



ORBOST ESTATE (Fearann Orboist)

ISLE of SKYE, SCOTLAND, UK.

The beginnings of settlement at Orbost on Skye's North West coast are lost in the mists of time. For thousands of years peoples have made small semi-permanent settlements on this remote part of the Hebridean Island. The physical evidence of their lives is largely gone but the spirit of the place is strong and lives on today with new inhabitants of the Orbost Estate.

The Isle of Skye

Skye is the largest island in the Inner Hebrides group, west of the Scottish mainland, being about 50 miles long and from 7 to 25 miles broad, with a coastline of nearly 350 miles. Its area is roughly 350,000 acres.

The name 'Skye' is now commonly thought to be derived from the Norse words '*ski*' meaning cloud and '*Ey*' meaning Island. In the 17th century the name was thought to derive from the name 'Skianach' meaning 'winged' referring to the two northern promontories of the island that resemble wings.

For many, the term 'Misty Isle' is synonymous with Skye and describes the ethereal qualities of this 'magic' place made famous in heroic stories and inhabited by ghosts and fairies.

The Geology of Orbost

Orbost is dominated by basaltic lava flows of early Tertiary age which form the characteristic flat topped terraced hills of Duirinish, Waternish and Trotternish. Beneath the lava is a variety of sedimentary rocks dominated by sandstone and shales of Jurassic age. These sediments are intruded by horizontal sheets (sills) of basic igneous rock 'Dolerite' related to the lava.

These rocks form a distinctive landscape of strongly terraced hills and valley sides with the valley forms being determined principally by lines of structural weakness created during the original rock formation. The harder lava flow now form the distinctive terraces and the softer material has been worn down by glacial activity to create colluvial drifts up to a metre in depth.¹

Pre Historic Occupation of Skye

Archaeological investigations across Skye have uncovered evidence of human occupation in an unbroken sequence from prehistoric times to the present day.²

¹ Orbost Land Study Final Report
University of Aberdeen September 1998.
² Archaeological Survey of Orbost Estate

Norse Occupation of Skye C8th Century - C12th Century

The first Norse raids of Scotland are recorded in 795AD and from that time on for nearly 400 years the islands of the Hebrides Group were under the control of Norsemen who wrested it from the original Celtic inhabitants and settled there. Many place names on the islands, including that of Orbst, are witness to this long period of occupation and settlement by the Norsemen during the period generally known as the Dark Ages. A notable discovery at Orbst is the remains of what is believed to be the first Viking settlement on Skye.

Under Viking rule there arose a mixed race, the Gall Gaidheal and in 1079, Godred Crovan united the Norse Kingdom of the Isle of Man and the Hebrides at the battle of Skyhill.

In 1095 King Malcolm Canmore of Scotland recognised Norwegian control over the Hebrides and in 1098 King Magnus Barelegs of Norway took control of the Kingdom of Man and the Hebrides.

The clan MacLeod is said to date from about this time when Leod, a son of Olave the Black, King of Man, gained control of the lands on Skye through his marriage to a daughter and heiress of Mac-arailt Armuinn, Norse Governor of the island.

Medieval Occupation of Skye 13th Century - 16th Century

In 1266 the Western Isles were ceded to Alexander, King of the Scots and entered a new phase of historic development. In parcelling out of his new territories, King Alexander granted Skye and Lewis to the Earl of Ross. The MacLeods of both islands became vassals to the Lords of the Isles. In Skye, the MacLeod Chiefs had their principal headquarters at Dunvegan.

The forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles in 1493 led to a new period in Highland history. The vassals of the old Lordship now held their lands directly of the King, and both branches of the MacLeods received Crown charters for their lands in Lewis and Skye. On June 15th 1498, A charter was issued by King James IV to Alexander Macleod (Mackloide) of Dunvegan granting him lands including 6 unciates of the lands of Duirinish.³

This charter included Orbst (Hirbst), located at the head of Bharcasaig Bay in the ancient Parish of Duirinish that continued to be held under subsequent charters by the Chiefs of the MacLeods of Dunvegan from this time. Other charters in the Dunvegan Muniments include a Charter of re-assignment by James V of March 3rd 1540 to William MacLeod (Mackloid) and Agnes Fraser his wife of lands in the Lordship of Glenelg and Duirinish on Skye.⁴

Chiefs like the MacLeods of Dunvegan who had sizeable estates often gave or leased such 'tacks' of land to a relative or a friend and these 'tackmen' in turn sublet the land to local people, while they farmed the best and most fertile areas themselves. This process of land management continued for more than 400 years.

Martin Wildgoose.

³ Muniments of Dunvegan Castle Ref No. 2 / 1-4 Crown Charter of Lands in Duirinish

⁴ Muniments of Dunvegan Castle Ref No. 12 / 1540 / 1 Crown Charter of lands at Glenelg & Duirinish

The 17th Century

The first available records of the Orbost Estate show that in 1683, Ean Mc Wannane (John McLennan) was paying rent to the MacLeod Chief for the tack of 'Hirbost'. The amount paid for the tack was the third highest rent on the MacLeod estates at that time indicating its relative status in economic terms.

At that time also the renowned Skye schoolmaster, John Macpherson born c1675, lived at Orbost. He was the second son of the Reverend Dugald Macpherson, minister of the Parish of Duirinish. John Macpherson was a noted Latin and Greek scholar, and one of the pupils at Orbost was Donald Roy MacDonald, who was involved in the escape from Skye of Bonnie Prince Charlie. John Macpherson died at Orbost in c1730.

The 18th Century

In the early 18th century there were reports of attempts to kidnap people from Skye and surrounding areas for transportation to the American colonies. Whether this practice was common is not known, but it was the commencement of extensive emigration patterns that were to continue for the next 200 years.⁵

The bulk of land in the Hebrides was distributed into 49 estates. Six of the largest of these were in the possession of noblemen. About one fifth of all land in the islands was under strict entail, and about three fifths belonged to absentees. The great Estates were managed by 'Factors' who usually resided on them. In the actual working of the estates, four different classes were involved; first, proprietors, who kept their lands under their own management; second, tacksmen, who held land under tacks, or leases; third, tenants who held lands of the proprietors without leases; fourth, crofters holding land without lease either of the proprietor or of the tacksmen. Some crofters were known as cotters who were sub-tenants holding from year to year.

The tacksmen were generally connected to the proprietors by clanship or blood, and formed a body of resident gentry.

On April 29th 1735 an Act of Court was published outlining 'Conditions for Tacksmen'

- 1: that the possessor of tacks are to make the roads at their own expense in such manner as the Laird shall direct wherever he requires them he being always bound to furnish on his own expense the proper tools.
- 2: that they pay all sorts of airage & carriage used & won't in anie of the Lo Countrys to the different Mills to which they are thirled.
- 3: that every town is obliged to have a good and sufficient kyll (kiln) & that no man allow his corn or grain to be brunt instead kyldrying under forfeiture of his tack except what may remain unkilldried after the first of May.
- 4: that every tacksmen lay his farm in kyldried and shilled corn under forfeit of his tack.
- 5: that all tacksmen who pay butter & cheese pay it of their own product & not whats made by his subtenants
- 6: that all who pay wadders shall pay them not their year old fluers & for the future the price of each undelivered wadder shall be three shillings sterlings.⁶

Norman MacLeod

5 See letters in National Library of Scotland dated 1739 and 1742 relating to attempts to kidnap people from Skye for transportation to America. Yule Collection MS.3142, ff.21-29

6 Muniments of Dunvegan Castle Reference No. 8 Act of Court –Conditions for Tacksmen April 29th 1735

Rent payments for the tacks were calculated annually and comprised money rents and payments based on produce. In 1724 the 'money rent' of Orbost was 100 pounds and by 1754 this had increased to 129 pounds 10 shillings.

By 1745, John MacLeod of Osdale had the tack of Orbost and fought alongside the 22nd Chief, Norman MacLeod as Ensign of Norman MacLeod of Waterstein's second Company against Prince Charles Stuart.

After the rebellion of 1745, many of the chiefs and other proprietors suddenly raised the rents and deprived the tacksmen of the power of sub-letting their lands. The sudden rise of rents took the tenants by surprise and large numbers of them emigrated in despair.

In 1754, Dr Samuel Campbell, who had been military surgeon to Norman MacLeod's Independent Companies during the '45, was given the Orbost tack. He built the earliest parts of Orbost House in 1755. At this time Orbost, Bharcasaig, Idrigill, Forse and Brandersaig were separate tacks and were held by different tacksmen.

In 1769 the Chief of the MacLeods was in dire financial straits. He increased the rents sharply, raised entry fees and reset the tacks. Many tacksmen gave up their leases and in 1771 three hundred and seventy crofters from Skye set sail for North Carolina in the Americas to find a new life. Hundreds more were to follow. By 1790 it was estimated that upward of 2,000 had crossed the sea to the New World.⁷

Between 1776 and 1792 the tacksman of Orbost was Neil Beaton..

In 1792 Orbost and Bharcasaig were linked and the tack was given to Olaus MacLeod, third son of Donald MacLeod and Margaret MasSween of the Roag family. Olaus and his wife Julia extended the tack house c1790 adding two wings. This was before the sale of Orbost, Bharcasaig, Idrigill, Forse and Brandersaig to Angus Campbell of Pabbay by Norman MacLeod in 1799 that brought the Estate into its present form.

Records of farms on the peninsular at this time indicate the following staff. At Orbost, a manager and 11 sub-tenants; Bharcasaig, a manager and 13 sub-tenants; Forse, a manager and 7 sub-tenants; Brandersaig, a manager and 4 sub-tenants; Idrigill, a manager and 6 sub-tenants.

The 19th Century

The 23rd MacLeod Chief, General Norman MacLeod, had amassed a large fortune during his time in India, however his expensive lifestyle soon ran him into financial difficulties leading to sale of many of the major MacLeod landholdings. In 1797 almost all of the Waternish Peninsular was sold to a merchant from Inverness, James Shaw for 15,000 pounds. On 16th August 1799 most of the Glendale peninsular was sold off for 8,300 pounds, two days later Skinidin and Cobost were sold for 4,000 pounds and finally on 19th August of the same year, Orbost, Bharcasaig, Idrigill, Forse and Brandersaig were sold together for a total of 5,000 pounds.⁸

The new owner of Orbost, Angus Campbell of Pabbay and of the Ensay and Harris Campbells, married Margaret, daughter of Norman MacLeod of Berneray. Sale of the

⁷ See letters in National Library of Scotland relating to Emigration from Skye in the 18th Century. Delvine Papers MS.1306 ff.54-55, & f.68

⁸ Muniments of Dunvegan Castle Reference No. 386 / 1-7 relating to the sale of Orbost, 1799 - 1874

land containing 'MacLeods Maidens', the rocky pinicals off Idrigill Point fulfilled one of the conditions of the 'MacLeod Curse' that the land would eventually be held by a Campbell.

Angus Campbell had also purchased the improvements at Orbost which included the Tackhouse and surrounding structures.

Campbell's mounting debts and the ever increasing interest payments far outstripped his income. On 29th march, 1805 he borrowed 3000 pounds from his sister-in-law Isabella MacLeod who had inherited Berneray and she became the owner of Orbost House and its lands. Having been removed from Berneray Isabella moved to live with her sister's family at Orbost house until Angus died in 1812. At that time his only surviving daughter Margaret was married at Orbost to her first cousin William MacLeod, son of Captain Norman MacLeod of Bernisdale and the couple moved into Orbost House.

William MacLeod is reported to have been a smuggler utilising the many caves along the coast adjoining the Estate to conceal contaband from the Customs Men. The earth for the garden surrounding Orbost House is said to have come from the Isle of Rum, and was used as a cover for the bringing in of contraband from France.

In 1825 after Chief John Norman MacLeod had made his elaborate improvements at Dunvegan castle, William and Margaret MacLeod added the splendid Georgian façade to Orbost House. The young couple lived in the grand new apartments while their aged aunt lived in the old tackhouse apartments. But hard times struck soon after with the failure of harvests in 1836. The people of Skye were destitute and starving. Bad weather also destroyed the peat stocks and people began burning the divots off their own roofs to keep warm. William was an 'improver' who saw the opportunity to convert the land to pasture for Cheviot sheep. During the next decade the Orbost 'townships' were cleared and laid waste by William Macleod, to be replaced with sheep and cattle. Evidence of these settlements can still be seen today.

Isabella MacLeod died in 1839 and Margaret and William inherited Orbost. They had seven children and in 1841, though the eldest daughter was living away from home, the six younger children were living at Orbost with a tutor and a governess as well as an elderly housekeeper and eight servants aged between 15 and 20 years old. A gardener and his family lived nearby.

William died some years later and by 1851 Margaret's three daughters were married. She was living at Orbost with three of her sons and seven servants, including a dairy maid and farm servant. Margaret and her eldest son, Norman took a lease of the adjoining ground of Uiginish from the bankrupted MacLeod Chief. Margaret MacLeod died in 1855. Norman Macleod was an officer in the Indian army and Orbost became neglected.

An account of the Orbost Estate and Orbost House are given in the classic travelogue, 'A Summer in Skye' by Alexander Smith written in the year 1867.

That's Orbost, sir, the house under the hill," said Malcolm, pointing with his whip, and obviously tired of the prolonged silence, "and yonder on the left are the Cuchullins. The sea is down there, but you cannot see it from this. We'll be there in half an hour," and exactly in half an hour, with Macleod's Tables behind us, we passed the garden and the offices, and alighted on the daisied sward before the house.

After I had wandered about for an hour I made up my mind that, had I the choice, I should rather live at Orbost than at any other house in Skye.....

Orbost lies pleasantly to the sun, and in the garden I could almost fancy Malvolio walking cross-gartered—so trim it was, so sunnily sedate, so formal, so ancient-looking. The shadow on the dial told the age of the day, clipped box-wood ran along every walk. Trees, crucified to the warm brick walls, stretched out long arms on which fruit was ripening. The bee had stuck his head so deeply into a rose that he could hardly get it out again, and so with the leaves—as a millionaire with bank-notes— he impatiently buzzed and fidgeted. And then you were not without sharp senses of contrast: out of the sunny warmth and floral odours you lifted your eyes, and there were Macleod's Tables rising in an atmosphere of fable; and up in the wind above you, turning now and again its head in alert outlook, skimmed a snow-white gull, weary—as tailors sometimes are with sitting—of dancing on the surges of the sea.

Orbost stands high above the sea, and if you wish thoroughly to enjoy yourself you must walk down the avenue to the stone seat placed on the road which winds along the brow of the broken cliffs, and which, by many a curve and bend, reaches the water level at about a quarter of a mile's distance, where there is a boat-house, and boats lying keel uppermost or sideways, and a stretch of yellow sand on which the tide is flowing, creamy line after creamy line. From where you sit the ground breaks down first in a wall of cliff, then in huge boulders as big as churches, thereafter in bushy broken ground with huts perched in the coziest places, each hut swathed in the loveliest films of blue smoke; and all through this broken ground there are narrow winding paths along which a cow is always being gingerly driven, or a wild Indian-looking girl is bringing water from some cool spring beneath. Here you can quietly enjoy the expanse of dazzling sea, a single sail breaking the restless scintillations; far Rum asleep on the silver floor; and, caught at a curious angle, the Cuchullin hills—reminding you of some stranded iceberg, splintered, riven, many-ridged, which the sun in all his centuries has been unable to melt. In the present light they have a curiously hoary look, and you can notice that in the higher corries there are long streaks of snow. On the right, beyond the boat-house, a great hill, dappled with brown and olive like a seal's back, and traversed here and there by rocky terraces, breaks in precipices down to the sea line; and between it and the hill on which you are sitting, and which slopes upward behind, you see the beginning of a deep glen, in its softness and greenness suggesting images of pastoral peace, the bringing home of rich pails by milkmaids, the lowing of cattle in sober ruddy sunsets. "What glen is that, Malcolm?" "Oh, sir, it just belongs to the farm." "Is there a house in it?" "No, but there's the ruins of a dozen." "How's that?" "Ye see, the old Macleods liked to keep their cousins and second cousins about them; and so Captain Macleod lived at the mouth of the glen, and Major Macleod at the top of it, and Colonel Macleod over the hill yonder. If the last trumpet had been blown at the end of the French war, no one but a Macleod would have risen out of the churchyard at Dunvegan. If you want to see a chief now-a-days, you must go to London for him. Ay, sir, Dun Kenneth's prophecy has come to pass—'In the days of Norman, son of the third Norman, there will be a noise in the doors of the people, and wailing in the house of the widow; and Macleod will not have so many gentlemen of his name as will row a five-oared boat around the Maidens!' The prophecy has come to pass, and the Tables are no longer Macleod's—at least one of them is not."

The Parish of Duirinish, Skye in 1880

The Ordinance Gazetteer of Scotland published in 1882 describes Duirinish as:

"Duirinish or Durinish, a parish in the W of Skye, Inverness-shire, containing the village of Dunvegan, on Loch Follart, 23 ½ miles W by N of Portree, under which it has a post office, with money order, savings' bank, and telegraph departments. Extending from the Grishnish branch of Loch Snizort on the N to Loch Bracadale on the S, it is bounded its E or landward side by the parishes of Snizort and Bracadale; its length is 19, and its breadth 16 miles; whilst its coastline, measured along the bays and headlands, is about 80 miles; and its area must be fully 100 square miles.

Sea-lochs run far up into the interior, cutting it into an assemblage of peninsulars; and are flanked with grounds rising in some places rapidly, in other places gently, from their shores. The headlands are mostly huge lofty masses of rocks, which rest on bases descending sheer into deep water.; and the coast of the northern district is a continuation of vertical cliffs and low shores, striking enough when first beheld, but wearying the eye by its monotony. The shores and islets of Loch Follart or Dunvegan Loch, with Dunvegan for centre-piece, form a grandly picturesque landscape; and the coast, from Dunvegan Head to Loch Baracdale, consists for the most part of cliffs, very various in height and slope, many of them lofty and almost perpendicular, and nearly all of such geological composition as to present a singular striped appearance. Some isolated pyramidal masses of rock, similar to the 'stacks' of Caithness and Shetland, stand off the coast, and figure wildly in the surrounding waters, the most striking and romantic of these being known as '*Macleod's Maidens*'. The northern district consists of Vaternish peninsular, and constitutes the *quad sacra* parish of Halen; the other districts may be comprised in three- Glendale, extending westward from a line near the head of Dunvegan Loch; Kilmure, extending southward Dunvegan Loch to Loch Bay, and containing the Parish Church; and Arnizort, extending eastward from Kilmure to the boundaries with Snizort and Bracadale.

The only mountains are the Greater and Lesser Helvel or Halivail, in the western peninsular, which rising to an altitude of 1700 feet above sea level, and ascending in regular gradient, with verdant surface, are truncated at the top into level summits, and to seamen are familiar as '*Macleods Tables*'. Hills occur in two series, but are neither high nor in any other way conspicuous. Numerous caverns, natural arches and deep crevices are in the cliffs of the coast. Issay island is nearly two miles long, and has a fertile soil and a considerable population; but all other islands are small and uninhabited. The rocks are chiefly trap; but they include beds of fossiliferous limestone, thin strata of very soft sandstone, and thin seams of hard brittle coal. Zeolites of every variety are very plentiful; steatite abounds especially around Dunvegan; and augite and ovine are found. The soil in a few tracks is clayey; and in still fewer is gravelly, in most parts being either peat moss or a mixture of peat moss and disintegrated trap.

Dunvegan Castle is at once the chief mansion and antiquity. Other mansions are Vaternish, Orbost and Grieshernish; and other antiquities are fifteen Danish forts, several tumuli, and a number of subterranean hiding places. Macleod of Macleod is owner of half the parish, three other proprietors holding each an annual value of 500 pounds and upwards, and three of between 100 and 500 pounds.

In the presbytry of Skye and Synod of Glenelge, this parish is divided ecclesiastically into Halen and Duirinish, the latter being a living worth 208 pounds. Its church built in 1832, contains nearly 600 sittings; and there is also a Free Church of Duirinish. The eight public schools of Borreraig, Borrodale, cplbost, Dunvegan, Edinbain, Knockbreck, Lochbeag and Valtin Bridge, and the Free Church school of Arnisort, with total accommodation for 923 children, had (1880) an av. attendance of 477."

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| Valuation | (1881) 7683 pounds 12 shillings |
| Population | (1801) 3320, (1831) 4765, (1861) 4775, (1871) 4422, (1881) 4317 ⁹ |

Crofting in the 19th Century

The Ordinance Gazetteer of Scotland 1882, provides the following information on crofting in the early to mid 19th Century:

"When the old tacksman system was broken up, about the middle of last century, many of the farms held by tacksmen seem to have been taken directly from the proprietor by joint tenants who grazed their stock upon the pasture in common, and

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Ordinance Gazetteer-Scotland in 6 Volumes
A Survey of Scottish Topography
Statistical, Biographical and Historical
Ed. Francis H. Groome 1882

tilled the arable land in 'run-rig', that is, in alternative 'rigs' or ridges, distributed annually. Since the commencement of this century, the arable land has in most cases been divided amongst the joint-tenants or crofters in separate portions, the pasture remaining as formerly in common. The first effect of this division into separate crofts was a great increase in produce, so that districts which formerly imported food, now became self supporting. But evils followed that had not been foreseen. So long as the farms were held in joint tenancy there was a barrier to their further sub-division which could rarely be overcome. But when each joint-tenant received his own separate croft, this restraint for the most part ceased. The crofters who had lived in hamlets or clusters of cottages now generally established themselves separately on their 'crofts'. Their houses, erected by themselves, says Sir John McNeill, who was appointed by Government to report on the district in 1850, in consequence of the great distress in 1846, are of stone and earth or clay. The only materials they purchase are the doors, and in most cases, the rafters of the roof on which are laid thin turf, covered with thatch. The crofter's furniture consists of some rude bedsteads, a table, some stools, chests, and a few cooking utensils. At one end of the house, often entering by the same door, is the byre for his cattle; at the other, the barn for his crop. His fuel is the peat he cuts in the neighbouring moss, of which an allocated portion is often attached to each croft. His capital consists of his cattle. His sheep, and perhaps one or more horses or ponies; of his crop that is to feed him till next harvest, provide the seed and winter provender for his animals; of his furniture, his implements, the rafters of his house, and, generally, a boat, or share of a boat, nets or other fishing gear, with some barrels of salt-herrings, or bundles of dry cod or ling for winter use.

As originally portioned out, the crofts appear to have been quite sufficient to maintain the crofter's family, and yield the landlord his annual rent. But when kelp was largely and profitably manufactured, when potatoes were extensively and successfully cultivated, when the fishing was good, and the price of cattle was high, the crofter found that his croft was more than sufficient for his wants; and when a son or a daughter married, he divided it with the young couple, who built themselves another house upon the ground, sharing the produce, and contributing to the rent. Thus many crofts which are entered on the landlords rent-roll as in the hands of one man, are, in fact, occupied by two, three, or even in some cases, four families. On some estates efforts were made to prevent this sub-division, but without much success. If the erection of a second house on the croft were forbidden, the married son or daughter was taken into the existing house; and though the land might not be formally divided, it was still required to support one or more additional families."¹⁰

The Highland Clearances

In the late 18th century and throughout the 19th century the old land tenure systems of the Scottish Highlands were under significant pressure for consolidation and conversion from small holdings to create large estates for sheep farming. The early migrations from Skye began in the 1760's to the Carolinas in the Americas and to Canada where the families of soldiers who had fought settled on grants of land. Some groups were led and organized by small tacksmen who sought to escape the rack-renting of their chiefs.

After 1840 the Isle of Skye became the property of several proprietors who in the next four decades served 1,740 writs of removal. While some crofters moved to other areas, many sought to emigrate. This process was common on Skye. Between 1840 and 1883 it is said that no fewer than 7,000 people emigrated from Skye to Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

¹⁰ Ibid

The 'Midlothian' Emigrants from Skye 1837

Typical of the early 19th century emigrants from Skye were those who travelled to the colony of New South Wales on the ship 'Midlothian' under the auspices of the Reverend Dunmore Lang's 'Bounty Scheme' of assisted passage which operated between 1837 and 1840.

Under Lang's scheme, government employed immigration agents, often clergymen of good character, travelled to Scotland to choose prospective immigrants on the basis of need and also of how useful their skills would be to the Colony. The ships sailed from Scotland, from near where the destitute highlanders were located. They were well victualled, with strict health regimes, their own clergyman on board and generally the immigrants had high morale. When the scheme was privatised by the Government, however, the new immigration agents had different agendas based on exploitation and profit. They were less scrupulous in their choice of both ships and migrants and many deaths occurred during the voyages.

The 'Midlothian' a barque of 414 tons, under Captain Morrison, left the small port of Uig, in Loch Snizort, Skye, on August 8th, 1837. The surgeon superintendant was Dr. Robert Stewart, and the minister on board was the Rev. William McIntyre. The ship carried nearly 300 passengers, most of whom were victims of the clearances and spoke only Gaelic. McIntyre gave English lessons to the passengers to equip them for their new life in the Antipodies.

24 persons died on the voyage to Australia, mainly due to dysentery, 18 of them children and women. This level of deaths was not uncommon in long sea voyages at the time.

The 'Midlothian' was the third ship of twenty in the Bounty Scheme that gave assisted passage to 4,000 Scots between 1837 - 40. The emigrants disembarked at Sydney Town on December 12, 1837. Another ship the 'William Nicholl' had arrived only a week before. They celebrated their landfall with a full Gaelic church service at Dunmore Lang's Scots Kirk on Church Hill in Sydney Town.

Not willing to be separated as previous emigrants had been, many of the 'Midlothian' group refused to take separate positions on scattered Colonial properties and claimed that the Government had promised that they would be re-established as an intact community with their own minister and that they would be able to maintain their Gaelic language. In a mutually beneficial arrangement John Dunmore Lang's brother, Andrew Lang offered to take 20 families of tenant farmers with a promise from Government of six months rations and free transport to his property 'Dunmore' near Patterson north of Maitland in the Hunter River Valley.

Amongst the list of passengers on the 'Midlothian' was:
Malcolm McLean, 32, a Shepherd of Orbost who could both read and write, his wife Margaret and their young children, Alexander, Eliza and Margaret.¹¹

A Norman MacLeod from Orbost migrated to Australia and finally moved to the Victorian Highlands where in 1845 he purchased land and founded the small rural settlement of 'Orbost' in Gippsland Victoria.

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The Midlothian Emigrants from Skye. - www.acay.com.au/~gsm/Bounty.html

ORBOST in the Later 19th Century

Captain Norman MacLeod inherited the Orbost Estate on Skye from his mother in 1855. On his return from army service in India he sold it in 1869 and moved instead to Uiginish. At the age of 51 he married and had four children. For some years he was also tacksman of the isle of Rum. He died at Uiginish in December 1888.

When Orbost was put up for sale in 1869 there was fierce competition between two rivals, Norman MacLeod of MacLeod the 25th Chief who sought to recover part of his patrimony and Kenneth MacLeod of the Gesto family who had been ousted from Gesto by an earlier MacLeod Chief in 1825. Kenneth had gone to India at the age of 15 with a single gold guinea and had made a fortune. On his return to Skye he sought to buy back his family home but was thwarted and instead set out to purchase property at Edinbane, Greshornish, Toke, Skeabost and much of Portree.

Outbidding the MacLeod Chief by 200 pounds, Kenneth MacLeod purchased Orbost for 11,200 pounds. His ownership was however short lived for he died within months of the sale.

Kenneth Robertson inherited the Estate in 1870 at the age of five from his bachelor grand uncle and thereafter took the name MacLeod. The estate was managed by his parents John and Isabella Robertson. Orbost House was let to Dr John MacLean who ran it as a sanatorium. In 1871 he had thirteen boarders, including two other doctors as well as his wife, four children and seven servants.

In 1885 Kenneth Robertson - MacLeod came of age and took over the running of the estate. He moved his parents into Orbost House while he himself remained at Greshornish.

Each year the house was let for shooting parties and in 1892, William Tarn first took the shooting at Orbost, where he met Flora, the third daughter of John & Isabella Robertson. The couple were married and in 1898 a daughter, Otta, was born to them.

Isabella Robertson died in 1902 and her husband soon after. Some of their children continued to visit Orbost during the summer months including Flora Tarn and her daughter Otta. One of the latter's childhood friends was her second cousin, Roger Swire, grandson of Isabella Robertson's brother Charles MacDonald. In 1931 Otta Tarn and Roger Swire were married.

Orbost House was let as a hotel in the 1930's to Mr. & Mrs. Porteous and remained a popular destination for shooting and fishing parties. At the outbreak of the Second World War Skye became a prohibited area, and the running of the hotel was taken over by Beatrice Robertson, Kenneth's youngest sister.

ORBOST in the 20th Century

The estate was last sold in its entirety following the death of Kenneth Robertson - MacLeod in 1945 to Colonel Roger Swire (retired) and his wife Otta. Retaining the grand old tackhouse for their own home, they sold the surrounding lands and farm to the MacDonald Brothers in 1956. Following the death of Otta, the Swire family sold Orbost House to David & Marion Roberts in 1975, retaining a small portion where they built a new house. Orbost House and its immediate garden curtilage it is now the property of George Kozikowski.

THE ORBOST ESTATE 1997 -2004

Orbost Estate was purchased in October 1997 by Highlands & Islands Enterprise (HIE) in partnership with Skye & Lochalsh Enterprise (SALE) to provide new opportunities for economic social and cultural regeneration through the creation of a viable and sustainable rural development in this remote area of North West Skye.

The project is for the establishment and nurturing of a dynamic and confident community through the creation of new economic opportunities which will act as a model for sustainable rural development in Scotland and further a field.

Fundamental to the success of the venture is the integration of people, land and entrepreneurial energy in a sustainable fashion through the creation of small holdings and other housing, the growth of small businesses and the encouragement of other ideas in keeping with the environment and culture of the area.

Orbost Estate is located in North West Skye approximately 5 miles south of Dunvegan and comprises 61 hectares of in-bye, and a further 1,856 hectares of hill ground. Although Orbost is limited in terms of its productive capacity for agriculture and forestry by its cool and damp climate and rugged topography, the land has considerable potential for supporting a viable economic community. Small holding is the heart of the Orbost vision, providing security and a base for families to diversify into new economic activities.¹²

Visitors are welcome to explore the estate using the footpaths to Bharcasaigh Beahs Idrigal, MacLeod's Maidens and the route to Ollisdal via Healabhal Bheag (MacLeod's Tables South)

Contact: Skye & Lochalsh Enterprise
The Green, Portree, Isle of Skye, Scotland UK.
Telephone (01478 612 841)

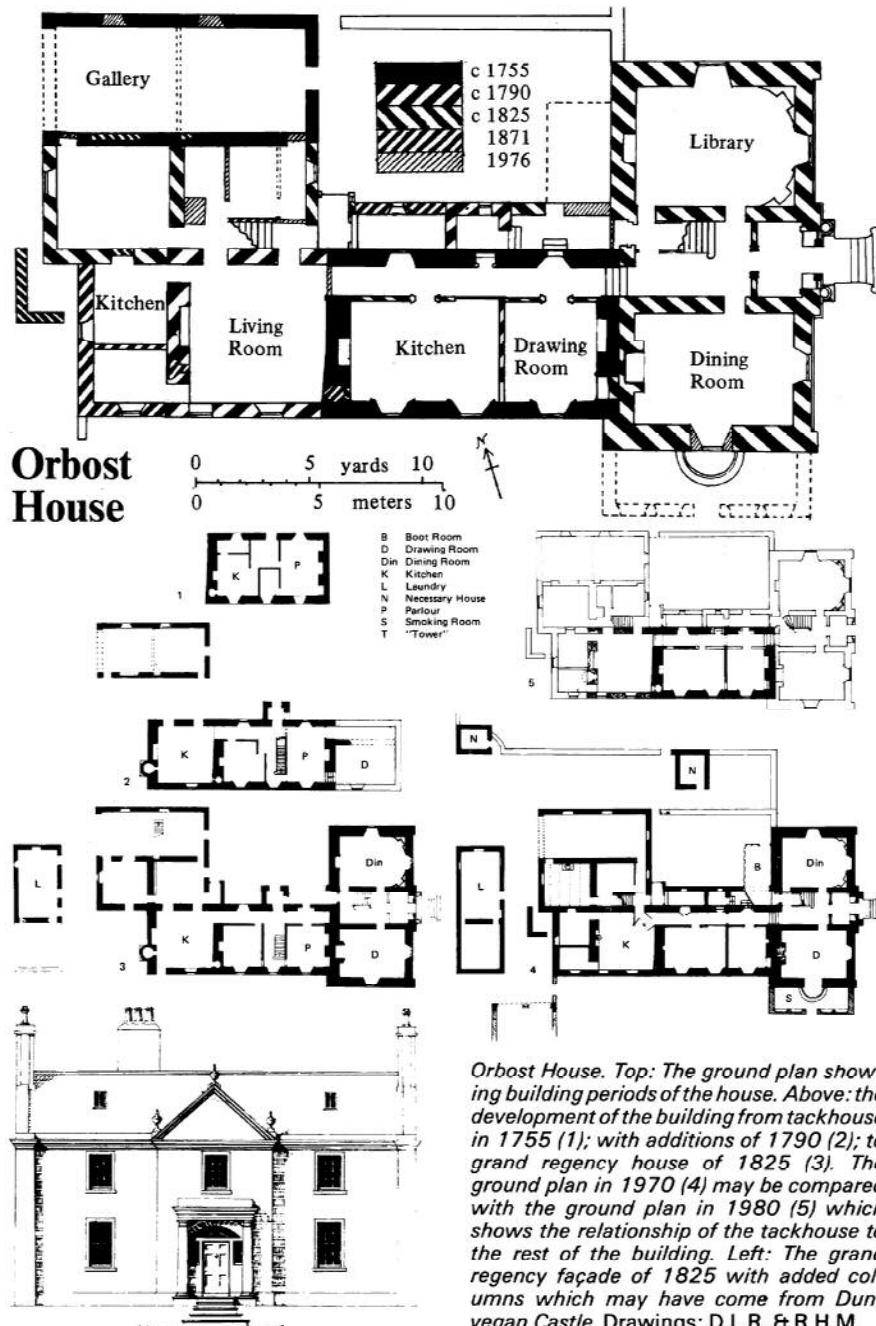
THIS HISTORY COMPILED IN 2004 BY ROBERT STAAS effie_papa@hotmail.com

¹² Orbost Land Study Final Report.
University of Aberdeen, September 1998.

'ORBOST HOUSE'

ORBOST HOUSE 1755 - 2004

The present structure of Orbost House can be seen to be the result of the several building periods. An analysis of the house was prepared in 1981 by Dr. David Roberts and Ruairidh H. MacLeod and was published in the Clan MacLeod Magazine Vol 8 No. 52, 1981. The illustrations below were prepared for that publication.



Orbost House. Top: The ground plan showing building periods of the house. Above: the development of the building from tackhouse in 1755 (1); with additions of 1790 (2); to grand regency house of 1825 (3). The ground plan in 1970 (4) may be compared with the ground plan in 1980 (5) which shows the relationship of the tackhouse to the rest of the building. Left: The grand regency façade of 1825 with added columns which may have come from Dunvegan Castle. Drawings: D.L.R. & R.H.M.

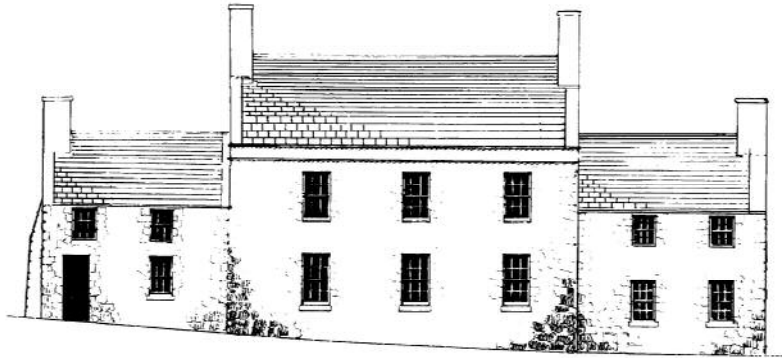
Orbost House showing phases of construction

The core of the building is still the mid eighteenth century, two storey stone tack-house of three bays with garrets over, built by Dr. Samuel Campbell in 1755.



Orbst Tackhouse C 1755 conjectural reconstruction

The 1792 additions to the east and west of the original building erected by Olaus MacLeod comprised two bay wings of one and a half storeys.



Orbst House C1800 conjectural restoration

The eastern wing was subsequently demolished and reconstructed as a fine two storey Regency House of three bays with attics by William MacLeod in 1825. This part of the house faces east out over a walled garden with a carriage drive with a diagonal prospect towards Bharcasaig Bay.

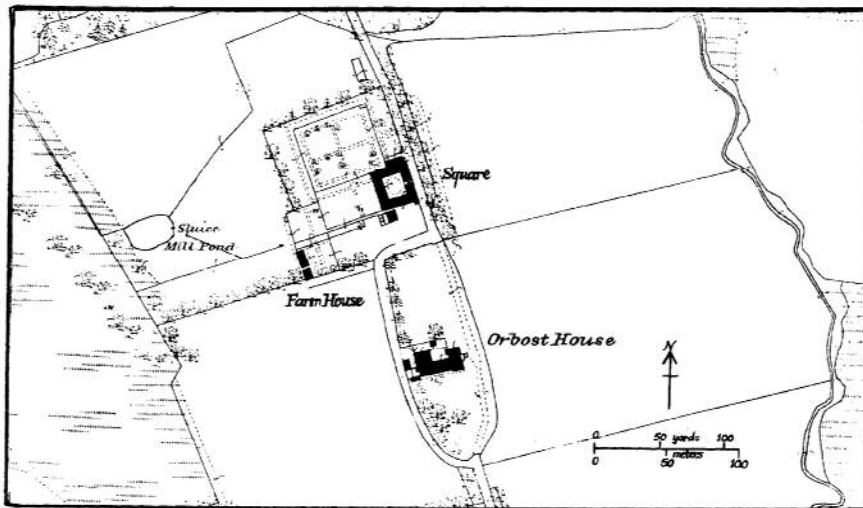
Further additions and remodeling of the house were carried out after 1840 and again in about 1871 when the accommodation was again increased and the original tack-house and Regency wing were connected at ground and first floor levels.



Orbst House C 1900 showing the Regency façade attached to original structure.

The house was used as a Hotel in the 1930's and is now restored as a home with attached self contained rental accommodation. The curtilage of the house is now contained within the walled area an area of about two acres.

To the north of the house is a separate 'Victorian' farm house, 1871, a stone 'square' or steding C1830's (modified) and a separate walled orchard garden C1840's.



Site Plan of Orbst House showing late 19th century configuration.

The Water Mill and associated pond and sluice have been demolished but the farm house, the walled garden and the steding survive though in various states of disrepair.

An account of the house is contained in the well known travelogue, 'A Summer in Skye' by Alexander Smith written in 1867. He wrote of his delight at the situation of the place yet....

“At Orbst, the house itself is the only thing that can reasonably be objected to. In the first place, it is one of those elegant expressionless houses in the Italian style with which one is familiar in the suburban districts of large cities, and as such it is quite out of keeping with the scenery and the spiritual atmosphere of the island. It is too modern, and villa like. It is as innocent of a legend as Pall Mall. It does not believe in ghost stories. It has a dandified and sceptical look; and as it has not taken to the island, the island has not taken to it. Around it trees have not grown well; they are mere stunted trunks, bare, hoary, wind-writhen. There is not a lichen or discoloration on its smoothly-chiseled walls; not a single chimney or gable has been shrouded with affectionate ivy. It looks like a house which has "cut" the locality, and which the locality has "cut" in return. In the second place, the house is stupidly situated. It turns a cold shoulder on the grand broken coast; on the ten miles of sparkling sea on which the sun is showering millions of silver coins, ever a new shower as the last one disappears; on Rum, with a veil of haze on its highest peak; on the lyrical Cuchullins—for although of the rigidest granite, they always give one the idea of passion and tumult; on the wild headlands of Bracadale, fading one after another, dimmer and dimmer, into distance ;—on all this the house turns a cold shoulder, and on a meadow on which some dozen colts are feeding, and on a low strip of moory hill beyond, from which the cotters draw their peats, it stares intently with all its doors and windows. Right about face. Attention! That done, the most fastidious could object to nothing at Orbst, on the point of beauty at least The faces of the Skye people, continually set like flints against assaults of wind and rain, are all lined and puckered about the eyes; and in Skye houses you naturally wish to see something of the same weather-beaten look. Orbst, with its smooth front and unwinking windows, outrages the fitness of things.

Of the interior no one can complain; for on entering you are at once surrounded by a proper antiquity and venerableness. The dining-room is large and somewhat insufficiently lighted, and on the walls hang two of Raeburn's half-lengths—the possession of which are in themselves vouchers of a family's respectability—and several portraits of ladies with obsolete waists and head-dresses, and military gentlemen in the uniform of last century. The furniture is dark and massy; the mahogany drawing depth and colour from age and usage; the carpet has been worn so bare that the pattern has become nearly obliterated. The room was not tidy, I was pleased to see. A small table placed near the window was covered with a litter of papers; in one corner were guns and fishing-rods, and a fishing-basket laid near them on the floor; and the round dusty mirror above the mantelpiece— which had the curious faculty of reducing your size, so that in its depth you saw yourself as it were at a considerable distance—had spills of paper stuck between its gilded frame and the wall. From these spills of paper I concluded that the house was the abode of a bachelor who occasionally smoked after dinner—which, indeed, was the case, only the master of the house was from home at the time of my visit. In the drawing-room, across the lobby, hooped ladies of Queen Anne's time might have sat and drunk tea out of the tiniest china cups. The furniture was elegant, but it was the elegance of an ancient beau. The draperies were rich, but they had lost colour, like a spinster's cheek. In a corner stood a buffet with specimens of cracked china. Curious Indian ornaments, and a volume of Clarissa Harlowe, and another volume of the Poetical Works of Mr. Alexander Pope—the binding faded, the paper dim—lay on the central table. Had the last reader left them there? They reminded me of the lute—it may be seen at this day in Pompeii—which the dancing girl flung down in an idle moment. In a dusky corner a piano stood open, but the ivory keys had grown yellow, and all richness of voice had been knocked out of them by the fingerings of dead girls. I touched them, and heard the metallic complaint of ill-usage, of old age, of utter loneliness and neglect. I thought of Ossian, and the flight of the dark-brown years. It was the first time they had spoken for long. The room, too, seemed to be pervaded by a scent of withered rose leaves, but whether this odour lived in the sense or the imagination, it would be useless to inquire.

Before 1945, Orbst Estate had remained a unified and sizable property with its main settlements beside the Orbst tackhouse at Bharcasaig and others to the south at

Forse, Brandarsaig and Idrigill. In the 1950's, Donald-John and his brother Ian MacDonald sold about 1,000 acres around Glen Bharcasaig and a further 1,000 acres on the peninsula's east coast including Brandarsaig and old Idrigill village in 1985 to the Forestry Commission. In 1997 the MacDonald brothers put the remaining land comprising 4,600 acres up for sale and it was eventually purchased by the Highlands & Islands Commission.

A more recent development at Orbost are, 'Cruachan Cottages', built to house 2 crofter's families and two workshops for craftsmen as part of the 21st century infrastructure of the Estate.

ORBOST ESTATE SKYE

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