in the interests of the greater good, it is a small but important miracle. Every project conducted and completed is one such too – and for the same reasons. But there is another thing that this idea that the Highlander is focused narrowly on land issues causes people to overlook.

The Moving Times research has revealed that a high level of energy and prolonged commitment has gone into the matter of schooling in North West Sutherland. It is for this reason that there are secondary schools within suitable travelling distances from the current communities. Being exposed to very different kinds of personal experiences of hostel schooling through our interview process has introduced everyone involved in this work via research and related events to points of view which are not their own. This has been helpful in dismantling polarised views on the hostels and choices relating to schooling past, present and future. Every type of educational provision in our study period has involved some sort of tradeoff between aspirations for good educational standards and opportunities and the pressing matters of finance and transport. A key issue is the matter of ensuring that, from an educational point of view, the school experience, be it side school, home based or hostel-based secondary education, is at a scale which delivers the very important social aspects of a school education as well as the academic aspects. Both are an equally important aspect of the responsibility of delivering education for the individual child and the County. The solutions to that conundrum vary in each generation. The reduction in the total journey times between east, west and north Sutherland in the 1970s – 80s on account of improvements in the road network, still mainly single track

nonetheless, led to Hostellers getting home at weekends instead of only on school holidays. Another factor which helped to make that change possible was the fact that the relative cost of bus and car transport fell in the same period. It has become common for every household to have a car.

However, McCleery's research on household incomes for HIDB in the wake of the 1991 census stated that many rural households on low incomes subject themselves to significant privation in order to have one or two cars because public transport provision is not of the sort which would make using it to go to work and take care of children and other dependents possible. Nonetheless the increase in bus contractors in the region helped to get the Hostellers home far more regularly which changed the nature of the Hostel experience very fundamentally.

It seems very likely that the original system of lodgings, and later hostel accommodation, which involved being away from home from twelve years old apart from during school holidays, has had a profound long term impact on language shift. No-one has specifically discussed this matter in interviewing with any remembered details from their own family experience. However, the broader discussion of what it was like leaving for the Hostel at twelve years old leads us to believe that parents must have been quite desperate to ensure that their children were full time English speakers by the time they left for the Hostel.

The reports in each generation of a sense of difference or 'otherness', on account of being a 'backcoaster' or west coaster, the fears that some teachers thought less of the Hostellers than the east coast scholars and interview mentions of Hostel boys always getting the blame for any kind of teenage trouble in the town all imply that efforts were being made by both parents and children to reduce, in so far as possible, that sense of 'difference' to minimise the chances of being a target for mockery or bullying and the accompanying misery of that position. This will quite definitely have included avoiding speaking Gaelic since Gaelic usage in Golspie and Dornoch fell away far faster than it did in the rest of Sutherland. The evidence to date of the current system indicates that it is facilitating a re-growth of Gaelic use amongst the younger generations, not least in Tongue and Farr, through access to Gaelic medium primary and to a secondary school which includes Gaelic in the curriculum too. But the turn back towards Gaelic is also being facilitated from two other sources. National policy, since the implementation of the Gaelic Act 2005, has opened up opportunities for schools and local groups. In addition, the mere fact of being at home in the area with everyday access to the older speakers means a greater exposure to the use of Gaelic. In Tongue and Farr, Feis Air An Oir provide language 'normalisation' in the medium of music and song. In Eddrachilles, a new Gaelic playgroup and special learning weekends, including song for adult learners, is also increasing use of and exposure to local Gaelic in everyday circumstances. In all five parishes people are taking Ulpan courses now which was not the case five years ago. On this evidence, the 'at home' schooling system is more positive for language survival and growth. Will Sadler's film, 'A Part of Who We Are', mentioned under the heading Poulouriscaig Side School, includes footage of a ceilidh in Strathnaver Hall and an interviewee who, in terms of Gaelic use, self-identifies as one of 'the missing generation' – those between forty-something and late sixties now – amongst whom Gaelic learning and use was actively discouraged at home and beyond. It will be interesting to see in another twenty years to what extent choices in schooling have helped to stem loss of Gaelic and gaining of Gaelic amongst these new generations.

In the course of a year of Moving Times research, we have discovered, gathered and created a veritable wealth of relevant materials. Indeed they are still pouring in. Research and analyses will continue well beyond the life of this particular project and it is very likely that there are several new sub-themes which could serve as the core of future projects. At this stage, it has not been possible to fully analyse all of this material to the point where we can provide

statistical descriptions of changes in schooling or indeed a full account of all the voices in this work. Here we have sought to provide a representative sense of that richness and diversity. In the Research Matters Book and DVD, we have likewise focused on describing the research process and the kind of materials and activities this generates. Oral history interviewing for its own sake does not generate very artistic or bonnie video material. That is not its primary purpose. In addition many of the memories are harsh, traumatic, personal and sensitive. That sort of material is not suitable for a cheery chirpie video. What we have done therefore is to use snippets and samples of all of our activities to try to give a rounded sense of the work without being intrusive and brash. From the point of view of research praxis, it is important to note that, when material is sensitive and emotionally difficult, a key part of the research process involves supporting the fieldworkers who are constantly exposed to that type of material. That takes time but is fundamental to good practice.

## **In Migration**

### **Ebb and Flow Migrations into Mackay Country.**

From this concern, an interest in-migration in general developed since they realised that it was such a remarkably unifying theme – everyone either has folk who migrated inwards or migrated outwards and many individuals will have plenty of both in their family story. It was felt that the more dominant ways of doing Highland history treat movement as being the epitome of trauma and loss. Examples include emigration and Clearance. These dominant streams and themes have rather overshadowed the steady arrival, in each generation, of migrants moving into the area and making their mark by dwelling there. The history of education in this area is strongly related to generational histories of temporary and permanent out-migrations. Our third theme balances that flow with insights into inward migrations and, indeed, finds that changes in education policy and delivery had a direct impact upon both kinds of migration.

We scarcely touched the surface of this complicated and understudied theme. Our research has sought to explore the in-migrants' stories through oral history recordings. The stories are very varied. And suffice to say they were very limited. A much larger budget and time resource would be required to carry out any research that would have meaning. For the purposes of this study it is important to note that our interview material also indicates that these cohorts of in-migrants were extremely active in quietly campaigning over several decades for local access to secondary education. It is not a coincidence that this was achieved across Mackay Country by the mid-1990s; it is a direct result of the difference that counter-urbanisation can make. This contraflow of younger people has helped to mitigate against the ageing population profile generated by the many generations of out-migration. we focus on the stories of some of those who were able to make that move on account of jobs in art and education or marrying into the area.

A significant number of in-migrants in the past thirty years are artists and craft people. It is not for nothing that Mackay Country constantly stresses the importance of the creative industries in the local economy here. While the absolute demographic trend regionally since 1971 has been one of population gain, the actual pattern on the ground is uneven. What that means is that particular places have still been losing population throughout those decades because the rate of out-migration has not always been adequately balanced by the rate of in-migration combined with what is called 'natural increase' – i.e. the birth rate. Hence the population in Mackay Country has continued to fall very slightly between the censuses and the demographic profile, as evidenced by falling school rolls in the past fifteen years, is still an ageing one.

An aspect highlighted in this brief selection indicates the importance of third generation return migration on trends in demography and community development in the past twenty years.

Highland history is full of accounts of migration but they all relate to trauma and loss. Clearances; emigration; multiple local migrations on account of clearance; seasonal migrations for work or education. The positive importance of in-migration in every generation is completely overlooked. Since the ice receded 10,000 years ago at the end of The Ice Age intrepid, imaginative, energetic people have made their way northwards into Mackay Country and made a home in some corner of this beautiful but belligerent landscape. It takes a special kind of person to look upon those scraps of soil and tireless westerlies, and to see in these things possibilities which are worth the toil. The first comers rounded headlands in a coracle or trekked through glens and over beallachs (mountain pass), sleeping in bough tents covered in animal hide until they came upon some friendly flow, machair pasture or sheltered strath which fitted their need for food, fish, water and shelter. In current times kayaks and mountain bikes are more likely to be part of the migrants' bundle than a bough tent, but that ebb and flow persists. In the very many generations in between people have made that northerly migration for work, for land, for love, for fish, for family, for sheep, for art and for business. Some stay a while; some stay forever. These people have given Mackay Country new businesses, new employees, an ever expanding skills set, different ideas, millions of hours of voluntary service to the local communities, people to fight for schools and services. In more private moments these are also people who mark and mourn the passing of things dear – but equally, people intent on making the very best they can of what is available for now and for the future. Our recent research has sought to explore the in-migrants' stories through oral history recordings. The stories are very varied. Here we focus on some of those who moved in on account of jobs with in art and education.

Balnakeil Craft Village is an unusual example of a cause of in migration. A significant and influential mixture of families and businesses began to move in, work and renovate. Over forty years later the legacy of that initiative is most significant. Community worker Ronnie Lansley and his wife Gwen are amongst those who arrived in Mackay Country because there was an opportunity in Durness parish which was affordable and achievable compared to their first plan of moving from Edinburgh to rural Wales. After a good long stint in The Craft Village itself, Ronnie and Gwen moved their home and business into Durness Village. The basis of Balnakeil has changed from renting to owning but its ability to attract and nurture new businesses and new arrivals persists.

Quite a number of Mackay Country in migrants past and present are in fact people with Scandinavian backgrounds. For these people this is a move 'down south'. The late Pat Rodlin (Skerryay) had Danish connections as does Lotte Glob (Laide). Lotte originally arrived with her family to live in Balnakeil Craft Village. Farr High School Headmaster Jim Johnston arrived from Shetland via teacher training in Aberdeen having shown wisdom beyond his years at that point by cleverly marrying a Bettyhill lass. Artist and Art teacher Elliot Rudie also has a Scandinavian family background:

*'It's quite complicated, but it's very typically Scottish in many ways. My father was Norwegian: his mother was Irish-Scottish, but he was bought up in Norway till he was ten. His father was a Norwegian engineer and inventor. He actually worked for John Brown in 1907 on the back-up engines for the sister ship to the Titanic. I don't know if you want to put that in your CV or not? Anyway, the sister ship kept on sailing for years. But Parsons steam engines were actually water driven in those days, so he was quite a visionary really. He filed about forty patents in four countries. My grandmother and him went around Europe in a big circle. They were going to Norway in the winter, getting there about November/December, and then in the Spring they would head for Northern France, and they would go to Britain and Ireland, and then they would set off for Italy. I don't know which order they did all this, or whether there*

*was any particular order, maybe they came back from Italy and went Britain, Ireland, Norway, or which way round.'*

After The Beat Hotel in Paris – and after teacher training in Edinburgh Elliot was hoping for a rural post. Elliot got an interview for a teaching job up north:

*He said, 'You've got the job. The only thing is, that it's not Edinburgh, it's travelling between Helmsdale and Bettyhill, because there's a chap working there and he's put it in his notice. He's going to go to Singapore'. So I had to wait about six months until he got the boat and it was all fixed up. I got notice about three weeks before Christmas, 'you can move now'. And we were near a railway line where we lived and they had a scheme, you could get a container and put it on the railway and they would take it all the way up and deliver it to the door, and it was all of your furniture, for peanuts, you know – long before Dr Beeching, anyway. So we packed all our stuff up into this container and left this area which was all pit bings and things, and came up to the beautiful fresh air of Helmsdale.'*

The Highlands and Islands have experienced over one hundred years of absolute population loss through out-migration and demographic shift which has led to an ageing population base. As a region the 1971 Census marks an important turning point because that is the first census since the mid-nineteenth century when that persistent population loss halts and begins to reverse. The gradual expansion of education provision in the north has created teaching jobs which have been important for several of our interviewees since that first job provided the stepping stone into making a life in Mackay Country. We see to that regional development initiatives created and funded by the HIDB, and later HIE, have also been a positive force through the provision of project development posts of different sorts. Once people get in the 'door', or over the Struie, by these means, there is a good chance that they will linger.

Chain migrations are a very common feature of all migration patterns locally and globally. A new form of that can be seen in the emergence of an increase in return migration. That pattern amongst third generation out-migrants is significant since, in decades past, people more commonly 'returned' to retire. The fact that first, second and third generation return migrants are making that move in their twenties and thirties, when they are of working age and able to set up in a self-employed capacity, is very important. Further more detailed analysis will be needed to make any specific claims but at present it is fair to say that, although the total population number has persisted in declining just a little in Mackay Country in the past twenty years, these findings do imply that the demographic health, judged by the average age of the population, is making a modest recovery at the local level. Lastly it is interesting to note that, even amongst these interviewees, the matter of hostel schooling is mentioned. Here we see again an awareness of the bonds right across the north which were laid down in each generation through the hostel system.

## **Moving Times with Strathnaver Museum**

Mackay Country Community Trust and Strathnaver Museum formed a partnership to develop activities with a common aim. This project was an exercise in working together to obtain results and conclusions that would otherwise be absent. To adequately preserve The Museum's wide-ranging collection of artefacts and archive the materials that relate to documentation of the history has come about from the concern that the culture, traditions and customs should be updated by record and kept for future generations.

Generally this projects activities.

Take the museum to the Mackay Country Communities with roadshows. Arranging guided walks in Strathnaver with a winter talk's series and other social events focused on local history, music and archaeology based on the museum collection.

Manage the collection and control the permanent and growing local archive with easy flexible and imaginative access to a range of historical sources through organising the acquisition and retrieval of records; entering material into searchable database/ catalogues and promoting local and global demand for this work through building up website archive access.

Digitizing all census material with training in genealogy to enable effective genealogical research to create a genealogy provision using archive materials and marketing a genealogy service.

Commission artists to share creative interpretations on the Museum's collection.

### **Artefacts at Strathnaver Museum**

Discoveries are so often made during the course of daily life. For instance, a Bronze Age burial cist containing a cremation beaker was unearthed by road workers at Chealamay, Strathnaver in 1981. The beaker is made of clay and would have held honey or mead. The 'Chealamay' beaker is on display within the museum and the burial cist has been reconstructed in the cemetery by the front door. The 'Dogskin Buoy' is probably our most intriguing artefact. Along with an old leather boot which is now known as 'The Melness Shoe', it was found in the wall of a house in Melness while it was being renovated. These finds probably date from the nineteenth century. The Dogskin Buoy and the 'St Kilda Mail Boat' were featured in the BBC Antiques Roadshow's visit to the Castle of Mey.

### **The Museum on the Road**

Curating the Collection the Strathnaver Museum Antiques Roadshow

Having secured excellent and imaginative curatorial support from Joanne Howdle from Caithness Horizons the Museum embarked upon a wonderfully quirky Antiques Roadshow Trail. The Museum, in collaboration with Mackay Country Community Trust, rolled into 'town' with displays, intriguing artefacts, one or two of the artists in residence and a whole lot of expertise to spare. You can hardly imagine the intriguing and often puzzling items members of the public brought along to get ideas and advice about 'what on earth is it?!' or 'where on earth did it come from?'. The 'finds' included a porcelain ginger jar made in China in the later seventeenth or early eighteenth century; wooden water pipe from a distillery; a hook used for catching sand eels and a Roman nail from Inchtuthil.

During the course of these roadshows ninety-five artefacts or groups of artefacts were presented for discussion, conservation advice and identification. Detailed research regarding the history and provenance of thirty of these artefacts has been undertaken and the resulting information passed back to the owners of these objects: a wonderful journey of discovery for everyone



involved. The Roadshow team travelled all across Mackay Country and put on their show in Bettyhill, Borgie Forest, Durness, Skerry, Strathy, Strath Halladale and Tongue.

Along with the road shows we arranged a series of guided walks and talks focused on local history, language, music and archaeology based on the museum collection.

#### Walks

- Bring the past to the future A Storytelling Walk Invernaver to the Sandy Dun
- Guided walk of the Clearance Township at Rosal
- Guided walk of Ceannabeinne Clearance Township
- Guided walk around Loch Croispol
- A walk around Strathnaver – Environmental differences, Then & Now

#### Talks

- Ian Leith – a visual presentation of ‘The Man Who Went to Farr’ a talk and debate on Patrick Sellar.
- Jim Hunter – Experiences of an evicted Clearance Family.
- Jim Johnston – A ten minute history of an Exile, Immigrant, Hosteller and Head Teacher.
- Isobel MacPhail, – Research techniques and how heritage can realise Museum’s potential.

#### **Intergraded Schools Programme**

Discussion with teachers at four primary schools and Farr Secondary school identified the best approach for Strathnaver Museum to produce material that would be useful to school in delivering the national curriculum. It was agreed that a practical, hands on approach covering a general concept of the Museum was best. Two avenues were pursued that would give an introduction to the concept of Strathnaver Museum and the history that the museum interprets.

#### **Portable Museum of Curiosity**

The Portable Museum of Curiosity was developed as an idea of things inspired by our heritage, folklore, and journeys over land and sea. Teachers have liaised with the artist Joanne B Karr about the contents and the practical touchy feely approach to reinterpreting the Museum’s stories. The box design and the contents refer to subjects more fully described in the museum. Children are made aware that further investigation beyond the Portable Museum of Curiosity is possible at the Museum. The Portable Museum will be lent to schools and will highlight the role the Museum has in the heritage and interpretation of History of Strathnaver.

This unique museum item, inspired by artist Joanne B Kaar, takes the Story of the Clearances and retells it concisely. This Portable Museum of Curiosity is available for loan to schools and for hire to other interested parties. The Box, when closed, resembles the pulpit which dominates the real Museum. This is where the people of Strathnaver first learned of the imminent evictions from their homes to make way for sheep. The Box is divided in to Land and Sea. The Land offers a glimpse in to the lives of pre Clearance folk living off the land. The Sea shows life in the post Clearance days when they had to learn to survive and prosper through fishing. To add a bit of fun there is a Sheep inspired game which encourages players to search the box for clues and to give thought to the impact the Clearances had on the people of Strathnaver and beyond. Teachers have liaised with the artist to ensure that the contents are relevant and encourage a ‘touchy feely’ approach to reinterpreting the Museum’s stories. The Box refers to themes more fully described in the Strathnaver Museum. We hope it will encourage you toward further

investigation both in schools and in leisure time. We hope it will highlight the role our Museum has in the heritage and interpretation of the Story of Strathnaver.



IMAGE 410 STRATHNAVER PORTABLE MUSEUM OF CURIOSITY

## Managing the Collection

In the course of The Museum's forty odd years in operation the collections have multiplied in type and scale. The work of caring for and cataloguing this very diverse and ever growing collection became somewhat overwhelming. In the past year funding, time and curatorial support has been dedicated to the hard graft of creating an up to date, digitised catalogue of those collections. At the same time new policies and approaches for the care and repair of delicate or damaged items have been researched and acted upon. We have brought the records up to date and used digital scanning to develop an interactive descriptive catalogue. The MIMSY system has become the backbone of the museum's collection.

Training has been provided to Museum staff and volunteers regarding how to document and report Treasure Trove material which is deposited at the Museum by members of the public. The review of the Museum's display and storage areas has led to the production of a Collection Care & Conservation Policy and a Collection Care & Conservation Plan. This sets out an action plan for the Museum to follow over the next few years in order to continue to make improvements in Collection care activities. It also identifies a priority list of objects which require remedial conservation treatment. It has therefore been both drudgery and a great joy for The Museum staff and volunteers to make such significant progress on a critical and very difficult central task for a small and busy museum such as ours.

In addition to all that, they also took the time to arrange guided walks, the events described above and to make significant progress towards the professional provision of a local genealogical service with global reach and ambitions! Past artist in residence Ruth Macdougall developed new marketing materials for The Museum.

Many of the artefacts displayed in the Museum are part of an enduring collection. As this has grown, due to limited resource, pieces have been unable to be properly catalogued. We intend to bring the records up to date and advance the information through digital scanning and developing an online interactive descriptive source. To do this we drew together and assembled information and material into one source to provide a comprehensive resource of research for the historical legend of the area. We trained volunteers in research techniques, collating information, determining the line of enquiry and initiating, along with supervising and participating in the work, to establish and market a genealogy service.

Taking the Museum and its investigations to the communities and people with involvement in production and identification of heritage material and using artefacts relevant to creating events encouraging and giving participation in a range of artistic medium as the vehicle for successful heritage interpretation. Through Artist Residencies which contained workshops and digital media we produced new exhibitions based on archive materials within an intergraded Schools programme which toured the area.

There are many enquires to the Museum from people tracing their ancestry. The museum will eventually hold a permanent record searchable and themed.

## **Artists**

During 2012 The Museum created 5 Artists' Residency positions. The brief for the appointed Artists was to create new work in their chosen medium informed and inspired by The Museum's collection. The 'Chealamay' beaker's clean lines and gravitas has shaped the beautiful work of ceramicist Lorraine Robson during her Residency. Textile artist Joanne. B. Kaar created new work in paper and a vibrant schools and community project around the topic of The 'Melness Shoe'. Film maker Will Sadler has engaged with the entwined histories of the resettlement or replotting which was involved in the processes of Improvement and Clearance which created the crofting system through a focus on the now abandoned township of Poulouriscaig near Armadale. His specific focus became the ceilidhs for which Poulouriscaig was so famous. Visual artist and printmaker Liz Myhill felt that her artistic journey during her Residency was shaped by 'the marks which had been left in the landscape by successive generations'. She has generated a fascinating geocaching project and original landscape prints through her growing fascination with the interplay of Museum artefacts and books, intriguing items brought into The Museum Antiques Roadshows by members of the public and the many local Bronze and Iron Age remains.

For Déirdre Ní Mhathúna it was the Gaidhlig lore of land and place evidenced through placenames and stories which has informed and shaped her production of deer hide maps and sound stories in the course of her Residency.

## **Lorraine Robson**

### **The Earth Itself**

"In a world where pressure is on instant results, dominated by commercialism and technology, I enjoy the meditative nature of allowing the form to evolve with handwork, imagination, and human labour, using the most primitive and natural materials available, the earth itself".

Lorraine Robson makes beautiful, contemplative, hand-built ceramics paying homage to ancient skills while embracing contemporary influences. She creates intuitively, a fusion of

ideas, drawing on a kaleidoscope of images and observations to make work with unique identity balanced between manufactured, machine made and organic references. Her ceramics, dictated by classic vessel forms, are not designed as functional. Coiling is her method of construction; slab and pinching for complex forms. Each vessel is fired a minimum of three times, the surface sanded and polished using diamond abrasives, then, silicon carbide is applied between each firing to reveal the beauty of naked clay.

Driven by ideas, sculptural qualities in Lorraine's ceramics are of utmost importance. Her focus is on form rather than surface colour or pattern in order to capture imaginations. Glaze is used sparingly to highlight detail, deepen interior shadow or to emphasise subtleties of shape and form. Lorraine exhibits work in the UK and internationally and has work in private and public collections.

#### Lorraine's Residency



IMAGE 411 LORRAINE ROBSON WITH THE MUSEUM'S CHEALAMAY BEAKER, FROM THE BRONZE AGE

I sought to spend time in the Strathnaver Museum and locality, making observations and meeting with people to share my artistic skills and to inform people about ancient hand-building clay construction techniques, inspired by The Museum's Chealamay Beaker, from the Bronze Age. This also raised awareness of contemporary ceramic art practice. By examining and researching ancient vessels, with crude nail and thumb prints from the people that made them thousands of years ago I now question whether I need to remove all trace of human intervention from my own sculptural works. For that reason the vessel I made in response to the residency is unlike my usual output in that I have deliberately left some of the marks created by the build process. The build technique of coiling, sanding, scraping and diamond polishing

is the same although I have employed a lighter touch. I found it quite difficult not to polish away dents and scratches that occurred naturally!



IMAGE 412 BEAKER CREATED BY LORRAINE ROBSON

I finished my vessel, based on burial beaker variations I'd researched, with a lime wax polish and white slip interior. It would have been easy to use a thick white glaze to cover any blemishes. I resisted. I'd also learned that many beakers had a white inlay in their incised lines, thought to be ground animal bone. I wanted to produce a contemporary vessel joining Modern practice with ancient, but a vessel with a ghost like appearance to pay homage to our Bronze Age ancestors and to leave something of myself in the marks and in my own nail prints as my own legacy.

During my initial visit I made careful observations of the Farr Stone taking lots of photos and charcoal rubbings of the relief carvings as well as visiting Caithness Horizons to view the Pictish stones on display there. Joanne Howdle later emailed me lots of info about the stones. I use photography as my 'sketch book' so it was another

opportunity to explore their collection too, for future reference. Museum artefacts are an important feature in my own artistic practice.

I worked with children from Farr High School. The pupils were given a demonstration in pinch and coil building and were then given the opportunity to build their own. I also gave the senior pupils advice on portfolio prep and art as a career choice.

Visitors to the Halladale Roadshow were able to make pinch pots and tiles. I displayed my Coil Pottery Progression exhibit at The Roadshow. It is now the property of Strathnaver Museum as a teaching aid to inform visitors of the build process likely to have been used to create the Chealamay Beaker. I also delivered my contemporary diamond polished coiled Burial Beaker, gifted to the museum as my response piece to the residency.

As part of my research I spoke with an archaeologist and visited Caithness Horizons, Thurso, and the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh, to observe other similar beaker examples discovered from all over UK. It's interesting that most examples, regardless of origin location share similar pattern. I found out that concentric horizontal lines, a common feature, like the lines found round the collar of the Chealamay Beaker, were often made using twine wrapped round the pot when the clay was soft.

For this reason I decided to use string and clay with the Melvich Primary School children to make texture drawings. The children enjoyed rolling out slabs of clay, as if they were baking biscuits; then they arranged string and twine into patterns on the flat clay surface. These plaster

discs could be used to create crayon drawings like the rubbings we'd discussed. The remaining clay slabs, with the string indentations, were then cut into discs, round clay tiles, and were fired in my kiln in West Lothian before returning them to the Strathnaver Museum for display.

## Joanne B Karr

The Life and Times of the Melness Shoe.



IMAGE 413 JOANNE B KARR

My work has been selected for juried exhibitions in locations which include South Korea, Germany, Australia, USA as well as Visual Arts Scotland at The Royal Scottish Academy. Touring exhibitions in Scotland and New Zealand resulted from a two year collaboration with New Zealand artist Lynn Taylor.

I was invited by the Su-Ho Paper Museum and Chaoyang University, Taiwan, as artist-in-residence. Lancashire based Horse and Bamboo Theatre commissioned me to make grass costumes for their production 'Angus' weaver of grass, touring to sell out shows in 2012. The ways in which these items were made was a mystery renowned art therapist, Joyce Laing,

wished to solve. I am continuing to make full size replicas of the now fragile grass garments made by the Uist artist Angus MacPhee to be housed in the Glasgow Museums Resource Centre. I am currently collaborating with Whitworth Art Gallery Manchester and am also artist-in-residence for the Wigtown Book Festival. I am one of four artists who were recipients of a Museums Galleries Scotland and Creative Scotland 'Iconic Artists in Iconic Places' grant.

I have been commissioned by Japanese fashion designer, Kyoko Ide, to make work for their two design shops in Tokyo in 2013. The Botanical Society of Scotland has invited me to give a presentation about my work at their AGM in 2013 at The Royal Botanical Gardens, Edinburgh. I continue to work with both Caithness Horizons and Strathnaver Museum on a range of other new projects inspired by local people and themes.

Joanne's Residency

Overwhelmed with objects and stories in Strathnaver Museum, Joanne decided to find out more about the objects which had remained a mystery 40 years after they were donated to the museum. A lady's shoe and a dogskin buoy were donated to the museum in the 1970's. They had been concealed within the walls of a house in Melness along with a whisky bottle. That's all that was known. Joanne has since discovered that there is a 'directory of concealed shoes' at the museum in Northampton. Northampton was known for its shoe manufacturing. They have over 1,500 shoes in the 'directory of concealed shoes' and The Melness Shoe wasn't one of them. Shoes were apparently concealed in buildings as good luck tokens or to ward off evil spirits. The practice was done in secret and not talked about which makes research difficult. They are usually discovered when a house is being renovated or knocked down.



IMAGE 414 MELNESS SHOE JOANNE KARR

Taking The Melness Shoe as her inspiration Joanne B Kaar, made 200 paper shoes and hid them from Balnakeil to John O'Groats. She drove 290 miles on her mission, and concealing paper shoes in phone boxes, egg honesty boxes, hotels, B&B's, Banks, Hairdressers, mail boxes, green houses, boats, travelling library vans, museums, stone walls and more... Each of the paper shoes concealed around Mackay Country in 2012 contains information about The Melness Shoe and also asks if you know any more about it or if you have ever found anything unusual concealed within walls. Joanne has had a few interesting e-mails from finders of paper shoes and hopes that people might be intrigued enough to visit Strathnaver Museum and see the real one.

Joanne worked with the pupils at Tongue Primary school on shoe themed activities. The children put a collection together in a decorated shoe box to post to Rebecca Shawcross, the Keeper of The Concealed Shoe Directory at Northampton Shoe Museum, so that the Melness shoe has now been added to The Directory. Joanne helped the pupils in Tongue primary school to make a small book about the objects which had been concealed within the walls of the house in Melness. The Northampton Shoe Museum has added the paper shoes and artwork from

Tongue Primary school to their collection. During her Residency Joanne was inspired to make a series of six new works, shoes being the common theme. They are displayed in traditional museum boxes and labelled with the source of inspiration.

### **Will Sadler**

#### **A Part of Who We Are**

For 10 years Will Sadler has run Arpeggio Films ([www.a-films.co.uk](http://www.a-films.co.uk)): a production company based in Newcastle that specialises in producing films with the voluntary, public and cultural sectors – including extensive work with museums and galleries. Through the company, he also managed the multi-award winning Beacon Hill Film Project (2005-2011), which supports young filmmakers with learning disabilities to create and exhibit their own work. In 2011, Beacon Hill Film Project became a separate social enterprise called “Beacon Hill Arts” ([www.beaconhillarts.org.uk](http://www.beaconhillarts.org.uk)) where Will has an ongoing role as the Development Director.



IMAGE 415 FILM MAKER WILL SADLER

#### **Will's Residency**

“A Part of Who We Are”, a short film.

As someone who usually has to follow a very specific brief given to me by a client, I found the freedom to create something of my own inspired by a museum object or theme a very exciting, but also quite daunting task, especially as there are so many starting points one could choose. Of course the Clearances form a core reason for the museum's establishment, but after talking to people during my research trips, I felt that any reference to the Clearances in the film would have to be from an alternative perspective than a straightforward historical account. Following



my initial visit in April, I spent a week in May having lots of meetings with numerous people who could offer advice on a number of themes that I had identified from the museum ranging from the Clearances, to fishing, emigration, industry and ceilidhs and created a first draft film outline. I realised that the place that kept returning to me in my mind was the ruined village of Poulouriscaig, two miles from Armadale. Poulouriscaig is a coastal resettlement village where people cleared from Strathnaver were moved to and I'd met Chris Mackay, whose people came from there. His wife, Margaret had told me that Poulouriscaig was "famous for its ceilidhs" and that "you could always tell there was a ceilidh in Poulouriscaig because you'd see the lights of the lanterns making their way up the hill". This image stuck in my mind. What really struck me was that this isolated village: a difficult place to get to, to live in and make a living – created as a result of a forced displacement of people from their ancestral homes, was nevertheless a welcoming place where you could socialise and share language, stories, music and culture. This is when I had the idea for "A Part of Who We Are": a film that tells the story of Poulouriscaig, its famous ceilidhs – and explores the ongoing role and social tradition of ceilidhs in today's Mackay Country.

If I had to choose one moment that summed up my experience, it'd be when I was working on creating the sequence in the film where footage of one of the ruined cottages that stands in Poulouriscaig dissolves gradually into a picture of the cottage as it was. The picture hangs pride-of-place above Chris Mackay's mantelpiece – and was drawn in the early 1900s by a visitor to a ceilidh in the village. I had spent ages trying to find the same position from where the visitor had drawn the cottage – and after much searching- came upon a rock which, when I sat down, matched the view depicted in the picture perfectly. To know that I was sitting in exactly the same place, capturing exactly the same image where someone had also sat over 100 years before was quite a moving experience.

Creation of the "Virtual Artefacts": Working with Museum Staff and Farr High School

I was keen to spend some of my time training museum volunteers in how to use and get the most out of a "Flip Camera" – a very basic camcorder. I bought a camera for the museum and delivered five training sessions to a total of eight volunteers in how to create a simple 30 second film cut to a voice over. Using these skills, volunteers created several "Virtual Artefacts": 30 second films describing particular objects brought in during the Roadshow events. They are available to view on the museum's YouTube channel (see below).

I also spent a day at Farr High School, and ran a workshop with 9 students there. The students had all been given Flip Cameras in advance of the workshop, and asked to take shots of something that summed up "home" for them. During my session, they chose their favourite clips, edited them using free software (Windows Live Movie Maker) and added an explanatory voiceover. You can see some of these films on the museum's YouTube channel

**Liz Myhill**

### **Marks Left in the Landscape**

The inspirations and outcomes of the residency have for me been very much shaped by my own exploration of Sutherland and the Strathnaver area, in particular while out drawing. Using information or objects in the museum as a lead I found myself particularly drawn to five specific locations; the oral history and photographs relating to life at Sletell and Poulouriscaig, pre-history objects and reconstructed cist which I related to the numerous Stone, Bronze and Iron Age sites in close proximity at Invernaver, coins from Loch Mo Naire and the text by Rev Donald Sage relating to Achness. The experience of drawing in these locations with a sense of events which had occurred there in times past was often a moving experience during which my solitude allowed the sense of peeling back the layers of time to imagine other people inhabiting

that same space. The most intriguing thing I found to be the marks which had been left in the landscape by successive generations of inhabitants, forms often repeating, resources being reused and always the sense of there being the possibility of discovering something which may have lain undiscovered for many, many years. In such a sparsely populated landscape this notion of exploration, discovery and of walking over ground which no other human has trodden for many years is easily appreciated.



IMAGE 416 LIZ MYHILL

I wanted to bring some of this sense of exploration to my work and also in a sense to contextualise some of the information I had gathered – to be able to access information at the sites it related to, get an impression of the locations with which museum exhibits were linked and aim to instill in others a similar enthusiasm and excitement about discovering for themselves the surrounding landscape and its history. In order to bring the landscape into the museum and the museum exhibits and information out into the landscape I decided to make two related objects for each locality, one to be held by the museum, the other to be concealed at the location.

Having collected various natural materials such as grasses, seaweed and grit while out walking on location I decided to incorporate these into the artwork by making collagraph prints – constructing a printing block from collage elements. Each print depicts a panoramic view taken from one of my sketchbooks and incorporates a section of ordnance survey map to increase understanding of the topography of the location as well as being rather appropriate given the quantity of time I spent consulting one while out searching for various landmarks!

The object for concealment at each location would take the form of a “geocache” in which a series of small scale artworks and snippets of information relating to the place and its history plus a log book would be placed in a box and hidden at the source. The co-ordinates are then logged onto the international geocaching website and made available to the museum to enable people to search for and discover the box themselves. A trial cache was placed at Poulouriscaig

in September and has so far attracted several visitors even during the winter months. I hope these geocaches will promote both enjoyment of the surrounding area as well as encourage visitors to the museum to expand upon what they may have learned.

## Déirdre ní Mhathúna

### ‘Gàidhlig as natural as sweet birdsong in spring’



IMAGE 417 DÉIRDRE NÍ MHATHÚNA

tro na h-ainmean-àite ionadail. Lean mi rathaidean Wade air na suirbhidhean a rinn Roy às dèidh Blàr Chùil Lodair. Air craicnean fèidh, tharraing mi dealbh Gàidhealach, ach le fiosrachadh Roy na bhroinn. ’S ann às dèidh sin, le mo cho-theacs na àite, a lorg mi ciall guthan mhuintir Shrath Nabhair a bh’ air an tasgadh ann an Sgoil Eòlais na h-Alba. Nise, tha dà shreath agam ri thaisbeanadh dhiubh – an sgeulachd chlaisneachd, bho beul gu beul, agus sgeulachd nam mapaichean. Tha an dà fhear a’ comharrachadh àm far an robh na daoine nas prìseile na fearann, far an robh a’ Ghàidhlig cho nàdarrach ri ceòl binn nan eun as t-earrach.

Seeking out my artist’s world my Gaelic one also emerges, intricately intertwined within. Over this past year I have relished the opportunity to discover and share the story of Strathnaver through my artwork. Up and down the route between Bettyhill and Edinburgh, I noted landmarks of the Gàidheal everywhere. On every mountain and peak and river, the story of the people is told through place names and local lore. As soon as I found the deer hides, it was clear that I’d make maps on and from them. I followed Wade’s roads, through Roy’s Surveys made after the Battle of Culloden. On deer hides I drew a Gaelic image, but with Roy’s information at its core. It was only now, when the context was in place that I found the real

My previous work was a mixture of arts consultancy and development, festivals and events, notably the legendary Café Graffiti, Edinburgh, and theatre design all over Scotland, (1980, 2002). My first professional engagement was as a costume design apprentice at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. In 2006 I graduated with a BA (Hons) Sculpture from Edinburgh College of Art. I’m currently finishing a Diploma in Gaelic Language and Culture through UHI Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic College on Skye.

### Déirdre’s Residency

A’ sireadh son cridhe mo shaoghal ealain, gheibhear mo shaoghal Gàidhealach, ’s an dà fhear fìchte-fuaighte ri chèile. Tron bhliadhna a tha seachad oirnn, lorg mi cothrom sònraichte sgeulachdan is eachdraidh sgìre Shrath Nabhair a thaisbeanadh ann an dòigh phearsanta, chruthachail. Thall ’s a-bhos eadar Am Blàran Odhar agus Dùn Èideann, mhothaich mi comharran nan Gàidheal air feadh na dùthcha. Lorg mi sgeulachdan nan daoine air gach beann is meall is abhainn, tro bheul-aithris agus

value and meaning in the Strathnaver voices deposited in the School of Scottish Studies. And now I have two streams of work to show you: the sound-story and the tale of the map-drawings. Each marks a time when the people were more valuable than the land, when Gàidhlig was as natural as sweet birdsong in spring.

## Pibrochs and Poppies 2015



IMAGE 418 PIBROCHS AND POPPIES LOGO

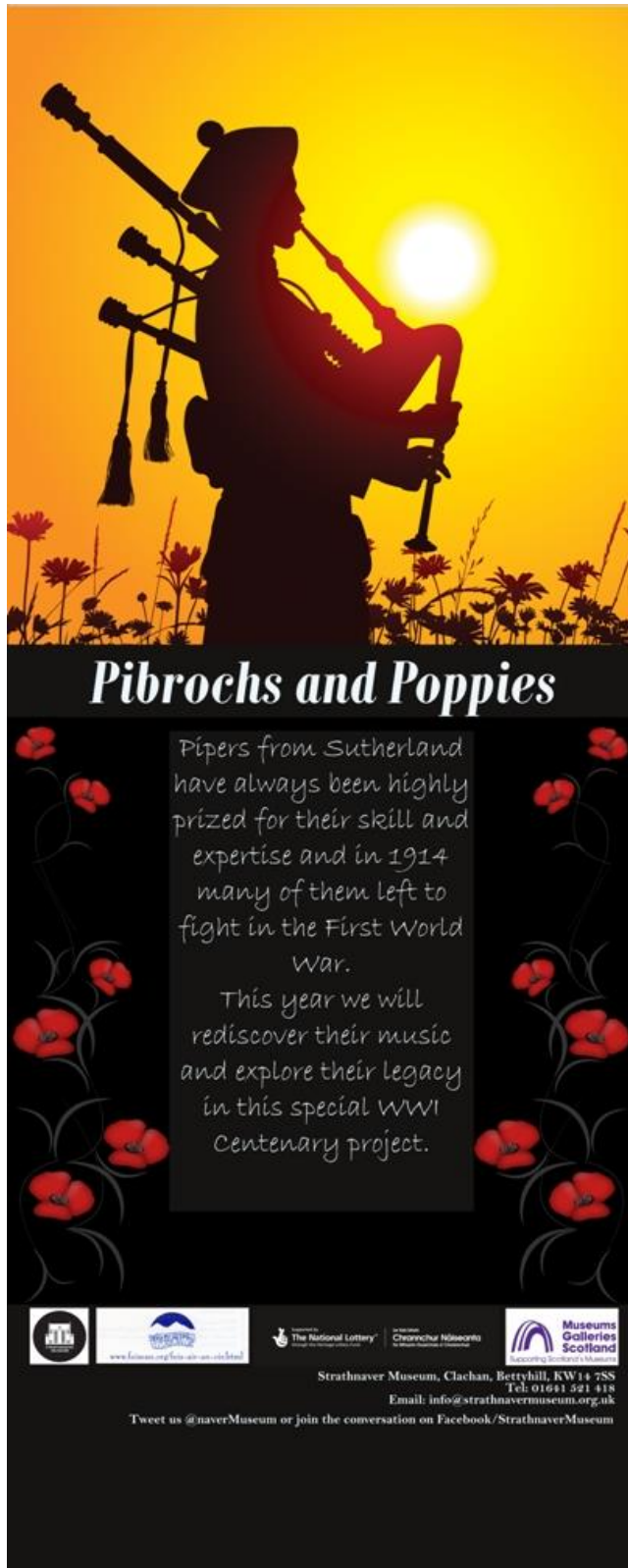
To mark the centenary of the First World War Mackay Country coordinated Strathnaver Museum to work with Fèis air an Oir to explore the role of music during the Great War. The project ran for 12 months and was made possible through funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund First World War: then and now programme, and Museums Galleries Scotland. The aim was to strengthen both an interest in, and understanding of, local music heritage and culture. The project will also see the composition of a brand new piece of music to commemorate those who were involved in WW1.

As part of the project we delivered music workshops and training for volunteers to enable them to develop their heritage skills. The information gathered was digitally recorded so that it could be shared on a dedicated web-page where everyone can get involved and contribute information. An exhibition, CD and DVD of the end of project performance which showcases a selection of traditional tunes alongside the new composition.

- 39 events held engaging 1,022 participants;
- Engaged over 100 volunteers;
- A booklet compiling the research findings produced available at Strathnaver Museum
- An original composition; on CD of the music produced;
- A DVD Film Pibrochs and Poppies - A commemoration of Strathnaver Pipers in World War One available on You Tube

- A travelling exhibition;
- Professional masterclasses provided to the young musicians;
- Programme of more informal training to volunteers and other participants.

The pipers we have identified were:



- John D Macdonald, 1st Battalion Scots Guards
- William Macdonald, 2nd Battalion Scots Guards
- Alexander Mackay, Lovat Scouts
- Angus Gunn Mackay, 1/6th Battalion Seaforth Highlanders
- Angus Sutherland Mackay, 1/6th Battalion Seaforth Highlanders
- Donald M Mackay, 1/5th Battalion Seaforth Highlanders
- William Mackay, 1/6th Battalion Seaforth Highlanders
- William Duncan Mackay, 8th Service Battalion Seaforth Highlanders
- Donald Iain Mackenzie, Scots Guards

Fiona Mackenzie was commissioned as researcher. Fiona has a background in heritage with a wealth of experience working with Timespan Museum and Arts Centre: Scottish Natural Heritage: Historic Scotland, Sutherland Partnership and with Strathnaver Museum: as a Development Manager.

Carol Anne Mackay Having been born and brought up in the North Coast area, was very interested to be involved in such a project and to able to be part of a team that will research and preserve any information and music from the area.

*“I have really enjoyed being part of two other local projects, Urachach and Drine, both celebrating music and Gaelic song from Mackay Country. I believe it is so important to preserve the music and song of our area so that we can pass it on and allow it to survive for future generations. I have experience teaching music to both*

IMAGE 419 PIBROCHS AND POPPIES POSTER

*adults and children and have also worked as a co-ordinator for various different music projects in the past.*

*Several of my compositions have been recorded on cd's and used in tv and radio broadcasts in the past. I enjoy writing tunes and like to keep them sounding as traditional and true to my musical roots as I can. Qualifications I have include a degree in Scottish Traditional Music from the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and an NC in Gaelic studies from Sabhal Mor Ostaig. My main instruments are the Highland bagpipes and Accordion although I have been known to play others too!!”*

*“Donnie MacDonald, who was identified through the project, rediscovered some old tunes composed by his Father, Willie MacDonald, who was a military piper in WWI. When I learnt of the plans to include these rediscovered tunes into the wider project, to add an intergenerational angle and to enable young musicians from the local community to bring them back to life – I thought this was a perfect focus for the film I had been asked to make.*

*Meanwhile the refurbishment of pipes which belonged to another WWI piper identified through the project: Alec MacKay and the composition of a new tune inspired by the old by local musician Carol-Anne Mackay offered the film a Modern dimension and relevance.*

*Learning about WWI pipers through their music offers an innovative and accessible way to be told their stories and to learn of their experiences during the war – but also demonstrates their positive spirit and hope expressed through their music at a time of extreme hardship.”*

North Sutherland is renowned for producing talented pipers and it is this legacy that Strathnaver Museum and Feis air an Oir are exploring in an innovative project called Pibrochs and Poppies.

Fiona Mackenzie, Project Researcher with Strathnaver Museum explains that: “Mackay Country pipers, from as early as the 17th Century, have been renowned for their great skill and expertise. During the 19th Century Mackay Country pipers were especially prized as it was said that they ‘came down as if trained in a school””.

The focus for both the musicians and researchers is to explore the role of music, particularly bagpipe music, during the First World War. It is thought that more than 2,500 pipers served on the Western Front alone, suffering heavy casualties. So far the project has identified 9 pipers from Mackay Country who were involved in World War One. With the help of the piper’s relatives the project is uncovering the piper’s stories and bringing their music to a new audience.

The musicians from Feis air an Oir have been learning a number of tunes written by William ‘Gruids’ Macdonald. Willie, born in Melness, was a prolific composer and joined the Scots Guards as a piper in 1912 serving in France and Belgium where he was badly gassed. Willie’s son and grandson, Donnie and John, came along to share their memories of Willie at a recent event organised to find out more about Mackay Country pipers. They told the researchers that despite being discharged ‘100% disabled’ in 1917 Willie fought back to mobility and eventually joined the Lovat Scouts as Pipe Sergeant. He also spend many years teaching piping in Skye.

A contemporary and friend of Willie’s was Tongue piper Donald Iain Mackenzie who also served in the Scots Guards during the First World War. Donald’s daughter Betty and granddaughter June have shared Donald’s story and that of his brothers James and David. James served with the Royal Engineers and was killed in action in France. Donald survived the

war and passed on his piping knowledge to his son Hamish, June's son Ewan is also a piper having been taught by the late Pipe Major Charles O'Brien.



IMAGE 420 8TH SERVICE BATTALION PIPE BAND TAKEN IN 1914.

Duncan Matheson and his wife Brenda from Brora also came along to share their family history. Duncan's uncle, William Duncan Mackay, originated from Skerray and served with the Seaforth Highlanders 8th Service Battalion as a piper. Arriving in France on the 9th July 1915, William's Battalion was soon in the front line preparing for their first major offensive at the Battle of Loos. On the 25th September the pipers from the Battalion took up position and began to play as they led "A" Company toward the German lines. It was as William played his Battalion through the gas in no-man's land that he fell, aged just 24.

Five pipers were killed that day and another five were wounded including Donald Valentine whose grandson's step-daughter Marelle Giles a teacher in Kent has sent us this photograph of the 8th Service Battalion Pipe Band taken in 1914. Duncan, who had not previously seen this image, has confirmed that his uncle William is pictured on the far right holding his pipes before he embarked for the Western Front.

The loss of pipers at Loos illustrates that the changing nature of military combat ushered in by the First World War, as soldiers dug in to trench warfare, made the piper who traditionally led from the front particularly vulnerable. Of course a piper is no more vulnerable than any other soldier but due to their unique skill set are more difficult to replace. After suffering heavy casualties at the beginning of the conflict most regiments tried to keep their pipers in relative security but it was the presence of the piper that was seen to inspire the men. On the battlefield under heavy fire the sound of the pipes may be drowned out but it was the piper that was followed, not his instrument.



The team have also uncovered what life was like on the Western Front thanks to Morag Sutherland from Brora who has kindly sent the team copies of letters William Mackay from Durness wrote. William like many Mackay Country men served with the 6th Seaforth Highlanders which was a territorial unit. Two other pipers from Mackay Country also served in this Battalion; Angus Gunn Mackay from Skerray and Angus Sutherland Mackay from Trantlebeg.

William describes his first experience of “going over the bags” during the first day of the Battle of Arras on 9th April 1917. It was during the opening day of the Battle that his Mackay Country comrades fell as they advanced on enemy lines. Angus S Mackay was the older brother of renowned piper John Mackay, Trantlebeg who was still a boy during the First World War. On the last day of the Battle of Arras William was killed during intense fighting around the Cemical works in Roux.

Another Mackay Country man who was involved in the First World War was Alexander ‘Alec’ Mackay. Alec saw service in Egypt, the Dardanelles and France with the Lovat Scouts. Although shot through the jaw. Alec recovered and fought on until the end of the war. Strathnaver Museum has kindly been loaned Alec’s bagpipes, medals and other memorabilia by his great nephew Allan Mackay. Alec’s story features in a new exhibition at Strathnaver Museum which will run throughout 2015.



IMAGE 421 CAROL-ANNE PLAYS ALEC’S REFURBISHED WORLD WAR ONE PIPES AT DURNESS HIGHLAND GATHERING

The project team will be at the Durness Highland Gathering on 24th July and they would be delighted to meet anyone with ancestors who were pipers during the First World War with a connection to Mackay Country. As part of the day a new composition written by Carol-Anne Mackay, another former pupil of Pipe Major O’Brien, will be premiered on Alec’s refurbished World War One pipes.

## Events

- Introductory Ceilidh November 2014
- A piping workshop held by Allan Macdonald
- Research workshop
- Tunes and Tales arranged for intergenerational workshop based around interviewing and information gathering
- Two school introductory workshops
- Ancestral Tourism Workshop, University of Strathclyde focused on this project
- Family History Classes trip to Highland Archive Centre in connection with Pibrochs and Poppies
- Pibrochs and Poppies: Music Workshop A music workshop with Farr High School S1s for the Pibrochs and Poppies project.
- March to the Museum with Festival of Museums event with a specific element commemorating WWI pipers.
- Music Workshop In association with Caithness Gigs, Music Plus Mentoring and Y-Not. Music workshop with musicians Ross Ainslie and Jarlath Henderson.
- Make your own music video workshop
- Durness Highland Gathering, Pibrochs and Poppies display and presentation of the new composition
- Feis Chataibh Ceilidh Trail session at the museum focused on WW1 tunes as identified in research
- Feis Chataibh Ceilidh Trail with Pibrochs and Poppies at Bettyhill Village Hall concert and ceilidh
- Music workshops learning researched tunes and new composition
- Video Workshops
- Training

The focus for both the musicians and researchers was to explore the role of music, particularly bagpipe music, during the First World War. It is thought that more than 2,500 pipers served on the Western Front alone, suffering heavy casualties. The project identified pipers from Mackay Country who were involved in World War One. With the help of the piper's relatives the project is uncovering the piper's stories and bringing their music to a new audience.

Old tunes composed by a World War I piper from North West Sutherland were accidentally discovered by his son. The reels were brought back to life by local young people and form the basis of a new piece of music by composer Carol Anne Mackay which received its premiere at the Durness Highland Gathering.

## Music

Track One:

### **4/4 March**

### **'The Piper's Place'**

Track one begins with a lively and perhaps hopeful 4/4 march to represent the pipers in their own rightful place before they enlisted with the army, left their communities and joined the regimental pipe bands.

### **Retreat March**

### **'Rank Reality'**

This tune has a more military feel and represents when the pipers were in battle and leading their regiments out to the Front Line. It is composed in a minor key to imitate the feeling of sadness and fear that would overcome many pipers and soldiers during War times. I am joined on snare drum by Grant Lyall from Wick for this tune.

Track Two:

**Slow Air**                      **‘The Fallen Pipers’**

This project has made me much more aware of the role of the piper during World War One and this part of the composition is in memory of the many pipers that never returned from the War. Thanks to Gordon Gunn from Wick for adding the lovely backing to this track.

Track Three:

**4/4 March**                      **‘The Piper’s Place’**

This is the same melody as the first part of the composition but it is played in a less lively and less hopeful style and is to represent the pipers returning back to their communities.

Track Four:

**Strathspey**                      **‘The Dancing Piper’**

In our small communities, the role of the piper was still very important after returning from the War. A piper would often play for dancing at local ceilidhs and gatherings and this strathspey is in the style of a traditional dance tune that would have been used. Pipers would often have been trained as Highland dancers too and this tune could be used for Ceilidh or Highland dancing. I’ve played an extra 8 bars as an introduction to this tune so that it can be used for a Highland Fling if required!

**Reel**                              **‘Reel for Ronnie’**

The Highland Bagpipes are a very important part of our musical future as well as heritage. Other traditional instruments play along with the bagpipe melody in this tune and demonstrate how accompaniment and harmony can complement the tune. The tune is named after Ronnie Lansley, the co-ordinator of the Pibrochs and Poppies Project. I’m delighted to be joined by Gordon Gunn on Fiddle, Grant Lyall on percussion and Marc Clement from Inverness on Guitar for the two tunes on this track.

## Rob Donn

(Pronounced Down) (1714-1778)

### The Mackay Country (Dùthaich 'ic Aoidh) Bard

Rob Donn Mackay was born in 1715 on the Mackay estate of Strath More below Ben Hope. Alltnacaillich. All that remains around this site are a few ruins. "The stream of the Old Woman". He came into the world, in a "blast o' January wind".

As Rob Donn put this:

*I was born in the winter  
Among the lowering mountains,  
And my first sight of the world  
Snow and wind about my ears.*

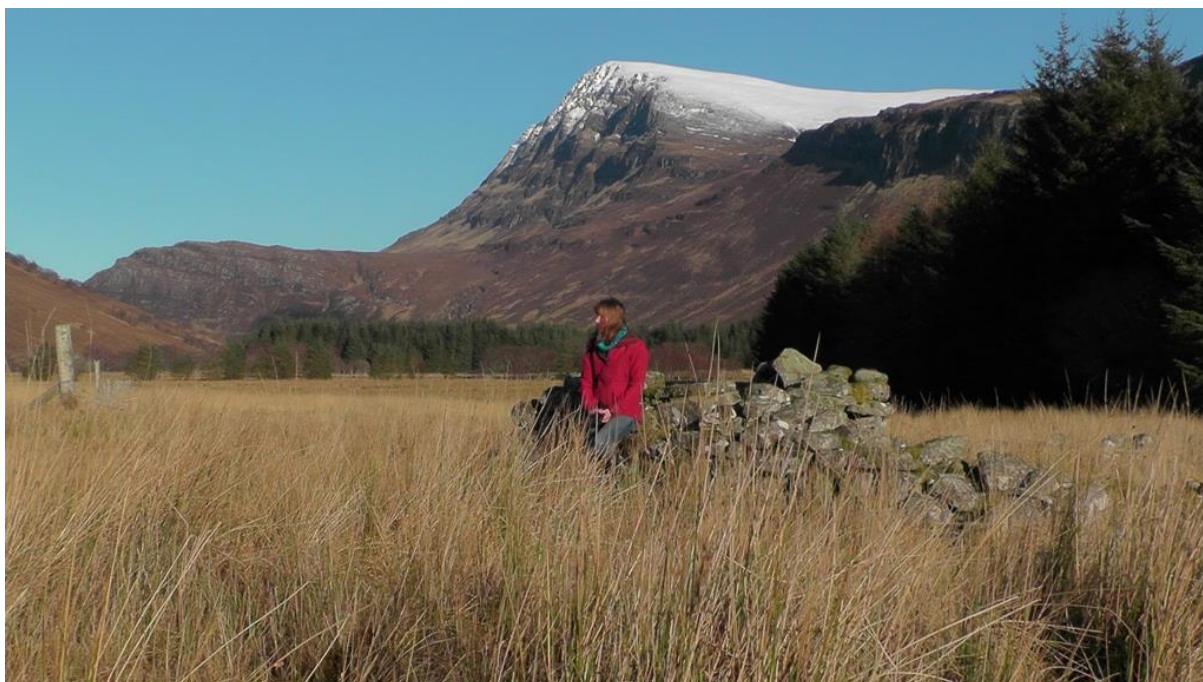


IMAGE 422 SARAH AT ALLTNACAILLICH ON THE RUINS OF WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN THE BIRTHPLACE OF ROB DONN

Quotation in the essay "The Life of Rob Donn" by Hew Morrison.

*Roderick Morrison of Cearvaig, near Cape Wrath, has given the only personal description we have of the bard. Roderick described him as "brown haired, brown eyed, rather pale complexioned, clear skinned, and, I would say, good-looking. When he entered a room his eye caught the whole at a glance, and the expression of his countenance always indicated much animation and energy. In figure he was rather below middle size, and stout and well-formed for his size. In the month of November preceding his death, he attended the interment of an uncle of mine, who was a co-age of his. When the coffin was lowered into the grave, Robert turned to me and said, 'There is my co-age committed to earth, aged 63, and before this time next year I shall be laid down here too.' ... I have always understood him to have been particularly happy in domestic life. His wife, Janet Mackay, was a remarkably sensible woman, and so active in her habits that she kept their concerns at home in order when Robert was absent. She was a fine singer, and it was delightful to hear them in the winter evenings sing*

*together. Two of the daughters had some turn for composing verses, and occasionally amused their father by quick replies to his impromptus, composed to any passing incident."*

Speaking in a dialect that was often the subject of erroneous 'correction' in early printed editions of his poetry, it has been in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that his contributions to the Gaelic poetic tradition have come to be truly appreciated. Rob Donn is an extremely important figure in the history of Gaelic literature and might arguably be as important to Gaelic poetry as his contemporary Robert Burns is to poetry in Scots. Donn lived through a chaotic period in Highland history as the Jacobite Risings resulted in lasting changes throughout the Highlands. The son of a small tenant farmer, he had limited opportunities to obtain a formal education, although he may have attended school long enough to begin learning his letters and eventually acquired some familiarity with spoken English. This is assumed by a reference in an obscure manuscript catalogue saying he went to school at Eriboll (this was likely only for a few months) and a mention in one song. As a child he was taken into the family of John Mackay of Muiseal, working initially as a herd-boy and later as a cattleman. The bard remained in Strath More for two-thirds of his life. Because Rob Donn could neither read nor write, he composed poems and songs entirely in his head, often with catchy tunes so that people could remember them. He then sang or recited them to listeners who did the same, circulating them throughout the community and beyond in a process of oral transmission he fully intended and sometimes mentioned explicitly. In other words, poems and songs were not just art forms but the journalism and social media of their day.

Poetry played a pivotal role in people's lives and circulated rapidly by oral transmission. Donn's use of language sometimes amounted to shorthand, he expressed himself with a management of language, yet embodied complex concepts and double meanings that often depend on alternative definitions of Gaelic words. Donn dictated his poetry from memory only towards the end of his life and was particularly notorious for his often-acerbic tongue. Rob Donn's enchantment lay in the living people about him and to understand the significance is to penetrate literary circumstances very different from today's.

Rob Donn composed at least 220 Gaelic poems, most intended to be sung, on subjects ranging from elegies and laments, social and political commentary, love and courtship, satire and humour, to praise, nature and sea songs. The one hundred known tunes are also quite varied, sometimes borrowed and sometimes original, some lively and others lugubrious. But everything – words and music – was created in his own fertile mind, and then communicated with his own voice to an avid audience. Rob Donn was particularly interested in the living people about him which has given us a unique insight into the entrenched clan and cleric influences on the way of life of Gaelic Mackay Country. Rob Donn remains the last and greatest of those who were in a position to interpret and enlighten us about the traditional, tribal way of life of Scotland before it was destroyed.

As a cattle herder and soldier in the Sutherland Fencibles (1759-1763), Rob Donn travelled widely in Scotland, meeting both English and Gaelic-speakers and hearing and learning the music they played and sang. After living briefly at Freisgill near Whiten Head on Loch Eriboll (where he was banished for poaching), he ended his days at Balnakeil in Durness, where he is buried outside the old church.



IMAGE 423 THE SIMPLE GRAVESTONE OF ROB DONN

Rob Donn's work leaves a legacy by depicting the activities of his time providing a valuable social commentary which describes people from all social spheres. The landscape and wider environment feature prominently in his work which offers an image of a long-lost way of life. His use of word, music and alliteration, held together by a strong use of rhythm, whether sung or spoken, make compelling performance material.

In 2012-13 Ian Copeland and George Gunn were involved in Moving Times, a Mackay Country project. They collaborated in a piece "*A walk in Strathnaver in memorandum of Rob Donn Mackay.*" This is well worth a listen.

Rob Donn's life coincided with the two major Jacobite campaigns, in 1715 (when he was only one) and in 1745. Rob's poems are written in the Sutherland dialect, and from their terseness, as well as the use of peculiar words, are difficult to translate. Rob Donn Mackay is deemed, by the natives of Sutherland, to be the best poet of the western highlands. They have been classed as humorous, satirical, solemn, and descriptive. His chief works are elegies and satires. Rob Donn can be seen as a singer-songwriter who, had he lived today, might well have sung of contemporary issues and personalities, like Sorley Maclean or Angus MacNicol. His verse had a quality which conveys meaning and shades of emotion even to those who do not understand Gaelic.

Precocious child he began composing verses when he was only three or four years old. Like Mozart, he had the ability to produce intricately composed work seemingly out of nowhere and his incisive wit gave his poems a cliff-hanging fascination between satire and praise. So spontaneous was his work, yet so well constructed, if he was stopped in the middle of composing, the poem ends but is still perfect.



IMAGE 424 A MONUMENT, ERECTED TO THE MEMORY OF ROB DONN IN 1829, IN THE CHURCHYARD OF DURNES, DURNES, SCOTLAND

Rob Donn died in 1778, at the age of sixty-four. A monument of polished granite was, by subscription, erected to his memory in 1829, in the churchyard of Durness, his native parish. There are 4 inscriptions in 4 languages, one on each face of the monument translated read

- Latin: "Siste Viator" Halt your journey, traveler, here lies beneath this turf Donn, Who sang in the countryside of girls outstanding in beauty; Someone who celebrated new marriages with joyful song; Someone who wept for those who had served well with mournful voice; And bitterly in various rhymes devoured his own mis-deeds.
- Greek: from Sophocles Oedipus Rex /Tyrannos, lines 1476-7 Tis right. I prepared this for you knowing the delight you feel here, the same now as long ago"

- Gaelic: We were a rough crowd, without judgement, at the hour you left, it was like a pruning for us.

A monument far more in keeping with the originality and simplicity of his character was placed upon his grave by his surviving friends soon after his demise—a rude, unpolished slab, containing no other inscription than the two emphatic words "Robert Donn."



IMAGE 425 INLAY OF POLISHED GRANITE.

The name of the bard has long been a topic of difference. The right of the bard to the surname of Mackay has been called in question, and it is alleged that his true surname was Calder. In literature Rob Donn's name was well known as Mackay prior to 1829. In the first Statistical Account of Scotland, page 531, vol. xx. :

“The celebrated Highland bard, Robert Donn alias Mackay, was a native of Strathnaver not far distant from Thurso.” It will thus appear that documentary evidence is as conclusive for the Mackay surname of the bard as traditional belief has all along been. By forgetting the prevalence of bye-names in the Reay Country and descriptive names or nick names are very common in this area, generations of families have been known by their “descriptive” name a practice which is still common today. An article written around 1900 The Bard's Surname. By Rev. Adam Gunn, M.A. discusses this topic in some detail and concludes “the surname of Rob Donn is beyond the region of dispute.”

### **Rob Donn’s Banishment to Freisgill**

From a report on a study by Dr. Isobel MacPhail,.

The illiterate bard, Rob Donn, born in the farm called Alltnacaillich in Strathmore in 1715. Rob moved to Muiseal, just up the river a little, when he started work as a boy for Iain Mac



Eachainn. Mac Eachainn became aware of his artistic gift for poetry and song composition and supported him in this. Once he married Rob lived across the river from Muiseal at Bad-na h-Achlaise. His songs are remembered and sung right into the present day. His best known song, something of a Sutherland anthem these days, is Gleann a Gollaidh – or Glen Golly, in English.

Local legend has it that Rob Donn was banished out to Freisgill by the Chief of Mackay because the Chief was weary of Rob Donn's fondness for getting a good beast. The account from 1829 calls the place Allt-coire-Fraisgil. [1] Hew Morrison talks of 'Friskin's Cave'. [2] 'Gill' is Norse for small steep glen or gulley and Freisgill is translated as Noisy Gully. The theory was that away from Strath More and Durness itself, out on Whiten Head, he would have no deer to poach. Whiten Head is characterised as bleak and windswept – a traumatic contrast to the shelter, trees, company and civility of life in the straths. It is a good story and has much truth. It is certain that a lively, clever, and convivial character such as Rob Donn' would find the social isolation of Freisgill a difficult banishment in comparison to the close social contact of life in Strath More or Durness. In his time at Freisgill, according to the Roy Military map, there were 7 buildings and hence about circa 20, 35 inhabitants. The route in would not have been the one used by estate workers today which runs off one of the loops of old road on the Moine road. The routes in Rob Donn's day would have been either via Inverhope at the mouth of the River Hope or over the hill from Melness. In living memory children from Freisgill went to school in Melness. They boarded there Monday to Friday. The last family to live at Freisgill did so during World War II. The keepers tell me that there was also a house out on Whiten head itself, north east of Freisgill. It is commonly referred to as 'MacGregor's'. There may also have been people there in Rob Donn's day. The Roy map does not help us with that because it does not always record just one or two houses, only the larger townships. For Rob Donn the route to company and conviviality from Freisgill would have been over to the Melness townships or back into Strath More and the townships there. Freisgill for him was indeed out of the normal run of social contact which centered on Tongue and Balnakeil where Donald, 4<sup>th</sup>. Lord Reay lived. Rob Donn was in demand at social gatherings of the elite and the common folk in Mackay Country and beyond. He was an elder of the Kirk and expected to attend presbytery meetings in Tongue. The local ministers and other elders took an interest and a great pride in his work. It is said that it was in the enforced isolation at Freisgill that he wrote the song Gleanna Gollaidh. The chorus expresses deep longing for 'the fine trees' of the tree lined Glen Golly. The verses praise Glen Golly. In comparison Freisgill is open, bleak, and treeless.

Kenneth Douglas's book about Rob Donn's poems and life includes a memoir at the start which draws on the memories of Rob Donn's daughters, cousins, friends and neighbours.[3] Writing in 1829, Douglas opens with an account of how Rob Donn's mother was musical and was known for her recitations of Ossian's poems. In this memoir it is stated that Rob Donn was granted the tenure of land at Freisgill and 'employed to shoot such number of deer from time to time, as Lord Reay's family might wish to have supplied'.[4] However in due course when a neighboring deer forest (not named) sought to build up its numbers Rob Donn was accused of being rather free about the numbers of deer he took from the hill. In discussing this matter the author states that to the Highlander taking a deer cannot be forbidden – 'Is ionraic a' mhèirle na fèidh' which he translates as 'Righteous theft is the (killing of) deer'. On several occasions the law was brought to bear upon Rob Donn in an attempt to stop him taking so many deer. During his time at Freisgill he was therefore summoned to appear before the Sherriff-Substitute and the Public Prosecutor, 'when the issue must have been banishment to the Colonies, in terms of statue'.[5] In spite of the potential severity of the penalties, on the way to court with his accomplice in the hunt and his wife Janet, when they came upon a herd of hinds Rob shot two on sight. His wife Janet and his neighbour were in great alarm but the story goes that Rob jested about the matter. Douglas suggests that on account of his poetic gift and fine repartee, a talent

much admired in Reay Country to this day, Rob Donn enjoyed a great deal of protection by the landowners and others amongst the ruling classes. He was little deterred by this incident and was again in the same trouble in no time at all. Douglas opines that it was shortly after these traumas that Donald, Lord Reay appointed Rob as ‘Bo-man’ or head Herdsman at Baile na Cille (Balnakeil). This was an important and responsible position which involved the whole household in significant responsibilities for the cattle, their feed and their milk. The Bo-man would also have several herders to manage as well. Apart from his few years in the army around 1756 Rob and his family lived at Baile na Cille for the rest of his days. Here Rob Donn was in the midst of a busy and populous community with other inspiring minds such as Rev Murdoch Macdonald and his family and all the social events associated with the Chief of Mackay’s household. In this time and in this place in that end of the Durness parish music, debate, learning, and repartee were rich and intellectually nourishing.

As for Freisgill, it in fact has its own beauty which is very different from the inland charms of Gleanna Gollaidh. The cave at Freisgill was so esteemed by the early nineteenth century that in 1814 it was visited by Walter Scott – yet to be made ‘Sir’ at that time. He had managed to secure a place on a seasonal run being made by the Commissioners of The Northern Lighthouse Board in the company of one of the Stevensons of lighthouse building fame. They left Leith on 28<sup>th</sup>. July 1814 and made first for Shetland before taking a route via the Orkneys, the north coast of Mackay Country and then onwards to Skye, Mull and Oban. Walter Scott was making this trip as research for his new (extended!) poem ‘Lord of the Isles’. His correspondence shows how anxious he was to get this work finished and to secure a good publishing deal, in the midst of debt and difficulty. In a letter in September he provides a brief description of Smoo Cave without mentioning the name of it and in several letters he mentions Cape Wrath. Whiten Head too is an intriguing and impressive coastline. The modern route to Freisgill is about 4 miles. I am still exploring what might have been the two common and logical routes (to Melness and to Inverhope) in Rob Donn’s day but I know their general path.

[1] Kenneth Douglas, *Orain Le Rob Donn: Songs and Poems in the Gaelic Language by Robert Mackay, the Celebrated Bard of Lord Reay’s Country, Sutherlandshire with a Memoir of the Author, and Observations on His Character and Poetry* (Inverness: Published by subscription: Kenneth Douglas, Inverness; R. Douglas, Tain; O’Liver and Boyd, Edinburgh; R. Griffin and Co Glasgow; and Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, London., 1829), p. xix.

[2] Hew Morrison, *Tourist Guide to Sutherland and Caithness: With Historical, Antiquarian and Angling Notes*, 2003 edition Spot On Printing, Dornoch. (Brechin: William Rae, Wick; John Menzies & Co, Edinburgh; Simpkin, Marshal & Co, London; Black & Johnson, Brechin., 1883), p. 109.

[3] Kenneth Douglas, *Orain Le Rob Donn: Songs and Poems in the Gaelic Language by Robert Mackay, the Celebrated Bard of Lord Reay’s Country, Sutherlandshire with a Memoir of the Author, and Observations on His Character and Poetry* (Inverness: Published by subscription: Kenneth Douglas, Inverness; R. Douglas, Tain; O’Liver and Boyd, Edinburgh; R. Griffin and Co Glasgow; and Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, London., 1829).

[4] Douglas, p. xviii.

[5] Douglas, p. xx.

### **Rob Donn Commemorations**

In September 2012 people from all around Mackay Country gathered at Balnakeil cemetery to celebrate renovations carried out to the monument. Rob Donn has been celebrated in many ways in Mackay Country over the years. Strathnaver Museum holds the work of Dr. Ian Grimble who studied the life of Rob Donn and wrote several books. Dr Ian Grimble was a founder of Strathnaver Museum and dedicated all his works to the Museum. Work by Donn was adopted by the Gaelic Department of Glasgow University as one of their textbooks.

In 2007 Mackay Country Trust supported Feis Air an Oir with a dedicated ceilidh to Rob Donn at Strathy Hall. Fear an taighe was Cathy-Barbara Mackay of Tongue and, in addition to young performers from Feis Air and Oir itself, there was an array of musical stars from the Gaelic world including MOD gold medallist Alison Rapson, BBC Radio Scotland Young Musician of the Year 2004 James Graham from Lochinver, and singers Marlene Rapson, Jean Mackay and David Morrison. Both the Melvich and Lairg Gaelic Choirs were represented as well. The up surging interest in traditional music was represented by fiddler Jenna Reid and piper Carol-Anne Mackay of the successful west-coast band Dòchas and, to ensure that those who had striven to keep the music alive in the doldrums days were not forgotten, there was a special tribute from Emily Wade, to the late Pipe Major Charlie O'Brien of Strathnaver, who honed the skills of many a young musician in his day. The keynote speech in praise of Rob Donn came from Dr Donald William Stewart, a native of Back in Lewis, who teaches in Edinburgh University and Sabhal Mor Ostaig and who has a special interest 18<sup>th</sup> century Gaelic literature. The event, which included a much appreciated buffet, was very well supported from throughout Sutherland and Caithness.

Rob Donn songs and poetry featured at Celtic Connections the Gaelic promotion group, Taigh na Gàidhlig Mhealanais, centred on Melness, marked the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the great bard of Durness, on a special show of his songs and associated music at the 2014 Celtic Connections winter festival in Glasgow. Carol Anne Mackay piper to the Clan Mackay carried out her student dissertation on the works, poems and songs. Practically every ceilidh, local and national MOD always contain songs of Rob Donn. There has been conferences and lectures specifically about Rob Donn. Across Mackay Country in subtle places references or quotes can be found. The renovations of the access, interpretation and creation of a picnic area at Smoo Cave incorporated stanzas of Rob Donn's work as inscriptions on benches.

In 2017 Strathnaver Museum and Mackay Country Community Trust worked on an exciting two year celebration of renowned Gaelic bard Rob Donn. The opportunity to involve an academic scholar having spent six years studying the works of Rob Donn and is now the most recognised expert was an opportunity to initiate the most detailed local heritage project undertaken about Rob Donn. Collaborating on the work was Dr Ellen Beard whose family (Great Grandmother) emigrated from Sangobeag Durness in the 1880's. Ellen was born and brought up in the USA and spent her working life there as an attorney with US Government dealing with the application of labour laws in areas such as Health and Safety, minimum wages, government programmes and various aspects of work and pensions legislation. However, when she was a teenager, she was told by her mother that she was descended from a Poet Laureate of Scotland by the name of Rob Donn and this revelation, though it turned out that the bard enjoyed no such title – indeed no such title existed, sowed a seed of interest which has borne fruit over several years. During that time Ellen spent two years at Sabhal Mor Ostaig mastering the Gaelic language, followed by six years at Edinburgh University where she has attained an MSc in Celtic Studies followed by a PhD on the works of Rob Donn. Throughout her life Ellen has developed an interest in music and, in her doctoral thesis, has used this expertise to help in analysing the works of the great poet. Her thesis explores the musical world and the song compositions of eighteenth-century Sutherland Gaelic bard. The principal focus is musical rather than literary, aimed at developing an analytical model to reconstruct how a non-literate Gaelic song-maker chose and composed the music for his songs. In that regard, the thesis breaks new ground in at least two ways: as the first full-length study of the musical work of Rob Donn, and as the first full-length musical study of any eighteenth-century Scottish Gaelic poet.

Over eighteen months a team of professional staff, prominent artists, children, young people, and volunteers from across the north Highlands shared a creative and educational journey to

explore and document the life, times and creative output of this important cultural figure. Integral to this multi-faceted heritage project was the aim of increasing public awareness of Rob Donn, both within the local community and farther afield. While he is still remembered proudly in song and story by many local residents, the project seeks to broaden the audience for his work among newcomers, visitors and the Scottish diaspora for whom the Gaelic heritage of eighteenth-century Mackay Country might otherwise be largely invisible and unknown.

The team behind the project also recognised the need for an accessible survey of the many places mentioned in Rob Donn's work and their relationship to the people, landscape, and society of his own time. While his poetry is a powerful window into the past, that window has gradually closed with the loss of Gaelic as a community language. To re-open it, we have tried to present his songs in a bilingual context, to place them in their original physical and historical setting, and to reinvent their content through the collective creative energy of a large number of thoughtful and talented local artists and designers. Local community engagement was thus central to the success of the project, both to introduce more people to Rob Donn's work and to engage a wider range of residents with the heritage of Mackay Country. Fundamental to this ethos was the recognition that the project should provide opportunities for everyone to learn more about Rob Donn and his world by involving them in ways that met their needs and interests.



IMAGE 426 ROB DONN PROJECTS

For this reason the project encompassed several strands to engage a wide range of participants. The Rob Donn Trail (Trailing Rob Donn) is a series of nine interpretive panels installed at strategic locations in the seven Community Council areas across Mackay Country, from Scourie in the west to Melvich in the east. Each panel provides maps, illustrations, a brief local history, a bilingual poetry excerpt, and a summary of the links between the poet and the panel location. For more in-depth background information, the trail is accompanied by a series of

scholarly podcasts and short videos (Recording Rob Donn), and a bilingual booklet, prepared by Scottish historians, a Celtic scholar, and a professional translator. On the artistic side, re-creating Rob Donn reflects the work of nine local artists, working in a range of media, who were commissioned to create their own responses to the life and work of the bard. Threading Rob Donn invited local craft workers to create textile panels depicting episodes from Rob Donn's life or work, resulting in some two dozen lovely panels in various materials and colours, often containing quotations from the poetry or depictions of the landscape. Tiling Rob Donn was a multi-generational art project in which students from Farr and Kinlochbervie High Schools, local primary schools, and a number of adults worked under the supervision of renowned ceramic artist Lotte Glob to create tiles on themes related to the bard. In addition, a writing workshop for upper primary pupils was held by children's author Barbara Henderson. The final project exhibition and exhibition booklet was curated by Rachel Skene.

### **Rob Donn Trail. The Booklet**

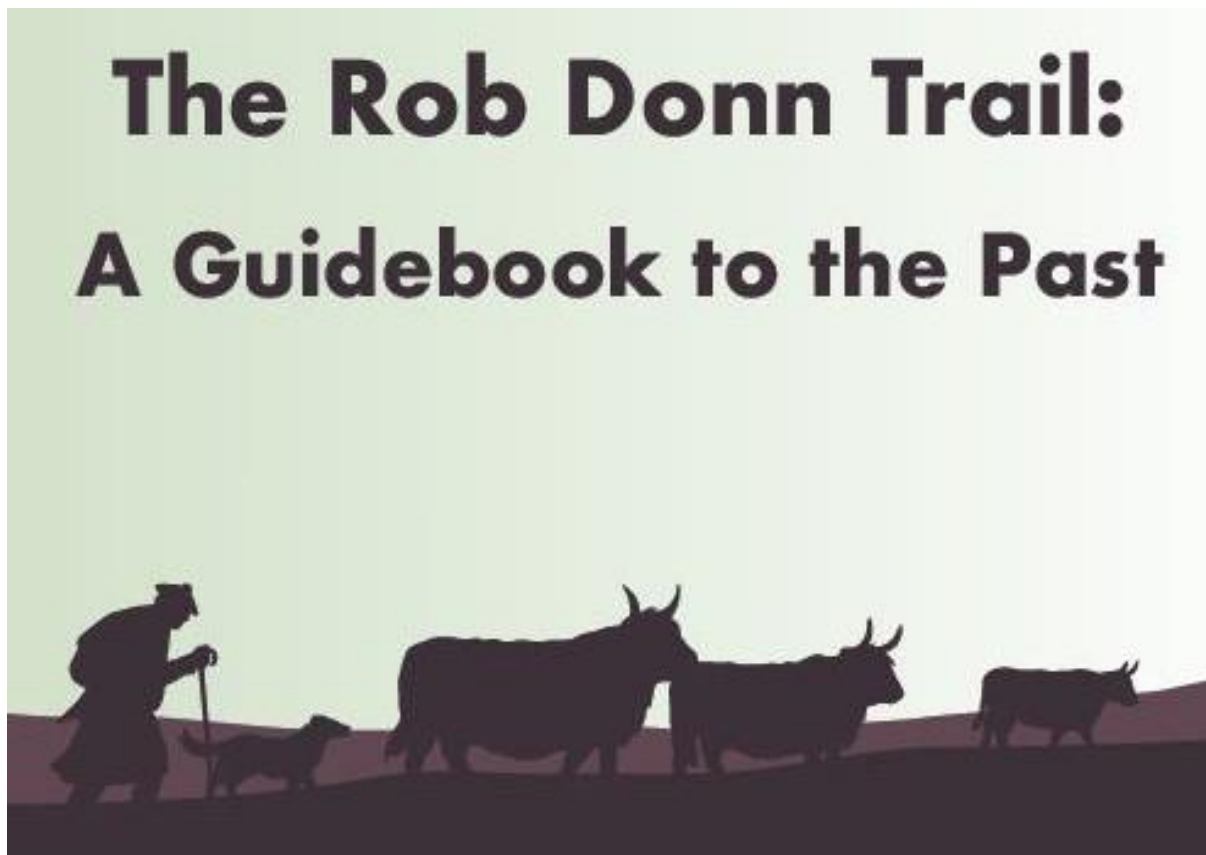


IMAGE 427 COVER OF THE ROB DONN TRAIL BOOK

A guidebook to the past produced from the project supplements the information provided by the trail itself and the podcasts available on the project website. It is bilingual, like the society it describes, but is designed for a general audience, including local residents, visitors, and the schools.

- Chapter 1 contains short biographical descriptions of Rob Donn, his neighbours, and his editors. Dr. Ellen L. Beard
- Chapter 2 introduces the concept of oral culture, including the Gaelic language and the roles of poetry and music. Dr. Ellen L. Beard.
- Chapter 3 discusses education, both informal (oral and practical) and formal (in schools). Dr. Elizabeth Ritchie.

- Chapter 4 concerns religion and the roles of ministers and the church. Dr. Elizabeth Ritchie.
- Chapter 5 describes the cattle trade, a mainstay of the local economy and Rob Donn's principal employment. Dr. Malcolm Bangor-Jones
- Chapter 6 addresses daily life and settlement history in Mackay Country, again focusing mainly on the eighteenth century but bringing the story into the present with a brief description of changes resulting from the nineteenth-century clearances. Dr. Elizabeth Ritchie and Dr. Malcolm Bangor-Jones.

The bi lingual booklet in Gaelic and English concludes with a list of sources and further reading, followed by the words and music of Rob Donn's song Glen Golly, still the anthem of Mackay Country today. Design and layout by Eilidh Price.

### **Historical Context**

The year 1714 marked a turning point for the British nation. A little over a decade earlier, the century-old Union of the Crowns had been followed by a Union of the Parliaments and, with the death in August 1714 of Queen Anne, the reign of the long-serving Stewart monarchs had come to an end, being replaced by a new dynasty in the diminutive form of the Hanoverian, George I. Within a year the accession of the "wee, wee German lairdie" had sparked a brief and pretty innocuous civil war but, thirty years further on, the so-called Bonnie Prince had fanned the smouldering Jacobite flame into a great conflagration which led ultimately to the slaughter at Culloden and an enormous, violent dislocation in the power structure, economy and lifestyle of the traditional Highlands.

During the snowy winter of the same year, under the shadow of Ben Hope, and in the humblest of circumstances, a child was born who from an early age displayed a remarkable gift for poetry and who, by the time he died in 1778, had left behind a remarkable corpus of work of a quality unequalled in the North and, many would argue, in the entire Gaidhealtachd. This was Rob Donn, bard to the Lords of Reay, as the then Chief of Mackay had styled himself when elevated to the peerage in 1614. Most remarkably, Rob Donn's poetic achievement was attained entirely without conventional education. He was entirely illiterate and, like the bards of even more ancient times, both composed and retained his work, from the longest and most complex elegies to the briefest of rhymes, entirely in his head. Thus it was left to others, from a higher social stratum, to record his work for posterity, sometimes to its detriment. Though the number of Gaelic speakers in the Mackay Country has declined catastrophically over the past century, their premiere bard has not been forgotten and, to ensure that his name remains to the forefront.

### **Donn Country**

Strathnaver Museum and Mackay Country Community collaborated on the two year celebration of the renowned Gaelic bard Rob Donn. Heritage projects were identified, and undertaken. The results cumulated in an exhibition and will be part of a permanent display in Strathnaver Museum.

With funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) Stories, Stones and Bones programme, to create community curated wall hangings the project team worked with local craft groups and individuals to create a wall hanging depicting scenes from Rob Donn's life and work. Participants created individual scenes from the life of Rob Donn which make up the final piece. A local artist Rachel Skene was appointed to support volunteers in their creations and to bring together all the craft elements of the project. All the schools in Mackay Country participated with the help of the school art teachers. Each piece is a unique imaginative interpretation of themes poems or events linked to Rob Donn's life.



IMAGE 428 THREADING DONN WALL HANGING CREATION TEAM

## Threading Donn



### These boots were walking Made by Juliane Lingner

"In making the acquaintance of all the drovers I wore out many a boot and spur", "

Dèanamh aithne ris gach dròbhair, chaith mi iomadh bòta, 's spuir"

From Rob Donn's poem 'To John Mackay'

Droving was a huge part of Rob Donn's life. Being out in the elements for weeks on end, walking great distances – a hardship but also a closeness to the natural surroundings that we can't begin to imagine. And still he was able to engage the mind regardless of all the physical hardship.



### 'Fjording Cattle' Made by Juliane Lingner

I found fjording cattle – sometimes the drovers were swimming themselves - to be the thing that fascinated me most about the droving.

(Wet felted background, needle felted details, drift wood boat)



### Inspired by 'To Winter' Made by Meg Telfer

I have shown the baby, born in all this turmoil, being protected by the Old Woman who, according to Folklore, lives in the waterfall crashing off Hope.

(The piece is hand stitched on recycled material)



### Inspired by 'Glengolly' Made by Janet Mackay, Ardgay

I chose Glen Golly because it is a poem that reflects the composer's feelings for the place where he belongs. There is also a lovely sung version on the CD by 'Drine'. Also I always enjoy the view across Strathmore towards Glen Golly when driving from Altnaharra to Loch Hope. A wonderful wild part of Scotland.

(The yarns used are handspun and dyed with natural dyes which always have a muted effect. The technique used is peg loom weaving)





**Inspired by 'Gleanna-Gallaidh'  
Glen Golly  
Made by Susan Bewley, Kinlochbervie**

Rob Donn wrote this song in homage to his native glen. In it he expresses a dreamlike picture of peace and fruitfulness. I chose the rowan tree, native to these parts and an essential outside each home for protection from evil.

I have painted this piece on silk, quilted and embroidered it and backed it with soft tartan to echo the gentleness of the image and its value to the poet.



**Inspired by 'To the Earl of Sutherland'  
Made by Kinlochbervie High School, S1 – S3**

"I was born in the winter Among the lowering mountains, And my first sight of the world Snow and wind about my ears"

(Wet felting collage and sewing machine embellishments)



**Inspired by poem 'A Trip to Stornoway'  
By Susan Bewley, Kinlochbervie**

Rob Donn had a difficult crossing of the Minch. It can be frightening and a cause of seasickness. This is what I have attempted to express in this knitted piece – he used very expressive words to describe the water.

I've written some of these on sea glass (from the Minch) and attached them to the 'waves' with silver wire, there is always a glint in the western water. I've used a selection of stitches to show the confusion of the water.

(Wool, knit, applique, shells, glass and wire)



**Inspired by poem 'To Winter'  
Libby Mackay, Rosemary  
Macintosh and Joanne O'Donnell**

"Every creature with any strength  
Seeks shelter in the wood, The long-  
haired antlered stags, Snorting,  
weary, weak, Take fright in the  
morning with the sound of a cold in  
their heads; And the fawns are  
wasting since they abandoned the  
mountain."

(White fabrics texture window on scene applique.  
Robin, salmon, deer, birch tree. )



**Inspired by poem 'The Court at Tongue'**

**Made by Janette Wyper, Liz Goudie, Isobel Slaughter,  
Eileen Gale with advice and encouragement from  
Lindy Trustram Eve and Carol Proctor.**

Rob Donn is walking towards Tongue. His friend  
George is playing the chanter beside Tongue house.  
The church is above the house. As he walks Rob  
remembers Sheriff Forbes, Hugh Mackay and the  
Englishman who sat there as a court, the broken scales  
indicate the lack of justice. Rob and Hugh are in blue,  
a hint towards the Mackay tartan, George is in red for  
MacLeod.

(The background was wet felted pre-dyed Merino wool.  
The house & church are woollen stitches on linen. The  
figures are made of felt with tweed clothing. The  
memory is cotton stitching on organza with small  
fabric pieces bondaweb-ed to the reverse. The organza  
background was needle felted)



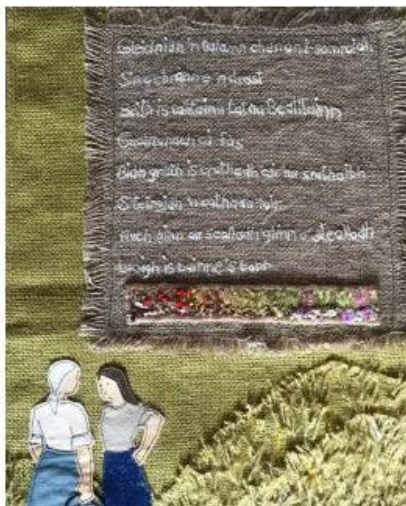


**Inspired by poem 'A Trip to Stornoway'  
By Jane Kitchener**

"To turn our backs to the land  
And our faces directly towards the sea,  
Subjected to the drenchings and the  
beatings Of the furious great waves,  
Mountainous, foamy, stormy, deep-valleyed."

(Woven tapestry, driftwood boat,  
feathery wool spindrift, tweed houses)

Acknowledgements: Joan Baxter, (tapestry  
weaver), Brora. Weavers Bazaar Yarns.  
Tapestry Weaving, Kirsten Glasbrook, Search  
Press.



**Inspired by 'Town and Country Life'  
Made by Anita Wilson and Liz Harvey**

The panel reflects the mood of the poem which  
charts the shortages and starvation of winter and  
the anticipated abundance and richness of summer

(Fabrics used include linen, cotton, hessian – some  
died with Lithuanian walnut hulls. Techniques  
included applique, embroidery and hookwork)



**Inspired by 'Glen Golly'  
Made by Lindy Trustram Eve  
Lettering by Eileen Gale**

Glen Golly remains to this day. The beautiful  
Glen Golly was a favourite place for Rob Donn.

He particularly appreciated the trees - Birch,  
Rowen and Scots Pine - the rushing water of  
the burn and spectacular waterfall and all the  
fauna and flora. This poem is one of the classics  
of Gaelic poetry and has been set to music.

Glen Golly is Rob Donn's eulogy to the land he  
loved. His poems are serious but with touches  
of humour. This panel is a tribute to Rob Donn "I  
don't desire your money. And I'll never join your  
army; I won't refuse your dram. But I'll do no  
more than that."

(Back base of the panel is formed of felted  
coloured wools. Other wools and found fabrics  
were used for embroidery and the figure of Rob  
Donn and water effect of the tumbling waterfall  
waterfall)



**Inspired by poem 'Isobel Mackay '**  
**Made by Jane Kitchener and Libby Mackay**

"Look at MacKay's daughter with the calving cows,  
At the foot of the deer forest all alone"

"Look at the scene,  
At the edge of the hills; This year she is sad,  
Every day alone.  
Look at the scene,  
At the edge of the hills; This year she is sad,  
Every day alone."

(Tapestry woven with appliqued features)

Acknowledgements: Joan Baxter, (tapestry weaver),  
Brora. Weavers Bazaar Yarns. Tapestry Weaving,  
Kirsten Glasbrook, Search Press.

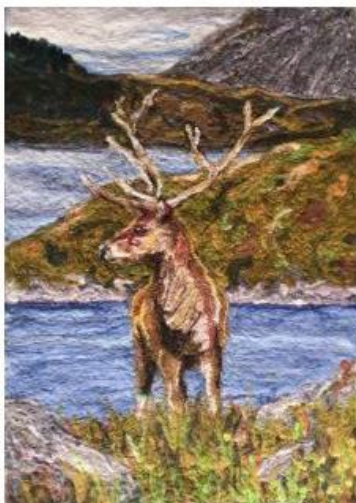


**'Inspired by ' A visit to Tongue Inn'**

Made by Carley Mackay

After one of many summonses to Tongue House Rob went in search of his friend George Macleod, Piper to Chief of Mackay, at the Inn below St Andrew's Church in Tongue. I will go in search of George Because I ought to be in his company, Since we are brothers in music, In the language of mouth and chanter.

(Needle felt onto a square of old woollen blanket)

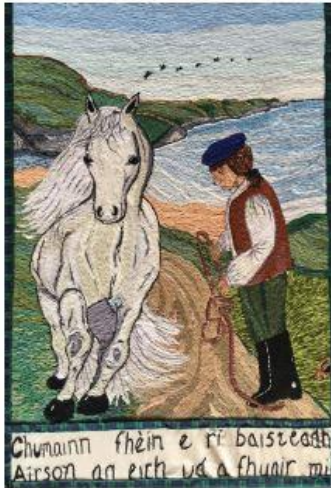


**'Inspired by 'The Drover's Lament'**

Made by Gill Mason

"Lonely now I spend my days; The year has therefore found me grieving, Gleaning harvest fields on braes,  
And deer in wastes to wander leaving"

(Needle felt onto a square of old woollen blanket)



**"I would hold him up for baptism  
In return for that horse I received"  
Made by Diane Mackay, Strathy East**

While the paternity of an illegitimate child born to Catherine Mackay in Durness was being discussed in the community, among the names put forward as the father were George of Handan and John of Strathy.

Catherine eventually married George Macleod, the lame piper, a friend of Rob Donn's. This episode was the source of material for a few of Rob Donn's poems. In one verse relating to John of Strathy, Rob states: "I would hold him up for baptism In return for that horse I received" When Rob Donn suggested in a poem, Captain John Mackay of Strathy may have been an alternative parent to an illegitimate child.

He received a horse as a gift or bribe from the Captain after naming him. The picture depicts Rob Donn collecting his horse at Strathy Mains and preparing him for the long journey home to Durness.

I chose this subject for the Strathy link as my husband's ancestors were cleared from Mudale about 1820 and they would have been familiar with Rob Donn's work. The only record of a link with Strathy is the horse referred to in a poem. Strathy Mains was a ruin by 1812 but my husband's family have lived in the land officer's house adjacent to the site of the old house for generations.



**Inspired by 'To the Earl of Sutherland'**

**Made by Roz Brooks & Janet Holland from Durness**

Cross-stitch:  
18 stitches per inch cross stitch  
plus tweed picture



**Inspired by  
'To Prince Charles Edward Stewart'**

**Made by Charlie Downie, Durness**

I chose the beginning of this poem because it seems relevant to me today, giving hope, encouragement, motivation.

The framework of my piece is made from knotted embroidery cotton, depicting stylised hills spanned by rainbows (a magnificent sight in nature and source for my knotwork design), flanked by a Celtic knotwork pattern in Mackay colours and culminating in a stylised saltire sky. I tried to convey the various hues of a morning sky with the infill.



**Made by Kinlochbervie Primary**



**Made by Durness Primary**



**Made by Scourie Primary School**

**Inspired by poem  
'Colonel Mackay and Christian Brodie'**

We were inspired by Rob Donn's theme of emigration in his poem 'Colonel Mackay and Christian Brodie'. We were told that the ships at the time had three masts. exemplary performance in the courses taken.



**Inspired by 'Fiadh à Fireach'  
Made by Juliane Lingner**

**Breac à linne, slat à coille is fiadh à fireach - mèirle às nach do ghabh gàidheal riamh nàire. A fish from the river, a staff from the wood and a deer from the mountain - thefts no Gael was ever ashamed of.**

Reading up about Rob Donn I was fascinated about the fact that he was a game keeper and poacher at the same time, prosecuted by a bailiff who had been a well-known poacher himself which, not being a Gael, seemed somewhat contradictory to me.

(Mixed media, including tweed and deer antler)

## Tiling Donn



IMAGE 430 ROB DONN TILES FROM PRIMARY SCHOOLS



IMAGE 429 ROB DONN CERAMIC TILES

Lotte Glob and Martina MacLeod agreed to help in creating two ceramic wall plaques Lotte directed five pupils from Kinlochbervie High and five pupils from Farr High Schools to join twenty invited adults to each produce a ceramic tile. Martina working with the art teachers of the six primary schools and asking every child in primary schools to paint a ceramic tile 10x10 centimeters based on their understanding of anything to do with Rob Donn.

### Re-Creating Donn

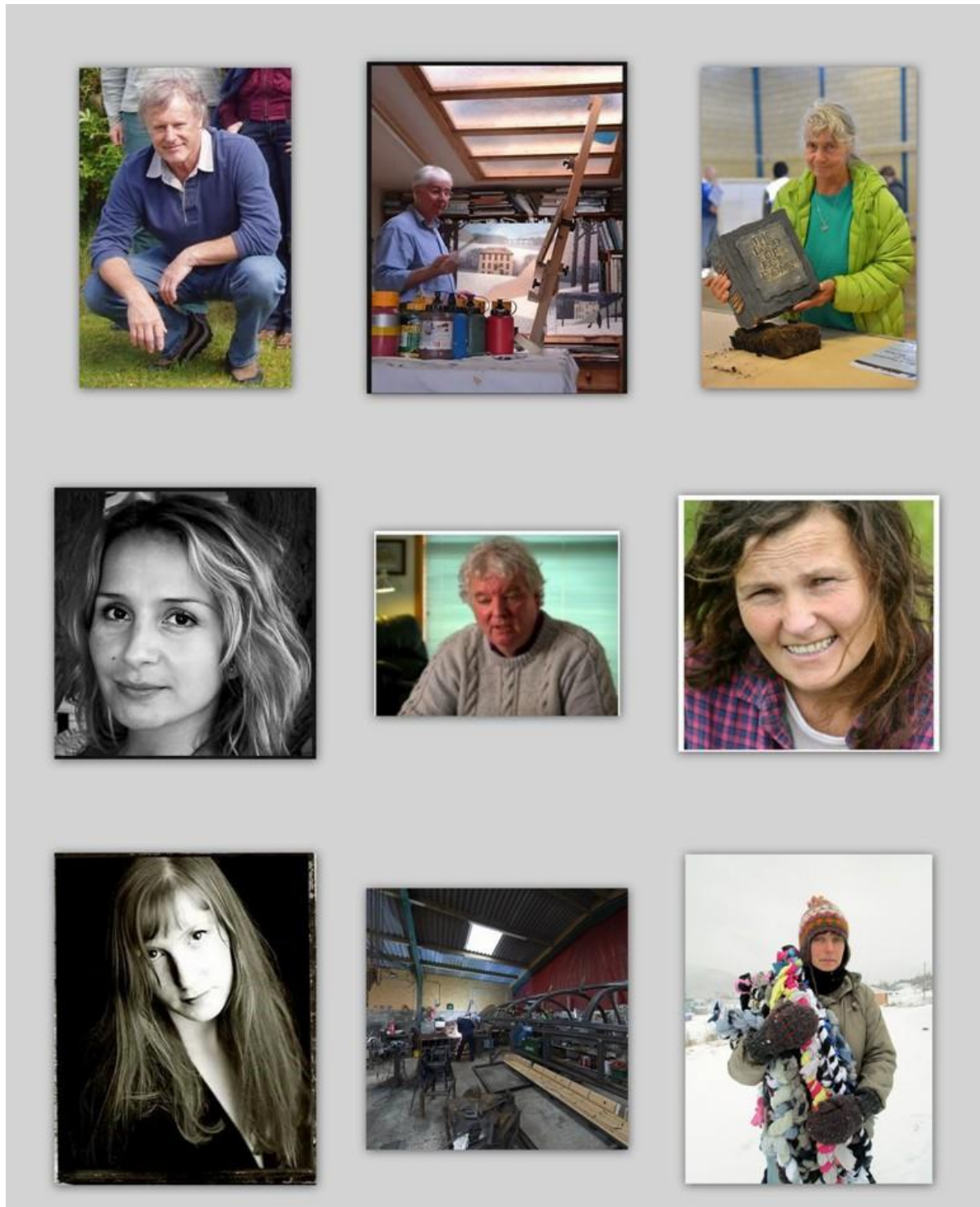


IMAGE 431 RE-CREATING DONN ARTISTS



Professional artists from Caithness and Sutherland created nine pieces of original artwork, in a range of media, to celebrate the life and times of this talented poet. Each artist sought inspiration from Rob Donn's life and work to create an art piece about any characteristic of Rob Donn's world.

The artists involved were,

### **Joanne Kaar**



IMAGE 432 ROB DONN ART WORK OF JOANNE KAAR

Weaver of grass, fiber artist inspired by journeys over land, sea and through time. Maker of portable museums of curiosity and baker of cake!

I live in Dunnet, on Dunnet Head, Caithness, Scotland, only two miles from where I grew up in the village of Brough. My artwork takes inspiration from our heritage. As both participant and instigator of arts and heritage projects and collaborations I have worked in Taiwan, South Korea, Iceland, USA, Canada, Estonia, and also exhibited in Japan, Germany, Spain, Australia, Sweden and Finland. My artwork is varied, and is as much at home in museums as art galleries.

Joanne's Inspiration. Missing trousers, Found

Rob Donn attended the MacRory wedding as an uninvited guest where he recited 'Briogais MhicRuaridh'. The poem poked fun and made accusations about as many of the guests as possible as he puzzled over the whereabouts of some missing trousers. In the poem Rob Donn

also referred to the Dress Act 1746 which was part of the Act of Proscription which came into force on 1<sup>st</sup>. August 1746. This made the wearing of Highland Dress, such as tartan or the kilt illegal in Scotland. At the time trousers made from local tweed were itchy. Dr Ian Grimble, one of the founders of the Strathnaver Museum, writes in 'The World of Rob Donn', about Donn's apparent frequent behaviour of removing people's trousers, both metaphorically and literally.

Nearly 300 years later, Joanne has imagined that a stash of now peat stained trousers has been 'found' in an area frequented by 18<sup>th</sup> century Rob Donn. This is 'art as artefact', as the trousers, although modern, will have once been worn by men who live in the area, documented and labelled with all known information about the 'find', donated to the museum and given an accession number.

### **Ian Westacott**

Based in Dornoch Ian Westacott grew up in Myrtleford, Australia and completed a Diploma in Art and Design at Wangaratta Technical College in Northeast Victoria in 1975. Later he completed a Graduate Diploma in Fine Arts at the Victorian College of the Arts in 1987. His first show was in Wangaratta in 1979 and since then he has exhibited in Australia, Scotland,

France and England, including shows at the Australian Galleries and the William Mora Gallery in Melbourne, Brown's Gallery and The Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh in Scotland. He has also exhibited the collection *Double Vision*, a collaboration with fellow print maker Raymond Arnold.

Westacott carries his etching plates to his subjects and works from life. He rarely uses photos or preparatory sketches preferring to rely on the image directly in front of him and on his memory. Back in the studio he slowly builds on the lines incorporating any marks already on the plate. "I'm obsessed with line" he says "it's the clarity and transparency of the etched line which makes drawing come alive for me".



IMAGE 433 ROB DONN ARTWORK OF IAN WESTACOTT

Ian's inspiration *"I can sort of place what I was thinking about when I first began: I'm astonished at the gradual decline of the Scottish landscape. Something is getting neglected and washed away all the time in Strath Hope. I guess it's the absence of people. The mountain towered over the old home of Rob Donn- I went there a year ago a couple of times and found myself drawing the remnants of trees, the upturned roots of birch on the loch closest to Rob Donn's family home and a lone one in view of the Dun Dornaigil broch. Rob Donn seems to dream the beauty of trees and nature."*

### **Norman Gibson**

Born in Edinburgh in 1942 and now lives in Brora, Sutherland. As a sculptor and designer with a thematic focus on landscape, archaeology and visual memory, Norman Gibson has had many exhibitions at solo, regional and national levels alongside an educational career in Scotland and England.

Former:

- Principal Teacher of Art, Aberdeenshire
- Lecturer in Art, Hamilton College of Education
- Sculptor and Jeweller, Lanarkshire
- Tutor, Cumbria College of Art and Design
- Lecturer/Director of Studies in Art University of Warwick
- Head of Department of Arts, Design and Performance, Manchester Metropolitan University

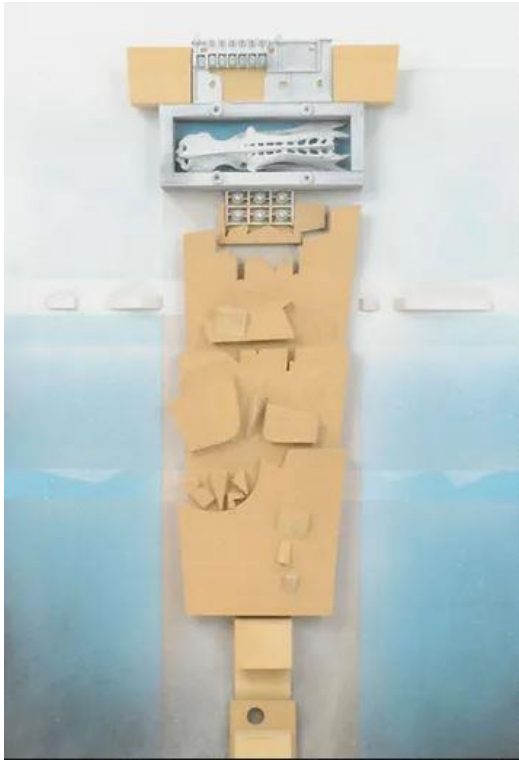


IMAGE 435 ROB DONN ARTWORK OF NORMAN GIBSON

A Littoral Translation. littoral adjective 1. Relating to or situated on the shore of the sea. Noun: littoral; plural noun littorals, a region lying along the shore.

### Jenny Mackenzie Ross

Jenny studied Fine Art (Sculpture) at Newcastle University has worked in a number of different studios and potteries before setting up Northshore Pottery at the Mill of Forse in 1993. Throwing is often central to her work, sometimes but not always for functional purposes, and as a starting point in the creative process. Her studio is a converted Oatmeal Mill which was bought as a ruin in 1993. The ground floor is studio space and subsequently, alongside her husband have renovated the upper floor to become a family home.

The Roots of Rob Donn by J M Ross.

When first thinking about this commission to create a sculpture in response to the work of Rob Donn I felt I had a problem. There was a feeling of dislocation from Rob Donn's world. By seeking out the places that he knew well and looking at the same mountains and birch forests, I found an

understanding of his life, but without being able to speak the Gaelic language, and with the distance of time and culture, it was not possible to access the complete pictures contained within his verses. Then I found a poem, an excerpt of which I have written below. The poem in its entirety is about a different kind of dislocation, a gulf that could not be bridged. It was about the barrier of Social Class that kept Rob Donn separate from the woman with whom he had fallen in love



IMAGE 434 ROB DONN ARTWORK OF JENNY MACKENZIE ROSS

*It is unrequited love for thee that deprived me of my reason  
It remains as lively with me as in your presence,  
Teasing and provoking, wounding me to the heart.*

*All through the day I am in turmoil,  
While it grows in me like a tree.*

This incredibly vivid image became the basis of my piece. Once I had completed the form of the root, I cleaved the sculpture in two in to represent this separation of souls. But the image of a root also chimes with the times of Rob Donn, when Rob and his community literally grew out of the landscape. The cutting, splitting and firing of the piece has also turned the sculpture into a landscape, an image within an image, echoing the cliffs of Ben Hope, and the gorges where familiar burns tumble down to the meandering glen of Strath More.

### **Lotte Glob**



IMAGE 436 ROB DONN ARTWORK OF LOTTE GLOB

"My creative process involves a close relationship with the landscape and wilderness of the Scottish Highlands, a part of which is long hikes into the mountains, bringing back materials such as rocks and sediments to incorporate into my work"

Lotte produced a ceramic book inspired by the "World of Rob Donn" and the land he lived in. Lotte used raw materials from Rob Donn's birthplace incorporated into the piece. Books of the Land. The spirit of the Highland landscape are gathered on long walks, brought back to be fused in the kiln under high heat, transformed in to sculptured books, challenge our perception of the book, viewed as artefact from the future or fossilised tomes from a distant past, the intangible and ephemeral. Hidden, within the

vitrified pages, rocks, sediment, pebbles, glass and bones.

### **Mark Edwards**

Mark Edwards is an artist living and working deep in the Scottish Highlands, a modern master in a very British form of surrealism.

The remarkable story of our artist began in 1967, when he went straight from school to study fine art at Medway Art College, met his future wife Sally, and continued his studies at Walthamstow College of Art London. In 1974 after teaching painting and illustration, and exhibiting his work locally, Mark and Sally bought an old 1958 Ford Prefect for £25 and drove up to the very north tip of the Highlands of Scotland. There, on the shores of Loch Hope surrounded by the dramatic mountains of Sutherland, they rented an old rundown shepherd's

cottage with no electricity. They lived in their remote cottage for 28 years, the first 10 years without electricity, and raised three children.



IMAGE 437 ROB DONN ART WORK OF MARK EDWARDS

It was a dramatic move but the stunning remoteness and isolation gave Mark the uninterrupted space and time to pursue his artistic ideas. During this period he painted and regularly exhibited throughout Scotland, supplementing his income by working as a gillie on the neighbouring Duke of Westminster estate. This seasonal work inspired a long running series of field sports painting, depicting the lives and work of the men who fished and stalked these remote estates, which grew Mark's reputation in the Highlands and further afield. In 1984, Mark not only celebrated the addition of electricity and a phone in their cottage, but he was invited to join the prestigious London agency, Artist Partners, run by the art director Chistine Isted.

### **Jana Emburey**

Jana wrote down a number of poems by Rob Donn with Chinese ink on Japanese Kozo paper, stretched on a wooden board 80 cm x 80 cm.

Jana Emburey is a visual artist working across a wide range of media. Her body of work includes paintings, drawings, printmaking, sculpture and installation. Emburey's work explores various subjects, although she is mainly interested in the concept of time perception, memory and inter-connectivity. Jana is preoccupied with our transient nature, our innate need to



IMAGE 438 ROB DONN ARTWORK OF JANA EMBUREY

preserve memories, how those are influenced by our emotions and how our current and future state is shaped by our perception of the past.

Jana says "The 'clouds' of ink represent the searching memories of Rob Donn (although it does remind me of peaty smoke too). I found it fascinating that he, towards the end of his life remembered in such detail what he created. I imagine, he perhaps didn't recite the works to the transcriber in a chronological order, therefore the poems overlap in no particular order, most of them becoming illegible as more and more come to the surface."

### **Sam Barlow**

Artist-blacksmith and sculptor in metal and stone, handling bespoke commissions from his Lairg-based workshop. Sam recently created the Fishtail entrance to the new Falls of Shin visitor centre, Lairg.

Sam has produced a solid but delicate and intricate work combining stone, a material abundant in Mackay Country with the oldest rocks to be found anywhere in Europe, and metal work

depicting the Bard. The metal is incorporated into the stone showing a continuum and slice of the living and inhabitants of the environment as Rob Donn's work revealed.



IMAGE 439 ROB DONN ARTWORK OF SAM BARLOW

Sam said "Reading the words of Rob Donn I was impressed with the sense of excavating a seam of life from the cultural geology of Duthaich Mhicaoidh (Mackay Country). As if you could strike into a strata of recent history and a flourish of life would spring forth (from the past)."

I was struck by the immediacy of Rob Donn's language, and the sensation of life that it portrays. As if his words are a layer of history in the bedrock. To read them is to excavate a small part of the cultural landscape, and be rewarded with rich clues to the life lived.

### **Wendy Sutherland**

Wendy lives and works in the far north of Scotland producing atmospheric interpretations of her surrounding landscape. Wendy Sutherland was born and is based in Brora, East Sutherland, in 1975. In 1997 she graduated from Edinburgh College of Art with First Class Honor's, becoming a Master of Fine Arts two years later. Since 1998, she has held eight one-person exhibitions. Wendy is the recipient of some ten art awards. Wendy has for some time identified as her primary goal an evolving interpretation of the landscape of the Scottish Highlands through a range of media and in this chosen field is already considered a leading figure.

The word spinning in a vortex is 'snow'

*'i was born in the winter  
among the lowering mountains,  
and my first sight of the world  
snow and wind about my ears'*



IMAGE 440 ROB DONN ARTWORK OF WENDY SUTHERLAND

**We were extremely fortunate, honoured and privileged to have artists with such ability involved. Our budget was very limited and they all participated with respect enthusiasm and artistic imagination for which we are extremely grateful. The images here do not do the pieces justice and they should be viewed in the context of the exhibition.**

### **Recording Donn**

Our projects have brought together several people with an interest and knowledge of Rob Donn. We have recorded some episodes on various topics related to the time, environment and work of Rob Donn on films and audio. These included

3 films with Jim Johnston discussing

- Rob Donn on Beinn Spionnaidh.
- Rob Donn At Freisgill on Whiten Head .
- Rob Donn in Glen Golly with Rhona and Duncan Macleod singing the famous song Gleann Gollaidh.

Dr. Donald William is a senior researcher at Edinburgh University and a lecturer at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. A film of Donald William speaking about Rob Donn at a ceilidh in Strathy and a video recording from the ceilidh in Strathy in 2007 a precursor to the project.

A film of Christine Stokes giving an introductory talk about Rob Donn



At the 2018 Durness Highland Gathering Mackay Country held impromptu ceilidhs in the bough tent and recorded Mackay Country Gaelic singers.

- Alistair recites a poem by Rob Donn
- George Gunn recites a poem about Rob Donn
- Issie MacPhail Interviews George Gunn about Rob Donn

#### **Podcast Rob Donn**

- Neighbours & Editors
- Settlement History
- Drove Roads & Cattle Trade
- Religion & Education



IMAGE 441 JIM JOHNSTON TALKS ABOUT ROB DONN ON BEINN SPIONNAIDH.

The podcasts involved experts in the field discussing, exploring and elaborating the chapter subjects from the project book *The Rob Donn Trail a Guidebook to the Past* with two further topics not included in the book.

#### The specialists

- Jim Johnston a teacher, writer, geographer and man with copious amount of knowledge about the area.
- Dr. Malcolm Bangor-Jones local historian with a particular interest in Sutherland.
- Dr. Elizabeth Ritchie, a history lecturer at the University of the Highlands and Islands.
- Dr. Ellen L. Beard an expert in the poetry and music of Rob Donn.
- *Donn & Burns Part 1 and 2.* Dr. Katherine Campbell and Dr. Ellen Beard discussing Robert Burns and Rob Donn.
- Dr. Alastair Mearns, Mackay Country Gaelic.

## Podcast Donn & Burns

Rob Donn is often referred to as the Robert Burns of Gaeldom. He was certainly a very influential figure and has been held in high regard for his poems and songs. In 2017 I had the opportunity to record a conversation between two of the most knowledgeable academics on a comparison of the life and legacies of the two men. This is an edited synopsis of the recording adhering as correct as possible, keeping the essence of the conversation. To illustrate points and give examples there was singing, humming and lalaing tunes which I have had to omit. The primary source audio is available on the Donn Country website or the Mackay Country Archive. I understand this could be the first time a comparison has been documented.



IMAGE 442 THE SPECIALISTS RECORDING ROB DONN PODCASTS

Dr. Ellen Beard a retired American lawyer a descendant of Rob Donn who came to Scotland to learn about Rob Donn, Gaelic, traditional music and related things and attained a PhD at the University of Edinburgh in 2016. Ellen's further credentials are outlined elsewhere.

Dr. Katherine Campbell is a musician and music lecturer, a freelance performer and composer and has also done a lot of work study of traditional music. Kath worked as a senior lecturer at the University of Edinburgh in the Department of Celtic and Scottish Studies until 2016 and has a big interest in traditional music and song from a lot of different angles. Katherine Campbell is an Honorary Research Fellow at the Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen. She now works freelance, and has been focusing on the songs of Robert Burns for the past few years, culminating in the book, co-authored with Dr. Emily Lyle, Robert Burns and the Discovery and Re-Creation of Scottish Song (Glasgow: Musica Scotica, 2020) and the solo CD, Robert Burns: Tune Unknown (2019). Katherine Campbell specialises in performing the songs of Burns, and continues to enjoy learning about, and being challenged by, the Bard's legacy. She has been singing the songs of Burns since childhood.

Ellen

Rob Donn was actually a little bit older than Robert Burns so if there were influences they would have gone from Rob Donn to Robert Burns. Rob Donn lived from 1714 to 1778 in northwest Sutherland, Mackay Country, he was born in in Strathmore which is one of the interior valleys and lived there for about two thirds of his life and then lived later in Durness. He was a native Gaelic speaker although I think he had some English. He was not literate although I think he must have gone to school for a few months at some point because he had started learning his letters. They show up in one of the songs and there's also a reference in a fairly obscure manuscript catalogue that says he went to school at Eriboll, but he was essentially working completely in the oral tradition. Any tunes he heard, any tunes he used he either made-up or based on things that were floating around in his brain. Musical ideas in terms of the words of his songs again he basically composed from scratch although again some of them are based on models of things he heard but he essentially worked completely in the oral tradition and completely in Gaelic, those are the main points.

Kath

Robert Burns was born in Ayrshire,, southwest Scotland in 1759 and died towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, 1796 a short life obviously and he was both a poet and a songwriter, he was equally happy writing words on their own as he was writing actual songs and with Burns and unlike Rob Donn he didn't actually compose his own tunes apart from one instance we know he had a go at composing a tune for a song called *Here's his Health and Water* but that doesn't survive so he really relied on tunes in the oral tradition or tunes he heard around him from his family from other folks. Obviously in the southwest growing up there was a very strong oral tradition but with Burns as well he was drawing on recently composed material sometimes, such as fiddle tunes that had been recent or very recently written, for instance there was a well-known fiddle composer in Flockoburar in Morayshire called William Marshall and he had written a tune and Burns picked up on that for one of his songs. William Marshal's tune was called *Miss Admiral Gordon Favorite* and Burns used this for his song *Of a' the airts*. So there is recent material and fiddle maternal which is quite often hard to sing as some of the composers at that time in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were trying to push the boundaries a bit further in some of their compositions.

In terms of written and oral traditions Burns could read music, did he get music from a book but mainly from listening and having them in his head. From some of his letters he mentions he remembers from boyhood some of the tunes. He had a fantastic memory and capacity to absorb material and recreate. Part of his work was about preserving material he knew from childhood. In some cases remembering just a fragment but taking those fragments and expanding them by so doing helping to preserve the oral tradition. Mainly expanding words because tunes very much stayed as they were. If you think about learning a song you usually remember the tune but it can be hard to remember five verses or ten verses whatever as the words tend to drop away but the tune is repeated and tends to be more complete in the oral tradition. Burns would take fragments of words and make them bigger, he would modify words. As an example when he went on his Highland Tour he went to Aberfeldy there was an existing song called the *Burkes of Abergeldy* in tradition. He was inspired by being in that place and changed Abergeldy to Aberfeldy and used the chorus *Bonnie Lassie Will ye Go* part of the original song and he turned that into his own chorus and added a few verses and he pressed to a new song. Aberfeldy sounds awful like Abergeldie and so that's how it's done.

Ellen

Oh how interesting. I've forgotten that Rob Donn used that too. How interesting.

Kath

Some of his sources were written and some of them were oral. I guess that he would be including instrumentals. He was highly literate and highly fluent in the Scots language as well as being aware of the big collections of the day. The work in the written collections, the early collections in Scotland of Scots songs only had the words quite often the music wasn't printed. For the music he would often go to things like instrumental collections so for instance Highland Vocal Airs was one of the collections that he got hold of and he went through that looking for tunes to actually use to and write new words for.

Ellen

That was Patrick McDonald and he was from Durness so this is the connection as Rob Donn was very likely a source for Patrick McDonald and Murdo McDonald his father and Joseph McDonald his brother and a lot of the some unknown amount of the material in the MacDonald collection probably came right out of Rob Donn's mouth so if Robert Burns used that those tunes would be a direct musical relationship between Rob Donn as the creator or preserver and Robert Burns as the one who used those melodies to compose songs which presumably became much better known than Rob Donn's original because they were available in a language that was that was more widely accessible. We'll come back to that but that's I think important about Rob Donn because I've tried to trace his own sources. I was able in my research to trace affinity of different tunes, this one sounds like a Gaelic lament and this one sounds like a song that was also in the Scots tradition, this one sounds like an instrumental tune the fiddle tune or bagpipe tune and we know who the bagpiper was, that was his friend so we can make some inferences but we don't know his actual sources but I think the more important thing for Rob Donn in terms of this connection is that he might have been a source for Burns, so interesting.

The next thing I wanted to talk about is and you touched on this a little bit already but I've got a couple of examples. How did the two men compose songs? My theory about Rob Donn was that because his songs were so topical as opposed to Burns that were more sort of lyrical and love songs and everything Rob Donn's were about current events and the latest gossip and whatever so I think Rob Donn usually began with a theme or a person or an incident or a topic of current interest, just something he'd been thinking about or something someone asked him to do like compose an eulogy then he thought of an appropriate tune which could have been complete or just a metrical model or just a little snap of melody that he would expand and then finally he composed the words. Again my theory is that he probably did that while he was humming or singing while he was outdoors working or walking across country or taking care of the cattle in the byer. I mean it could have been a wide variety of things but this is just what he did in his head. So the main difference is between Rob Donn and Robert Burns were that Rob Donn could not read and write and Rob Donn composed some of his own tunes.

Do you want to comment on that before I go to people in my example just given example?

Kath

So what's probably coming across with what we've said already about Burns is there a lot of different ways in which he actually created material usually starting with the tune, that's the starting point so just to give you an example and a bit of a story around it. His very first song is called *Handsome Nell* and it was written when he was 16 or 17 and he was working in the harvest fields. He'd taken a bit of a liking to a partner who was working in the harvest fields, a girl called Nelly Kilpatrick, and so he thought I'll write a song for Nelly, so again this particular person in mind like you were talking about with Rob Donn and so what he did, Nelly had a favorite reel or a favorite tune she liked to hear and that was called *I am a man I am a man and married* say that slowly, quite a funny song. What Burns did with that, he knew that song, knew

the words and he knew the tune and then took that and made this song for *Handsome Nell* a compliment to Nelly.

*I am a man I am a man and married* reflecting his own personal circumstances at that time so you see how the title is quite funny and the fact that Nelly likes it works on a number of levels. So he takes that same tune and incorporates *Handsome Nell*. You see how he's got the idea from the girl and this tune or reel she likes and then he has as a compliment creates this new piece Handsome Nell.

Ellen

How many women were flattered in his life by composing songs for them?

Kath

It's a great way of expressing admiration affection isn't it very memorable as well.

Ellen

I've a couple of examples that show the way that Rob Donn composed tunes and he did it in a number of ways some of them were borrowed some of them were based on a model some of them I credit as composition, it depends on what you call musical composition how much it has to change from the original before it's considered a new tune as opposed to a variant and I never fully resolved that but anyway we're not going to resolve it today.

I've got two examples one of them is a eulogy and the other one involves lighter tones. My first example of a compositional method that Rob Donn used is something that I discovered in several eulogies and I think what he did is he took a metrical model from an older Gaelic eulogy, the *Massacre of Glencoe* and it has this kind of what I called in my thesis the funeral march rhythm and he used that for several other eulogies that worked also in four time with slight variations. There might be a few little extra quavers or something but one of them he used for the Earl of Sutherland, who was his commanding officer in the Sutherland Fencibles during the seven years' war and the Earl died young, with that really steady beat. Here's another one this is the eulogy for Ewan of Paula and it's got the same metrical structure to very different tune and I think this is one way he composed so it's the same kind of idea.

And then there's another example which I thought might be kind of fun about the way he composed and you may know more about the origin of this one than I do but there was a melody that was popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century called *Over the Hills and Far Away* which I think might have even been a show on the stage in London and various places and but it seems to just be in really wide circulation. The basic tune he used for two songs but then there's another one that is kind of on his borderline between what a variant is and what's in a composition. I would call it a new composition but one of his 9<sup>th</sup> century editors actually said no it's just *Sally Grant* but I'm not convinced he had a very good musical ear, but somehow he recognized the similarities cause you couldn't actually sing Rob Donn's words to this tune because the meter is different and everything but this other tune it's got some little pieces that are similar so the last line of *Over the hills* and the chorus of this other song to *Sally Grant* goes like this and there's some other little pieces that I think this actually shows the way his mind worked. I mean which is sort of amazing to be able to recover after 250 years.

Kath

Again this is a very early example, one in Burn's repertoire but the song *Westlin Winds* it's quite a well-known one in Scotland and great lyrics as well but it started out he knew a song called *I had a Horse and I had na Mare* a song sung very slowly and he starts out by writing actually two different songs to this one tune uses for *I had a horse and had na mare* I'll sing it

just little bit. It's quite long not a terribly well-known tune nowadays but that's actually the tune that Burns originally intended for the song of *Westlin Winds* and it started out doing that for two songs another song *When first I came to Stuart Kyle* to that same tune which we have a bit of but it didn't really develop but the one to develop was this song called *Westlin Winds*. It starts out as a tune and it's interesting that it starts out with not just one composition but with another composition as well and it's the *Westlin Winds* that develops.

Ellen

Which slaughtering guns was he referring to?

Kath

It's a contrast between the sort of *Westlin Winds* of autumn when winds, the westerlies, are coming from the west and this is the time the sportsman becomes a sort of blood sports theme if you like later on so it's a contrast between western winds sort of beauty and the piece of autumn on the one hand and then the sportsman and the murdering cries and all the rest of it.

Ellen

But it wasn't on the war during the Napoleonic war or anything like that?

Kath

I think it's more of a nature theme in a commentary, but again coming back to what you were saying about Rob Donn it's what's happening at that time it's all composed in August so it's this as autumn approaches kind of thing so I think the time of year when it was written is significant to what was happening around him at the time.

Ronnie

When Burns was writing songs did he actually sit and write them down and correct them as he went or would they come quite naturally just from thoughts?

Kath

I think most songwriters working whenever area they're working it can come all at once but quite often it's a process of refinement so in the case of song sometimes it's just lucky we have very good information for the song we don't have it in the case of all songs but with Burns it starts off with a tiny fragment and with one verse and it's going to be set to this tune and then it develops and it's published in his poems, chiefly in the Scottish dialect the Kilmarnock addition there's some songs actually towards the end of that, I think it's called *Song composed in August* at that time so the titles changed it's become a lot fuller then it gets published later in the Scots Musical Museum which is the big Scott song publication of the late 18th century and it changed its title again. Some of the lyrics have changed and it's at that point it's also then set to a different tune because there was a lot of editorial things and the actual song of *I had a horse* had already appeared in Scots Museum so probably the editors were looking for a different sheet so it's quite a complex history of the tunes and their publication, so it's really a process. With Burns also what is actually published with tune wise was not what it started out as which is another complication.

Ellen

That happened with *Auld Lang's Sine*.

Kath

Absolutely that's right George Thompson published it with a different tune that was not Burns original the tune. The one now sang is not Burn's original. The one Burns originally sang is

beginning to come back. There's quite a lot of folk singers singing the original in preference actually to the one that was published but the one that's sort of known globally is the one that was published by Thompson. There's a lot of we could have another discussion about but I won't go there today.

Ellen

The next thing I want talked about was again this relationship between Gaelic and Scotts musical traditions and song traditions and how each of these bards borrowed to some extent but in different amounts presumably. for Rob Donn I looked at 100 tunes in my thesis and my book counting all the repetitions, cause he used some more than once, but 100 hundred tunes made it easy to do percentages so I calculated that about 2/3 of them were borrowed from various sources and about 45% were borrowed from Gallic song about 25% from Scott song 12% from maybe other songs which could have been in English or Irish or show tunes or whatever kind of miscellaneous and maybe 18% were instrumental although I'm not entirely sure about all that and there was a lot of crossover between these categories obviously and then the other thing had to do with how many melodies he composed himself and again there are issues of classification and lack of information but I decided that he had composed or could be given credit for composing about a third of these hundred so 67 borrowed, 33 new but the most interesting thing that I found in just looking at the different genres was that he composed new melodies for about 3/4 of the eulogies but only about 1/4 of the other songs which were often lighter in in tone and it seemed to me that that this shows that he and or his community believed that eulogies for the dead should be based on models from within the Gallic tradition so that was a more conservative genre essentially.

So what about what about Burns to what extent did he use Gaelic material or material that came from Highland sources do we know?

Kath

Well I think the work you've done the on the breakdown and knowing roughly how many Rob Donn composed himself is very important to know it really is.

So with Burns we've got obviously materially heard in southwest Scotland we've got the tunes that can travel across boundaries, across linguistic boundaries that can come from other places. Often they'll be sort of smoothed out and shaped in certain ways that people will recognize even if it's a tune from let's say a different country a different part of the world sometimes it will be taken on board and smoothed out end up sounding a bit more like something that would be recognizable locally and so Burns was very interested in a good tune he loved a good melody and one of the things he said was that, and this is very roughly quoting what he said but something like, "*...please excuse this compositions of mine as many beautiful airs wanted words...*"

So I think Burns is certainly recognizing he's setting out to find good tunes that he likes, hearing tunes that are beautiful to him and his own categorization so really anything that he heard, fiddle tunes, tunes that were already in existence in the southwest, highland melodies as well. When he went on his tour of the Highlands he was particularly on the lookout for melodies.

Ellen

Where did he go?

Kath

He went and as far north as Loch Ness he stopped at places like Aberfeldy, Inver on the way and continued along the Murray coast stopping at places like Nairn and so on and on that trip it was partly about gathering of melodies.

Ronnie

Could they play instruments?

Kath

Burns played the fiddle

Ellen

There's no evidence that Rob Donn played an instrument. The poetry itself indicates that he considered himself a singer but he made references to fiddlers and pipers. One of his best friends was a piper and he talked about going to a wedding where all the preparations were made, the piper and the Bard were there so the Bard was singing and reciting poetry, the piper was playing the pipes. He also makes references to fiddlers on occasion and of course the McDonald's played the fiddle they played all kinds of things and had some classical training on the violin. No I don't think he played an instrument he was probably too poor to be able to afford one. He was a singer.

So what about what about the Patrick McDonald collection. It was published in 1784 and was called Highland Vocal Airs it was the first collection of Gaelic song tunes essentially published in Scotland. Patrick McDonald was the son of the manse and his father Murdo McDonald was the minister in Durness, Joseph McDonald was his younger brother so at least those three all did collecting in in the Durness area as well as elsewhere. Some compositions were their own apparently but Rob Donn, as far as I can tell, was the best known singer in the Gallic tradition in Durness and that area in the 18<sup>th</sup> century so it seems to me very likely that that that they heard some of those melodies from Rob Donn now they may have heard them from other people too but he I think he had a gift as a singer and also a composer of words. He must have had an incredible memory because he dictated all of his 220 poems and songs to the local minister and the daughter of another local minister near the end of his life and so he apparently remembered all this stuff so it seems to me that he probably would have been an excellent source for their collecting but I don't have any way of proving that except by looking at individual tunes that titles in impacting McDonald and pieces of melodies that seemed to refer back Rob Donn's poems so there's some of that but I don't have the examples today so we'll leave that alone.

So Rob Donn could have been a source for Robert Burns indirectly because of material that he contributed to the Patrick McDonald collection and then the other thing, the other connection is that both of them probably used some of the same older melodies that were already in the oral tradition throughout Scotland especially some of the Scots tunes with the instrumental tunes even new fiddle tunes depending on the date and so on but I mean Rob Donn obviously heard a lot of that stuff and so there are examples of tunes that are in the Scots Musical Museum which also seemed to have been used by Rob Donn.

What has been found about Burns and the Highland Local Airs?

Kath

Burns was very interested in highland melodies and he could certainly read music, he could play the fiddle as well and in fact and we know that he got a copy of the Highland Local Airs from James Johnson. James Johnson was the Ingram music publisher a great friend of Burns and was heavily involved in the work on the Scots Musical Museum. Johnson gave Burns a



copy of the Highland Vocal Airs round about 1788 and we have a letter actually which talks about Burns using the collection and what he's looking for.

I'm going to quote you letter 258 - Quote from Burns

*"I am in hopes that I shall pick some fine tunes from among the collection of Highland Airs which I got from you at Edinburgh. I have had a fiddler 2 days already on it and expect him every day for another review of it."*

So it sounds as though fiddlers are playing the Airs to Burns and he is saying ya or na, effectively like this one I don't like that one so what we actually have is we know for sure that two Airs in the Scots Musical Museum in both for the same song *Sarah Liza* actually were taken directly from Highland Vocal Airs. This is a real close example and again I'll just see if I can read a bit of this that will be relevant for us. He'd obviously heard these Airs being played and he liked two tunes now they don't even have titles so there's simply called numbers 112 and 133 cause not all their songs and Highland Vocal Airs actually have titles. So it calls them in the museum a Gaelic Air and another Gaelic Air and one of the tunes seemed to have reminded Burns of the tune of *Lochaber* which was one he liked and I'm just going to read you what Burns says to James Johnson, so this is obviously in the context of the getting the music ready for the Scots Musical Museum so Burns gives Johnson instructions on what he needs to do to the tunes in the Highland Local Airs, so here's the quote.

*"The song will not sing to your tune but there is a Perth shire tune in McDonald's collection of Highland Airs number 112 which is a much admired in this country. I intended the verses to sing to that Air. There is another Air in the same collection number 133 an Argyll shire Air which would with a trifling alteration will do charmingly."*

And then he talks about the alterations he wants to the tune changing little things here and there altering crotchets in the bar so it's very very specific. So what we actually end up with is in the Scots Musical Museum we actually have these and so if you look in the Scots Musical Museum you've got number 367 and 368 and they're both *Fair Eliza* as I've said the first says a Gaelic Air and the second once the same song to another Gaelic Air so these relate to the tunes in the Patrick McDonald collection so I think 367 relates to the first one which is 112 in the Highland Vocal Airs and the second one, if this is making any sense, relates to number 133 so 368 in the museum relates to 133 in the Highland Vocal Airs and the two alterations that Burns hoped for have also been executed by Burns and musical editor Stephen Clark. so it's just to summarize we've got a couple of songs or the same song in the museum two versions of *Fair Eliza* which the tunes equate directly to the Highland Vocal Airs.

Beautiful tune the other one is 368 in the museum.

Ellen

Rob Donn composed a lot of satire not exclusively but Burns wrote a lot of flowery love songs nature poetry etcetera. Both men used the same tune Burns the Braes of Aberfeldy, Donn a satire about extramarital sex.

Ronnie

Was there much lost in Donn's work as it was late in his life that the songs and poems were written down.

Ellen

I don't think there was a lot lost there was probably some words and tunes that went missing if you look at what was preserved there is a lot of femoral stuff. From the research it is clear that there was very little of value that disappeared maybe some little topical stuff but there is a good

representation of his work in what was preserved. The eulogies, Jacobite songs and the long songs were preserved. There is a reference of an early love song for a woman in Tongue that does not seem to have survived. There was song published in the Celtic monthly that did not get in any of the editions, a series of place names, *The song of the Mountains*, (translated from Gaelic) named all the places people knew and was very popular. A great reference for Gaelic place names. Adam Gunn published it I went through all of Malcom McFarland's papers in the National Library and I couldn't find much in terms of music and in terms of texts. I'm sure there was stuff but the fact is that over 220 of his poems and songs were published in the 19<sup>th</sup>. Century which is far more than were published for any other Gaelic poet from the 18<sup>th</sup>. Century and so I think a much larger proportion of his stuff was actually published and preserved then for people who were literate now. Maybe the people who were literate were more selective about what they published or they had editors who were more selective as opposed to the approach up north where people were proud of the native son and they just tried to keep everything but I doubt if there was much else really I mean there would accept odds and ends.

Ellen

I think we should just sum up and talk about what are their legacies today and why are they so different. Is it just the language or are there other factors because they both compose songs in the 18<sup>th</sup>. Century in Scotland but one of them compose songs in Gaelic and the other one compose songs in Scots which is close enough to English that people could sort of figure it out although maybe some of the songs Burns composed were more standard English. I don't know but what do you think of the reasons for the differences in in their legacies or why is Burns so incredibly popular now?

Kath

Well a big question. I think Burns, his genius appeals to a lot of different sections of the community and I think he's both a poet and songwriter and I think Rob Donn was primarily a songwriter from what we've heard and been talking about this morning.

Ellen

I only looked at 100 poems for which I could find tunes there are a lot of the others probably did have tunes but I think there probably were some that did not. Probably his main output is songs. I think Rob Donn is very much writing for the local community. He's commenting on topical issues and folks that he knows all the things that are happening locally so it's quite local although the tunes of course are coming in from further afield.

Perhaps and you may disagree it appeals or would have appeal to a certain section of the population at the time.

So you're talking about the content of the words really

Kath

The thing is though that Burns obviously gets published and we're looking at the collection of Scots song in 18<sup>th</sup>. Century, 600 songs all with tunes and lots of people are buying this and it goes into lots of different editions then Burns is in touch with very influential people editors like George Thompson people that are well connected. George Thompson gives his songs classical type arrangements but there's a lot of famous composers of the day drafted in to provide material so it's very hard to compare the two actually because they're doing different things. One is responding to the local community the other is working with publication editors that kind of thing it was some very influential people and is getting the material out there and then we're just talking about the songs here so it's difficult to make comparisons I think.

The Scots Musical Museum with 600 songs, everything was published with words with tunes and they were published beginning 1787 through to 1803 and there were a lot of love songs and a lot of nature song and some songs about current events. Burns wasn't the only composer included many of the songs are his but certainly not exclusively a collection by Burns. There's a lot of traditional songs like the one we mentioned earlier *I Had a Horse* is in there so some of the songs that were well known at the time were covered in the museum. So a vast repository.

Ellen

Rob Donn was primarily a local poet although a few of his songs were about broader social and political issues. There were some Jacobite songs that that he composed during the 45 and during the rising and then afterwards during the oppression that followed but most of these songs, although they may illustrate broader issues like marriage, the status of women, hierarchy in that society and how it worked, there in the context of people he knew and things he saw. He was more of a reporter who in some ways because song was like local journalism or social media or something that's how people communicate where's Burns was really writing as an author for a broader audience.

Kath

I think we want to concentrate on their legacies you certainly can compare songwriting methods and all that but comparing the two in talent or genius, I think we want to stay away from that. I think we should talk about the language and stuff and focus on songwriting methods. Let's go back to this question of what would their legacies in in 19<sup>th</sup>. to 20<sup>th</sup>. and now the 21<sup>st</sup>. century mean.

Ellen

For Rob Donn because he composed completely in Gaelic his songs were remembered and could be read and appreciated by anyone who knew Gaelic but as the language declined in that community both Gaelic as a whole but also in the particular community that remembered him fewer and fewer people had access to the songs and I think the three additions in the 19<sup>th</sup>. century were efforts to preserve that material in print which the local community very much wanted to do but at that point basically a fairly small percentage of the Gaelic speaking population had the literacy to do that so there was an addition in 1829 which was done by a minister who was the grandson of someone about whom Rob Donn compose some songs and then the other two additions were in 1899 and again they were masterminded by people who had connections with the far north but had some education and were literate and one of those Adam Gunn the minister in Durness and then the other was Hue Morrison who grew up in Torrisdale. He became a teacher and head of the Edinburgh Public Library so they were publishing these things again as a cultural preservation but a lot more people could read them in Gaelic. It was a biography about Donn by Ian Grimble that was first published in 1979 and then republished in a new edition with more Gaelic in 1999 and in the meantime people in the local community still sang some of the songs at ceilidhs they still remember some of the stuff.

I think there's material in the archives of The School is Scottish studies that I haven't even listened to. John McGinnis reported in Durness in 1958 and so there's probably still stuff that he recorded that people knew then that now they forgot so I think what happens is that there's the languages has declined the number of songs in the repertoire just keeps diminishing. That's why I decided to work on trying to do a new edition of some of this material and managed to amuse myself for a number of years digging out all these old additions of the poetry and finding songs buried in various places in libraries and so on and putting them together so now there are 100 songs, all the ones for which I could find melodies with music and staff notation which is kind of a reconstruction. It's not exactly what he's saying but it's something for musicians to

start with. There is the complete Gaelic texts and the complete English translation so this is I hope something that will bring this back to life for a lot of people and they can at least get some sense of what he did. It's a small world it's going to be deeply interested. I think there's going to be people in the northwest Highlands, they'll be people in the Scottish diaspora who might have ancestry from there, people in the Gaelic academic community that'll be interested and I'm hoping that Scottish historians and other people will be interested in the translation just for primary sources for social history because that's what he talked about. It's not like people all over the world are going to have Rob Donn suppers!

Kath

Well you never know. What you've got here is great with the book you've done because not all of these, only a very small part of these songs are known and sung at the moment so hopefully with the publication of the book you'll actually be introducing new Rob Donn material into the Gaelic song repertoire because as people look through the book and pick out things this looks good and you like that you like the melody and then start to sing themselves hopefully that will then spread it to other people so they hear it or want to sing and learn the material so hopefully we'll see some of these 18<sup>th</sup>. Century songs reintroduced into present day. I'm sure that will happen.

I mean even with Burns obviously there's a lot of songs known Auld *Lang Sine* and *Green Grow the Rashes O* are very famous but there's obviously a huge number of other things that aren't really sung even though Burns is the author or even though it's him that's reworked the songs there's a lot of songs that aren't really known. Burns himself wrote well over 300 songs and some may disagree with me here but I would say a dozen are very well known others sort of everybody knows in Scotland or the diaspora but then but then there's a broader number been recorded by music groups. There's a series of CDs called the complete songs of Robert Burns Jean Redpath did earlier with the American composer Serge Heavy. She recorded with orchestral arrangements in fact a very large part of the songs she didn't actually finish the project to my knowledge for various reasons but it was an attempt to record all the songs. The complete songs of Robert Burns it's a more recent a project by doctor Fred Freeman involving a series of CDs published on Lynn records and featuring a lot of different voices and singing the song so it is a complete songs of Robert Burns.

Ellen

Have you made a CD of Robert Burns?

Kath

Actually funny should ask. I've a book with Emily Lyle which is due to be published quite soon by Musical Scotia a Glasgow based publisher. I worked jointly with my colleague Emily Lyle and it's called *Robert Burns and the Discovery and Recreation of Scottish Song* and what we did there is I included a CD showing examples of what the traditional song would have been like and then what Burn's song would have been like. The song *If I had a Horse* I sing that and then I sing Burns *Westlin Winds*, so it's looking at what the original was. We do that with 10 chapters and I do a song for each chapter showing the pair of versions.

### **Podcast Mackay Country Gaelic**

Discussing its history current status and how it differs from standard literary Gaelic are Dr. Ellen Beard and Dr. Alasdair MacMhaoirn a historian who teaches at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig is the National Centre for Gaelic Language and Culture Based in Sleat, Isle of Skye.

## Trailing Donn

We commemorated the life of Rob Donn by a series of plaques placed at or near to each of the sites identified from research into his work. Rob Donn's droving took him all over Mackay Country. He discusses people places and circumstances he encountered. The drovers were local men. In May, they would start to visit farms, bargaining for cattle often only one or two at a time, since many of the highland farming tenants were very poor. Gradually, they would have a herd they could gather as summer advanced and drive south. Ahead of them lay a long and dangerous journey. Rivers in flood might have to be crossed; journeys must be made over trackless mountains, sometimes in thick mist where a drover might easily lose his way; or well-armed "rievers" might try to steal cattle.

The method of travel would have been quite different in the 18<sup>th</sup>. Century. The roads we know today would not have been in existence. Mountain tracks, bealachs and passes through the straths in conjunction with sea ways would have been the usual routes.

Rob Donn's droving took him all over Mackay Country. He discusses people places and circumstances he encountered. The Rob Donn Heritage trail was set at nine focal points on the A835 and a deviation into Strath More.



## Rob Donn Scourie and Eddrachillis

The parish of Eddrachillis (between the Kyles) was home to George MacKay of Handa (now a bird sanctuary) and to Christine Brodie, daughter of the minister at Badcall, who was courted by Iain MacEachainn's son Hugh before he left to seek his fortune in Jamaica. Rob Donn composed love songs in the voices of both, including these words from Christine:

Tha mi 'g athchuing' ort bhi tigh'nn,  
Mu 'n dean a' ghrian milleadh ort,  
Mu 'm faigh thu biadh ni tinneas duit,  
'S mu 'm faic thu oigh ni mire riut.

I am praying that you will come back  
 Before the sun harms you,  
 Before you take food that makes you ill,  
 And before you see a girl who flirts with you

Hugh did not return until many years later, and Christine married another; her grandson Rev. Mackintosh Mackay edited the first collection of Rob Donn's poems in 1829.

### Rob Donn Kinlochbervie and Loch Inchard

**The Rob Donn Trail  
Slighe Roib Dhuinn**

**Rob Donn MacKay**  
 Rob Donn MacKay (1714-1778) was a Gaelic poet who left a rich legacy of some 220 poems and songs about life in Dùthaich MhicAoidh (MacKay Country) before the Clearances. Rob Donn was born at Allnacailich and lived most of his life in Strathmore south of Loch Hope. After many years as a cattleman and drover and a stint in the military, he ended his life at Balnakeil near Durness, where he is buried and honoured with a memorial.

**Rob Donn and Eddrachillis**  
 In Rob Donn's time, the Parish of Eddrachillis (Gaelic for 'between the kyles') was home to George MacKay of Handa (now a bird sanctuary) and Christine Brodie, daughter of the minister at Badcall, who was courted by Iain mac Eachainn's son Hugh before he left to seek his fortune in Jamaica. Rob Donn composed love songs in the voices of both, including these words from Christine:

*Tha mi 'g athchuing' ort bhith tighinn  
 Mun dean a' ghrian milleadh ort,  
 Mum faigh thu biadh ni tinneas duit,  
 'S mum faic thu oigh ni mire riut.*

*I am praying that you will come back  
 Before the sun harms you,  
 Before you take food that makes you ill,  
 And before you see a girl who flirts with you.*

In fact, Hugh did not return for many years and Christine married another; her grandson Rev. Mackintosh MacKay edited the first collection of Rob Donn's poems in 1829.

**Eddrachillis & Scourie**  
 Eddrachillis from Gaelic Eadar Dhà Chaolais (between two straits). Scourie from Old Norse Skógarærgi (shieling of the woods). Scourie was the birthplace of General Hugh Mackay, Commander-in-Chief of William and Mary's Scottish army from 1689-1690 during the conflict with James VII. In Rob Donn's day, the parish church and manse were located in Badcall. Handa Island and Scouriemore Headland are Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The island is a nature reserve run by the Scottish Wildlife Trust, with spectacular sea cliffs, stacks and bird life; the residents migrated to Canada after the potato famine of 1848. The headland features the 'Scourie Dykes', dark intrusions of molten igneous rock into older geological formations.

View of Badcall Bay from the Old Manse

Logos: HISTORY HERITAGE & ARCHAEOLOGY 2017, The National Lottery, Leòdhas Chrannchur Nàiseanta, CAITHNESS & NORTH SUTHERLAND FUND, NDA, SSE

IMAGE 443 TRAILING DONN TRAIL INFORMATION PANEL

Rob Donn composed two notable poems set in this area. One features Davie, a resident of Loch Inchard whose boat was blown off course to Orkney. Unfortunately he was rescued:

Bha do nàbaidhean toigheach,  
 Anns gach bàgh 'g iarraidh naidheachd,  
 'S leis a' chràdh bh' orr', chan fhaigheadh iad deur.  
 Ach o 'n chual iad thu thilleadh,  
 O na cuantaibh, gun mhilleadh,  
 Shìn an sluagh ud air sileadh gu lèir.

Your loving neighbours were searching  
 For news in each bay  
 With such grief that no tear could they manage,  
 But when they heard you'd returned  
 From the oceans unharmed,  
 Those people all started to cry.

The other praises the determined young Anna MacKay, who left her family to marry a young cowherd living at the shielings near Aisir ('Oldshore').

### **Rob Donn and Balnakeil**

Balnakeil (Baile-na-Cille, the church settlement) was the heart of Durness Parish in Rob Donn's lifetime. Here stood the church where Rev. Murdo MacDonald preached, the cemetery where Rob Donn is buried, and Balnakeil House, the home of Donald, fourth Lord Reay. Nearby were the manse, home of the musically gifted Joseph and Patrick MacDonald, and Keoldale, home of factor Kenneth Sutherland. Rob Donn composed elegies for several of these men and lighter verse about other neighbours; his elegy for Murdo MacDonald declares his own poetic creed:

Fìor mhasgall chionn pàidhidh,  
No stad gealtach le gàbhadh,  
Bhrìgh mo bheachd-s' ann an dànaibh,  
'S mi nach dèanadh, 's nach d' rinn:  
Ach na 'm biodh comain no stà dhuit,  
Ann a t' alladh chur os àird dhuit,  
Co na mis' do 'm bu chàra,  
'S cò a b' fheàrr na thu thoill?

Outright flattery for payment  
Or caution through fear of danger  
Never was or will be  
The basis for the opinions in my poetry.  
But if it could be a tribute or service to you  
To raise your fame on high for you,  
Who should do it more than I,  
And who could deserve it more than you?

Like Tongue House it remains exactly as Rob Donn saw it, though it has also lost all its eighteenth century furnishings." According to Dr. Grimble, Balnakeil was built by the second Lord Reay who was educated in Denmark while his father was fighting with his clan regiment in the Thirty Years' War, "*and it may not be fanciful to see in its architecture the influence of the Danish manor-farm*". Another story related by Ian Grimble tells how the wife of a Mackay chief, a Sutherland by birth, helped save Kenneth Sutherland, an army deserter who had fled to Durness during or shortly after the 1745 rebellion. A detachment of troops caught up with him at Balnakeil. "Whether by accident or design, Kenneth Sutherland did not choose one of the doors leading to the ground-floor premises when he bolted through the garden and across the court. He chose the entrance which took him to these narrow stairs. At the head of them can still be seen the little closet beside the paneled reception room into which Lady Reay pushed her clansman in his extremity. She then welcomed his pursuers as they tumbled up the stairs, ushering them into the great room beyond Kenneth's hiding place. She ordered drink for them; she summoned the women who were working about the premises and improvised a dance."

### **Rob Donn and Loch Eriboll**

Several Rob Donn songs are set on the shores of Loch Eriboll, including elegies for Ewen of Polla and the Rispond misers and comic songs about a wedding at Port Chamuill and a marooned sailor at Freisgill. The Rispond misers, bachelor brothers who died a week after turning a beggar from their door, were roundly condemned for lack of Christian charity:

Daoine nach d' rinn briseadh iad,  
Is e fiosrachail do chàch;  
'S cha mhò a rinn iad aon dad,  
Ris an can an saoghal gràs.

These men broke no commandments,  
As far as we can trace,  
Nor did their deeds show anything  
Of what the world calls grace.

### **Rob Donn and Tongue**

Tongue House was the seat of Lord Reay, Chief of MacKay, where Rob Donn was often summoned to account for questionable activities such as poaching deer and composing Jacobite verse. After one such incident, he adjourned to the inn below the church with his friend George MacLeod, Lord Reay's piper, commenting:

Thèid mise an dèidh Sheòrais  
Oir is còir dhomh bhith 'm fagus da,  
Oir is bràithrean ann an ceòl sinn,  
An còmhradh beòil 's am feadaireachd.

I will go in search of George  
Because I ought to be in his company,  
Since we are brothers in music,  
In the language of mouth and chanter.

Tongue was also the home of Iain Thapaidh (John 'Happy' Sutherland), schoolteacher at Ribigill, whose lack of musical ability and other failings made him a frequent target of Rob Donn's satires.

### **Rob Donn and the Parish of Farr Bettyhill**

In addition to the Mackays living in this area during Rob Donn's lifetime, two of his editors had strong links to Bettyhill and nearby Torrisdale. Hew Morrison (1849-1935), born and raised in Torrisdale, was a schoolteacher, friend of Andrew Carnegie, and chief librarian of Edinburgh Public Library; his 1899 edition of Rob Donn contains 220 Gaelic poems. Historian Ian Grimble (1921-1995) wrote the biography *The World of Rob Donn* and helped establish the Strathnaver Museum here in the Farr Parish Church. In the words of Grimble's friend, eminent Gaelic poet and scholar Ruaraidh MacThòmais (Derick Thomson):

Tha fhios gun cuir Rob Donn fàilt' ort  
Ma thachras sibh ann an saoghal eile,  
'S bidh sgeulachd no dhà agaibh  
Mu Shrath Nabhair 's Gleanna Gallaidh.

Undoubtedly Rob Donn will welcome you  
If you meet in another world,  
And you will exchange stories  
About Strath Naver and Glen Golly.

### **Rob Donn and the Mackays of Strathy**

Rob Donn's long-term employer Iain mac Eachainn ('John son of Hector') was descended from the MacKays of Strathy, although he lived in Muisel in Strath More, where Rob Donn joined



his household as a farm servant at an early age. Like his partner Hugh of Bighouse, Iain was a drover and farm manager; he was also a poet and patron of the arts who recognized the talent of his young protégé:

Tha m' obair-sa air dol gu làr  
Thèid i bàs do dhìth nam fonn,  
Ach leis gach brìtheamh dan eòl dàn  
Bidh cuimhne gu bràth air Rob Donn.

My work has fallen to the ground  
It will perish for want of airs,  
But with every judge of poetry  
Rob Donn will be remembered forever.

Rob Donn composed several poems for this family, including the pipe song Isabel MacKay and a heartfelt elegy upon Iain's death in 1757.

### **Rob Donn and the MacKay's of Bighouse Melvich**

Hugh MacKay of Bighouse (d. 1770), one of Rob Donn's employers, owned Strath Halladale and built Bighouse Lodge on the river near Melvich. A relative of Lord Reay, Chief of Clan MacKay, he managed the Reay estate and employed Rob Donn as a drover taking cattle south to the great trysts at Crieff and Falkirk. Bighouse's daughter Janet married Colin Campbell of Glenure, whose 1752 murder featured in Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Kidnapped*. Although Rob Donn composed several praise poems for this family, he also accused Bighouse of deceit when selling cattle to the Lowlanders, and once said, when invited to admire a new suit:

Chan eil putan innt' no toll  
Nach do chost bonn do dhuine bochd.

There's not a button or button-hole in it  
That hasn't taken money off a poor man.

### **Rob Donn and Strath More**

Rob Donn lived most of his life in this strath, first at Allt na Caillich (burn of the old woman), then at the home of Iain mac Eachainn in Muiseal, and later with his own family at Bad na h-Achlais. This is where he composed his early love songs and political verse. To the southeast is Mudale, where the Reay Country cattle were gathered for the long trek to the markets in the south. And to the southwest is Gleann Gallaidh (Glen Golly), praised in his best-known song

Ged a gheibhinn gu m' àilgheas  
Ceann t-Sàile MhicAoidh,  
'S mòr a b' annsa leam fanadh  
An Gleann Gallaidh nan craobh.

Although I got all I wanted  
Of MacKay's Kintail land,  
I would much rather stay here  
In Glen Golly of the trees

## Mackay Country Scheduled Monuments

Many of the pre clearance townships were founded around ancient sites as can be deduced from the few examples here. There are few of the villages designated as Scheduled Monuments but several have nationally important archaeological sites or historic buildings associated with them. Ancient Monuments UK, an online database of historic monuments that are listed as being of particular archaeological importance for Mackay Country from the parishes of Farr, Tongue and Eddrachillis are listed here. Durness is dealt with elsewhere.

Sources:

- Historic Environment Scotland
- Historic Environment Scotland
- <http://www.canmore.org.uk>
- Local Authority

### Farr

#### Ach a' Chuil, broch

700m W of E end of Loch Naver  
Scheduled Date: 19 November 1938  
Last Amended: 29 March 2001  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM1880  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: broch  
Location: Farr

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.3112 / 58°18'40"N  
Longitude: -4.2912 / 4°17'28"W  
OS Eastings: 265855  
OS Northings: 938132  
OS Grid: NC658381  
Map Code National: GBR H6SR.M2Q  
Map Code Global: WH398.1CTD

#### Description

The monument comprises the remains of a broch (a fortification of Iron Age date) and adjacent remains. The broch stands on a small promontory on the south shore of Loch Naver. It is a little over 15m in diameter, and built of large blocks of local stone. On the NW side its outer face is still visible, and the entrance appears to have been from the SE. On the landward side of the broch is a low curving wall with a causeway on the SE. This causeway crosses a shallow boggy ditch and rises to a second line of outer walling, surviving as a row of large stones. There are other large stones and traces of walls on the promontory which may also be associated with the broch.

The area now to be scheduled is irregular on plan, to include the broch, its outer works and an area around and between them in which evidence relating to the monument's construction and use is likely to survive. It is bounded on the N by the shore of the loch, on the W by the lowest stretch of a small stream and elsewhere by a line drawn about 40m out from the outer edge of the broch mound. It measures a maximum of 72m N-S by 55m E-W.

#### 'TheTulloch', fortified enclosure

177m NE of Langdale  
Scheduled Date: 11 December 2002  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM10503  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Secular: earthwork

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.3735 / 58°22'24"N  
Longitude: -4.2291 / 4°13'44"W  
OS Eastings: 269725  
OS Northings: 944944  
OS Grid: NC697449

Location: Farr

Map Code National: GBR H6XL.KKJ

Map Code Global: WH4B1.0SFN

### Description

The monument comprises a small fortified enclosure, known locally as 'The Tulloch', of probable medieval date, which is visible as a substantial earthwork. The monument is situated on the edge of the river terrace W of the River Naver, about 4m above the flat valley floor, at a height of about 45m OD. It commands extensive views to the NE and SW along Strath Naver.

The monument is circular in form, with an internal diameter of about 18m, and consists of an enclosure defended by a substantial ditch on its W side. The height of the enclosing rampart is 1.7m from internal ground level to its summit, and about 3, 3.5m high on the W side of the monument. Several large boulders exposed in the inner slope of the turf-covered rampart in the W arc may be the remains of an inner retaining wall.

The massive ditch, 12.5m wide, is breached by a causeway in the SW arc and there is another gap on the NE side, which indicates that there were two entrances. The ditch would have formerly extended all the way around the perimeter. There is no gap in the rampart corresponding with the causeway across the ditch in the SW arc, which indicates that the defences may have been to some extent re-built at a later phase.

The date of the enclosure is uncertain, but both its position and form suggest that it may be a medieval fortification, rather than a prehistoric one.

### **Achargary, chambered cairn and ring cairns**

380m NNW of

Scheduled Date: 18 October 1938

Last Amended: 27 January 2003

Source: Historic Environment Scotland

Source ID: SM1760

Schedule Class: Cultural

Category: Prehistoric ritual and funerary:  
chambered cairn

Coordinates

Latitude: 58.4644 / 58°27'51"N

Longitude: -4.1971 / 4°11'49"W

OS Eastings: 271926

OS Northings: 954996

OS Grid: NC719549

Map Code National: GBR J60C.26B

Map Code Global: WH49N.HHLZ

### Description

The monument comprises a Neolithic chambered burial cairn set on a river terrace W and SW of the River Naver, with several smaller mounds, probably Bronze Age ring cairns, nearby. The large cairn was originally scheduled in 1938, but an inadequate area was included fully to protect the archaeological remains. This scheduling extension expands the protected area to cover all of the large cairn and includes the smaller cairns for the first time.

The chambered cairn is roughly circular, about 22m in diameter and stands up to 2m high. Large stones protrude from the centre, indicating the position of the burial chamber, which has probably been disturbed in the past. About 18m to the SW is a group of five smaller ring cairns, probably of Bronze Age date (around 1500 BC). These vary in diameter, but are about 4m across on average.

The area now to be scheduled is irregular on plan, measuring a maximum of 88m SW-NE by 60m transversely, to include the chambered cairn and the ring cairns and an area around them in which related archaeological remains are likely to survive.

### **Achcoillenaborgie Cairns**

500m N of Lochan Duinte

Coordinates

Scheduled Date: 11 December 1934  
Last Amended: 15 December 1998  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM1781  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric ritual and funerary:  
long cairn

Latitude: 58.5005 / 58°30'1"N  
Longitude: -4.206 / 4°12'21"W  
OS Eastings: 271538  
OS Northings: 959030  
OS Grid: NC715590  
Map Code National: GBR H6Z8.B3B  
Map Code Global: WH49G.CLCT

### Description

The monument comprises two long cairns; funerary and ritual monuments dating from the Neolithic period (c. 5000-2000 BC). It was originally scheduled in 1934 and only the above ground structures of the cairns themselves were covered by this scheduling. This rescheduling takes in a larger area to ensure that all the archaeological remains likely to be associated with the cairns are protected.

The monument lies in rough grazing land overlooking the River Naver at around 15m OD. The cairns are set roughly in line, aligned NNW-SSE. Both were excavated at least twice during the late 19th century. The southern cairn measures a maximum of 75m long by 24m wide, narrowing to 13m at the S end, with a maximum height of approximately 3m. The Victorian excavations exposed a chamber near the northern end which measures approximately 8m by 2m by 1.5m deep. This chamber is set at a slight angle to the axis of the cairn and at least two lintel stones are still in position. There are forecourts at both ends of the cairn, defined by horns built out of the body of the cairn, and the fragmentary remains of facades made up of large orthostats. The northern cairn comprises two sections; a heel-shaped, horned cairn containing a roughly circular chamber to the north, and a long cairn to the south. These sections are separated by a gap approximately 2m wide, and it is probable that the two sections once formed a continuous whole, measuring approximately 60m long by 17m wide. The presence of forecourts at either end of this unified monument, following the same pattern as the southern cairn, further strengthens the argument that the two sections once formed one cairn.

The area proposed for scheduling comprises the remains described and an area around them in which material relating to their construction and use may be expected to survive. It is irregular in outline, with maximum dimensions of 150m NNW-SSE by 40m transversely, bounded on the N by a fence.

The monument is of national importance because of its potential to contribute to our understanding of prehistoric funerary and ritual practices. It may be expected to contain material relating to its mode of construction and use. The cairns are unique in the north of Scotland in their use of upright stones in the façade, and the development and use of these cairns may have continued through most of the third millennium BC.

### **Achcoillenaborgie Broch**

Strathnaver  
Scheduled Date: 22 June 1939  
Last Amended: 30 May 1961  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM1824  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and  
defensive: broch

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.504 / 58°30'14"N  
Longitude: -4.2085 / 4°12'30"W  
OS Eastings: 271408  
OS Northings: 959424  
OS Grid: NC714594  
Map Code National: GBR H6Z7.WGY  
Map Code Global: WH49G.BJ64

### **Allt a'Bhealaich hut circles**

Naver Forest, Strathnaver  
Scheduled Date: 13 May 1965  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM2518  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: hut circle, roundhouse

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.2907 / 58°17'26"N  
Longitude: -4.2425 / 4°14'33"W  
OS Eastings: 268631  
OS Northings: 935752  
OS Grid: NC686357  
Map Code National: GBR H6WT.CCV  
Map Code Global: WH398.SWY5

### **Allt a'Chaisteil, broch**

E of Rhinovie, Strathnaver  
Scheduled Date: 18 October 1938  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM1828  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: broch

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.4872 / 58°29'13"N  
Longitude: -4.1911 / 4°11'27"W  
OS Eastings: 272361  
OS Northings: 957523  
OS Grid: NC723575  
Map Code National: GBR J609.BZ4  
Map Code Global: WH49G.LYG1

### **Allt Ceann na Coille hut circles & field clearance cairns**

Naver Forest  
Scheduled Date: 13 May 1965  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM2521  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: hut circle, roundhouse

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.3426 / 58°20'33"N  
Longitude: -4.2704 / 4°16'13"W  
OS Eastings: 267193  
OS Northings: 941585  
OS Grid: NC671415  
Map Code National: GBR H6TP.4M7  
Map Code Global: WH392.CKQV

#### **Description**

Circa 1870. 2 storey and attic stugged coursers. 2 Edwardian shops with fascias and patterned glazing above transom, and 3 1st floor windows. Canted dormer. Slated roof.

### **Armadale Burn broch**

1420m SE of Armadale House.  
Scheduled Date: 14 November 2017  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM13678  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: broch

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.5355 / 58°32'7"N  
Longitude: -4.064 / 4°3'50"W  
OS Eastings: 279933  
OS Northings: 962670  
OS Grid: NC799626  
Map Code National: GBR J6B5.955  
Map Code Global: WH49B.JQZG

#### **Description**

The monument is a broch, a substantial stone-built roundhouse, dating from the Iron Age (between 600BC and AD 400). The broch is visible as a dry stone structure sitting atop a large knoll with surviving walling, an entrance and some internal features. It is defended by natural scree and cliff around its eastern side and by a conjoining circuit of low drystone walling running from the north of the broch around its west, south and southeast sides. The broch is located on the west side of a steep ravine to the south of Armadale Bay at approximately 60m

above sea level. The broch is approximately 17m in overall diameter with its walling up to 4.5m thick. The entrance is located on the southeast side and has a well-preserved passage leading inwards. Around the southwest quadrant up to fifteen stone courses are visible and overall the broch survives up to approximately 4m in height. The interior is obscured by vegetation but records indicate the presence of chambers within the thickness of the enclosing wall. An outer wall extends from the river cliff north of the broch around the west side, rejoining the cliff in the southeast. There is an entrance through this outer wall in the northern half, opposing the inner broch entrance in its southern half. There are structural remains at the bottom of the west side of the knoll, the form of which indicates that it is a prehistoric domestic structure.

The scheduled area is circular on plan measuring 70m in diameter, to include the remains described above and an area around them within which evidence relating to the monument's construction, use and abandonment is expected to survive, as shown in red on the accompanying map.

Source: Historic Environment Scotland Statement of Scheduling

### Cultural Significance

The cultural significance of the monument has been assessed as follows:

#### Intrinsic Characteristics

The monument comprises the structural remains of an Iron Age broch with surviving architectural features. The broch survives as low, drystone structure, with a well-preserved entrance passageway in the southeast quadrant leading to the interior. The interior appears to be relatively undisturbed and archaeological features, artefacts and ecofacts are likely to have been sealed by the collapse of sections of the interior wall. The outer defensive wall and an adjacent structure at the bottom of the natural knoll upon which the broch sits adds the site's significance.

By analogy with a number of excavated brochs, the broch and its outer-works are likely to contain deposits rich in occupation debris, artefacts and palaeoenvironmental evidence that can tell us about how people lived, their trade and exchange contacts, and their social status, as well as providing information about broch architecture and construction methods.

Brochs in Sutherland and Caithness are typically thought to date from the mid-first millennium BC through to the early part of the first millennium AD. The presence of outer-works and structure beyond these outer-works indicates that this site may have had an extended development sequence. Scientific study of the site would allow us to develop a better understanding of the chronology of the site, including its date of origin, state of completeness and any possible development sequence.

Brochs are a specific and complex type of Atlantic roundhouse. They were large structures that could accommodate an extended family or a small community. There would likely have been a social hierarchy within the community living here, however, the construction of these elaborate towers is often understood in terms of elite settlement. Other interpretations have stressed their likely role as fortified or defensive sites, possibly serving a community across a wider area. Brochs are complex structures likely to have had numerous purposes in prehistoric society.

## Contextual Characteristics

Brochs are a widespread class of monument across northern Scotland with notable concentrations in Caithness, Sutherland, Orkney, Shetland, the Western Isles and the northwest Highlands. In this part of northern Scotland, they are clustered along the coastline and, in the case of this example, within the major north-south straths. These river valleys would have served as important communication corridors. This broch is located midway between two local clusters of similar sites around Torrisdale Bay and beside the River Naver, to the west and, Melvich Bay and Strath Halladale to the east.

Links between neighbouring brochs such as within this local cluster are likely and these links suggest broader community interests at the time of the construction and use. This example therefore has the potential to broaden our understanding of prehistoric society and community across northern Scotland.

The broch sits on a prominent natural knoll and is well defended because of the steep slopes of the knoll. These natural defences appear to have been accentuated by an outer defensive work. The knoll with the broch on its summit is a prominent landscape feature with extensive views southwards and along the River Naver. It may have been deliberately sited here to control the local topography and to be seen as a prominent landmark.

## Statement of National Importance

This monument is of national importance because it makes a significant addition to our understanding of the past, in particular of Iron Age society in Sutherland and, the function, use and development of brochs. This is a well-preserved example with identifiable architectural features including an entrance passage and internal features. Significant archaeological deposits are likely to survive in and around the broch, indicating activity and materials used in the broch's construction, occupation and abandonment. The broch's location on a prominent knoll and the associated outerworks are aspects of the importance of this site, demonstrating how topography was exploited and accentuated by those building brochs. The site also can add to our understanding of settlement patterns, social structure and economic circumstances prevalent during the Iron Age in northern Scotland.

## **Bad an Leathaid, deserted township**

Strathnaver	Coordinates
Scheduled Date: 13 May 1965	Latitude: 58.2939 / 58°17'37"N
Source: Historic Environment Scotland	Longitude: -4.2162 / 4°12'58"W
Source ID: SM2511	OS Eastings: 270184
Schedule Class: Cultural	OS Northings: 936054
Category: Secular: settlement, including deserted, depopulated and townships	OS Grid: NC701360
	Map Code National: GBR H6YT.5FP
	Map Code Global: WH4BF.6SJQ

## **Baligill Burn, limekilns**

Scheduled Date: 11 January 1978	Coordinates
Source: Historic Environment Scotland	Latitude: 58.567 / 58°34'1"N
Source ID: SM4290	Longitude: -3.9693 / 3°58'9"W
Schedule Class: Cultural	OS Eastings: 285546
Category: Industrial: kiln, furnace, oven	OS Northings: 966004
	OS Grid: NC855660
	Map Code National: GBR J6K2.QJC
	Map Code Global: WH496.0X4W

## Baligill Mill

Scheduled Date: 11 January 1978  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM4265  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Industrial: mill, factory

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.5637 / 58°33'49"N  
Longitude: -3.9688 / 3°58'7"W  
OS Eastings: 285563  
OS Northings: 965637  
OS Grid: NC855656  
Map Code National: GBR J6K3.4Q3  
Map Code Global: WH49D.00CV

## Ben Klibreck, Campsite and Survey Station

Meall nan Con  
Scheduled Date: 11 March 2003  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM10795  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Secular: camp

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.2358 / 58°14'8"N  
Longitude: -4.4086 / 4°24'31"W  
OS Eastings: 258677  
OS Northings: 929976  
OS Grid: NC586299  
Map Code National: GBR H6HY.THV  
Map Code Global: WH39L.78W7

### Description

The monument comprises the remains of a campsite, constructed by soldiers of the Ordnance Survey in the earlier part of the 19th century while conducting the first triangulation of Scotland. It also includes the remains, on the nearby summit, of the original survey cairn, as well as later survey points.

The campsite lies on the E flank of Meall nan Con, the highest summit of the Ben Klibreck ridge. It consists of several foundations, aligned along the hillside, just below the crest of the ridge, not far from the summit itself. The most substantial, and the furthest from the summit, is a small rectangular drystone building, standing to gable height at the N end. This structure has a small fireplace and chimney void in the NE end, and a doorway in the S end of the SE wall. Along the SE wall, overlooking the downhill slope, is a broad platform of large slabs. By analogy with similar camps elsewhere, this building would have been the cookhouse and duty room of the camp.

At the same level as this structure, and between it and the foot of the summit slope, there are several sub-circular scooped platforms in the hillside, three of them revetted with large stone slabs on the downhill side. At least two smaller, non-revetted platforms also survive. These platforms would have been the bases for the stout canvas bell-tents used as accommodation by the survey party. On the very summit of the hill, to the SW of the camp, a large circular enclosure of drystone construction overlies the remains of the original survey cairn (and is no doubt constructed from it). Within this enclosure are contained the Modern (1960s?) triangulation pillar and its broken (1930s?) predecessor.

Such camps are often known as Colby Camps, named after the officer commanding the Ordnance Survey at the time. The nature of the instruments of the period, the need for very precise measurements and the exigencies of Scottish mountain weather frequently necessitated lengthy stays at high altitude (in one extreme case, three months) to complete the measurements required. This survey programme laid the backbone of the mapping system that served Britain until recent advances in satellite and electronic distance measurement.



The area to be scheduled is in two parts. A circular area, 20 in diameter, includes the stone shelter, the underlying remains of the original survey cairn and the two triangulation pillars. An approximately rectangular area, up to 100m NE-SW by 50m NW-SE, includes the stone building and the various tent platforms, as well as an area around them in which evidence relating to their construction and occupation is likely to survive. These areas are marked in red on the accompanying map.

Source: Historic Environment Scotland

#### Statement of Scheduling

The monument is of national importance as one of the key sites of the early 19th-century primary triangulation of Great Britain. As such, it has great significance in the history of scientific cartography, in which Britain was probably the world leader at that date. Only a few camps survive to this standard of preservation. Its existence serves as a reminder of the intensity of manual effort once required to conduct survey measurements which are now almost effortless and routine.

#### **Blar na Fola & Breac Dubh, hut circles**

Naver Forest

Scheduled Date: 13 May 1965

Source: Historic Environment Scotland

Source ID: SM2522

Schedule Class: Cultural

Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: hut circle, roundhouse

Coordinates

Latitude: 58.3238 / 58°19'25"N

Longitude: -4.243 / 4°14'34"W

OS Eastings: 268724

OS Northings: 939440

OS Grid: NC687394

Map Code National: GBR H6WQ.R4Q

Map Code Global: WH398.S1PQ

#### **Borgie Bridge, homestead**

250m E of

Scheduled Date: 6 February 1963

Last Amended: 20 November 1992

Source: Historic Environment Scotland

Source ID: SM2134

Schedule Class: Cultural

Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: homestead

Coordinate

Latitude: 58.4964 / 58°29'46"N

Longitude: -4.2816 / 4°16'53"W

OS Eastings: 267117

OS Northings: 958720

OS Grid: NC671587

Map Code National: GBR H6S8.KH2

Map Code Global: WH389.6PDZ

#### Description

This monument is a defended homestead of probable Iron Age date situated on the edge of a natural escarpment overlooking the Borgie valley. The monument consists of a semi-circular ditch averaging 8m wide and 2m deep from which material has gone to form a flat-topped mound about 18m in diameter and 2m high. The ditch stops short of the escarpment at both ends where there are slight counterscarps. A causeway crosses the ditch in the SE. Eccentrically placed on the top of the mound is an amorphous stone walled circular structure, possibly a prehistoric round house. The area to be scheduled measures 60m E-W by 50m N-S, to include the defended homestead, internal stone structure and an area around in which traces of activities associated with the building and use of the homestead may survive, as shown in red on the attached map.

#### Statement of Scheduling

This monument is of national importance for its potential contribution to an understanding of prehistoric defensive construction and domestic life.

### **Borve Castle**

Scheduled Date: 30 May 1961	Coordinates
Source: Historic Environment Scotland	Latitude: 58.5464 / 58°32'46"N
Source ID: SM2112	Longitude: -4.1918 / 4°11'30"W
Schedule Class: Cultural	OS Eastings: 272531
Category: Secular: castle	OS Northings: 964113
	OS Grid: NC725641
	Map Code National: GBR J604.JLZ
	Map Code Global: WH498.LG34

### **Carnachy Hut Circles,**

Strathnaver	Coordinates
Scheduled Date: 13 October 1938	Latitude: 58.4333 / 58°25'59"N
Source: Historic Environment Scotland	Longitude: -4.1939 / 4°11'38"W
Source ID: SM1845	OS Eastings: 272000
Schedule Class: Cultural	OS Northings: 951529
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: hut circle, roundhouse	OS Grid: NC720515
	Map Code National: GBR J60F.PNC

### **Clach An Righ Stone Circle**

400m NNW of Dalharrold	Coordinates
Scheduled Date: 4 December 1934	Latitude: 58.3199 / 58°19'11"N
Last Amended: 23 February 1998	Longitude: -4.2562 / 4°15'22"W
Source: Historic Environment Scotland	OS Eastings: 267938
Source ID: SM1779	OS Northings: 939032
Schedule Class: Cultural	OS Grid: NC679390
Category: Prehistoric ritual and funerary: stone circle or ring	Map Code National: GBR H6VQ.YZQ
	Map Code Global: WH398.L4FQ

### **Description**

The monument comprises a stone circle of prehistoric date. It is being rescheduled to rectify the map location of the scheduled area.

The monument lies in a clearing in a coniferous plantation at around 75m OD. The stone circle is approximately 7m in diameter, and surrounds a low cairn about 5m in diameter. Only two of the circle's stones remain upright, the most northerly measuring about 1.75m high by 0.2m thick by 0.8m wide at the base tapering to 0.4m, while the southerly one measures about 2.5m high by 0.15m thick by 1m wide tapering to 0.3m. A smaller stone abuts the latter at right angles to its northern face. There are four fallen stones visible, measuring between 0.75-2.5m long by 0.5-1m wide. Three of the fallen stones form an arc 6m to the SW of the upright stones. Other fallen stones may survive in the vicinity, hidden beneath the undergrowth.

The area proposed for scheduling comprises the remains described and an area around them within which related material may be expected to survive. It is a circle, 30m in diameter, minus a chord on the E side where it is cut by a forestry track, as marked in red on the accompanying map extract.

### **Statement of Scheduling**

The monument is of national importance because of its potential to contribute to our understanding of prehistoric ritual and religious practices.

### **Cladh Langdale Burial Ground** and possible chapel site

Scheduled Date: 11 November 2003	Coordinates
Source: Historic Environment Scotland	Latitude: 58.3759 / 58°22'33"N
Source ID: SM10834	Longitude: -4.2261 / 4°13'33"W
Schedule Class: Cultural	OS Eastings: 269908
Category: Ecclesiastical: burial ground, cemetery, and graveyard	OS Northings: 945206
	OS Grid: NC699452
	Map Code National: GBR H6YL.6XH
	Map Code Global: WH4B1.1QVT

### Description

The monument comprises the remains of Cladh Langdale burial ground and possible chapel site. The monument was in use in the Early Christian period and later. It is visible as an earthwork within an enclosing wall, situated on the broad, NW bank of the River Naver in the Strathnaver steep-sided valley, at about 45m O.D...

Cladh Langdale is long-disused; it is first documented in 1769 and a burial apparently took place there at the beginning of the 19th century. A chapel at 'Langdale' or 'Langwell' is referred to in 19th-century accounts and it has been suggested that faint traces are discernible as a depression in the centre of the burial ground though there are a number of such features.

The elevated irregularly-shaped burial ground has maximum dimensions of 28m WSW-ENE by 21m NNW-SSE overall and is enclosed by a drystone revetment with square N and E corners but those at the SW end are more rounded in form. There may have been an entrance at the N corner indicated by the presence here of two flat slabs which, at one time, may have functioned as steps.

A shallow ditch surrounds the enclosure; its better definition on the SW side may suggest that the burial ground had been extended in this direction. This may be contemporaneous with the revetment and may explain the increased gradient and irregular shape of the burial ground in this locality. A number of graveslabs and header and footer stones have been identified within the enclosure.

The area proposed for scheduling comprises the remains described and an area around them within which related material may be found. It is irregular on plan with maximum dimensions of 43m SW-NE and 23m from the north-westmost corner to the south-eastmost, as marked in red on the accompanying map extract. The boundaries are defined by the outside edge of the bank that encloses the burial ground.

### Statement of Scheduling

The monument is of national importance because of its potential to contribute to our understanding of an Early Christian and Medieval ecclesiastical site. It is an unusual example of a substantial burial enclosure that preserves complex phases of extension. Its importance is also increased by its high archaeological potential given its early abandonment and this resource is worthy of protection given the lack of the documentary sources available.

### **Cnoc Airigh an Leathaid Hut Circles,**

Naver Forest, Strathnaver	Coordinates
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Scheduled Date: 13 May 1965  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM2519  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: hut circle, roundhouse

Latitude: 58.2696 / 58°16'10"N  
Longitude: -4.2234 / 4°13'24"W  
OS Eastings: 269673  
OS Northings: 933371  
OS Grid: NC696333  
Map Code National: GBR H6YW.23Q  
Map Code Global: WH4BM.3D3S

### **Cnoc Carnachadh Broch**

1400m N of Carnachy  
Scheduled Date: 13 October 1938  
Last Amended: 20 January 2003  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM1850  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: broch

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.4438 / 58°26'37"N  
Longitude: -4.1922 / 4°11'31"W  
OS Eastings: 272136  
OS Northings: 952695  
OS Grid: NC721526  
Map Code National: GBR J60D.Y5H  
Map Code Global: WH49V.K1X7

#### Description

The monument comprises the remains of a broch, a fortified dwelling place of Iron Age date. It is surrounded by a low bank and a ditch, and stands on the edge of a natural terrace on the W side of Strathnaver. The broch was originally scheduled in 1938, but an inadequate area was included to protect the broch and the surrounding wall and ditch were omitted entirely. The scheduling extension rectifies that situation.

The remains of the broch are much reduced, with the walls standing no more than 0.75m high; but details of the plan survive, including stretches of the inner and outer wall faces and a possible intra-mural chamber on the W. The broch appears to have had an internal diameter of about 7m, within walls 3-4m wide. The site of the entrance is not apparent on the W (upslope) side, while a low bank, representing the tumbled remains of a stone wall, can be traced most of the way around the broch.

The area now to be scheduled is circular in shape, with a diameter of 60m, to include the broch, outer area, ditch and ruined wall, as marked in red on the accompanying map.

#### Statement of Scheduling

The monument is of national importance as the remains of a broch, a significant type of late prehistoric fortified dwelling place. It has the potential to provide important information about late prehistoric domestic and defensive architecture, economy and contemporary land use.

### **Cladh Rivigill Burial Ground** and possible chapel site

Scheduled Date: 11 December 2002  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM10513  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Ecclesiastical: burial ground, cemetery, graveyard

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.415 / 58°24'54"N  
Longitude: -4.177 / 4°10'37"W  
OS Eastings: 272920  
OS Northings: 949464  
OS Grid: NC729494  
Map Code National: GBR J61H.5F3

## Description

The monument comprises Cladh Rivigill burial ground, alternatively known as Cladh Righ-Geal, which is an early Christian burial ground and the possible site of an associated chapel, visible as an earthwork. The monument is situated on a gentle slope some 450m from the E bank of the River Naver, at about 45m OD.

The burial ground was erected on one of several natural mounds in the area; the low-lying area to the S was probably part of the flood plain of the river at one time. The mound measures 33m NW-SE by 30m NE-SW at its maximum extent and the summit measures 13.5m NW-SE by 11.5m NE-SW.

A number of uninscribed graveslabs have been exposed on the surface of the mound in the past. These ranged in size from about 1m to 1.9m by 0.3 to 0.5m, and some of them had header and footer stones. This type of graveslab indicates an early Christian date for the monument.

The remains of an enclosing wall survive around the summit of the mound. This wall stands 2-3 courses high in places and was stone-faced with a rubble core. A chapel may have been sited at one of two possible locations suggested by areas of stone scatter: one on the N arc; and another on the SE arc of the enclosing wall.

A circular stony area below the S side of the mound could denote the presence of either structural remains or turf-covered field stones. The lower W arc of the mound appears to have been quarried which has caused slumping in a number of places.

The area proposed for scheduling comprises the remains described and an area around them within which related evidence may be expected to survive. It is an irregular circular shape in plan, with maximum dimensions of 54m NW-SE by 50m NE-SW, as marked in red on the accompanying map.

A Modern access track runs along the N boundary of the monument, heading E towards Rhifail. The surface and top 30cm of this track is excluded from the scheduling to allow for its routine maintenance.

Source: Historic Environment Scotland

## Statement of Scheduling

The monument is of national importance as a relatively undisturbed single-period ecclesiastical site, dating from the early Christian period. It has the potential to contribute to an understanding of early Christianity in this part of Scotland, where this type of site is relatively rare. The apparent presence of undisturbed graves adds to the high archaeological potential of the monument.

## **Cnoc Na Gamhna Hut Circles, Burnt Mound & Clearance Cairns,**

Naver Forest	Coordinates
Scheduled Date: 13 May 1965	Latitude: 58.2948 / 58°17'41"N
Source: Historic Environment Scotland	Longitude: -4.2346 / 4°14'4"W
Source ID: SM2514	OS Eastings: 269114
Schedule Class: Cultural	OS Northings: 936194
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: burnt mound	OS Grid: NC691361
	Map Code National: GBR H6XT.316
	Map Code Global: WH398.XSQ0

## **Cnoc Na h'Iolaire, Hut Circles & Clearance Cairns,**

Strathnaver  
Scheduled Date: 13 May 1965  
Last Amended: 28 July 1975  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM2513  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: hut circle, roundhouse

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.2772 / 58°16'37"N  
Longitude: -4.2305 / 4°13'49"W  
OS Eastings: 269285  
OS Northings: 934223  
OS Grid: NC692342  
Map Code National: GBR H6XV.JVQ  
Map Code Global: WH39G.Z6MZ

### **Cracknie, Souterrain And Settlement**

Scheduled Date: 26 April 1993  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM5663  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: souterrain, earth-house; Secular: settlement,

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.4264 / 58°25'34"N  
Longitude: -4.2866 / 4°17'11"W  
OS Eastings: 266561  
OS Northings: 950941  
OS Grid: NC665509  
Map Code National: GBR H6SG.95V  
Map Code Global: WH38P.4G0M

### **Description**

The monument consists of a souterrain and a post medieval settlement on a NE-facing slope. The souterrain is almost intact. The entrance is marked by a hollow and a number of large stones, including one fallen cap stone. The full length of the souterrain is about 14.3m.

It is an average of about 1.3m high and 1.1m wide, but the inner end is pear-shaped. The walls are carefully built without mortar and it is roofed with slabs overlapping each other. The post medieval settlement includes a long house, kiln barn and an area of enclosed infield with traces of rig and furrow. The souterrain is located within the enclosed infield of this settlement.

The area to be scheduled measures 270m NNW-SSE, by 105m WSW-ENE, to include the souterrain, post medieval buildings, enclosed infield and an area around in which traces of activities associated with the construction and use of the souterrain and settlement may survive, as shown in red on the accompanying map.

Source: Historic Environment Scotland

### **Statement of Scheduling**

The monument is of national importance for its potential contribution to an understanding of prehistoric and post medieval domestic life and architecture.

### **Dalharrold Hut Circle**

380m NNW of  
Scheduled Date: 3 June 1965  
Last Amended: 29 October 2010  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM2516  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: hut circle, roundhouse

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.3196 / 58°19'10"N  
Longitude: -4.2572 / 4°15'25"W  
OS Eastings: 267881  
OS Northings: 938994  
OS Grid: NC678389  
Map Code National: GBR H6VQ.YHD  
Map Code Global: WH398.K4ZZ

## Description

The monument comprises a hut circle of later prehistoric date. The original scheduling for this monument incorporated another hut circle which has now been destroyed by quarrying, making rescheduling necessary to clarify the area protecting the surviving elements of the monument.

The monument lies in moorland on a spur of land overlooking the River Naver, at around 70m OD. It is an oval building with internal measurements of approximately 7m E-W by 11m transversely. Its walls survive as heather-covered stone banks up to 2m wide by 0.8m in height. The entrance is in the S and is partially blocked with stones. There is a stone clearance heap to the E and two clearance cairns to the WNW.

The area proposed for scheduling is a clipped circle on plan, to include the remains described and an area around within which material related to the construction and use of the hut circle may be expected to survive, as shown in red on the attached map extract. The scheduling extends up to, but excludes the fence line on the NE, to allow for its maintenance.

Source: Historic Environment Scotland

## Statement of Scheduling

The monument is of national importance because of its potential to contribute to our understanding of upland prehistoric settlement and economy. It will provide evidence for the nature and date of construction and occupation. Its importance is increased by its proximity to other monuments of potentially contemporary date.

This hut circle was originally scheduled with NC 63 NE 7: however, the latter has now been destroyed by a forestry road and is to be de-scheduled. This re-scheduling will ensure that only the remaining hut circle is scheduled under index no. 2516.

## Dalmor Homestead

300m W of

Scheduled Date: 27 January 2003

Source: Historic Environment Scotland

Source ID: SM10500

Schedule Class: Cultural

Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: homestead

Coordinates

Latitude: 58.4679 / 58°28'4"N

Longitude: -4.2014 / 4°12'5"W

OS Eastings: 271686

OS Northings: 955393

OS Grid: NC716553

Map Code National: GBR J60B.S87

Map Code Global: WH49N.FFK9

## Description

The monument comprises a prehistoric homestead, visible today as a substantial earthwork. The monument is situated on a knoll some 300m W of the village of Dalmor and 120m W of the River Naver, on the NE slope of Cnoc Dalveghouse, at a height of about 40m OD. The site has commanding views to the N, S and E overlooking Strath Naver.

The homestead consists of a stone-walled enclosure defended by a massive ditch and outer rampart. The enclosure is roughly circular in form with a maximum internal diameter of 12m. It is enclosed by a wall which stands up to 1.5m high but has become spread up to 3m across. Originally the enclosure wall was probably surmounted by a timber palisade and the interior probably contained one or more buildings.

The configuration of the causeway entrance in the SE is unlike any other so far encountered in Sutherland. The passage is 5.8m long, flanked by intermittent slabs on edge, and continues into the enclosure interior rather than ceasing on the regular boulder-lined inner face.

A massive ditch, from 6.5-8m wide and up to 2.2m deep, encircles the S and NW sides of the enclosure, while an outer rampart still stands up to 1m high. Both the ditch and the outer rampart are broken in the W. The site is protected on the NE side by the natural slope. Clearance heaps with indications of field plots and banks, probably contemporary with the homestead, lie nearby to the E (at NC 717 552).

The monument probably dates to the later Iron Age (from about the time of Christ up to c. 500 AD). It has previously been classified as a broch or a dun (and, indeed, is called a dun on the OS map), but more recent research points to its identification as a small defended settlement or homestead.

The area proposed for scheduling comprises the remains described and an area around them within which related material may be expected to survive. It is circular in plan with a diameter of 70m, as marked in red on the accompanying map.

#### Statement of Scheduling

The monument is of national importance because of its potential to contribute to an understanding of prehistoric settlement and economy. Its archaeological potential is significant given its excellent state of preservation and its importance is increased by its proximity to other monuments of potentially contemporary date for the purposes of comparative study; its causeway entrance arrangement, for example, is unusual in this locality.

#### **Dalvina Lodge, Hut Circle**

Scheduled Date: 17 February 1993	Coordinates
Source: Historic Environment Scotland	Latitude: 58.3531 / 58°21'11"N
Source ID: SM5628	Longitude: -4.2279 / 4°13'40"W
Schedule Class: Cultural	OS Eastings: 269717
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: hut circle, roundhouse; Secular: enclosure	OS Northings: 942670
	OS Grid: NC697426
	Map Code National: GBR H6YN.62H
	Map Code Global: WH4B7.09ZS

#### Description

The monument consists of a prehistoric house, a hut circle on a low knoll in fairly level moorland.

The hut circle is oval in shape, measuring 12.5m N-S by 10m E-W. It is defined by a wall 0.2m maximum height and 1.7m wide. There are slight indications of an entrance to the S.

The area to be scheduled measures 50m in diameter, to include the hut circle and an area around in which traces of activities associated with its construction and use may survive, as shown in red on the accompanying map.

#### **Dalvina Lodge, Hut Circle and Field System**

1130m SSW of	Coordinates
Scheduled Date: 17 February 1993	Latitude: 58.3545 / 58°21'16"N
Source: Historic Environment Scotland	Longitude: -4.2342 / 4°14'3"W
Source ID: SM5627	OS Eastings: 269354
Schedule Class: Cultural	OS Northings: 942842
	OS Grid: NC693428



Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: hut circle, roundhouse

Map Code National: GBR H6XN.367  
Map Code Global: WH392.X8WP

#### Description

This monument consists of a prehistoric settlement on a NW-facing hill slope.

The settlement consists of a single hut circle and associated field system. The hut circle measures 11m NE-SW by 10m NW-SE within a stone wall spread to 2.5m wide and up to 0.9m high. The entrance to the hut circle is in the SW. The field system consists of clearance cairns and lynchets in the area surrounding the hut circle.

The area to be scheduled measures 105m N-S by 80m E-W, to include the hut circle, the field system and an area around in which traces of activities associated with the construction and use of the settlement may survive, as shown in red on the accompanying map.

Source: Historic Environment Scotland

#### Statement of Scheduling

The monument is of national importance for its potential contribution to an understanding of prehistoric domestic life and agricultural practices.

#### **Dalvina Lodge, hut circles**

320m SE and 450m SE of  
Scheduled Date: 11 February 1993  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM5564  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: hut circle, roundhouse

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.3628 / 58°21'46"N  
Longitude: -4.2239 / 4°13'26"W  
OS Eastings: 269987  
OS Northings: 943746  
OS Grid: NC699437  
Map Code National: GBR H6YM.FWS  
Map Code Global: WH4B7.22W9

#### Description

The monument consists of the remains of 3 hut circles and traces of cultivation on a W-facing hill slope.

The W hut circle measures about 12m in diameter within a low wall. The central hut circle is 10.5m in diameter within a more substantial wall and has an entrance to the SE. There are traces of other prehistoric enclosures and cultivation in the vicinity of this hut. The E hut circle is largely destroyed by later cultivation.

#### **Dalvina Lodge, Settlements**

700m SSE of and 1050m S of  
Scheduled Date: 11 February 1993  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM5565  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: hut circle, roundhouse; Secular: settlement,

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.358 / 58°21'28"N  
Longitude: -4.2257 / 4°13'32"W  
OS Eastings: 269867  
OS Northings: 943216  
OS Grid: NC698432  
Map Code National: GBR H6YM.T9D  
Map Code Global: WH4B7.251Z

#### Description

This monument consists of two prehistoric hut circles and the remains of two distinct, but adjacent, cleared settlements.

One hut circle, which measures 12m in diameter, lies within the fields of the S cleared settlement. The second hut circle is about 10m in diameter and lies to the SSW of the N cleared settlement. The two post medieval settlements, Auchenrach and Achupresh, were both outlying settlements connected with the township of Rosal. It has been suggested that they originated as a result of the land reclamation which was occurring at the time of the Clearances. Auchenrach consists of an enclosure containing four acres, a long-house, an outhouse and a yard. There are possible indications of earlier buildings on this site. At Achupresh the enclosure contains six acres, two long houses, a corn-drying kiln, at least one outhouse and a yard. A third enclosure to the SW of Achupresh contains possible traces of cultivation, but no buildings. The two settlements were presumably cleared at the same time as Rosal, in 1814-18.

The area to be scheduled measures a maximum of 570m N-S by 600m NE-SW, but excludes the Modern road and the fence line to the W of the road. The area includes the hut circles, the cleared settlements and an area around in which traces of activities associated with the construction and occupation of these structures may survive, as shown in red on the accompanying map.

#### Statement of Scheduling

The monuments are of national importance for their potential to contribute to an understanding of prehistoric and post medieval domestic life and agricultural practice. The post medieval settlements also have potential to add to the understanding of the process of the Clearances in this area of Scotland. Their value is enhanced by their documented association with the well-studied settlement at Rosal.

#### Description

The monument consists of the remains of a broch and outworks situated on a spur to the S of the Carnachy Burn.

The broch has an internal diameter of about 7m and a wall between 3.7m and 4.3m wide. There is no clear indication of the location of the entrance, but a mural gallery is exposed in the rubble of the broch's SW arc.

The broch is naturally defended on all sides except the SW, which has outworks consisting of a double rampart with traces of 2 ditches. The ditches are 12m wide and about 2m deep. There are gaps between the natural slopes and the ends of the outer defences. The ditch contains the footings of a sub rectangular structure, which is about 12m by 4m.

The area to be scheduled measures 80m WSW-ENE by 70m N-S, to include the broch, the defensive ramparts and an area around in which traces of activities associated with the construction and use of the monument may survive, as shown in red on the accompanying map.

#### Statement of Scheduling

The monument is of national importance for its potential to contribute to an understanding of prehistoric defensive architecture and domestic life.

#### **Dun Creagach Island, Broch**

Loch Naver

Scheduled Date: 12 April 1939

Source: Historic Environment Scotland

Coordinates

Latitude: 58.2866 / 58°17'11"N

Longitude: -4.3815 / 4°22'53"W

Source ID: SM1855  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: broch

OS Eastings: 260469  
OS Northings: 935578  
OS Grid: NC604355  
Map Code National: GBR H6KT.MQJ  
Map Code Global: WH396.NZR9

### **Dun Viden, Broch**

700m NE of Carnachy  
Scheduled Date: 13 October 1938  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM1860  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: broch

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.4366 / 58°26'11"N  
Longitude: -4.183 / 4°10'58"W  
OS Eastings: 272650  
OS Northings: 951881  
OS Grid: NC726518  
Map Code National: GBR J61F.GMX  
Map Code Global: WH49V.Q69R

### **Farr Churchyard, Cross Slab**

Scheduled Date: 31 December 1925  
Last Amended: 7 September 1967  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM1889  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Crosses and carved stones: cross slab

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.5294 / 58°31'45"N  
Longitude: -4.2097 / 4°12'34"W  
OS Eastings: 271430  
OS Northings: 962253  
OS Grid: NC714622  
Map Code National: GBR H6Z5.VV4  
Map Code Global: WH498.9WM6

### **Fiscary, Cairns & Chambered Cairn**

Scheduled Date: 20 December 1934  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM1790  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric ritual and funerary: cairn (type uncertain)

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.533 / 58°31'58"N  
Longitude: -4.181 / 4°10'51"W  
OS Eastings: 273112  
OS Northings: 962602  
OS Grid: NC731626  
Map Code National: GBR J615.HK9  
Map Code Global: WH498.RS7D

### **Grumbeg, Depopulated Township,**

N shore of Loch Naver  
Scheduled Date: 14 August 1961  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM414  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Secular: settlement, including deserted, depopulated and townships

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.3129 / 58°18'46"N  
Longitude: -4.3346 / 4°20'4"W  
OS Eastings: 263322  
OS Northings: 938408  
OS Grid: NC633384  
Map Code National: GBR H6NR.K7D  
Map Code Global: WH397.DB43

### **Grummore, broch**

Scheduled Date: 12 December 1938  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM1866  
Schedule Class: Cultural

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.2969 / 58°17'48"N  
Longitude: -4.3717 / 4°22'18"W  
OS Eastings: 261085

Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: broch

OS Northings: 936703  
OS Grid: NC610367  
Map Code National: GBR H6LS.S83  
Map Code Global: WH396.TQFD

### **Grummore, Depopulated Township**

Loch Naver  
Scheduled Date: 31 March 1962  
Last Amended: 10 February 2003  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM2209  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Secular: settlement, including deserted, depopulated and townships

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.2969 / 58°17'48"N  
Longitude: -4.3788 / 4°22'43"W  
OS Eastings: 260668  
OS Northings: 936717  
OS Grid: NC606367  
Map Code National: GBR H6KS.WGK  
Map Code Global: WH396.QQ1D

#### Description

The monument comprises the extensive remains of the settlement of Grummore, occupied at least as early as 1726 and cleared in 1819. The majority of the monument was scheduled in 1962, but this re-scheduling adjusts the boundaries to take account of better mapping now available and also of recent changes in land use beside Loch Naver.

Grummore was finally cleared, after centuries of occupation, in 1819. This was one of the relatively few episodes during the Highland Clearances in which croft roofs were actually burned to prevent re-occupation. In 1819, sixteen families were finally cleared, several having already been evicted five years earlier. Roy's map of 1726 shows only five houses, suggesting that Grummore expanded rapidly. This was at least partly a result of incoming cottars from other settlements in the area which had been cleared earlier.

The remains at Grummore are extensive and complex, and of multiple date. Within a hill- or head-dyke (which itself shows signs of re-building at several points) are the foundations of over sixty buildings, of which slightly less than half were dwellings, the rest being barns and byres, with at least three corn-drying kilns. A large number of walled enclosures, for stock management and crop raising, lie within the boundary of the settlement. In addition, there are many slight building foundations and traces of walling scattered over the hill-ground beyond the main boundary (these are not included in the scheduling).

The area now to be scheduled is in two parts, both very irregular on plan. The larger has maximum dimensions of 840m SW-NE by 630m transversely. It is bounded on all sides (except the SE) by a line running approximately 5m beyond the crest of the main head-dyke, and on the SE side by the NW edge of the Modern B873 road. The smaller part is a maximum of 660m SW-NE by 65m transversely. It is bounded on the NW by the SE edge of the B873 road; on the NE by the SW bank of the Grummore Burn; on the SE by the shore of Loch Naver; and on the SW by a straight line running from the B873 road SSW to the loch shore. These areas include all of the building remains and field boundaries, as well as the land lying between and among them, in which evidence relating to the history and use of the settlement is likely to survive. The areas are indicated in red on the accompanying map.

This re-scheduling now excludes that part of the former scheduled area beside the loch, which is occupied by a caravan park, and also an area of woodland at the E end of the larger of the two scheduled areas. It adds a band of about 5m wide around the rest of the outer edge of the former scheduled area. The B873 road and the ground beneath it are excluded from the scheduling to allow for maintenance. Grummore broch remains scheduled separately.

## **Halladale Bridge, Hut Circles**

670m NE of, on banks of Giligill Burn  
Scheduled Date: 5 December 1973  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM3304  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: hut circle, roundhouse

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.546 / 58°32'45"N  
Longitude: -3.8918 / 3°53'30"W  
OS Eastings: 289989  
OS Northings: 963537  
OS Grid: NC899635  
Map Code National: GBR J6R4.J0H  
Map Code Global: WH49F.6G0F

## **Inshlampie, Broch**

1175m NE of  
Scheduled Date: 7 February 2005  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM11123  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: broch

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.3956 / 58°23'44"N  
Longitude: -4.1913 / 4°11'28"W  
OS Eastings: 272015  
OS Northings: 947329  
OS Grid: NC720473  
Map Code National: GBR J60J.QWD  
Map Code Global: WH4B1.L7CQ

### **Description**

The monument consists of the remains of an Iron Age broch, a drystone-built fortified dwelling, situated on the edge of a rocky escarpment in rough grazing land on the eastern slopes of Strathnaver at around 80m OD.

The monument survives as the grassed-over remains of the broch and its outworks. The broch has stone wall footings approximately 4m thick enclosing an area 8.3m in diameter, giving an overall dimension of around 16.5m. The wall has been reduced to near ground level. The broch is surrounded by what appears to be a double rampart with intervening ditches, with an entrance through the outworks to the SE. On either side of this entrance, along the inner face of the inner rampart, are the discontinuous remains of a stone retaining wall. An arc of walling, 4.2m long, against the inner face of the same rampart immediately W of the entrance, possibly represents the remains of a domestic structure, probably later in date than the rampart. The inner of the two ditches is up to 8.5m wide and 3m deep, whilst the outer is up to 6m wide and 1.2m deep. A secondary boulder-built enclosure, measuring 21m x 6m, has been built within the inner ditch to the NE and partially overlies the entrance causeway.

The area to be scheduled is circular on plan, approximately 100m in diameter. This includes all the features described as well as an outer area within which evidence relating to the construction, occupation and abandonment of the site may be expected to survive, as marked in red on the accompanying map extract.

### **Statement of Scheduling**

This monument is of national importance as the remains of an Iron Age broch, being of the 'mound-on-mound' type common to Caithness and Sutherland. It offers the potential to provide information on the nature of settlement and defensive architecture during this period of prehistory.

## **Tongue**

### **Caisteal Bharraich, Tower**

Scheduled Date: 29 December 1938

Coordinates

Last Amended: 4 March 2002  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM1896  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Secular: tower

Latitude: 58.4759 / 58°28'33"N  
Longitude: -4.4353 / 4°26'7"W  
OS Eastings: 258081  
OS Northings: 956753  
OS Grid: NC580567  
Map Code National: GBR H6FB.73D  
Map Code Global: WH38D.V745

## Description

The monument comprises the remains of a small tower house standing upon the summit of a promontory high above the Kyle of Tongue. Its history is unknown although it is said to have belonged to the Bishop of Caithness who stayed here on his way from his castle at Scrabster to his property of Balnakiel. The monument was first scheduled in 1938. On this occasion, an inadequate area was included to protect all of the archaeological remains: the present rescheduling rectifies this.

The tower, measuring externally 7.5m along the south wall and 6.7m along the other three sides, stands to first floor height. It is constructed of random rubble and is bonded in shell lime. The tower appears to have been of two storeys with a single chamber on each floor, perhaps with an attic; the slots for the roof ties still survive. The ground floor, entered from the N, was vaulted, as is demonstrated by the remains of the springing. The ground floor also had a window through the east wall; only the E ingo now survives. The ground floor does not communicate with the first floor, indicating that the first floor had an external doorway. A plan by MacGibbon & Ross (1887-92) shows a first floor doorway through the S wall. However, it is now impossible to confirm this interpretation.

To the N of the tower there is a scarp showing traces of walling, which extend NW for 20m from a rock outcrop near the tower to the coastal cliff.

The area to be scheduled includes the tower house and an area around it that has the potential for the survival of associated archaeology. The area is irregular in shape and has maximum dimensions of 110m from its westernmost point to its easternmost, and 75m from its northernmost to southernmost points, as marked in red on the attached map.

## **Dun Mhaigh, broch Kinloch**

Scheduled Date: 18 February 1937  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM1858  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: broch

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.4416 / 58°26'29"N  
Longitude: -4.4816 / 4°28'53"W  
OS Eastings: 255237  
OS Northings: 953037  
OS Grid: NC552530  
Map Code National: GBR H69F.3VD  
Map Code Global: WH38L.424Y

## **Grianan, house, Lochan Hakel or Hacoin**

Scheduled Date: 4 December 1934  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM1897  
Schedule Class: Cultural

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.439 / 58°26'20"N  
Longitude: -4.452 / 4°27'7"W  
OS Eastings: 256958

Category: Secular: house

OS Northings: 952686

OS Grid: NC569526

Map Code National: GBR H6CF.CGF

Map Code Global: WH38L.L47X

### **Kinloch Lodge, Chambered Cairn**

Scheduled Date: 29 December 1938

Last Amended: 20 January 2004

Source: Historic Environment Scotland

Source ID: SM1798

Schedule Class: Cultural

Category: Prehistoric ritual and funerary:  
chambered cairn

Coordinates

Latitude: 58.4376 / 58°26'15"N

Longitude: -4.4858 / 4°29'8"W

OS Eastings: 254980

OS Northings: 952602

OS Grid: NC549526

Map Code National: GBR H69F.7ZF

Map Code Global: WH38L.2660

#### **Description**

The monument comprises a chambered round cairn of Orkney-Cromarty type with polygonal bipartite chamber and passage. The site is situated in rough moorland at around 67m OD on the S facing slope of Creag Ach'an t-Srathain. The site was originally scheduled in December 1938, but an inadequate area was included to protect all of the archaeological remains: the present rescheduling rectifies this.

The monument measures 14-16m in diameter and 1.4-1.8m high, and is covered with bracken and turf. It has been heavily robbed and its full extent is not fully visible on the ground. The chamber and passage, constructed with thin stone orthostats, are aligned NE, consisting of a larger polygonal inner chamber measuring approximately 4m E-W and 3m transversely, a small antechamber, approximately 2m E-W and 2.5m transversely, and a short passage 2m in length.

The area now to be scheduled is circular on plan, measuring around 40m in diameter as marked on the accompanying map extract in red.

Source: Historic Environment Scotland

#### **Statement of Scheduling**

The monument is of national importance as a Neolithic chambered round cairn of Orkney-Cromarty type. It has the potential to provide a valuable insight into the ritual and funerary practices of this period.

### **Lochan Hakel, Cup & Ring Marked Rock**

Scheduled Date: 4 December 1934

Source: Historic Environment Scotland

Source ID: SM1806

Schedule Class: Cultural

Category: Prehistoric ritual and funerary:  
cupmarks or cup-and-ring marks and similar  
rock art

Coordinates

Latitude: 58.4387 / 58°26'19"N

Longitude: -4.4514 / 4°27'4"W

OS Eastings: 256992

OS Northings: 952650

OS Grid: NC569526

Map Code National: GBR H6CF.CQ8

Map Code Global: WH38L.L5J5

### **Eddrachillis**

#### **An Dun, Broch**

360m WSW of Kylestrome

Traditional County: Sutherland

Scheduled Date: 19 October 1938  
Last Amended: 1 August 2018  
Source: Historic Environment Scotland  
Source ID: SM1833  
Schedule Class: Cultural  
Category: Prehistoric domestic and defensive: broch  
Location: Eddrachillis  
County: Highland

Coordinates  
Latitude: 58.2595 / 58°15'34"N  
Longitude: -5.0406 / 5°2'25"W  
OS Eastings: 221708  
OS Northings: 934121  
OS Grid: NC217341  
Map Code National: GBR F6XW.ZWS  
Map Code Global: WH16T.JNYJ

## Description

The monument is a broch, a complex stone-built substantial roundhouse, dating from the Iron Age (between 600BC and 400AD). The monument is visible as a roughly circular drystone walled structure within which an intramural gallery and stair are visible. There are traces of an outer enclosure surrounding the structure. It is located on a small intertidal islet just off the north shore of Loch a' Chàirn Bhàin.

The broch occupies a small island connected to the mainland by a natural causeway which is submerged during periods of very high tide. The broch measures around 9m internally within walls that are between 4-5m thick. Substantial sections of internal and external wall facing survive intact and there remains visible a wall passage with eight stairs on the north side of the broch. The interior is rubble filled and two Modern shelters have been created from the rubble on the south side. To the north of the broch, where the causeway joins the islet, is a line of masonry which may represent the remnants of an outer defensive works

The scheduled area is irregular on plan to include the remains described above and an area around them within which evidence relating to the monument's construction, use and abandonment is expected to survive, as shown in red on the accompanying map. The scheduling specifically excludes the above-ground elements of the post-and-wire fence that runs north-south across the eastern edge of the monument.

## Statement of Scheduling

### Cultural Significance

The cultural significance of the monument has been assessed as follows:

### Intrinsic Characteristics

The monument is an example of a broch, visible as drystone-walled structure set on the top of a rocky outcrop. Overall the site is well-preserved with good structural and field characteristics and there is no record of excavation on the site although some clearance of the interior has taken place. The level of preservation of the broch together with the remains of possible outer defensive works are an important part of the monument's intrinsic characteristics and adds to its cultural significance.

The monument has very high potential to support future archaeological research. It has significant structural features such as walling, guard cell, wall passage and stairs. By analogy with other brochs that have been excavated there is potential for buried remains of further wall cells and stairs, scarcement ledges, internal stone partitions, hearths and water tanks within the broch. These unexcavated areas will contain deposits rich in occupation debris, artefacts and environmental evidence that can tell us about how people lived, their trade and exchange contacts, and their social status, as well as provide information about broch architecture and construction methods.



Brochs in the northwest Highlands are typically thought to date from between 600 BC and AD 400. They are a specific development of complex Atlantic roundhouses and were large complex structures that would have had numerous purposes and a multifaceted role in prehistoric society. They could have accommodated either an extended family or a small community and the construction of broch towers is often understood in terms of elite settlement. Some interpretations have stressed a role as fortified or defensive sites, possibly serving a community across a wider area. The location of An Dun supports the view that defensive considerations could be a factor in the location of brochs but the choice of such prominent sites in the landscape could also relate to control over land and route ways and/or conspicuous demonstrations of status.

#### Contextual Characteristics

Brochs are a widespread class of monument found across northern Scotland with notable concentrations in Caithness, Sutherland, Orkney, Shetland, the Western Isles and the northwest Highlands. However, this example is one of only three brochs in Assynt. These brochs are located close to, or on, the coast. The other two examples are An Dun, broch 800m SSW of Ardvair (scheduled monument SM1832, Canmore ID 4550) 5km to the southwest and An Dun, broch, Clachtoll (scheduled monument SM:1831, Canmore ID 4499) 19km to the southwest. There is therefore potential for comparative study on a local and national scale to better understand the function of such monuments, their interrelationship and the significance of their placing within the landscape, in particular in relation to our understanding of Iron Age social hierarchy, changing settlement patterns and systems of inheritance.

#### Statement of National Importance

The monument is of national importance because it contributes to our understanding of the past, in particular of Iron Age society in northwest Scotland and the function, use and development of brochs. It is a well-preserved example of a broch with surviving elements of the structure and architectural features, with high potential for occupation deposits and associated remains. The broch is a prominent feature on the loch shore and adds to our understanding of the siting of such monuments. This in turn can help our understanding of settlement patterns and social structure during the Iron Age in the northwest Highlands. Brochs are relatively uncommon in Assynt compared to other areas of northern Scotland, and the loss of this monument would significantly diminish our future ability to appreciate and understand the development, use and re-use of brochs, and the nature of Iron Age society, economy and social hierarchy in this area and further afield.

#### **Badnabay, chambered cairn**

WNW of Laxford Bridge	Coordinates
Scheduled Date: 30 June 1939	Latitude: 58.3731 / 58°22'23"N
Source: Historic Environment Scotland	Longitude: -5.0477 / 5°2'51"W
Source ID: SM1767	OS Eastings: 221863
Schedule Class: Cultural	OS Northings: 946772
Category: Prehistoric ritual and funerary: chambered cairn	OS Grid: NC218467
	Map Code National: GBR F6XL.NMY
	Map Code Global: WH167.FTL0

#### Description

1838 William Burn. Mixed Norman and late gothic motif round and semi-elliptical arches with late gothic mouldings. Basically rectangular plan, rubble-built with symmetrical ashlar gable front to street: central gable with 3 advanced stepped lights rising into octagonal base for circular arcaded bellcote, conical stone roof and cross finial; lower flanking stairhall towers

single windowed to front and flanks semi- elliptically arched doors to front, angle buttresses; flat roofed vestibule clasped between them breaking forward into buttressed porch with semi-elliptically arched doorway. Doors have 2 orders of shafts windows and bellcote one. Flank elevations 2 tier 4-bay with simple chamfered openings, slate roof. Interior tunnel. vaulted in plaster with diagonal ribs, and with transverse ribs continuing on flat-ceilinged aisles above wings of horse-shoe gallery. Several stained glass windows, remainder tinted glass.

### **Kylestrome, cairn 130m**

Scheduled Date: 19 October 1938	Coordinates
Last Amended: 1 August 2018	Latitude: 58.2606 / 58°15'38"N
Source: Historic Environment Scotland	Longitude: -5.0368 / 5°2'12"W
Source ID: SM1800	OS Eastings: 221935
Schedule Class: Cultural	OS Northings: 934225
Category: Prehistoric ritual and funerary: cairn (type uncertain)	OS Grid: NC219342
	Map Code National: GBR F6YW.TXL
	Map Code Global: WH16T.LMRR

### Description

The monument is the remains of a round cairn, dating to the Bronze Age (between around 2500BC and 800BC). It survives as a grass and heather covered stony mound measuring around 7.5m in diameter and standing up to about 1.5m in height. The monument is located below the summit of a small hill in an area of rocky outcrops close to the shore of Loch a Chàin Bhàin at a height of 5m above sea level.

The scheduled area is circular in plan, measuring 28m in diameter, to include the remains described above and an area around them within which evidence relating to the monument's construction, use and abandonment is expected to survive, as shown in red on the accompanying map.

### Statement of Scheduling

#### Cultural Significance

The cultural significance of the monumen has been assessed as follows:

#### Intrinsic Characteristics

The monument is a well preserved example of a prehistoric burial monument; cairns are a characteristic form of Bronze Age monument in Scotland. Cairns of this type, however, are relatively rare in northwest Scotland. The cairn survives as a low stony mound, measuring around 7.5m in diameter and standing to a maximum of 1.5m in height. As with other types of cairn, the monument is likely to contain one or more burials or cremations.

Given the good level of preservation, there is a high potential for the survival of human remains, associated grave goods and environmental or palaeobotanical remains. Such archaeological deposits can help us to better understand beliefs surrounding death and burial in the Bronze Age, as well as funerary rites and practices, trade and contacts, social organisation and the climate and local vegetation at the time of construction. These deposits can help us understand more about the practice and significance of burial and commemoration of the dead at specific times in prehistory. There is also good potential for the survival of secondary or 'satellite' burials and related archaeological evidence for funerary pyres or other funerary activity in the area surrounding the barrow.

Archaeological survey in this area may reveal further unrecorded examples. This would increase our knowledge of this type of monument and improve our understanding of their distribution and survival.

#### Contextual Characteristics

These types of cairns are relatively uncommon in northwest Scotland, being more commonly found in the lowlands. There are few other recorded examples in this area. Those that are recorded include Eadar a Chalda (scheduled monument SM13697) and Druim na Coille Moire (scheduled monument SM13699). The relative scarcity of such monuments is particularly notable when compared to the number of chambered cairns, which are earlier dating to the Neolithic period, in the same area. This contrast may be due differences in discovery and survival but could also reflect changing burial practices or population change. The study of the distribution of prehistoric funerary monuments in this locale could therefore further contribute to our understanding of the Neolithic and Bronze Age in this area.

Bronze Age cairns are often located with higher ground on two or more sides. This means that that the cairn is hidden from certain directions. There is always one open aspect to the cairn usually with a view or connection to lower lying ground often beside a water course. The cairns are normally prominent from the lower lying land; this aspect usually appears as the highest side of the cairn. These cairns are typically located in areas where there are naturally occurring outcrops of the bedrock which the cairn appears to emulate. The monument is relatively low lying, close to sea level, however, it is located at the foot of a slope which rises steeply to the north and local topography limit the cairn's visibility from the east and west. The monument would have originally sat close to the shore of Loch a Chàin Bhàin, although the setting has been altered by the creation of a Modern causeway which carries the A804 road. However, even without the Modern roadway, the small island, Garbh Eilean, would have acted as the southern side of a natural bowl affording only open view out to the southwest to the loch.

#### Statement of National Importance

The monument is of national importance as a prehistoric cairn which can make a significant addition to our understanding of the past, particularly the design and construction of burial monuments, the nature of burial practices, and their significance in Bronze Age and later society. The cairn is particularly important as it appears to be a well-preserved, rare type of burial monument in the Highlands. As such it adds to our understanding of differing forms of burial monument and ritual and funerary practices during the Bronze Age. The monument contributes to our understanding of the form, function and distribution of Bronze Age burial monuments. Funerary monuments are often our main source of evidence for the Bronze Age in Scotland and so are an important element in our understanding of the nature of Scotland's prehistoric society and landscape. Because of the rarity of upstanding cairns of this scale and date in this part of Scotland, the loss of this monument would significantly diminish our ability to appreciate and understand the placing of such monuments within the landscape and the meaning and importance of death and burial in prehistoric times.

#### **Oldshoremore, corn mill**

Scheduled Date: 28 October 1977

Source: Historic Environment Scotland

Source ID: SM4010

Schedule Class: Cultural

Category: Industrial: farming, food production

## Strathnaver Museum



IMAGE 444 STRATHNAVER MUSEUM

Strathnaver Museum has perhaps the most longstanding position as a Mackay Country cultural and historical resource, having operated since 1972. It sits at a highly strategic position for Mackay Country at the entrance to Bettyhill (one of the first large villages if travelling from the east) and has a striking prominence being housed in the old Farr Parish Church. A copy of the current Mackay Country digital archive and some hard copy materials are housed by Strathnaver Museum, while Mackay Country features prominently in the Museum's digitising activity and web site content. It has been at the forefront of strengthening the position of the Gaelic language within the local community, most relevantly working to promote Mackay Country Gaelic.

The Strathnaver Museum was established by historian Dr. Ian Grimble and a group of dedicated locals. First opening its doors in 1976 the Museum is located in the former parish church of St Columba, where parishioners first heard of their evictions and where the Napier Commission heard evidence from north Sutherland crofters and tenants in 1883. Strathnaver Museum, has relied heavily since its inception on the work of volunteers and has had many long serving and dedicated unpaid assistants during that time.

Primary sources at the museum include

- Various oral histories and transcriptions depicting life in Strathnaver
- Reay Papers from 1600
- School Log Books, Kirtomy, Skerray and Farr from late 1800s

- Various petty cash books and account records for local stores estates & mills from the early 1800s
- Mackay Country Archive – accounts and images of life in Mackay Country covering a variety of topics
- A number of local research projects covering a range of topics such as recording memories of Burr’s general merchants and delivery vans
- Various DVDs produced as part of our research projects

Housing a wide-ranging collection of artefacts, books and documents the Museum has also consistently added to its collection by conducting research projects. The Museum also has well established links with the diaspora from such projects as *Clan Mackay goes Global* and regularly collaborates with Clan Mackay Societies and Mackay Country Trust.

### **Aims of Strathnaver Museum**

“Preserve and promote the history and culture of the area for present and future generations by conserving, interpreting and augmenting the Museum’s collections together with the archaeological, historical and natural history of the area, for the public benefit, by running the museum and all its organised activities on the best possible practices. This with a determination to make a museum for the district in which will be preserved the evidence of the history, way of life and arts of our forebears which will be open to the public”.

### **Museum and Mackay Country Synergy**

A key feature of the Museum’s themes in relation to broadening the appeal of Mackay Country is that they go well beyond simply the emergence of the Clan Mackay; in particular the Museum details the area’s history back to Neolithic times and incorporates the archaeological, historical and natural history of the area as well that of its peoples. In this sense, therefore, the Museum has a unique position both historically and geographically that should necessitate it having a central role in developing Mackay Country activity.

The Strathnaver Trail, which begins from the Museum, is another facet that widens appeal of the area to the general visitor and has the potential to increase the average time people spend in the area.

Mackay Country Trust has no property or central establishment, Strathnaver Museum provides the crucial focus.

### **Farr Stone**

Outside the Strathnaver Museum stands a Class II Pictish Symbol Stone. The prominent Pictish rectangular slab that stands in a vertical position a few yards west of the building has a basic design is a ringed cross, but this has been elaborated with decorated panels, blended with great skill to produce a harmonious whole. It probably dates from between 800 and 850 A.D. Despite local tradition, there is no mystery about its origin. It marks the grave of an important local, religious, or political personage. The three small rough stones that stand nearby are certainly gravestones and may well be of the same age.

In *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland* (1903) J Romilly Allen and Joseph Anderson first classified Pictish stones into three groups. *Class 2* — stones of more or less rectangular shape with a large cross and symbol(s) on one or both sides. The symbols, as well as **Christian** motifs, are carved in relief and the cross with its surroundings is filled with designs. Class 2 stones date from the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century.

This sophisticated monument bears carving on one broad face only. The slab has been carefully dressed to a rectangle with a plain flat-topped pediment with sloping concave sides. Face A is



IMAGE 445 FARR STONE

heavily carved in relief within a plain border, the whole dominated by a ringed cross on a D-shaped pedestal. The ornamentation is dense and elaborate but lightened by plain spaces between the arms of the cross and by panels on either side of the shaft containing airy spiral work. At the top is a panel of diagonal key pattern within a plain and narrow roll moulding. The cross fills the width of the slab and its upper arm touches the top panel. It has rectangular terminals and widely rounded armpits, and a central raised boss carved with a fat triple spiral. Small triple spirals link the boss with the squares of key pattern in the terminals of the upper and side arms. The squares of key pattern can also be read as crosses. The lower arm, shaft and ring are filled with interlace. The basal pedestal has a border of interlace within which a D-shaped panel is enclosed by a narrow roll moulding and containing two swan-like birds, their necks entwined. The cords of the spiral work on either side of the shaft become space-filling tight interlace above and below, and similar interlace fills the spaces beside the upper ring of the cross. Below the base of the cross is a densely packed panel of key pattern. The basal portion of the slab is hidden below ground.

Historic Environment Scotland conducted a site visit on 17 October 2016. The request which came through HES Heritage Management followed local concerns regarding the possible deterioration of the carved detail of the Farr Stone. The stone was treated in 1992 by Historic Scotland (HS) conservators to remove a heavy accumulation of lichens that were obscuring the carved detail and potential conservation issues. In 1996 concerns were raised that the carving might be weathering more rapidly following this treatment and a further inspection was made by HS conservators in 2000. This inspection revealed that there was absolutely no evidence of deterioration although there was some evidence that biological growth was beginning to re-colonise the surface. This report should be referred to for more detailed information on that assessment.

The cross-slab is carved from a blue/grey schistose slate with quartz inclusions. The stone has a well-defined natural bedding strata which is well cemented with natural mineral binders. It measures approximately 2.290m in height, 0.610m in width at the base, 0.635m in width at the top and 0.230m in depth. It is carved in low relief on the westerly elevation only. The carving consists of a key pattern at the top, a cross incorporating key pattern designs with a semi-circular boss, a ring connecting the arms and a narrow shaft rising from a semi-circular base. Within this semi-circular base are two intertwined birds. Below this is a further key patterned panel partially concealed by turf. The stone is standing directly in the ground of the churchyard with no obvious supporting base.

### <sup>133</sup>**Elliot Rudie on the Farr Stone**

On the front of the museum when it was originally constructed as a church starting about 1730 or 40 something like that it originally had eight windows and later on perhaps about 1775 they made four of them into two big tall windows something like you would get in Thomas Telfer's churches, his parliamentary churches, in fact this might have been the prototype for that who knows

At the west end of the church the church itself is exactly east west there is an area of slightly lighter green grass a circular area which is a sacred enclosure and it's just behind me stretching around there it goes down and you can see there's a large stone and three stones beside it where I'm standing there are gravestones dating from the 20th century and the 19th century but nobody else is buried here now. These people presumably thought that it was very superstitious and old-fashioned to worry about things like sacred areas and they just got themselves buried here anyway nothing wrong with that it's pole position for them however the rest of the population have steered clear of this since the dark ages. The biggest stone is the Farr Stone.

One of the most important parts of the Farr Stone is the back of it and in a Pictish stone they left just the surface of it originally at the very beginning quite rough and they would make designs which ran over the surface sometimes looking rather like tattoos actually on an arm or something like that. Now the monks obviously prized this stone which came from the mouth of the river a district called Invernaver and one of the things about this type of Moine cist is that it has ripples in it beautiful ripple something like the grain and wood and also crystals and the monks would have prized this particularly Columba who's a great artist and visionary so this stone was chosen right at the beginning because of the natural designs on the back of it is carved, on the other side it does look a little bit as though it's been cracked there but that crack is an igneous intrusion and happened millions of years ago, beside it are three smaller stones which are contemporary with the main stone itself probably slightly earlier and these would be monks from that period sometime in say 600 and something through into the early 8th century one of them might have carved a stone and the carving is quite amazing.

It's a kind of a unique stone the Farr Stone or *clock fracker* as it's called in Sutherland Gallic and it has layers and layers and layers of iconography in it possible that this whole design which is a very integrated design was originally either an altar piece or a garment maybe which the person who would have stood in front of this stone would originally have worn and they may have just pinned it over and then pecked their way through to get the design and copy it.

Part of it is Irish in design and part of it is Pictish design from the Pictish period this makes it quite a unique stone the other thing which is totally unique to the Farr Stone is as far as we know, no pun intended, it's in exactly the original position it was set up, not only does the local folklore say that the monks came here set up this stone in the morning they had gone and the

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<sup>133</sup> This narrative is a transcript from a series of video recordings with Elliot

stone was left and it's never been moved but it's also on the same alignment as these stones it's not on a west east alignment like the main building and it actually points towards the start of midwinter sunset and also points towards Northern Ireland the sun's setting over it. Now Columbus came from Northern Ireland so that might have something to do with it. About 40 miles or so east of here is Orkney and on Orton is Maeshowe on the chamber a great chamber tomb the chamber points towards the mid-winter sunset it was built several thousand years, three and a half at least, before this was ever made and it's quite surprising to find that the monks are thinking along those lines thousands of years later.



IMAGE 446 ELLIOT RUDIE

The cross part of it actually represents a brass style of cross which you find in Northern Ireland in Ulster and they have found from the 8th century the 7th century brass crosses of this type they're not very big about that size and also the stone moulds which they were cast from. Now down there (underground) we may find crosses like that: archaeologists would love to have to have a little peek into the soil where I'm standing. The key patterns are another very intriguing feature of the stone because this is picture shark and the pics were still in charge of what is now Scotland at that time mostly on the east side of Scotland the Scots were actually at this particular period starting to come in in the west

into Argyll and so on Columba being part of that movement so we have the Irish bit in the middle but it's standing on top of a picturesque pattern which goes away down under the grass there and another one up there very complicated very symbolic of something in pictures culture. The thing is that this particular design is also found on a stone in Wales also dating from seventh or eighth century and this particular design is found in the Book of Kells which is thought to have been masterminded by Columba and it's quite likely that he was also the mastermind behind this very integrated design so it may be that the whole design is spelling out a message to the people that the tattooed pagans that would have been standing around. it has three swastikas on it just like you get on Tibetan prayer match this is also extremely unusual even more perhaps alarming is there is a symbol here and the only thing that you can find like it are in books of tattoos of Maoris in New Zealand. Now most people will find that rather strange but the Maoris migrate eastwards from the north pole through India to the cook islands going through Melanesia and then they get down to new Zealand just before we do in actual fact the Picts were tattooed.

### **Elliot Rudie**

Elliot Rudie has a long connection as part time volunteer Interpretive Guide and Director at Strathnaver Museum for over 40 years. On retirement he was made Honorary President. his



long experience and encyclopaedic knowledge will continue to inform the debate on the future evolution of what has become a local institution.

Elliot Rudie was born September 5, 1939 in Dundee, Scotland. After completing a Diploma in Drawing and Painting from the Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in 1960, he hitchhiked to London, where he worked as a kitchen porter for about six months and then set off to Paris, hoping to find work and set up a studio to pursue a career as an artist. Unable to establish himself, he returned to Scotland, but then went back to Paris in the spring of 1961 managed to get a job as a bank doorman/interpreter at 22 Place Vendome. Rudie found out about the Beat Hotel from the photographer Steve Lovi and was eventually able to secure a room, where he stayed for six months and immersed himself in his drawings and writing. After the Beat Hotel closed, he settled in Scotland and worked for 30 years as an art teacher. Rudie's drawings and paintings have been exhibited in galleries and museums in Scotland and England. Stylistically, he sees himself rooted in the ironic humor of Expressionism, but is heavily influenced by the apocalyptic vision of the American Beats, particularly William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg.

Elliot Rudie, of Arken, Bettyhill who, having started his volunteering career in April 1976 when his wife, Pat, was curator could very nearly claim to have been in there with the brickwork. Elliot, whose day job from 1971 to 1997 was as Principal Teacher of Art at Farr High School, still pursues a lifelong interest not just in the history and archaeology of the local area but across a far broader conceptual spectrum on the ancient world and, throughout his career as a museum guide, conveyed this enthusiasm to visitors and colleagues in his own inimitable style.

Around 2000 I recorded a series of videos with Elliot interviewed by Rosemary Mackintosh talking about the Strathnaver Museum and its collection.

### **Strathnaver Museum Tours with Elliot Rudie**

1. Clearances General
2. The pulpit
3. Achanlochy Museum
4. Blackhouse & box bed
5. Dog Skin Buoy
6. Inside the museum house
7. Patrick Sellar
8. The cart & peats
9. The boat
10. The Bust
11. Farr Stone Elliot Rudie English
12. Farr Stone Elliot Rudie Gaelic
13. Achanlochy Township Part1
14. Achanlochy Township Part2

All the recordings are available on you tube.

## Strathnaver

By the early seventeenth century, Strathnaver was the name used to refer to the whole north western corner of the mainland, from Strath Halladale westward to Cape Wrath and south to Assynt. Dr. Olivia Lelong gives a very detailed account of the historical background to the name and place in Strathnaver Province Archaeological Research Project 2004 Season: Borralie, Durness.

Strathnaver and the coastline round its mouth were occupied through different periods since the arrival of Christianity on the north coast of Scotland. Certainly the nature and pattern of that occupation altered over time, but the evidence of archaeology, place names, maps and charters does indicate that certain places were inhabited consistently, throughout history. The evidence of place names clearly shows that the Norse did influence the area linguistically. Place names which are Norse in origin tend to decrease in proportion to Gaelic names the further west one goes from Reay (Waugh 2000, 13)

Norse place names in northern Scotland generally fall into two groups: those that refer to local topographic features, or topographical names, and those which refer to the way in which it was inhabited or to a person associated with that habitation, or habitative names (Waugh 2000,13)

The chronology of brochs and hut-circles in the northern Highlands is poorly understood; none of Strathnaver's brochs has been excavated or dated, so there is no direct evidence for their dates of construction and occupation. The brochs of Strathnaver are such a striking and coherent family of structures. The sites of chapels or churches are scattered along the strath and the coast around its mouth. Some have archaeological evidence for early origins, while others do not.

By 1415 Strathnaver had become the domain of the MacKays, and there are precious few facts to explain how that had happened. The whole origin of Clan MacKay is obscure, although it is traditionally connected with the MacEth's, the independent rulers of Moray who consistently caused trouble for the house of Canmore.<sup>134</sup>

The valley of Strathnaver is as green fold of earth, the richest in that part of the country, a narrow twisting glen down which the black water of the River Naver runs from south to north, from the loch of its name to the Atlantic Ocean. The people who lived there in 1814 were mostly Mackays, by name. The houses were grouped in a dozen small townships, northward down the strath to the sea and westward along the shore of Loch Naver. Because of the mission there, Achness was perhaps the most important to the people. It took its Gaelic name, Achadh an Eas, the cornfield by the cascade, from the brown stream that still falls in noisy delight from hills where once the Norsemen buried their dead.

There was Rhifail, the enclosure in a hollow, the smooth dale of Dalvina, Skail the sheiling, and Syre where the young men had been assembled in the spring of 1800 for service with the Sutherland Highlanders. Along the loch, toward Altnaharra at its finger-tip, were Grummore and Grumbeg. On these fell the evening shadow of Ben Klibreck across the water. The people had plenty of flocks of goats, sheep, horses and cattle, and they were living happy, with flesh and fish and butter, and cheese and fowl and potatoes and kail and milk too. There was no want of anything with them, and they had the Gospel preached to them at both ends of the Strath. In the valley of Strathnaver a number of pre-Reformation church or chapel sites are known, for example at Langdale, Skail, Rivigil, Grumbeg, Farr and Klibreck. Several of these have indications of early Medieval origins (Lelong 2002, 210-19).

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<sup>134</sup> Medieval Strathnaver Barbara E. Crawford

The ruins of the numerous settlements deserted during the depopulation of the last hundred and fifty years. They are not 'antiquities' in the normal sense but clearly are a characteristic feature of the Highlands which should be recorded; they were rather casually included on the old 6-in. map of the middle of last century. (Baldwin, J.R. (ed.) 2000. *The Province of Strathnaver* Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies.)

Strathnaver surveyed by B. Meredith 1810.'

Meredith insists that the main source of income for the tenants of those pre-eviction days was stock rearing, especially of black cattle, though horses, sheep and goats were also kept. He remarks that the more industrious of the menfolk migrated south during the spring and summer months to supplement their resources.

*The Image of The Highland Clearances C. 1880-1990.* A thesis presented for the degree of Ph.D. at the University of St Andrews. Laurence Gourievidis.

The Clearances describe the process by which the small tenantry, who lived in Highland glens, was evicted to make way for sheep, for the development of sheep farming. It was a slow process which spanned over almost a century and has become the outstanding mark of socio-economic transformation in the Highlands. The Clearances period does not constitute a uniform whole, but a succession of individual episodes. Most went unrecorded and are hardly mentioned, having left little evidence. Others, more sensational, tend to dominate the image. The process of change in the Highlands was strongly influenced by agricultural improvers, who wanted to foster the economic development of the region.

New breeds of sheep were introduced in the Highlands in the 1760s and very rapidly landlords began to recognise the advantages of the sheep economy, Landlords were keen to reorganise their estates to make them more profitable by converting the inland areas into sheep walks and displacing the native inhabitants of those areas to the shores,

Although exact figures are impossible to quote, it is assumed that between five and ten thousand people were evicted from the straths between 1807 and 1821. The early plans and phases of the Sutherland evictions were elaborated and implemented by Patrick Sellar and William Young, two Morayshire farmers totally won over to the cause of improvement. It is during their factorship that one of the most controversial clearance episodes occurred in Strathnaver in 1814 and led to Patrick Sellar's trial for arson and culpable homicide in 1816. He was acquitted, but both he and William Young were subsequently replaced by James Loch in 1816.

Clearances were designed in parallel with population resettlement, as opposed to deliberate expulsion. Many tenants, however, chose to emigrate rather than occupy the plots offered on the coast. The clearances in Sutherland and elsewhere in the Highlands destroyed a long established pattern of life. The Clearances viewed as the tip of the iceberg threatening to annihilate Gaeldom,

### **The Strathnaver Evictions**

Strathnaver has its own place in the history of the Highland Clearances. It was a popular area and there were numerous townships, all of which were cleared by Factors, on behalf of the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland. The man responsible for the earlier clearances was the Sutherland's factor, Patrick Sellar. Sellar had been forced to resign his post in part due to adverse publicity generated by his harsh methods of evicting families from villages. But Sellar did not leave the region, instead he became a sheep farmer himself. Sellar, and others like him, wanted even more land cleared for sheep. It fell to his successor, Francis Sutherland, to carry out the clearances.

Though it seems Sutherland was himself a generous man, he gave his constables free reign to enforce evictions of families from the glen. This including burning cottages so they could not be reused. Though the methods of the constables drew more adverse publicity, it did not stop the evictions.



IMAGE 447 THE ROAD IN STRATHNAVER TODAY BESIDE LOCH NAVER

Before clearances the strath of Naver was home to over 350 families with a population of more than 2000 people in small villages working the land as communal system. There is very little to see of the remains of the houses. The structures were demolished and stones used for dykes and larger enclosures. It is evident the Strath was inhabited for millennia and the people cleared were the results of generations of families that had lived and worked this land. The coming of the sheep from the South involved the creation of a wilderness to provide the extensive grazing demanded by the new shepherds who were producing wool for the mechanised textile manufacturers of the Industrial Revolution.

### **Pre Clearance Townships of Strathnaver**

Individual townships, with the variations in spelling, lack of records have ensured that many of the places are just not recorded. Surveys of Strathnaver Strath have revealed several ancient monuments where the villages were. This area is littered with cleared townships. It is likely that Norse farmers began to settle in Strathnaver from as early as the ninth century AD (Crawford 1987, 40-42), giving names to their farms and to features in the landscape,

The paired names Rosal and Langwell could indicate their importance as pasturing places for horses used to travel between Easter Ross and Strathnaver (see Crawford forthcoming). The banked enclosure at The Tulloch may relate to the importance of Langdale in this respect. The Tulloch's proximity to the chapel site at Langdale could indicate that this locale was a seat of civil and ecclesiastical authority, which controlled movement along an important inland route during the late Norse period and into the Medieval period. The early documents demonstrate that, certainly by the thirteenth century, Langdale, Klibreck, Achadh an Eas and Grumbeg were

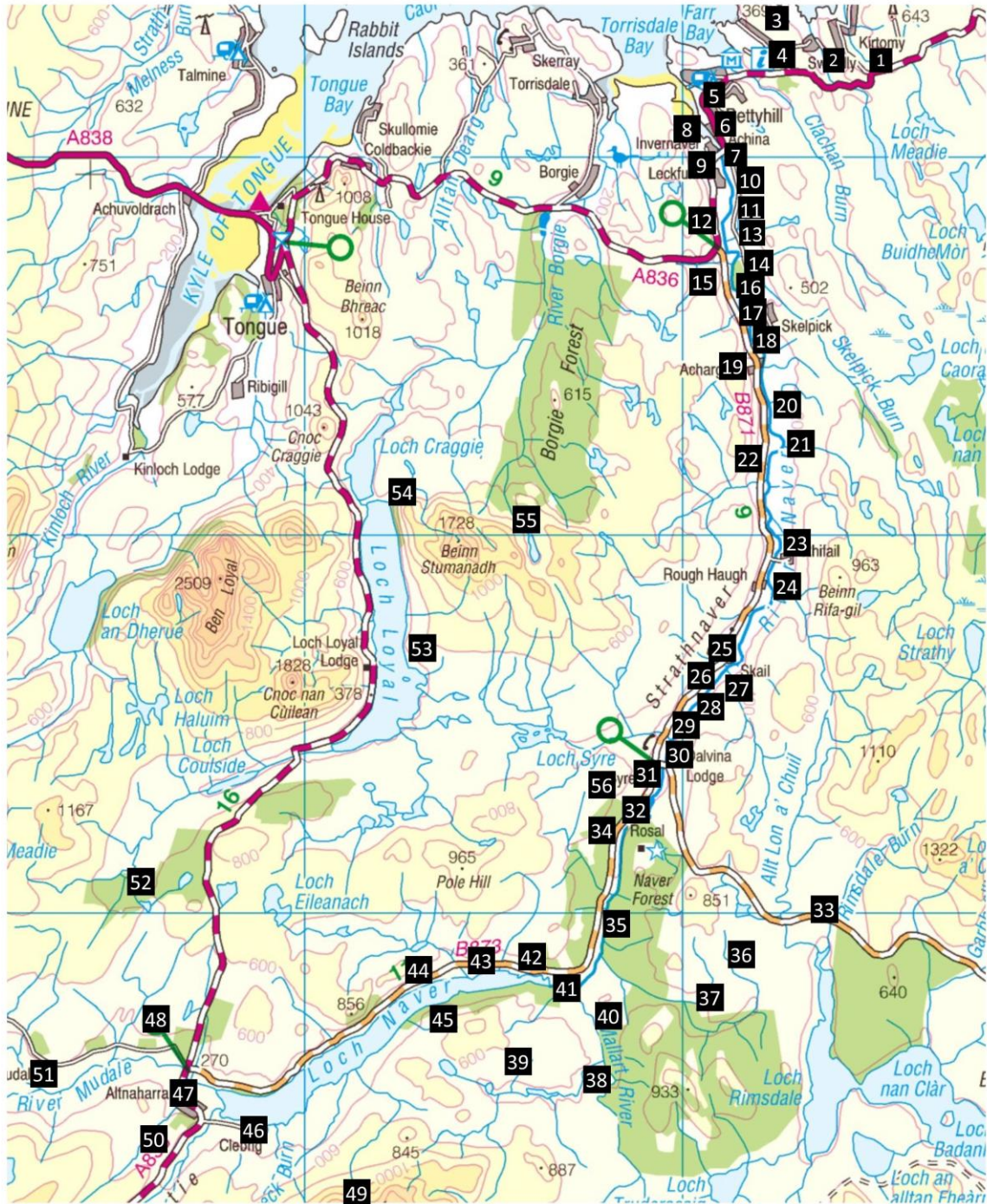
settlements with tenants whose surplus produce would have been due to their overlords. They may have begun as Norse farms, which were gradually brought within the system of feudal control that engendered the development of townships, or joint tenant farms, by the sixteenth century. (Dodgshon 1998)

For the year 1806, Henderson gives what is intended to be a full list of all the townships of Strathnaver with the area of arable land and the number of families on each. It is noticeable that the lists of settlements in Strathnaver which can be compiled successively from the early records in *Origines Parochiales*, from Pont, then from Roy's map, and finally from Henderson, grow longer with time. Possibly this merely reflects more attention to detail and in fact all the new names in Henderson's list are very small settlements. Another explanation must be considered however. Several of the new names appearing on both Pont's and Roy's map are apparently old shieling names, brought under cultivation. It seems only reasonable that the number of settlements in Strathnaver had been extended since the Middle Ages mainly by the occupation of shieling grounds and that this process was greatly accelerated in the later eighteenth century.

The names are very much corrupted. The arable was probably very variable in quality, for sometimes there were three or even fewer acres to the family, but sometimes ten or more; no distinction was made between infield and outfield. In all, Henderson's list comprises 49 settlements, excluding some which were clearly outside Strathnaver, and several which cannot be located. Of the 49, however, it is clear that many were very small; 11 had less than 10 acres (with only 1 or 2 families) and only 26 had more than 30 acres. From this list, it would appear that Rosal was one of the largest townships in Strath Naver, with 13 families and 50 acres of arable; it is surpassed in size of population only by Truderscaig and Langdale with 18 families, and Grummore and Syre with 14. Captain Henderson had given the population of Rosal in 1815 as 13 families. This was only an estimate but suggests the approximate total of dwellings to be expected at Rosal. The observed number, 15-18, in estimating the total population, Henderson may not have included or allowed sufficiently for squatters, either refugees from other evicted settlements or of the type of the notorious William Chisholm who figured so largely in the trial of Patrick Sellar and who was illegally occupying a small stretch of arable in the moor to the east of Rosal.

Stats from Henderson 1812, 1811 census data, republished by Bangor Jones 2000, Strathnaver Museum and O'Reilly ongoing work since 1972.

On the west side of the river Naver there were 126 families occupying over 600 acres of arable land.



Township	No Families	Arable Acres	Total population
1. Kirtomy	9	30	
2. Swordly	5	15	
3. Farr	10	30	
4. Clerkhill	1	30	
5. Betty hill	2	14	
6. Dale har	4	20	19
7. Achina	7	16	

8. Invernaver	10	40	
9. Leckfurin	6	24	
10. Achcoillenborgie	11	4	48
11. Achinloch	11	36	45
12. Achnabourin	5		31
13. Rhinovie	3	30	
14. Dal na drochaide	2	7	
15. Apigill	3	16	17
16. Dal horrisgle	5	16	30
17. Dalveghou se	6		28
18. Skel pick	12	60	68
19. Acheargary	5	16	21
20. Achanellan	5		29
21. Dunviden	8	40	38
22. Carnachy	17	66	102
23. Rhefail	10	30	40
24. Rivigill	17	44	85
25. Skiall	10	50	51
26. SkailWood			
27. Garbh	1		
28. Inshlampie	2	9	
29. Rheloisk	4	30	24
30. Langdale	22	70	94
31. Syre	18	65	99
32. Rosal	15	50	79
33. Rimsdale			
34. Ceann na coille	6		41
35. Da I harrold	7	14	
36. Bad an leathaid	1	4	
37. Truderscaig	17	54	103
38. Coire nam feuran	4	20	24
39. Righcopag			
40. Achadh an eas	3	12	
41. Ach a chuil	3		18
42. Dalathuraice	3	15	
43. Grumbeg	7	30	39
44. Grummore	22	50	117
45. Ruigh na sealbhaig	10	36	60
46. Klibreck	12		72
47. Alit na harra	3	7	17
48. Cnoc dubh			
49. Alit na ba	1		
50. Tumore			
51. Mudale	10	48	
52. Dionachchoire	3	16	
53. Leitr beg	4	30	

54. Ach nan clach	2	16	
55. Stionach coire			
56. Kedsary	2	8	



IMAGE 448 STRATHNAVER



## Taken on a Journey

A Full Circle – The journey through time of the Mackay Family of Heilam Ferry, Loch Eriboll from 1841 - 2014. Strathnaver Museum presented an exhibition about the family of Allan George Mackay of 139 Skinnet, Melness.

The Clearances to the Present Day. 1814, the year that the Highland Clearances hit the Province of Strathnaver. On taking financial advice from her factors, James Loch and Patrick Sellar, the Countess of Sutherland agreed that her tenants should be removed from their inland crofts to make way for large flocks of Cheviot Sheep which would provide her with a much better financial return on her land than the existing rents being paid by her crofting tenants.

### George and Dolina Mackay

This family story starts with Annie Mackay (nee Sutherland) born 1838. She and her husband were cleared from Totaig, a settlement on the west side of the Kyle of Tongue, to Achnahuaigh along the coast of Melness. Anne and her husband Alexander Mackay had a daughter Dolina who married a local man George Mackay in 1887. George, a cabinet maker to trade, had made plans to emigrate to Canada to pursue a better way of life for his family but, on being asked by the then Duke of Sutherland to work as a boat builder, he agreed and moved to Heilam Ferry House by Loch Eriboll to take up his new position. The ruins and remains of Totaig, a settlement on the west side of the Kyle of Tongue are still visible today.



### Heilam or Heileam Ferry

Heilam Ferry lies on the eastern shore of Loch Eriboll, it was the site of the ferry across the loch until the road was completed in 1890. The origin of the name is Norse and means an islet or a rock detached from the mainland. In 1819 there were seven tenants of the Reay Estate

living there. The ferry house was built in 1813 and can still be seen on the Ard Neakie promontory. There was an Inn close to the house and Dolina, Hughie's mother ran a shop there.



IMAGE 449 HEILAM FERRY HOUSE ERIBOLL

1st battalion Seaforth Highlanders with no mention of medical issues. Hugh wrote a letter home to his parents stating his wishes in the event of his death, a not so uncommon practice among those heading off to war. He was sent to France where he was eventually captured by the Germans and became a Prisoner of War (POW). His parents received a letter saying 'missing, presumed dead'. In 1918 he and another Highlander escaped and evaded capture by being hidden by a Polish priest and by speaking Gaelic which was mistaken by the Germans for Russian. He made his way back to Britain and very shortly returned to France for the remainder of the War.

On his return he received a handwritten letter of thanks from King George and was DE mobbed having been decorated with the British war Medal and the Victory Medal.

Buckingham Palace

1918

The queen joins me in welcoming you on your release from the miseries and hardships, which you have endured with so much patience & courage. During these may months of trial, the early rescue of our gallant Officers & men from the cruelties of their captivity has been

Hugh Mackay

On the 1st of February 1888, George and Dolina had a son, Hugh Mackay. Hugh was born at Achnahuaigh in Melness Dolina had moved back home to her parents' house for the birth. Hugh was the eldest of 7 boys and, along with his brothers, attended Eriboll Side School for his primary education. Dolina had a shop and his father also ran the ferry across to Portnancon. Loch Eriboll was a busy safe haven for shipping at that time. After leaving school Hugh went to Aberdeen to study teaching and often made the journey from Loch Eriboll to Aberdeen by trawler. He graduated and became a teacher with one of his early posts being in Farr School, Bettyhill. He then moved to Gersa near Watten in Caithness and while there met Catherine Sutherland of Scotack Farm. They began courting.

The First World War

When War broke out Hugh, then 27, tried to enlist but was turned down as medically unfit. By June 1917 he had been enrolled with the

uppermost in our thoughts. We are thankful that this longed for day has arrived, & that back in the old Country you will be able once more to enjoy the happiness of a home and to see good days among those who anxiously look for your return.

George R I

Letter from King George

Hugh was, however, very much alive and carried on a correspondence with Catherine who was now a nurse tending the wounded in England. In 1918 he and another Highlander escaped and evaded capture by being hidden by a Polish priest and by speaking Gaelic which was mistaken by the Germans for Russian. He made his way back to Britain and very shortly returned to France for the remainder of the War. On his return he received a handwritten letter of thanks from King George and was demobbed having been decorated with the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.

Hugh and Catherine

On leaving the army Hugh returned to teaching and in 1921 he and his first love, Catherine, got married at her home Scotack Farm in Caithness. They then moved to Latheron where they had 2 children George and Catherine. Later they moved again to Ardhattan Schoolhouse on Loch Etive where Hugh continued teaching as headmaster until his retirement to the village of Connel Ferry. Throughout his career Hugh kept a notebook recording current issues, some of which bear a striking echo of issues still very prevalent today, both in the field of education and local public transport!

Catherine died in 1974 and George in 1976 at his son's home.

George, the son of Hugh and Catherine, followed in his father's footsteps and became a teacher. He got married and had 3 sons. The middle son, Allan, came to work at Hope Estate in 1984, married Kirsteen and now live in Melness. They have 2 children, Eoghann and Riona. Riona, a pupil at Farr High School, is currently a voluntary archivist working at Strathnaver Museum which is how this story came to be here for you today!

### **Alan Mackay**

Francis Gunn interviewed Alan Mackay shepherd and farm manager in Melness during "*Taken on a Journey Project.*" This edited synopsis is about Alan's view in a historical context of hill farming and crofting.

Could you tell me something about the settlements connections to your family?

My great great grandmother was evicted from here at the time of the Highland Clearances. They were forcibly moved out and they resettled at Achnahuaigh in Melness. The houses are typical style what they would call back houses, the walls went up to probably not much higher than the person themselves, probably a bit lower maybe, just shoulder height. The roof trusses were made mostly from peat bog timber, that's the stuff that comes out of the ground that's found when you're cutting peats, its old trees that have died back from years and years ago. they are a very important part of the house structure because there is no trees in this area for building so when they were cleared they required these timbers to rebuild where they were going and in a lot of the cases the houses were burnt out and they didn't have these timbers to rebuild their houses. it would then be clad in possibly turfs or it was thatched with heather. The fire would probably be in the middle of the house although it may have been at the end but more likely in the middle of the house and opening at the top, that was typical black houses. There were also the animals lived in the house but not in the same part of the house as the people lived, they were brought in in the winter time. The few cattle they would have would

have would be taken to add to the warmth of the house but they were in a separate part of the house, they weren't just wandering around in the house with the people as some think it was separate, there is a definite divide between them and the living area.

There would have been probably three houses of the same together with boundary walls of the area that they worked. They would have been growing potatoes, bear tight barley and then they graze the hill in the summer putting their cattle and their sheep out way out on to shelings. their cattle would have been descendants of the Highland cattle we have today that would be smaller it would probably be quite a hairy type of animal black brindled coloured which is a sort of black red colour, they would have had some form of sheep probably more Hebridean type maybe goats and no doubt there was hens about the place as well. on this particular area here they also had the Kyle of Tongue to live off so they had shell fish they would most definitely been getting fish out of the sea as well to add to their diet so their lifestyle would have been productive. They would have been comfortable in the standards of the time, compared to today no but were probably quite content with their lot.

The whole of the Kyle Tongue was habited then from the far end to the Melness settlement. Not as it is today but there was people living in these places all up and down the Kyle so it was a well populated area. They were cleared to make way for the sheep and they wanted the sheep in the land because the land was good so to say they were impoverished is a bit of a contradiction. If they were impoverished why did they want the land? Because the land was good because it was looked after well particularly because they're grazed with cattle and the cattle made the ground fertile. When the sheep farmers came in the land was grazed hard with large numbers of sheep probably more sheep then really should have been on it which was detrimental in later years, not at the time because it was good grazing. They were interested in profit and that's what they got because at the time it was the Napoleon Wars there was a desperate need for meat and wool so money was good to them. This the place was good to the sheep farmers and the people were then evicted off to make way for them and they were then impoverished getting put down to what we have now is Crofts. Crofting was imposed on the people it isn't something that came about it was imposed on them and that's the system we have today which now they are protected because of the clearances the people are protected with their land.

It was peat that they would have to burn on their fires the peat banks are still visible behind the houses here you can see them quite clearly. Those fires would have been burning since possibly Pictish time because people have lived here for that long and it was once the fire was going it was going for generations. When the clearances came that was the end of that, the fire went out for the first time for the first time in generations.

Ironically I'm a Shepherd in the farm that was created after clearing my ancestors off the land to make way for the sheep. It's a relatively large sheep farm we carry about a 1000 ewes. At one time Melness Farm was the largest sheep farm in Europe, it is nowhere near that size now it was broken down at the time of the Sutherland Estate selling off and it's now down to a about 20,000 acres of hill land it's an extensive hill sheep farm and it's changed in a lot of ways. Manpower is not there. The farm that at one time would have had at least five shepherds' now one shepherd and myself we take in contractors to help at busy times. Main things that have changed is the transportation we have vehicles to get about we have quad bikes. Animal medicines have changed sheep farming dramatically we don't get the deaths that we used to get but we still manage the sheep in much the same way on the hill. They're kept on their own ground. They come in at lambing they go back out again they come back in to be clipped and they're back out in the hill again so they spend nine months of their life on that hill of which part of that is through the winter. They don't come in they're on the hill for themselves have to

get on with it. if the weather's bad we will get supplementary feeding but other than that they left to go on with it.



IMAGE 450 MELNESS FARM

The hill farming and crofting today is very similar to what it would have been 100 years ago. Crofting has changed in that less people are doing crofting, less of the land is worked and there's certainly less stock kept. It is the same situation within the hill farms. conservation has become a major player in these hill farms and crofting we are having to work hand in hand with conservation measures that are put upon us some are good some we might argue with but it is the way it is and because of that a lot of people are not going to be prepared to put up with the red tape. I think it's a very fragile existence, we're very much determined upon the price of lamb. We aren't in the position to finish lambs we have to sell them store as with the cattle. Our markets are far away. If it wasn't for agricultural support there would be even less sheep farmers and hill farmers in this area and crofters in particular would not be here they couldn't exist without the agricultural support. There are still huge economic tensions going on here. it's a cost of living in these this part of the world is not cheap, transportation is the biggest expense we have for everything has to be transported in, it has to be transported out and fuel prices are not cheap that really makes the job very, very difficult economically. One of the largest concerns in the agricultural industry in general but certainly in these this part of the world is there is very few young people coming into it. the farms now, because of the economics, tend to have one shepherd there is not the same number of under shepherds getting taken on. Within crofting itself it's a hard it's not a hard life but its hard work making a living at it and a lot of the young people are not going to be prepared to do it and in a way you can't blame them. Those that are trying to get into it finding it increasingly difficult to get a start because a lot of the farms are not taking on young people but there is less and less young people wanting to do it.

## Strathnaver Trail

In 2008 I visited the Strathnaver Trail with Jim Johnstone who had the original concept for the trail and identified the localities to include with researching and providing most of the text. This report does not follow or detail the whole trail but a conversational view of a trip up Strathnaver looking at areas of interest. Sarah Beverage interviewed Jim as we visited the sites and I video recorded his narrative. The wind disrupted some of the recordings, all are watchable and available at Strathnaver Museum. This is a transcript of Jim's story. Detailed accounts are available in publications specifically about the trail localities but this account gives further background and insight into Jim's thinking on the history the trail portrays.



IMAGE 451 STRATHNAVER TRAIL SIGN

The name Strathnaver is a famous one and I think the main reason why it's famous is the immense amount of publicity that the Strathnaver clearances of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century have achieved both at the time and more recently.

Now we are at a kind of dividing point in a sense. Naver starts more or less here at the beginning of Loch Naver, but further up from here along the side of the Moodle River are the meadows of Moodle, which were shelling areas for much of upper Strathnaver including Rosal which is one of the most famous names in the annals of the clearances because it was there or rather within a mile of Rosal and Badanloscan that the famous incident took place, which led to Patrick Sellar, one of the instruments of the House of Sutherland being tried for culpable homicide in Inverness. While clearing the houses he was alleged to have set fire to a house with an old woman in it, and that she had to be carried out of the burning house, and as a result died from shock and a few days later.

Patrick Sellar curiously has a different take on all this as you might expect and his line was that the people of Rosal had asked him to go up and make sure that he cleared the tinkers out of Badandlosscan and another curious side-line to this is that Donald MacLeod, the famous author of *Gloomy Memories* and prolific writer to the newspapers in the 1830s and 1840s, and right on into the 1850s criticising the clearance policy generally, which of course was still going on another parts in Scotland. Donald MacLeod was sighted as witness for Patrick Sellar at the trial in Inverness. There's no record that he actually appeared, but he would have been there because he was at the end of this trial.

Patrick Sellar burst into tears

Yes, he burst into tears that's correct. There's a famous incident and described very well in a book by Eric Richards probably the most knowledgeable person about the whole clearance episode the author of four books about it, including the Leviathan of Wealth, which he wrote without access to the Sutherland Papers and then two volumes of what provides a work of art almost with the large amount of information and very revealing accounts.



IMAGE 452 JIM JOHNSTON AND SARAH BEVERIDGE AT THE ALTNAHARRA PILLARS

I am standing at the pillars in Altnaharra and Altnaharra is right at the start of the Strathnaver trail. The pillars themselves have quite an interesting story and that shortly after the Sutherland family bought the estate here from the Mackays in 1829 they wanted to have an impressive entrance to their lands and they decided to have these pillars specially made. They were made in a quarry on the top of Drumholiston about 40 miles from here and one day, the ploughman from Tongue was sent with his dray, which was quite a rare thing at that time a four wheeled cart to go with, I think, four horses in this huge cart over to Drumholiston, and pick them up. He went and crossed the River Halladale on the chain boat bridge, which is now no longer in use. In fact, some people don't even believe it was ever there, and when he came back to the chain boat he couldn't get back across because the river had come up to such an extent that it was pouring and pouring of rain. So he turned and went down Strath Halladale, hopping to cross the river at Kinbrace, but again, the river was far too high and he couldn't get across at the ford there, so he continued on down through Helmsdale, and eventually to the Mound, and came round by Rogart and back up here this way. He put the pillars off here at the Altnaharra,

but in the course of this which took him about two to three days the rain never stopped, and it was very cold and he got pneumonia and shortly after he came home, he died a young man and left his widow and one child were left in Tongue. Because, he was dead he was obviously no use as a ploughman anymore, so the widow was put out the house and went and stayed in Skerray for a while, Torrisdale in Skerray and I got their story from Hugh MacDonald in Melness some years ago and wrote it up in an article somewhere I can't remember where and got a letter from the descendant of a son who had moved from Torrisdale, eventually to Bonar Bridge, and apparently there are still relatives there. But the pillars originally had inscriptions around the top telling about the Sutherland ground and the various information like sort of sign posts, but there was a big panic during the lead up to the First World War, whether the country was going to be invaded by the Germans, that has been now but they are tourists, but they decided they would get rid of these and get rid of the inscriptions and chip them all off. They did. This was done all over the country with all kinds of signs were destroyed everywhere It was years before anyone could find their way around! But the pillars are still here and still unstamped.

The bit about the quarry and Drumholiston. A geologist was looking at these signs at these pillars here, and he reckoned that they came from the Jurassic Rocks of Brora and that they could only possibly have come from the east coast because he detected a fossil in the side of one of these pillars. So the next thing to check is whether there's another outcrop of the Jurassic at the top of Drumholiston and if there is it's the only one on the north coast. So that's the story of the pillars.

Is it because the population of Strathnaver was popular, but they had the Mission house there?

They had mission houses everywhere. The main church was in in Bettyhill and they had a kind of outstation in Achness so there was the main minister in Bettyhill and then there's this mission in Strathnaver. There were a lot of people here, I don't know exactly how many, 2020 it was something of that order a huge number.

We are looking now at Ben Hee which is said to be the highest fairy hill in Scotland. The Hee element coming from *shein* in Gaelic, and we're looking up the valley of the Moodle here and the flood plains on either side of the valley. Incidentally the farm there the farm at that we're looking at here with all the dry stone dyke, that's now a deer farm and you can see a large head of domesticated red deer just to the right in front of us there. Swinging out and you could see commercial forestry mostly belonging to Altnaharra estate on that site. The natural forests are the remnants of natural forest, Birch and Hazel and suchlike down along the side of the burn and along the side of the river the Vagstie Burn. If you look at the Ordnance Survey name books for that name, then you'll see that the ordinance survey people proposed to spell it with a ph which would be correct in Gaelic but the Duke of Sutherland's factor in Tongue had struck this out, then written in magnificent copperplate writing that was absolutely rubbish and it should be spelt with a V. So an amusing aside there and then round looking at Ben Kilbreck, which is the highest mountain in the parishes of Tongue and Farr at 3154 feet. It's also a mountain consisting of Moine schists and rocks of that kind told that politic schist, which means that you can trace the melting of the rock when it was deeply underground in the deformation of the pelites, which are little quite often, or light coloured marks within the overlying rock. And then looking down Loch Naver itself, which is a classic case of an over deepened trench created by ice. We are at the edge of what would have been the major ice sheet in North West Sutherland here at one time, with ribbons of glacier flowing away from there. Then there's very little evidence that the ice actively covered Ben Kilbreck. It's unlikely that reached the very top, but we would have been standing here if you were here at the time of the icy ice sheets greatest extent, then there would have been maybe a 3000 foot dome of ice. Over



a little bit to the south of here, and ice movement across virtually the whole of this area, except the very tops of the hills, so there would be standing out like nunatacks or inselberg's as you get in Greenland and Antarctica today.

As we go down the strath will see evidence of glacial features principally carved in glacial drift or in influential glacial deposits, grasslands and gravels, and so on, and we take a look at them as we go along. there are very well developed corrie called the whipped corrie up there and holds snow very late in the season so if you're up there that's a big crevice in it which a burn normally runs down into Loch Chor on the other side which is another example of exactly the same kind down into Loch on the other side which is another example of exactly the same kind of loch, but yes, there's a really well developed corrie there, and as I say it is a huge snow wedge which stays there until well into the summer. Then if you go along the ridge of Ben Kilbreck you come to a monument which marks the place where an aeroplane crashed I think in 1957 and three servicemen RAF servicemen were killed there. It's quite an impressive monument and has a plaque on it with all their names and details.

Just opposite here at Ben Kilbreck is the settlement called Kilbreck right down at the foot of the hill and just beyond it in the open hill there's ancient Christian symbol cross, it's not markedly Pictish, but it is evidence of very early Christianity here. We're in a landscape which has a history going back a long, long way far beyond Christianity as we'll see later on.



IMAGE 453 GRUMMORE BROCH

We are now at Grummore on the shore of Loch Naver and behind here is rocks dating from the Iron Age. The original kind of time frame in which placed them used to be about 100 BC, 200AD but last few years it's been proven that they were actually occupied for a longer period than that. The period of broch occupation has been extended by at least 150 years. Brochs are normally associated with metal working, metal exploitation of various kinds very often to do with mining metal and with smelting it. The metal that would be associated with this broch, one of the things that Donald MacLeod says in his extensive book of Gloomy Memories is that the

Altnaharra Hotel was partly roofed with timbers taken from the church at Achness because Donald Sage, the famous minister who wrote Memorabilia Domestica he was the preacher in Achness and there was a mission house there and allegedly, when the clearances were complete, the roof timbers were taken from Achness and used in the roof of the Altnaharra Hotel. Few years ago must be about every 15 years ago now there was a proprietor in the Altnaharra hotel called Alan Finch and he did a lot of renovation work and in part of the hotel found charred timbers, which he thought might be the ones that came from our connexion but there's no record that any attempt was made to actually burn the church in Achness, and it looked to me when I crawled through the attic and looked at them that they were actually relatively Modern timbers which had been charred by some kind of bizarre accident in the loft

rather than it had been carried from Rosal or somewhere like that, but it's just the side-line on the whole story.

If there is any metal association, will almost certainly be iron and iron is found locally in a smeltable state. This was recorded by Timothy Pont in his investigations here. If you look at the Pont map that will say that "*here be ironed made*" or something like that. The broch here is evidence of the long period of time during which man has occupied this area.



IMAGE 454 GRUMMORE

And up to our west here on the hillside there's one of the larger villages, one of the larger pre clearance village is the village of Grummore which had at least 32 households in it at the time of the clearances and was cleared in two phases with half the population being cleared in one year and the second half in the year after, and this is the maximum extent on this side of the River Naver, Loch Naver catchment that Patrick Cellar's farm encompassed. So his farm eventually began here at Grummore, or extended from here on this bank of the Naver all the way to the sea.

Behind the broch beyond this again in Ben Kilbreck, and we are getting quite a good view of it from here just as the people on this campsite here are. A kind of unlikely campsite with absolutely no facilities except the view of the magnificent mountain and the view across the loch, surprisingly full all year round. Not the sort of place that local people go on holiday!

There is some documentary sources said it could have been recorded as at Mickle.

Ah yes, that appears as Meekle Nupe, something like that, in a charter. Meekle as this is going into Scots rather than Gaelic, or oral Norse, but I'm not quite sure of when the name changed. I know that in all the records that I've seen, it appears as Grummore or something similar apart from that one that referred to. It just seemed rather unusual Meekle, I always thought meant small and whereas in Gaelic and the place name Grummore mean large, so it's a bit confusing, Yeah, but then lots of things are.

Grummore is unusual in various ways, but one way in which it particularly different from most of the pre clearance settlements that there's very considerable use of stone in the buildings and most pre clearance settlements there's a foundation of stone which is really very low, and the

walls above that were made of turf, supported with wooden beams called Crux. But here it would seem that more use was made of stone than anywhere else along the trail. It is possible though that some of these buildings were post clearance because when Grummore was being cleared instructions were given that the buildings were not to be burned because Patrick Sellar was about to occupy the farm and intended to house some of his shepherds here so it could be that the improvements were made to the original houses and the turf walls were replaced with stone. Looking at this casually it appears that the buildings were more modern looking than any others in Strathnaver from that day.



IMAGE 455 BOULDER CLAY

I mentioned earlier that we were very much in a glaciated landscape, and there are two forms of deposit left by the glacier. One of them we can clearly see here in this cutting on the roadside alongside Loch Naver. The higher up the strath we are, the more likely we are to find this deposit rather than the other. This is boulder clay and if you look at it you'll see that the stones in it are all angular there's very, very little, if any evidence of rounding, and that indicates that the stone has been transported here without ever having been rolled along by water in a river or a stream or anything like that. This material is kind of matrix of clay, matrix of rock flour has been plastered on to the bedrock by glacier

itself, and the angular fragments are there within it have either been plucked from the bedrock by the glacier or have been broken up by freestyle weathering giving the sharp angular shape. The other clue to this being boulder clay, rather than any other form of deposit, is that it's completely sorted and there are huge boulders further along. Here again, angular sharp edges everywhere and if you look at the deposit itself, just right where we are, you'll see that there are a range of sizes of material all head over heels and absolutely mixed up completely. This is the stuff that sometimes gets left exposed at the surface, and when the glacier retreats and then the clay element of it dries out and blows away and forms soils elsewhere like the lowest soils of China and so on and very, very fine fragments. Hence the name rock flour. The places where the glaciers have been leaves a very chaotic landscape, but here it's all been overlain by peat and soil. There's been soil formation processes as we could see above. Here the soil is relatively thin, but still quite discernible as soil and quite able to grow crops and various things and further down the strath we will see outwash materials, which consist of sands and gravels, which tend to be sorted to an extent, but not all sorted, as they would be in a normal river system. You'll also see Eskers with again, are outwash deposits the colour is different if you look at the colour here, just by glancing at this you can tell that this is in fact boulder clay because it's grey in colour. If you find, as we will later on, examples of outwash you'll see that it has a distinctive reddish colour and that kind of rule operates virtually everywhere in the

world where glacier glaciation has taken place irrespective of the rock type. The grey for the boulder clay and red for the out wash.

Near the top of the boulder clay here there's been some leaching through of materials from the soil into the clay itself, changing its colour but above that, there's the soil itself. It's only been forming for about 12,000 years, that's a very short time, Strathnaver is now recognised as being completely clear of ice by about 12,500 years ago, but that's quite a short time for soil formation process to go on, hence the rather thin soils and hence the quite poor quality of soil and in many, many areas, and indeed of course the higher up the hills you go there's sometimes no soil at all and you'll still see the bare bedrock with striations in it. Maybe we'll find some of these later on.

This is what they used to call megmatite that flowed into the cracks in the gneiss. The best place that you'll see that is Bettyhill. From there we can look across the bay across Far Bay, and there's this skerries, the stacks sitting out from the end of that point and there's a huge layer of this stuff just injected into and around Strathy Point. Great examples of it where you see cracks have been formed, then it's running first one way and then the other.

Professor Cheng Yuqi used to be head of The Chinese Geological Services and he did his doctoral thesis in Bettyhill in the 1930s, and it consists quite a bit of explanations of how this material got to be in the rock. Because megmatite melted at a lower temperature than the other rock you get these over thrusts that took place here. Kilometres thick chunks of rock over one another, then obviously that generates a lot of heat and energy and at the same time fractures within the rock This would be so hot that it would flow in just like, I don't know chocolate.



IMAGE 456 GRUMBEG ABRACH BURIAL GROUND

We are now at Grumbeg a little bit further down the strath which is a smaller settlement than Grummore, but like its neighbour was cleared to make room for Patrick Seller's Farm, the part of Grumbeg that we're in here is an ancient graveyard. We're standing in what's known as the Abrach burial ground, but beyond it outside, it is the graveyard of the more ordinary Mackay. On the wall around that graveyard, there were two sculptured crosses found. Both of them now in Strathnaver Museum at Bettyhill. the story

of this particular place that were standing in is that the Abrach's who thought themselves a cut above the ordinary Mackays, and after a violent disturbance at a funeral said to have a completely separate burial ground and we are standing in it. It's been pointed out that this building that we're in this long, narrow, rectangular building is highly reminiscent of some pre reformation chapels, and that it may in fact be just that a pre reformation chapel in association with the attached burial ground.

Looking away from here in the distance, we can see two hills. They're not particularly high round about 2000 feet but the one on the right is the larger of the two at Ben Griam Mor and the one to the left Ben Griam Beg and round the top of Ben Griam Beg is one of the largest hill forts in the whole of Scotland and also one of the one of the highest to be found in the whole

nation. The hill forts like the brocks were made use of while they were never permanently occupied but they were constructed roundabout, the hundred 100BC, 100AD era and therefore, more or less parallel with the brochs in age.

When we were coming up to this building we passed through a whole lot of bracken and were discussing how bracken might have been used, even today, or certainly in the fairly recent past, crofters have used it to make thatch, bedding and potato clamps, that's very good for insulating against frost and so on. Patrick Sellar, who became the farmer in possession of this area and famous for various other reasons was a noted farmer, not just in Scotland, but throughout Europe, and one of the things that he was very good at was the preparation of compost and the construction of middens. On his lowland farms and on the east coast near Golspie, he has written about, in his farm reports, constructing middens using bracken. He would put a layer of dung and then a layer of bracken and so on. I don't imagine he did this personally, although it is said that, he was right up for jumping off his horse and getting in among the sheep and turning them over and looking at them, and was a very active person in all kinds of ways. But he constructed these middens using bracken and was able to break the very, very resistant bracken down to useful compost, so perhaps that's adept for today's farmers as well and we could get rid of some of this stuff.

Looking behind us here you can see a huge expanse of Forestry Commission forestry. Most of this has been planted in the 1950s and some of it actually had to be replanted because of an infestation of Pine Beauty Moth. Pine Beauty Moth is native to Canada and in Canadian Woodlands, natural woodlands, it doesn't present a problem, but in the situation here of virtual monoculture it developed to an extraordinary degree and almost wiped out the forestry plantation at that time. It was treated with some very noxious chemicals, and was a kind of experiment for forestry worldwide and control of quite difficult and quite, from their point of view, obnoxious animal.

Looking now at Achness which is one of the forty nine or so settlements that there were between the meadows of Moodle and the sea in pre clearance days the Achness that you see today is part of the resettled Strathnaver and although it's been abandoned since about 1960, at was considered to be quite a good holding. The name Achness means the place of the waterfalls and the name derives from the waterfalls on the Rive Moodle, which flows into the River Naver at this point and Achness was where there was the mission Chapel, where Sage the minister the one that's most respected and liked by Highlanders of the present generation and probably Highlanders of the past as well because of his association with Strathnaver and his support of



IMAGE 457 DALHARRAL

the people's case against the landlords but his mission kind of Chapel was here at Achness and it's from there that the roof trusses were allegedly carried to Altnaharra and used in the new House of Spirits Liquors at the Altnaharra.

We are now at Dalharral on the upper reaches of the River Naver and Dalharral is, although the present building there is a fairly modern one, and has been a small farm croft in recent times, although now abandoned this area had a settlement of its own in pre clearance times, but

it's famous for something much more than that and that was one of the places where the Scots and the Norse came into contact in the tussle that was between the emerging Scottish Nation and the Earls of Orkney for control of the north of Scotland. It's well known that Orkney, Shetland, The Western Isles, even as far as the Isle of Man and much of Ireland was completely under the control of Norse leaders for many, many hundreds of years and that included the whole of present day Caithness the whole of Sutherland and this area west of Caithness, then known as the Dales of Caithness and corresponding roughly to the Mackay Country. So this was definitely a place that was under the control of the Norse for many hundreds of years, but here on the riverbank, behind us, on the other side of the river, there in either 1196 or 1198 a pitched battle took place between the Norse and the Scots. Scots being led actually by a man, called Reginald of the Isles who was, in fact another Norseman, but they had hired and paid him to go and sort out his relatives in the far north William the Lion, not having time to come up here himself, he sent the Reginald of the Isles with an army up to sort out Caithness and Sutherland and battle took place between Reginald of the Isles and his men and Harold Madison, who was then Errol of Orkney and who had control over Caithness and North Sutherland. In this battle it's the story that the Norsemen were defeated and that Harold was killed and that he was buried just on the other side of the river here at the site. We can't actually see the site but it's called Clachanrea, the stones of the king or the stone of the king, but that is in fact a much more ancient monument, that's a henge type setting stone circle and has an astronomical significance rather than a sepulchral one although that cairn in the middle of it is quite a small setting, stones about 7-8 feet high, most of them recumbent, but there are still stones standing there, seven stones in the setting altogether, three of them are still standing and the rest there unfortunately lying down. The story obviously is not entirely true because Harold Madison went on from here to commit all sorts of dastardly acts in Caithness, including, I think, hacking out the bishop's tongue and things like that and went on to rule in Orkney for quite a long time after the battle so clearly he wasn't killed here and also further down the strath there are quite a lot of cumuli, quite a lot of cairns and Gunn and Mackay in their book on Sutherland and the Reay Country attribute the cairns to burial grounds for the dead Norseman slaughtered by their ancestors, The Porto Mackays, but that's not true either, because the cairns that they allegedly buried in are much, much older than that and are of Neolithic age and are in fact passage graves so the true story of the Battle of Dalharral will probably never be known, but Harold leaves his name in this place.

We are now at the Braes on Strathnaver and at the memorial to Donald MacLeod, who is one of the main figures in the clearance story and that he provided much of the information that historians and folklorist and all kinds of people have used to produce more recent material. His version of events as the version of events that's used by Iain Crichton Smith then by Neil Gunn and by various other authors who have written about the clearances Fin Macaula is another one.

IN MEMORY OF  
DONALD MACLEOD  
STONE MASON  
WHO WITNESSED THE  
DESTRUCTION OF ROSSA;  
IN 1814 AND WROTE  
"GLOOMY MEMORIES"

Donald MacLeod was a resident of Rosal. He was young man in 1816, when the village of Rosal was cleared and he was actually cited as a witness for Patrick Sellar in the case in Inverness with regard to the Tinker Chisolm in Badanloscum. Donald MacLeod is a character in the story who put his own spin on everything, and it's perhaps best not to read Gloomy



IMAGE 458 MEMORIAL TO DONALD MACLEOD

Memories as a historical account although the passion that it expresses and feelings that are in there are certainly shared by many people who experienced the clearances and their descendants perhaps even more so in whom the bitterness still goes on. MacLeod was a stone mason, but somehow he managed to acquire an education in English, although he would have been a native Gaelic speaker as virtually everyone was and he became able, by pretty slender means you would think, to write very eloquently and dramatically in the 19<sup>th</sup> century style, and to berate The Countess of Sutherland, the Sutherland Family and various other people. Quite stylish and articulate in his letters to the newspapers in America, and Britain. Then the collected works, Gloomy Memories. Gloomy Memories was written or given that name as a response to a book by Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had come over to this country from America, she of course was a famous author of Uncle Tom's Cabin, which was a kind of pro negro antislavery polemic, and for which she was considered the liberal in the USA but when

she was here, she was associated with the aristocratic ruling classes rather than with the common people, and she took the part of the Countess of Sutherland in a book that she wrote about her experiences in Britain, and it was called Sunny Memories. Donald MacLeod, of course, had a different view of things, and titled his collection Gloomy Memories.

This monument, which actually has a minor inaccuracy on it, and that states that the village of Rosal was cleared in 1814. In fact, the people of Rosal received their rits in 1814, but that actual clearance didn't take place until two years later until 1860. This monument was opened, declared open by Ian Grimble, the historian who did a great deal of good for the Mackay Country, and that his doctoral thesis was entirely on the Mackay dynasty and out of that doctoral thesis he produced three books, quite revealing to the public at large about the clearances and about 18<sup>th</sup> century Scotland.

One is of the trial of Patrick Sellar which is the most famous one and that's the one that deals specifically with the clearances, written in quite an imaginative way through the eyes of different people looking on at the events. Another one was chief of Mackay and he looks at the kind of heyday of the Mackay Clan when Lord Reay was sufficiently influential to be a member of the Privy Council and have the right to raise troops and to be paid for that by the government and to take part with people levied from Strathnaver and indeed from the rest of Scotland. Then the religious wars in Europe, so that on one occasion he raised 3,600 people from Strathnaver and the north of Scotland to go and fight, a foreign war and in Europe on behalf of the Protestant side, because the Mackays were resolutely Protestant. Unfortunately, this Scottish contingent was soon reduced to 800 able bodied men and a handful of maimed, the rest presumably were

killed, and when he came back to look for more he found it much more difficult in these circumstances.

The other book that Ian Grimble wrote was on Rob Donn the famous poet. The poet of the Mackay Country and in it he sets the context in which Rob Donn's poems were written, and from his research for his PhD, was able to give background to the various chieftains for whom Rob Donn in a sense worked and to the events that Rob Donn was portraying in his poems. It's a very good critique, not just the poetry but of the picture that that poetry presented of 18<sup>th</sup> century Scotland. Later Grimble went on to write a comparison between the work of Burns and the works of Rob Donn. Now the two weren't exactly contemporary, but their lives did overlap and he was pointing out the difference there was between the two and that the Gallic poet Rob Donn was genuinely an unlettered man. He couldn't read his own language. He couldn't write his own language and yet he was able to compose and recite numerous poems and hold them all in his head, whereas Burns, although he's presented as the ploughman poet, had a very good education for which his father paid dearly and was equally able to write in flawless English as he was in Scots. Indeed he took Scots on board as his means of portraying his ideas rather than out of necessity. It wasn't his language, he was just able to operate in it effectively. I would say that Ian Grimble was along with perhaps Eric Richards, the very person who had done most to reveal the history of the Mackays and the history of the clearances, although of course Eric Richards, professor of History at Flinders University in Australia, concentrates much more on the clearances than Grimble did.

Sorry you were talking about Donald MacLeod for his efforts and sort of blasting the landlords and their policies that he was hounded from Sutherland.

That's correct. Yes he was evicted from here together as a young man and he was eventually expelled from Sutherland Estates in 1830. By that time he was a fully grown adult with a wife and family and was living in Bettyhill near the church. He had fallen out with the factor of the Sutherland Estate over various things, and also with the minister, the Reverend David Mackenzie and the Reverend McKenzie had refused to give him a letter stating his good character. As a result, the estate was able to somehow find a reason for expelling him. He was working in Wick as a stonemason and his family were thrown out of the house, literally thrown out of their house in Bettyhill. The doors were boarded up the windows, boarded up and they had to walk towards Strathy and were given shelter in Armadale because the people in Bettyhill and all the area in between and land owned by the Sutherlands had been told on pain of eviction that they were not to give shelter to his family. The family wound up in Thurso and are recorded in the census, in 1841, maybe earlier than that, in Thurso and then in Edinburgh and he finally emigrated to Canada and lived in in Woodstock, Ontario where *Gloomy Memories* was finally published. His grave is as far as I'm aware, unknown, although I have seen a report that someone in Canada has found his gravestone in Woodstock, but I've seen no documentary evidence of that, but descendants still exist. When this monument was opened I think it would be 1982 something like that, it's quite a long time ago I wrote a series of articles for the John O'Groats Journal on Donald MacLeod and Donald MacLeod's times and as a result of that had people from London got in contact with me to say that they were his descendants, and I have a photograph of them which they sent, which made a further article, and you know grist to the mill of a correspondent!

Reverent David Mackenzie also is there not some stories about him?

Yes,

Reverent David Mackenzie is a kind of bugbear in the clearance in that people believe that he was pro landlord and anti-crofter, anti the working people. But I don't personally think that.



There's a great deal of evidence that that's the case, because certainly later on when he was writing on the poor law reforms, he stated quite categorically in print that he felt that he had been present when the great dislocation took place, when the transfer of people from the heights here down to the to the coast took place and he stated quite categorically there that this had been to their disadvantage, and that people were worse off than they had been in the previous system. It was said that he received like payment from the state for supporting them and that his sermons were anti in favourable of the land lords.

That's why it's impossible to tell whether that was the case now, and it may well have been because the church at that time did preach putting up with things rather than trying to change them and it could be that he did do that. I just don't know, but certainly he was willing later in his life to speak up for the common people and also when the disruption of the Church of Scotland took place, which was partly a political thing and an anti-landlord thing, the new Free Church really was created cause they objected to the right of the landlord, to place the minister and he, with his entire congregation, went into the Free Church, so he wasn't a cowardly man, he wasn't person without principles, he I think believed in freedom he believed then something different and he maybe gets a bad deal and press.

The preacher who does get a good name of course, is Donald Sage, who was the preacher at Achness here and he wrote an account of the clearances and Memorabilia Domestica, it's only a small bit in Memorabilia Domestica and it wasn't actually published during his lifetime although he gets a good review from the people there's no attempt made by him to say anything at the time, and indeed it was only his family who allowed the publication of his thoughts on the clearances many years after he was dead and they had second thoughts about it, because the stuff that he said was quite explosive in that he confirmed so many of the things that Donald Macleod had said like the extent of the burning and the callousness with which people were treated, lack of regard for age and infirmity. The poisonous relationship that existed between the officers of the Sutherland Family and the common people.

Here at Syre and we're at a place which once had a very interesting assemblage of corrugated iron buildings. One of these is right behind us here. The church at Syre, now property of the Church of Scotland but built originally by the Free Church In 1891, as an offshoot of the Free Church in Altnaharra and transferred to the Church of Scotland in about 1901 because there was an ecumenical movement at that time and some free church congregations voted to join another Presbyterian Church, to form, the United Free Church and Altnaharra, including Syre here voted to do that and they came into the Church of Scotland. Then they came into the UF church and in 1929 the UF Church United with the Church of Scotland to become the new Church of Scotland as it is today. The ironic thing about this is that in Bettyhill something similar happened. Everyone in the congregation of the Free Church voted to become the United Free Church, which they did, but after a couple of years then some of the original free kirkers decided that they didn't like this church and that they wanted their own church back. Like quite a few other congregations throughout Scotland, they went to court and evicted their former minister who had gone into UF Church and moved back into the original church. The UF Church then had to build a church of its own a few yards away in Bettyhill and when the Union of the churches took place in 1929 there were two Church of Scotland congregations in Bettyhill, each with its own minister, and they eventually only United roundabout 1953. In the minutes of the presbytery it says everyone agreed exclamation mark which I think is very funny.



IMAGE 459 SYRE PATRICK SELLERS HOUSE

On my left here, there's another interesting building and that building is what's left of what is known as Patrick Sellers House. it was becoming ruinous quite recently, and was largely knocked down and rebuilt in the fashion that you see there just now, but was rather bigger than that, although nothing like the kind of style in which you would think of a person of Patrick Sellar substance would

be accommodated. of course, his main residence was over in the Golspie side it called Melly and this was just a place that he visited when visiting his Strathnaver sheep farm because he had two arable farms over in Golspie as well. If you move further round you can see the remains of a fank. You can see the remains of a very large fank, a very large sheepfold and along with that, there is a gigantic corrugated iron barn which stood until just recently. That had to be demolished in the year 2000 because it was becoming runniness but the size of it and the complexity of it illustrates the size of the sheep farm that was here. I don't know whether it was extended Patrick Sellers day, I rather doubt, but certainly the sheep farm that followed that, not Syre Farm, here was a gigantic operation on its own. Patches of Strathnaver were returned to the Strathnaver people from 1901 due to the intervention of the Congested Districts Board and the strath was divided into 29 lots leaving out of course chunks for existing sheep farming. But it was divided up into 29 lots leaving out the existing sheep farms and these were largely taken up by 1904. And then the new population of incomers to the strath, descendants of the original evictees joined the congregation here of keepers and shepherds from the sheep farm round about.

We are now at Skail about midway down Strathnaver and Skail is one of the many names in Strathnaver and along the coast which gives evidence of Norse occupancy. Because the word Skail comes from Scally in Old Norse, which means a barn, but not necessarily a barn in the sense of a storehouse but that sometimes also apply to a house of some importance. So at Skail we've moved way, way back in time. Instead of being at the place with that name, were at a place where there's the denuded remnants of a chamber tomb. This is a circular chamber tomb and out beyond this is a big circle as the curve once held in a massive mound of stone. The chamber that I'm sitting in here this is the antechamber, the front bit, Where the photographer is that would have been a passage leading in from the outside of the of the chamber and behind me as the second part in the bipartite chamber. And this is of Neolithic age. Which is as early as we get absolute evidence of settlement in the Strath here. We're talking about the time before the pyramids were a long way back in history here. This form of burial was in use in Britain for a long, long time, for centuries after centuries. These tombs were central to farming communities and were used by the same community over a long period of time as part of their burial rites. All sorts of funerary practises went on at that time, but generally speaking if you had to enter a tomb like this and it had never been disturbed you would find in this antechamber

or front chamber here would be a floor of sand and on that floor would be standing an earthenware pot in which there would be the remains of a human being, burnt bones and ash, but largely bone. And mostly the larger bones of the human body they would be contained in that earthenware pot. It is thought what they used to do was to expose the body, maybe on a raised platform similar to the Native American practise, And they would leave the body there until the birds had stripped it or rotteness had stripped it of all its flesh. And the birds taking away all the small bones, the bones of the fingers, the bones of the toes so all you would have to burn at the end would be the big bones, the bones of the legs, and backbone and so on. Hence you never find in these graves the finger bones the little bones of ear or anything like that because that's all away to the wind. And presumably the burning released the soul eventually, to wherever it was going to go.



IMAGE 460 SKAIL. JIM AND SARAH IN THE CIRCULAR CHAMBER TOMB

In the next chamber You would find perhaps packed right to the roof The remnants of hundreds, even maybe thousands of these earthenware pots, because whenever someone new, was being buried they would fling the earthenware pot into the next chamber and smash it, and then there would be a great mixture of bones, of countless individuals and shards of pottery. It's also thought that there might have been some kind of ceremony associated with this so that the medicine man, the shaman, or the priest or whatever you would call them, would be in the chamber here, when the earthenware pot was being carried in and would be drumming or singing or something in a rhythmic way. you can imagine the kind of reverberations that would recur in an enclosed area like this, So evidence from the very distant past of man's spirituality and here right in the centre of Strathnaver from a long long time ago that practising burial in

the same way as people were throughout Britain And indeed in a large part of Europe, showing that there was a unified culture even then.



IMAGE 461 STONE IS SAID TO MARK THE GRAVE OF THE RED PRIEST MEALRUBA

As far as the people of Strathnaver are concerned, this is not chamber tomb. This is a priest cell. This is called the temple and the story is that Mealrubha the Red Priest lived here when he came here first to represent the Columbian Church to try to convert the people from their heathen ways and make them into Christians. At about the same time, or very shortly afterwards the Norsemen arrived and Mealrubha was killed at the door of his cell right here by a heathen Norseman. Whether that's true or not is open to question, but there's no doubt at all that Columbus Church was active in this area for I think quite some time before the Norsemen arrived. But the heathen Norsemen did arrive and they did suppress the local church and they did takeover, and they did rule. So whether this story literally true or not no one will know. It may be that this place for the heathen

people of the time had some sort of veneration, and it's part of the history of religions that takeover from other religions that they often takeover the places of worship for the places of reverence as well. So if this was denuded even then and a temple to whatever heathen gods there where it's quite possible that the new priest swept all that away and would take up residence here and show that there were no evil spirits or none more powerful than their own God. So an interesting kind of double story at Strathnaver here at Skail. There's no doubt at all that these tombs represent a long period of settlement. A huge amount of effort, and it used to be thought that they were maybe built in a fairly short time by a large team of people, but in fact they may have been built over a long period of time by a relatively small number of people, or maybe there was some kind of united effort in creating a place for the new group having moved in, but there are numerous examples of this kind of tomb in Strathnaver both in the valley of the river Naver, and in the wider province of Strathnaver. Some of them are certainly on a par with similar passage graves, similar megalithic monuments, in the rest of the country and if they were excavated and rebuilt they would be absolutely marvelous monuments. Further down the Strath here just at the Heragree, there's a place where there were three of these right next to each other. Three great mounds and these were denuded in modern times to build walls for the new sheep farms and buildings of stone there completely gone. The buildings like this monuments like that, are common in this area showing the long extent of farming settlement here and how stable their society was.

This stone is said to mark the grave of the Red Priest Mealrubha, the priest whose dwelling the temple is said to exist just down the road there as the old chamber tomb. you can see a cross roughly incised in it and It certainly looks to me as a piece of local rock because I see a stream of migmatite in it actually. It's been pointed out to me that this is very similar stone to stones associated with a church a Chapel at Tain dedicated to St Dothach or Dufface and this very Chapel was the site of a dreadful murder carried out by Mackays from Strathnaver who came across a Mowit from Freshwick in that area. Personally they had a grudge against him and who killed him in the church and his followers burned the church and burned his followers there. This was thought to be, even by the standards of the time, going a bit far. When the young Mackay came back his two brothers took him to Inverness and he was executed. This stone came back to Strathnaver as booty from St Duffus. Near Tain, although it would be a long carry and heavy carry for a horse. More likely, perhaps it is in fact part of the ancient pre Reformation Chapel that used to stand here and the graveyard that behind us here in the grass.

In the grassy area here, there's the remains of a pre reformation graveyard various graves, marked with stones. in the height of summer just now, it's completely shrouded in grass Which, as I think Walt Whitman reminds us, grass covers all. However, when we're standing or perhaps just behind the photographer there that also used to be a Chapel a pre reformation Chapel A



IMAGE 462 MONUMENT COMMEMORATES THE RAISING OF THE 93RD SUTHERLAND HIGHLANDERS,

Roman Catholic Chapel. When the church at Bettyhill was being built. to replace this church and to take over from all the little chapels that were in the area, that's not the present church in Bettyhill, but the one that preceding it in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the people of Strathnaver carried the stones from this Chapel, in wicker baskets on their backs all the distance from here to Bettyhill, to ensure that the stone That they had worshipped in all these years would be still extant in the new church.

As far as the monument here is concerned that another folklore story about it, which is that if the waters of the Naver wherever to carry this stone away then Strathnaver would be returned to its people. it said that there is a very considerable flood sort shortly after the clearances and the stone was threatened by the river, which is just behind us here and that the Sutherland Estate workers were directed to go and prop up the riverbank and make sure that the waters didn't reach the stone, Strathnaver was re populated in any case, whatever happened to the stone it in much smaller numbers than before. But certainly an ancient Christian marker.

This monument commemorates the raising of the 93rd Sutherland Highlanders, very famous infantry regiment, which served with the British

Army for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was raised in 1800 at Syre 4 or 5 miles south of here and the plaque marking It was marking its raising was transferred here when the new Strathnaver Hall was built after the re population of Strathnaver. The 93rd served in numerous different areas of conflict in the world in the Crimea, in the Napoleonic Wars and South Africa all over the world and were famous for their resolution in the face of the enemy, and in particular for their participation in the Battle of Balaclava, where they formed the thin redline tipped with steel, which kept the Russian cavalry at Bay. They were famous, in fact, for never retreating. But on one occasion when they were in India, they took part of the relief of Lucknow. The famous relief of Lucknow. After the siege on this occasion, when they were being mustered for the attack of Lucknow to drive out the Indian mutineers, they were there with a number of other regiments in a camp and sent out a patrol into the surrounding area. Within a few minutes the patrol was seen to be fleeing back towards their own lines. Much to the amusement of the other regiments, because the reason that they were fleeing was that they had encountered the hornets' nest which one of them took a swipe at with a sword, and these Hornets had pursued them with vigor and had found their way up their kilts and things like this. This led to a long correspondence in regimental magazines in which the other regiments took the mickey out of the 93rd and the 93rd, just couldn't see the joke at all. But they were a famous regiment. They were an honorable regiment. They were people who were well disciplined. They hardly ever needed to be shot or whipped or anything like that unlike the rest of the British Army, in which discipline had to be maintained with extreme force, they were decent sort of God fearing people. They even took their own ministers with them, and after the Free Church was formed their men formed their own kind of congregations of the Free Church within the 93rd while the officers remained in the Church of Scotland. The first raising of the 93rd in 1800 they were able to raise a regiment over 1000 men 1200 men to put overseas from Invergordon. Within a few days as things went on and men, returning from these regiments found their land had been taken from them and their homes had been destroyed it became more difficult to recruit people in this area although even towards the end of the century there was still a large number of highlanders from Sutherland and people from Strathnaver in the ranks of the 93<sup>rd</sup>.

We are standing in the courtyard just now of another form of chamber tomb. Another form of Neolithic megalithic passage grave. This is a long Cairn and it's also a horn cairn in the sense that there's a large courtyard area at this end of the cairn. Now, this particular one is unusual in that its unique in the north of Scotland through having orthostats in the kind of facade of the courtyard, orthostats, these large stones that you can perhaps see, tall uprights and they are architectural features really, as well as being decorated they are not purely decorative. There's



IMAGE 463 FORM OF NEOLITHIC MEGALITHIC PASSAGE GRAVE. THIS IS A LONG CAIRN

a local legend that goes with them or is associated with the two largest ones, which is that under one of them you've got treasure buried and under another one you have disease so of course everyone is scared to dig them up in case they get the wrong one, but this again is one of these passage graves. Although if you were to crawling through the passage the chamber is much smaller than the chamber of the tomb at Skail.

In Strathnaver there's one a little bit further up by Skelpick than this Skelpick long cairn, and it's by far more massive than this just as we're saying at Skail the cairn would have been central to a farming landscape 4 to 6000 years ago as a very very ancient farming landscape. At that time, sea level was quite significantly higher than it is today and would be up roughly at the level of the road here, so would be instead of being on the edge of a river here near to the small river flowing by, there would be at the quite extensive arm of the sea. The sea would be much, much closer to us than it is today. Looking around here you could see that there's a very distinct concordance of summits. In fact, looking at the summit of that river terrace across there, you could actually see on it the remains of other buildings, and these are circular houses these are all hut circles and one of them is very very large indeed and virtually all the river terraces at this kind of level, in Skelpick have remnants of some kind on them, so it's been a very densely populated area this in times past.

There are three distinct levels in this landscape. There's one at about 10 feet above current top of the tide one at about 40 feet and one in just over 100 feet and we can see all three of them from here. That's the 40 foot one there The lower level of the flood plain of the Naver is roughly at the 10 foot level, and then perhaps higher up here roughly the breakers slope between the two the very steep hill face there and the bracken covered lower slopes There's 100 foot level. There's not so much of it left, but you can see it very distinctly in some places, and maybe on another day will go and have a look at the where it can be absolutely clearly seen and where it is in fact being used for cultivation to this day. three distinct river levels, and each of these marks time when the sea level stood still long enough for the river to cut distinct flood plain in some cases a very wide one, so the river then is cut down in the 12,000 years since Strathnaver was emptied of ice, the river is cut down through 100 feet of sediments and there have been three standstill periods when it's been able to carve notches in the sediments and it's on these notches these bench areas these terraces that man has made his home through time.

If you want to look along the top of Naver rock over there, you can see further evidence of glaciation, and that if you look along the rock top you'll see occasionally sticking up little protuberances is and these are erratic boulders All the way from the top of Naver Rock, their right to sea. In fact you could see another one just exactly opposite this. Here these are all boulders that have been deposited by the ice, so presumably the ice was at the level of these tops there and able to carry along and push along boulders of that size. And then leave them behind when it retreated. So we're talking about massive movement of a huge tongue of ice, a massive glacier running down here from the ice dome inland that we saw and running out to pass them long past the mouth of the current mouth of Naver to the Naver mouth perhaps 40 miles offshore at what's now, approximately the edge of the continental shelf. So a dramatically different landscape here. 100,000 years ago, and when that's constantly changing in time in response to changing sea levels and changing climatic conditions.

In the Neolithic landscape would there have been a lot more trees and natural sorts of Birch and Hazel cover?

I think that the Neolithic landscape might have had rather better species than that because the climate in Neolithic times rather better than it is today and that they were able to farm higher up the hillsides than we are just now. The species that would have been growing here would have been, there would have been Birch and Hazel, but there might also have been trees like

oak which you don't get growing here naturally today, although they will grow if they are planted. These people would have a demand for timber and would be cutting it down with stone axes and stone axes are quite effective although they made seem primitive to us they are quite able to reduce forest area and there must have been a lot of people around here because there's a lot of these monuments and these monuments can hold many many dead people over a long period of time. A fairly dense population in all these peripheral areas at that time and reflecting a very reasonable climate, I think, and also creating a demand for timber a demand, which went on right on into to almost the present day, but was still quite great in the Iron Age, because we have evidence of smelting of iron here and of charcoal burning and all that kind of thing. So timber for most of time here, but beginning to run out, running out perhaps mediaeval times, late mediaeval times and very scarce by the time of the clearances, so that people had to look for bog timber to make the crux of their houses. They couldn't get big enough bits of timber locally to serve as kind of strengthening bits in their tough house.

It seems that looking at monuments with lots of evidence of how people treated their dead, but there's not a lot of evidence of how people actually lived.

No, that's absolutely true, but fairly confident that these people were farmers, that they were growing crops like oats and also bear, which is a form of barley. That they were exploiting the sea and I don't think that kitchen middens have been found from that age in Strathnaver, but nobody has really looked for that sort of stuff. If you were to look for it then you would you would probably find it. It's unlikely that they were very well off the evidence from the large number of bones that have been found throughout Britain is that these people didn't live very long. Their stature was quite considerably less than ours, and there they suffered from the kind of illnesses that people still suffer from here. Rheumatism and arthritis and things like that brought on by cold and damp conditions and their teeth were ground down by having to eat meal that had been ground and rough with rough stones and so on, so it certainly wasn't a kind of Neolithic utopia or anything like that, but they probably lived well enough. They knew nothing else, of course, and they had time to build these monuments and to reflect on what life is all about and wonder what would happen to them and the next world so you know they were fully human people. Stone Age people weren't stupid and lacking technology they had technologies of a kind and they were able to do remarkable number of things with the stuff they had. So these were people just like us making the best of the environment that they were in and much closer to that environment than we could ever be but absolutely human like you and me.

We are at Achanlochay which is one of the medium sized settlements in Strathnaver. The largest would have as many as maybe 30 households in them, and the smallest only one or two, but this one Achanlochay had nine settlements when it was visited by Cosmo Faulkner one of the factors of Sutherland Estate in 1810, with him was Benjamin Meredith who was mapping the whole area for Sutherland Estates with a view to improvement and he produced some absolutely marvelous maps of Strathnaver, which are available in the National Library of Scotland in the map room of the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh. Achanlochay At that time had, quite a like all these pre clearance villages, an area of in byland enclosed by a wall It had arable ground Achanlochay was a little bit different in the sense arable land was over On the other side of on this side of the Naver, but on the other side of what's described by Captain John Henderson, who also visited here while composing his book history of An account of the Agriculture of Sutherland and Caithness. He described as a wet loan and underwood, and at the just down here the other side of the road you can see exactly that to this day and the fine green that's over there. That's the arable land of Achanlochay. It's actually very good quality. Subject to in addition and wet conditions and one of the things with Cosmo Faulkner said, was that the people with trifling expense could have prevented this happening by simply building a wall keeping the water out, but that was never done and still hasn't been



done so the river still floods that area, although it's now used as a reseed park by a local crofter. Achanlochry was cleared in 1819 and the third great clearance of Strathnaver this time factor in charge was a guy called Francis Suter and he in this clearance, although it had been banned by Sutherland Estate made use of fire and once again got the estate and very bad odor in the newspapers and got a very sharp reboot from James Lock who was the kind of overseer of all these estates, Marquis of Stafford. Not to terrify the people allegedly, but to ensure that they didn't return that they couldn't come back to resettle the place. The people who left here eight out of the nine actually it had gone down by the time that the clearance took place. I think there were seven families here then, but six out of the seven went and settled locally, mostly at Strathy Point, and one was said to have gone to the colonies. But again, that could be traced, through the Sutherland papers and their names and so on easily found out because in Benjamin Meredith's maps, there's usually a section which he draws on the actual map, listing the names of the tenants and the extent of their possessions. And he divides their divides the area that's available to them up into inby land and shows that by coloured key. Its sophisticated mapping by an expert mapper in that time. But the small interesting area which you could scarcely notice unless it was interpreted for you could walkover here and see nothing quite easily and yet there's an awful lot to be seen, and the same is true throughout this area.

There's a small corn kiln over there, yes. Tell us a little of that

All these villagers had corn kilns. A corn kiln is absolutely necessary if you're having any kind of subsistence economy, because that was never really dry enough here to produce fully dried off corn of any kind. Oats and your bear had to be dried. One reaped it then thrashed it the cord kiln was a means to do this. It consisted of a fire and an indirect flu, which put hot gases from the fire under where the corn was positioned and heated up and drove the moisture off. It should then be hard and dry and suitable for milling, usually in in mills quite close by and owned by the people themselves. One of the things that brought Sutherland Estate into a lot of trouble with its tenants after the clearance was that they forced people to come to big mills that they had built themselves like the Swordley mill and people had to travel a long distance to get their corn ground. Whereas before they were using type of mill called a Click Mill, which is characteristic more of the Northern Isles and which has a horizontal grinding stone and kind of paddle wheel underneath and usually on a very small scale there is one near here in the Skelpick Burn just a few metres away from here and another one at Kirtomy which was looked at and has a little book written about it but. Milling was a crucial part of these people's life and their lifestyle required the dry grain in order for it to be possible. The corn and would be spread out on it and then the fire is over here somewhere and flu leads through underneath. We get kind of central heating, something like that.

Were they a fire hazard?

Often caught fire and had to be built quite far away from the house

The church yard at Clachan at Bettyhill and Clachan is situated right on the edge of Farr Bay. Between us and the bathers there is a large group of sand dunes and to the other side, there's a cliff which used to be a sea cliff but now separated from the sea by massive sand dunes and also by underlying of glacial material. So it's quite an interesting place from the viewpoint of dune morphology. If you look around you can see kind of common levels in the landscape, as we've seen in Strathnaver, and these are raised beaches whereas in the river valley they would be called terraces. There are other similar levels and it's on these that the small fields and crofts of Clachan have really established for a long, long time.

Right behind us here is absolute evidence that settlement has been in existence here for a long time, the famous Farr Stone which dates from roughly the 8<sup>th</sup> century. A Pictish stone but it's

from the Christianized Pictish Kingdom and consequently its main emblem is a cross. The Pictish religious symbol stone here probably marks this as a place of worship going back many, many centuries to the Colomian era and would have been perhaps a gathering place for worship to take place in the open air.

Just behind the Farr Stone, there's the church. This is a relatively modern church by Christian standards in Strathnaver, and this one was built in 1774 at least so it's claimed in the First Statistical Account entrance by the Reverend James Dingle, who was minister here in 1791, when that account was written. He says that the church was built here in 1774 and the manse was renovated the following year. When the church here was built the Reverend Munroe, Master Munroe was the minister. He'd been minister from 1753 until James Dingle started up. The Church of that time could accommodate hundreds of people. It's really quite a place inside, but it isn't quite such a place as was as when it was first built because it used to have gallery's inside, and these are no longer in the kind of configuration that they were in at the time. This church was last worshiped in the 1950's until the congregation here amalgamated with another Church of Scotland congregation, which existed, within a few 100 yards of here at what used to be the United Free Church. They both joined together and when that agreement was reached, shown in the parish records, it says everyone agreed exclamation mark. And that is perhaps an unusual thing for people to all agree.

But the church here in the history of the church here goes back well beyond 1774 when this one was built. There's evidence of church having been built here in 1223 and that church as a contribution towards its construction, the people of Strathnaver actually carried the stones from the Chapel at Shire, down here in wicker baskets on their backs so that the remnants of the old Chapel would be built into the walls of the new church. Their place of worship with them right down here. Can imagine that walking down the miles it is from Syre, no roads, nothing like that carrying great stones to go into this construction so It has a lot of history in it.

Come back to the Farr Stone here. The local legend has it that this stone didn't originate here at all, but that the boat came into the bay and the next day the stone was there and had been erected by the people who came off the boat. The Reverend James Dingwall in his account in the in the first statistical account 1791 says that a Dane of distinction is buried here, but that's probably absolute rubbish because Danes of distinction, although they did come into this place not long after their stone was configured unlikely to be buried in beside a Pictish Christian stone, although these stones certainly have been used as supertall marks. The most likely purpose of this stone is like a stain glass window or something like that. That's to illustrate the worthiness of God to the illiterate, that kind of thing.

The Church of St. Columba for most of recorded history was the main Church of this area the Church of the Parish of Farr and has been closed now for more than fifty years and has since become Strathnaver Museum. The fact that it did become the Museum was largely due to the interest of the historian Ian Grimble, who came to Bettyhill in the early 1950s and took a great interest in what went on here and what is going on here since he died in Bettyhill. A few years ago, but in the interim, among many other things, wrote three books about the province of Strathnaver. That's the larger province of Strathnaver, stretching from Reay right across to Eddrachillis. The huge area of Mackay Country and also was instrumental in the founding of Strathnaver Museum. He also took an interest in the Clan Mackay Society, and they too have a big interest in the Museum and visit here from time to time and have reunions and so on, and have made a significant contribution to the exhibits within the Museum. But obviously this being Sutherland and this being Strathnaver, one of their main exhibits in the museum or one of the main interest of the Museum is the clearances the Sutherland Clearances, which took

place in this vicinity in the years between about 1806 and 1819 and perhaps the main thing that would attract people to the museum itself.

The building behind this is the manse of the Church of Scotland. Here the manse that was once associated with the Church of Saint Columba here in Bettyhill and is referred to in Gloomy Memories because Donald MacLeod alleges that it was built for the Revenant McKenzie, who was who he also alleges, was a puppet of the of the Sutherland regime at the time of the clearances. The reverend McKenzie comes out rather better than that in the longer term history, because he did at the disruption in 1843 take his church and his parishioners into the Free Church and became a Free Church person and he spoke out at the time of famine in 1831 on behalf of the people. He declared that they were much worse off than they had been before the clearances and that he had witnessed this with his own eyes and therefore seems a little unlikely that he was quite so much in their pockets as it would seem. However more recently, the manse here has become become initially a kind of bed and breakfast establishment that was split into flats and occupied by tourists during the summer, but then more recently became the Farr Bay Inn and special dispensation had to be sought to allow spirit liquors to be sold with a bit of controversy at the time, but now generally accepted.

This is actually a very interesting landscape from the of point of view of a geographer or geomorphologist, because the whole area that the church is built on here and that the manse is built on, and indeed all the kind of croft land roundabout here, is all relatively new ground because it's been created at the time of the last glaciation. Prior to that, the cliff that's in front of us here, that cliff that stretches right along here would have been a sea cliff. The sea would have been coming right in here instead of ending up a few hundred yards away in Farr Bay be coming right in here and carving that still vertical cliff from that very hard rock. In geomorphological terms that's called a fossil cliff, not because it contains the remains of all the animals or anything like that, but because it's being fossilized in time. By being separated from the agent that created the agent that created it, being of course the sea beating against it for millions of years. The ground that we're standing on here consists of fluvial glacial material, glacial drift, and outwash covered by dune material covered by dunes blown in from the sea when sea level changed in the past and it's created this. Quite a large area of ground which has been put to good use by crofters over the years and also around here by the various ministers because we are standing in the graveyard here all around is the glebe.

And looking further around, you can imagine in glacial times a little tongue of glacier coming down through the braes there down through the sandy braes and further round towards us here there's a great meltwater channel that's cut by melting ice coming from the ice inland ice cap not far away In those times. Sure an interesting little bit of landscape if you're into that.

Moving on to the mouth of the River Naver.

Into my left here is a 19<sup>th</sup> century ice house built to process salmon caught at the salmon fishing station on the mouth of the River Naver. The ice for the ice house used to be cut from local lochs using axes in the winter and brought down here with the horse and cart and then tipped in a hatch in the roof. They used to tip it in until the building inside was absolutely full to the very top of ice and close all the doors and close the hatches and then leave it until they needed it later in the season. By the time that they came around to actually using the ice, then you could open the door here and go into the ice house and you could walk right round the great mass of ice which had frozen into gigantic a lump in the middle. And then they picked off with ice picks what they needed for the days catch and used it to fill in on top of the fish boxes which were sent off to Billingsgate, usually taking to the railhead at Forsinard or Thurso leaving here on a horse and cart and travelling all that distance by horse and cart until they came to the train.

I'll tell you more about the building and then we're going to the fishing, yeah?

Behind that there's. There's a house that used to be occupied by the manager of the fishing, and beyond that there's the house that they used to keep the cobsles in and all the nets and that kind of thing. And behind this building there's a kind of add on, which is called the boil house, and that goes back to an earlier time when they were processing salmon in a different way. They were kind of three stages in salmon processing here. The first one was when the salmon was salted and put in wooden barrels, and these were exported by smack from here. There used to be a mast on top of the hill just directly behind me here about a couple of 100 yards away and there was a system of signals that they used so that when the smack was passing by along the North Coast here, visiting other salmon fishing stations, then if they had the flag up for fish then it would come in and pick up the barrels or more often actually they had to put them off at Port Snowy, which is just over the hill here a very, very precipitous go where they kept another cobalt and that cobalt was used for transporting the barrels out to the smack and that smack would take them right round down the East Coast and the salmon used to end up as far away as the markets of Paris.



IMAGE 464 19TH CENTURY ICE HOUSE BETTYHILL

After that they went on to another system and that was when the boil house came into being. There were tin smiths here and they had to solder up tins of salmon. The tins were not like the things you get today with John West salmon which are about three inches across. They were all different sizes because they were made on the spot and they are quite large and you could get a lot of salmon each tin. They used the solder right here in Bettyhill, and then sent again to distant markets. The salmon was boiled in that case and put into the tin, and the tin was soldered up, and that preserved it until it could get wherever it was going to so that was the three stages. First of all, exported in wooden barrels, then in tins, and then finally fresh when the railhead came here and off to Billingsgate and going off to Billingsgate continued right on until comparatively recently and it's only in 1992 that the salmon fishing here stopped. They used to impose a quota by then on the number of fish that they could take from the river at the end of the salmon fishing system here was 3000 a year, but in the 1960s far greater catches were taken right here on the mouth of the Naver, and in one particular day they had 997 I think it was

something like that number nearly 1000. They didn't quite make the 1000, but coming on for 1000 fish in one days take. In 1976 they took over 700 fish off one pool in the Naver when the river was very low so salmon fishing has been big business here for a long, long time. The salmon fishing station here isn't either the first or the only one, because further up the river but still quite near the mouth there used to be a wall built right across the river and within that wall there were two gaps and in each gap was a wooden fish trap called a crib and there are places in rivers all over Scotland called curve or crumbs and that's what it means. It's a wooden fish trap.

Wooden fish traps were the property of the estate, but they were maintained by whoever had the lease of the fisheries at that time and used to be inspected on a regular basis by officials of the estate. The Duke of Sutherland actually visited here one time and that's recorded inside the large building there. There's beautiful kind of coper plate writing, but in chalk on a beam that's a record of their visit. The rich and famous were getting here even before the days of the landed gentry, indulging in sport. Nowadays the river is devoted to sporting use. There isn't any sweep net fishery and all the estates all these estates around Scotland are dedicated to finish all forms of commercial fishing of salmon.

But although the salmon of declined hugely over the years, it doesn't seem to have been because of commercial fishing. That's because of some much greater and more powerful changes taking place generally and maybe environmental as much as it is caused by man, although you would think that taking 1000 fish a day would have an effect, and it probably did a bit, but Jock Mackay, who was the last in this said that when he was at the fishing there were as many salmon left when they finished fishing as there had been when they started. I see that I and I think it was true. There are times on the Naver here when I came here first thirty five years ago, that you can just about walk across the river on salmon and it just doesn't happen anymore. Whether it ever will have no idea, but certainly being a productive place here for centuries as far as that's concerned.

Looking across the Torrisdale Bay here, which is interesting in that that's Norse place name. Like many of the names here, but you could see the mouth of another river the River Borgie and the salmon fishing station here used to maintain a station on it as well. The same form of fishery the sweep net. We look more closely at how that was carried out in a few minutes.

Now I'm standing in what remains of the shelter that used to be used here by the salmon fishing crew. There were five men in a salmon fishing crew and one of them used to be up here all the time and he used to watch the river and he could actually see against the sign of a river bottom a shoal of fish coming or he could see the movement on the surface of the water, and the cobalt was down on a strip of sandy beach just write down here sitting ready with two men at the oars and with the net in the stern. As soon as he saw the fish coming, he would shout row in Gaelic and they would set off with the cobalt around the fish right round in a circle back in and then they would haul them in on the beach here and that was a sweep net fishery. They were doing exactly the same thing at the other side there on the Borgie but then this little concrete building here used to have an old cobalt overturned on top of it or in later years a corrugated iron roof and the whole crew used to be sitting there waiting for something to happen. And then they would man the boat. From there when the tide was getting right, and the spy man would be sitting here watching and watching and every time he gave the shout off they went.

Just off to the north here we have an island called actually has two names Ellen Neave and Coomb Islands and that means the island of St Columba and Ellen Neave means island of the church land. Although there are no remains of any kind no remains on the surface of any buildings or anything like that on the island place name evidence, both on the island itself and in the adjacent mainland illustrating Colombian ministry is being administered. Being present

there missionaries from the Church of Columba being in that area and local legends and support that. So it's further evidence that Christianity has been a very long term influence in this area, and that's probably one of the places where it's started. For example, on the shore opposite the island, there's a strip of land and on the shore side, there is a hill, that's called the People's Noel and allegedly. The Columbian priests when they came there first, they used to stand on the island and presumably in stentorian voice used to preach to the people on the opposite shore. So that's interesting folk tale and an interesting assemblage of place names.

Looking across the river from here across the mouth of the Naver we can see Naver Rock, which is quite interesting from a landscape point of view and a classic glaciated valley. This U shape that's got a very steep sidewall, a flat bottom and a steep wall on the other side. If you look along the top of the rock there, then you'll see every here and there large boulders sticking up and these are classic examples of glacial erratic's. These are the patched blocks that you read about the geography textbooks and these have been dumped there by the movement of ice in the past. The whole landscape here is being created by ice one way or another. The part we are standing on here as a river terrace that marks out of previous sea level. The sea would be right up to this level and the river that time or the out wash from the glacier at that time would be dumping material into the sea there and forming this sort of terrace. As you can see, all up and down the Strath.

Looking further up the valley here you can see a little knoll just nearest here, little kind of headland sticking out into the river. At that point there was once a big house at the foot of many of the valleys in North Sutherland. Here you have big houses, you have the big houses in Melvich Big House in Armadale. There used to be a big House of Strathy, although it's been carried away to build houses with and there also used to be a Big House in Bettyhill here and that was the location of it right there.

Mackay Clan have a long war like tradition. This goes back right to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century's and perhaps the most famous Mackay of all was first Lord Reay for raising regiments in this area for service and the religious wars in Europe. At one time raising 3000 men for the British, not for the British Army, but the servers, mercenaries in Europe. Right at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Countess of Sutherland, the same countess who is responsible for the clearances raised regiments in this area. The first recruiting point was at Syre and within the valley of Strathnaver 600 men were recruited for the regiment that became the 93rd Regiment of the British Army. Very famous regiment. Renowned for never retreating.

Military service continued to be a factor in this area, and when the nation has called on people to volunteer then people from Strathnaver and indeed all the peripheral areas of Britain have been among those volunteering to go. The evidence of that is here on this War Memorial, which is now in the centre of Bettyhill, but used to be about quarter of a mile away just opposite the old primary school where the names that are on here, people belonging to these names used to go to school and quite a few people on the War Memorial here from the coast. People here were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for the nation a nation that did very little for them.



IMAGE 465 BETTYHILL WAR MEMORIAL

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When the footnote acknowledges “This is the information submitted by a government-sponsored project.” It is some of the work carried out by the Special Programs Department of Caithness District Council under the sponsorship of the Man Power Services Commission and later by the Caithness and Sutherland Training Unit is included and they have given permission for it to be used. 1973 -1987.

## About the Writer.

In 1981 Ronald Lansley left Edinburgh, became Self-employed, moved to Balnakeil Craft village with his partner Gwen and developed a small craft enterprise. Studio 17, a creative craft enterprise working as a cottage industry producing a range of functional art and craft work with an indigenous local partiality. In 1999 they relocated their business enterprise to Sangomore Durness.

Since involvement in community projects Ronnie has been responsible for obtaining grants for projects in excess of one million pounds and developing and initiating budgets within projects. A synopsis of Ronnie's relevant activities that have allowed the collection of material for this book are listed below.

1981 – 1986. Actively participated in the attempt to establish a long term Multi-functional Community Cooperative in Balnakeil Craft Village.

1990-1994. Member North West Sutherland Action Group for KLB Secondary School

1993-1999. Chairman Durness Primary School Board.

1993-1999. Treasurer and member of Durness Primary School Parent Teachers Association.

1993- 1998. Community Secretary of the Durness MoD liaison group.

1994. Founder member Durness Local Studies Group.

1996 – 2009. Secretary and parental leader of Durness Youth Club.

1997-2019 Local Correspondent for the Northern Times supplying reports and information weekly to the Durness Colum.

1998 -2018. Member of Durness village Hall Committee.

1999 – 2010. Established the company and registered the charity, Secretary Director of Durness Development Group Limited.

1999 Wrote and published a book *Durness Past and Present*.

2000- 2006 Member of the Arts festival committee arranging an annual weekend event of food and music.

2000- 2010 Member local committee organised and administrated the Cape Wrath Challenge week – Annual event.

2000 Treasurer Durness Gardeners.

2000- 2021. Established the company and registered the charity, director, secretary Mackay Country Community Trust Limited.

2001. Parent Member Kinlochbervie High School Board.

2004-2006. Chairman Kinlochbervie High School Board.

2005 Community advisor with principle objective: to develop community acquisition of forestry land for North Sutherland Community Forrest Trust.

2005 -2006 Consultant to facilitate the participation of North Sutherland Community Forest Trust in the rural development pilot project, Woods Work, with a view to achieving and stimulating community woodland based economic activity.

2006 – 2010. Durness representatives on NWH Geopark steering group.

2007 -2019. Employed part time. 20hrs week job share, in community development for North West Sutherland with the Council of Voluntary Services' North supporting and promoting volunteers in the community and voluntary sector.

2007. Community Renewable consultant, 1 year researching potential renewable energy projects for Durness.

2008 – 2011. Secretary and elected member of Durness Community Council

2011 -2013. Designed and secured funding and Project management for 2 heritage schemes with Strathnaver Museum and Mackay Country.

2013. Co author with Courtney McKay Stevens of *Strong Highland Women, stories from Durness and Balnakeil*.

2014 – 2020. Member Local Area Partnership for the Highland LEADER Programme.

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