



The Early Settlers of Pairc

The Park peninsula is said to have been the last district on the Island to have been extensively populated. Probably that statement refers to the ancestors of the present population, many of which settled there about 200 years ago in the second half of the 18th century.

There were, however, some settlers and tacksmen in Park, at least ever since Seaforth Mackenzie acquired the Island nearly 400 years ago in 1610. When Seaforth first came to Lewis he was not very sure of his newly acquired subjects and naturally he wanted to protect himself from the Macleods who were numerous on the Island. He therefore chose to build the stronghold at Seaforth Head in Park, hence the Seaforth title.

He built a small castle at Seaforth Head with a circular tower, on the site of three large stones of a druid circle, which he built into the walls of his castle. Then he surrounded himself with his trusted friends, the Mackenzies and their associated clans the Maciver's and MacIennan's, by placing them in all the best tacks in the Parish, as well as placing the first Seaforth factor for the Island, also a Mackay, 'Murchadh Mòr Mac ic Mhurchaidh', the tack of St Colm's Island in Loch Erisort. In that way he provided for his own security as well as rewarding his clansmen and their associates for their loyalty. In so doing he apparently observed the old Gaelic injunction which says: 'Mu ni thu math, dean ri do duinne fein e' - if you do a good turn, do it to your own people.

'An seann chaisteal' the old castle is in ruins since long ago, but the site may be identified on croft 6 Seaforth Head where a crofter's house was subsequently built on the site. The last occupant of the crofter's house was the family of James Morrison, 'Seumas a' Gheta', who moved later to croft 1 Balallan.

Later on the Seaforth's built an elegant mansion house, known as Seaforth Lodge, overlooking Stornoway Harbour, and there is a tradition in Lochs that some of the stones for that project came from 'Loch Odhairn' or Loch Gravir.

Subsequently, when James Matheson bought the Island from the Seaforth's in 1844, Seaforth Lodge was demolished and the present Lewis Castle, which is now part of a technical college, was built on the site.

Before the Seaforth's acquired the Island of Lewis it is said that the whole area of Park might have been a hunting ground for the Clan Macleod, the previous owners of the Island. In support of that contention, the Morrison MSS state that John Garve Macleod of Raasay and some of his followers on their way home from Lewis, landed at Park to hunt deer in his cousin's forest. Also, the Gaelic name for Loch Shell in Southern Park Loch Shealg 'hunting loch' suggests that the area might have been a hunting place of old. The Morrison manuscript also mentions that the forest between Loch Seaforth and Loch Erisort was full of deer and abounded with wild fowl. Yet another ancient writer says, 'There is an abundance of deer in the chase of Oservaul'.

It would appear from the foregoing that the peninsula of Park was sparsely populated, if at all populated, before the Seaforth regime. Nevertheless every feature of the topography of Park is named and very often the names appear to be clear evidence of earlier Viking occupation.

In any event we know that the population of Lewis was small, even when Seaforth acquired the Island and therefore, there wasn't a lot of pressure for living space or any reason for the people to spread out into the remoter areas of the Island. In 1755 the population of Lewis was only 6,386 persons and 60 years later in 1821 the population had nearly doubled to 12,231 persons and in less than 60 years later, it had doubled again, and continued to increase dramatically during the whole of the 19th century.

The dramatic increase in the population of Lewis in the 18th and 19th centuries therefore indicates the increasing need for the population to spread out and occupy any area of land within the Island that might be sparsely populated. Hence one of the reasons for an increase of population in the peninsula of Park at that time.

Under the old runrig, clan system of land tenure which prevailed everywhere in Park until about 1818 and in some parts of Park for some time after that date, only the tacksmen's names appeared on the rent roll. The smallholders or crofters were tenants of the tacksmen and as a rule they paid their rent to them in agricultural produce and free labour. The tacksmen did not therefore keep records and it is difficult, and often impossible, to trace the names of the very early smallholders in Park or elsewhere in the Island.

Another complication was that sometimes the listed tacksmen were absentee tenants, holding fairly large areas of land and sub-letting parts of it to secondary or sub-tacksmen, who in turn sub-let some of their land to smallholders or crofters which they gathered round them on their tacks.

There were at least thirteen tacks listed in Lochs from Ranish to Siford in the 1718 rental list, and nine of them were tenanted by clansmen of Mackenzie of Seaforth.

The following four tacks are listed in the 1718 rental list for Park, and while it is very likely that these four tacks embraced the whole of the Park peninsula at that time, we cannot be absolutely sure, and neither can we be sure if there were sub-tacksmen or smallholder settlements there as well, at that time.

The tack of Habost was tenanted by Alexander Mackenzie at a rent of £9/5s/2d. Siford or Seaforth was tenanted by Donald Mackenzie at a rent of £3/6s/8d. The Shiant Islands which very likely included an area of Southern Park, as was the case at a later date, was tenanted by Kenneth Mackenzie at a rental of £4/8s/10d. The tack of St Colm was tenanted by Alex Mackenzie at a rental of £18/10s/4d. The high rental for St Colm's tack indicates that at that time St Colm's tack embraced a large part of the mainland of Park in the area of St Colm's Island. We know that at a later date the tack of St Colm, or Crobeg as it was sometimes known, included a large area of the surrounding land, extending at least to Caverstay if not further to the west, and very likely including Cromore and possibly further to the east.

Later on Colin Mackenzie 'Cailean Dearg' who became Chamberlain of Lewis in 1739, used his influence to get a lease of the whole of Park as a single tack, on very favourable terms, for his son-in-law Donald Macneill, who was known as Macneill-an-Eilean, because he lived on Eilean-Challum-Chille, St Colm's Isle in Loch Erisort.

That lease came to an end in 1776. However, it seems that for the last twelve years of that lease, these lands were sub-let to George Gillanders, who himself would almost certainly have sub-tenants in Park. After 1776 it would appear that the Park peninsula was once again leased in smaller units and George Gillanders still held land in Park.

Possibly Robert Weir became tacksmen of Calbost in 1776. In any event we know that he was at Calbost in 1784 because he sent a letter to the Lewis Presbytery dated 11th May 1784, relating to the translation of Rev James Wilson, then Minister of the Parish of Lochs, to Crathie on the mainland of Scotland. Local tradition informs us that Robert Weir resided at 'Lite-Sithein' to begin with, a place between Calbost in Gravir, where it was said that the early settlers of Gravir resided before moving into what is now the village of Gravir. We know that later on in 1814 Robert Weir held both Calbost and Gravir as his tack at a rental of £118. It is possible therefore that Mr Weir was the tacksmen for both villages ever since he came to the area.

In 1780 the following seven year leases were granted, but obviously there were other unexpired leases in the area at that time:

	£	s
Habost, Angus Smith	20	
Kershader, Alex Maciver, Shipmaster and Merchant, Stornoway	7	
Lemreway and Isle Ewart and Shiant Isles, Norman Macleod, Stornoway	32	15
Siford, Brinigil, Stromes, Bagh Reimsabhadh, Sealladale and half of Isle Seaforth, John Macleod	31	
Ailtenish, Roderick Mackenzie of Garrabost	6	
Ceann-Chrionaig, Donald Donn Macleannan, Angus Smith, Marion Macleannan	6	

It will be noted that the last-named trio held the tack of 'Ceann Chrionaig', at the head of Loch Brollan, in the southern tip of Park peninsula, as a tack or small community of crofters or smallholders. Most, if not all, the present townships of Park and Marvig townships that no longer exist were tacks or farms held either by tacksmen or by crofter representatives of the local community acting on behalf of the community.

The 1814 estate rental list gives the following tacks at Park:

	Rent (£)
Allan Morrison, Habost	52
Donald Macaulay, St Colm	30
Robert Weir, Calbost (including Gravir)	118
Mrs R Ross and son, Cromore and Crobeg	106
Kenneth Macleod, Lemreway and Steimreway	100
Miss Maciver, Orinsay	22
Reid, Downie and Mackinnon, Agents, Park Farm	320
Ten tenants at Eishkin	57
Twelve tenants at Marvig	40
Six tenants at Kershader	42
Five tenants at Garyvard	28

The above list is obviously not a complete picture of the whole of the Park peninsula at that time.

The runrig system of land tenure was replaced by the crofting system in most of Lewis from about 1814 and Park was lotted about 1818-19. By that time the population of Lewis had nearly doubled in the previous 60 years to over 12,000 persons in 1821. In the 90 years that followed, the population of Lewis increased dramatically until it peaked in 1911 at 29,532 persons. The Highlands in general showed the same tendency of a dramatic increase in the population during that period, and in fact the population of Britain as a whole increased in similar fashion from 11,000 in 1801 to 26,000,000 in 1871.

In 1881 when the crofter agitation for land law reform was nearly at its height in the Highlands and Islands, the population of the Parish of Lochs alone was 6,284 persons, which was nearly as many as was in the whole Island over 100 years earlier in 1755.

Not only was the 18th century a time of population explosion, but it was also a time of great upheaval and change in the Highlands and Islands as a whole. There was a policy of oppression and persecution of the Highland people by the British Government following the defeat of the Jacobite House of Stewart at the battle of Culloden, the last battle fought on British soil. There was also the British Government policy of disarming the Highland clansmen and putting an end to the Highland clan system. Above all, there was the rise in landlordism and the iniquitous land policy that followed that traumatic event in the history of the Highlands.

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