

North Lochs on the records

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This text is the basis of a talk presented to North Lochs Historical Society on Tuesday 26 March 2013. It accompanies a PowerPoint presentation that is available at www.slideshare.com/ [insert address].

Slide 2: Church Records

As you will no doubt be aware, the history of the Church in Scotland is complicated with multiple separations and mergers. Religion played a key role in the communities of the Western Isles providing not only spiritual guidance but education and charitable support to the needy.

There is also the genealogical aspect of the records, recording baptisms, marriage and funerals prior to statutory registration in 1855. As a result, church records are highly important.

The Tasglann doesn't hold any church archives. Any historical records relating to individual churches, regardless of denomination, are still held by the churches. Some have inevitably been lost. Schisms and the closure and merger of churches are always a dangerous time for records when they can be neglected, fought over, or squirreled away as private precious objects.

As part of the Tasglann project we have visited several denominations to see what records are held. Kirk session minutes, deacon's court minutes and communion rolls have often survived along with records of individual services. Christening, marriage and funeral rolls are also common. For North Lochs, we haven't viewed any records but we would be happy to do so.



Historical records of the Church of Scotland records go to the Church's head office in Edinburgh who then deposit them with the National Records of Scotland. The church has agreed to allow the Keeper of the Records of Scotland at the NRS to locate such records, and the records of individual churches, within local authority archive services where storage and security conditions meet standards equal to those at the NAS. As such, it is hoped that the five volumes of Presbytery records for Lewis dating from 1742 to 1919 will be returned to the islands when the new archive facility at Lews Castle is established.

For other denominations, such as the Free Church, it is unclear where the higher level records are although some do reside in Edinburgh at the NRS or within the Free Church offices.

It's clear that such records have a natural home on the island, where the people to whom they relate can access them for study and pleasure. I'm sure such minutes are a treasure trove of information on the appointment of ministers, the building and provision of churches and the internal politics of the islands.

As mentioned, the church had a civic role prior to 1840s through providing for the poor and taking a lead in education. The early 1800s saw a gradual shift in responsibility from the church and estate owners to centralised government structures. This sees new administrative structures being created and as a result new types of records and archives being created.

Slide 3: Lochs Parochial Board – existing records

Things began to change when the 1845 Poor law Act established parochial boards. The Boards, and later parish councils, dealt with some matters relating to roads, taxation and water supplies but the bulk of their time was spent dealing with the poor of their area. Previously, charities and the church had taken a lead role in this with assistance from landowners in the islands. North Lochs fell within the auspices of Lochs Parochial Board which later became known a Lochs Parish Council.

The main role of the Board was the collection and distribution of poor relief to those most in need within the parish. The Board employed an Inspector of the Poor whose job it was to visit those in need. He could give out financial aid on the spot or arrange for the provision of clothing or minor building repairs. More serious cases likely to require greater intervention, or ongoing financial support, were referred to the Board resulting the keeping of detailed case records. The Board sat in judgement on the individual case and could either dismiss it, offer regular financial payment or payment in kind such as clothing or fuel. In extreme cases, individuals unable to look after themselves or be cared for by others were sent to the poorhouse in Stornoway or mainland asylums in the case of those suffering mental or physical infirmity.

The Tagslann hold the records of the Lochs Board with detailed records of individual cases from 1890-1930.

Slides 4 & 5: Extract from the General Register of the Poor 1890-1911

These records are a valuable genealogical source that has been little used. This is mainly due to their innate sensitivity – many are only just coming out of data protection restrictions of 100 years but even so, memories on the island

are long and they therefore they must be handled and used sensitively. A number of anonymised case studies follow.

1 In 1918, a female from Ranish is recorded as living on her brother's croft. Hitherto she supported herself by working in the neighbourhood on crofts and at the peats. She now feels unable to work on account of advancing age. "Has been a respectable and industrious woman all her life". She was 62. She was admitted onto the roll for 3 years until she started to receive a pension.

2 A female, aged 49. The applicant resides with a younger sister who is married and has one child ages 11 years. Husband is in America since 9 years and not supporting his wife and child. Has no stock of any kind. Has no food at time of inspectors visit. Is given 1 ball of meal.

3 A gentleman aged 52 is a crofter and has two cows and a number of sheep. He has no family but himself and his wife. He does not want any assistance from the Parish Council except a little money to pay for the lifting of the harvest.

4 Murdo Macdonald is a fisherman, aged 34. An application for assistance is made on his behalf by a friend. He has four children aged 8 and under, the youngest being 10 weeks old. Murdo is recorded as suffering from Rheumatic fever and is unable to work.

The parish would have expected the first port of aid to be his own family but the records note his parents are dead. He has a small house on his uncle's croft and his own wife is recorded as being a patient in the Inverness District

Asylum – only ten weeks after the birth of their child. A woman is paid 5 shillings to attend to the children. His income is described as “the Kindness of relatives.”

The poor inspector grants £1 relief and refers the case to the Parish Council.

Two pages later, his wife, Donna Mackenzie, has an application made on her behalf by her brother, Malcolm, presumably as the husband himself is incapacitated. She is removed to the Asylum and the Parish take on the payments for her care there. Sadly, she dies within a year and the payments stop. Just after her death, her husband's relief is reduced to 16s 3d and a year later, when his eldest child hits 10 it reduces to 10 shillings. After 4 years on the roll, he is removed, presumably being well enough to fend for himself.

These poor records can be tough going and should be approached with caution by family historian – you may remember the *Who Do You Think You Are* where Jeremy Paxman cried – that was poor law records! However, they can be amazingly rewarding. Past researchers have discovered all sorts of fascinating details about family members and their antics. The absence of family members who have moved away are often noted in these records and researchers have discovered whole branches of family overseas as a result.

Slide 6: Lewis Combination Poorhouse

Severe cases of poverty, illness or homelessness were transferred to the poorhouse in Stornoway at the top end of what is now Westview Terrace. A poorhouse could have been established in Lewis anytime after 1845 but the parish councils all resisted even though pressure was applied by central

authorities. Eventually, the Lewis Combination Poorhouse was built in the mid 1890s.

The minutes of the Poorhouse Committee for 1893 through until 1970 by which point it was the Management Committee for Dun Berisay and Coulregrein Home. The Poorhouse was jointly erected by the four parochial boards of Lewis and from the outset there were the usually inter parish arguments you would expect from any decision taken in Lewis. The proportion each parish was to pay towards its establishment, building and maintenance was based upon the number of beds allocated per parish. Needless to say, Stornoway had the largest share but this was increased when Barvas, Lochs and Uig complained that they didn't need so many beds.

Life in the poorhouse was deliberately hard – really it was only meant to be your home for a limited period until you got back on your feet. However, many people died in the poorhouse as they had no where else to go or anyone to look after them in their old age.

Slides 7 & 8: Dietary scheme, 1929 for Lunatic and Ordinary Poor

The minute book of the poorhouse gives details on the daily rations of food allowed: As you can see this is pretty meagre – a repetitive diet of meat and fish, potatoes and an evening meal of porridge.

For inmates, it was their parishes that sent them to the poorhouse due to their poverty or inability to look after themselves. A separate dietary book records notes on their admittance. Such notes were blunt: “deaf & dumb”, “Rhumatism”, “Homeless”. One female is described as “morally weak” and leaves 5 months later to work on the herring.

Slide 9: Crop rotation

The poorhouse has also left one other interesting record. During the war, its lawns and gardens were given over to the growing of crops. 20 years worth of vegetable patch drawings have survived within a volume, detailing what was grown (including the varieties of potatoes). We've digitised this for use by schools looking into crofting as a practical example of crop rotation where the children can study individual plots to see how the soil was managed.

In a nutshell, if your family history notes anyone dying in the poorhouse or they are listed in the census as a pauper, there is a good chance some record of them is held by the Tasglann.

Slide 10: Lewis District Committee & Lewis District Council

In 1890 the commissioners of Supply were done away with and Ross & Cromarty County Council was established. The records for both these organisations are held by Highland Archives in Inverness, the majority of the area having been incorporated into Highland Council at local government reorganisation in 1975.

At a local level, the Lewis District Committee was established in 1890 to implement council decisions and oversee many local services. The Committee consisted of County Councillors for the area and representatives from the parish councils.

Slide 11: Roads for Lochs

The first meeting focussed on petitioning parliament for funding for new roads and bridges on the islands. Notably, in Lochs,

“That it is expedient in the interests of the District that a branch road be formed from Leurboast and Raenish through the moor to join the main road to Stornoway a distance 4 miles or nearby”

Slide 12: Pentland Road

Roads were a key feature of their work but not always to the landowner's pleasure. For example, the Pentland Road (which celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2012) is heavily documented but its naming didn't go down well with Major Matheson who objected to a road going across his land being named after Lord Pentland.

The Committee's sub-committee gives a flavour of its activities: roads, finance, public health (who employed medical officers and sanitary inspectors). The committees would discuss works to be done across the islands but also would take evidence from local crofters and cottars on their own issues relating to land requirements and roads; and work with government enquiries. The agenda for a meeting in 1920 included: housing for crofters; district health in Point; water supply to Ness; mail services; roads; the Moss End Fever Hospital committee; the appointment of a medical officer of health; nurses remuneration; infectious disease in Tolsta; level crossings in Sandwick and providing a motorbike for the sanitary inspector.

From the 1910s onwards, the Committee also took on the role of providing district nursing and prior to the advent of the NHS the committee records are an important source on health matters in the islands.

In war time the committee played its part. They petitioned the military authorities to request an extra four days leave for the soldiers of Lewis and Harris to allow for the extra travel needed to visit family and still allow them

the same amount of time together as a lowland compatriots. When the *Iolaire* sank in 1919, the Committee worked with Stornoway Town Council to raise money and provide relief.

In 1930, the District Committee was merged with the four Lewis Parish Councils to form Lewis District Council. The new council was responsible the poor law until its abolition with the coming of the welfare state in 1948, but it also took on County Council functions at a local level including public health, nursing services, housing, roads, harbours, water supply and drainage.

Slide 13: Valuation rolls

Valuation rolls for the period 1899-1973 are held for Lewis. These list all properties with a rateable value and were produced annually. They give information on the location of the properties, their owner, tenant and occupier along with the rateable value. These are good for finding out who was living in certain properties at a given time and when properties were built.

Slide 14: School locations

As well as local government records, the most heavily used records in the collection are those relating to education.

The Education (Scotland) Act 1872 introduced compulsory education for the first time to children in Scotland and established school boards whose records form the basis of the school collections. Prior to 1872, education was undertaken at a parish level and not strictly enforced. Additional schooling was provided across the island by a proliferation of charity schools such as the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK), Gaelic Schools Society and Ladies Schools along with Free Church schools.

It's worth noting that for researching pre-1873 schooling that records in Edinburgh are particularly valuable. In the National Records of Scotland, the Seaforth Papers can provide some detail on schools in the areas but they also have the records of the SSPCK. Additionally, the Gaelic School Society reports are held at the National Library of Scotland.

Tasglann nan Eilean Siar holds the a complete run of school board minutes for the Lochs area from 1873 through its various guises into what is now the Education Committee of the Comhairle.

The Tasglann, in partnership with the library service, also the majority of the island's school log books and, where they exist, admission registers, which need to be tightly controlled due to legislative requirements.

In 1873, when the School Boards were established, there was a parish school in Lemreway (South Lochs) and Free Church Schools in Leurbost and Carloway (which came under the Lochs Board). Carloway and Lemreway were transferred to the Board, but the Leurbost Free Church decided to discontinue the school but retain the building for congregational use. The minute book states the intended location was at "Astapel near the Old gate on the road at Leurbost for Leurbost, Corssbost and Raernish, Grimishader and Croirgarry".

Slide 15: Scholar numbers 1873

After checking the number of children for each school they realised Leurbost wouldn't be big enough and so a second school was planned to cover Raernish and Grimishader.

Another school was planned at Achmore to also cover Lochganivich, technically in the Uig Parish area. Due to its isolated location, it was decided

this school would be jointly managed and funded by both Lochs and Uig school boards. From 1875, it had its own school board who usually met in Soval or Knockiandue rather than at Achmore itself – presumably the Board didn't like travelling.

Slide 16: Achmore School

The school opened in 1877 following an advertisement for a teacher “Teacher (Female) wanted – wanted for the new public school at Achmore building in combination with the Parishes of Lochs and Uig, Lewis, and designed to accommodate 30 scholars. Salary £40 per annum and Government grant.”

The Board minutes are concerned with the locating and building schools, the appointing teachers discipline, curriculum matters and the all important government grants awarded to each school.

The minutes note that in 1892, grants were made available for the teaching of Gaelic in the schools. The Board immediately informed all teachers “to introduce reading by Standards IV and upwards of the Gaelic Scriptures (with translations into English) twice a week during the time set aside for religious instruction and to suggest that in cases where the head teacher is not Gaelic Speaker, the reading on these days should be supervised by a native Pupil Teacher or monitor. It is expected that the teachers will supply at their own cost the Gaelic scriptures required.”

The school log books of which I'm sure many of you are familiar show the weekly life of a school and if read in conjunction with the Board Minutes give an in-depth account of education history in the area.

Log books for the following schools have survived: Achmore 1917-1992, Fidigarry 1879-1963, Grimishader 1893-1963. Teachers were supposed to record in the log book the introduction of new books, courses of instruction, the visit of managers and inspectors, staff absence or any special circumstances that may affect the opening of the school. This they did to varying levels of diligence.

Slide 17: Grimshader log book Nov 1906

“Attendance only fair. Children being kept away as potato lifting is in progress. One or two sick with cold. This being a fanking day, a few boys were left in the afternoon.”

Slide 18: Grimishader May 30th 1913

“Attendance not so good this week, weather being stormy... As this is Communion week, Thursday was given as a holiday.”

Slide 19: Grimishader May 30th 1913

“Attendance not so good this week. 3 scholars kept from school with scarlet fever. All the seniors are making good progress with their work. The juniors are not so well up on their work, as teacher finds it impossible to pay them the attention they need on account of having so many classes. The schoolroom is kept clean and tidy”

Slide 20: Fidigarry 26 Oct 1937

“Received 1 ton 16cwt coals today. Headmaster gave a few Exercises of new “Physical Education” to Advanced division and senior classes today in the schoolrooms as playground is in a mess with mud.”

Slide 21: Fidigarry 12 November 1937

“Headmaster unfit to walk to school today. Sprained his right foot while teaching table 19 to Senior classes in Mr Smith’s room on 11/11/1937.

As playground is so muddy and wet the Physical Exercises practiced in the different rooms. Space limited and exercises correspondingly limited.”

Slide 22: lolaire

In the aftermath of the lolaire disaster, Lewis District Committee and Stornoway Town Council established a fund to support the families of the victims of the tragedy. As well as the minutes of the fund, which run from 1919-1938, and its financial records, the most poignant records are the individual applications for financial assistance by the bereaved families.

A simple application form for assistance was completed in each case, quite often by a relative or friend of the next of kin and even the local minister. In many cases, letters requesting assistance accompany the applications which can be both moving and tragic.

The records are closed for 100 years as individuals are potentially still alive who are mentioned within the records, although an extract below has been anonymised and some details left out for this talk to protect identities:

The author writes: “I respectfully beg and apply to your committee for some help owing to my present circumstances. I lost my whole support in the death of my son in the lolaire disaster and a month ago my daughter died. I receive only 7 shillings a week pension. The funeral expenses of my daughter have left me penniless.”

Often, it’s when things go wrong, or need major administration, that records become voluminous. It says something about the power of records that we fiercely guard those relating to tragedy and hardship – not just for

reasons of privacy but also because they document something important to us as a community. We don't have lots of records of smiling happy people in the islands within the archive collections. That's not to say they weren't, I am sure they were many happy people, but records aren't required for that.

Slide 23: Letter from NRS Hutchieson to Lady Matheson

On a lighter note, one surviving document we do have relating to the Matheson period is a letter to Lady Matheson in August 1862 from NRS Hutchison, tenant of Soval lodge, concerning arrangements for a visiting fishing party. In the letter, he suggests options for entertaining the party but points out the issues of midges and whether it's suitable bathing weather. He also discusses the menu for the evening meal consisting of "Mutton top and bottom / salmon to quarters – Entrees of ~~soup~~ / Trout frites. Venison steaks (assuming they are able to catch a stag) and, my personal favourite, "Sautee á la Squeak de Bubble".

Slide 24: D D Morrison's, Stornoway

None of these business collections are explicitly Lochs related although it is highly likely that some of you will either remember them, have worked with them or heard about them through Stornoway contacts.

The first collection is that DD Morrison, the electrical retailer established on Cromwell Street in the 1920s. I'm sure many of you will have bought a radio from there at some point. The collection of business records isn't large: purchase ledgers, account books, photographs and stationery such as these business cards you can see here. Even so, it's a small part of the island's retail heritage preserved, catalogued, and now publicly accessible.

Slide 25: Lewis Coffee House Company Ltd

A much earlier collection is the minutes and ledgers of Lewis Coffee House Co, whose last home is now the Star Inn on South Beach Street. The business was established in 1878 as a temperate alternative to licensed premises of Stornoway. Members could drink coffee or other beverages, enjoy snacks and cake, and, for a small fee, access the reading room to read the newspapers and journals stocked. In this image, if you look beyond the fish, you can see the Coffee House marked standing next to the Bank building which is now Anderson Macarthur's. The company wound up in 1911, ironically only a few years before Stornoway became dry.

[No slide] Harris Tweed Authority

In January 2012, the business archive of the Harris Tweed Authority was deposited with the Tasglann. The collection dates back to the early 20th century and consists of minutes and financial papers but also a huge swath of papers relating to legal defence of the iconic trademark. It's a great collection consisting of advertising materials and documents relating to the court case that helped to define what Harris Tweed is. A box list is available of the collection but full cataloguing has not yet been undertaken. With the development of Lews Castle, it is hoped these records will find a permanent home and that other Tweed Authority records currently in Inverness will be repatriated to the island.

Similarly, the records of Macrae's undertakers have been surveyed. As the only undertaker on the island, the day books are an interesting record containing information that is likely to be of interest in the future to genealogists.

Slide 26: Lewis Railway Map

A recent acquisition is an estate map relating to the fishings at Garynahine. Such estate maps are fascinating for showing the development of an area showing boundary lines, croft allocations, fishing rights and changes in use of land over time. Sometimes, they're not entirely accurate having been annotated by someone who hasn't surveyed the land or is taking a rough guess leading to croft disputes!

This plan started life as a plan of the fishing rights. However, on closer inspection the map features a surveyed train line running around Lewis. Running from Stornoway up the east coast to Tolsta and across the moor to Skigersta and a proposed station by Adabrock. It then heads back down to Barvas and across the moor back to Stornoway. A branch line runs from Barvas to Delbeg. A final line runs from Laxdale down to Aline, passing through Achmore and down the back of Balallan. Sadly, no line appears to have been planned for North Lochs.

We assume this is a plan from Lord Leverhume's ideas to industrialise and modernise the islands.

All the items featured in this talk are available for public consultation. Please contact Tasglann nan Eilean Siar on enquiries@tasglann.org.uk or 01851 822750 for more information.