

Childhood In South Erradale and more



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South Erradale is a crofting village consisting of 29 crofts arranged in three rows, with one or two out of line. The rows run W to E with number one at the sea end of the village. (see map of croft numbers and names) In some cases 2 or 3 crofts might be together as a holding rented by one person.

A river– The Red River– flows through the village and is spanned by a bridge with 13 arches which was built around 1874.



I was born and brought up at No 16. I recollect that when I was growing up in the late 40's and 50's, there were 13 occupied houses, 3 of which were thatched.



An Peigi's thatched house



Zinc roofed and thatched houses



A number were zinc roofed and one or two were slate or felt roofed. There was also a shop attached to the house on No 4. It's thought that the shop was built in the late 20's or 30's with money given to Mrs Mackenzie by a brother who went abroad and came back temporarily to the village.



One house was built outside the boundary but the occupant did have a croft on the other side of the village from where the house was. Perhaps the cottage was built first and then a croft became vacant. The higher numbered crofts were the ones which were "taken in" last and tended to be heathery rather than arable.

There are a number of ruins outside the boundary fence which have been identified as houses or sheds which were used as barns, byres, and a bull shed.

The bull shed today



Flora's barn today



TIGH EACHAINN MHOR (Big Hector's House)



This is a fairly well preserved ruin outside the boundary (see also detailed survey) which was probably occupied up until between the wars. It was built by Hector Macpherson (born around 1890) who may have got the site from the estate at an earlier date, left the village and may have been a policeman in Glasgow. He built a proper house when he returned. I was told by the late Flora Mackenzie, that his two daughters emigrated to America. A man by the name of Shonnie was enamoured of one of the girls and said he would keep a fire going until they returned. He must have eventually given up, for as far as I know, the girls never returned. They may have been found jobs by a woman called Kate Mackenzie who went to New York after the WW1. They in their turn may have helped find work for another 3 sisters from croft 26 who emigrated.

The two sisters who emigrated to America



These girls– Maggie, Mary, and Kenna– did return at some point but just to visit. I remember when Kenna (the youngest) came back to visit her brothers and niece (Ian, Donald and Nan) sometime in the 50's but I never heard that Hector's daughters returned. Shonnie died a batchelor along with his brother Farquhar. (I got this information from a woman who ws born in 1928 and, as far back as she remembers, the house was always a ruin).

The generation of people who lived in the houses at the top of the village (The Braighe) in my time never married so there were no direct descendants to take over the crofts which they had kept in good order all their days. (Sad)

FLORA'S STEADING,AND OTHER RUINS

This building is now in ruins but was fully functional as a byre and barn,etc. when I was young. It is ideally situated for the use it was put to latterly as it is in a sheltered corner and there is a stream at the side of it for animals to drink from. (see detailed survey results)

It may have been used as a staging post for changing horses long ago,(ref in Dixon's book to the end of the vehicular road here). This makes sense as the old road passes by it. I'm sure that bits were added to it over the years, by Flora's father and forebears, when the new coastal road was constructed and it was no longer needed as a stage post.

Another view of Flora's barn



There are various other ruins nearby, including a shed for a bull, which was supplied by the Board of Agriculture. (The scheme to supply bulls and rams to improve the stock, by the Board of Agriculture, was started as early as the late 1800's). Donald Mackenzie of croft 26 was the custodian when the bull was housed in that shed. There is also a bull park on the other side of the old fank to the east of the village.

WELLS

Mains water didn't arrive in the villages on the south side of Gairloch until the early 60's and comes from Loch Braigh Horrisdale.

The proximity of water was very important and would have had a bearing on where houses were built. River or burn water could have been used for washing etc but it was desirable to have a well or spring for drinking water near a house.



Two of the wells as they are today (see detailed survey of wells in village)

The sources of water for each house as I remember them are as follows:

Croft no Crofter

1/2	Willie Macrae	2 wells in bank north of house
3	Ruin on croft	always water rising below bank
4/5	Ian Mackenzie	well below bank W of house
6	Murdo Mackenzie	well near gully towards river
7	Ruin of house	well in hillside S of ruin
8	John Mackenzie	well in bank S of house
9	Ruin of house	well near ruin and another 2 on croft
11	Flora Mackenzie	probably used well for 26 and river water
14	Ian Mackenzie	burn running by house
16	Donald Mackenzie	well by river below house and another across river
22	Alasdair Macpherson	well in bank behind house and piped to tank with tap at top for drawing off water. (very modern)
23	John Macrae	well on croft 28 and one on hillside N of house
25	Ian Mackenzie	? May have been in field N of house
26	Donald Mackenzie	well N of house by the dyke ,but also well nearby in the hillside

House outside village on S side occupied by Murdo Campbell. Well W of house near burn.

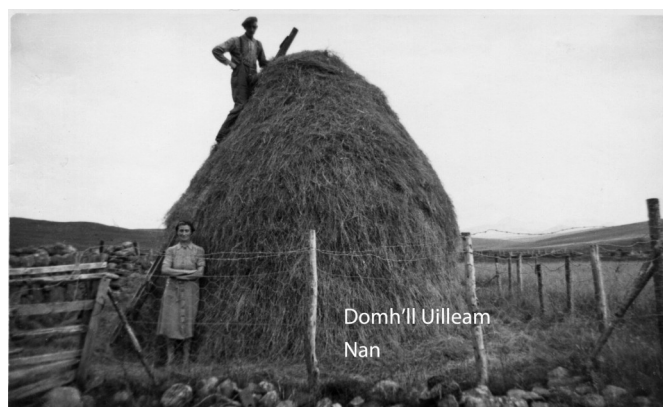
The water tank at croft 22



GENERAL

When I was young, there were 3 older single men in the village who didn't work their crofts but went away to do seasonal jobs such as ghillieing, stalking or fishing. They did, however, cut their peats as there was no alternative fuel. 4 houses were occupied by people who, as far as I remember, didn't do anything else but croft work. The remainder also worked their crofts but had other jobs as well which helped to keep body and soul together.

I remember that most of the crofts were well cultivated and looked very tidy in the autumn, when all the crops had been secured. It was lovely to run barefoot on the cut hayfields in late summer but very sore to run on the corn stubble. We didn't have to go barefoot but we just liked it in the warm weather and indeed there was a bit of a competition as to who would be first to come to school barefoot. We could run so much faster without shoes, or so it seemed.



In these days, the village was surrounded by a fence which I suppose must have been put there when the original head dyke began to fall and there wasn't enough man power to re-erect it. The road went through the village so there were 2 gates—one on the N side nearest to Opinan (an Geata Mor) and the other on the S side on the way to Red Point. If we children were in the right place at the right time, ie when a visitor's car was passing through, we might get a penny or two for opening the gate. This did not happen very often as the traffic was limited to the summer holidays I suppose, and there were other things to do rather than stand at the gate on the off chance that a car might come that way.,

HORSES

Croft work was done according to the seasons and either manually or with the use of horses and the appropriate implements eg ploughs, harrows, grubbers, seed drills, rollers and of course carts.



The use of carts and ploughing



Horses were used to pull all of these implements so life would have been very difficult without them.

I don't know when these implements would have come to the village although I believe some were made fairly locally by the blacksmiths in the area. Where did the iron come from? Some of the crofters had a knowledge of working with metal and knew about tempering iron, etc. so they could mend an implement if it got broken.

During the times of the year when they were required to work, the horses

were stabled, but in summer they were put out on the common grazing and allowed to roam at will as a group.



Working horses of South Erradale

A blacksmith came at a particular time of year to shoe the horses and that was quite an occasion. He was the brother-in-law of our neighbour and used John's cart shed for the job. I wondered how the horse didn't feel the heat of the iron on its foot and didn't much like the idea or the smell of the burning hoof but I still hung around with my brother and pal to see what went on.

Most people had at least one horse but some didn't have any. Latterly my father had only one horse by the name of Jimmy so he had to borrow Bobby, our neighbours horse, to make up the team for ploughing, as 2 horses were required for that job. Those who had horses and implements did ploughing, etc for those who didn't or those who weren't able. Horses which were borrowed were given a good feed by those who borrowed them, after the work was done.



The horses I remember and who they belonged to are as follows

Croft

SOUTH ERRADALE

4	Bessie and Prince	Ian Mackenzie
8	Ronac and Bessie	John Mackenzie
11	White mare (Belle)	Flora Mackenzie
16	Tommy and Jimmy	Donald Mackenzie
23	Bobby and Morag	John Macrae
25	Jean	Ian Mackenzie
26	Dick, Dolly and Jack	Donald Mackenzie

Red Point farm was run by Donald Mackenzie (previously 4 South Erradale) and his horse was called Polly. He would borrow one of the other horses to do his ploughing.



Ian with Prince and Jimmy at work

OPINAN

croft 11 Nancy and Firachan Sandac Mackenzie

croft 14 Queenie and Frisky Duncan Macaulay

Frisky was bought by Flowerdale estate and used to carry deer during the shooting season.

Other people had horses but would have given them up before my time. Horse dealers came the way now and again. I think they were tinkers or travellers but I don't know if they were contacted in some way or did they just arrive. The male horses were geldings but a stallion must have been hired now and again for I remember that Ian Mackenzie's mare Jean was home bred. She was Dolly's foal. She was quite a handful for Ian as he was not in the first flush of youth at the time. Jean was by far the youngest horse and I don't know if she was ever used or if she was sold. Our Jimmy died of natural causes at home and I'm sure the rest did too. (I went to school in Dingwall at age 12 in 1956 so sort of lost track thereafter). The horses would pretty much have been gone by then.



Horses were used for fun as well!

TRACTORS eventually took over from horses. This coincided with the ageing of the original crofters of my time, which was probably a good thing, as their coming lightened the work considerably.

The first tractor to arrive was bought by Alasdair Macpherson of 22 South Erradale. I believe it had iron wheels—a Fordson perhaps.

My father bought a 2 wheeled BMC tractor which had to be steered by the 2 handles at the back much like a barrow. Using it made for heavy work and he eventually replaced it with a Grey Fergusson. Willie Macrae had a Rollo tractor which was a ride-on but quite small and supplied by the Rollo factory which operated in Inverasdale post-war. Some of the horse drawn implements were adapted for use with a tractor and some others were bought.

Tractor at South
Erradale



COWS

Almost everyone had a cow or two. The number of cows kept would depend on how productive the crofts were as all the winter feed was home grown, and perhaps how many were in the family. Horses had to be fed during the winter months as well. Our cows were called Bob and Mortisean, Bob because she had a short tail and Mortisean because she may have come from a man from Port Henderson who went by the name of Mortisean, but I'm only guessing about that.

Calves were not allowed to suckle naturally as the cows had to be hand

milked. They were taught how to drink out of a pail. This was done by starting the calf to suck a hand and then guiding its head into the pail (hand still in mouth) until it drank by itself. After a few days the calf was tethered outside on the grass while the cows were driven on to the common grazing. The cows were milked morning and evening so they had to be taken home at night. This was a job for children during the summer time and was quite enjoyable if there were no midges. Quite often the cows would come off the hill to the call but still had to be collected at the village gate. Our cows were always put south but since our crofts were in the middle row the cows were driven along a path between the crofts and to our gate. I don't remember them giving any bother trying to get into the crops but I suppose the dogs knew what was what.

When the cows went dry in winter time, dried or tinned milk was used or watered down syrup for brose or porridge. People shared milk when the season was coming to an end as some cows went dry before others. The milk was delivered in re-cycled bottles - mostly whiskey half bottles, as they were just about the right size for a child to carry. The children made the deliveries.

If the man of the house had another job the cow care was left to the woman who had to do it along with all the other work involved with crofting life. Women shared the work involved in peat lifting, sowing of crops, potato planting and lifting, hay making, etc. As well as cooking, cleaning, childcare, knitting, sewing and any other jobs that needed done.



Taking home the peats in a creel

Helen 'Harry'
Mathair Iain Peigi

SHEEP

Sheep mostly stayed on the hillside - far up the glen in the summer time and on the near hills at other times. They were blackface sheep and didn't get any extra rations as far as I remember. Only the "Board" Ram got special treatment. When he was with the sheep at tupping time he had a trailing tether so that he could be easily caught and taken inside at night. Ours shared the stable with the horse and he was given oats, turnips and hay to keep him in good order.

Clipping time was a big event and took place in the old fank at the top of the village. This was next to the river so that it was easy to fill the dipper.



The old fank today

All the able-bodied crofters from Port Henderson, Opinan, and South Erradale took a day to gather all the sheep, going perhaps as far as the slopes of Baoisbheinn and Ben Alligan to gather. My mother (and others) would be waiting anxiously for them to appear far up the river valley. They would be kept overnight on a peninsula in a hill loch between Opinan and South Erradale and maybe longer if the weather wasn't suitable for shearing. I don't remember my father doing any special limbering up for the long day of walking and climbing which the gathering involved, except maybe getting his tackety boots ready. Maybe feet would be sore the following day and the dogs were exhausted but work carried on as normal.

HENS

Most crofters had hens. They were kept in a henhouse which would be

part of the steading, but during the summer months they were moved to a henhouse away from the fields where the crops were growing. Our hens had a seaside retreat! They were transported in sacks. Father and mother would have maybe 5 or 6 hens apiece and children could carry a couple each, so the flock of hens was transported in one go. They were fed twice a day and then had to be closed in at night. That was a job for children and when the nights started closing in, we would run all the way there and back before darkness fell. There was another summer henhouse on the other side of the burn from ours, but the others would be up on the hill outside the boundary fence.

Hens outside An Peigi's
South Erradale



CULTIVATION

As mentioned already, all arable crops were well cultivated. All the feed for animals had to be home produced and indeed some for human consumption, for example potatoes, turnips and carrots. Hard work indeed, but people helped each other out at tattie planting and lifting and turnip lifting times. Tatties and turnips were kept in clamps in the fields or some stored near the house or sheds. (mice were more of a problem inside, but the clamps seemed to be fairly mouse proof).

In between all this, time had to be made for cutting and lifting peats, which were the only fuel available in this area, although I do remember that there was coal burnt in the fire in the school. (probably came to Badachro or Gairloch by boat). In my father's time pupils had to take a peat or two to school to keep the fire going.

Helping each other out with the tatties



Nan, Beileà, agus Floraidh
a'bhean aig Tommy Hendry
(Morag Browning a th'ann)

A sizeable peat stack



Occasionally an old tree stump would appear in the banks where the peats were being cut and this was considered to be a very good fire lighting fuel.



1. Grace (6 S Err) 2 Dola 3 Joham (2 Opinan) 4 Ian MacRae (5 PH - Bootler) 5 Becca MacAulay
1 Jessie (2 Opinan) 2 Dol Warren 3 Marnie (6 Opinan) 4 Sandy Warren 5 Kathy MacPherson (7 RP) 6 Leslie Myall (2 PH) 7 Kenny Bhilidh
8 Jemima MacPherson (4 PH)

Opinan school days