



[Housing in Pairc in 1833]

'Five Houses - Two of Stone and Lime and Three of Stone and Clay'

The story behind the above headline is from the pen of Rev. Robert Finlayson, parish Minister of Lochs, writing in the second statistical account in 1833. He refers to two classes of accommodation in the Parish of Lochs at that time. There were only five houses in the first group he refers to, as follows: His own house at Keose, which was built about thirty years earlier, about 1800, and the farmhouse at Valamus in southern Park, also built about 1802 when the Park sheep farm was established, were the only two houses in the Parish of Lochs that were built of stone and lime. Also, there were three dwelling houses in the Parish built of stone and clay, which were occupied by farmers, only one of which was slated. They were comfortable considering their size.

The second group of houses Mr Finlayson refers to are the homes of the ordinary people about which he says; 'They are wretched, they are built of stone and moss and they are thatched with barley stubble'. The new Highland class division of privileged and servile brought about by the rise of private landlordism following the debacle at Culloden in 1746 is clearly illustrated by the above statement. Setting out the way the ordinary people were forced to live.

The first group of houses referred to above as occupied by farmers, is the privileged with security of tenure, and one of these houses was, in all probability, the house of the Calbost tacksman, Robert Weir, the ruins of which may still be seen in the boundary between croft No. 3 & 4 Calbost.

The walls of Robert Weir's house were built of stones and clay and there were two gable end chimneys in the house, very much like the 'white houses' that were built after the 1886 Crofters Act. It was however a thatched house with the roof and thatch resting on the outer wall and the thatch overhanging at the eaves.

We do not know when Robert Weir's house at Calbost was built, but we do know that Mr Weir was Tacksman at Calbost in May 1774 because he wrote a letter to the Lewis Presbytery on that date, relating to the translation of Rev. James Wilson, the then Minister of Lochs, to Crathie on the Scottish mainland. He may have been in Calbost, and built his house there long before 1774. Mr Weir died in 1821 and his house was occupied later by Malcolm Mackenzie 'Calum Ruadh Thormoid Òg', until that family built a new house on croft No. 4 Calbost, about 1908. The design of Robert Weir's house was nearly 150 years ahead of its time in Lewis.

It is a pity that the good Minister, Rev. Robert Finlayson, who was held in the highest esteem by his people in Lochs, does not appear to deprecate the prevailing social and political system that created the wretched living conditions of the ordinary people to which he refers as the second group of houses.

Hundred and hundreds of crofter families were being forcibly evicted at short notice from their humble homes throughout the Highlands and Islands, including southern Park where the first commercial sheep farm in Lewis was set up by the Lewis Estate in 1802. The Park Peninsula was part of Mr Finlayson's congregation of Lochs and the whole peninsula from end to end was inhabited by crofters until the Park Sheep Farm was established at the southern tip of the peninsula and continued to expand for the whole of the first half of the 19th century. These evictions were therefore taking place before, during and after Mr Finlayson came to Lochs in 1824.

By 1843 the Park Sheep Farm had overrun 44,000 acres of crofters land and cleared over 30 crofter communities from the southern part of the peninsula. Valamus House to which Mr Finlayson refers was the purpose-built farmhouse of the Park Sheep Farm. Even if the ordinary people were minded to build substantial expensive houses for thousands, how could they? When they had no security of tenure, and were constantly waiting for the inevitable knock on the door and possibly forcible emigration to some overseas land. The realism of the situation was that the crofters were people without rights, until they rebelled and secured the first Crofters Act of 1886.

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