



## [Overview of the Physical Features and History of Calbost]

The small crofting village of Calbost nestles round a fresh water loch known as 'Loch Dubh', which empties itself into the Bay of Calbost called 'Camus Chalaboist'. It lies on the Minch coast of Lewis some nine sea miles south of Stornoway, and about 30 miles from Stornoway by road, because the road winds its way round the long arm of the sea known as Loch Erisort.

The village is one of 10 crofting townships situated in the Park peninsula, in the Parish of Lochs, in the southwest corner of the Island, next to Harris. Geographically, the Park peninsula is almost cut off from the rest of Lewis by two long arms of sea water 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 sea lochs between the townships of Balallan and Airidhbhuach. The peninsula extends to an area of 68,000 acres.

The physical features of the area are a landscape of hills and villages and numerous fresh water lochs, as well as coastline indented with many arms of the sea, usually referred to as sea lochs, which together with the fresh water lochs gives the Parish its name of 'Lochs'. The old name for the Park peninsula was 'Oservaul' which is obviously derived from Norse, while the present name of Park or 'A Phàirc' is a Gaelic name.

The name 'Calbost' is considered to be of Scandinavian origin. The suffix 'bost' denotes a homestead or small farm, while the prefix 'Cal' or 'Kali' was probably the name of the Scandinavian occupant.

The Hebrides were finally severed from the Norwegian Crown and incorporated with the Kingdom of Scotland in the 13<sup>th</sup> century after about 5 centuries of occupation. Obviously the Scandinavians occupied the whole of the Park peninsula from end to end as they left their mark everywhere in the form of Scandinavian place names, including the Calbost area. We have no idea however when they occupied the homestead of Calbost or how long they were there.

The puzzling thing is how the Scandinavian place names survive to this day on such an extensive scale in Lewis during the six or so centuries since the Scandinavian power in the Hebrides was broken, particularly during the early part of that period when we know that Lewis was sparsely populated.

We venture to say that it looks like the Scandinavians did not leave in the 13<sup>th</sup> century but assimilated with the Gaelic Gaels. Considering that it is the Norse names that predominate throughout the Park peninsula, it is likely that the Scandinavians predominated in the early period after the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It is said that in Lewis as a whole, there are about four times as many more Norse names as there are of purely Gaelic origin.

Leaving speculation aside we know that Robert Weir was the tacksman at Calbost in 1784 because he wrote a letter from there to the Lewis Presbytery dated 11<sup>th</sup> May 1784 relating to the translation of Rev. James Wilson, then Minister of Lochs, to Crathie on the Scottish Mainland. Probably Mr Weir was at Calbost at least 8 years earlier in 1776.

Unconfirmed oral tradition indicates that Robert Weir resided at first at a place called 'Lite Sithinn' between Calbost and Gravir, where some of the early settlers at Gravir resided before moving into the east end of Gravir up to about croft 13 called 'Gill'. It was implied that Mr Weir was at that time tacksman of Gravir and Calbost, but we are unable to confirm that. We do know however, that Mr Weir was tacksman of both Gravir and Calbost later on, and he paid a combined rental of £118.

Mr Weir was one of the most progressive entrepreneurial tacksman in Lewis in his day. He was active in fishing and had a white fish salting station at 'Mol a Ghò', the pebbly beach where the boats were hauled at Calbost. Pebbly beaches were very suitable for drying the fish in the sun and the wind. Mr Weir was also active in kelping and agriculture. We believe that the ruins of his kelping kilns may be seen near the site of his salting station in the neck of the small peninsula known as 'Eilean a Ghò'.

As a tacksman Mr Weir attracted a number of settlers to his tack and he provided them with land and work as kelpers and fishermen. That was before crofting land tenure replaced the old run-rig system of tenure. Obviously Mr Weir was fairly well off as his home was well ahead of its time in construction. Although it was a thatched house, the walls were not built in the Lewis tradition of undressed stones for thatched houses, but were more in the white house tradition of dressed stone and clay. The ruins of the house may still be seen on the boundary

between crofts 3 and 4 on the edge of his big garden 'Gàradh Mor', which was a large enclosure extending across the width of crofts 2, 3 & 4.

Oral tradition relates that there is soil that came from Ireland in the 'Gàradh Mor' of Rob Weir, and apparently that is probably correct because it appears that it was the custom to use Irish soil as ballast in ships returning 'light' (without cargo) after delivering a cargo to Ireland. That soil was then unloaded at places like Calbost before a new cargo of fish or kelp was loaded. Then the servile smallholders who were dependant on the goodwill of the tacksman would set to work to carry the precious Irish soil to the master's garden.

Also, we may be sure that Robert Weir operated the grinding mill on the stream at Calbost. It is said that these mills are of Scandinavian design, and the likelihood therefore is that the Calbost mill was in use by the Scandinavians and probably continuously ever since, including Robert Weir. The mill is situated on the stream on the boundary of croft 11 Calbost, and the crofting tenants of that croft used it. The last person to operate the meal mill was Kenneth Nicolson of 11 Calbost. It was producing meal regularly until Kenneth's family moved to Stornoway in 1902. That was one of the very first families to move away from Calbost.

The last grinding stones used in the mill are still there, and we hope they will be left there as an ancient monument showing one aspect of the way of life of our ancestors. The present grinding stones were taken from the stone quarry near Dalbeg on the west coast of the Island sometime in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were taken to Stornoway on a cart, thence to Calbost by boat, and then manhandled to the mill. They are much larger than the former grinding stones that were in the mill. The former grinding stones were subsequently used as hearthstones in two Calbost houses, that of Donald Finlayson of croft 10, and John Mackay of croft 7. Our aunt, Kate Nicolson, often told us how she and others spent the whole night in the mill watching the grinding when the water was plentiful.

When Robert Weir died in 1821 his next of kin was given as Alexander Mackenzie, vintner, Stornoway. His household effects were sold by auction on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1821, presumably at Calbost. The inventory of the articles on sale throws some light on the standard of living of a Lewis tacksman just before the tacksman system finally passed out of the historical view in Lewis.

The following is a list of the goods on sale and the names of the buyers:

<b>Buyers</b>			<b>£</b>	<b>s</b>	<b>d</b>
Charles Simpson	Keose	1 Cow	4	4	0
Murdo Macleod	Sheildinish	1 Table		9	0
Murdo Macleod	Sheildinish	1 Table		3	0
Murdo Macleod	Sheildinish	1 Cupboard		7	6
Alexander Macleod	Calbost	1 Chest		5	0
Donald Maciver	Marvig	1 Cupboard		9	0
Murdo Macleod	Sheildinish	1 Desk		5	0
Alexander Mackenzie	Marvig	1 Chair		1	0
Duncan Maciver	Marvig	1 Chair		1	7
Norman Macfarlane	Marvig	1 Chair		1	0
Alexander Mackenzie	Marvig	2 Chairs		1	9
Mrs Morrison	Lemreway	1 Feather Bed	1	1	0
Kenneth Maclean	Calbost	1 Bed Cover		7	6
John Macleod	Valtos	2 Candlesticks		4	0
John Macleod	Valtos	1 Tray etc		7	6
Alexander Mackenzie	Marvig	1 Pot		2	1
Murdo Macleod	Sheildinish	1 Chest of Drawers		14	0
John Macleod	Valtos	2 Fire Irons		1	8
Alexander Mackenzie	Stornoway	1 Barrel Bean Seed		10	0
Donald Mackenzie	Stornoway	1 Barrel Bean Seed		9	0
Murdo Macleod	Sheildinish	1 Cask		1	6
Murdo Macleod	Sheildinish	1 Chist	1	13	0
John Macleod	Valtos	1 Tablecloth		3	6
Murdo Macleod	Sheildinish	1 Tablecloth		3	3
Murdo Macleod	Sheildinish	3 Hand Towels		1	6
Lewis Smith	Marvig	1 Peat Iron			11
Donald Maciver	Marvig	1 Bucket and Spade		1	6
John Macleod	Valtos	1 Barrel		2	0
John Macleod	Valtos	1 Tea Boiler		5	0
Murdo Macleod	Sheildinish	27 Barrel Potatoes @ 2/8	3	12	0
Donald Smith	Calbost	Roof of a House	1	5	0
Norman Mackenzie	Calbost	1 Boat	1	10	0
Norman Mackenzie	Calbost	1 Fishing Frock		12	0
			19	15	9

Deduct Funeral and Servant wages	9	10	
Balance	10	5	9

If we assume that Mr Weir, who according to local oral tradition had some connection with Aberdeenshire, was about 25 years old when he came to Calbost, he must have been past retiring age when he died in 1821. By that time the Calbost tack was already divided into seven crofts at the time of the first lotting in 1814/18. These first crofts went to the smallholders who were under the run-rig system of land tenure along with Robert Weir. Probably his last few years in Calbost was spent in retirement.

The names of the first seven crofters at Calbost following the first lotting were as follows:

Alexander Macleod	Born 1796	Married 1815	Subsequently at croft 1
Donald Kennedy	Born 1788	Married 1810	Subsequently at croft 2
Norman 'Buidhe' Mackenzie	Born 1780	Married 1805	Subsequently at croft 3
Donald Smith	Born 1790	Married 1815	Subsequently at croft 5
Kenneth Macleod	Born 1780	Married 1809	Subsequently at croft 13
Malcolm Finlayson	Born 1800	Married 1820	Subsequently at croft 14
Kenneth Maclean	Born 1760	Married 1790	Subsequently at Buala Glas then croft 15 in Gravir

Later on four younger men came to Calbost probably as squatters. They were:

Malcolm Mackay	Born 1801	Married 1829	Subsequently at croft 7
Jock Macleod	Born 1808	Married 1833	Subsequently at croft 8
Murdo Morrison	Born 1801	Married 1826	Subsequently at croft 9
Murdo Nicolson	Born 1811	Married 1841	Subsequently at croft 11

Crofts were not given numbers until after the First Crofters Act of 1886 when crofting was recognised statutorily. Before that, crofts were known by a name usually indicating their geographical location, in the same way, as farms are still known. Crofting townships are therefore usually divided into various districts. The following are the Calbost districts:

- 'Cnoc a Runnsan' where croft 1 and 2 are located.
- 'Cnoc a Bhuanna' where croft 3, 4 and 5 are located.
- 'Cnoc a Cheardaich' where croft 6 is located.
- 'Loba a Loch' where croft 7 is located.
- 'Creag a Choin Dubh' where croft 8 is located.
- 'Glaic Na Sioman' where croft 9 is located.
- 'An Allt Dubh' where croft 10 and 11 are located.
- 'Baile Phàil' where croft 12 is located.
- 'An Allt Ruadh' where croft 13 is located.
- 'A Bhuala Glas' where croft 14 is located.

The setting up of a commercial sheep farm in southern Park in the opening years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Seaforth Mackenzie, the Lewis proprietor, and the clearance over a period of years of over 30 villages from there in order to make room for the cheviot sheep of the Park Sheep Farm, resulted in numerous displaced families from southern Park and elsewhere in Lewis.

Even as early as the 1820s and 1830s displaced families from southern Park sought refuge in the villages of northern Park, and at least five of the original families at Calbost came from southern Park. The evictions from southern Park continued for most of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, causing severe congestion in the already overcrowded villages of northern Park at a time when the population was rising very fast. There was a population explosion in Lewis in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, rising from about 9,000 people at the beginning of the century to about 29,000 people at the end of the century.

By 1844 the long reign of 234 years of the Seaforth regime in Lewis came to an end, and James Matheson the China opium dealer, who was born in Lairg in Sutherland, bought the island for £190,000. Mr Matheson and his advisors soon realised that overcrowding on the small crofts in Lewis were chaotic and a new re-allocation of the in bye arable land of the villages was unavoidable, because already more than one family lived on many of the crofts.

In about 1850 James Matheson initiated a programme of re-allocation of croft in bye land throughout the island, usually referred to as the second and last lotting. In the Park district at least, the second lotting was little more than a re-allocation of the arable land already occupied by crofting communities. For instance, whereas the in bye land of the tack of Calbost was originally divided into 7 crofts at the time of the first lotting in 1814/18, in 1850/52 the village was divided into 14 crofts with only a little extra land re-claimed from the common grazing round the village.

It seems that in the case of Calbost the first lotting was unfrozen and the whole inbye land of the village was re-allocated together with a little extra land taken in by moving the boundary wall out a little on the higher ground round the village, and the whole re-allocated into 14 new crofts probably averaging about 5 acres each. But for some mysterious reason, some of the 14 new crofts were much smaller than others.

The 14 new crofters were made up of the 6 original crofters and the subsequent 4 additional crofters already mentioned, and 4 sons of the village as follows:

Tormod Og Mackenzie	Born 1817	Married 1840	Subsequently at croft 4
Tormod Choinnich Macleod	Born 1815	Married 1836	Subsequently at croft 6
Aonghas Chalum Finlayson	Born 1817	Married 1840	Subsequently at croft 10
Domhnull Thormod Mackenzie	Born 1819	Married 1844	Subsequently at croft 12

It is not quite clear if all the demand for new crofts at Calbost was fully satisfied at the time of the second lotting. At least one Calbost family, Kenneth Kennedy, born on croft 2 in 1812 settled on croft 4 in Marvig, whether by choice or not we do not know.

Our host in the ceilidh house, Angus Morrison, often referred to the second lotting, which took place when he was a boy of about 10 years old. His contemporary, Kenneth Nicolson of 11 Calbost, was employed by the surveyors to hold the measuring chain for them. When the surveyors called for Kenneth he was busy assisting his father making a new herring net.

Up to about that time all herring nets were made by hand at home. It was in 1850 that James Paterson of Musselburgh invented a loom that was capable of weaving cotton gill nets, which were less bulky than the previous hemp nets.

Angus Morrison, our host in the ceilidh house, also told us how the lots were drawn at the time for the second lotting. Each tenant put a token in a hat, and the person in charge of the allocation extracted a token at a time, and announced the croft that fell to the owner of the token. His grandfather, Murdo Morrison (1797-1870) known as 'Murchadh Breabadair', put a sealskin tobacco splochan in the hat. When the sealskin purse was drawn the man in charge said, 'Is dual do'n ròn bhith'n cois na mara.' (It is natural for the seal to be by the sea.) Murdo got croft 9, which borders the sea.

The original 14 crofters in Calbost at the second lotting in 1852 were as follows:

- Alexander Macleod of croft 1 who came from Carloway.
- Donald Kennedy of croft 2 who came via southern Park.
- Tormod 'Buidhe' Mackenzie of croft 3 who came from the Carloway area.
- Tormod Og Mackenzie of croft 4 who was the son of Tormod 'Buidhe' of croft 3.
- Donald Smith of croft 5 who came via southern Park.
- Norman Macleod of croft 6 who was the son of Kenneth Macleod of croft 1
- Calum Og Mackay of croft 7 who came from Kirivick in Carloway.
- Jock Macleod of croft 8 who came from Garenin in Carloway.
- Murdo Morrison of croft 9 who came via southern Park.
- Angus Finlayson of croft 10 who was the son of Calum Finlayson of croft 14.
- Murdo Nicolson of croft 11 who came from Eishken via Gravir.
- Donald Mackenzie of croft 12 who was the son of Tormod 'Buidhe' of croft 3.
- Kenneth Macleod of croft 13 who came from the Tolsta Chaolais area.
- Calum Finlayson of croft 14 who came via southern Park.

The population of Calbost at the time of the second lotting was only about 100 persons in 1851, and the total in bye croft land in the village was about 70 acres (14 crofts at 5 acres each). That worked out at about ¼ acre of in bye land per person, which was obviously insufficient to begin with, far less later on as the population multiplied.

Fifty years after the second lotting, in 1901, the population of Calbost had doubled to 200 persons without any real increase in the in bye arable land available to them. The history of the land problem at Calbost is similar to the history of the land problems of all the villages of the Park peninsula and elsewhere in the island. The land problem was at its worst in the 100 years following the second lotting in 1850, peaking in the middle of that period.

Considering that the common grazing of Calbost extended to 1735 acres, it is difficult to understand why the in bye land of the crofts had to be confined to about 5 acres each on average. Furthermore, there was additional suitable land adjacent to the village, which could easily have been included within the crofts at the time of the second lotting.

In fact most of the crofts were extended by taking in some of the land that was adjacent to the crofts about 1890 when the first Crofters Commission granted crofters requests for croft extensions all over the island, after the passing of the First Crofters Act of 1886.

At that time 'Lòn a Ghrugaich' to the north end of the village as the road comes in from the Marvig direction, was divided into six portions as extensions to crofts 1 to 6. That process could have been continued towards the Marvig boundary including 'Buala Chalaboist' where some of the best arable land in the village is to be found. In fact two landless cottars moved out from the village and settled at 'Buala Chalaboist' during the land raiding period of the 1920s. They were Murdo Morrison and Angus Morrison who moved out from the overcrowded croft of 9 Calbost where there were five large families living.

There is evidence of cultivated land in the form of lazy beds in several places round Calbost, including 'Buala Chalaboist', 'Mol Na Bràithrean', 'Mol a Ghò', 'Creagan Ruadh' towards the side of Loch Odhairn near Gravir, and also in the Catisval area. No one knows who cultivated these areas or when. It may have been the Scandinavians.

Calbost was grossly overcrowded for over 100 years before it went into decline and depopulation. Agitation for Land Law Reform started in earnest in Calbost and everywhere else, as early as the 1870s, and by the 1880s the people of the Highlands were angry and militant.

That was the hey-day of British Capitalism, the golden age of British farming and the British Empire. Industry was booming with iron and steel, engineering textiles, as well as overseas trade. Yet, the only spin-off that came to the Highlands and Islands from that great wealth was the stepping up of the provision for sporting facilities for the benefit of the affluent rich of the industrial class. It was at this time that the Park Sheep Farm was converted into a sporting deer park in 1886. Ironically, that was the same date as the First Crofters Act of 1886.

In converting the whole of the 42,000 acres of the Park Sheep Farm into a sporting deer forest, the Lewis Estate deliberately ignored the petition from 32 landless families from Calbost, Marvig and Gravir for permission to occupy the former crofting townships of Steimreway and Orinsay. Not a single new croft was created, although the whole of the 42,000 acres was land from which crofters were removed to make way for the Sheep Farm.

In 1891 there were 35 families living on the 14 crofts in Calbost. If we look at the census figures for the 70 years from 1871 to the beginning of the Second World War in 1939 we find that the population of Calbost averaged out at about 176 persons per census year giving an average of about 12 people per 5-acre croft, or a personal allocation of about a third of an acre of in by land each. Yet the priorities of the Lewis Estate lay in the direction of sporting parks for the affluent rich and well housed.

#### **The dwelling house of Robert Weir**

The Calbost tacksman who died in 1821. We do not know whether the Tacksman's house was built by the Lewis Seaforth Estate or privately by Mr Weir himself. One elderly lady in Calbost, Flora Smith, felt it was built originally by the Estate but that is doubtful because the roof of a house was sold in the sale of the personal effects of Robert Weir in 1821, and the site was not feud officially.

The construction of the house was well ahead of its time. The walls were built with stone and clay, but traditions inform us that the roof was thatched. The roof was not resting on the inner wall in the traditional way but on the outer wall with the thatch overhanging the wall at the eaves. It was a white house with a thatched roof. The second statistical account for the parish of Lochs written in 1833 by the parish minister Rev Robert Finlayson says, 'there are three dwelling-houses in the Parish built of stone and clay which are occupied by farmers of which only one is slated, the Inn at Loch-Shell.' Probably the house of Robert Weir Calbost was one of the three houses mentioned above.

Long after Robert Weir had died, the family Malcolm MacKenzie 1843-1908, 'Calum Ruadh Thormoid Oig' lived in the house. Probably he roofed it when he married Anne Ferguson (1847) from 12 Habost Lochs about 1869. They raised a family of 3 girls and 6 boys there, before the boys built a new house in 1908/10, the gable ends of which may be seen against the skyline in line with Mr Weir's house. In the 1940's the right front end as seen in the photo was converted into a hen-house. Until then the four walls of the house were in good condition. A blocked back door may be seen in the centre of the Picture, to the back.

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