



[Housing in Calbost]

A crofter is a tenant of his croft land, not the owner, and therefore until the passing of the first Crofting Act in 1886 giving Crofters security of tenure, the Crofter population of the Highlands of Scotland were people without rights.

They were completely at the mercy of inconsiderate landlords at whose whim they might be, and often were, moved from place to place and very often shipped overseas against their will. In that way they were unable to build substantial permanent houses but had to be content with homes of simple construction built by their own hands from local materials. For obvious reasons, as little as possible was imported.

In the circumstances the house of the Gael was not an object of domestic luxury and embellishment. Its primary function was to provide shelter from the cold, the wind and the rain and it served that purpose well. It was a warm comfortable home that reflected the character of the social life of the family, the community and the environment. Also the technology and architecture of the old Hebridean house was quite remarkable.

Once the first Crofters Act was on the statute book the crofter population gradually realised that they enjoyed security of tenure, housing improvements began to take place, domestic architecture, which is never static, began to adapt to the changed situation and new ideas came in, and continue to come in to this day.

Even the architecture of the old Hebridean thatched houses show a progression as may be seen from the various ruins that are fortunately still left with us, not yet vandalised. Several of these old types may be seen in Calbost. The oldest of which do not have any gable-ends, or chimney because the only fireplace was the one in the middle of the floor in the living compartment. The walls being at the very same level of height right round the house. The corners of the walls on the very oldest houses were rounded at both ends of the house and later on the corners at the top end or 'Culaist' (best room) was built with right angle corners.

The next stage was a house with a fireplace in the best room as well as the living room but not yet a gable-end but a small square chimney-head like a flask. That was followed by houses with one full gable-end in the best room and later still by two gable-ends, one on each end of the house or sometimes the byre part extended past the second gable-end which just protruded through the thatch. By that time the rounded corners had gone and were replaced by angled corners. Usually the gable-ends were constructed with stone and clay like a white house, whereas the walls of the house were constructed in the traditional way with a thick sandwich of earth in between the inner and outer stone wall.

A distinguishing feature of an old Lewis thatched house was the way the roof rafters rested on the inner wall, leaving a broad ledge of wall-top or sufficient space to enable one to walk right round the house on the wall-top 'Tobhta'. Probably that feature of the architecture of a Hebridean house is unique to the Hebrides. On the mainland the rafters rest on the outer wall and the thatch overhang the edge of the wall at the eaves.

The walls of the old thatched houses were constructed in a scientific manner and it may be claimed that the principle was the forerunner of the modern cavity-wall principle. The walls were about 5 feet thick and comprised of an inner and outer stone wall with 2 foot or so space in between the inner and outer walls filled with earth packed firm, and referred to as 'hearting'. The water from the roof percolated down through the earth in the cavity and formed a damp blanket of earth which created an effective insulating barrier that prevented the heat inside the house from escaping through the walls, and the cold and wind from the outside from penetrating through the walls. Also, the stones in the inner wall were set with a slight slope outwards towards the cavity in order to prevent the passage of moisture from penetrating into the interior.

Usually these old thatched houses were built on a declivity to ensure that any water or dampness flowed easily away downhill. The floor of these houses is often referred to in a derogatory way, as beaten earth. The truth is that the floor was also constructed scientifically and with due care. First of all, all the earth was removed from the inside of the house down to the hard and then the area was filled with small clean stones in order to allow any water to percolate away at the bottom level of the stones. Then a quantity of good pliable clay was mixed into a mortar and a liberal covering was applied to the surface of the floor. When the clay was dry it was pressed down by trampling. Sometimes a dance was held in the new house to ensure that the floor was pressed down well. The last of these household dances in Calbost was held in 1946 in 'Peter's' new house, but the floor on that occasion was a wooden floor and the occasion was the wedding dance of Angus 'Samson' Macfarlane and Ciorstag 'Glady' Mackenzie 12 Calbost. A properly constructed clay floor was warm and comfortable, whereas a modern cement floor is cold and uncomfortable.

Thatched houses are nowadays referred to in a derogatory manner as black houses 'Tighean Dubh'. Probably that came about by unthinking people due to the phonetic similarity between the Gaelic words 'Tighean-Tughaidh' 'Tighean Dubh'. The writer remembers many happy hours spent in various comfortable and clean thatched houses as a carefree youngster at Calbost. Also, it goes without saying that many fine men and women were reared in thatched houses and many of them made their mark in the world in various departments of life, including the Church, both at home and abroad.

The pitch or slope of the thatched roof was fairly low for several reasons. To minimise the effect of the wind on the house and avoid the thatch being stripped off the roof by the force of the wind, to avoid the tendency of the thatch to slide down if the pitch was too steep, and to blend into the natural environment. They avoided using iron nails and used wooden pins instead and rope, usually heather rope. The thatch in Lochs was normally of barley straw and the barley was harvested with a view to using part of the sheaf for thatch. Whereas the oat crop was harvested usually by cutting with a sickle, the barley crop was harvested not by cutting the stalks but by pulling the roots out of the ground, thereafter the sheaves were cut in two by the sickle just below the band 'Sgathacan'. The bottom part of the sheaf with the roots was set aside for thatching. Thatching was done in tiers starting at the bottom and working upwards. The root ends were placed uppermost and were covered by the overlap of the subsequent tier.

The thatch was secured by looping heather rope 'Siomain-Fraoich' back and fore over the roof and attaching fairly heavy stones. 'Acraichean', to each loop about 1 foot apart and about 1 foot above the top of the wall, 'Tobhta', an interesting feature of these thatched roofs was the 'Maide-Starag', or raven stick which protruded out through the roof at the end of the ridge in order to provide a means of attaching the ropes which secure the thatch on the ends of the house 'Siomain-Fraoich', was eventually replaced by 'Siomain-Thearlaich' coir rope from Charles Morrison's shop on Bank Street, Stornoway, hence the Gaelic name 'Siomain-Thearlaich'. The roofs were regarded as a moveable thing and therefore belonged to the tenant. Normally, but not always the tenant was allowed to take his own roof timbers with him if he was moved or evicted. The walls belonged to the tacksman or landlord as the case may be.

We see therefore that the old thatched houses were not thrown together in any old way but evolved over a long period of time and the architecture embraced various features that were designed to ensure that the houses afforded the maximum protection from the elements. For instance 'Cùl ri gaoidh' (back to the wind face to the sun). And 'An iar 's an ear an dachaidh is fhèarr' (east and west the best homestead).

An efficient system of central heating was achieved by placing the peat fire on heat absorbing stone slabs set in the middle of the floor of the living apartment, 'Cagailte'. In that way there was no loss of heat as the family gathered round the fire. An opening in the thatch at the ridge for the escape of the smoke, a little to one side of the fire was called 'Farleus'. A chain was hung from the cross-spar, 'Sparra-gaoithe' directly above the fire, 'Slabhruidh', on which hooks could be fastened in order to hang the three legged cooking pots. The cooking heat was adjusted by means of lowering or raising the hooks in the links of the chain.

Once the crofters got security of tenure some of them began to convert their thatched houses to white houses by removing the thatch and replacing it by clean timbers covered with sarking boards and felt or almost always old canvas sails which were treated annually by a liberal coat of coal tar. Even long before then the timber for the roof of the fishermen's house were usually taken home with them on their fishing boats from the Caithness fishing at the end of the season. The first white house to be erected at Calbost was a conversion from a thatch house. Kenneth Nicolson 11 Calbost converted his thatched house in the early 1890s to a felt roof. Subsequently it was slated with asbestos slates. Although it was not used since Kenneth's daughter Christy who was married to Alexander Mackenzie 12 Calbost, died in 1917, it is still roofed and used as a barn, one hundred years later.

New purpose built white houses began to be built in Calbost in the 1890s beginning with John Macleod 8 Calbost, 'Iain Ruadh', and then Donald Mackenzie 'Domhnuill Beag' 12 Calbost. Both of these houses are still standing although the canvas and coal tar roof was replaced by corrugated iron on the No 12 house. The No 8 house is now covered with green mineral felt which is the nearest to the traditional sail canvas and coal tar. The stone Mason work for John Macleod's house at 8 Calbost only cost £8 at that time.

There were no new traditional thatched houses with earth filled walls built in Calbost in the 20th century. The only two thatched houses that were built in Calbost in the first quarter of the 20th century were houses with walls of stone and clay and the roof resting on the inner wall was not successful because the clay did not absorb the rainwater from the roof the way the earth did. The old technology was a proven technology.

Much of what was excellent in our way of life was lost with the passing of the thatched houses as the Lewis Bard Kenneth Macdonald, Sandwick so ably and nostalgically expresses in song:

A charaid 's mor bha ceangailte
Ri druim a' chabar sùith
A thuilleadh air na cailleachan dubha
Bha seoladh anns a smùid

Bha caomas air na cabair ud
Cho geal ri mirean fhùr
Ach sgapar sìos gu h-ealamh e
Nuair dh'fhalbh an cabar sùith

A chàirdean dh'fhalbh a h-uile rud
Nuair dh'fhalbh an cabar sùith
Dh'fhalbh an aiteas is am bàidh
Ro bhuileach as ar duthaich
Dh'fhalbh am blàths 'san cridhealas
An cathranas 's am mùirn
Is leapaichean a chàirdeas
Nuair dh'fhalbh an cabar suith.

The Hydro-Electric supply came to Calbost about 1950 and two of the oldest thatched houses in the village were joined to the electric supply. The house of Murdo Finlayson No 10, which was built by his father and the house of Calum Morrison No 9, thought to have been built by his grandfather, 'Murchadh Breabadair' one of the original crofters at Calbost. Both of these houses were lit in turn by Cruise Lamp which used fish oil and the Paraffin Lamp using a wick as well as the Paraffin Pressure Lamp known as the 'Tilly Lamp', and the electric bulb.

Because of the nature of crofting tenure the Government introduced a Crofter Housing Scheme about 1912 with provision for grants and low interest loans to crofters. The scheme was operated by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, D.A.F.S. The purpose of the scheme was to assist the crofters to raise the standard of housing in the seven crofting counties. It was a very successful scheme because it certainly helped to raise the standard of crofter housing and it was cost effective both to crofters and the taxpayers.

The Scottish Crofters Union commissioned Mr Mark Shucksmith of Aberdeen University, a recognised expert on rural housing to undertake an independent assessment of the workings of the Crofter Housing Scheme in 1985, 'Crofter Housing the Way Forward'. It is stated in that booklet that a new council house in Barra at that time cost the taxpayer some £41,700 over a period of 60 years plus the cost to the local authority of acquiring the land. A similar new houses on a Barra croft with the crofter receiving the maximum grant and loan from D.A.F.S. costs the taxpayer only £12,300 over 40 years.

Only one family in Calbost ever took advantage of the Department grant and loan system of financial assistance to build a house, and that was John Macleod of No 3 'Iain an-Choinneach' who built a Dept. house in the early 1920s when building material was very expensive after the 1st World War. The people of Lochs were not keen to undertake the responsibility of servicing a loan in the depressed economic conditions of the 1920s and 30s. After the 2nd World War in the 1940s several Calbost families decided to build Department houses but withdrew when they discovered that the herring fishing was even more depressed than it was before they left for the 2nd World War. Weaving also went down at that time and they all abandoned their plans to build in Calbost and they moved to the towns and cities. The supply of stones for the walls of at least one of these new houses were gathered ready to start building, and the heap of stones may still be seen on the proposed site on Croft No 9.

In retrospect, it was a pity that the crofters of Lochs did not take greater advantage of the excellent grant and loan facilities on offer by the Department of Agriculture before the 2nd World War when building material was cheap. However, money was scarce because the herring fishing never recovered after the loss of the European markets during the 1st World War.

The standard of crofter housing in rural Lewis nowadays is very high. All thatched houses have disappeared many years ago. Water, sewerage, electric and telephones etc are all available in the rural areas.

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