

THE UISTS

Introduction: the survey area: North and South Uist

The farming of the Outer Hebridean islands of North and South Uist has gone through several distinct phases since the late-18th century, and the most recent of these are represented in the surviving buildings. The landscape presents great contrasts between mountains, lochs and long inlets on the east to the windswept machirs of the west. Between the two are some flat and relatively fertile soils, but the harsh climate has long inhibited agriculture.

The late-eighteenth century

By the eighteenth century both North and South Uist were almost entirely under the control of the Clanranalds and cadet branches of the Macdonald family. According to the Rev. Buchanan, who visited the Uists inbetween 1782 and 1790 Mr Macdonald of Boisdale (South Uist) was ‘universally allowed as the best farmer in the west of Scotland’, encouraging his tenants by example. To the north of Boisdale, most of the rest of South Uist was under the control of Mr Macdonald of Clanranald whose approach to agricultural ‘improvement’ was rather different in that he ‘turned several hundreds of souls out of their possessions and bestowed their farms, by large tracts of country on a few favourites’. This estate had been divided into six farms in the 1750s with rents of between 400 and 192 marks, each then sublet to many sub-tenants.¹ Lord Macdonald of North Uist chose yet another route to ‘improvement’ in that he reduced the size of the largest farms and removed ‘idle tacksmen’ to make room for ‘industrious tenants’.² Here again there had been clearances, with more than 200 people leaving for North Carolina between 1770 and 1775.³

Below the landholders were the tacksman, and Buchanan found them living in affluence and ‘able to rank with the gentlemen’. Many were involved in improving their farms. On North Uist Mr Macdonald of Balranald had drained lochs and converted the ground into rich arable fields.⁴ On South Uist there were six large farm farms held by this group. This generally rosey picture painted by Buchanan is tempered by the observation that the division between rich on poor was greater here than perhaps anywhere else. Whilst the tacksmen could augment their agricultural income by trade or smuggling, the subtenants were at the mercy of the tacksmen and had nothing beyond their small share in a communal farms to support them and were often desperately poor. For instance as late as 1822 there were 28 sub-tenants on the farm at Stoneybridge and 26 at Kildonan (both on South Uist),⁵ long after both areas are said to have been re-organised into individual farms. Presumably population pressure meant that what existed in theory could not be implemented in practice.

The picture presented by Buchanan is of islands where landholders and tacksman lived well and farms were productive. This view is generally supported by the reports of the local ministers in the *Statistical Account*. Whilst it was only the west coast and the north end of North Uist where the sandy soils were suitable for cultivation, ‘in good

¹ NAS GD 201/1/351/5

² Rev. J.L. Buchanan *Travels in the Western Hebrides from 1782-1790* (1997 edition) 11-12

³ *Statistical Account* 20 (1793) 100

⁴ Buchanan, *Travels in the Western Hebrides from 1782-1790* (1997 edition) 17-18

⁵ NAS GD201/1/351/20

seasons the most luxuriant crops of barley and clover pasture as well as small oats could be grown'. About 2000 cows and 1600 horses were kept. However, in bad years meal would have to be imported and many cows died. Very few sheep were kept and here there was certainly room for intensification which would be helped by the granting of long leases to encourage a sense of security. This would also result in improvements to buildings. There was 'not a slated house in the parish'. In spite of emigration, there had been a great increase in population since 1755, from 1909 to 3218 in 1793. This was partly the result of inoculation and early marriage, but equally important was the 'proprietor's preference for small tenants' so that he had a large work force available for his main source of wealth - the gathering of kelp. This employed the entire population from the 10th of June to the 10th of August and about 1200 tons were exported.⁶

In South Uist the only cultivatable land was a strip between the sandbanks of the west coast and the mountains to the east. Seaweed was used for manure and barley, oats, rye and potatoes produced, but even in good years there was not enough to feed the population for more than nine months of the year. Between 400 and 450 cattle were sold every year, but prices were always low because of the problems of transport. Again kelp was the main commodity, with about 1100 tons exported every year. The need of a large labour force for the kelp kept the population high. In 1793 there were 3450 people, over a thousand more than in 1755, although the number had been decreased by emigration.⁷

The picture at the end of the 18th century is typical of that over much of north-west Scotland; landowners wanting to keep a large population on their estates to work the kelp, and improving farmers taking over the farms and displacing the communal farmers. Some would be cleared and forced to emigrate, whilst others were resettled on very small holdings, relying on kelping for a living. If the *Statistical Account* is to be believed there was still much improvement on the large farms to be done. The Rev Allan Macqueen said of North Uist 'There is no country more capable of improvement'. For instance, in 1803 Kildonan farm on South Uist was still let to 'Macdonald and 19 others' as a communal farm.⁸

1800-1840

Little had changed by 1811 and the writing of the *General Survey*. The houses were still all thatched and 'a disgrace to a civilized country', with no windows or chimneys.⁹ The work of Macdonald at Balranald is mentioned along with a few others but 'they have many difficulties to encounter'.¹⁰ The horses and black cattle were 'not bad', but overstocked because there was a lack of winter feed and also of proper housing.¹¹ Of the smaller tenants, they were busy with the kelp all summer. 'A man occupied along with his family all summer and part of the autumn in making kelp, can never manage

⁶ *Statistical Account* 20 (1793) 100-125

⁷ *Statistical Account* 20 (1793) 126-133

⁸ NAS GD201/2/43

⁹ J. Macdonald *General View of the Agriculture of the Hebrides* (1811) 792

¹⁰ J. Macdonald *General View of the Agriculture of the Hebrides* (1811) 803

¹¹ J. Macdonald *General View of the Agriculture of the Hebrides* (1811) 1804

land to good purpose: he must neglect the one or the other, and in Uist the land is almost completely neglected.¹²

Some improvements were begun before the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815. A report on North Uist was completed by John Blackadder for the Clanranald family in 1800. At that time it was divided into five districts containing forty farms. Six of these were leased, but the others were held from year to year by as many as thirty joint tenants on one farm. Crops of bere were said to be very good while oats and rye were only 'tolerably' so. The arable land was farmed under a run-rig system with the cattle kept on a common. The tillage was cropped for three years and then put down to grass. The grass was covered with seaweed before being ploughed up, but only the first year produced a good crop. Heavy ploughs requiring four men and five horses were used. Blackadder wrote that the land should be enclosed and farmed on a rotation including clover and turnips. Some of the common he also thought was 'improvable'. For this to be possible the land needed dividing into individual farms. All should have their 'separate share of the arable land inclosed and with a comfortable house built upon it and covered either with heath or slate with a certainty of enjoying the same for a number of years; it would in a short time give altogether a different turn to the rural economy'. If improved agriculture were to be introduced, then a 'good example' needed setting. 'The greatest part of the people never have been out of the island and are altogether unacquainted with agriculture or improvement of any kind whatever and without some instruction it cannot be expected that they will do anything out of the common road'. He suggested that an 'overseer' should be brought in to take over one of the farms and set an example. Blackadder appreciated that it was kelp rather than farming that was of the greatest value to the owner and so small farms encouraged the population to keep on kelping 'which is the first object of the landlord here' were the best way forward.¹³ The arable lands of North Uist were measured and lotted and communal farm townships ended in 1814. Although the common grazings remained there was still a 'powerful impetus towards improvement'. Crop yields rose and some of the tacksmen were embanking against the sea and draining lochs. The problem of sand drift onto arable was controlled by planting grass on sand banks.¹⁴

A survey in 1813 preceded the laying out of crofts which were to be created that winter. Balemhisfail farm was converted to 15 crofts although the soil was said to be well 'adapted for clover or turnip husbandry'. Balemhiconan was converted to 10 crofts 'of inferior quality'. Goldbay was a farm of less than 80 acres and therefore too small for two horses, but it remained as a single-tenant holding. It was to be cropped under a four-course system. Clachan was converted to 10 crofts, Remisgary to 9 'of inferior quality', Valogue was another small single-tenant farm, Orimsay was to be 24 crofts, Grenitot, 24, 17 on arable and 8 on 'improvable moss', Solos, 23 crofts, Dunsellar 10, 'seven with excellent turnip soil', and Middlequarter, 11 crofts. Vallay and Maliglet were to remain as single tenant farms which should be enclosed and managed on a four-course rotation. They 'could contain 20-25 acres of turnip land'. Generally, the land was said to be under-rated considering the extent and value of the soils, for various reasons: 'The total want of knowledge amongst the inhabitants, and

¹² J. Macdonald *General View of the Agriculture of the Hebrides* (1811) 795

¹³ John Blackadder's survey of Lord MacDonald's estates on Skye and North Uist, (1800) Hull University Library DDBM/27/3

¹⁴ *New Statistical Account* 14 (1837) 174

the distance from any sort of market resulting in expense and hazard of sending off cattle.' 'The first obstacle may and will soon be overcome, for the crofting out of the land and placing every man on his own footing is at best considered to be a first leading step to it.' The problem was that few of the inhabitants had been out of their own country was again stressed and so 'enterprising young men' should be sent away at the owner's expense to learn new methods. It would be better to train the local inhabitants that import 'strangers of skill and capital' who would not come 'without a great encouragement given by the proprietor and they will be looked at by the local inhabitants with a degree of jealousy'.¹⁵

However, it was only the tacksmen who had leases, usually of between 7 and 14 years, leaving the smaller tenants as insecure as ever. Griminish (lately possessed by Capt. Alex. Mclean and Vallay (lately possessed by Mrs Harriet MacDonald) farms were let to the North Uist minister, Rev. Finlay Mcrae in 1829 for 14 years at a rent of £129. There were no husbandry clauses but the buildings had to be kept in repair.¹⁶ Although the cultivated land was extended through land reclamation no new rotations incorporating clover and turnips or improved stock accompanied the creation of the crofting system.¹⁷

South Uist was divided and communal farms nominally ended in 1818. Yields improved and the proprietor no longer had to find meal in the spring. New ploughs were introduced and potatoes were drilled. Turnips and clover were introduced. As a result, produce was said to have tripled and rents gone up from £2,200 in 1797 to £5,600 in 1837. Sand banks were being planted and a 'large sandy tract in the northern part of 600 acres is now brought into cultivation.' However, enclosure and drains were still required.¹⁸

With the end of the wars and the beginning of a settled period of European peace in 1815, the price of soda ash, produced from kelp and an important ingredient of gunpowder dropped, and with it the fortunes of the landholders, the Clanranalds. In 1812 the kelp profits on North Uist amounted to £14000 to the proprietor; by 1837 they were nothing.¹⁹ The tackmen and small farmers were often in arrears with their rents. In 1816 the tacksmen of North Uist asked for a rent reduction because of the fall in cattle prices. 'Cattle are the only thing they have to depend upon to pay their rents'.²⁰ 1821-2 was a bad winter, many animals perished and those that survived were poor. The factor took cattle to Falkirk market with the idea of raising part of the rent owed to him, but the prices were so low that it was not worth taking a second lot. He saw the problem as one of over-population. 'The allotments of land are so small that tenants cannot subsist, even in a good year. In order to enable them to harvest his kelp, the landlord has to provide provision' and with the drop in prices this was becoming less worth while. The only other way to recoup rent was by giving tenants work such as building roads, laying stones in the sea to encourage the growth of kelp and building

¹⁵ NAS GD 403/2

¹⁶ NAS GD403/4/1

¹⁷ J.B.Caird 'Land use in the Uists since 1800' *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh* **77B** (1979) 514

¹⁸ *New Statistical Account* **14** (1837) 189

¹⁹ *New Statistical Account* **14** (1837) 176

²⁰ NAS GD403/1/3

sand banks to protect the coastal fields. 'A sum not exceeding £500 should be spent on sand banking this year'. Drainage on some farms would help to keep the rents up although a general reduction of 20% was necessary in the bad years of 1820-22.²¹ From 1826 onwards, as the tackmen's leases ended, the sub-tenants were systematically cleared and farms created. Grazings and machairs were added to the already large farms which were let, often to incomers who were prepared to pay high rents.²² In 1827 the best way forward seemed to be to reduce kelp manufacture and cattle rearing and concentrate on sheep. This would involve a policy of clearance. 'The proprietor wishes to clear two parts of the (South Uist) estate for pasture where the poorest of the people and most of the sub-tenants reside'.²³ As a result 1,300 people were shipped to Canada, but the population continued to rise. As the Clanranald finances became more critical there followed several surveys of their estates in an attempt to find some way of making them more profitable. That for Benbecula and South Uist in 1829 shows that there were seven farms, of between 183-558 acres of arable, all with considerably larger acreages of hill pasture.²⁴ Finally, in 1838, the Clanranald estates on Benbecula and South Uist were offered for sale and in 1841, were sold to Col. Gordon of Cluny.²⁵

Early descriptions of improvement give no indication that new buildings were part of the process, but a lease for the Benbecula farm of Griminish agreed in 1832 laid down that the buildings should be ensured for £820, suggesting that there was a substantial steading by this date.²⁶ A list of claims for meliorations in 1852 for several South Uist farms suggests that some building work had taken place. The tenant at Drimore was allowed £400 for 'building farmhouse, etc.' and at Askernish £840 was allowed for 'farmhouse and offices' as well as drainage and enclosure.²⁷ Whilst there is no doubt that the small tenants continued to share their black houses with their animals until after the end of the century, the large farmers were building steadings on a scale comparable with those on the mainland.

1840-1890

The period following the sale by the Clanranalds up to the 1880s, is very poorly documented. Col. Gordon's purchases on the Uists were part of a grandiose plan for improvement in the Western Isles. Originally, he planned to keep the local inhabitants on the land but he soon realised that this would not fit his plans for improvement and so in 1848 and 1851, there were major and notorious clearances to Cape Breton Island allowing for the creation of great sheep farms. In South Uist by 1850 crofters and cottars formed nine tenths of the population but were concentrated in less than one third of the land, including most of the less fertile areas. In North Uist there had been many evictions and by 1883 the farms of the former Boisdale estate consisted of 171

²¹ NAS GD201/1/350

²² J.B.Caird 'Land use in the Uists since 1800' *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh* **77B** (1979) 515

²³ NAS GD201/2/97

²⁴ NAS GD201/1/353

²⁵ NAS GD201/5/61 Evidence to Crofters Commission suggests that the sale took place in 1836

²⁶ NAS GD403/4/1

²⁷ NAS GD201/1/357

crofts let to 190 tenants and 49 cottars.²⁸ Agricultural statistics begin in 1866 showing well over 1000 acres of barley and oats with up to 300 acres of rye being grown in each of the Uists as well as turnips and potatoes. Nearly 20,000 sheep and up to 7000 cattle were kept and the number of working horses gradually increased over the century. Population also continued to rise and the problems of small, overcrowded holdings did not diminish.

The first clear picture of the situation during these years is in the evidence given to the Crofters' Commission in 1883. The crofts at North Boisdale (South Uist) were first laid out in the 1840s when holdings for 24 crofters were established. However by 1883, this same land was shared between 48. This doubling of numbers meant that land was being overused, and crofters who had had crops for sale were now heavily in debt.²⁹ In 1881-1882, common grazing was taken from the crofts and put into farms, which resulted in violence and the crofters illegally grazing them. In 1884 crofters in Lochdar and Stoneybridge were also taking over land, fencing was removed, the boat of the Ormiclate was destroyed and hay stacks thrown down.³⁰ Nineteen crofts were set up in South Boisdale at about the same time when land at nearby Frobust and Kildonan was cleared to make larger farms there. Again the land was becoming poorer because of continuous cropping, but at least the crofters had a few eggs for sale.³¹ Emigration to New Benbecula in Manitoba was being encouraged.

Similar overcrowding was reported on North Uist where eight crofts were laid out at Carinish in 1814, but by 1883, these were occupied by 22 crofters as well as 22 landless cottars.³² It was clear that if the crofters were to stay, more land was needed for them. However, in some crofting areas, improvements were being made. Tenants were being granted ten-year leases from 1880 and this was encouraging building and drainage work. On Benbecula, now owned by Lady Gordon Cathcart, the holdings had been re-organised in 1882, involving the emigration of 400 people and land being given to the remaining crofters.³³ At Gramsdale (Benbecula) new dwelling houses and byres were being built, with the estate providing wood and slates.³⁴ The general conclusion had to be that the crofting areas were overcrowded and more land needed to be found.

1890-1930

The Congested Districts Board, set up in 1897, was much involved in finding and buying suitable land on the Uists for this purpose. As the depression in agriculture deepened in the 1880s, there were landowners who were prepared to sell farms to them. In 1888 the rents of South Uist crofts had been reduced by between 9 and 28% by the Crofters' Commission and as rents from the larger farms were down, the sale of the estate was not recommended.³⁵ In 1898 34 holdings were created at Sollas and Grenitote in North Uist, with tenants chosen from the most crowded districts, 'care

²⁸ J.B.Caird 'Land use in the Uists since 1800' *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh* **77B** (1979) 515

²⁹ Crofters' Commission *Minutes of Evidence* (1883) 709

³⁰ NAS TD85/63 A6/14

³¹ Crofters' Commission *Minutes of Evidence* (1883) 712

³² Crofters' Commission *Minutes of Evidence* (1883) 790

³³ NAS AF67, 1921

³⁴ Crofters' Commission *Minutes of Evidence* (1883). 762

³⁵ NAS TD86/102/A5

having been taken to give preference to men who are energetic and to others who have some capital of their own.' The new crofters were given loans for the construction of houses and buildings.³⁶ Leases stated that the holdings were not to be split amongst the heirs, but be assigned to one of the crofters' children. There was to be no sub-letting and no cottars were to be allowed on the crofters' land.³⁷ A report on crofting on North Uist in 1903 stated that there were 31,598 acres of croftland divided between 368 crofters and let for £2,002. 96 houses had been rebuilt since 1886. 'Every encouragement was given by the estate for the improvement of houses, land and stock. The new houses were built with gables giving two rooms and a bed closet below and two attics and store closet above. The houses were stone with stone, thatch, corrugated iron or felt roofs (in that order of preference) roofs. However, this was only the tip of the iceberg. When William Mackenzie visited the area for the Board in 1905, he noted the new crofts in North Uist and the fact that there had been a great improvement in the way of building houses in Benbecula in the previous seven years. When the estate was offered for sale in 1809 the 'remarkable fertility of the machair grazings' and the 'fine crops of barley, oats, tye and potatoes' were described as well as 'several new townships formed for crofters'.³⁸

On South Uist, the problems were still intense. The township of Stoneybridge was one of the most crowded on the Uists. 'The large farms are very large and take up all the desirable land and the small holdings very small and on the poorest of land. Nowhere is this evil more glaring than on South Uist. The young leave and the old remain. The old and decrepid are left to eke out their lives amid squalor and poverty caused by the evil system under which the land is administered'.³⁹ On South Uist negotiations for land were initiated with Lady Cathcart. However feelings were running high and it was not until frustrated crofters had 'raided' land at Gerinish in 1905-6 that land was made available to the Congested Districts Board there and 32 holdings laid out.⁴⁰ In 1906 the farm of East Kilbride was bought and 15 large and 14 smaller holdings set up. The size of the problem of overcrowding can be gauged from the fact that there were 41 applicants for the large and 49 for the small holdings. Help was provided by the Congested Districts Board for the building of houses and fences, and to buy seed.⁴¹ In 1911 the powers of the Congested Districts Board were transferred to the Board of Agriculture and in 1912 77 new holdings were created at Ormiclate, Bornich and Milton and 38 were enlarged at Stoneybridge. There was little activity during the war years, but after 1918 returning soldiers, who had been promised 'homes for heroes' were more militant in their demands. Land raids at Glendale in 1918 resulted in the creation of 22 holdings and between 1919 and 1920 11 new holdings were laid out at Askernish.⁴² 1920 and 1921 saw more land raids at Drimore and Drimsdale, Newton and Balranald, with raiders going to prison before finally winning their case for more land.⁴³ In 1927 nine new holdings were created at Drimsdale and the hostility was

³⁶ NAS AF42/201 &254

³⁷ NAS GD298/76

³⁸ NAS TD85/63/A6/1

³⁹ NAS AF42/2447

⁴⁰ NAS AF67/1921

⁴¹ NAS AF42/3761,3570,3476,3807 &3819

⁴² NAS AF67/146

⁴³ NAS AF67/1921

dieing down. Most of the suitable land had been transferred to crofters and the farms created by the 1850s had been broken up.

The 1912 land valuations (NAS IRS) show something of the state of buildings at that time. Many townships still consisted mainly of black houses although soem felt or slate roofs were beginning to appear. the only buildings on the crofts were a byre and barn, with the occasional cart shed. wood and corrugated iron were frequently used for farm buildings. In contrast some of the large steadings were of stone and slate and contained the wide range of buildings associated with such a group on the mainland.

The Uist crofting economy was very similar to that of north-west Scotland and its farming history between 1917 and 1987 followed very much the same course. Acreages of cereals and roots plummeted, particularly after 1950. Oats was the only cereal that remained significant. Cattle numbers also declined from their highest in 1917, with only sheep increasing. A few pigs were kept. Farm buildings would therefore be becoming obsolete with no need for new building.

Conclusion

The result is that the landscape of the Uists is predominantly a crofting one with the period of the large farms lasting less than a hundred years. However, evidence for this brief phase remains on a few farms where existing buildins were divided amongst the later crofts. Crofts date from the 1880s to 1920s and buildings representative of all these phases have been chosen for survey.

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