

A Brief History of the Park Peninsula

Park or Pàirc is the name given to the part of the Parish of Lochs, in the Isle of Lewis, which is situated south of Loch Erisort. The area is a peninsula bounded on the north side by the sea-loch Erisort and on the south side by Loch Seaforth, leaving a narrow neck of land of about one mile between the heads of these two sea lochs. The area of the peninsula is about 68,000 acres.

In the southern sector is the sporting estate of Eishkin, extending to about 42,000 acres. The population is distributed between the ten crofting townships of Habost, Kershader, Garyvard, Caversta, Cromore, Marvig, Calbost, Gravir, Lemreway and Orinsay, all of which lie on the shores of the northern part of Park and extending to 26,000 acres.

Very little is known about the early history of Park, but there is evidence to show that the area was inhabited from a very early date. The ruins of a Broch on an Island in Loch Cromore and in other places in the Lochs district are evidence of early occupation. It is reasonable to assume that the Picts were here as well as the Gaels and the Vikings. The followers of St. Columba also settled in St. Colm Island on Loch Erisort. The Vikings left the strong imprint of their Scandinavian place names from one end of the peninsula to the other, and we maintain that these place names would not have survived to this day without continuous occupation of the peninsula.

In the 18th and 19th centuries the man of Park, like his counterparts in other parts of the Highlands and Islands, was a man without rights and privileges and often at the mercy of an inconsiderate landlord.

His choice of site in the Park area was governed by accessibility to the sea, because from the sea came, in large measure, the substance of his livelihood. He made a living by arduous toil, from sea and land. He built his own house, with his own hands, from local materials. He often built his own boat. During the long winter evenings he spent his time pleasantly and light-heartedly with his fellows in the ceilidh house.

He was a Gaelic speaker with little, or no, knowledge of English until the second half of the 19th century. His native culture, in which song, story, folklore and religion played important parts, remained unchanged until comparatively recently when travel, two World Wars, education, radio and television, shattered his isolation and brought him into more frequent contact with the outside world.

Crofting is a way of life rather than an industry. It is part time agriculture and the traditional main ancillary industry in Park was fishing. However the First World War ruined our European markets for herring, such as Germany, the Baltic States and Russia, and the Lewis fishing industry never recovered its former glory thereafter. Nowadays the Lewis fishing fleet is smaller and they fish for white fish and shellfish. Fish farming also provides employment.

Between the two World Wars, when the herring fishing declined and the anchorages of Park began to empty of fishing boats, the young people used their seamanship skills in the Merchant Navy. In due course the British Merchant Navy also declined and serious depopulation set-in in Lewis but more particularly in Park and similar isolated districts. The outflow of indigenous young people is to some extent counteracted by an inflow of people from the industrial cities. The new settlers are, in the main, from a different culture and language.