

The STORY of GAIRLOCH

A Brief History of
Gairloch and district

The Gairloch district has often been called “the Highlands in microcosm”. Its history at first sight certainly seems typical: a story of slow development from primitive violent times to 21st century prosperity. But, as this concise account hopes to show, the story is much more interesting than one might expect.

The main area covered is Gairloch Parish (yellow on the map, *right*), focusing in particular on Gairloch Estate. This estate, which has always been owned by the same Mackenzie family, has varied in size and shape; the red border on the map shows its greatest extent, around 1750, and the green its area today (both are very approximate).

*Any errors, omissions, inadequacies and opinions may be blamed on the author, **Jeremy Fenton** (jeremyfenton@btinternet.com), who is grateful for help received from many other authors, local informants, and especially **Gairloch Heritage Museum** with its archives and photographs. Please let him know if any copyright has been unwittingly infringed, and of any other mistakes.*

This is a very condensed version of our history, and not necessarily intended for reading at one sitting! There is plenty of scope for further research and reading; for a start, see the book list below.

Names are normally given with the spellings commonly used today, although most originated in Gaelic.

Places with superscript numbers are shown on the map inside the back cover (e.g. Kildonan¹).

*The **front cover** is an excerpt from Blaeu's map of 1654, reproduced by kind permission of the National Library of Scotland: see the box on page 11.*



Here in this remote corner – stop!
The round earth has no corners
and every point is at its centre:
here in this quiet centre of the world,
remote only from the noisiness outside,
people have woven their intricate stories,
lives rich in thought and action,
coloured by happiness and sorrow.
But time filters out reality,
leaves only a smattering of dead facts,
and the truth of lives lived is lost.
What can we do but glean a few threads
from the tapestry of the past,
and mend it with our imagination?

Recommended Books (* out of print: try online, ** only available locally)

Gairloch and Guide to Loch Maree: J.H. Dixon (Gairloch Heritage Museum)** – see p7.

Before Scotland: Alistair Moffat (Thames and Hudson) – general prehistory

Pigeon Holes of Memory – Dr John Mackenzie: Christina Byam Shaw (Constable)*

Gruinard and Letterewe, the Lairds and the Clearances: William MacRobbie**

A Hundred Years in the Highlands: Osgood Mackenzie (Geoffrey Bles)

Eighty Years in the Highlands – Osgood Mackenzie's life and times: Pauline Butler (Librario)

A Hundred Years in Wester Ross 1900-2000: Donald Shaw*

Loch Ewe during World War II: Steve Chadwick (Wilderness Guides)

Gairloch Heritage Museum leaflets and project reports**

Guides to local history and places by Dorothy Malone**

See also other guides by Jeremy Fenton**: *Guide to Gairloch and District, Roundhouses of Wester Ross, Achtercairn Paths, Wester Ross Rocks (Geology), Wild Wester Ross (Wildlife)*

THE BEGINNING

The story of North West Scotland began three billion years ago when our foundations of solid rock were laid. During the next two billion years, this rock was very slowly transformed, eroded, and covered by deep layers of sediment which in turn became rock, so that today we have a craggy landscape of Lewisian Gneiss topped by Torridonian Sandstone, a land different from and older than anywhere else in Western Europe. The first known single event to occur here happened while the sandstone was being laid down, 1.2 billion years ago: an asteroid two miles wide struck the land about 50 miles to the north, making a crater five miles deep and splashing debris as far as our area. But of course no-one was there to witness it.

Since then, our little tectonic raft of land (North West Scotland) has kept itself intact, but it has travelled around the world, for much of the time hitched to the edge of a large continent (Laurentium) which would become North America. We have been to the South Pole and back, we have joined ourselves to the other four pieces of Scotland (North Highland, Grampian, Midland Valley, Southern Uplands) and to England, dinosaurs have come and gone (you can see their footprints in Skye), the sea has risen and fallen, until finally we abandoned North America and joined Europe; the split caused a flurry of volcanoes down the west coast, including Skye, but fortunately it did not damage us. A greater threat had already been faced when a huge mountain range, the Caledonians, was created by another continent (Baltica) crashing into us from the east; but the movement (the Moine Thrust) stopped just in time, at what is now Kinlochewe. Our little raft has led a charmed life!

For most of the last two million years, having reached the north of the world, we have been in an Ice Age with alternating cold and warm periods: ice-caps and glaciers formed and melted, deepening valleys along the lines of faults and rivers, isolating mountains, and shaping the landscape into its present extraordinary beauty. By 11,000 years ago the ice had gone and life could start to re-appear: the land was almost ready for the human story to begin.



The Ice Age today (Svalbard)

Before people could occupy the land, which was covered by glacial debris (sand, gravel, boulders), nature had to improve it by fertilising the soil, growing plants, and introducing animals. At first the ground was tundra, cold and treeless but green with mosses, lichens and tough plants like crowberry; reindeer and other arctic animals arrived. As the climate warmed, the ground was colonised by other pioneer plants such as scrub birch, willow and hazel, whose leaves enriched the soil. In due course trees grew, including alder, oak and pine, to make dense forests, and woodland animals came north: deer, wild boar, otter, beaver, along with their predators – wolf, lynx and bear.

THE FIRST PEOPLE

The first humans to reach Scotland either travelled up the east coast after crossing from Europe on dry land ("Doggerland", which disappeared under the sea by 4000BC), or sailed up the west coast in simple boats (coracles or dugouts). The very first people we know of in Scotland were west-coasters, who remarkably managed to reach the island of Rum about 6500BC. They were hunter-gatherers, nomads who lived off the land and the sea and made temporary campsites. They were busy in Rum: no fewer than 140,000 stone flakes or tools have been found. These Mesolithic people were modern humans like us, and according to DNA analysis they are in the ancestry of 80% of people in this country.

For the first people, the North West of Scotland was rough, overgrown and mountainous, with short and rapid rivers because the watershed of the Highlands is near the west coast (the relatively flat, lush lands of the east were more attractive to farmers). There were few mineral resources, not even flint. But the flat raised beaches, left high and dry as the land rose after the Ice Age, were valuable land, and there was a plentiful supply of sea food and migrating birds to eat.

The first evidence of people in the Gairloch area comes from the dunes above Red Point beach. Here over 3000 Mesolithic "lithics" from perhaps 5000 BC onwards have been found: stone tools, or the cores from which they were cut, or discarded flakes. The stone is mostly quartz, but there is also bloodstone brought from Rum. Some of the tools found were Neolithic arrowheads and some even later, so the site was used over a long period. Not far away two natural rock shelters have been found with piles of seashells beside them: "shell middens", the remains of Mesolithic meals.

The next oldest remains found so far come from above Achtercairn¹⁹ (Gairloch), where excavation in one of the prehistoric stone circles found 70 quartz flakes or cores and one tool, a hole-borer: a small "quartz assemblage". The tool-makers here were apparently not very skilful! Charcoal found with the quartz has been

At each stage of human cultural development, we have traditionally given the periods and the people different names: Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age, to 4000BC) for the first hunter-gatherers, Neolithic (New Stone Age, 4000-2300BC) once they learnt to farm, Bronze Age (2300-700BC) when they learnt to make metal tools, and Iron Age (700BC - 450AD) when they learnt to smelt iron. These do not represent a series of "invasions", but the spread from the south of new technologies, along with a relatively small number of immigrants. In this area the dates and the differences between the various Ages are very blurred.



Quartz working
c2700BC
Achtercairn



Stone axe-head
c2500BC
Inveran



Carved stone ball
c2000BC
Kinlochewe



Ceramic beaker
c1700BC
Poolewe



Bronze spear
c800BC
Poolewe



Cracked pot-boiler
c500BC
Achtercairn

carbon-dated, showing that this work area was being used in 2770BC by Neolithic people (with later use in 1390BC). Elsewhere in the district a stone axe-head and a mysterious carved stone ball have been found from the same period.

Pollen analysis at this Achtercairn site shows at first a mixed landscape with scrub, woodland, heath, and grassland; then trees decline and barley-type cereal is found, which looks like clearance and agriculture. The “Neolithic Revolution” has arrived: migrants from Europe have brought and taught the skills of growing crops and keeping animals instead of (or as well as) hunting and gathering, and people are burning or cutting down trees and scrub to make clearings for their small fields. They probably lived in wooden huts, of which no sign survives. We know nothing about the language spoken then, but it is possible that the immigrants brought a new language with them, perhaps an early form of Celtic.

ROUNDHOUSES

After about 1500BC there is much more evidence of people, since (possibly because the climate was deteriorating) they started to build stone-walled houses: roundhouses. Why round? One reason is simply that a circle is easier to draw than a rectangle (think about it!). Why stone? There were plenty of rocks lying around everywhere in the glacial debris (in many other parts of Britain wood alone had to be used). A circular wall perhaps a metre high was probably topped by a thatched cone with wooden roof-beams supported on posts: big enough for an extended family.



Nearly 200 roundhouse sites (ruined stone circles) have been found in the district, and no doubt many others are buried in peat or under later buildings. Only two have been dated so far. The earliest of these was very near the Neolithic work area mentioned above, but was inhabited in 725BC: that is, 2000 years later, perhaps 80 generations – the timescale is mind-boggling! Beneath this roundhouse was an older turf-walled house which is undatable. The second dated roundhouse, also above Achtercairn (where a series of digs has taken place), was in use around 475BC.

There is another structure nearby which may be the most important prehistoric site found so far in Wester Ross: a very large (17.5m diameter) stone circle, well built from big stones, likely to have been roofless, its entrance aligned on the winter solstice



sunset, with evidence of a very hot fire at its centre and charcoal dated to 254 and 213BC. It is thought to have been a temple or ceremonial site, and may be unique: a sort of Wester Ross Stonehenge.

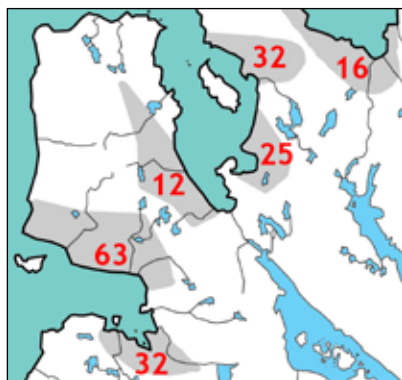
After 2000BC knowledge of metal-working seeped north and tools could be made of copper (too soft!), and then bronze (a hard alloy of Scottish copper and imported Cornish tin). Not many bronze objects have been found here: an axe-head, a spear-head, a small bronze ingot – and the “Poolewe Hoard”, found by a crofter cutting peat above Poolewe in 1877, comprising five axe-heads, three rings and an ornament, perhaps left as offerings to the gods. From 700BC it was officially the Iron Age, and iron may have been smelted here in bloomeries using “bog iron”, poor-quality ore found in the iron pans which form as a layer below the soil; but there is little evidence. Stone tools were still good enough for many tasks and have been found in the roundhouses, mostly sandstone beach pebbles used for hammering, smoothing, or as “pot-boilers” for heating water (hot stones were put into water to boil it).

The climate had been at its best in 3200BC; around 2000BC a serious decline started. Bogs and peat began to develop, and trees stopped growing in upland areas. When you see tree stumps buried in peat, they usually date from this time: 4000 year old wood! Since then there has been no “Caledonian Forest” covering the whole land, but sheltered valleys and coasts remained wooded – at least until the trees were cut down. By the time we entered the current era (AD) the climate had warmed again.



We know little about the life of the roundhouse-dwellers except that they were farmers, growing bere (an early form of barley) and oats, and keeping sheep, goats and some cattle. The walls of their fields often survive, little more than un-straight rows of separate boulders; they may have been simply boundary stones, or the gaps may have been filled in with plants like hawthorn to make fences. The farmers also hunted and fished. Pottery was made; a beaker was found in a rare cist (stone slab) grave near Poolewe. Grain was ground into flour using a primitive stone saddle quern, leaving chips of stone in the bread which were not good for the teeth!

As the centuries passed, we can imagine clusters of huts making small villages of round houses, more extensive field systems, more cattle, and wide pastures. Little can be deduced about their culture or beliefs from the meagre remains; several possible small “ritual sites” have been found – but we have no idea what the rituals were, or whether there was yet a priestly class of “Druids”. The Achtercairn ceremonial circle implies sun worship, and also tells us something about the society. It was a major undertaking which needed manpower and leadership; perhaps it was planned by a local chief with ambition, authority, and a fear that the sun might die in winter. The population



Roundhouse sites found so far

was probably growing, but we can not calculate it; there is no way yet of telling how many roundhouses were occupied at the same time.

One gets the impression that this part of Wester Ross was then rather behind the times, or at least did things differently: we have found no henges, no standing stones, no brochs, no definite crannogs, no rock carvings such as cup-and-ring marks, no definitely prehistoric duns (forts) – and later no castles were built. Even burial sites, common elsewhere, are rarely found here: just a few possible cairns and a cist grave.

HISTORY BEGINS: Picts and Christians

The first written information about Wester Ross dates from about 150AD; it is a name on a map by the Greek geographer Ptolemy, who called the local tribe the Carnonacae. That's all! We know nothing of what happened here in the first centuries AD.

Things become a little clearer thanks to the Romans. Their attempts to subdue the Highlands (notably in 84AD and 211AD) led by 300AD to a union of the various tribes in the east to defend themselves against further invasions – and, of course, to raid lands to the south! The people of this alliance were named by the Romans “Picti”, which in Latin means the painted or tattooed people. The Picts were not new immigrants, but the original people with a new name and organisation. Pict-land, or “Pictavia”, finally included all of eastern Scotland down to the Forth. Over the next 500 years it grew into a relatively civilised and cultured society ruled by a king and a prosperous upper class. Hardly any Pictish writing survives, except the puzzling pictures and symbols on their famous “symbol stones”, which may represent family names among other things. But the Pictish names of places and people have been passed down (for example, *pit-*, meaning a piece of land), and the language has been shown to be a form of Celtic: P-Celtic, which is the origin of Welsh, as opposed to Q-Celtic from which Gaelic comes. (The whole subject of the Celts and their languages is controversial and currently much debated.)

It seems reasonable to assume that the people of our district were of the same race as their neighbours, the Picts, and so spoke this P-Celtic language. However, Wester Ross does not seem to have been seriously involved in Pictavia; Rome was no threat here, and cross-country travel was difficult. The only evidence of contact is two simple Pictish symbol stones, the only ones found on the west coast mainland: one is in Gairloch Museum, made of local sandstone, showing a salmon and part of an eagle (*right*); the other is in Londubh cemetery, Poolewe, with an unclear geometric symbol.



Our history could be said to begin with the arrival of the first Christian missionaries. From perhaps 350AD there had been a gradual settling in Argyll and the southern islands of Irish invaders or immigrants, called the Scoti (or Scotti); they named the

region Dalriada after their land in NE Ireland (Dal Riata), and brought with them the other type of Celtic language, Gaelic. Probably in connection with this, a series of Irish monks came to Scotland, the first and best-known being Columba who founded a monastery on Iona in 563. Others followed his example, and at least two of them came north to evangelise our area. They brought with them the Gospel (“good news” of Jesus Christ), the Gaelic language, and the culture of the Irish church which was at this time a centre of European learning; this included reading and writing. They lived in communities centred on a church building, sleeping in small beehive-shaped “cells”. By 800 both Scots and Picts had been evangelised, the Picts showing the change by incorporating crosses into their symbol stones.

The first missionary thought to have reached our area was Donan. He travelled up the west coast, as is shown by a string of Kildonans (“Church or Cell of Donan”); he died in a massacre on Eigg in 617. There is a Kildonan¹ near the head of Little Loch Broom, with the ruins of a chapel. The founder of Chapel of Sand at Laide was said to have been Columba, but is more likely to have been Donan, if it is indeed an ancient site.

A better attested missionary here was Maelrubha (642-722), also from Ireland. He built a monastery at Applecross and had a small church or hermitage on Isle Maree³⁵, which had been the site of pagan sacrifices before his time. Many churches were named after him too, including the first church in Gairloch (now the Church of Scotland), and the recently built Episcopal Church in Poolewe. Loch Maree, previously called Loch Ewe (the Inner or Freshwater one), was renamed after him in the 1700s with one of many corrupted spellings of his name. Isle Maree later reverted to paganism; for example, in 1678 a Mackenzie family was summoned to Dingwall by the Presbytery “for sacrificing a bull in ane heathenish manner in the island of St Ruffus, commonly called Ellan Moury in Lochew”. As recently as 1868 a “madman” was taken there to be healed. Today the only superstition left is the “penny tree”, into which visitors hammer a coin for luck.



Isle Maree from Tollie

VIKINGS

After 800 the Picts and the Scots gradually merged, forming the kingdom of Alba; tradition names the first king as Kenneth MacAlpin, crowned in 843. This union was stimulated by the need to face a serious new enemy, the Vikings, who certainly affected our area. The success of these Scandinavian raiders, here mostly Norwegians, was due largely to their remarkable sea-going ships. They created havoc over much of Scotland, although their ultimate aim may have been to find living space and settle. In the 790s Skye and the Hebrides were pillaged. By 850 Ketil Flatnose ruled a wide Hebridean realm, and his grandson Thorstein added much of the west coast mainland; perhaps he is our first named ruler.

It is almost certain that Norsemen settled in the Gairloch district. Physical evidence, such as their longhouses, is rarely found on the mainland, and there is nothing definite here; but it seems likely that local houses changed from round to rectangular at this point under Norse influence, built at first of turf and wood and so not surviving today. However, there is plenty of evidence in the many local names of Norse origin: for example, Diabaig⁴⁶ (*djup-vik*, deep bay), Melvaig (*melar-vik*, grass bay), Shieldaig²³ (*sild-vik*, herring bay), Miol (*mjo-vollr*, narrow field), Slattadale (*slettr-dalr*, flat valley), Erradale (*eyrar-dalr*, gravel-beach valley), Horrisdale²⁶ (Thorir's valley), Longa (*lung-ey*, perhaps ship island), etc. (To see a language very close to Old Norse, look at modern Icelandic and its place names.) We can imagine that Vikings lived here and intermarried with the locals; maybe the area became bi-lingual. Most people were still farmers, perhaps by now paying rent to a chief (Thorir of Horrisdale?) in kind and in labour – sometimes military labour.

Apart from the names, a few legends hint at a local Norse connection. There is a small hill above Gairloch called Torr na h-Ulaidhe, Hill of Treasure. An old story explains this as the place where inhabitants fleeing into the hills stopped to bury their “treasures” out of sight of the shore, to save them from sea-borne raiders who were probably Vikings; sadly for us, they must have retrieved them later. There is a better-known legend, imaginatively told by Dixon (*see below*). The Viking Prince Olaf was married to his young bride by the priest on Isle Maree, a successor of Maelrubha. When summer came and he set off raiding in his ship, he left her in the priest's care. To test his love when he returned, the princess foolishly feigned death, and the story predictably ends, like that of Romeo and Juliet, with the suicide of both lovers. There are two ancient gravestones on Isle Maree to prove it! Perhaps there is at least a glimmer of truth in the story.

CLANS

The Highlands and Islands were always a problem for the Scottish kings: an unruly region which valued its independence. The people were described by lowlanders as “a savage and untamed nation”, and “wyld wykkd Helandmen”. In 1098 a treaty with Norway made all the western islands Norwegian territory, but the west coast mainland Scottish. It probably made little difference; it would be some time before the Scottish king had any influence here. The tribal clan system was beginning to develop, with local chiefs. “Clann” means family, and Mc or Mac means son; so, for example, the MacLeods were a clan founded by Leod, the MacKenzies by Kenneth (Gaelic *Coinneach*; the spellings MacKenzie, Mackenzie and McKenzie were all used).

DIXON'S GAIRLOCH

Much of our information about the history of Gairloch comes from a remarkable book by an incomer from Yorkshire called John Dixon (1838-1926). He moved here in 1874 for health reasons, renting Inveran Lodge near Poolewe. In 1886 he published a book which must be the envy of the rest of the Highlands: his “Gairloch and Guide to Loch Maree”, an impressively thorough compendium of everything you could possibly want to know about the district. It is a major source for this history. Dixon left Inveran in 1899 to travel abroad, and settled in Pitlochry in 1902, where he also produced a local guide in 1925.

All were “children” of the chief and owed allegiance to him rather than to the king, whether a Scottish or a Norwegian king. Several clans were actually Norse.

But they did eventually come to see themselves as more Scottish than Norwegian, especially after 1263. In that year King Hakon of Norway used the excuse of a violent Scottish raid on Skye to lead a major expeditionary force to reinforce his rule over the islands; this force was defeated by King Alexander III at the Battle of Largs, with the help of a storm. Three years later, Norway handed over the Hebrides to Scotland. There was now no doubt that Gairloch was Scottish.

A complicated period now followed during which the ownership of Gairloch was disputed. We only have pieces of this jigsaw, most of them recorded by Dixon.

- In 1292 King John Balliol set up the Sheriffdom of Skye, and Gairloch was included in it: this is the first mention of Gairloch by name (Gaelic *gearr loch*, the short loch). The dominant family here by this time was the **MACBEATH** clan which was of Norse descent. They had three strongholds: Eilean Gruidh³⁶ on Loch Maree, an island or peninsula on Loch Tollie¹⁸, and the Dun or fort (*an Dun*) next to Gairloch beach (which has some vitrified stone in it and may be much older).

- The nominal rulers of our district were the Earls of **ROSS**; this earldom was set up about 1200 as a reward for assisting the king in suppressing a revolt in Moray, and its territory stretched from the west coast to the Black Isle, roughly the present Ross-shire. After 1306, King Robert Bruce confirmed that Gairloch belonged to the Earls of Ross – in spite of the MacBeaths.

- A relative of the Earl was called Kenneth, and from him the Clan **MACKENZIE** takes its name; he died in about 1304. He took over Kintail for himself from the Earl of Ross, and oddly this extended to cover Kinlochewe, but not Gairloch. The Kintail Mackenzies will be important in our story.

- About 1350, the Earl of Ross’s men seized Kinlochewe back from the Kintail Mackenzies. Murdo MacKenzie got help from his MacLeod uncle in Lewis, killed the interlopers and threw their heads into the river; they washed up at Anancaun⁴⁴, “Ford of the Heads”.

- In 1366, Earl William of Ross granted “to **Paul McTyre** [a cousin of the Earl] and to his heirs ... the lands of Gerloch ... for yearly payment of a penny of silver.” This was confirmed by King Robert II in 1372, but we know no more of Paul McTyre.

- In the 1430s, King James I granted “to Nele Nelesoun ... the lands of Gerloch and others”; this Neil son of Neil was a **MACLEOD**, belonging to another clan of Norse origin which ruled Lewis. Dixon speculates that the MacLeods were brought to Gairloch by the **MACDONALDS**, Lords of the Isles, who had taken over the Earldom of Ross by this time. **Neil MacLeod** proceeded to drive out the MacBeaths. As well as using the MacBeaths’ three former strongholds, the new MacLeod masters of Gairloch built the Tigh Dige (“Ditch House”, a large turf blackhouse) in Flowerdale²², and a small hilltop fort west of Port Henderson²⁸.

- Many MacDonalds too settled in the area, especially around Loch Torridon. But

the MacDonald Earldom of Ross became extinct in 1493, leaving the Mackenzies, Lords of Kintail, as the most important clan here; they were given some of the Earldom's land, and gradually increased this until they owned most of Ross-shire. Attached to them were the **MACRAES**, who had been given land in Kintail in exchange for their service, mostly as warriors; they were called "Mackenzie's shirt of mail".

But Gairloch still belonged to the MacLeods, who had driven out the MacBeaths.



Reconstruction of a large turf house

CLAN LIFE

Meanwhile what was life like here? During these changes, there must have been some immigration, but many of the "common people" presumably remained the same, merely transferring their allegiance and paying their tribute to a different chief; surnames were not yet used. We cannot be sure when the concept of "land ownership" arrived here (shouldn't the land belong to the people who live on it and farm it?). It may have come with the Vikings or the birth of the Clans, but was certainly in place when the Scottish crown started issuing feudal "charters" to the earl or to clan chiefs in the 1300s: they "owned" land by the authority of the king, and their tenants paid to use it and to be defended by them, at first by giving a proportion of their produce and labour. This could be a mutually beneficial system, unless the landowner was greedy.

The upper class of a clan comprised a **Chief**; his **Household**, who also acted as warriors when needed; and the **Tacksmen** who were the intermediaries between the Chief and the clan members, allocating land to their sub-tenants, collecting rent, perhaps providing support in time of famine. Clans may have claimed to be united by ties of blood, but these were likely to be mythical or even faked; clan unity was maintained by genealogists, by bards who recorded and embellished stories of valour, by conflict with other clans, and by feasting. Clans grew by conquest, by marriage, or in due course by crown charters of land. "Cadet" branches of the clan, whose first Chief had been a younger brother, often controlled smaller areas; the Gairloch Mackenzies will be an example of this, although they were to end up with more land than their Kintail superiors.

The **ordinary people** were still small farmers, living in villages ("clachans") in the glens or on the coast; the population may have been greater than today's. They were happy to be protected by whatever clan was dominant in their area, even if they were made to fight, with their local tacksman as their officer. They lived in "blackhouses" built of turf (perhaps on a stone base), with a roof of wood and thatch, no windows, and a single room with a peat or wood fire burning in the middle of the floor. They mounded the ground into ridges ("rigs") to grow their oats and barley, and kept small black cattle and a few sheep which spent the summer in the rough grazing above the head dyke at the top of the village, or away at the shielings – summer grazing areas with small huts. Their diet included oatcakes, cheese, milk, beef, fish, game and wild berries. They were self-sufficient, for example making their own clothes from their own wool. Until the 1800s there were no roads, just worn tracks, and no wheeled vehicles; few would ever travel to the east where towns and trade were beginning to develop. Wester Ross at this time faced west, not east, and most travel was by sea.

THE GAIRLOCH MACKENZIES, 1494-1628

The MacLeods did not hold Gairloch for long; soon they were ousted by the Mackenzies, who are still the Lairds of Gairloch today (“Laird” is a Scottish version of “lord”, meaning simply a landowner). Dixon tells the story of how it started. In about 1480 Allan MacLeod was the Laird, a peaceable man; he had married a daughter of Alexander Mackenzie, 6th Lord of Kintail, and they had two sons. They lived in the house at Loch Tollie¹⁸, which was probably on the peninsula jutting out from the south shore, not on one of the islands. Allan had two brothers who lived in Lewis; they were horrified that the next Laird of Gairloch would have Mackenzie blood in him. They sailed to Charlestown²¹, spent the night in the Tigh Dige, and laid their plans. Next day they went to Loch Tollie, saw their brother’s boat on the east shore and guessed that he had gone fishing in the River Ewe; they caught up with him, found him asleep, and killed him. Next they went to the house on Loch Tollie, took away the two young boys, killed them and buried them; foolishly they kept the bloodstained shirts. Their mother, with the help of an old retainer, got hold of the shirts as evidence, and took them to her father at Brahan in Easter Ross; his son, Hector Roy Mackenzie (*Eachainn Ruadh*), was sent with the shirts to Edinburgh. King James IV was horrified, or more likely saw a chance to gain feudal control over more land, and gave Hector Roy a rather wholesale “writ of fire and sword” to destroy the unfortunate MacLeods; one wonders what story Hector told him. In 1494 Hector was given Gairloch by crown charter (as a younger son, he was not entitled to the Lordship of Kintail): “the landis of Gerloch ... lyande betwix the watteris callyde Innerewe and Torvedene”, i.e. from Loch Maree to Loch Torridon.

As the first Mackenzie Laird of Gairloch, **Hector Roy Mackenzie** (c1440/1494*-1528) never quite got rid of the MacLeods; they held on to a third of the district. At first he spent little of his time in Gairloch, being involved in a series of bloody inter-clan conflicts which at one point saw him outlawed and later pardoned by the king. But from 1507 he stayed at the Tigh Dige in Flowerdale²², a short distance from the MacLeods in the Dun (*right*) – an odd situation. On one occasion they almost caught him as he ran back to Flowerdale, but he ambushed and killed three warriors in turn. He was a heroic figure, and involved in many battles, including the disaster at Flodden in 1513 where Gairloch soldiers must have fought. Famously he kept a bodyguard of twelve MacRaes.



The next Laird, Hector Roy’s son **John** (Gaelic *Iain*) **Glassich** (1513/1528-1550), was an abrasive character and it is said that he was poisoned while imprisoned at Eilean Donan Castle in Kintail; there were frequent inter-Mackenzie feuds. His eldest son **Hector** (c1542/1550-1566) succeeded, and died violently, probably at the hands of the MacLeods, as did his brother Alexander a few weeks later.

John’s third son, **John Roy** (1548/1566-1628), now became the 4th Laird. He would be much more successful; by the time of his death the long series of conflicts, battles,

* birth/succession as laird

massacres, murders and feuds had largely come to an end. He managed to expel the MacLeods from the Dun, and by 1600 from the whole area. He made peace with the Kintail Mackenzies, who in 1610 extended their land to include Lewis as well as Ross-shire (minus Gairloch); in 1623 they were given the title Earl of Seaforth (from Loch Seaforth in Lewis), and we must now call them the “Seaforth Mackenzies” (this earldom became extinct in 1815). John Roy still felt the need for protection and lived on Eilean Ruairidh Beag³¹ on Loch Maree, improving the house and garden built there by a Ruairidh MacLeod. When he died, he was buried in a chapel built by his son in Gairloch Old Churchyard, which is still visible.

The MacLeods made several attempts to return to Gairloch. One gave its name to Leacnasaide²⁵ on the south shore of Gair Loch, “Slab of the Arrows”. Many of the MacLeods had settled with their kinsmen in Skye, and one night after a drunken party a band of young men set out from there to recapture Gairloch. They tied up their ship at Fraoch Eilean to await the day. Two MacRae archers had recognised the ship, and walked round to a rock slab which was the nearest point on land, 400 metres from the island. At dawn they opened fire, with such success that only two MacLeods remained alive; one man was pinned by an arrow to the top of the mast. There are several similar stories of MacRae archers vs MacLeod sailors. The last skirmish was on land in 1611, when the Laird’s elder son lost his life.

MAPS

At this time Gairloch first appears on maps of Scotland. Mercator in about 1595 has “L. Gar” and “L. Hew”; admittedly Loch Gar is shown inland at the head of a river, and Loch Hew is what we call Loch Maree, but it’s a start. Map makers copied Mercator until in 1654 Blaeu published his famous atlas, its Scottish section produced by Robert Gordon and based on the remarkable work of Timothy Pont before 1614. Here there are a good number of haphazardly spelt but often recognisable names, and the coast is at least beginning to take shape; you can see it on the front cover — how many names can you recognise?

A huge step forward was taken with William Roy’s military survey of 1747-55. The spellings Gair Loch and Loch Ewe are now fixed; “Gairloch’s House” is in Flowerdale; farmed areas, woodland and settlements are shown; the first roads (or rather tracks) all meet at Kinlochewe — from Torridon, Glen Docherty, Gruinard via Shenavall and Heights of Kinlochewe, and north of Loch Maree (but this starts a few miles north of Letterewe).

On John Knox’s map of 1784 the unfinished military road along Loch Maree is shown; a Clans Map of 1822 oddly marks “Gairloch Castle”; in 1862 Blacks’ map shows the new Destitution Roads, but the spelling of placenames is still erratic. (To research these and many other maps, use the excellent National Library website: maps.nls.uk/scotland/)

Finally, after a huge triangulation and survey effort, the first Ordnance Survey map of parts of the area was published in 1875 (they were working here by 1816), and the first one inch to a mile map of the whole area in 1882: a magnificent achievement. But their ignorance of Gaelic sometimes showed, and their survey of the remote Great Wilderness was inaccurate; among other mistakes three Munros (over 3000ft) were shown as 2850ft: the surveyors were under pressure from the landowner and presumably the cloud was low (we shall meet this landowner again, Meyrick Banks). Unfortunately, too, the tautologous phrase “Loch Gairloch” was perpetuated (first used on a chart of 1755), on the grounds that the names Gair Loch (the loch) and Gairloch (the village) were too confusing.

IRONWORKS

The Gairloch area has usually been rather distant from the affairs of the rest of Scotland, but there have been two occasions when it came to the fore. The first was now, with the Ironworks of Loch Maree. Dixon comments on the incongruity of heavy industry beside the most beautiful Scottish loch; the reason was its plentiful trees. Around



1605 **Sir George Hay**, a prominent lawyer and politician who would later be High Chancellor and an Earl, was trying to take control of Lewis (from the MacLeods), as were the Mackenzies of Kintail. The Mackenzies were successful, but in exchange encouraged Hay in a scheme to make use of the trees, running water and bog iron on their land on the north side of Loch Maree to set up the first modern blast-furnace ironworks in Scotland; these replaced earlier more primitive "bloomeries" in the area. Iron-smelting took place at Fasagh⁴² at the east end of the loch, Furnace⁴¹ near Letterewe, and next to the River Ewe – the Red Smiddy¹² (*above*), where a weir was built to channel water to operate the bellows which provided the "blast" of air (its remains can still be seen, but are badly in need of preservation and interpretation). Cutting down forests had been banned by law in England and soon would be in Scotland (wood was too precious for ship-building etc); but up here, and soon with a royal licence, Hay was safe. Charcoal was produced beside Loch Maree, consuming up to 300 acres of woodland a year, mostly oak. Iron ore was imported by sea to supplement local bog iron, and cannons and other products were exported to England and later to Holland. Profits were shared with the Kintail/Seaforth Mackenzies (Gairloch was not directly involved) and helped to pay for developments in Lewis. Most of the ironworkers were English, as was the expertise. A scheme to build a canal from loch to sea never came to anything. Smelting probably ended about 1630, due to the death of Colin, 1st Earl of Seaforth, and growing competition from cheaper foreign ironworks.

John Roy's second son, **Alexander Breac** (1578/1628-1638) succeeded as the 5th Laird. He lived mostly on Eilean Suthainn³⁴ on Loch Maree, and he too was buried in his chapel in Gairloch graveyard. Not all warfare had ended: he had some trouble with cattle raiders all the way from Lochaber. The 6th Laird, **Kenneth** (1605/1638-1669), rebuilt in stone the old turf Ditch House in Flowerdale, renaming it the Moat House, and lived there: there was no more need of an island home. His son was **Alexander** (1652/1669-94), who added land to the estate, including Mellon Charles.

Next (names are alternating) came another **Kenneth** (1671/1694-1703), the 8th Laird, who left the estate deeply in debt, but made up for it (or perhaps caused it) by being knighted: he was made a **Baronet of Nova Scotia** by Queen Anne in 1703, the year of his death. These baronetcies were a fund-raising scheme for both the colony and the crown, and it is unlikely that Sir Kenneth had any real connection with Nova Scotia. He was educated at Oxford, and served in the Scottish Parliament where he strongly opposed the Union with England. And he was only 32 when he died. It was at about this time that potatoes were introduced to the area; within a century they would become the most important food (but there would be a price to pay...).

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Sir Kenneth's son succeeded as the 9th Laird and 2nd Baronet at the age of 3: he was of course **Sir Alexander** (1700/1703-1766). According to Dixon he gave its name to Flowerdale²². He built Flowerdale House (*right*) on a site above the Moat House, the first house in Gairloch with a slate roof, and also a barn in 1730 which is probably the oldest dated barn in the Highlands. Both these buildings are now A-listed ("of national importance"), as is Udrigle House near Laide, built in 1745 by William Mackenzie the Laird of Gruinard, and described as "one of the most distinctive of the small surviving Lairds' houses in the Highlands" (*right, today*).



Alexander is the first Laird known to have travelled abroad: Gairloch was slowly beginning to open up to the world. He was a good businessman and the finances of the estate recovered; in 1743 he sold land in Kintail and bought instead the Kinlochewe estate. Sensibly he kept out of the '45 rising, although some of his tenants may have joined Prince Charlie independently. There is a story that the prince's valet, carrying gold

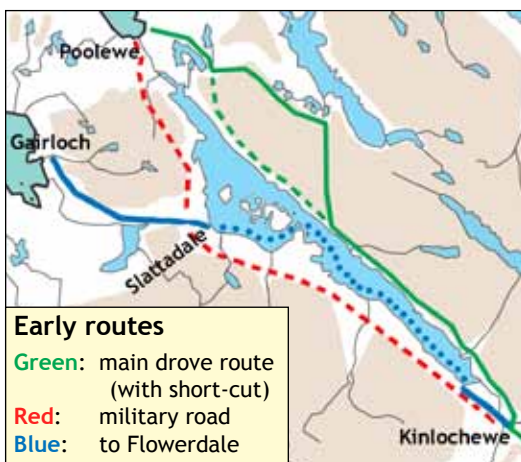
MUSIC and POETRY

The Highland clans have a strong tradition of music and poetry. From early days bards sang or recited the great deeds of the clan, and the Mackenzies supported pipers and poets. An outstanding family of pipers here played for the Lairds from Iain Roy to Sir Hector, starting with Ruaridh MacKay in 1609. Ruaridh's son was Iain Dall (1656-1754), "Blind John", who was taught by the famous MacCrimmons in Skye and became both piper and bard to a series of Lairds; he died aged 98, and a monument was recently built to him in Flowerdale. His son Angus and grandson Iain continued the tradition; the latter finally emigrated to Nova Scotia. Another grandson of Iain Dall was William Ross (1762-90), "the Gairloch Bard", a musician and poet who taught in the parish school. His contemporary Alexander Campbell (1767-1843) was appointed by Sir Hector to recite his own and traditional poems to him and his guests several times a week; he only spoke Gaelic and he could not read — poems were passed down orally. Iain Mackenzie (1806-48), himself an expert musician, achieved fame by collecting and editing the poems of these two and others, publishing "Beauties of the Gaelic Language" and other books; a monument above Gairloch graveyard commemorates him. Alexander Cameron (1848-1933) was known as "the Tournai Bard" and has a monument at Inverewe. In recent years there has been a revival in traditional music and Gaelic song, helped especially by the charity Feis Rois. You can go to a Mod, a Gaelic music competition; or to a Ceilidh, a concert with dancing, originally an impromptu party. Special musical forms include *port-a-beul*, "mouth-music", in which the voice becomes an instrument; and *piobaireachd* or pibroch, a complex theme with variations on the pipes. Since 2012 Gairloch has had its own Pipe Band.

for his master, arrived in the area to meet two ships which had turned up at Poolewe, but was murdered near Loch Maree; the gold has not yet been found. On another occasion, an English ship came into Flowerdale bay, and ordered Sir Alexander to report aboard; he politely declined, inviting the captain instead to dinner on the hilltop above Flowerdale, Creag a' Chait. In response the ship fired a broadside at his new house, and one cannonball was later to be seen embedded in the wall.

At this time the route from the west coast to Kinlochewe, used by visitors and drovers, was by a rough track from Poolewe to the north of Beinn Airigh Charr, across the pass to Letterewe and along Loch Maree. There were no made roads, and travel was not easy: in 1649 a report of the Presbytery of Dingwall complained about "the visitation of Gairloch and Lochbruime continewed [postponed] by the way not rydable and inability of brethren to goe afoote." Today we use what seems to be a much easier route along the south side of the loch, a route which opened up Gairloch to the rest of Scotland; this was not built until 1849, but it was almost built in 1763. After the Jacobite rebellions, General Wade constructed military roads all over the country. When he died his work was continued by Major Caulfeild, who in 1763 laid out a route from Kinlochewe to Poolewe via the Tollie pass; Poolewe rather than Gairloch, presumably because it was then the port for ships to Stornoway and the Outer Isles. Sections of the route can still be seen, including the old bridge at Grudie³⁷, but the road was never completed, perhaps because of the Major's death in 1767, or perhaps because it was no longer considered a military necessity. The "military road" was of limited value to locals; most of the route had at least been cleared of vegetation, but it was not usable by wheeled vehicles.

The 10th Laird (breaking the naming tradition) was **Sir Alexander Roy** (1731/1766-1770), who again got the estate into debt in his four years. In about 1758, the rather grand Conan House had been built for him on their eastern land at Conon Bridge by his father, mainly using his bride's dowry. This house was to become the winter residence of the Mackenzie Lairds, with an annual migration to Gairloch which, before the road was built, involved riding to Loch Maree and sailing along the loch to Slattadale; the horses were taken along the military road, which therefore must have been a usable route even if unsurfaced, and rejoined them for the final section to Flowerdale. It was probably now that this final stretch acquired a made track (parts of this predecessor to the present "Old Road" can still be seen). The horses towed sledges for the luggage. For the tenants who took the horses to Conon and back this must have been a rare holiday.



SIR HECTOR MACKENZIE

With the 11th Laird and 4th Baronet, **Sir Hector** (1757/1770-1826), we reach the 1800s, which were to be a century of remarkable change for the district. He was only 12 when he succeeded, but in due course he became a very popular landowner, generous and humane towards his tenants. Remarkably, he did not employ a factor (manager) but “dealt directly and entirely with his people, ultimately knowing every man on his estates”. He sold certain properties to pay off debts, and encouraged enterprise among his tenants.

In particular, he developed the fishing industry (cod, ling, herring) which became the first major source of income for the area since the ironworks. In 1776 Charles Cumming from Aberdeen built a large house above Flowerdale Bay as a fishing station, and gave his name to Charlestown²¹; the Badachro²⁷ area was developed for fishing, with buildings also on Dry Island and Isle Horrisdale²⁶ (*right, bay and Dry Island*). Sir Hector set up curing stations to dry the fish, and provided wood for boats and buildings. He himself bought all the cod caught (up to 40,000 a year), had them dried, and exported them to Bilbao in Spain. In 1815, perhaps influenced by the British Fisheries Society which had developed Ullapool in 1788, he set up a small fishing village at Port Henderson²⁸ (his second wife was Christian Henderson), but it would last only 30 years



before its fishermen became crofters (its ruins can still be seen, *above*). Sir Hector's own interests included gardening, farming, fishing, shooting and tree-planting (for example, the Flowerdale Arboretum); he was also Lord Lieutenant of Ross-shire.

In 1772 **Thomas Pennant** on his “Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides” visited our district, landing at Dundonnell and riding overland to Kinlochewe. He stayed a night at the “whisky house, the inn of the place” on the best bed, which had a heather mattress. He then took a six-oared boat along Loch Maree, stopping at Isle



Maree³⁵ where he was told about the elaborate rites for the treatment of lunacy. He landed, probably at the top of the short River Ewe, where the Minister welcomed him, took him to the nearby Tollie Church, and then to the manse (Cliff House, *left*) for two more comfortable nights. He was shown the salmon fishery, potatoes being grown on the peat (probably in “lazy beds”), and the remains of the “very

antient iron furnace". He reported that there were high hopes for Poolewe: it was the port for the Government-packet that sailed regularly to Stornoway in Lewis, a land being developed by the Earl of Seaforth. That and the military road made Poolewe "a place of much concourse", where it was hoped that a town would form.

He then rode to Gairloch, and stayed with 15-year-old Sir Hector. He learnt that the population was increasing thanks to the fishing which supplemented the simple farming life: herring from June to January, cod from February to April. About 500 cattle, 80 horses and 150 sheep were taken to market in the east each year. But he commented on the absence of a town and shops, so that even necessities could only be bought from opportunist and profiteering traders. Significantly, he deplored the "run-rig" system by which strips of arable land were not permanently allocated to tenants but redistributed every few years: "so much of the spirit of the chieftain remains, that they dread giving an independency to their people". But a few improvements in farming were appearing, such as the use of seaweed as manure and the burning of lime (there are three small marble quarries in the area, and limestone was also brought in by boats as ballast).

The estate records show how land was allocated to tenants. Here is a sample from 1770: "To John Ross – the peck of Achtercairn Wester which is presently occupied by him for yearly payment of £1-8-7¾ with half a carriage horse [presumably a carrier, as there were no carriages yet], 1 wedder [sheep], 1 kid, cheese, butter." We do not know how much a "peck" was – maybe just a strip of run-rig. The cash payment would come from selling livestock and perhaps fish; cattle were gathered above Achtercairn and driven as a herd to Easter Ross by the route north of Loch Maree.

Twenty years later, in 1792, a remarkable initiative by Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster produced "**The Statistical Account of Scotland**". He sent questionnaires to all church ministers, and collated the returns to give an idea of the present state of the country. The Rev Daniel McIntosh wrote the report on Gairloch Parish. A selection of his comments:

- There are many rivers, but "no bridges nor passage but by horses".
- Limited arable ground produces potatoes, oats and barley; meal is also supplied by trading ships in the summer [probably partly at the Laird's expense].
- The population is about 2000; some are aged over 85, and two centenarians died recently.
- The people are "in general sobre, regular, industrious, and pious", and known for their civility and hospitality.
- There is only one school [in Strath], so that "the rising generation suffer much". The language is Gaelic, with no opportunity of learning English.
- The number of poor is growing, as elsewhere in the Highlands: perhaps a hundred, who are supported by the church [and also by the Laird].

The second Statistical Account in 1836 would show improvements in education, at least. But its writer thought the population (by then about 4500) was too high, and recommended "conveying one third to Upper Canada"!

CLEARANCES (but not here)

Sir Hector and the Mackenzie Lairds who followed him were exceptional in the Highlands, determined to look after the people on their land and improve their lot, and refusing to evict them or force them to emigrate, although from about 1800 there was a trickle of voluntary emigration (probably with passage paid), especially to NE Canada, Australia, New Zealand – and to southern Scotland. The people, however, were sometimes required to move, for example when in 1800 the 17 smallholdings in Achtercairn were turned into a single farm; one assumes they were well treated.

Neighbouring estates were more typical of the Highlands at this time, preferring wholesale evictions, often with the excuse that tenants were failing to pay their rents, to make the land more productive by setting up large sheep farms (the sheep were Cheviots, not the small attractive black-faced sheep favoured until then). These estates had belonged to various related Mackenzies, but in these more civilised times they found it difficult to make a good living from their land and decided to sell up.

John Macintyre was an enterprising farmer who from 1803 developed unproductive **Letterewe** for arable and sheep farming, renting the land from its Mackenzie owner (whose sister he married); his work was praised by a famous visitor, James Hogg. **Gruinard** Estate to the north belonged to the Seaforth Mackenzies until in 1795 it was bought by Henry Davidson of Tulloch, who was happy to let Macintyre take over the lease of much of his land too for sheep-farming. As tacksman Macintyre cleared the tenant smallholders out from the glens to the coast at Little Gruinard and “First, Second and Third Coast” – sadly bureaucratic names. Macintyre retired to Gairloch in 1830, and in 1835 Davidson sold Gruinard to an English coal-mining magnate and property owner, **Meyrick Banks** (1811-1881), who also bought Letterewe soon afterwards. Banks became notorious for being a bad neighbour, going to court frequently, and treating his own tenants as virtual slaves (like his coal-miners, perhaps). He evicted numerous smallholders, including those who had already been sent to the coast by Macintyre; he even, famously, re-evicted an elderly woman, a pauper, from the Church Cave near Laide where she was living after being removed from her cottage (what was the rent for a cave?). Evictions had also been carried out by his neighbour Sir George Mackenzie of Coul (an Easter Ross family) in 1838 from his land at **Slaggan, Mellon Udrigle, Tournag and Inverewe**.

Torridon Estate was luckier. Until 1826 it belonged to cousins of the Gairloch Mackenzies, but then it was sold to a Seaforth Mackenzie who also owned land in Kintail and Lewis. He rarely visited, and sold Torridon in 1838 to a Colonel MacBarnet who died within a year; the trustees for his son took over. Sheep farms were started, land was confiscated, tenants were moved (many to create the present villages), and life became very difficult, although there were no actual forced emigrations. Some may have emigrated voluntarily, but most stayed on, and in 1872 the estate was bought by an excellent and very popular landlord, Duncan Darroch, who restored tenants’ land, removed the sheep, and instead set up a “deer forest” (the word “forest” here does not imply trees, but open land devoted to hunting). Deer-stalking was beginning to replace sheep-farming as a source of income.

ROADS – a start

This engraving from 1817 shows a new bridge over the Flowerdale river and two buildings. These are both change-houses, basic inns for travellers and places where horses could be rested or changed. The right-hand one, Inchgowan, was built before 1770; the other, Kentail, was built by Sir Hector in 1792, and is now called the Old Inn. Travel at this time



was still on foot or horseback on largely unmade tracks, with no wheeled vehicles. When the Mackenzie family was staying at Flowerdale, mail was brought from Dingwall by a weekly runner, 60 miles each way, following the drove route to the north of Loch Maree; these postmen are said to have used a rock-climbing short-cut across the Bull Rock³⁸ beside the loch, a route that has not yet been found (*map p14*).

But in 1807 a Government Commission formed local committees to raise funds from landowners and arrange for the building of proper drivable roads, as opposed to the foot-worn tracks used up to now; this area was District 6, from Little Loch Broom to Loch Torridon. Labour was to be provided by tenants as part of their rent ("statute labour"). By 1816 a new road had been made from **Gairloch to Slattadale** on Loch Maree (you can still walk half of this, the "Old Road"). Work had also started on the road from **Gairloch to Poolewe**, by a route said to have been laid out by Sir Hector's butler; but there were many delays due to "small income, high arrears and times of scarcity", not to mention "the fallacious promises of the wealthier classes" and the poor quality of the labour, and it was not completed until 1830. The **Kinlochewe to Achnasheen** road followed by 1834. In 1837 the government promised to pay half the cost of the most important road of all, from **Kinlochewe to Poolewe**, following either the drove route to the north or the old military route to the south of Loch Maree; a surveyor, Lewis Russell, was hired to make a detailed plan of both possible routes. He recommended the southern route, and in 1839 the committee agreed to go ahead. The government funding offer would expire in 1846.



But other more immediate needs took over. The River Ewe had always been a major barrier, as well as a boundary between estates; in summer horses could cross it, but pedestrians had to walk a mile upstream to cross by the ironworkers' weir; in winter sometimes

neither was possible. A bridge was urgently needed, and the first **Poolewe Bridge** was opened in 1843 (*picture below left*). Soon after this, the weir was removed, lowering the level of Loch Maree and increasing the area of flat land below Kinlochewe.

In 1846 the road from **Kinlochewe to Torridon** was built. In the same year Meyrick Banks (who would be a thorn in the side of the committee for many years) asked for a **Poolewe-Aultbea** road, and it was agreed to build a “bridle path” but on a line suitable for a future carriage road: admirable foresight! But there was not enough money to start on the Loch Maree road, in spite of the government’s matched funding. *To be continued...*

SIR FRANCIS MACKENZIE

In 1826 Sir Hector died and his son **Sir Francis** (1799/1826-1843) succeeded as the 12th Laird of Gairloch. He was a well-educated man, had travelled abroad, and like his father he had enlightened ideas about his duties as Laird. He was a keen student of agriculture, and in 1838 he published “Hints for the Use of Highland Tenants and Cottagers”, in the hope that the primitive subsistence farming of the district might be improved; it contained detailed advice on food, clothing, boats, fishing, agricultural implements, cattle, horses, garden vegetables, housing and furniture. Unfortunately most of the people could not read. It was difficult to run his 170,000 acre estate, especially since like his father he did not employ a factor; the land was very poor (peaty, thin-soiled or rocky), and poverty meant that rents were often unpaid. Also like his father, he imported cargoes of oatmeal simply to keep his growing population alive, but he had to admit that they were “indolent and careless”.

A report of 1810 had summarised the problem: “The business of farming is but ill understood ... lands in very bad order ... attachment to ancient customs”. At this time the people lived in “wretched hovels”, sharing the front door and the house with their animals, and even sleeping in beds hanging above the cattle and their dung in order to keep warm. These cattle not only provided central heating and milk, but their calves were one of the few sources of cash to pay the rent.

Not much remains today of these pre-1845 (“pre-improvement”) smallholdings. There are a few stone foundations of cottages; many of these had turf walls on them, but some better ones were by now being built in drystone (i.e. stone without mortar). There are traces of “lazybeds”, a relatively advanced method of cultivation using soil and seaweed between turf banks; small circular hill fields can be seen here and there, fertilised by cattle, dug with hand-ploughs, and often re-using prehistoric walls; many small communal corn-drying kilns have been found, soon to be replaced by centralised village mills. Transhumance (movement of livestock to the summer shielings) continued until 1845; many ruined shieling huts can still be seen.

Francis was so beset by financial problems and stress as a result of his efforts that he took an extended holiday in France in 1841; but he suffered a breakdown, and died in a mental institution in London two years later. He left his second wife, Lady Mary (née Hanbury), with his two sons by his first wife and her own son, Osgood.

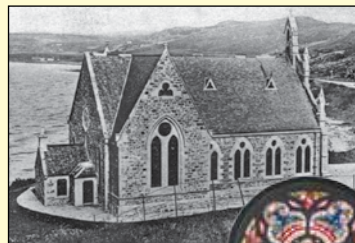
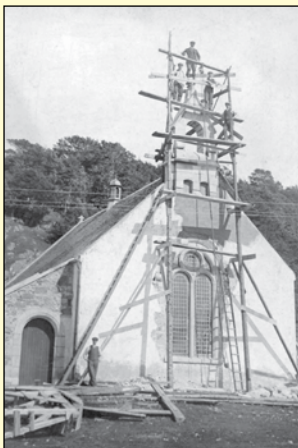
CHURCHES

Little is known of the original Irish or Celtic churches founded by Donan, Maelrubha and others; the first church recorded was in Gairloch in 1255, with sub-churches or chapels at Laide (Chapel of Sand, *picture upper left*), Poolewe and Kinlochewe. In those days the national church was Roman Catholic, but after the 1560 Reformation it became Protestant, at first Episcopalian (like the Church of England, with bishops) and then in 1689 Presbyterian (without bishops). Sir Hector replaced the thatched building by a stone church with a roof of Easdale slate in 1791, and with various later alterations this is the present Gairloch Church of Scotland (*below centre, 1909 additions*). A second church was built in Poolewe in 1828, one of the "Parliamentary" Highland churches funded by the government and designed by Thomas Telford (*lower left*), and a third in 1889 at Aultbea.

In 1843, the year of Sir Francis's death, came the national Disruption, when the Free Church of Scotland split from the established Church of Scotland. It was provoked by the undemocratic imposition of ministers chosen by landowners, and was the culmination of 110 years of protest. Three Free Churches were hurriedly built in the parish (Aultbea, Poolewe, Gairloch), but they were poor buildings and had to be replaced about 40 years later when Kinlochewe also added its own; the new churches were of high quality, the Gairloch one being surprisingly grand (*upper right*), even possessing an unexpected rose window (it was built round the old church which meanwhile continued in use inside!).

Since 1843 there have been other splits and reunions resulting in other denominations: United Presbyterian 1847, Free Presbyterian 1892 (disagreement over biblical infallibility), United Free 1900, Associated Presbyterian 1989 (freedom of conscience), Free Church Continuing 2000 (application of Church rules). Often there seems to have been a mixture of genuine Christian faith with an excessive religious fervour which featured austerity, intolerance, and an emphasis on law rather than grace, fear rather than love; but today these Churches may represent mostly differences of style rather than of belief. A recent addition has been the small Episcopal Church of St Maelrubha, built in 1964 in Poolewe.

An interesting feature of the area is the outdoor churches: two caves at Laide and Cove, used by various congregations without a building, and the Leabaidh na Ba Baine on the Golf Course; this hollow is said to have been made by the legendary giant Fingal for his white cow to calve in, and was later used for large-scale communion services as it could seat up to 3000 (*lower right*).

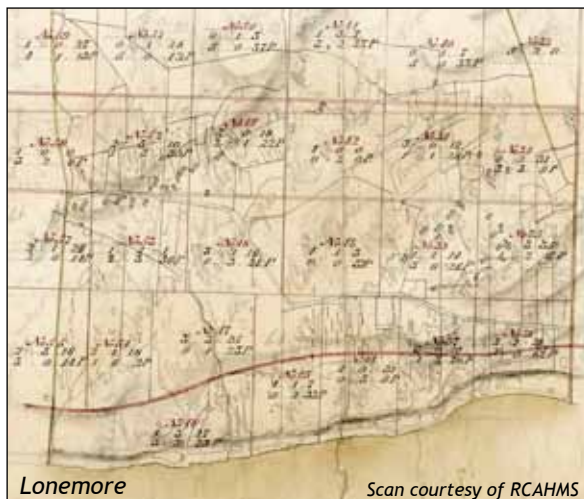


DOCTOR JOHN

The older son of Sir Francis, Kenneth, was only 11 when his father died in 1843. For the ten years until he came of age, the estate was run by his mother and, more formally, by three family trustees, including his uncle Dr John. They proved to be momentous years.

Dr John Mackenzie (1803-1886) was a medical doctor, but aged 28 he abandoned this career and set up as a farmer in Easter Ross. In 1841 his brother Francis asked him to take over as factor of Gairloch Estate while he went abroad. Dr John accepted, little knowing that his brother would never return and he would have the job for 12 years. He set out, with the cooperation of Lady Mackenzie, to establish a sustainable crofting system, completing the reforms which his brother had tried to begin. He believed strongly that “the population in the Highlands can be supported by the soil, without being obliged to emigrate”, but realised that the smallholders needed better houses, agricultural training, and a change from the run-rig system of annual allocation – that is, their own plot of land. He knew from his Easter Ross experience and from his studies how to farm using modern scientific methods, and that the methods used by the people here were primitive. The estate was heavily in debt; what he could do would be limited by the trustees and the accountants in Edinburgh, but he was determined to go ahead with radical reforms.

First, he employed a well-known land surveyor, George Campbell Smith, to survey the estate. The maps he made are remarkably detailed and accurate for their time; they show the current houses and cultivation, and superimposed on these a network of 600 planned “crofts”, averaging about 4 acres; 500 of these were on as yet undeveloped land (in the end not all were used). On the basis of this map, in 1845 run-rig was abolished and the old houses were abandoned. Each tenant was assigned his



own field; as far as possible this was near where they had lived, but there were some completely new townships such as Opinan (south)²⁹ and Ormiscaig⁷. The word “croft” means a small enclosed field; for the first time the tenants were now crofters with their own very small farms. Today the scattered lay-out of houses reflects the crofting “townships” which were thus formed, and the 1:25000 OS map clearly shows the pattern of walls. In the early 1800s larger farms had been established at Red Point, Shildaig²³, Kerrysdale³⁰, Slattadale, Flowerdale²², Achtercairn¹⁹, Little Sand, Tollie and Isle of Ewe⁹; these stayed outwith the croft system.

Each crofter had to build his own house in the centre of the croft, partly using materials from his previous house; the new houses were mostly drystone rather than turf, but still with thatched roofs. Common grazing was available for livestock in any area which was not a croft, including road verges. So far, so good; but the real problem came in persuading the crofters to use proper scientific methods of farming such as rotation of crops, manure, drainage, and a byre for animals. Dr John asked the trustees to provide full-time supervisors for each township, but they did not allow the expense; the estate already had too many financial commitments such as tax, rates, ministers' and schoolmasters' pay, new schools, annuities, "Poor's money", repairs, interest on debts... On the other hand, a lucrative new source of estate income was now being developed, deer-stalking: in 1842, 38,000 acres of deer forest had been set up in the hills and moorlands of the estate.

Many crofters were very reluctant to follow the new methods, and Dr John felt that compulsion was needed: he had to be cruel to be kind. But then in 1846 and continuing for five years, with remarkably bad timing, the Potato Blight struck the Highlands, and the main food supply was blotted out. Things were not as bad in Gairloch as elsewhere, partly because another source of income was increasingly made use of: many of the men spent the summer on the east coast as hired hands on fishing boats. The trustees helped as much as they could, and soon generous relief was sent from the charitable "Fund for the Relief of the Destitute Inhabitants of the Highlands" and other sources. Lady Mackenzie contributed to the local income by developing a home hosiery industry, in 1847 employing 100 women; Gairloch's home-made woollen stockings became famous.

ROADS (*continued*). Partly thanks to the efforts of Lady Mackenzie, the Relief Board agreed in 1848 to give money towards road-building rather than food hand-outs, a work creation scheme. After the very slow progress earlier, roads now began to come thick and fast, with the estates paying in the end less than a third of the cost; they are called Destitution Roads. Crofters from Skye and other badly-hit districts were brought in by the contractors to help. The **Loch Maree** road was built according to the plans made in 1839 (but only to Slattadale, not Poolewe), and opened in 1849; the 6-year-old Osgood Mackenzie cut the first turf, and was later delighted when the first wheeled vehicle reached Gairloch: a carrier's wagon (commerce leads the way!). In October Dr John, chairman of the roads committee, triumphantly drove along the newly-opened road from Kinlochewe to Flowerdale in less than three hours, and December saw the first arrival of the "Invernessian 2-horse carriage". The West was at last joined to the East. Other drivable roads followed: the difficult **Poolewe to Aultbea** road, opened in 1849 with great celebrations, followed by the continuation to **Gruinard** (which was poorly maintained until Gruinard River itself was bridged in the early 1900s); **Kerrysdale to Badachro** and



soon beyond, **Strath to Sand, Poolewe to Inverasdale,** and **Laide to “Openin Harbour”** some years later. The **Gairloch to Slattadale** road was realigned to its present route by 1855 to remove steep hills and give access to the Kerry Falls beauty spot and the Badachro road. Bridges were mostly fine stone arches, but some were the old-style “clapper” bridges made with large slabs. Road maintenance would be a constant battle on the gravel roads until tarmac arrived in the mid-1900s. Oh, and there was one road which would be planned but never built: Red Point to Diabaig⁴⁶. It almost made it in the 1970s, but was then shelved; the drive is still 45 miles instead of 6.



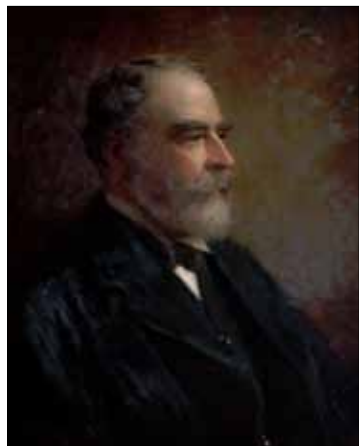
Dr John in 1867, aged 64

In 1848 Dr John decided to set an example to the reluctant crofters, and took over Isle of Ewe⁹ which he made into a modern demonstration farm (rather inconveniently placed!). Finally in 1856 his time as factor ended and he returned to the east. The crofting improvements he had started became well-known, but were controversial (“the Gairloch Crofting Experiment”) and not well received nationally; they were not taken up by other estates, which preferred capitalist sheep farming to promoting the good of the “peasants”. But perhaps there was more hope in Gairloch now because education was advancing: in 1792 there had been only one school, but the estate had now increased that to twelve with the help of the Free Church and various charitable bodies such as the SSPCK (Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge) or the Inverness Society for the Education of the Poor in the Highlands.

SIR KENNETH MACKENZIE

By now **Sir Kenneth Mackenzie** (1832-1900), the 13th Laird, had come of age. In his time a series of major advances prepared the estate for the 20th century. He was generally popular and known to his tenants, although perhaps he spent too much time at Conan House and too little at Flowerdale. The parish population reached its highest point, 5449, in the census of 1861: it had doubled in 50 years. There may be many reasons for this, including the efforts of the lairds, improved health, employment in the fisheries, and potatoes.

CROFTING. In 1885 he had 442 crofting tenants; each averaged $\frac{3}{4}$ acre of arable ground within his croft, 2-3 milking cows, 5-10 sheep, hens, some horses, and a family of 5. He did not push forward his uncle’s reforms, but at least an Agricultural School was set up in Poolewe by 1865 “to teach practical agriculture



Sir Kenneth (by WE Miller)

to children of crofters for 1½ hours daily and elementary branches of learning during the rest of the day". In 1883, after several years of poor crops, a return of potato blight, and falling prices for livestock, the Napier Commission was set up "to inquire into the conditions of crofters and cottars in the Highlands and Islands" (a "cottar" had a cottage and a very little land, often in exchange for labour). Sir Kenneth was a Commission member, but stood aside when Gairloch was being inspected. Most of his crofters were happy with him, but there were some complaints: for example, common grazing being taken for deer forests; 60 days of unpaid labour expected (as part of their rent); tenants' views often ignored. The result of the Commission was the 1886 Crofters' Holdings Act, which among other benefits gave security of tenure and appointed the Crofters' Commission to settle conflicts. Here crofters' houses gradually improved with the use of mortar, and from the 1890s corrugated iron started to replace thatch. Meanwhile sea-fishing was still important; in 1884, 80,000 cod were sent to Spain and Ireland: salted, pickled or dried.

TRAVEL AND TOURISM. By 1863 a steamer was reaching Gairloch from Oban, and from 1881 to 1931 David Macbrayne's 720-ton SS Claymore came from Glasgow every Saturday, calling at Gairloch, Poolewe and Aultbea. In 1870 the railway reached Achnasheen; in 1893 detailed plans were made for a railway from Achnasheen to Poolewe, and perhaps on to Aultbea, but it came to nothing: sadly for Poolewe, the Seaforth's had sold Lewis in 1844 and its hopes of becoming a major port had disappeared. With the new roads as well, the area was ready for tourism, and this was encouraged when in 1872 both Gairloch Hotel and the Loch Maree Hotel³² were built by the estate, and sold by 1881 to James Hornsby (the first landlord of the latter); they must have done well, because both were enlarged, in 1881 and 1888 respectively. Gairloch Hotel especially was a big employer, with facilities to compete with the southern Hydros. Other early hotels in the area included Kinlochewe (c1850), Aultbea (1860) and Poolewe (1861). In 1898 Gairloch Golf Club was founded. Mr Hornsby brought (with great difficulty) a small steamship, the 30-ton Mabel, to Loch Maree in 1883; it took sightseers and travellers along the loch on a regular timetable until 1911, using jetties at Tollie Bay, Loch Maree Hotel³² and Rhu Noa⁴³.

In 1877 Gairloch Estate was given the seal of royal approval when Queen Victoria visited, staying at the Loch Maree Hotel for six nights and visiting Kerrysdale, Flowerdale, and also Torridon; no doubt this gave a huge boost to tourism.



SS Claymore (above), Mabel (below)



EDUCATION. In 1872 the Scottish Education Act set up state-sponsored compulsory Board Schools throughout the country. Here the dozen or so rather haphazard local schools were replaced by 11 newly built schools covering the whole area, plus a variable number of small Side Schools for remote spots such as Gruinard, Isle Horrisdale²⁶, Isle of Ewe⁹ and Letterewe⁴⁰. These were in effect primary schools, but in 1894 a new wing was



added to Achtercairn School for secondary pupils. The language used in the schools was English, and a decline in Gaelic began. The government supplied detailed instructions on the design and management of the schools; the picture above shows the new Mellon Udrigle School with teacher's accommodation and schoolroom.

HUNTING AND FISHING. These became an important business, with wealthy clients leasing landowners' houses or specially-built lodges for the season, or staying with the landowners. Many big houses were built at this time, often in decorative style with turrets and ornamentation, making a striking, even grotesque, contrast with the small houses of the crofters. They included:



Ardlair (above), Letterewe (below)

Gruinard House by 1861 (Dundonnell Estate),
Drumchork Lodge⁸ c1881 (Meyrick Bankes),
Tournaig House¹⁰ 1878, **Inverewe House**¹¹ c1865,
Ardlair House³⁸ c1885 (Meyrick Bankes's daughter), **Letterewe House**⁴⁰ enlarged c1880,
Shieldaig Lodge²³ 1868, **Kinlochewe Lodge** 1858,
Torridon House 1876 (Duncan Darroch),
Ben Damph House 1887 (Earl of Lovelace).



When in due course it became too expensive to maintain these houses, one was demolished (Ardlair, by army gunfire in the 1940s as an artillery exercise!) and some became hotels; only two of those listed above are permanent homes today, Gruinard and Torridon.

VILLAGES. Gradually increasing wealth led to the development of the villages which we know today, with shops and services for the surrounding townships of crofts. For example, in 1881 Achtercairn¹⁹ and Strath²⁰ (Gairloch) had between them a police station with two cells, a school, a drill hall and armoury (for the Volunteers, formed in 1867), a salmon fishing station, two master masons, a smithy (*right*),



two general shops (items like tea, sugar and jam were no longer luxuries), shoe-making shops, tailors, a boat-building yard, and a mill (which closed in 1922); the smithy and the mill were popular social centres in any village thanks to the fires kept alight in them. From 1850 Dr Robertson had practised in Gairloch, but by 1880 the only doctor in the parish lived in Poolewe. Gairloch and Aultbea each had a policeman, but there was “little crime”. However, from about 1800 a good many excise men were employed to deal with the most serious and common “crime”, illicit whisky manufacture in remote and well hidden stills; this resulted from the arguably unjust tax on whisky, a means of raising funds for the government. From 1883 the mail came daily from Achnasheen, and was carried to outlying villages by runners; by 1907 a motor car was bringing mail and passengers. A carrier came weekly, although most goods still came by sea. Telegrams could be sent from the main villages, telegraph poles followed the roads, and the telegraph line to Stornoway entered the sea at Firemore. There was a bank in Gairloch, at first a branch of the Caledonian Bank. The largest houses in each village were usually the Manses, the Ministers’ houses; three Church of Scotland manses are notable: the old Gairloch Manse (1805, now Strathgair), the old Poolewe Manse (1828), and Cliff House (c1759), also in Poolewe. In 1881 out of a population of 4594, 138 people were “paupers”, receiving parish aid administered by the “Parochial Board”: an early form of Welfare State. About 1846 a large Poor House was built; this would later become the rear part of Gairloch Hotel.

Osgood Mackenzie (1842-1922) was the half-brother of Sir Kenneth. In 1862-3 his mother, the (now) Dowager Lady Mackenzie, bought for him the estates of Kernsary¹³, Inverewe¹¹ (formerly “Lochend”) and Tournais¹⁰, totalling 12,000 acres and including a farm on each estate but no crofters: plenty of land to wander over with his gun, killing anything that moved (see p35). About three years later Inverewe House and walled garden were built. As the peninsula was treeless except for scrub willow, Osgood planted a wood for shelter (finding that Corsican Pines were tougher than native Scots Pines). Frustratingly, we have no systematic account of how he developed **Inverewe Garden**, which became famous even in his lifetime and would eventually become the premier tourist attraction in Wester Ross. He probably started to plant it in



Inverewe walled garden, house and trees, c1880

the 1880s, and to introduce exotic plants after 1900. He had an interesting, lengthy and expensive quarrel with Meyrick Banks (that man yet again!) over fishing rights: Osgood’s clients could legally fish all of Fionn Loch because he owned five miles of its shore, and he claimed that they could also fish Dubh Loch⁵ at its southern end which is only separated from it by an artificial causeway (made about 1830 for sheep). The case eventually reached the House of Lords, where Osgood lost.

In 1900 Sir Kenneth died. His son, also **Sir Kenneth** (1861-1929), became the 14th Laird and 7th Baronet. Four years later he added a major extension to Flowerdale House ("Westerdale"), doubling its size. A few snapshots from his time... Eight Gairloch Rifle Volunteers went to serve in the Boer War; in 1908 the Volunteers would become part of the Territorial Army: D Company, 4th Battalion, the Seaforth Highlanders. The census of 1901 showed a population drop of 800 since 1881, to 3797. The numbers living in remote places make an interesting comparison with today: for example, Isle of Ewe⁹ 31, Isle Horrisdale²⁶ 46, Dry Island 8, Shenavall² 2, Carnmore⁴ 8, Achneigie³ 10 (the last three were mostly gamekeepers). A recent institution was the coastal Salmon Fishing Station, where salmon following the coast to find their river were caught in nets; there were 25 in Wester Ross, including Red Point, Achtercairn¹⁹ and Big Sand. Rubha Reidh lighthouse was opened in 1912 (*right*); the three keepers and their families could only reach it by sea until a road was built in 1962.



THE FIRST WORLD WAR

In August 1914 the First World War began. Loch Ewe was already important as a deep sheltered harbour used by the Royal Navy for exercises; there had been a number of fleet visits since 1898, including the impressive battleships, to the delight of local schoolchildren who were often invited on board. In April 1914 a young sailor died after an accident aboard a battleship, and was buried in Londubh graveyard, Poolewe. As the funeral ended, smoke and flames were seen to be rising from Inverewe House across the bay. The naval funeral party joined in the efforts to save the house, to no avail (*right*). Osgood Mackenzie, his daughter Mairi and her husband and cousin Robert Hanbury were then living at Tournaig House¹⁰, but they lost the income from letting Inverewe for hunting.



Mairi's albums supply much of the evidence for the little-known part Loch Ewe played in the war. It became a secondary base for refuelling (with coal) because of worries about the vulnerability of Scapa Flow, the main base in Orkney, to submarine attack. In 1915, once the defences of Scapa Flow



had been completed, Loch Ewe's importance diminished, although there were still some excitements such as the arrival of a "dummy fleet" of merchant ships disguised as warships, or the visit of the First Lord of the Admiralty, one Winston Churchill. The base at Aultbea continued to be used for coaling until it was closed in 1919.

135 men from Gairloch parish were mobilised in 1914. The 4th Seaforths suffered heavy losses in the war, fighting in France and Belgium, as did many other units with which local people served. War memorials would be unveiled recording 64 dead from Gairloch Estate (including the Laird's son Roderick), and 34 from Aultbea.

BETWEEN THE WARS

In the period between the wars the population declined sharply as many young people moved to the cities or abroad to find work. Life was hard: prices collapsed, many widows had to bring up families alone, rationing continued into the 1920s. A local tragedy hit the headlines which can't have helped tourism: in 1922 eight guests and two ghillies died of food-poisoning after eating sandwiches made at the Loch Maree Hotel; this was the first known case of botulism in Britain.

But there were signs of progress. Crofters were given the right to buy their houses, although they found that the parish rates were likely to be higher than their previous rents. The Prime Minister, Lloyd George, visited Flowerdale House on holiday in 1921 (while there, he called an emergency Cabinet meeting in Inverness, the only time it has met outside London). In 1930 Gairloch District Council replaced the parish council; the County Council took over collection of rates and maintenance of roads, although even in the mid-1930s the only tarred roads in Wester Ross were a few streets in Ullapool. There was a daily bus service to Achnasheen, but most goods still came by Macbrayne's steamer. In March 1930 telephone exchanges were opened; the first in Gairloch was in the Post Office, formerly Inchgowan change-house. The new Inverewe House was built in 1936 by Mairi Sawyer (who had re-married). In 1937 sheep from Achtercairn Farm were driven on foot to Dingwall for the last time, and next year they went by lorry; the dog was left behind, but turned up at Dingwall anyway! Tourism was flourishing by 1939 with new holiday homes being built.

In 1929 **Sir Hector** succeeded his father as the 15th Laird of Gairloch and 8th Baronet, the last in an unbroken line. When he died unmarried in 1958, the baronetcy passed to another branch of the family.

As the importance of the Gairloch Laids in the life of the area has inevitably declined in modern times, it seems convenient to complete their story here. In 1959 the niece of Sir Hector, Marjory (daughter of his sister), was recognised by the Lord Lyon King of Arms as successor to Gairloch: the Lairdship was for the first time passed down the female line, and the new Laird became known as **Madam Mackenzie**. She in turn passed the estate on to her son, **John Mackenzie**, the 17th and current Laird, who lives at Canon Bridge. By the way, in 1960 it was decided that the vacant chieftainship of Clan Mackenzie belonged to the Earl of Cromartie in Easter Ross, although the Gairloch Mackenzies were the bigger landowners.

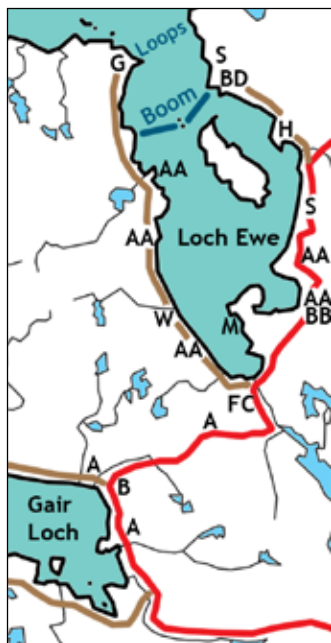
THE SECOND WORLD WAR

On 3rd September 1939 the Second World War began and everything changed. People had to become used to a strict new regime: rationing (until 1954 for some things!), black-out, ploughing of grassland to grow more crops, government purchase of all meat animals, air raid precautions, travel restrictions, a Home Guard, no weather forecasts allowed. But the greatest impact was made by Loch Ewe's role as a naval base; not since the ironworks in the 1600s had the area been so nationally important.

As in the First World War, Scapa Flow was considered vulnerable, this time to bomber attack, and Loch Ewe (known as "Port A") was selected as a temporary base for the Home Fleet. When the fleet arrived on 13th September, Churchill visited again, and sent out a message to the ships: "This is a God-fearing community and the local people are to be treated with respect." Much discussion now took place about where the main base should be, with Rosyth and the Clyde also being considered; the decision in October was that Scapa Flow would be the permanent base, and Loch Ewe retained for occasional use. Ironically, a little earlier HMS Royal Oak had been sunk by a submarine in Scapa Flow, and in December the flagship HMS Nelson was damaged by a submarine-laid mine while entering Loch Ewe.

From January 1941 Loch Ewe became much busier with a new role, as a gathering point for convoys, servicing merchant ships and their escorts; in June 1941 it was commissioned as HMS Helicon, based in Aultbea (^H on map below). As well as Atlantic convoys, between February 1942 and December 1944 nineteen convoys of the PQ and JW series set sail for Russia, carrying invaluable military supplies, totalling 481 merchant ships and over 100 naval escorts. The biggest of these left Loch Ewe with 47 merchant ships plus their escorts; it seemed to the locals that you could almost walk across the loch when they were all at anchor. Unfortunately photography was not allowed!

Throughout the war the Loch Ewe and Gairloch district was subject to restrictions. Checkpoints or barriers were set up at Inverness Station, Achnasheen, Glen Docherty (with mined culverts), Achtercairn at the Wildcat Store^B and Laide Post Office. The Achtercairn barrier disappeared one day, and suspicion fell on a local who was thought to have Nazi sympathies; but nothing was proved until years later part of the missing barrier was found under the floorboards of his house. Many local buildings were commandeered, including Gairloch Hotel as a hospital and Loch Maree Hotel as a rest place for officers. Pool House was for a time a YMCA, useful for soldiers on leave. There were army camps^A beyond the new Gairloch cemetery (the Golf Club was a NAAFI), near the shore in Strath²⁰, and near



Loch Tollie¹⁸. Recently-built holiday homes were taken over for officers. Military personnel outnumbered locals 3 to 1, including detachments of Welsh, Polish, Indian and Honduran troops, some of whom found the climate hard to bear.

On the plus side, Poolewe Bridge was rebuilt wider in 1939 to cope with the military traffic (*right*), and the Poolewe-Gairloch road was realigned to its present route; the armed forces provided plenty of cash, employment, and a ready market for local entrepreneurs; there were film shows and other entertainments; and fallen barrage balloons were a prized source of useful material (good enough to



make a wedding dress with!). There seems to have been an unprecedented buzz about the place: the local people felt that they were in the front line, contributing willingly to the war effort. There were many memorable episodes: for example, the crash-landing at Big Sand of a Spitfire which was flying from Orkney to Shetland, or the stray anti-aircraft shell which blew a patch of cabbages onto a Lonemore roof.

Today the concrete remains of military installations can be seen all round Loch Ewe: anti-aircraft batteries^{AA} (there were at least five air raids, doing little damage), a barrage balloon base^{BB}, coastal defence artillery at Cove^G (using two six-inch guns salvaged from HMS Iron Duke), signalling stations^S, a munitions store at Inverewe^M, a watering point at Naast^W, and the large base at Mellon Charles^{BD} from which the anti-submarine boom was deployed across the loch, one of a number of sophisticated defences. A cable was laid to Iceland, entering the sea at Gairloch.

Quite separately, Poolewe hosted (along with Glen Feshie in the Cairngorms) the Highland Fieldcraft Training Centre^{FC} from late 1943. Its aim was to train future officers by outdoor activities, and the tough ten-week courses were run by Lt Col Lord Rowallan of Scouts fame. The later Outward Bound movement owed much to this scheme.

Two tragic accidents are still remembered by memorials at their sites. In February 1944 the American Liberty ship William H Welch, about 10,000 tons, was heading for Loch Ewe to join a New York-bound convoy. A ferocious storm blew up and she failed to make the turn into the loch, instead being driven on to a reef near Eilean Fuairaidh Mor¹⁷, and at 4.00am she broke in two. It was too rough to launch lifeboats. Seven hours later a huge wave washed the remaining crew overboard; only 12 out of 74 reached the shore alive. There was a vigorous rescue effort, involving an escort tug, crofters from Cove¹⁶, lighthouse men, coastguards, Fieldcraft soldiers, seamen from Aultbea, WRNS, and the YMCA supervisor – many tales of heroism in appalling weather. The survivors were taken to the Gairloch Hotel/Hospital.

In June 1945, a month after the end of the war, a US Air Force B-24 Liberator, “Sleepy Time Gal”, with a crew of nine gave a lift home to six soldiers. No-one knows exactly what went wrong, perhaps an engine failure, but it seems that in an attempt to find a

place to land they crashed into a lochan, one of the Fairy Lochs²⁴ south of Gair Loch. A memorial and aeroplane remains mark the site today. There was a similar story on Beinn Eighe in March 1951 when a Lancaster on a night exercise crashed in Coire mhic Fhearchair⁴⁵; the RAF rescue service's incompetence in dealing with this had the valuable effect of making the RAF re-think and greatly improve their Mountain Rescue role nation-wide.

Gruinard Island⁶ became notorious when in 1941-2 scientists from Porton Down chose it as a suitably remote place (locals might disagree) to carry out experiments with anthrax; one hopes that this was only to find out whether the enemy might develop a usable weapon. The effect on the sheep was predictable, but it almost went wrong when one infected carcase floated to Mellon Udrigle beach. The island was closed until 1990, when it was declared safe after many attempts to clean it.

MODERN TIMES

After the war, there was some way to go before Wester Ross reached the standard of living of the south. In 1950 a government White Paper was produced which showed the main areas of concern. It was called "A Programme of Highland Development", with the aim of stopping depopulation, and it suggested improvements to roads, houses, water supply, harbours and tourist facilities; but there was little serious action for at least another ten years.

Roads. There were complaints that fish lorries were being discouraged by poor roads and going to Ullapool instead, and demands for improvement: "Roads are first essentials and in this the Highlands lag a hundred years behind the times... The most desperate need is for improved communications, especially in remote areas where small communities are slowly but surely disappearing through their lack." The A832 (roads were numbered in 1922) was tarred by about 1940, and the minor roads ten years later, but they were all still single-track with passing places; it was not until the 1960s with the Crofters' Counties Road Scheme that a programme of doubling the A832 began, finishing (almost) with Glen Docherty in 2000.



Electricity reached the district in 1950-2 thanks to a diesel-electric power station in Aultbea and then the Kerry hydro-electric scheme, at the cost of ruining a well-known sight, Kerry Falls. It is hard to over-estimate the importance of this: a far cry from the darkness of living in roundhouse or blackhouse. Once the National Grid was set up, other hydro schemes too were planned, and threatened serious environmental damage: in 1960 a major and now unthinkable scheme for Fionn Loch and Lochan Fada was rejected (it was vetoed again five years later); another in remote country south of Gair Loch was refused in 2004 after eight years of national debate. Today numerous smaller schemes are being developed.

Crofting was declining: in 1951 the “gradual disappearance of the west coast crofter-fisherman” was lamented. Crofters were allowed to buy their land, and later to amalgamate crofts to make more sustainable farms; from the 1950s most gave up arable farming and turned to sheep, and many took on second jobs. Grants became available to build new bungalows, replacing the old stone cottages, but many crofts were abandoned and “de-crofted”. Peat was still cut as fuel, but coal was also arriving on coastal “Puffers”. The first tractor appeared after 1945.

Fishing too declined. Catches of herring and cod have plummeted since 1970, partly because of over-fishing; today creel-caught shellfish and trawled prawns are dominant, mostly sent to Spain (like Sir Hector’s cod!). Salmon farming expanded in the 1980s and 1990s, which provided an alternative source of salmon; but it also contributed to the collapse of loch and river fishing for wild salmon and sea trout which was partly due to the spread of parasitic sea lice from fish farms. The last fishing station, at Red Point, closed in 2000 because of a shortage of wild salmon.

Villages expanded. There was a tourism boom in the 1950s, with many B&Bs and holiday lets opening. After 1980 incomers began to settle in the area and the population started to grow again; many were retired people returning to a place they had fallen in love with on holiday. And there was a general move from outlying townships to the main villages. Crofting land was bought for housing, with up to four houses built on each former croft (and painted white!), including many second homes and holiday homes. The Council and housing associations helped to provide homes for locals, starting with the post-war Swedish houses, pre-fabricated wooden buildings intended for those returning from the war. Gairloch Estate sold many small parcels of land for housing and other developments.

Today fewer traditional jobs such as crofting, fishing and fish processing are available, there are fewer young families with the result that school pupil numbers have gone down, and there is concern that many young people have to leave the area to make a living. But the community as a whole is reasonably prosperous. This is largely thanks to tourists (except in winter), those who have second homes here, and those who have moved here from outside, with the whole range of services which they demand in modern times. Like many rural villages, Gairloch might find it hard to flourish without the input of cash and energy which these people provide.

A selection of events from 1950 to today

1950: Kay Matheson of Inverasdale¹⁵ was one of the four who stole the Stone of Destiny from Westminster Abbey.

1951: the first anti-midge cream arrived, guaranteed to work for 3 hours!

1952: Gairloch played a small part in the Cold War when the Anti-Aircraft Operations Room (AAOR) was built in Achtercairn¹⁹, a huge concrete bunker, one of four in Scotland. It was immediately outdated, but was given new life in the **1980s** when it was converted into Highland Council’s reserve nuclear bunker; that too was soon outdated with the end of the Cold War, and it became a Highland Council roads depot. Now the aim is to resurrect it as the new Gairloch Museum.

**Population
Gairloch Parish**

c = approximate

1755	2050 c
1811	2755
1821	4518
1831	4445
1841	4880
1851	5186
1861	5449
1871	4550 c
1881	4594
1891	4000 c
1901	3797
1911	3318
1921	2781
1931	2376
1941	2300 c
1951	1991
2011	2300 c



Achtercairn and Strath: above 1960s, below 2016



1952: Mairi Sawyer handed over Inverewe Estate and Garden to the National Trust for Scotland; she died the following year. Numbers of visitors grew to more than 120,000 a year in the early 1970s and 137,000 in 1993, but like other tourism it later suffered from the arrival of cheap foreign holidays and rising petrol prices.

1960: Strathburn House opened, the 100th Council home for the elderly in Scotland.

1960: the community was devastated by a terrible and nationally mourned accident, the drowning in Gair Loch of the doctor, the vet, the grocer and the garage owner.

1960s: the Council acquired Gairloch Pier from MacBraynes; a new pier was built in **1977** and extended in **1990**. Pontoons for leisure boats were added in 2005. (There had been a proposal in 1967 to move the harbour to Shieldaig.)

1962: Sands Holiday Centre was set up.

1966: the NATO ship fuelling depot was opened near Aultbea.

1967-8: Torridon Estate (excluding the house) passed into the hands of the National Trust for Scotland, in lieu of death duties for the Lovelace family.

1969: Gairloch Conservation Unit was set up to coordinate the deer management of all local estates, the first in Scotland.

1977: Gairloch Heritage Museum opened in the old Achtercairn Farm steading, thanks largely to the initiative of Sheriff and Mrs Murdoch; in 1980 it was Scottish Museum of the Year.

1978: Gairloch and District Times (aka Yellow Pages) was launched.

1979: the Gairloch Gold Rush: bore-holes were drilled 600m deep beside the old road above Kerrysdale to find out if the gold, silver, copper and zinc found in sulphide deposits there were worth exploiting (they were not).

1983: Gairloch High School was upgraded to take all secondary pupils (previously many had boarded in Dingwall); in **1994** its new building was opened, which included the community library and leisure centre, and was claimed to have the biggest slate roof in Europe. It also has the biggest catchment area in Europe.

1986: the first Great Wilderness Challenge took place, a charity run/walk from Dundonnell to Poolewe.

1991: trawling in Gair Loch was banned after years of campaigning, to preserve the shellfish stocks; only creel fishermen now operate in the loch.

1993-8: 58 Sea Eagle chicks arrived at Loch Maree as Stage 2 of the reintroduction.

1994: Gairloch Medical Centre opened.

2003: Two Lochs Radio started broadcasting; it still claims to be the smallest commercial radio station in Britain, but its coverage has increased to six lochs.

2005: a hurricane caused enormous damage to trees and structures; there were other damaging storms in **1984** and **2014**.

2010: Dry Island declared independence as the new country of Isonia: see the website!

2012: the GALE Centre was opened by Gairloch and Loch Ewe Action Forum, including the latest in a series of tourist offices.

2015: the North Coast 500 (NC500) route was set up round the coast from Inverness to Lochcarron, including the road from Dundonnell to Torridon, and was soon recognised as one of the world's finest drives. This has increased the number of visitors; previously many tended to visit Skye or Ullapool on the trunk roads but neglected the area between them.

The story of **land ownership** in this area has been long and very complicated, with boundaries and owners frequently changing. All estates but one eventually fell into non-Mackenzie hands; Gairloch Estate is very unusual in the Highlands in having had the same family of landowners for so long, since 1494. Around 1970 four local landowners were Whitbread (beer), Macdonald-Buchanan (whisky), Wills (tobacco) and Horlick (malted drink)! In 1996 Andy Wightman published "Who Owns Scotland", a book giving details of all the estates. Here are the local estates in order of size at that time (those marked * have changed hands since 1996):

Letterewe	81,000 acres	Paul van Vlissingen* & family
Gairloch (& Conon)	56,900 acres	John Mackenzie
Torridon	41,000 acres	National Trust for Scotland
Dundonnell	33,600 acres	Roger brothers*
Kinlochewe	30,000 acres	Pat Wilson
Inveran	18,500 acres	J Macdonald-Buchanan*
Coulin	18,300 acres	Philip Smith
Aultbea	15,000 acres	J Hardy
Gruinard	14,800 acres	Hon Mrs A Maclay
Grudie & Talladale	12,300 acres	John Wills
Beinn Eighe NNR	10,500 acres	Scottish Natural Heritage
Diabaig	8,600 acres	Sir Paul Nicholson
Big Sands	7,900 acres	W & M Cameron
Tournaig	6,400 acres	Sir John Horlick*

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT



It seems suitable to finish with a look at our natural environment, which is today the strongest attraction of the area. Our mountainous scenery has not always been appreciated, mountains once being seen as dreary wasteland; a “green and pleasant land” was then the ideal. Thomas Pennant in 1772 on Loch Maree barely noticed the hills; he was much more interested in trees. But the romantic idea of experiencing beauty and sublimity in wildness soon took hold: James Hogg, visiting Fionn Loch in 1803, called the scene “dreadful and grand beyond measure”, and in 1836 the Minister of Poolewe wrote that “the traveller who, from the west end of Lochmaree, takes a view of the scenery before him, cannot fail to be struck at the wild grandeur of the scenery; the much admired and far-famed Lochmaree.” Local people who had known no other landscape no doubt had a more utilitarian attitude to it, but they did know it well: the Ordnance Survey, when they surveyed the land and researched place-names, found that most features had Gaelic names, some historical (treasure hill), some recalling people (MacRae’s shieling), many simply descriptive (the big red hill, file mountain), some obscure (Baosbheinn has three possible meanings).

Osgood Mackenzie (p26) got to know his large estate very well, and certainly appreciated the wildlife on it; but at that time appreciation was expressed by a gun rather than a camera. He boasted of the extraordinary number of birds and other animals he had killed, and seemed puzzled to find that some species were becoming rarer or extinct. Even before his day, the larger predators had been exterminated; one of Scotland’s many “last wolves” is said to have been killed below Beinn Alligin in the late 1700s. Today people come here to climb the hills (including 17 Munros), walk the glens and coasts, sail the sea, study the unique geology, and enjoy the wildlife for pleasure rather than sport; photography has helped to give us all a love of fine scenery and the beauties of nature. Access is allowed everywhere, thanks to the excellent Scottish Access law; this owes much to the late Dutch owner of the Great Wilderness, Paul van Vlissingen, who set the precedent by his “Letterewe Accord” in 1993.

Humans have, of course, always affected the land they live and work on, and so there is little true “wilderness” left below about 200 metres; above that, apart from paths and the odd high shieling, the land is still largely wild, as hill-walkers appreciate. On the lower ground trees have suffered most. They have been cut down by farmers, ironworkers, house-builders, boat-builders, Canadian lumberjacks (brought over in wartime) and others. There have been efforts to restore the woodland: in the 1800s many woods were planted and managed by the estates, and more recently the

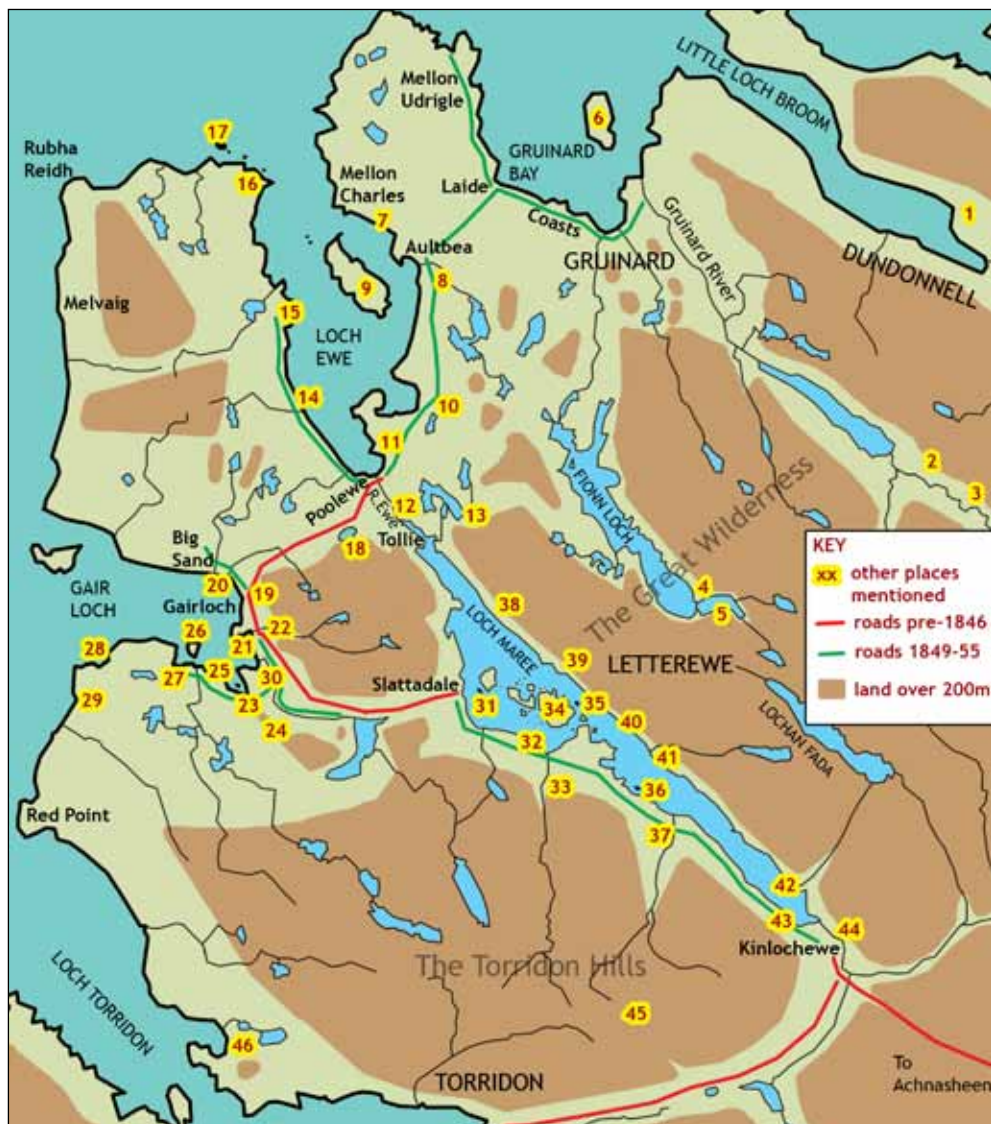
Forestry Commission has been at work; both often planted alien species. Today, strangely, the idea has become popular of a “Caledonian Forest” which should cover the entire landscape, including high ground, however irrelevant it is in Wester Ross (see p4); there has been a rash of large-scale, well-intentioned, subsidised but totally misguided native tree plantation schemes on our peaty moorlands, along with miles of fences. Moorland here is the proper (“climax”) vegetation, a feature unique to the Scottish Highlands with a special beauty of its own, and trees struggle to grow on it. One example: in 2002-7 the biggest native tree plantation in Scotland was created in the 15 square miles of rocky hills, lochs and moors to the east of Gairloch, with 2½ million trees planted; in the lower and previously farmed fringes all is well, but in the other 90%, above 200 metres, the trees are stunted, dying or dead.

The first official recognition and protection for our natural assets came in 1951, when 10,500 acres of land were bought by a government body, the Nature Conservancy, and turned into Beinn Eighe **National Nature Reserve**, the first in Scotland; the Loch Maree Islands were added to this later. There followed a panoply of designations, mostly administered by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). The main ones are:

- **Sites of Special Scientific Interest** (SSSIs): these include much of Torridon and the Great Wilderness, and many smaller areas such as Inverasdale¹⁵ peatlands and Shieldaig²³ woods.
- **Special Areas of Conservation** (SACs): Fionn Loch, Loch Maree and its surroundings, and some SSSIs (a European designation).
- **National Scenic Area** (NSA): the whole area except the flat moorland south from Port Henderson²⁸.
- **Wild Land Areas** (WLA): (1) the Great Wilderness from Little Loch Broom to Loch Maree but excluding the peninsulas; (2) from Shieldaig²³-Loch Maree to Torridon.
- **Marine Protected Area** (MPA): the sea from Rubha Reidh northwards.
- **UNESCO Biosphere**: the whole of Wester Ross (international recognition).

All this protection has helped to conserve the area, but there have been failures. Controversially, a recent spate of small run-of-the-river hydro-electric schemes has been allowed, excellent in principle (and profitable) but each seriously scarring and de-wilding the land, including some of the best land. Sadly, planners seem unwilling to place a value on natural beauty and wildness. Our district, from Little Loch Broom to Loch Torridon, contains arguably the most spectacular landscapes in Scotland; it needs and deserves to be treated with great care and sensitivity.

Let the last word go to John Dixon, who moved to the area for health reasons (p7): “Its romantic scenery and health-giving climate are its most obvious attractions; but add to these its wonderful legends and traditions, the eventful history of its dominant family, the story of its old ironworks, the interesting peculiarities of its Highland inhabitants, the distinction conferred upon it by the visit of Her Majesty Queen Victoria, the great geological controversy about its rocks, the sport its waters afford to the angler, the varied subjects it displays to the artist, ... and you have a list of allurements it would be difficult to beat elsewhere.”



Other places mentioned with page(s)

1 Kildonan 6	13 Kernsary 26	25 Leacnasaide 11	37 Grudie Bridge 14
2 Shenavall 27	14 Naast 30	26 Horrisdale 7,15,27	38 Ardlair 25
3 Achneigie 27	15 Inverasdale 32	27 Badachro 15	39 Bull Rock 18
4 Carnmore 27	16 Cove 30	28 Port Henderson 8,15	40 Letterewe Hse 12,25
5 Dubh Loch 26	17 Eilean Furadh Mor 30	29 Opinan (south) 21	41 Furnace 12
6 Gruinard Island 31	18 Loch Tollie 8,10,30	30 Kerrysdale 21,22	42 Fasagh 12
7 Ormiscaig 21	19 Achtercairn 2 etc	31 Eilean Ruairidh B. 11	43 Rhu Noa 24
8 Drumchork 25	20 Strath 25 etc	32 Loch Maree Hotel 24	44 Anancaun 8
9 Isle of Ewe 21,23,27	21 Charlestown 10,15	33 Talladale 12	45 Coire mhic Fh. 31
10 Tournai 25,26	22 Flowerdale 8,13 etc	34 Eilean Subhainn 12	46 Diabaig 7,23
11 Inverewe 25,26,33	23 Shieldaig 7,21,25,36	35 Isle Maree 6,15	
12 Red Smiddy 12	24 Fairy Lochs 31	36 Eilean Gruidh 8	

