



## Whitefish Salting Stations

In the entirely different circumstances of a few hundred years ago, it is said that Lewis was self-supporting. At that time the population was small. Fish of all kinds were plentiful, the water meal-mills on the streams supplied meal, and the domestic cow supplied dairy products. Their own sheep and cattle supplied meat and so on.

Although the inhabitants of the island worked the land and the sea for their living, they were not very commercially minded at that time except for the buying and selling of cattle, which was normally done on an appointed day at an appropriate place known as cattle sales 'Latha-na-Dròbh'.

The inhabitants of the Highlands and Islands got a rude awakening after the debacle of Culloden in 1745, after which the new system of landlordism was imposed on them by replacing the old clan system with landlords. That event sparked off the Highland clearances and the exploitation of all the natural resources of the Highlands and Islands, including the people, the kelp and the fishing etc., in order to sustain the high society lifestyle of their new overlords.

It was during that traumatic period, in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that the Lewis Proprietor, Seaforth Mackenzie and his tacksman established a commercial white fishery in Lewis. It was based mainly on cod and ling at small curing stations (tighean sailleadh), which were established on almost every suitable beach around the Island wherever there was a community living.

That phase of our Island history has passed away and unfortunately very few details of that activity survive, except that here and there people can identify the site of their village salting house.

The Gravir salting house is perhaps the best known of the various Park salting houses, because it was converted into a dwelling house by Murdo Macphail (Murchadh Dùnie) 19 Gravir, on whose family croft it was sited. The Lewis white fish salt houses ceased to be in use towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the crofters' overcrowded conditions towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were at least six families on Croft 19 Gravir. They were Murchadh 'Dùnie' Macphail in the salt house and his three brothers, Neil Macphail the first postmaster at Gravir, Aonghais 'Mor' Macphail and Kenneth 'Goirid' Macphail, as well as their father Donald Macphail (Domhnuill an ic Neill) and their uncle Murdo Macphail (Murchadh an ic Neill). Donald Macphail, one of Murchadh Dùnie's sons settled in Port Sunlight, England, and extracts from his daybook appeared in 'Tional' (the magazine of the Pairc Historical Society) earlier.

One of the other salting houses about which some details are known is the Calbost salting house which was sited at 'Mol a Ghò' at Calbost Bay. Originally the Calbost tacksman Robert Weir operated it. After he died in 1821 it was operated by local people such as Norman 'Buidhe' Mackenzie of 3 Calbost, and later by Murdo Nicolson of 11 Calbost and his son Kenneth.

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Date:

Original document title: Whitefish Salting Stations - Tighean Sailleadh

Location in physical archive: Series K, File 3, Section 58

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/9/3

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