



[The Value of Timber]

In the 18th and 19th centuries timber was very scarce in Lewis hence the reason why any useful driftwood that was thrown up on the shore by the sea was highly appreciated and well used for roof timbers. If however a suitable log came ashore they sawed it up into boards suitable for boatbuilding etc. The sawing of the logs was done in a saw-pit constructed for that purpose called 'Sloc-sàbhaidh'. The method of construction was to build two parallel walls about 5 feet high, a few feet apart open ended. The log was placed on timbers over the pit and using a two handed saw 'Sàbh-mor' with one man standing above and the other below the log they could saw very big logs into thin boards. These saw-pits were usually near the shore. There is one in Tolsta Chaolais and there was one in Calbost on Croft No 10 near where to Loch Dubh goes into the sea. That area is still called 'Sgaid Sàbhaidh'. The idea came from Canada.

The Lewis Estate claimed exclusive rights to all driftwood, seaweed and everything else that was thrown up on the shore by the sea. The Landowner's men were known on more than one occasion to have entered a crofter's home and remove driftwood timber rafters from the roof. Old Sheriff Court records disclose complaints against people from Lemreway about 1824, long before the people were evicted from there. Donald Macleod and others were charged with the crime of wrecking.

Donald Macleod, Norman Macaulay, Murdoch Mackenzie, Robert Mackenzie and John Maclellan were ordered to pay £4.00, being the modified value of the mast found and destroyed by them. Louis Nicolson, Neil Nicolson, John Macinnes, Donald Maclellan, Murdo Macdonald and Angus Macdonald were ordered to pay £2.00, being the value of the mast found and destroyed by them. Donald Smith was fined 10/- (50p) the value of the beam found and destroyed by him.

In addition the following Lemreway people were acquitted - Donald Macaulay, Angus Macaulay, John Macdonald, Hector Mackenzie, Kenneth Morrison, John Morrison, Murdoch Maclellan and John Maclellan. It is of interest to have these twenty names on record as evidence of some of the people that lived in Lemreway at that time.

Timber was so precious to the Islanders that apparently they were on occasion tempted to murder for a good supply of it. About 1785 it was said that a boat from Mealista in Uig sailed through the Sound of Harris to Wester Ross for a cargo of timber. On the way back they were forced to seek shelter from the worsening weather in 'Bàgh Ciarach' at the most southerly point of Southern Park. Nothing was heard of the Uig boat and the people of Mealista gave it up as lost at sea. It was only when blankets were offered for sale at the annual market day at Stornoway during the following summer by people from Park, that the foul deed was discovered. The blankets were recognised by an unusual identification mark and a confession followed. It is said that the Mealista crew were murdered for the sake of the timber cargo their boat was carrying, when it struck a reef close inshore in a gale.

In the late 19th century when the Lewis fishermen were in the habit of taking their large Zulu sailing fishing boats to the herring fishing on the east Scottish coast, they often brought back home with them a supply of timber in their boats, particularly if a young man was preparing to set up a home of his own.

After the passing of the first Crofters Act in 1886 giving crofters security of tenure for the first time, the crofters began to build permanent white houses in Lochs, and the timber for these houses was often brought home in their fishing boats at the end of the Caithness fishing season. One can well imagine the pride with which the newlyweds show off their 'tigh-geal'.

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