



The Kelp Industry

It is said that in the early years of the 19th century, which were the last kelping years, that the profits from Hebridean kelp amounted to £70,000 a year and that in the three years from 1808 to 1811, Lord Macdonald and Clan Ranald each received a new amount of £14,000 a year, but after about 1812 prices began to fall.

It is also said that Seaforth derived much money from kelp in Lewis, and that on one occasion his factor in Lewis took £11,000 from the Island. That was a large sum of money then and we feel that the rent money might have been included in that sum, particularly in view of the fact that Seaforth was somewhat late in realising the potential of kelp.

Kelping was carried out wherever there were good kelping shores in the Highlands and Islands, beginning in the Orkneys about 1722, but not the Hebrides until the 1730s when Mr Hugh Macdonald of North Uist brought over an Irishman to teach the people the method of kelping. Kelping came to Lewis on a small scale in the 1770s but it was much later before it was fully developed.

The Seaforth proprietor of Lewis was late in realising the enormous profits that could be made from the seaweed resources on his Lewis estate, and therefore the exploitation of the seaweed resources of Lewis was left to enterprising tacksmen like Robert Weir of Calbost and others.

Certainly kelping was carried on in Park as in other places in Lewis, from an early date, as is evidenced by the lists of known kelp workers in almost all the townships of Park.

However, the Lewis proprietors' so called improvement plan already referred to, set out to remedy the estate's omission to exploit the full potential of the kelp resources of the estate, and the first step towards a complete takeover of all kelping activities in Lewis was the removal of the tacksman class who stood in the way of the takeover plan and in turn that step involved the introduction of a new system of land tenure for the small landholders who had hitherto held their land from the tacksman.

The new system of land tenure called crofting, involved the small landholders, who were also the kelp workers in a direct tenurial relationship with the landlord and in that way the landlord was in full control of a large potential workforce for the exploitation of the kelp industry. Legal rights to the seaweed resources on which the kelp industry was based were also established by the landlords and in that way the estate controlled the raw material for the kelp industry and they made sure that the tenants did not encroach on the seaweed beds reserved for the proprietor's kelp, nor exceed the quantities of seaweed allocated to them for the fertiliser purposes.

The term kelp is sometimes applied collectively to seaweed but it is also used to describe the ashes of seaweed when burnt in a kiln. The ashes of seaweed yield alkali which was used extensively in the manufacture of soap and glass etc. in the 18th and 19th centuries and therefore kelping came to be an important industry in the Hebrides at that time.

The production of kelp was carried out by small tenants who cut the seaweed with sickles and piled it into a kiln built of loose stones on the beach, where the seaweed was stirred continuously with long irons until it became a liquefied mass. It was then left for a long time to cool and harden, and was covered to protect it from the rain, until it was ready for shipment to the southern market.

The work was very arduous and it went on day and night during the short season of part of the summer, when the whole family, young and old, male and female, were engaged in the work. The average earnings of the whole family for the season was said to be about £7 in the best years and therefore very much less than that in the average of poor years. It was the hardest labour that the people engaged in during the whole year and it was at that time that they were worse fed, because their potatoes and meal etc. was mostly consumed, and they were therefore often obliged to take meal out on account, against the kelp money with which they hoped to pay their land rent. In that way they often sank deeper into the master's debt.

Rev John Cameron, Parish minister at Stornoway, writing for the statistical account in 1833 stated that, "the toil of cutting, drying burning the seaweed, and watching the pot day and night, until the ware is converted into boiling lava, is terrible, and would require extraordinary wages. This process, if not injurious to health is ruinous to the eyes".

About 40 creels of seaweed were needed to make one cwt of kelp. Between 15 and 24 tons of seaweed, depending on how wet it was, was needed to make one ton of kelp, and the landlord demanded 2 cwt extra to every 20 cwt ton of kelp, in order to offset any impurities that might be in the finished product.

In the early period the small tenants who also worked on kelping were at the mercy of the tacksman from whom they held their land under the run-rig system and to whom they were all obliged to sell their kelp at whatever price the tacksman offered.

After the departure of the tacksman, the landlord had a complete monopoly of all stages of production and marketing of kelp, because he had control of the raw material and the labour, and as there was no competition he could fix the price for the finished product. Moreover, as the kelp producing tenants held their land direct from the landlord he was able to fix the land rent so high as to enable him, in a subtle way, to provide for part of his kelping wage bill, and there was no provision in law for the crofters to appeal against rent raking. In that way competition was stifled and in the circumstances as might be expected, the landlord kept the lion's share of the kelp profits and the crofters were reduced to the status of helper's service vessels of the estate.

In order to expand production a plentiful supply of labour was needed because the kelping season was short, and in the years around 1800 many people emigrated from the crofting areas, and the landlords became alarmed at the loss of labour, because they felt the production of kelp would suffer if the high rate of emigration continued.

The landlords therefore used their considerable influence in the British Parliament in order to pass a bill to stop emigration but as soon as the kelp industry declined the restrictions on emigration were relaxed because the presence of too many small holders in the highlands and islands was an embarrassment to the landholders since they could not make a profit out of them, and the clearances in Park and elsewhere were renewed again at that time.

In the early period the mainland proprietors who did not have good kelping shores shipped their evicted tenants to overseas territories while Island proprietors and others with good kelping shores encouraged more and more people to live on a limited amount of land along the coastline because kelping was a labour intensive industry and it was necessary to have a large potential workforce of crofters and their families on small uneconomic landholdings, in order to force them to supplement their meagre income from the land, by having to work on the dirty heavy and unpleasant work of kelping.

The crofts of Park were surely among the smallest and poorest in the island and although there is hardly any arable land in Park, no allowance was made in the size of the crofts for the absence of arable land, and therefore the crofts are quite inadequate to sustain a family on their own, and it seems the improvement plan certainly envisaged the crofts of Park as part time to retain a kelping work force in the various villages.

In the early years of the 19th century the price of kelp went up as a result of the war with France but stabilised at a reasonably good average price of about £10 a ton from about 1812 to 1822, as compared with the earlier peak years when the price was £20 - £22 a ton.

Before the Lewis proprietor got round to implementing his improvement plan and dismissing the tacksman and lotting the Island under the new crofting land tenure, not only were the best years of kelping lost to him but almost the whole of the really profitable years were gone before he was in position to exploit the seaweed resources.

Between 1822 and 1825 various import duties on competitive commodities were reduced such as the duty on Barilla from Spain, which yielded four times as much alkali as kelp, and that caused kelp prices to drop very considerably to about £5 a ton and although Lochs was still producing 100 tons a year in 1830, the price had fallen below £5 a ton by then, and there was very little profit in kelp for the landowners after the early 1820s.

By 1840 the trade was considered almost valueless. One source quotes 1820 as the best kelping year for the Lewis proprietor when his income from the exertion of crofting kelp workers was £3,000.

Although crofters income from kelping was small and the work arduous the people welcomed the opportunity to earn a little money, and the loss of income from kelping together with the poor fishing seasons followed later by the failure of the potato crop as a result of blight in the 1840's, was keenly felt by the people and there were conditions of economic depression in Lewis when the island changed hands in 1844.

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See also Hebridean Connections, for information about kelp-making in Uig:
<http://www.hebrideanconnections.com/Details.aspx?subjectid=40719>

For information about kelp-making in Harris:
<http://www.hebrideanconnections.com/Details.aspx?subjectid=58362>