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Bàgh Hairteabhagh, Hartavagh Bay -
South Uist, The Western Isles



If life ever happens to bring you To this place on a visit, You'll see sights with your eye to stimulate your thoughts.'


*'Ma bheir tachartas gu bràth
Thu don àit' seo air chuairt
Chì thu seallaidhean le d' shùil
A bheir ùrachd dha d' smuain*

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You'll see sights with your eye
to stimulate your thoughts.'*

Scotland's history is full of amazing characters – Kings, Clan Chiefs, Roman Generals. Its archaeology abounds with evidence for mysterious prehistoric peoples whose lives and experiences can only be guessed at. The period my site belongs to is the first where the experience of ordinary people is recorded extensively, and occasionally in their own words.

Hairteabhagh, like many such communities in the Western Isles, was largely abandoned by the early 20th century. It seems isolated and eerily quiet now, but it was once home to a hard-working Gaelic community. South Uist bard and crofter Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin was moved enough by the site of the abandoned bay to write a poem considering life in Hairteabhagh as it was remembered in the local community. It provides a useful guide to the archaeology that survives there today.





You'll see memories aplenty and get knowledge that's new - All histories will come, So neatly to your view

*Chì thu cuimhneachain gu leòr
'S gheibh thu eòlas as ùr –
Bidh na h-eachdraidhean gu lèir
tighinn cho rèidh fo shùil.*

*You'll see memories aplenty
and get knowledge that's new -
All histories will come
So neatly to your view*

Chì thu tobraichean tha fàs, agus làraichean fuar - You'll see wells that are deserted, and the cold sites of houses...'

The remains of thirteen blackhouses lie clustered around the bay, exactly matching the number of families living in the township in 1851. These rectangular, stone-and-earth-built houses are typical of the place and period. They were constructed of local materials in a traditional style, and were intended as accommodation for a family and, in the winter, their cattle. The practice of sharing living space with cattle allows both people and animals to share warmth in winter, and is common across many places and periods. Many of these houses have tallan, dividers which separate the byre-end from the living space for the families. These were probably added later – reflecting changing living standards across the region in the period. These houses were abandoned by the end of the 19th century. In 1920, when crofters returning from the Great War were agitating for land across the Hebrides, two new crofters' cottages were built alongside the ruins of these earlier dwellings.

'Chì thu buailtean a' chruidh-laoigh, air gach taobh anns a' ghleann -You'll see the folds of the milk-cows on each side of the glen...'

The hillsides above the settlement are littered with remains of crofting. Stone and turf enclosures survive as low footings, evidence of cattle folds and later sheep fanks. Feannagan, ribbon-like cultivation remains, blanket the landscape – testament to many hours of back-breaking work with the highland foot-plough, or cas chrom. Peat-stacks also dot the landscape, as do the scars of the peat-cutting. Once cut, it was piled to dry on the stacks and later used as fuel to keep the hearths of the nearby houses burning.

'Seòltachd gu glacadh èisg, dearbhadh ainbheirt an t-sluaigh - A device to catch fish, that shows people's plight'

One of the most striking features of Hairteabhadh is Eilean Dubh – the Black Isle – which lies in the centre of the bay. It is ringed by several caraidhean or 'fish traps'. These stone-built structures extending into the tidal bay are designed to trap fish in pools of water as the tide goes out, allowing them to be caught using nets. Fish traps of this type are found across the West Coast of Scotland, but they remain poorly understood. It has often been assumed by archaeologists that they were a normal part of life in these coastal communities. However, evidence from Gaelic oral tradition is increasingly showing us that such fish traps are a response to difficult times, when the land could not produce enough food to meet the needs of local families. It is no surprise that so many of these caraidhean date from the 18th and 19th centuries, a time of great hardship in Gaeldom. These times of hardship left a mark in local culture, being remembered in the songs and poems of later generations – without this evidence it is unlikely that caraidhean would be fully understood

understood.

Hairteabagh also contains archaeological evidence for prehistoric settlement, and it is likely the bay has played host to human activity for thousands of years. The communities of Hairteabagh in the 19th and 20th centuries were short-lived, but they are no less important for that. Two generations of Gaels lived out their days there and thanks to the local tradition and the surviving archaeology it is possible to gain some sense of their lives, labours, and landscape.

All extracts of poetry are from the poem 'Bàgh Hairteabagh' by Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin

Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin

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