



## [The Origins and Lifestyle of the People of Pairc]

As the population of Lewis increased towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, a steady stream of migrants from other parts of the Island moved into Park to swell the small population already there. The new settlers came mainly from the western seaboard of the Parish of Lochs, which extended at that time right across the Island to the Atlantic coast, taking in Shawbost, Carlaway etc. Others came from the Parish of Uig and from Harris.

Perhaps it was quite natural for young people to move across the Island, within their own Parish, to the less densely populated east coast, at a time when the population in the west coast was growing and the demand for the available land increasing. Many of the present day people of Park can still trace their ancestors to the western seaboard of the Island.

The early settlers were attracted to Park for several good reasons, such as the prospect of securing landholdings for their own. There was also the prospect of earning some money in the prosperous kelp industry, in an area with an extended coastline of sheltered bays and sea lochs, which was eminently suitable for the harvesting of seaweed for kelping.

Yet another good reason was the ease with which they could pursue the fishing all year round from the natural anchorages and numerous sheltered bays and sea lochs in Park, as well as the very good fishing banks offshore, where there was an abundance of all kinds of fish including herring, white fish and shellfish, at that time.

These conditions offered distinct advantages for fishing and kelping compared with the exposed west coast of Lewis, where the Atlantic storms rendered the area unsuitable for fishing for a good part of the year.

Crofters at that time relied almost entirely on what they could produce from the land and the sea, and while the land on the west side of Lewis might be more suitable for agricultural crofting, the hills of Park offered valuable shelter for stock.

Taking all things into consideration, and particularly the abundance of fish, life in Park was probably more congenial than what the west coast of Lewis offered at that time.

Nowadays Park is at a serious disadvantage compared with most of the Island because of the long overland distance of about 30 miles on an indifferent road, between the area and Stornoway, the main town and port of the island. Paradoxically Park was not considered remote from Stornoway in earlier times when there were few if any roads on the Island and all traffic went by foot or by sea.

In fact living in Park in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was an advantage compared with many parts of the Island, because there was easy and fast access from Park to Stornoway by sea transport; the distance by sea being only eight to twelve miles.

Boats were to the people of Lochs at that time much the same as cars are to people everywhere nowadays. Every family owned or had a share in a sizeable boat. Smaller boats were used in the sheltered inshore waters and larger boats were used for offshore fishing and ferrying back and fore to Stornoway. The sheltered harbours and anchorages of Park were as convenient for boats then, as the roads are for cars today.

The location of the crofting communities in Park were always governed by their accessibility to the sea, because it was from the sea that their livelihood came, in a large measure.

The new settlers' first task, once they decided on a suitable place in which to settle down, was to build a home. Crofters have always practised the concept of self-help and homeownership by building their own homes without any form of outside assistance, until comparatively recently.

However, as a caring society, the concept of cooperation and neighbourly communal assistance was generously practised and all available neighbours came together to assist in any difficult task such as building a home etc. There is still a good deal of neighbourly help practised in the crofting townships.

Once a home was built the family set about at once to reclaim an agricultural holding from the virgin moorland and the thin soil on the sloppy hillsides of Park. That task entailed a great deal of backbreaking arduous work, as

may be seen by the numerous lazybed ridges of former cultivated areas, as well as cairns of base stones extracted from the ground and gathered together in heaps all over the place.

The economy of the Park community in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was based on crofting, fishing and kelping. If, therefore, a family in Park had a reasonably sized landholding of their own at that time their standard of living would be fairly good. They would be able to raise a seed crop and after retaining some seed for planting next year, they would send the rest of it to one of the numerous village watermills on the streams of Park in order to grind it into meal for bread, porridge etc.

They would also raise a potato crop and fodder for cattle. The emphasis was on cattle rearing rather than sheep at that time, and most crofters would have a few beasts. In any event they would all have a milking cow or two in order to provide milk and dairy products for the family. They would have a few followers for sale at the fall in order to raise some cash for the rent etc. They had sheep as well, grazing on the sheltered hills of Park, which yielded mutton for the table and wool which was dyed, carded and hand-spun during the long winter evenings. Then the yarn was woven into cloth for the family garments and blanketing, as well as yarn for knitting.

After the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century kelping went into serious decline and was no longer an important factor in the economy of the area. Fishing was however assuming an ever-increasing important place in the economy of the area during the whole of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. White fishing was more important during the first quarter of the century, but herring fishing was steadily increasing in importance during the whole of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but particularly during the second half of the century until it peaked before the First World War.

A family could not, however, live on the produce of the sea on its own, although it was a valuable source of nutritious food. A landholding was an indispensable element in the economy of the Park community. In Park, crofting and fishing were suitable activities and as complementary as potatoes and herring, the most popular dish in the area. In other places it might be another form of gainful employment that was more consistent with part-time agricultural work.

Diversification is a necessary element in the lifestyle of most crofters because, as a rule, their landholdings are part-time agricultural units. The system has worked well because in practice, it has retained the people on the land more successfully than any other form of activity in the country. Diversification is the strength of the system rather than its weakness, as many of its critics maintained over the years.

A balanced diet of reasonable variety could be achieved from the simultaneous harvesting of the land and the sea. Land is the common feature in the concept of a successful crofting community. Without it, the only option available to the people was emigration or a move to the uncertainties and squalor of the industrial cities - a life which did not appeal to these independent, hard-working, open air people. Land was also felt to be a safeguard or insurance against the inevitable periodic failures in either fishing or agriculture.

The settlers in Park at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were therefore crofter/fishermen with a sprinkling of tradesmen among them who served the needs of the crofting community, such as weavers, tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, stonemasons, blacksmiths, boat builders, millers, preachers, and later on itinerant Gaelic teachers etc. Kelping was also carried out by whole families during the season.

Gaelic was the spoken language and even in our day in the 1920s and long after, we all went to school without a word of English. In school, from the very first day, we were suddenly and strictly introduced to an alien language. Not a lesson or even a word of our mother tongue was ever heard in the classroom. Only in the playground could we use our mother tongue.

Socially it was a classless society with doors always open day and night. In fact there was no provision made for locks on doors. Even when we were young very few people ever locked their doors at night or when they were out of the house. Visiting each other's homes was a feature of the way of life.

Many of the tasks were carried out on a communal basis. Social care was provided within the community for those who were not able to cope for reasons of illness, widowhood, old age and infirmity or any other reason. Such people were willingly and freely helped by the able-bodied members of the community, even to the extent of cutting, drying and carrying home their annual supply of peat if necessary. They also provided their own medicines, as well as nursing and maternity care.

The young people created their own entertainment and activities and they were never bored or frustrated, as it is so often said about present-day youth who seem to be over-provided for in comparison to the youth of the past. Like their seniors, the youth worked hard, participating in the work of the community, yet they were happy and carefree as they grew up in the rural setting. They built and repaired their own boats and to this day one might see a boat under repair or a partially built new boat, outside a crofter's home.

Ever since supplies of salt became freely available after the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the people salted their winter supply of meat, white fish and herring and that was regularly supplemented by a supply of fresh fish and herring, all of which, along with a plentiful supply of potatoes and meal for porridge and bread, along with a

plentiful supply of dairy products, provided a good wholesome health-giving diet, as long as the people were left alone to earn their living by their own initiative from the natural resources that were around in abundance. It was not a money-based economy, yet kelping and commercial fishing and the occasional sale of stock provided some money for the rent and other necessities.

In that way the people of Park were, to a large extent, self-sufficient in their sheltered bays, which were at that time teeming with all kinds of fish, including shellfish. Their stock was out on the sheltered hills and they worked hard to convert the blanket of peat to rich arable land, in that way making a living by arduous toil, from land and sea.

However, the people of Park, like their counterparts in other parts of the Highlands and Islands, were people without rights or privileges, and as we shall see later, they were at the mercy of inconsiderate landlords, who could, and often did, evict them without good reason and with little or no advance notice, seeing they had no security of tenure. Their standard of life is to be judged by comparison to the standards of the time, and there is little doubt that so long as they were left to their own devices their standard of life compared favourably to any rural dweller, and far superior to the masses who worked for twelve hours a day for six days a week, for a pittance, in the factories of industrial Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their housing also compared very favourably with anything enjoyed by the urban workforce. In fact we feel the standard of life and housing of the crofting community still compares more than favourably to their urban counterparts.

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