



## [The Development of Harbour Facilities at Stornoway]

There is some speculation about the origin of the name 'Stornoway'. Some say it is derived from the Norse word 'stiornu', which means Anchor Bay, and some say it derives from the Gaelic designation 'Stròn-a-bhàigh', which means the end of the bay. On one thing, however, all are in agreement and that is that Stornoway Bay is a very safe anchorage and a natural place for the development of a commodious harbour. Probably that is why the tidal rock at the head of the Bay was chosen in the distant past as the site for the original Lewis Castle, said to be the stronghold of the clan Nicolson, and later on for the clan Macleod, before it was reduced to rubble by the guns of Oliver Cromwell. Now it lies submerged under the subsequent development of King Edward Wharf, otherwise known as number one wharf, near the terminal of the previous roll on/ roll off car ferry.

When Martin Martin visited Stornoway circa 1700 he tells us there were only 60 families there at that time. Some eighty years later when John Knox visited Stornoway in 1786 he commented that they were sorry to see that noble port without a quay. The vessels had to load and unload upon the beach or in the bay by means of small boats. Local oral tradition still speaks of the time when there were no piers in Stornoway and fish was landed on the beach or carried in baskets over a row of boats, sometimes walking over planks of wood that were placed across the boats.

An old map dated 1785 shows a number of small stone jetties in the inner harbour, but the only pier that was suitable for a larger vessel at that time was situated at the corner of North Beach Street and Esplanade Road, not far from where the Fisherman's Co-op is at present. That quay was known as the 'big quay' or the 'old pier'.

The present town of Stornoway evolved from a combination of three or four small villages. The original village of Stornoway lay in the peninsula area between North and South Beach. Then there was the village of Bayhead which was in the area where Bayhead Street is now and the village of Newton with landholdings stretching backwards from the foreshore in the Newton area. There was a fourth village called Ranol where the castle grounds are at present. The inhabitants of Ranol were moved by Sir James Matheson in order to make way for the castle and the castle policies.

Seaforth Mackenzie the Lewis proprietor encouraged the people of Stornoway to build small private stone quays by including a condition in their feu charters obliging feuars to build such stone quays on their land. Probably not unlike the small stone quays that may still be seen at the bottom of crofts in almost every village in Lewis.

Undoubtedly it was the development of harbour facilities at Stornoway that was the most important single contributing factor in the development of the town and the fishing industry in Lewis. Once proper harbour facilities were established at Stornoway it became the centre and focal point for all the fishing activity on the whole Island, and the growth of herring fishing was quite phenomenal in Lewis in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In that way the whole Lewis community owe a great debt of gratitude to the Harbour Commissioners down through the years for their foresight. Their counterparts of the present deserve our encouragement as well, for their ambitious development schemes. They also demonstrate that they are mindful of the best interests of the whole community.

As the Herring fishing developed and rural fishermen acquired large fishing boats, the fishermen of the landward area of Stornoway Parish were able to berth their boats in Stornoway for the weekends and during the off season. In the sheltered anchorages of Lochs, fishermen put down permanent mooring facilities and we recall every anchorage there being full of fishing boats. There is not a single large offshore fishing boat moored in any of the townships of Lochs now.

In 1816, eight Stornoway traders collected money to repair and improve the 'old pier'. They also formed a committee and drew up regulations to manage the quay and harbour; they appointed a harbour master with the approval of the landlord, Seaforth Mackenzie.

It transpired however that the landlord had no authority over the foreshore and the harbour commission asked Seaforth Mackenzie, as their Member of Parliament, to secure a Private Members Bill to enable them to constitute a proper harbour authority. It seems that Seaforth was unable to arrange the necessary legislation before he was appointed to the position of Governor of Ceylon about 1837.

After Sir James Matheson acquired the Island in 1844 he introduced the first regular steamboat service, using the steamer 'Online', and later on he introduced the paddle steamer 'Mary-Jane' between Stornoway and the

mainland. He built what was then known as 'The Steamer Quay' at the corner of South Beach and West Beach or Esplanade Road, not far from where the ramp for the roll on/roll off car ferry stood until recently.

Apart from these two piers, one on each corner of the west side of the peninsula area between North and South Beach, the rest of the foreshore of Stornoway harbour was more or less in its natural underdeveloped state.

An old Barque called 'Amity' was beached on the west beach by Sir James Matheson opposite the old customs house, which is now the building known as 'Amity House' and is at present used as the offices of the Harbour Commission. That wreck was also used as a quay.

Early in the 1860s the people of Stornoway appealed to their Member of Parliament, Sir James Matheson, the proprietor of Lewis to promote Parliamentary legislation that would enable them to establish a public harbour authority for the town. Instead of complying with their request Sir James, unknown to them, took steps to personally acquire the whole of the foreshore of Stornoway Bay from Arnish point right round past Holm Point. Among the reasons he put forward was sea erosion along South Beach and the problems of private individuals erecting piers to suit their fancy, without proper authority.

No enquiries were made to ensure that the local indigenous fishermen that depend on the sea for their living had proper access to the sea, and Sir James became the owner of the whole foreshore of Stornoway bay in 1863. As soon as he secured effective power Sir James took steps, through his despotic estate factor Donald Munro, to harass and deprive a large number of town's folk of an ancient source of income by warning them that they could no longer use the private piers for fish curing, neither could they let them for fishing purposes or otherwise exercise any rights of ownership over them as they had done in the past despite the fact that the piers were created by them at their own expense. Obviously Sir James wanted to control the harbour of Stornoway, the main port of the Island, in the same way as he controlled the land of the Island. If he had been successful it is reasonable to assume that the history of the fishing industry in Lewis would be very different, as would the history of the community in Lewis.

There were however men of courage in Stornoway at that time and they stood up to Sir James and ensured that the harbour came under the control of the community. A public meeting was called and a provisional committee was set up which was later strengthened at subsequent public meetings, and charged to promote the best interests of the community and the development of the fishing industry as well as the shipping connected with the port, in co-operation with James Matheson.

A heated dispute followed which became known at the time as the 'Foreshore Question' between Sir James and the parties that claimed an interest in the quays. Sir James claimed that he had purchased the foreshore and that he was the trustee and superior of the burgh, and as such he was the only legally constituted authority with all rights of property in the public quay vested in him.

The committee disagreed with Sir James and proceeded to discuss how they might secure possession of Stornoway harbour for the public and so render it more efficient for the purposes of trade and fishing.

Sir James asked the Court of Session to declare that he had sole and exclusive right to alter, improve and enlarge the piers at Stornoway without interference by the parties that claimed rights in the quays. And that these parties should hand over to him any dues levied or any balance in the quay account, which by then had accumulated a fair sum.

The quay committee responded by convening another public meeting and obtaining a unanimous mandate from the people of the town to carry their case to Parliament. Among those who signed the petition to Parliament were 16 fish curers, 13 coopers and 36 fishermen, indicating the extent of the fishing activity in Stornoway in the 1860s.

In February 1864 the Court of Session case was withdrawn and in August 1864 Sir James Matheson subscribed the instrument which brought the 'Stornoway Pier and Harbour Commission' into being. In 1865 the Pier and Harbour Commission was incorporated by an Act of Parliament.

The development of Stornoway Harbour from this time onwards was dramatic. It is difficult to visualise the position as it was from then. A few small piers and in the inner harbour vessels were beached at spring tides within the area now known as Perceval Square, where a saw pit existed. No time was lost by the newly commissioned Harbour Commission to procure a harbour order to authorise the commission to execute the following works:

1. A timber wharf 150 ft in length, which was the original part of what later became known as No.1 Wharf.
2. A quay wall of masonry 350 feet in length (seaward of high-water mark) extending northwards from the said timber wharf to the quay known then as 'the old quay'. That masonry quay occupied the position of the wreck of the barque 'Amity' which was used locally as a quay, and in the early days that masonry quay was known locally as 'Quay an Amity' or 'Esplanade Quay'.

3. The reclamation or infilling of the space behind 'Quay an Amity' made that area on the esplanade available for fish curing or other purposes.
4. The provision of works, buildings, sheds and warehouses etc. which may from time to time be necessary for the improvement of the harbour or the accommodation of shipping.

These very necessary improvements provided for the expansion of the fishing industry in Lewis in the 1860s and 1870s when the fishermen were getting larger fishing boats. In 1881 when these works were completed it was clear that the expansion of the fishing industry was outpacing the harbour improvements and that there was urgent need for additional quays. Consequently authority was sought in 1881 for the construction of an extension of 200 feet to No.1 Wharf.

After completion of the work authorised by the 1881 order, a further application was made in 1892 in order to carry out a very comprehensive programme of harbour improvements. This was evidence of the enormous increase in the fishing industry in the port, and the steadily increasing need for additional berthing facilities. The following works were authorised in 1892:

1. The construction of solid quays extending along Cromwell Street for a distance of 980 feet.
2. Extending along North Beach for a distance of 237 feet.
3. Extending along South Beach in an Easterly direction for a distance of 1,210 feet and linking with the retaining wall at Patent Slip which was situated at the former Newall Woollen Mills known as Patent Slip Wool Mills. In all that was an extension of 2,427 feet of solid quays, and in addition to that, this order gave authority to construct two more timber wharves which became known as No.2 and No.3 wharves. Actually the construction of a 4<sup>th</sup> wharf and other improvements in the Newton area was contemplated but never undertaken.

There was very considerable infilling to be carried out in the open spaces between the new solid quays and the existing roadways. Eventually these reclaimed areas were invaluable because they provided essential space for the rapidly developing herring fishing industry, particularly the curing yards where thousands of barrels could be seen stacked up ready for the feverish activity of the fishing seasons. The Harbour Commission owned a dredger at that time and they carried out deepening operations in the inner harbour for a number of years.

All the works authorised by the 1892 order were completed before the end of the century and the facilities provided by the farsighted public spirited men who served on the Harbour Commission during these years met the needs of the expanding fishing industry, both in berthing and in reclaimed areas for on shore fishing activities during the peak years of the fishing industry up to the beginning of the First World War.

During the First World War the Stornoway piers were used extensively. No. 2 wharf was used exclusively by naval ships of various kinds during the war. Because of the wheeled traffic and the constant use, all three wooden wharves were showing signs of wear and tear, and by the end of the war the Harbour Commission were contemplating carrying out further improvements, including the re-construction and extension of the wooden wharves.

However, Lord Leverhulme became proprietor of Lewis in 1918 and as such he was a Member of the Harbour Commission. Leverhulme included extensive harbour improvements in his development plans for the Island, mainly in the Newton/Goat Island area but these did not materialise before he left Lewis. Before his departure Lord Leverhulme gifted considerable property to the Harbour Commission. These became known as the 'gifted properties'.

A new harbour order was confirmed in 1926 authorising the following works which were carried out during the period 1930 to 1934:

1. The construction of a solid breastwork, built on steel sheet piling along the whole length of Cromwell Street Quay.
2. The construction of reinforced concrete wharves in front of North Beach Quay and Esplanade Quay and the replacement of this timber quay that was built in the area of King Edwards Lamp in 1865.
3. The deepening of the inner harbour by dredging to a depth of 8 feet at low water mark and 13 feet at Esplanade Quay.
4. The Commission also replaced and extended No.1 wharf with a reinforced concrete structure, and in 1938 No.2 wharf was also replaced by an extended reinforced concrete structure.

After the Second World War another harbour order was promoted in 1947 authorising the following works:

1. An extension of 300 feet in length to No.1 wharf giving a depth of 24 feet at low water.
2. The construction of a causeway, length 2,030 feet from Newton Street to Goat Island and an embankment extending from the causeway to Battery Point, about 600 feet in length.
3. The construction of a slipway and slipway jetty at Goat Island
4. The demolition of the timber structure known as No.3 wharf which had become obsolete and its replacement unnecessary, which was evidence of the fact that the period of growth of the port was past.

All the development the Stornoway Pier and Harbour Commission provided gave the expanding herring fishing industry suitable harbour facilities ahead of requirement. Even when the port bustled with activity when the three or four hundred fishing vessels landed thousands of crans of herring each week, there was no congestion in the harbour.

While there was herring fishing at Stornoway before 1860 it was on a much smaller scale. It was during the 80 years between 1860 and 1940 that Stornoway was really prominent as a herring fishing port. The herring industry grew rapidly and was really prosperous during the last 40 years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the hey-day of the herring fishing in Stornoway was during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From then on the herring fishing declined.

The importance of the herring fishing industry to Stornoway is reflected in the coat of arms of the town. The motto, 'God's Providence is our Inheritance', is directly related to the fishing industry.

The Arms of Stornoway show the constellation at the top which denotes a Burgh of Barony. The sailing ship indicated the great shipping trade of the past. The three fish indicated the importance of the fishing industry in the economy of the town, and the old castle which was that of the Macleods in Lewis.

Stornoway became a Burgh of Barony in 1607. The Coat of Arms of the Burgh of Barony of Stornoway is no longer relevant because of the reorganisation of local government in 1975 and 'Comhairle nan Eilean' became a single tier local government for the whole of the Western Isles.

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