



Physical Features and Antiquities of Pairc

The Park, or Pairc peninsula, in the Parish of Lochs, is situated in the south east corner of the Island of Lewis, next to Harris. Geographically it is almost cut off from the rest of Lewis by two long arms of seawater known as Loch Erisort to the north and Loch Seaforth to the south, confining the land access to the peninsula to a narrow neck of land at the heads of these two lochs between the townships of Balallan and Airidhbhruaich. The land area of the peninsula extends to 68,000 acres.

The physical features of the area are a landscape of hills and valleys and numerous freshwater lochs, as well as a coastline indented with many arms of the sea, usually referred to as sea lochs, which together with the numerous freshwater lochs in the area gives the Parish its name of 'Lochs'.

Vegetation is similar to that in the other areas of the Island - heather, moss and sedges. Native trees are conspicuously absent, except for occasional rowans and willows mainly in the settlements, however, there must have been plenty of trees at one time, as there are tree roots to be seen preserved in the deep peat in many places in Park.

The old name for the Park peninsula was 'Oservaul', and obviously that name is derived from the Norse, while the present name of Park 'A Phairc', is derived from Gaelic. There are very many place names of Scandinavian origin all over the peninsula, a fact which would seem to indicate that the area was extensively under Viking occupation at some time or another after the Vikings came to Lewis at the end of the 8th century.

It is said that the occupation of Lewis dates back into ancient antiquity, as evidenced by the erection of the Callanish Stones which experts assert were old when Rome was yet unborn, and in the light of that, there may have been periods of occupation by unknown people in Park in the long distant past. While there is not a lot of archaeological evidence of ancient occupation in Park, there are some, such as axe heads etc found at Kershader, of a similar time to those found near Balallan and other places in Lewis, which the experts speculate might be thousands of years old. There is also a marked Neolithic pottery site at Loch Mòr an Tanga not far from Torostay, and an ancient grave came to light about 1925 near Habost when the main road round the end of Loch Erisort towards Habost was being built. There is plenty of evidence of cultivation in places other than the present settlements, and we cannot be sure when some of that was done.

There are also the ruins of a 'dun', or defensive fort, on an island in Loch Cromore and there are ancient places of worship such as at St Colm's Island in Loch Erisort near Crobeg where it is said some of the followers of St Columba lived and gave their name to that island. There is an ancient place of worship on the Shiant Island of St Mary off the coast of Southern Park. On Croft 5 Cromore there is Leas-an-Teambuill 'The Temple's Garden' and the inference is that there may have been a temple there sometime in the distant past. There is also the theory that the garden may have been associated with the place of worship on St Colm's Island. The stone wall of the garden, which was said to be round in shape, was removed by Calum Mackenzie 'Calum Anna' towards the end of the 19th century in order to clear the agricultural ground. The site is just below Murchadh Ann Mackenzie's house on Croft No. 5.

From a very early date the people of Uig were in the habit of taking their cattle to sheilings 'airidhean' for summer grazings in Park, and the well-known 'Airidh Domhnuill Chaim' the sheiling of the one-eyed Donald Macaulay, Uig, as well as many other ruins of sheilings, remain to this day in the form of green grassy mounds, as evidence of the seasonal occupation of the area.

There are also the remains of several old dykes, one across the neck of land between the heads of Loch Erisort and Loch Seaforth. That dyke was said to have been erected by the Seaforth landlord and it is known locally as Garadh-an-Tighearna 'the Landlord's Dyke'. The purpose was to keep the landlord's stock within the park and the common people and their stock outside.

The remains of another dyke called An Garadh Mòr 'the Great Wall' can be seen west of Glenside Gravir and extending on the one hand to the sea between Lemreway and Orinsay, and on the other hand it goes out the glen and may be ending at Loch Sgibaclete but the course of it is somewhat obscure.

When Lady Matheson refused repeatedly to grant the petitions and applications of the landless cottars of Gravir for land in Orinsay and Steimreway in the 1880s and instead gave these lands to Roderick Martin of Crobeg, the

people of Gravir protested vigorously by tearing down part of the Great Wall during the crofter agitation which culminated in the Crofters Act of 1886.

Yet, another dyke, the remains of which can be seen as it goes on to the shore in the 'Ard Alaskir' between Marvig and Cromore not far from 23 Marvig. That wall is also known locally as the Garadh Mòr and it goes from there north west and can be seen from the main road a mile or so outside Cromore at It a Mhuile. It passes along to the south of Garyvard but the course of it after that is somewhat obscure, but presumably it goes on to Loch Erisort somewhere. We have not been able to trace any tradition which might indicate what purpose this wall served. We speculate that it may have marked the boundary of the St Colm tack at the time. We know that the lands of St Colm's tack extended as far as Caverstay and possibly further at one time.

[ends]

AN ARCHIVE RECORD FROM THE ANGUS MACLEOD ARCHIVE www.angusmacleodarchive.org.uk

Author: Angus Macleod

Date:

Original document title: Location and Physical Features of Pairc

Location in physical archive: Series F, File 9, Section 1

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/6/13

© Angus Macleod Archive