



[The Establishment and Expansion of the Pairc Sheep Farm]

By 1800 the south country sheep farmers with their big cheviot sheep (na caoraich mhor), were all over the Highland mainland and were ready to move into the Islands.

The first commercial sheep farm that was established in Lewis was the Park Sheep Farm which was set-up by the 10th Seaforth Lewis Proprietor, Colonel Francis Humbertson Mackenzie, and later Lord Seaforth. He was Proprietor from 1783 until he died in 1815.

The Park Sheep Farm was set-up about 1802 at the southern tip of the Park Peninsula, in the Parish of Lochs. A modern farm house was built at Valamus, on the southern shores of the Peninsula, where it may still be seen, although by now, it is falling into disrepair. At that time the whole of the Park Peninsula was inhabited by crofters from end to end, and the greater part of them resided on the southern half of the Peninsula.

In order, therefore, to establish the sheep farm, the Lewis Estate cleared a number of crofter townships in the area round about Valamus, which together with the Shiant Isles, made up the original farm. It is thought that the original area of the farm embraced the land south of a line drawn, east/west from the head of Loch Brollum at the township of Cearnn Chrionaig, to the head of Loch Claidh at the township of Glenclaidh. About half-a-dozen crofter townships were cleared as follows: Valamus Bheag, Valamus Mhor, Caolais an Eilean, Smosivig, Glen Claidh and Ceann Chrionaig.

The displaced crofter families had no alternative but to emigrate or squeeze into the remaining townships of Park and elsewhere in the Island and share the available land along with the crofters already in these townships, whereby causing conditions of extreme overcrowding, which deteriorated over the years as the population increased.

Lord Seaforth suffered from deafness and imperfect speech, yet it was said of him, that owing to his remarkable mental endowment he triumphed over his disability. It was he who raised the 78th Seaforth Highlanders from among the inhabitants of his own estates, in the course of which many young men from the crofter villages were forcibly conscripted into the army in order to fight overseas and create, and protect, the British Empire (Saighdearan Mhic Choinnich Bodhair) soldiers of the deaf Mackenzie. The writer's great-great grandfather was one of them as well as many others from Lochs and elsewhere.

In 1800 Lord Seaforth was appointed Governor of Barbados and therefore he was not at home when the Lewis Estate established the Park Sheep Farm in 1802.

In his absence the Lewis Estate was managed by Trustees, but no doubt he was responsible for the broad outlines of Estate policy. He could safely leave the sordid details like forcible crofter evictions etc. to his loyal lieutenants.

It was Lord Seaforth's daughter Mary Frederica Elizabeth that inherited his estate when he died in 1815. His four male children had pre-deceased him as prophesied by Coinneach Odhar when he was under sentence of death. She was the 11th Seaforth Proprietor of Lewis. Mary was better known in Lewis as Lady Hood Mackenzie, as she was the widow of Admiral Sir Samuel Hood. He died in 1814 only months before Lord Seaforth. Subsequently Lady Hood Mackenzie re-married James Alexander Stewart of Glasserton in 1817. He assumed the name Mackenzie to please his wife, it was said, and so that there might be male heirs to carry on the Mackenzie name.

Mrs Mary Stewart Mackenzie is remembered in the traditions of Lewis as a good Christian lady to whom Lewis is deeply indebted for her Christian concern to exercise her right as Patron of the Lewis parishes, by appointing only Evangelical preachers, if at all possible. It was said that she scoured the Highlands for the Godliest ministers, and that patronage in her hands became a holy weapon. The first of these Evangelical ministers, Rev. Alexander MacLeod, came to Uig, Lewis in 1824 and a few years later in 1829 the Godly Rev. Robert Finlayson came to Knock, Point. He moved to Lochs Parish Church at Keose in 1831 and at the Disruption of the Scottish Church in 1843, he and the entire Lochs congregation joined the Free Church and built a new church at Crossbost.

Mary Elizabeth's second husband, James Alexander Stewart Mackenzie bought the Lewis Estate outright in 1825, and he was therefore the 12th Seaforth Proprietor of Lewis and the last of the Seaforth line that lasted 234 years, as Lewis landlords. James Stewart Mackenzie was a Member of Parliament for Ross-shire including Lewis, from 1830 to 1837, when he became Governor of Ceylon, where he was until his health broke down and

he was forced to retire. On his way home he died in Southampton in October 1842, in his 59th year. It was at that time that the crofters of Lemreway and Orinsay were being cleared.

Before Lord Seaforth established the Park Sheep Farm about 1802, he had been thinking of introducing large scale commercial sheep farming to Lewis. In 1793 he advertised the whole Parish of Uig for letting as sheep farms, much to the amazement of Colonel Colin Mackenzie of Stornoway, the first Surveyor General of India. Colonel Mackenzie wrote from Hyderabad to the Lewis factor in 1794 expressing concern. Mercifully that scheme was not implemented.

As soon as James Stewart Mackenzie married Lady Hood Mackenzie in 1817, he considered how he might increase the income of the Estate. In 1818 he stated that if it became necessary for him to dispossess the overgrown population of Lewis, which was daily becoming more and more burdensome, in order to make way for sheep, he felt that as many as 5,000 people might be spared from Lewis to render the change complete.

The population of Lewis in 1811 was said to be 10,092 and in 1821 it had risen to 14,541, so apparently the Lewis Proprietor was thinking of clearing half the population and replacing them with sheep. It appears he was quite indifferent to the social consequences of displacing such a large number of people. In his view they were people without any rights, while he was convinced that he had a divine right to do whatever he wished to the land and the people of Lewis.

It is obvious that commercial sheep farming in Lewis was under consideration by the Lewis Estate ever since the 1790s when the whole Parish of Uig was advertised for letting as sheep farms, and then 40-50 years later when the estate put forward an ambitious plan to convert the two parishes of Lochs and Uig exclusively for let as commercial sheep farms. Considering the expansionist policy adopted by the Lewis Estate in respect of the Park Sheep Farm ever since it was set up in 1802, until it ultimately overran about two thirds of the whole Peninsula, it is reasonable to conclude that it was the aim of the Estate to convert the whole of the Park Peninsula, extending to 68,000 acres, into one large sheep farm, ultimately.

The indigenous crofter population was systematically cleared, until by 1843 only eight of the forty crofter townships that were in the Peninsula when the sheep farm was established, were left; they were Habost, Kershader, Garyvard, Caversta, Cromore, Marvig, Calbost and Gravir.

It is also of interest in that respect that the Lewis Estate isolated the Park Peninsula at an early date by erecting a wall across the isthmus of about two miles between the heads of Loch Erisort and Loch Seaforth, which is the only land access to the peninsula. Traces of that wall, known locally as Gàrradh an Tighearna (the landlord's wall) may still be seen in the area.

It would make good sense to an early 19th century Lewis landlord to clear all the troublesome crofters from the Park Peninsula and enjoy the exclusive use of a large secure private area, virtually surrounded by the sea, as a profitable commercial sheep farm, complete with valuable sporting rights.

After the decline in the kelping industry in the early 1820s the Estate could no longer make a profit out of crofter labour and the clearances were stepped up. Estate policy of imposing additional evicted crofter families on to other townships caused severe overcrowding, by reducing the area of land available to each family while they continued to pay the same or even higher rents. In that way overcrowding was used as a means of generating a higher income for the Estate.

In the early 1820s the Seaforth landlord, James Stewart Mackenzie, stated that tenants evicted from Park must, and ought to be content with whatever land the Estate could give them. At that time displaced crofters from the Park Peninsula were sent to Balallan, Leurbost, Point, Barvas and round about Stornoway. In 1827 some of the former inhabitants of Park were moved to waste land at Aird Tong.

In the following year, Alexander Craig, who managed the Seaforth Estate at Brahan on the Scottish mainland visited Aird Tong and was appalled by what he saw:

Until I saw the actual situation of the new cottars at Aird Tong I had no idea of the great hardships and deprivation that the poor people had to endure. The situation of the new cottars at Aird Tong at this moment beggars all description. It is even worse than anything I ever saw in Donegal, where I always considered human wretchedness to have reached the very acme. There were no tracks, far less roads, to the new settlement and its occupants had literally to step to their knees in mud once they stepped outside their thresholds.

In the early 1830s the Lewis Estate again put forward an ambitious plan for Lewis, when large scale so-called improvements were visualised by embarking on two simple arrangements. Firstly, at the expiry of the leases all the improvable land in the Parish of Stornoway, on both sides of Broad Bay, would be lotted. Secondly, the whole population of Lochs and Uig, embracing the southern half of the Island of Lewis, was to be transferred to the Broad Bay allotments, and the two parishes let exclusively as sheep farms. Providence spared us from that upheaval.

Fortunately, the Lewis Proprietor, Mr James Stewart Mackenzie, had second thoughts and decided to adjust his policy of improving Lewis by removing the crofters from Lochs and Uig, and instead he decided to exploit the great line white fish industry of cod and ling, which was started earlier in the 18th century by the Lewis factor and his tacksmen.

The Parish of Lochs had excellent fishing banks offshore near sheltered sea lochs and there were plenty of sheltered anchorages in the numerous sea lochs. Furthermore, the market town of Stornoway was only one hour's sailing away. While Uig was also very suitable for fishing, it was not so convenient for access to Stornoway, and they were more inclined to make the longer sea journey to Glasgow with cargoes of dry salted fish.

Small white fish salting stations were established all along the coast, particularly wherever there was a pebbly beach, where cod and ling could be dried in the sun and wind. Lobster fishing was also carried on in the sheltered lochs of Park and they were sent to the market in London. Both Lord Seaforth and Mr James Stewart Mackenzie of Seaforth took a keen interest in the fishing.

Among the most progressive of the tacksmen fish curers at the end of the 18th century was John Morrison of Shader, Point, Lewis Maciver of Gress, Robert Weir of Calbost and Roderick Nicholson of Stornoway. In 1824 a list of places that urgently needed a pier was drawn up. Among them was Calbost in Lochs and it was surveyed in 1828 but a pier was never built there.

By 1823 the Park Farm had extended from its original small area around the farmhouse at Valamus and the Shiant Isles to embrace all the land enclosed by a west/east line from the side of Loch Seaforth above Scaladale-Mhor, across the Peninsula through Gleann Airidh an Dhomhnuill to Ceann-Tigh-Shealg (Shell head) at the head of Loch Brollum.

In addition to the original six crofter townships overrun by the Park Sheep Farm, this second great leap forward cleared another eight townships, which were; Bunchorcabrig, Bagh-Reinsabhaigh, Bàgh-Ciarach, Ceanmore, Gilvicphaic, Scaladale-Bheag, Scaladale-Mhor, Ceann-Tigh-Shealg, making a total of 14 townships now overrun by the sheep farm.

That rearrangement of the boundaries of the sheep farm bypassed and isolated a group of seven townships on the east side of the Peninsula between Loch Shell and Loch Brollum. They were Brollum, Hamascro, Mol-Truisg, Mol-Hagarraigh, Ailtinish, Buthinish and Gearraidh-Riaghsaidh. Doubtless that was the third leap forward by the sheep farm, when these seven townships were cleared making a total of 21 townships cleared in the 1820s.

The fourth leap forward towards the north bought the Park Farm boundary to the grazing boundary of Steimreway on the shores of Loch Shell and right across the Peninsula to the grazing boundaries of Habost on the shores of Loch Erisort. On that occasion probably in 1833 the Park Farm swallowed up yet another eight townships at least. They were Stromas, Brunigil, and Seaforth head, Sheildinish, Cleitir, Ceann-Tharbhaidh, Gearraidh-Reastail and Ishginn, bringing the total number of crofter townships now overrun by the Park farm to 29. Ten years later in 1843 Lemreway and Orinsay were cleared and in 1857 Steimreway was cleared, which makes at least 32 townships cleared as well as a few other small communities such as Cuiriseal, Eilean-lubhairt etc.

In trying to clear the crofters of Lemreway and Orinsay in 1842/43 the Estate ran into difficulties for the first time in all the 30 townships or so that they had cleared from Park in the previous 40 years. The crofters of Lemreway and Orinsay, or Loch Shell as they were usually known, refused to leave their land and homes and their fight for their rights are on record for posterity.

Donald Munro, better known in Lewis as the 'Shaw', was involved in the clearance of Lemreway and Orinsay in 1843 in his first of many crofter clearances. He had just arrived in Lewis in 1841 in order to take up the posts of Procurator Fiscal and Legal Agent for the Lewis Seaforth Estate. He was not yet the Lewis Estate Factor until 1854, where he made a name for himself. Mr Knox was the factor at the time of the Loch Shell clearance of Lemreway and Orinsay.

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