

Colla

Airigh nan Gobhar - Arinagour

This report on Arinagour is the work of **Mrs. Betty MacRae** (nee MacDougall), daughter of Hector MacDougall of Coll (Eachann Mòr) 1880 - 1954. An Inspector in the Glasgow Police, he won the Bardic Crown at the National Mod in 1936, and with the Rev. Hector Cameron, was co-author of the **Handbook to the Islands of Coll and Tiree** published in 1933. Hector MacDougall's mother, Ann MacLean (Anna Lachainn Neill), was a talented bardess.

by Betty MacRae (nee MacDougall)

Arinagour - Airigh nan Gobhar - Shieling of the goats

The earliest mention of Arinagour is in Boswell's diary of his Hebridean Tour with Dr. Johnston in 1773. Their host, "Young Coll", did not lodge them in the inn there, "a little poor public house close upon the shore", but bore them off to Achamore to stay with a kinsman, Captain Lachlan Mclean. A population list of the island in 1776 gives only two families in Arinagour - one of these must have been the innkeeper.

In 1813, Ebenezer Davidson, the master of the S.P.C.K. School in the west end wrote to the Gaelic Schools Society pleading for a teacher to be sent to Coll as there were many parts of the island without any educational provision for the children who were too far distant from his own small school. He made special mention of Arinagour, reporting that Mr. Maclean of Coll had some years past established twenty five families there, each with a croft, moss etc. and that there were another five families near by.

The Society made a quick response and one of their teachers was installed at Toraston in December of that year and he soon moved to Arinagour. These schools moved at intervals from place to place in the island. There are reports of their work from various stations till 1859. The General Assembly also sent in a teacher, Alexander Stewart in 1826, but he was soon transferred to Arileod in the west end in 1828 as Davidson had left the island. The Old Parochial Records reveal a steady build-up of the village population from the turn of the century.

When Sheriff Alexander Nicholson made his report on the state of education in the Hebrides in 1856, he found Coll to be one of the worst off areas in the provision of schooling. By this time the island had been bought by John Lorne Stewart and he promptly responded in 1857 by having a school built at Arnabost in the centre of the island. It was called Arinagour School and was attended by the children of the village and the Toraston district. In a fierce storm in 1880, the roof was completely blown off and retrieved from some hundreds of yards away.

As a result of the Education Act of 1872, the Laird had a school and teacher's house built in the village, and the school at Arnabost was closed. The contractor was a Coll man Angus MacLean whose family had moved to Tobermory. He was involved in much of the building in Coll thereafter and employed local labour.

By 1942, the Coll population had declined greatly so all outlying schools were closed and the children conveyed by car to and from Arinagour. Then a new school was built in the upper village in 1956, the old Board School was bought privately and used for letting until purchased by Coll Herbals. After some years of prosperity and decline, the Herbals sold out and the building is now in process of renovation as a Guest House.

There was difficulty in staffing the Coll schools. The log- book for Arinagour shows an alarmingly quick turnover. Substitutes often had to be found to hold the fort. Isolation may have been part of the trouble, but H.M.I. reports and the school logs reveal poor conditions in the school with regard to heating, lighting and general maintenance, and the sanitary conditions were appalling. Fortunately, a local girl, Miss Flora Kennedy, graduated to the profession and took charge till she retired a few years ago. The present school is well staffed and equipped for Primary Education, the children moving on to Oban High School on the mainland for Secondary Courses.

The first detailed information on the names of the villagers comes in the 1841 Census when the population was 162, living in three streets - High Street, Low Street and Castle Street. There were 11 households in High Street, 16 in Shore Street and 8 in Castle Street. High Street still exists today with 4 houses and Low Street is now known as Main Street and Shore Street. Castle Street ran upwards, probably the way now leading to the upper village and the Dairy. There are visible ruins of at least two houses on the shore side of the road below Taigh na Mara Guest House and there were said to be very old houses behind Low Street, known as An Garradh Dubh - the Black Dyke. Certainly the Parish Board Records mention re-thatching of the paupers' houses in Arinagour.

The inn started the list of Shore Street and there is a possibility that this was "the miserable inn" avoided by Boswell and Johnson. There is an old local belief that the building known as "The Smithy" was once a Drinking Howff of poor quality. In 1879, the Oban Times reported the building of a fine new house and carpenter's workshop and smithy in Arinagour. The report was accurate about the carpenter's house, but a sketch made by J.T.Reid in 1876 from the steamer St. Clair as she hove to in the bay, shows quite clearly a building on the site of the smithy so it must have been a conversion, not a new building.

The first carpenter to occupy the new house was Charles MacDonald from the west end, a highly respectable kirk elder. When he died in 1891, the estate factor, Alexander Darroch decided to allocate that house to the shopman / postmaster. The shopman at that time was Robert Sturgeon from the mainland. Darroch thought very highly of him and when the current postmistress, Janet MacCorkindale, left to marry a Tiree man, he appointed Sturgeon in her place. He was an enthusiastic photographer with the old glass plate camera and an important collection of his pictures is held in the Edinburgh Museum. He was something of an entrepreneur, agent for the fishermen and even negotiated contracts with the continent. He later had a house built at the south end of the village, and his son, Robert, after years of service in Africa as an agricultural adviser, returned to Coll and had it rebuilt as the present guest-house.

The first smith to work the forge was James Smart from Campbeltown, but he left nine years later and was succeeded by a Coll man, John Kennedy. It was said of him that he could shoe six carts before breakfast! He died in 1920 and was

followed by Donald Sutherland, an incomer who married a local girl. He was the last smith on the island and one of his daughters lives at Caolas an Eilein with her son. The old building was recently bought by a southerner who plans to have it converted to living accommodation.

In the 1841 list, the innkeeper was a Hugh MacKinnon who emigrated after 1847 to Canada and settled in Mara. Along with the crofters, cottagers and labourers, there were several tradesmen and two Chelsea Pensioners, veterans of the Napoleonic Wars. Of all those families, only one can be connected with the present Arinagour folk - I think the great grandmother of Mrs. Katie Sproat, Shore Street is the Marion MacLean listed there in 1841.

In 1851, there was a population of 180 comprising 41 households. The street names were not given. By this time a MacDonald family is listed, and present day descendants are still in the village. Also, the MacFarlane family had appeared from Mull. The late Captain Donald MacFarlane bought what had been the carpenter's house for his retirement and it is still in the family possession.

By 1861, the population was down to 122. There had been considerable emigration to Australia in the previous decade due to the hard times following the potato failure. There were 34 households but no mention of streets. The Dairy Farm appears for the first time, having 5 rooms with a window. This was the first census that asked about windowed rooms. The island had been bought by John Lorne Stewart in 1856, so he had obviously started building his dairy farms. The hotel had 7 windowed rooms.

In 1871, the villagers numbered 120 in 6 houses in High Street and 16 in Low Street. The Dairy Farm now had 6 windowed rooms and the inn had 9. The grocer's shop and house were empty, but there were two merchants in the village. Charles MacFadyen and his family now appear on the list. He became ferryman and then harbourmaster.

1881 saw a drop to 110 of 25 households including the Dairy Farm, the inn and the shop. Many of the households held two families, one in each end.

In 1891, the factor Darroch described the houses thus.

"They are rented for single apartments at 30/- and for double at £3 per annum, paid half-yearly. The roofs are circular and covered with felt, walls rough and floors concrete."

The population was 73 of 18 households and by that time the village was augmented by the factor's lodge, the teacher's house and the Free Church Manse. The hotel now had 10 windowed rooms and there was the Dairy Farm. Another addition later that year was a house for the island doctor, now known as Craig Darroch and privately owned. Dr. Smith was the first to reside in it. Prior to that, Dr. Buchanan in Tiree had served the islanders. Later doctors did not use the house and it was rented out until Dr. Paterson, a native of Coll took on the practice. In

the next century a new house was built for the doctor beyond the ladge on the Monadh Bàn.

A piped water supply was introduced to the lodge, the hotel and the doctor's house in 1893 but the villagers had to wait till the mid-1930's before having a system operating giving each house a sink and an outside water-closet at the back of the house. There was a period of controversy over that. The Laird of the time wanted to raise the rents because of this improvement but the villagers objected, believing that a grant had been given for the work - whereupon the water was cut off! The matter was finally resolved, and at a later date with a new laird, the sitting tenants were given the opportunity of purchasing their houses. Mull View House was built during the Kaiser War by Captain Neil MacQuarrie for his mother who had been living in Shore Street. After Jan de Vries purchased Coll, he had a Scandinavian type bugalow built behind the lodge for his overseer. He also had a sun lounge built on to the end of the lodge. Unfortunately, the workers robbed the site of the old house at Achamor for stones - the house that Boswell and Johnson had stayed in.

Shortly after the turn of the century in the early 1900's, Neil MacFadyen from the east end completed his apprenticeship and set up as carpenter in Arinagour. He had spent some of his time in the Shetlands to learn the craft of boat-building. The family lived at No. 1 Main Street and a fine workshop was built on the other side of the road. His son Charles followed him in the trade. The workshop was recently converted to a fine dwelling house used by a grandson and his family for holidays, and another grandson and another grandson has the family home at No. 1.

Hugh MacDonald, a son of the family at No.5 Main Street built a house for himself across the road from the parental home. It was painted green and was always known as Green Cottage. His son Neil kept the shop for many years till he retired to the mainland. The house was sold and then rebuilt much more commodiously and is used for letting.

The estate clerk of the time, David Fotheringham, built a house on the dairy road, now owned by the Council.

The Reverend Roderick Ross, Free Church minister was involved in the union of 1900 which resulted in the United Free Church. Some of the congregation were in agreement and there was a United Free Church group meeting in the house now known as Windswept, and the other part of the building was the manse. The bulk of the people remained faithful to their old Free Church and very soon the United Free Church disappeared and the building became two houses.

When the Arinagour houses were in estate ownership most of the tenants were estate workers, but only three had a croft. Darroch, the factor, strictly supervised the condition of the houses and threatened dismissal and eviction if they were not kept up to his standard. At the yearly Agricultural Show in Arinagour, prizes were awarded for the best kept house and the finest garden. Darroch showed a bitter animus to the Coll population. He ruled with an iron hand and when the people had the temerity to propose Ross as their candidate for the Council in preference to the 'establishment', he organised a vendetta against the minister, cutting off the manse from access to the road and pasture for the cow. He even had dirt emptied down the house well. The dispute finally reached the Sheriff Court in Oban in 1894. Darroch lost the case and was ordered to remove all barriers and hindrance at the manse. Right of way had been established by the minister's stay there.

In 1906, an addition was built on to the north gable of the teacher's house for use as a Parish Council Office complete with a brass plate on the door. Now it has been combined with the house to form the Church of Scotland manse. The new Church of Scotland was built in 1907 to replace the Clabach church, as the bulk of the people were nearer to Arinagour. Robert MacTaggart was the teacher at the time and his son James was injured in the eye by a flying stone splinter. Treatment was delayed by the isolated nature of the island and gross loss of eyesight resulted. But James MacTaggart went on to a fine career in music. He was church organist in Helensburgh for a time and later led the Carradale Gaelic Choir to glory several times at the Mods. He had exceptional talents as pianist, singer and raconteur. His sister Margaret was awarded a bursary by the County Education Committee. She took the highest place in the county in the examination. She held promoted posts in Glasgow schools.

Council houses were built in Carnan Road when the new school went up and there have been additions since. The Free Church manse was bought by the Council and converted into two dwelling houses.

Only three of the houses in the white terrace on the shore are in continuous occupation but the others are not holiday houses in the sense of letting out to strangers. They are in use as 'second homes' to Collaich whose connections with the village go back through generations.

When Captain MacQuarrie retired from sea-faring, he took on the management of the hotel and the family remained there until well after the Hitler War when it was bought by Guy Jardine and greatly modernised. It was further developed and improved by Alastair Oliphant and ownership has continued in the family with his son Kevin.

The first mention of a quay at Arinagour was in 1846 when the Scottish Fisheries Board was surveying possibilities in then islands for piers and boats, to enable landowners to give employment in the difficult times of the Potato Famine. The pier at the head of the loch was very small and in need of repair. A local mason, Allan MacLean, did some repair work for £35, but a massive repair was required at a cost of £300, half of that to be paid by the laird. He was bankrupt by this time, but ultimately the Committee of Destitution decided to build a pier 30 yards long by 40ft. broad and 12ft. high. They had found only 4 boats in Arinagour large enough to tackle cod and herring fishing. They all needed help with equipment. The other boats were just skiffs. That is now known as the Old Pier.

John Lorne Stewart, the new owner from 1856, had a new pier built and it was in use till 1969 when the current pier was completed and then in 1991 was converted to Ro-Ro use. Prior to that the regular mail service steamers had to anchor out at the buoy and a ferryboat took passengers and cargo between the steamer and the pier. It used to be man-powered with massive oars but later it was engine operated.

Many Coll men followed the sea-faring life and worked on the island steamers. Captain John Campbell from Caolas, Captain John MacKinnon from Sorasdal and Captain Donald MacFarlane, also from Sorasdal, had command of the Hebrides for a period, and Charles MacKinnon from Cornaig Mhor captained the Dunara Castle.

There was steady improvement in communications. A postal service in 1863 made a weekly delivery from Tobermory to Coll. An inland delivery service started in 1886 and by 1867 the steamer Trojan was coming from Oban three times per week and there was also a weekly call from the Hebridean, then the Hebrides.

For a period, roughly 1886 - 1890 a COLL ALMANAC was produced and gives much information on life in the island at that time. The Hotel was charging 7/6 for bed, board and attendance and the liberty of fishing, per day. A Temperance Society had a membership of 75, and there was a Public Library and Reading Room somewhere in the village. The Store advertised drapery etc. boots and shoes, hardware and a variety of island produce. A letter to the editor of the Oban Times complained bitterly of the prices charged - still a current complaint. The shop was owned by the laird and managed by many shop-keepers over the years till purchased by Janet Driver a few years ago.

Now a committee issues a magazine yearly, a most creditable production for such a small island. The outline of the village is much as it was. There are two shops, the postmistress is local and a picture and handcrafts gallery has just been opened in a chalet behind the hotel. There is a bistro in the old store building with a complex of holiday flats. Bed and Breakfast accommodation is fairly easy to arrange. Arinagour ground is now owned by Colin Kennedy who has a fine new house on the brae opposite the old school. He is a sheep farmer in a big way, and owns ground in other places on the island.

The villagers are well organised for recreation. They have music and drama clubs and regularly put on entertainment in the Community Hall built in 1961. All seem to live comfortably. There is no vestige of the grinding poverty that used to beset the peasantry.