



[Social Change in the 20th Century]

Life on the croft in the opening years of the 20th century was not very different to how it was in previous centuries, but our generation in the 20th century experienced more changes in every aspect of our lives than our forebears saw in the previous thousand years. Possibly even in the last century, people could not imagine that men and women would be regular visitors to the moon.

Previous generations were to a great extent self-sufficient and independent as far as food and clothing were concerned. It was a subsistence economy, in which money did not play a big part, but during the 20th century we have come to rely on the weekly pay packet almost exclusively, and that is why we must have jobs available in the rural crofting areas, if our valuable crofting way of life is to survive. Technology has changed the crofting world as it did everything else.

People worked hard on the land and on the sea, and they were reasonably content so long as they had the basic necessities of food and clothing, such as potatoes in the barn and in the potato pits (sloc a bhuntat'), meal in the kist, salted herring in the barrel, salted and dried fish and mutton hanging on the 'sioman', cattle in the byre, sheep on the hill and free range hens, whose eggs were acceptable in the local shop as legitimate currency. The humble egg was one of the main cash crops of the croft.

They converted the wool from their own sheep into personal clothing as well as blanketing. That, of course, involved many processes and a great deal of hard labour. The wool was washed in the stream or loch, then dyed, carded, spun, woven and finished (luadh). Women were always busy knitting, sewing and even tailoring or patching - 'a stitch in time saves nine' (is fheàrr breid na toll).

The self-sufficiency of the community involved local tradesmen of all kinds, such as weavers, tailors, shoemakers, stonemasons, carpenters and builders etc., as well as village shops. If local tradesmen were not available in one's own village, then they were in one of the villages nearby. In our village we were fortunate to have all these facilities available within our village.

John Smith, Balallan, testifying to the Napier Commission at question 17327, praising life in Southern Park said:

Nobody needed to leave the place from one year's end to another for anything the family required. If one family happened to be short of provisions, they had only to ask their neighbour who could supply them.

There were two things that had a major influence on life in the seven crofting counties in the 20th century. First and foremost, the first Crofters Act of 1886, and secondly the introduction of the old age pension of five shillings (25pence) a week in 1909.

Housing

Until the Crofters Act, no crofter could build a permanent substantial dwelling house for fear of being evicted at short notice, at the whim of the landlord or his tyrannical factor. As soon as the first Crofters Act was on the Statute Book, crofters began to improve their houses. At first they converted their thatched houses by replacing the thatched roof with a new wooden roof, which was covered with canvas or old sails and had an annual coat of coal tar. Before the beginning of the 20th century new purpose built white houses began to appear, and some of the very earliest of these are still to be seen.

'Tigh a Chlachair', 2/4 Kershader may be the oldest white house. 'Tigh Dhonnchaidh Iver', 7 Gravir is also one of the first white houses. Number 8 and 12 Calbost are the oldest purpose built white houses in Calbost. Number 8 was built in the mid-1890s. There are two refurbished thatched houses in Calbost, Kenneth Nicholson, No.11 and Kenneth Macleod, No.6. The No.6 house is modernised with all the latest gadgets and is the only house that is continually occupied in Calbost now.

There was a revolution in housing in Lewis in the 20th century, and long before the end of the century, all the old thatched houses had disappeared. Similarly, society has achieved a high standard in social welfare in the 20th century. The introduction of the old age pension at the beginning of the century was a big step forward. It gave senior citizens security, independence and self-respect.

In the past, Islanders liked to have their houses near the shore, if possible, because it was from the sea that much of their sustenance (beoshlàint) came. Boats were also their means of travel and transport. Every family had a boat in the same way as every family has a car now-a-days. There were no vehicular roads in Park, Lochs until the 20th century, and our vehicular road link with Stornoway was not completed until about 1928. When the roads came people were inclined to build their houses near the road, rather than near the shore.

The house of the Gael was a warm and comfortable home. Its primary function was to provide shelter from the cold, the wind and the rain and it served that purpose well. It also blended well into the natural surroundings and was therefore environmentally friendly.

Even long after the crofters achieved security of tenure it was difficult to build a new house. Money was scarce and the fishing uncertain. The first big break after the 1886 Act came about 1912 when the Dept. of Agriculture for Scotland (D.A.F.S.) made provision for assistance for crofter housing in the form of loans. Later on, in 1949, grants and loans became available. D.A.F.S. stores (Stòr a Bhùird) were also established in Stornoway and various other places early in the 20th century, where crofters could buy building materials at cost. These measures helped very considerably to raise the standard of housing in the crofting world.

The people of Lochs were not very keen to undertake the responsibility of a D.A.F.S. loan. The older generation were always afraid of borrowing money and falling into debt. 'Better a small house with blessing, than a large house with bad reputation (S'feàrr tigh beag agus beannachd, na tigh mor agus mollachd)'.

There was only one Dept. house ever in Calbost. It was built in the early 1920s, when building material was very expensive after the First World War, 'Tigh Iain an Choinneach', croft No.3.

After the Second World War three new Dept. houses were planned for Calbost. One was for Murdo Kennedy, No.14. The walls of his new house were nearly ready when he was lost in the War. Angus Nicolson, 11 Calbost and Malcolm Morrison, 9 Calbost were also ready to start building. Prospects for work were not good and the young people preferred to move into the towns and cities.

The coming of the Hydro Electric and the domestic water supply about 1950 made a tremendous difference to our way of life on the croft. From then on the Lewis housewife had all the facilities that her sister had in Glasgow. The electric cooker did away with the three legged iron pot on a peat fire. The washing machine was a revolution in itself. It ended the washday, which began with carrying a large supply of water in pails from the well, heating a large three-legged pot of water on the open fire, setting up a big tub and rubbing the clothes on a corrugated washboard, followed by a visit to the stream nearby, or the loch.

The coming of a piped water supply ensured that every house had a fully equipped bathroom, and that is what pleased the womenfolk more than anything else.

There are many things one could say about housing and modern facilities, but we must be careful that we do not consider ourselves, or our comfortable way of life, to be superior to that of our forebears.

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