



[Introduction to Pairc]

The Park or Pàirc Peninsula is the name given to that part of the Parish of Lochs on the Island of Lewis, off the west coast of Scotland that is situated in the southwest corner of the Island, next to Harris. The Peninsula is almost cut-off from the rest of the Island by two long arms of the sea, known as Loch Erisort to the north and Loch Seaforth to the south. The access to the peninsula by land is over a narrow neck of land, a mile wide, between the villages of Balallan and Airidhbhuach at the heads of these two long sea lochs.

The physical features of the area are a landscape of hills and valleys and numerous fresh water lochs, as well as a coastline indented with many arms of the sea, usually referred to as sea lochs, which together with the fresh water lochs in the area gives the Parish the name of Lochs.

The Park Peninsula extends to 68,000 acres, two thirds of which was cleared of crofters and the Park Sheep Farm established in their place. Later on, in 1886, the Park Sheep Farm was converted into a sporting deer park. The ten crofting townships that survived the clearances occupy the remaining third of the peninsular. The whole area of Lewis extends to 404,180 acres.

The rocks of the Western Isles are among the oldest in the world and were first described by geologists working in the Western Isles as 'Lewisian Gneiss'. A blanket of peat 'mòine', of which sometimes the deposits are very deep, covers the Island. Dried peat is commonly used for fuel in the Islands, and the traditional method of cutting peat is by hand, using a peat iron 'tairisgeir'.

Cutting the peats takes place in the spring and is almost a social occasion with neighbours helping each other. Once cut, the slabs of peat, about 10 inches by 8 inches by 2 inches thick, are left on the ground to dry for 2-3 weeks and then lifted and stored together in small heaps called 'rudhànean', and left to dry in the sun and wind for another few weeks. Cutting the peats involves the whole family taking part at various stages, and taking the peats home to build into stacks for winter fuel is also a social occasion often involving the neighbours.

The villages are set out in strips of land known as crofts, which in Lewis usually only extends to 5 acres each, and the village boundary wall encloses the whole village. The area outside the village boundary wall is common grazing, to which everyone in the village has free access. The village peats are usually cut on the common grazing, which is regulated by a Grazings Committee. The Grazings Clerk usually also acts as Chairman. Crofts are meant to be part-time agricultural units and therefore it is necessary for a crofter to have some other work. Traditionally that used to be fishing but now-a-days a large variety of other forms of employment sustains crofting in the Highlands and Islands.

Lewis is covered with heather and the Island is known as 'The Heather Isle' or 'Eilean an Fhraoich'. A Gaelic song in praise of the Island by the Lewis Bàrd, Murdo Macleod of Leurbost (Murchadh a' Cheisdear), 1837-1914, is regarded as the Lewis unofficial anthem.

Gaelic has been our mother language in Park for generations, but ever since the marriage of the Scottish Gaelic King Malcolm Canmore to the Saxon Princess Margaret in the 11th century, the establishment and the educational system discourage Gaelic.

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