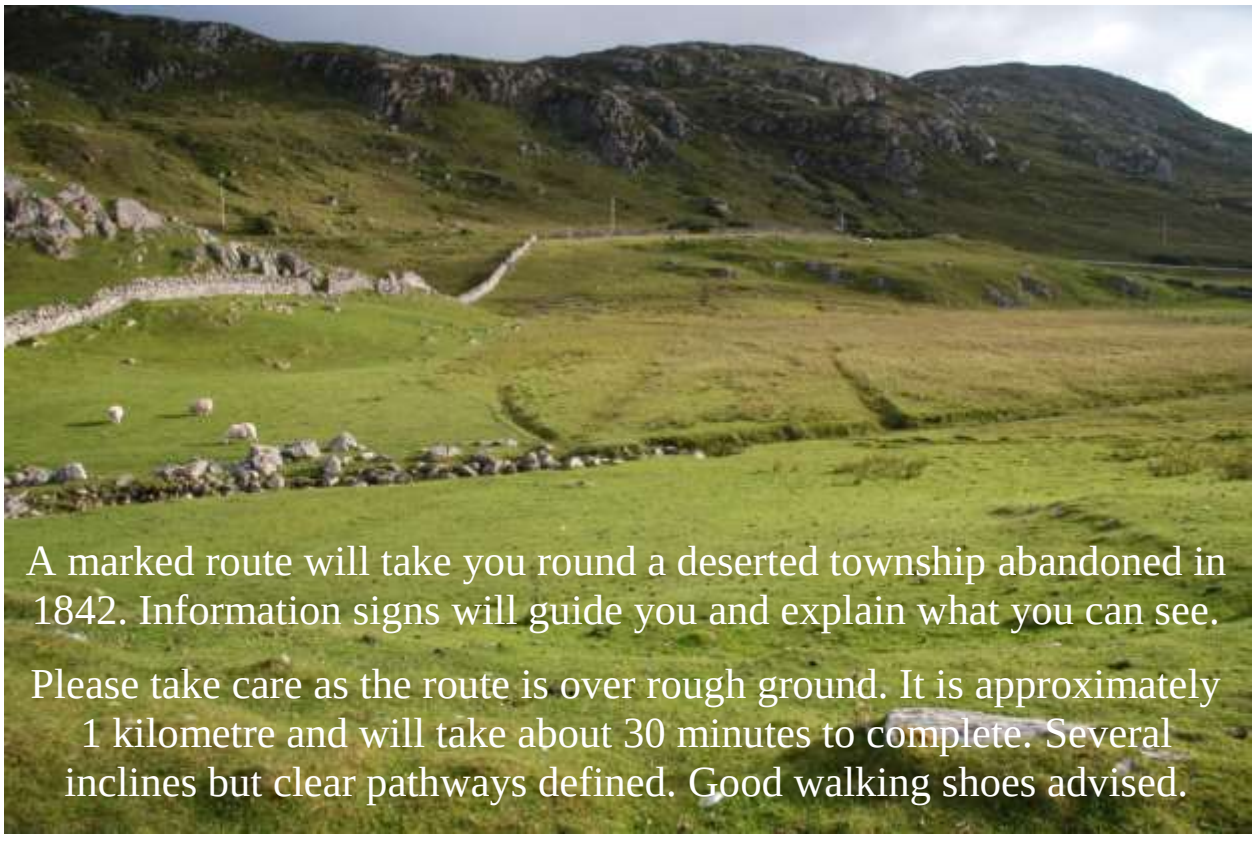
‘Riots in Durness’

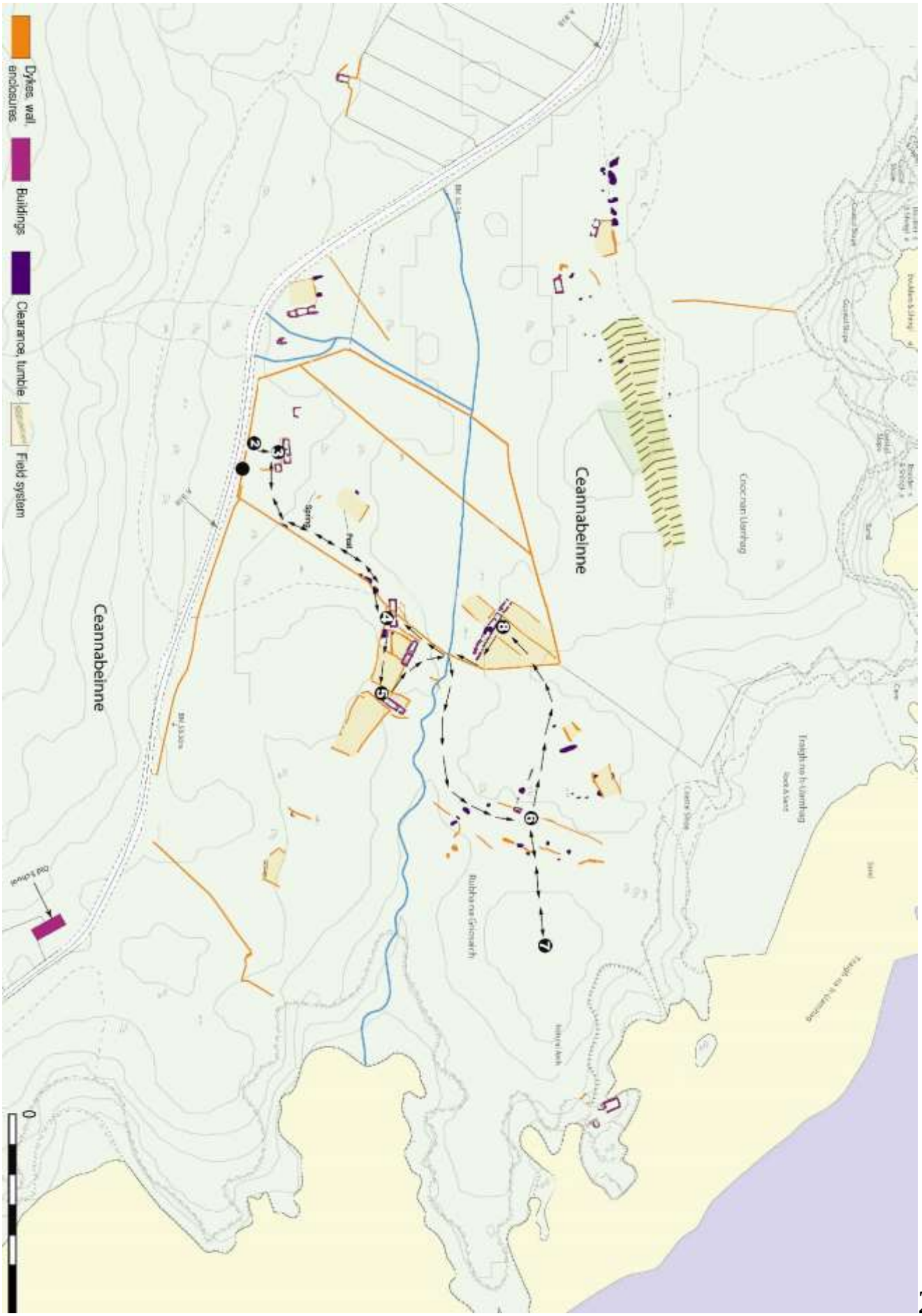
Discover the story of the Highland Clearances and the Durness Riots

The abandoned township of Ceannabeinne (meaning ‘head of the mountain’) lies two miles to the east of the village of Durness in northern Sutherland, at the northern end of the mountain from which the township takes its name. It lies to the north of the A838 road that leads from Durness to Tongue.



A marked route will take you round a deserted township abandoned in 1842. Information signs will guide you and explain what you can see.

Please take care as the route is over rough ground. It is approximately 1 kilometre and will take about 30 minutes to complete. Several inclines but clear pathways defined. Good walking shoes advised.

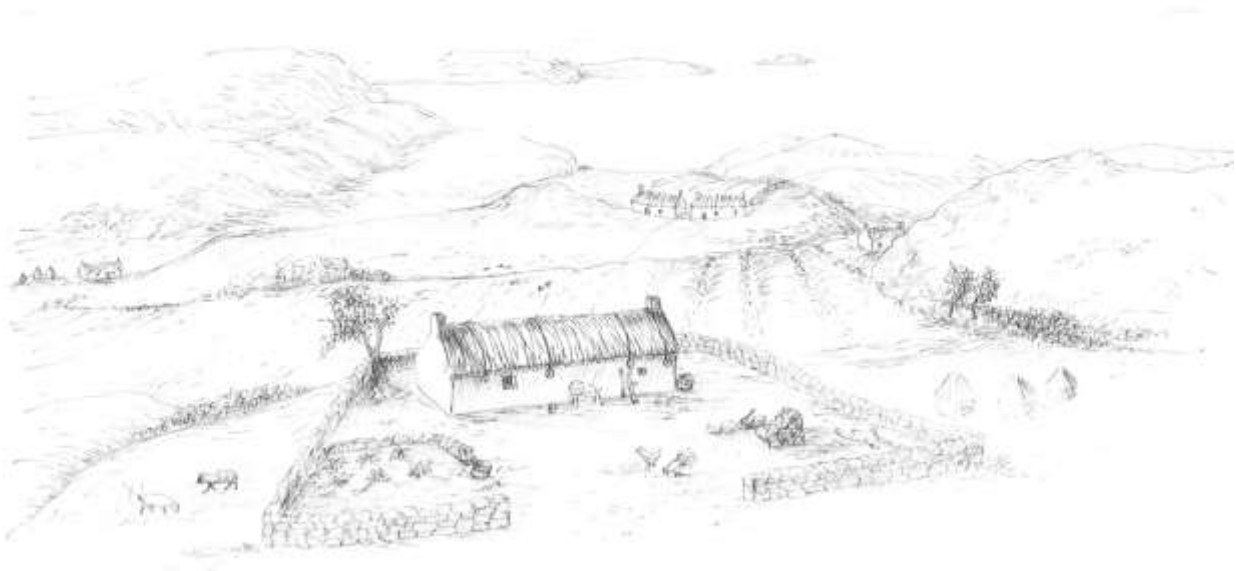


2.

Ceannabeinne Township Trail

The Highland Township

In the Eighteenth century Ceannabeinne was typical of a farming community in the Highlands. The farm was rented by a Tacksman from Lord Reay, Chief of Clan MacKay. In turn he sub-let the farm to tenants. The wealth of the farm lay not in crops, but in cattle which were grazed on the extensive hill ground near by. Working together in a communal, self sufficient way, the tenants created a close-knit community
In 1841 there were 50 people living here in ten households. The following year there were none.



For its size, this area supports a surprising variety of plants. 120 species of flowers have so far been recorded, and more will be found. Reasons include the nature of the underlying rock (Lewisian gneiss), the varied topography, with well- and poorly-drained areas, and, in places, deep glacial deposits topped with wind-blown sand. From this point, you can see some of the range of plant communities present, for example, wet grassland, separated by a sheep fence from a bog with abundant cotton-grass.

The Riots

In the Eighteenth century Ceannabeinne was typical of a farming community in the Highlands. The farm was rented by a Tacksman from Lord Reay, Chief of Clan MacKay. In turn he sub-let the farm to tenants. The wealth of the farm lay not in crops, but in cattle which were grazed on the extensive hill ground near by. Working together in a communal, self sufficient way, the tenants created a close-knit community. In 1841 there were 50 people living here in ten households Ceannabeinne was on the Rispond Estate which stretched from the Durness outskirts south along much of the western shore of Loch Eriboll.

The small harbour at Rispond, 2km east of here, was successfully developed in the late 17th Century by a James Anderson from Peterhead. He was a harsh man, reputedly paying his workers in tokens which had then to be spent, at inflated prices, in his shop. He also rented the sea bed to local fishermen who could only use the harbour if they agreed to this form of extortion. However Anderson was an entrepreneur and built, for the time, large fishing boats at Rispond, smoked and salted fish and developed the crab and lobster trade all for the fast growing southern city markets. He also opened up markets abroad by exporting salted fish to the Baltic countries.

3. Houses and Homes Life begins to get better

Of the 14 houses recorded here in 1841, little remains. However, in front of this sign you should be able to make out the rectangular foundation of a house, probably built about 1800. An archaeological dig revealed the western gable had a fireplace and the inside walls were plastered both unusual in a township of this date. The site has been drained and flattened, there is a garden between here and the road and it commands a view over the township. Tenants had no security over their homes so whoever built this house was relatively well off and confident in his future

The garden of this house has reverted, like much of the higher parts of the site, to a patchwork of close-grazed grassland and wet heath. There are cushions of bog-moss in the wettest places. The tall tussocks of soft rush follow the line of a former ditch on the up-slope side of the house.

Illustration: soft rush

Highland society changed dramatically during the 1700's as the centuries old clan system broke down. Despite being on the Government side in both Jacobite Uprisings, the Clan MacKay lands faired no better than the rest of the Highlands. Like many other Clan Chiefs, the Lord Reays invested poorly in their southern ventures and life styles and debts soared. Rents were increased but with so many people eking out a living on such poor land, there was little chance of improving agricultural output so tenants were unable to pay. The solution for many landowners was a massive reorganisation of their estate. This involved moving people from the productive inland glens to the coastal fringe where they would become fishermen and small farmers – crofters.

The land they were forced to leave became grazing for sheep which, in the early 19th Century had a much higher financial return than the rent people could pay.
This was the Highland Clearances.

4 The Traditional Longhouse

Nearly all sites of former habitation in this area are marked by patches of stinging nettle, which is eaten by sheep in the spring, but can survive decades of grazing. Nettles have also extended down the relatively new wall, where sheep take shelter.

The stone wall beside you was constructed after Ceannabeinne was abandoned in 1842 and is partly made from the walls of the houses. Look carefully and you will see the grass covered foundation of a building. The stone wall goes right through it! This was a traditional longhouse. To the left was the living quarters and to the right was the byre for the cattle, separated by a wall of stone or wood, but with a door between the two. Can you spot the hole in the base of the gable to your right? This was the end of a channel which drained the effluent from the byre.

The eastern part of Durness Parish (Strathmore, Hope and Eriboll) was cleared in the early 1820's by Lord Reay, but this failed to clear his debts and he sold the remainder of the MacKay lands to the Duke of Sutherland in 1829. In the early 1830's the western part of the parish was cleared and the crofts as you see them today were laid out. However this did not include Rispond as James Anderson held an unusual lease which gave him complete control over the management of the estate. During this period Anderson allowed a number of families to settle in the existing communities on his estate and opened up marginal land along Loch Eriboll. He also expanded his business interests by buying the Assynt fisheries based in Lochinver giving him control of almost all sea fishing in North West Sutherland.
Despite a small clearance from the estate in 1839, the tenants of Ceannabeinne may well have thought that the dreaded Clearances had passed them by. It was with little wonder then that they reacted so badly when in the late Spring of 1841 they were served with a Notice of Eviction giving them only 48 hours to get out.

5. Homes and Gardens

The Lewisian gneiss cliffs behind these houses, and the steep slopes below them, have a rich assemblage of plants, including primrose and the spiky rosettes of yellow saxifrage. The richness may be due to minerals leaching out of the rock, or to shell sand blown up from the shore

Here you can see much more clearly what a longhouse looked like. This house was not demolished and has simply collapsed over time. You can also see a large rectangular garden. The house probably had two rooms separated by a simple wooden partition. One room was the kitchen with a central hearth where all the daily family life went on. The other room was a bedroom, sometimes furnished with box beds, where everyone slept. In this building you can still see the connecting doorway in the gable between the house and the byre where the animals were kept. In the garden there would have been kale, cabbage and the all important potato. Oats and bere (a type of barley) were grown on the arable land and ground for meal to make oatcakes and beremeal scones. Butter and cheese came from the herds of cattle which were the main source of wealth for Highlanders. Being so close to the sea, fish would also have played an important part in the diet of the people.

James Anderson chose the day carefully when he sent the local Sheriff Officer, James Campbell, to serve the writ of eviction. The men were all at Balnakeil 6 kilometres away cutting bent (marram) grass for thatch, so the women were left to deal with the situation. One woman ran to the top of the hill by the shore to call to the men, which, reputedly, they heard and returned home with haste. However, they were too late. The women of Ceannabeinne took charge, grabbed the Officer and forced him to burn the writ over a hastily kindled fire by the roadside. They could then claim the writ had not been served!

Needless to say, Anderson tried again. A few days later Police Superintendent Philip MacKay from Dornoch (the County Town of Sutherland) arrived with a new writ. He did not last long. In the ensuing skirmish he lost his Macintosh coat and with the skirl of the bagpipes ringing in his ears, he was chased away in a hail of stones

6. Signs of life a very long time ago

Bracken has colonised areas of well-drained soil all over this site, many of which must have formerly been cultivated. Bracken has its uses, as bedding for stock, but there would not have been much here in the past. The close-grazed grassy areas are carpeted by small herbs, including daisy, self-heal and wild thyme. *Illustration*: self-heal

Settlement here at Ceannabeinne may go back a very long way. Durness was heavily settled during the Neolithic period which began about 6000 years ago. This small valley stretching from the burn appears to

have been cultivated as there are a number of clearance piles which are stones collected when the land is being cultivated. Some appear to be quite neat cairns. If you look very closely at the hillside in front of you, you may be able to see the strips of land that are clearer of stones than the surrounding land. You can also see terracing on the land behind you as it drops from the ridge down to the sea. This could be evidence of very ancient farming, but it is muddled up with later changes and practices.

By now the press had picked up on the story and the Inverness Courier and the Edinburgh based Scotsman were both reporting the story in a very condescending manner, criticising the uncouth Highlanders. Meanwhile, it was decided that force would have to be used to serve the writ. Superintendent MacKay was sent north again via Tongue and Farr to raise a 'trusty party'. Not surprisingly in an area ravished by clearances 20 years before, he managed to raise only three old men who promptly turned back at Hope Ferry when they were told the people of Durness were ready and waiting for them!
Another victory perhaps, but there must have been apprehension among the people as they wondered what would happen next.

7. A Sign with a View – Religion and Education

The bright green grassland on the limestones of Eilean Hoan provides excellent grazing for sheep, which are still ferried out there. On the seaward side of this hill, wind-blown sand supports low-growing shrubby plants such as mountain avens and creeping willow, with lots of tiny stripy snails

From here you can see across the mouth of Loch Eriboll to Whiten Head. The island is Eilean Hoan and it too was cleared in 1842 when its four families were evicted. On the island is a medieval cemetery used by Durness people, according to tradition, to bury their dead as graves on the mainland would be disturbed by wolves! You can also see Ceannabeinne cottage beside the main road, the only survivor of the township. It was built in 1827 as a school and schoolhouse and survived as such until 1847. On a rock stack by the cliffs below and out of site of this spot, are the scant remains of an early Christian monastic settlement consisting of domestic buildings and a chapel.

Beware! The cliff edges are very broken and the approach is very steep and not recommended.

Matters came to a head on Saturday 17th September 1841.
To quell the lawlessness in Durness the Sheriff-substitute for Sutherland, the Procurator Fiscal, Superintendent Philip MacKay and 14 Special Constables headed north from Dornoch. They arrived in Durness about 9pm and were allowed to pass through the parish to the inn at Durine. Here a group of about 50 men tried to speak to the sheriff. He was asked not to carry out the eviction on the Sabbath day, but this was refused. This was adding insult to injury and was the final straw.
About 10 o'clock the men gathered at the well on Park Hill opposite the inn. The crowd may well have swelled by this time and possibly as many as 300 had assembled. Quite how violent what happened next is unclear. There appears to have been a charge at the inn and the police constables fled the building and hid among the corn stooks in the neighbouring fields and the rocks on the shore. MacKay, the Fiscal and the Sheriff stood their ground in a room in the inn. However they were seriously out numbered and were dragged from the room. The constables were rounded up and they were all escorted to the boundaries of the parish. Victory to the people of Durness, but at what cost?

8. A Row of Cottages

The adjacent wall, built since the site was cleared, has been standing long enough to become covered with lichens, which are very slow-growing. Conspicuous along the top of the wall are the grey tufts of one of them, sea-ivory

Here there were three cottages with long, narrow gardens. Excavations showed the central house had a stone paved floor and the house to the right had been rebuilt at least twice since its original construction. In this house was a central fireplace and round it was found evidence, in the form of two thimbles and a brass button, of an important occupation in a township, tailoring. Township life was a communal affair and people relied on one another to help in the struggle from one year to the next. While most people were farmers obtaining money from the sale of cattle, in 1841 there were two sailors and a boat carpenter living in Ceannabeinne. They would have been employed by James Anderson at Rispond. That was, however, to no avail, and in the Spring of 1842 they, along with the other residents of the township, made their way past the newly built Rispond Estate wall to the sparse, barren hillside at Sangobeg, just few hundred yards down the road or further afield to new beginnings in the cities of the Lowlands or the distant lands overseas.

The Consequences

A few days after the riot at the Durine Inn the Sheriff of Sutherland, Mr Lumsden, arrived. He delivered a 'powerful speech' in which he threatened the use of the 53rd Regiment from Edinburgh to carry out the eviction by force. Fearing horrific reprisals, the much respected local minister, Rev William Findlater, sought the intervention of the Duke of Sutherland. The Duke was quite horrified at what was happening, but was held by the tenancy agreement Anderson had rendering him legally useless to help. However the weight of public opinion, including that of the Press which was now very sympathetic, forced a compromise; the tenants could stay until May 1842, giving them time to find somewhere to go. Meanwhile, the publicity generated had made the government very aware of what was going on and they set up an enquiry led by the young Depute-Advocate for Scotland, a Mr Napier. His findings were very sympathetic to the Durness people and no prosecutions were brought against anyone for any wrong doings. Many years later the same man led a very significant enquiry – the Napier Commission which finally led to the Crofting Act of 1886 giving Crofters the right of tenure.

Environment

To fully understand the environment of Ceannabeinne the locality should be considered in the wider ecological context within this environment the farm town would comprise of a variety of situations many of them inherently ephemeral but stabilized for a time by human control while laterally the area was maintained by the multifarious activates of a single domesticated animal species instead of by the influence of climate or large plants. Garden areas would have been very fertile in their day which is difficult to understand now as the ground is heavily grazed by sheep since the township was cleared. Grazing sheep and rabbits keep grass incredibly short and bracken becomes invasive. The Productive gardens would have been growing potatoes, cabbage, kale, onions and carrots, More recently even with the grazing of sheep the area is likelier to be of a natural climax - Blanket bog and sparse grassland. Grazing pressure is a key factor in determining ecological variation while the site is becoming waterlogged and declining into moor land. This still holds a vast array of life.

- 119 species of ferns and higher plants were listed from the site; further visits would add more, but probably not many. This is a respectable number of species from a relatively small area and reflects the wide range of habitats present and the different plant communities they support.
- The plant communities form a mosaic. Their variety and distribution may be explained by factors such as the topography, presence of outcrop rock, steepness of slope, drainage/water logging, underlying soil type (acid/neutral/basic, peaty/sandy) and past and present management of the site (cultivation, grazing and the construction of drains, walls and buildings).
- The plant communities have characteristic indicator species, such as members of the heather family. However, some species occur across a range of communities and the communities tend to intergraded at their edges.
- There are only a few species obviously associated with past occupation of the site. They include tough, long-lived perennials, such as stinging nettle, and others, typical of scree elsewhere, which are protected from grazing in the tumbledown walls.
- For more information see the full species list and detailed comments.

Birds

Heathland birds are quite difficult to spot as they are well camouflaged among the dense vegetation. You are more likely to hear them singing. Birds of prey can be seen here too. 86 species of bird have been identified around the site. This includes species which are likely to be seen from or within the clearance area, i.e. breeders and passers by. It is by no means purported to be an all inclusive record and it is likely to be added to and corrected over the years. The species were catalogued as

- Breeding in immediate area,
- In passage through area,
- Common,
- Rarely seen.
- Winter migrant.

Fauna

- Mammals - The dwarf vegetation characteristic of open heathland does not provide enough cover, the food supply is limited, and free-draining soil makes the conditions too dry. Due to the lack of suitable cover, lowland heath is typically inhabited by underground dwellers like foxes and rabbits. Badgers are absent from the heath because the soil is too sandy for them to build their sets. Other mammals include shrews and short-tailed voles who live in the grass. Deer have very occasionally been seen grazing.

- Invertebrates - Lowland heaths are home to many species of invertebrate. Insects that proliferate during the warm summer months include ants, beetles, dragonflies, spiders, grasshoppers, moths, bees and wasps. Several butterfly species can be seen fluttering among the flowering heather and gorse during the summer. Areas of wet heath with small bogs and pools support most of the UK's 38 species of dragonfly.
- Reptiles - The lowland heath habitat supports all six British native reptiles. Here they find a good supply of invertebrates and small mammals on which they feed.
- Amphibians - Amphibians are found in areas of wet heath.

Solid and Drift Geology

The Ceannabeinne township is built upon Precambrian basement which consists of grey, banded Lewisian Gneiss and numerous red-pink coloured pegmatite intrusions which become more abundant travelling inland towards Beinne Ceannabeinne. The basement in the Durness area is capped by white-cream coloured quartzites of Cambrian age which belong to the Eriboll Sandstone Group (consisting of the Basal Quartzite and Pipe Rock members). The quartzites have been eroded down to basement level at the location of the township although small outliers of the lowermost Basal Quartzite are found immediately to the northwest of the site around Cnoc nan Uamhag. These quartzites also form the nearby dip-slope on the western side of Loch Eriboll (hence the *Eriboll Sandstone Group*) and are also found more locally at Sangobeg. Here the rocks have been down-faulted where sections of both the Basal Quartzite and overlying Pipe Rock are present.

Drift deposits are widespread with thick glacial tills covering most of the area. These contain large erratic boulders which are mainly gneissose at Ceannabeinne although boulders of quartzite are also common in the area which have been eroded from outcrops found to the west of Loch Eriboll and Sangobeg. Coastal areas however have relatively thick, raised wind-blown sand deposits which consist of carbonate-rich shell sands which are characteristic of the Durness area.

As the underlying basement and quartzites are all composed of acidic silica-rich rocks, one might expect to find poor, acidic soils beneath the township which are similar to the boggy and heather covered regions found immediately inland. However, unusually large areas of green pasture are found across parts of the township and along areas hugging the shoreline. This type of pastureland is more characteristic of areas around the village of Durness where Durness Group carbonates are found, implying that the carbonate sands are allowing pasture growth in otherwise unfavourable conditions. It is interesting to see that some enclosed fields are much more pasture-rich than their surrounding land with stone dykes often coinciding with lines of vegetation change. Therefore it is likely that these underlying raised sands have been purposely spread across certain fields and have been used as a raw fertiliser in the past.

The building stones appear to be local rocks as only gneiss, quartzite and some pegmatites were noted in the wall remains. The majority of the building stones are gneisses, although a large proportion are boulders of Basal Quartzite which appears unusual at first as only small outcrops are found *in-situ* at the nearby Traigh na h-Uamhag (beach). All of the local rocks are very hard crystalline materials which would make quarrying without machinery difficult. Therefore due to the general rounding of the building stones, it is also likely that small erratics and other loose boulders have been collected from nearby and brought to the site. Also, a nearby gully at Clais Lobhta, Sangobeg represents a large fault where the northern slope is covered in quartzite scree which may have been another source for some of the building material, all within easy distance for transporting materials.

Ref

- Text Mr. Graham Bruce with extracts from Glasgow University Archaeology department report 2007 Dr. Olivia Lelong
- The site was visited by Pat and Ian Evans on 27,11 May and 29 June 2007 for botanical report
- Donald Mitchell Highland Council Country side ranger compiled the bird lists
- Iain Greag Supplied the Geology text
- Artists Impressions Nicola Poole
- Photographs Ronnie Lansley
- This project is in the ethos of the Sutherland Biodiversity plan

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