

Durness History

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Occupying the north west corner of the county of Sutherland, Durness parish covers nearly 606 square kilometers. This makes it one of the biggest parishes in Scotland, but with only about 315 people, it has the lowest population density of any parish in the country and is the remotest area on the British mainland. It is a land of mountains and moors fringed with golden sands and spectacular cliffs. Within its bounds are the Clo Mor cliffs, the highest in Great Britain, Cape Wrath, the most north westerly point in Europe, Smoo Cave, the largest entranced cave in the British Isles and Ben Hope, the furthest north 'Munro'. Unlike many other areas in the Highlands, Durness has good, fertile soil, particularly to the north and east of the Kyle of Durness and at Eriboll. This is caused by ancient limestone rock, which produces a fertile, alkaline soil giving rise to a richness of plant life unusual in this part of the north.

Not surprisingly, ancient man was attracted to this area and Durness abounds in remains of early settlement from those at Smoo Cave of the hunter gatherers of 4000BC to the hut circles and chambered cairns of the Neolithic Age and the brochs and earth houses of the Iron Age. Later, about 720 the Irish saint Maelrubha brought Christianity, founding a monastery at Balnakeil. The Vikings came and settled, rather than pillaging and in mediaeval times Durness became an important centre of the Clan Mackay. Balnakeil House developed from the domestic buildings of the monastery to become a Clan seat. During the late 17th and 18th century, Durness was seen as a place of culture and learning giving rise to the term uaislean Dhuirinish or the Durness Gentry. The parish school was established in 1712 and the school building of 1766, although ruined, remains substantially as it was built. In 1714, Rob Donn, the Gaelic Bard, was born in Strathmore in the eastern part of the parish. He grew up to become a celebrated poet, - the Robbie Burns of the north, and his songs are still sung throughout Gaeldom today. In 1760, Joseph MacDonald, the youngest son of the parish minister wrote, 'A Compleat Theory of the Scots Highland Bagpipe'. This was the earliest attempt by a piper to record his music in writing and is a very important document in the development of the bagpipes.

Emigration from the parish began in 1772 when 200 people left for South Carolina. This was before the notorious clearances when people were forcibly evicted to make way for sheep farming. Despite having been on the government side during the Jacobite Uprising of 1745, the Mackays were hit by the economic downturn which crippled the Highlands in the aftermath of the Battle of Culloden. Poor management of the Mackay estates did not help and in keeping with elsewhere in the Highlands, sheep farming was seen as the salvation. The first enforced clearance was in 1820 in the West Moine district of the parish, followed by the Keoldale Estate clearances and in 1841, the Rispond Estate Clearance. The latter was, however, a clearance too many and it sparked off a series of events known as the Durness Riots, the first real resistance to clearances in the Highlands. The population, however, peaked in 1881 with 1109 people and then gradually declined. The biggest drop came in the aftermath of the First World War when emmigration to the Scottish Lowlands, England and Canada was particularly popular.

Today Durness is heavily dependant on tourism, although sheep farming and crofting are still important. Public Service jobs, hotels, small family run businesses, self employed crafts people and a fish farm make up the bulk of the economy.