



## [The Decline of Calbost and Its Causes]

During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the population of Lewis, like that of the rest of Britain continued to increase. The villages of Park were no exception with Calbost peaking at 200 people in 1901, and the total population of the Park Peninsula peaking at nearly 2,000 souls in 1911.

Our generation has witnessed many changes both local and worldwide. Crofting and our way of life have undergone a profound change in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Distant events influence our local economic environment, as the old man realised when he expressed a wish for a small distant war 'Cogadh beag fad as' in order to increase prices.

### **Fishing and crofting**

Crofting and fishing in Lewis were complementary. For the crofting way of life to be successful it is necessary that some additional employment be available to the crofter and his family within reasonable travelling distance from the home.

The fishing, and in particular the herring fishing, was the traditional employment that fitted in well with crofting, and while the fishing was reasonably successful in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the crofting way of life was also successful.

The First World War destroyed the traditional markets for cured herring, such as Germany, the Baltic States and Russia. That upset the economic base of crofting in Lewis and to a large extent the communal and independent lifestyle of rural villages, and in the absence of suitable alternative employment, serious depopulation set in.

The indigenous population of the Island declined by about one third in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the case of Calbost the entire departed through death and depopulation in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The last person to be born in Calbost was in 1956, and the last indigenous resident died there in 1997.

### **Grinding water mills**

At one time there was a mill on almost every stream on the Island, and more than one mill on some of the larger streams. The crofters raised the necessary crops to enable them to provide the grain that kept these mills going.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the people had come to rely on oatmeal and flour that was imported onto the Island and sold by the wholesale merchants of Stornoway in bolls of 140lbs at a moderate price compared to the time and effort needed to raise one's own crop.

The mill on the stream at croft 11 Calbost was in operation until the last miller, Kenneth Nicolson of 11 Calbost, and his family moved to Stornoway in 1902. By that time most of the small watermills on the Island had ceased to operate.

Mr Nicolson's family was one of the first, if not the first, family unit to move out of Calbost. He was a weaver and he took his 'beart mhor' wooden loom, constructed by himself, with him to Stornoway.

At the time the Harris Tweed industry was a rural cottage industry and some people felt it was a mistake for Mr Nicolson to move to Stornoway because he was not likely to get enough work there as a weaver. He was known in Stornoway as 'the weaver' (am breabadair). Fifty years later almost the whole of the Harris Tweed industry was concentrated in Stornoway and Calbost was almost totally depopulated.

The departure of the last miller and the closure of the Calbost grain mill in 1902 was a significant date in the history of Calbost. We don't know who built the grain mill, or when it was built, but we believe that it is reasonable to assume that the Picts might have built it and that it was working for the last two thousand years. The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century therefore marked a profound change in the way of life of Calbost and the whole of the crofting community.

### **Sheilings**

A glance at the list of Calbost place names illustrates various changes in the course of the history of the village. There were at least seven sites where sheilings were set up, with possibly more than one sheiling in each area. Almost all of them were in the Catisbhal area. That indicates that there were a lot of cattle in the village at one

time. Our generation had no experience of that romantic custom because the practice of removing the cattle to the sheiling and summer grazing had ceased before the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

We now live in a different economy with few cattle and the domestic cow is replaced by the daily milk van.

'Sithean' (fairy hill) appears at least a dozen times in the list of Calbost place names. The name derives from 'sith' (fairy, i.e. fairy hill). The frequency with which this place name appears indicates a strong superstitious belief in fairies or an ignorant and irrational belief in supernatural agencies.

Meantime, no one in Lewis believes in fairies any more, or any other similar supernatural agency because the community has adopted sound Biblical Religion, which had dissipated these superstitions, and sithean is no longer associated with fairies.

### **Earlier communities**

The Ordnance Field Survey of 1851 notes 'Allt Mol na Braithrean', which is a stream flowing out of 'Loch na Buala Duibh' into the sea at 'Mol na Braithrean'. There is a corn mill on it where it falls into the sea.

There is, to this day, evidence of the ruins of the corn mill and one of the millstones, but there is no tradition of when, or, who operated this mill.

There is, however, widespread evidence of cultivation in the area of Mol na Braithrean in the form of old lazybeds extending eastwards over the side of Rudha na Creaga Moiré and westwards to Buala Chalaboist at the main road.

There is therefore strong evidence indicating that there was a community living at Mol na Braithrean in the distant past, so long ago that there is no oral tradition surviving into the 20<sup>th</sup> century about the mill or the people who cultivated the land near the mill.

The area of the mill had been incorporated into the common grazing of Calbost and, earlier, into the tack of Calbost, which apparently was inhabited by the Norse at one time. That indicates that the Mol Na Braithrean mill and community possibly pre-dates Calbost.

We can only speculate as to who operated this mill - was it the Gaels, the Norse or the Picts?

A great deal could be said about the numerous changes that took place in the crofting area in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Dr. Walker's list of exports from the outer Isles in 1764-65 was black cattle, herring, dried ling and cod, fish oil, whisky, linen yarn, wool blanketing, kelp, salmon, sheepskin and feathers. The above list shows that the economy of the Outer Isles depended to a large extent on the land and the fishing some 250 years ago.

Even as recent as 1918, it was the projected development of the fishing industry that attracted Lord Leverhulme to Lewis mainly. It was the failure of the fishing industry after the First World War and the worldwide economic depression that was the main reason for Leverhulme's departure in the early 1920s.

Fishing and crofting had an important place in the life of the crofting community for generations. It was the crofting way of life that retained the people in the rural areas in the Islands, as long as the fishing was prosperous, or some other alternative employment was available.

History shows that the establishment either failed to understand the crofting way of life, or was indifferent to the welfare of the crofting community. For over 100 years the crofters, in their thousands, were forcibly removed and dispossessed of the land on which they had lived for generations, and successive British Governments colluded with the landlords in their policy of clearances by turning a deaf ear to the plight of the crofter community. In fact, the main plank of British Government crofter policy during that dark period of history was emigration which of course was in line with the landlords' clearance policy, and directly opposite to the frequently stated needs of the crofting community, which was land and living space.

Only when the Government became alarmed increasingly during the period known to history as 'The Crofters War' in the first half of the 1880s, when widespread discontent in the Highlands and Islands, including widespread rent strikes and the distinct possibility of rural anarchy, did the Government heed the crofters cry for relief from the oppression of the landlord system, and the first Crofters Act of 1886 was passed with the assistance of a handful of newly elected crofter Members of Parliament then at Westminster.

The 1886 Crofters Act failed to restore their lost lands to the crofter community and therefore the Act failed to dispel the consequent discontent and land raiding by the numerous landless families who were forced to spend their whole lives living in barns and poor housing on their parents and relatives crofts. That discontent continued until the crofter community gave up the struggle in the late 1920s. By that time not only was the land question unsolved, but the herring fishing failed as well and the depopulation accelerated. The Merchant Navy and the Harris Tweed Industry are no longer a significant factor in crofter employment.

The coming of education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a big improvement in the life of the people, but education, in the absence of suitable employment only helped to hasten depopulation in the Highlands and Islands.

The small 14-croft township of Calbost was bursting at the seams with gross overcrowding during the long period of about 100 years from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and much the same conditions existed in all the villages of Lochs and Lewis as a whole.

The following table showing the number of family units that lived on each of the 14 Calbost crofts at the time of each 10-year census period illustrates beyond doubt, the gross overcrowding that was caused by the landowner's policy of crofter clearance and the denial of any land to the landless families.

#### Family Units in Calbost - Croft by Croft in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries

Croft	1841	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	1990
1	1	1	2	2	2	1	3	2	2	2	1	1	1	1		
2	2	4	3	2	2	4	4	2	2	2	2	1				
3	1	2	2	1	2	3	3	2	2	3	1	1	1			
4		1	1	3	4	4	3	2	2	2	1					
5	1	2	1	1	1	4	4	3	3	2	1					
6	1	1	1	2	3	3	2	3	3	2	2				1	1
7	1	1	3	3	4	4	4	3	3	2	1					
8	1	1	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	2	2	1				
9	1	2	2	4	4	5	4	6	6	4	2	1				
10	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	3	4	3	1				
11	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1			
12		1	1	1	2	1	2	2	3	2	2	2	1			
13	1	2	3	4	4	5	6	4	4	3						
14	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	1				
Total	14	22	27	32	36	42	44	37	38	32	20	10	4	1	1	1
Outside the village wall										3	3	3	2	1	1	

1. At that time elderly grandparents were cared for by the village community and naturally the figures in the above table are somewhat inflated by the inclusion of a few elderly families.
2. Nothing can disguise the gross overcrowding on each and every croft of Calbost in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.
3. The writer can testify to the overcrowding in the 1920s and 1930s. I remember six large families on croft 9 Calbost in the 1920s.
4. As a teenager I remember over 30 families in Calbost in the 1930s.
5. Note the growth on the common outside the village wall in the 30s and 40s.

[ends]

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