



## The Loch Shell Flitting (1843)

(Latha an Fhuadachaidh)

The ejection warrants served on the crofter community at Loch Shell in 1843 called for urgent action. The complete removal of all the people and everything they possessed immediately, including the dismantling of their houses and the removal of their cattle and stock etc.

By reason of its very nature the programme had to be carried out in one day, as far as possible, because once their homes at Loch Shell were dismantled the people would be homeless until their roof timbers from Loch Shell were transported by boat to their new destinations in order to erect shelters to receive the families, particularly the children and senior citizens, pregnant mothers etc., because there were no houses at Crossbost or Glen Tolsta where the majority of the people were going.

The extensive oral tradition about the flitting of the Loch Shell community in 1843 indicates that the community organised the flitting with military precision and care, as indeed they would have to do in the circumstances. It appears that they organised themselves into parties or groups, and each group was given a specific task to carry out on the day of the flitting.

There was no question of telephoning a furniture removal firm because there was no such facility on the Island, not even a telephone, roads or motor vehicles. Therefore the first thing they would have to do would be to organise all the boats in the community and their crews, as well as the boats from the neighbouring villages. The crofting community is a close-knit and hospitable community and they always rally to the assistance of their neighbours in an emergency.

We shall call this first group **'The Transport Group'** or **'Team No.1'**.

Crossbost was about seven sea miles across the open sea from Loch Shell, and an open boat would take at least one hour each way, plus loading and unloading time for each return trip, say nearly four hours per trip. Glen Tolsta was about 12 miles away and much more exposed with a small open top-heavy boat. In order to move a large community of several hundred people and everything they possessed, the boats and crews would need to operate a shuttle service, and probably on the next day as well, even with the assistance of the boats from neighbouring villages.

It was also necessary for Team No.1 to exercise a scheme of priorities. The first priority was to transport the heavy roof timbers covered over with canvas or old sails in readiness for the most vulnerable members of the community to take shelter. The Crossbost tented camp was sited at Mol Chraisavick, which is the beach at the east end of Crossbost.

### **Team No.2 - House Dismantling Group**

It would be necessary for the house dismantling group at Loch Shell to start work very early in the morning in order to make some roof timbers available to the boat team as soon as possible. Great care would have to be exercised in the handling of these valuable timbers, as they would have to be used, not only to erect tented camps at their destination, but also for the families' new houses ultimately. Strong men were also needed to carry these heavy timbers to the shore.

### **Team No.3 - The Reception Camp Building Team**

At least two tented reception camps were erected, one on the beach at Crossbost and one on the beach at Glen Tolsta. The builders of the reception camps would be conveyed to the sites on the first boat. These tents and some upturned boats would be their homes until they could build new permanent homes for themselves. One family, the Carmichaels, overwintered under their boat on the beach at Glen Tolsta. The more vulnerable members, such as the old and infirm people, young children and their mothers, would be given priority.

### **Team No.4 - Furniture Removal Team**

Meantime, each of the sixty or so families at Loch Shell would be busy packing their household effects into baskets and any other container available. Everything within the homes would have to be removed outside quickly. Beds, dressers, benches, tables, stools, chairs, cooking pots, crockery, utensils, bed clothing and personal clothing, food, fishing gear, ropes, agricultural implements and tools, as well as everything a large

community needed. All that would, in the first instance, have to be carried down to the shore in order to be ferried to their new destinations by the boat transport team.

#### **Team No.5 - The Livestock Team**

From an early hour in the morning of the evacuation day, a large group of men, women and children were out on the hills of Park rounding up their livestock, milking the cows and organising the sheep and cattle droves, according to their destination, ready for the overland trek across the moor via the head of Loch Erisort at Balallan.

What a chaotic scene that must have been, sheep bleating, cattle mooing, dogs barking, people running back and forth excitedly, while the barefooted children were having a great time helping where they could, but blissfully unaware of the desperate worries of their parents and seniors.

On the trek across the moor the various droves were kept separate, Jacob fashion, 'with a space betwixt each drove', according to their ultimate destination.

#### **Team No.6 - The Crop Attendants**

Under the terms of the agreement imposed by the Lewis Estate on the Loch Shell community, the crofters were allowed, at the discretion of the Estate Factor, to leave one person per family living in their barns at Loch Shell, in order to weed and protect the growing crops.

#### **Team No.7 - The Pedestrian Group**

The pedestrian group consisted of those who were able to walk over the moor to Garyvard where the boats were laid on to ferry them across Loch Erisort and continue their journey on foot to their various destinations. This group consisted of mothers carrying young children in shawls or creels on their backs, while walking slightly older children on their hands. According to the well-known historian and genealogist Donald Mackenzie, 15 Crossbost (Domhnuill Dubh), his grandfather (Domhnuill Bàn Murchaidh Coinneach) was one of the children who walked from Orinsay to Garyvard on his mother's hand, at the age of three years, while his younger brother Alex, who was born in 1843, was carried by his mother, either before or after his birth. Some of the elderly men-folk also walked the five-mile journey from Loch Shell to the Garyvard ferry if they were fit enough. Those who were able were laden with food, milk and other necessary household goods for the journey, as well as for their arrival at the camps.

#### **The Exodus**

When the day was far spent, and the droves of livestock etc. were on their way all that remained at Loch Shell was the pedestrian group. Setting off simultaneously from the two villages of Lemreway and Orinsay, climbing the high ground to the north of the villages on their way to Garyvard ferry.

Once at the top of the hill they paused for a last nostalgic view of the two villages where they were born and brought up. Now abandoned, their happy homes were reduced to empty roofless ruins with no fires on the hearths, no smoke rising from the houses, and no children playing noisily among the houses. Their tear filled eyes would also wander to the magnificent panoramic view of the hills of Park and out to the Shiant Islands in the distance. It was a distressing occasion that brought forth much quiet weeping as the deprived homeless families turned away to face a hard and uncertain future.

#### **Resettlement**

It was fortunate that the flight of the Loch Shell fugitives was not in the winter because the area is notoriously dangerous with strong currents and squalls of strong wind coming down suddenly from the high hills of Park. It was also fortunate because of the very heavy programme of resettlement work awaiting the community. The first priority was to build new houses for themselves before the winter set in, probably temporary homes to begin with. At that time there was no official assistance available to help them with their building programme, financial or otherwise. There was, however, ready and willing voluntary assistance available from friends and neighbours.

They could not neglect to apply themselves to their calling, the fishing, in order to earn sustenance for their families, particularly during what was left of the summer herring fishing season.

It was also necessary for them to turn their urgent attention to the reclamation of new landholdings from the virgin uncultivated land in order to be ready to plant a crop in the spring, in a few short months.

Then there was the question of a peat supply. Although June was late in the year for peat cutting, the reality was that their new homes would need a lot of heating, and the young children and senior citizens would need as much warmth in the coming winter as was possible in the circumstances. Probably they had a good peat supply at Loch Shell, but ferrying top-heavy loads of peat in small boats was a dangerous exercise and there was also the time factor before the winter gales set in. As there was no electricity or gas, peat was therefore essential for cooking as well as for heating.

The building programme was not confined to their new dwelling homes; they would also have to address themselves to the building of barns, byres, stockyards and probably dykes or boundary walls around the new villages in order to protect next season's crops from the livestock.

The harvest which was still at Loch Shell was also calling for their urgent attention, first of all to gather the harvest and then to ferry the crops, and everything else that remained at Loch Shell, including the dismantling of the barns, before the final date of 1<sup>st</sup> November.

The distribution and resettlement of the evicted crofters of Lemreway and Orinsay in 1843 was approximately as follows. Later on there were slight adjustments through the movements of a few families, before the second lotting in 1850-52, when the boundaries of present-day crofts were drawn up.

Settlement Location	Families from Lemreway	Families from Orinsay	Families Re-settled
Crossbost	17	14	31
Glen Tolsta	4		4
Leurbost	1	3	4
Steimreway		2	2
Gravir	2		2
Crobeg	1		1
Grimshader		1	1
Sandwick		1	1
Airidhbhruach	1		1
Stornoway	1		1
Senior Citizens	6	6	12
Emigrated	1	1	2
Don't know	1	1	2
Schoolteacher	1		1
Total	36	29	65

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