

Nigg - A Changing Parish

by Anne Gordon 1977

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Farming I

If place names are a reliable source of information, then it appears that the Picts lived at Caanruidh on Wester Rarichie in early times and practised simple agriculture. The local derivation of Rarichie refers to these people saying in spring time, "Let us go down to make rows of scratches" (to sow seed in). (1)

From their primitive farming methods there would have evolved the economy typical of the Highlands, with infield-outfield systems and common land. Although communication between parishes was difficult, it seems certain that the establishment of Fearn Abbey would have influenced farming over a considerable surrounding area, and certainly their drainage work made an impact on the parish of Nigg.

The building of the Bishop of Ross's summer palace at Nigg must also have helped to introduce new methods, especially as the parish was one of his sources of revenue and his produce was stored in the gironel of Nigg until required. (2-M.874) This gave every incentive to produce as good crops as possible, and in later years as well the influence of the church on agriculture, in the form of improving ministers, has been considerable.

Nevertheless, the farming of the area, in common with the rest of Scotland, was in a pretty miserable state in the 17th century. Years of fighting had kept trade and farming behind that in England. There were no potatoes nor turnips and very little winter feeding; most of the stock were slaughtered in the autumn and salted down; and when spring came, those kept for breeding were usually in poor condition and barely able to rear their young. Bere and barley, both of poor quality, were the main crops. (3)

The whole of the 16th century was one continuous time of suffering and disaster, with a desperate scarcity of food. The century ended with a spectacular famine, heralded by a cold east wind and dense sulphurous fog in August 1694. These passed over the land, striking the corn with mildew so that it whitened and shrank. "From this unfortunate year till the year 1701, the land seemed as if struck with barrenness, and such was the change in the climate, that the seasons of summer and winter were cold and gloomy in nearly the same degree. The wonted heat of the sun was withholden, the very cattle became stunted and meagre ... November, December, and in some places January and February became the months of harvest; and labouring people contracted diseases which terminated in death, when employed in cutting down the corn among ice and snow."

So wrote Hugh Miller (4) describing the Seven Years' Famine which hit the parish of Nigg as hard as anywhere else, so that 140 years later the New Statistical Account particularly mentioned this "awful period" when many died of want, the rich became poor, land changed hands, the whole face of society changed, there was a startling decline in morals, and all in all, it was one of the three events which the NSA said had had marked effects on the identity and character of the people.

But severe as it was, this famine was not isolated. In 1708 the people were reduced to eating snails and as many as 13 families out of 16 on one farm died. There was famine again in 1709 when large areas became derelict. The autumn and winter of 1740 were very bad, once again with a fog that scathed the crops as if by fire. 1783 was known as the "Black Year," and would have been blacker still had not potatoes been introduced by then so that the people had something to make up for their lost grain crop. 1808 and 1818 saw partial crop failures, as did 1836-7, and then the over-popular potato let the people down in the potato famine which occurred locally in 1846-7.

That famines turned people's thoughts to emigration is clear from letters written by Naomi, Lady Pitcalnie, third wife of Alexander Ross of Pitcalnie. In 1773, well before the "Black Year" she wrote to John Mackenzie, Dunskaithness "anent the peoples going to America," expressing her wish that her tenants should be given what food they needed in the hope that they would "continue as they are and give over thoughts of going to America at least for some time till they can know more about it." (5)

The prospect of famine was very frightening and in a prolonged drought in the summer of 1775 the congregation of the Associate Church were ordered to spend part of a Monday doing as little work as possible and in prayer and supplication for rain due to "the present dismal aspect of Providence with respect to the weather, particularly the long continuance of the drought and the withering winds that have been of late, whereby the corns in many places are much hurt." (6) Such is the background to farming in Nigg.

Oxen and cattle Place names are not usually given without a good reason and twice there are early references to places associated with cattle. The “burn of the little ox” (Allt an damhain or Altandown) flows from the Hill of Nigg into the gully just west of Caan ruidh and between Broomtown and Balintore there lies the “pass of the kine” (Dorus na(m) ba). (1)

By the end of the 18th century, farmers kept a great stock of black cattle for work and these oxen occur frequently in a variety of references. (7) The inventory of Alexander Ross Johnstone, Easter Rarichie, said that in 1606 he had “oxin great and small” in addition to “twa ky.” (2-M.425) A reference in the minutes of the Old Parish Church speaks of a man putting an ox in a plough in 1706; in 1727 Widow Denoon at Rarichie had 15 labouring oxen and 20 head of cattle (2-M.349); in 1738 David Ross of Kindeace (Bayfield) had 30 oxen compared with 13 horses (2-M.356), a number which seventeen years later went down to 14 labouring oxen valued at £252 Scots, compared with only 7 horses.

As to cattle themselves, Widow Denoon had furthermore 5 milk and 3 yell cows; in 1738 Kindeace had 3 milk cows and 3 stots, while in 1755 there were there “2 cows, 2 two-year old she-cattle and a shagy bull (sic).” (2-M.394) In 1806, John Ross, Castlecraig, wintered 222 head of cattle (2-M.741) although it is not clear where this was done.

Labouring animals, horses as well as oxen, were sent in the summer to graze on hill land – the Highlands – leaving unfenced crops safe from their depredations, returning in time for the harvest work. (7) This sheiling system, whereby crops and grass were conserved at home in summer by sending animals away to hill pastures, is referred to in the inventory of Widow Denoon whose labouring oxen in summer were “at the high lands at grass.”

Although some of this pasture was grass let out for cattle-grazing on the Hill of Nigg (7), most was outside the parish and by the end of the 18th century fears began that this summer pasture would not be available for much longer due to the development of sheep farms on these lands, and that people might have to alter their method of keeping a large number of black cattle for work, though enclosures were one answer. (7)

Nevertheless, the sheiling system continued into the early years of the 19th century. An account of farming in Easter Ross in 1810 described how “for the most part the horses and cattle employed in the labour of the farms are sent as soon as seed time is over, to graze in summer on some hill pasture, for which 5 or 6 shillings are paid.” (8)

Herds went with these animals to watch over them while they were away – and sometimes they got into trouble as the Nigg Kirk Session minutes show. In 1730 some of them found themselves in front of the Session for “beating and swearing at other herds who kept cattle with them.” Cattle were summered as far afield as Struie in the parish of Edderton and there is a mention of “herds who kept cattle with others at Kildmorie,” a place which is certainly not in Nigg.

At the beginning of the 19th century, these black cattle were one of the chief exports of Easter Ross (8) and by the middle of the century the introduction of steam power enabled graziers to ship cattle to London markets, thereby raising the local price of meat from about 3d per lb to 4d to 6d per lb. (9)

Yet the difficulties foreseen in the Statistical Account for Nigg over the lack of summer pasture appear to have come true, and by 1841 little attention was being given in the parish to the production of black cattle or of fat cattle. At the end of harvest, however, farmers had begun to buy in young Highland stock to eat the straw in winter and spring, selling them in summer “if they could get good enough prices.” (10)

Dairy produce was mainly for subsistence and is not mentioned at all in the Statistical Account, although as already said, seventy years earlier Widow Denoon had kept 5 milk cows. By 1841 there were still no great milkers to be found. Farms and such crofts as had land to keep a cow supplied themselves and those around them with them; fisher folk sometimes bartered fish for milk; and servants were glad of it if their mistress gave them some whey. (6) Dairy prices in 1841 were:-

| | |
|--------------|--------------------|
| Fresh butter | 9d per pound |
| Cheese | 6/- per stone |
| Warm milk | 3d per Scotch pint |

Butter

Was made regularly on farms for home use, and possibly a little for local sale, well into the 1940's.

Horses

In 1606 Alexander Ross Johnstone had "4 hors" while in 1738 Kindeace had 13 horses and in 1755, 7 horses, in both cases about half the number of oxen. Clearly, oxen were at that time the most numerous working beast, yet the fact that horses accounted for only half the number of oxen perhaps indicates that they were more effective. By the end of the 18th century, there were a "great number" of horses but mainly "of a trifling and diminutive kind," which admittedly does not sound as if they were very useful.

The Agricultural Revolution brought changes and by 1841, the NSA was able to say, "The horses are generally of a superior breed and well fed." They justified having a number of blacksmiths at smithys around the parish and were still sufficiently used to justify a smith living and working at Culnaha smithy until 1937, and a visiting smith coming there every week until about 1953. There are now no working horses in Nigg.

Sheep

Have been kept in the parish for many years. In 1606 Alexander Ross Johnstone had "xxxv scheip" at Rarichie, and Widow Denoon in 1727 had 60 there. According to the Nigg Kirk Session minutes, fishermen might keep sheep also and there is a particular reference to one fisherman who had a sheepcote at Dunskaith. On a little hillock there, people remember when a shepherd used to sit watching over his flock (11), this spot being probably chosen because being pastured on shore ground made even diminutive sheep "become fat and fetch a good price." (12)

The number of sheep increased thereafter but by the end of the 18th century it had dropped greatly. Whereas the cattle population was affected by the turning over of Highland grazings to sheep farms, within the parish itself sheep grazing land was being lost to fir plantations – as the Statistical Account put it, "the grounds on which they were pastured being laid under plantations of fir, to the no small loss of the farmers in general, who are by this means deprived of many advantages which they derived from that useful animal, such as the best of manure for their fields, clothing for their households, and some help annually to pay their rents." The Pitcalnie Estate accounts show how often "wedders" were paid as part of rents, and not only was there clothing for the household, but "plaiding for the Lady" also appears as part of the rents.

Even so, it seems likely that it was the Industrial Revolution rather than the lack of sheep that ended local weaving. In any event, the NSA says that by 1841 clothing was usually bought in shops and the old weavers had given up, and sheep are dismissed thus, "There are few sheep in the parish and these consist of Southdown, Cheviot and the small country kind." Nevertheless, some sixty years later, one of the finest flocks of grey-faced sheep possible belonged to Robert Adam on the Hill of Nigg. (13)

Pigs

Have been reared for long in Nigg, so much so that a well by the shore to the west of Shandwick is called Tobar na' muc, Pigs' well. (1) Swine feature in the Pitcalnie Estate rents and in the years before 1841, fisherfolk in the parish had been encouraged to grow potatoes specifically for fattening pigs for market, but when prices dropped this trade fell off. But even when it was economic to rear pigs on potatoes, the fishers on the Seaboard particularly, liked to have a pig to fatten, usually sold to local butchers for killing or for re-sale to the south via Invergordon's harbour. The problems of villages pig-keeping are implied in this condition in the Shandwick Estate Feu of 1841, "Should any Pigs or Swine be kept on the subject of this Sett they must be confined and not suffered to go at large through the village."

At the Nigg Ferry end of the parish, crofter-fishermen also kept pigs, and some of those at Balnapaling were most kindly treated by a neighbour who always took any Sunday left-overs to them, served like two courses on two plates. (11)

Goats

Are another animal that appear in place names, with a path near Old Shandwick named Spardan nan gobhar, goat's roost. (1) Kids were among the items supplied by the parish for troopers at Balnagown about 1649 (2-M.566) and up until the later years of the 18th century, goats were kept on the face of the hill overlooking the Moray Firth, feeding on the grass and heaths there which were so full of medicinal herbs that their milk was remarkable for restoring health. (7) It appears that by 1841 these goats had gone wild and were living in the Castle Craig rocks;

they were described then as “Upwards of 100 goats ... which no other quadruped can approach.” (10) Some were still there about 1910 though in nothing like such numbers, and they very quickly became extinct thereafter, and there are no goats, wild or domesticated, kept now.

Poultry

Here again a place name can be used to indicate early presence near Old Shandwick where there used to be Crot Kerk, Hens' Croft. (1) In 1606 Alexander Ross Johnstone had 13 geese; the parish gave capons, hens and eggs as part of their share for supplying troopers at Balnagown in 1649, and both hens and eggs appear in Pitcalnie Estate rents of 1785. One man's rent included 21 hens, another's 10, and yet another's 8; and 40, 100 and 120 eggs are also listed. Poultry do not appear to have been raised on any large scale, yet they contributed to rents and had a small but useful part to play in domestic economy.

Pigeons

There are no large doocots such as are found in other parts of the country, but there are small pigeon lofts in pediments over pends at both Nigg and Pitcalzean farm steadings (14) and a smaller one in the gable of the Pitcalzean House coach house.

Rabbits

Are not mentioned in either of the Statistical Accounts as being the scourge they later became in areas near cliffs or sand dunes. They were a useful source of food and there were great scenes at harvest time when the rabbits, which had moved inwards as fields were cut, finally had to flee from the cover of standing grain. Many a good meal followed.

While not officially reared, the time came when farmers, perhaps in self-defence, began to regard rabbits as a crop and let their land to trappers who killed them for sale to the English Midlands. This system may well have encouraged their healthy breeding as it was not unknown for a trapper, hoping to rent the land for some time, to introduce a healthy buck rabbit or two to improve the stock. In some cases, farmers employed the trapper and sold the rabbits themselves.

Bees

Never played a large part in the farming economy but nevertheless 3 pints of honey appear in the rent of a man called Francis Henry, a tenant of Pitcalnie Estate, in 1785.

Hides

One of the by-products of home-killed animals was hides. In 1553, Alexander Ross of Balnagown arranged that part of his payment to Jhone Ross of Dunskaith for a shipload of goods should be in “hyds.” Tanning itself became an important matter when taxes were imposed on it, and it was in this connection that in 1622 various gentlemen including David Ross of Pitcalnie, William Ross of Annatt, Andro Munro of Culnald and others, met with Lord Erskine's Commissioners to discuss the subject. As a result of the new tax, these men agreed that they, their tenants and servants, in the area from Alness to around Tain, should bring all their hides to the tannery in Tain to be tanned, barked, dried and stamped. For their part, the tanners promised to receive the skins, to bark, tan and dry them within twenty weeks and return them to their owners. (2-M.496)

Rotations

By the middle of the 18th century, turnips began to be grown as a field crop and thereafter crop rotations began. One writer stated in 1810 that the ordinary rotation practised “for centuries” was bear followed by two crops of oats, or sometimes pease, and always a quantity of potatoes. (8) As potatoes only came into general use after 1750 it is impossible that this system had operated for centuries, but it may be taken as a guide for the system once rotations began to be practised.

The Statistical Account makes no mention of rotations but the New Statistical Account says that by 1841 a four-shift or even a three-shift system was common, but it was not long before the seven-year shift became normal. At Ankerville, for instance, the rotations for four fields between 1881-1887 were:-

| | | | |
|------------|---------------------|------------|----------------------------|
| White crop | White crop | White crop | Grass |
| Grass | Green crop | Green crop | White crop |
| Oats | Barley | Wheat | Green – turnip or potatoes |
| Turnips | Grass | Grass | Barley |
| Barley | Oats | Oats | Grass |
| Grass | Turnip and potatoes | Turnips | Oats |
| Oats | Wheat | Barley | Fallow (15) |

Fertilizers

Although hard work was involved, fertilizers were reasonably easy to come by in Nigg, which was more fortunate in this respect than many other parishes.

Dung was highly regarded and jealously husbanded, with cottars keeping their precious supply close by their homes for safety, so as to have it ready for their potato crop. Even during the cholera outbreak of 1832, people at the Whins of Nigg showed the greatest reluctance to remove dung hills from their doors to a safe distance, a reflection of how valuable it was to them.

Sheep manure was also well thought of, as the Statistical Account makes clear, referring to its loss when tree planting reduced sheep stocks. Well into living memory, people at Nigg Ferry made sheep's turdies into a liquid manure by adding water. (11) They also collect pigeon manure from the caves, it and hens' manure being considered good for fruit bushes, although for use on potato ground the mixture needed the addition of something like seaware. (11)

By 1841, a good deal of lime was being used. (10) It was readily available as shell marl in the Sands of Nigg from where it was collected by boats that sailed out at high tide, anchored and waited until the falling tide left them dry on the Sands. They then dug as much as the boat would safely carry home. This marl, like fine sand, was put on heavy land to break it up (16), and was also a valuable source of lime in an area without limestone.

There is no record of fish guts being used as manure in Nigg although they were used in this way elsewhere in Easter Ross. What the sea did provide was a liberal supply of seaware, used for a long time as a manure for potato ground.

In Shandwick, some village families are said to have had their own strip on the shore for gathering seaware, but certainly by 1841 the villagers were not allowed to take drifted ware from the Bay. This was the exclusive right of the Shandwick Estate's farm tenants and it was only if small quantities came in that the villagers were permitted to collect it into heaps not less than 100 yards above high water, for use themselves or for sale. (17) They could however cut it from the rocks if they wished, just as the folk near Nigg Ferry did. The collection of seaware began in February when the women set off early in the morning to cut it below Dunskaith Castle, ready for their menfolk to come along later and carry it home by boat. It was carried ashore by creel or by barrow and allowed to stand for about three months to dry and let the salt out before being dug into the ground ready for the potato crop. (11) Many of the fisherfolk used it so liberally that the farmers from whom they had rented potato land had splendid crops in those fields the following year.

By the end of the 18th century, bone manure was being used for turnip ground (7) but its source is uncertain, although it perhaps came from a bone meal factory in Invergordon.

Before going on to farm crops, kelp should be briefly mentioned although it does not come into the same category. It was made in very small quantities in Nigg – several proprietors were given the rights of making it in 1770 and the Cromarty merchant, William Forsyth, sought from Lady Pitcalnie the rights of making it on her shores. Where it affected agriculture was by taking men from the land, leaving more work for the women to do on the croft and the farm.

Flax

Is not mentioned in either of the Statistical Accounts but nevertheless it was being grown in the parish in the earlier 1700's, and even at the end of that century there was still one flax dresser in Nigg. (7)

A general effort had been made in the Easter Ross area about 1736 to encourage flax-growing as a part of agriculture and to further the idea, Tain Town Council engaged an experienced weaver “to carry on the weaving of plain linen after the Dutch method for four years at least” and to train a journeyman weaver in each of these years. (2-M.1208)

Tobar nam puill linn, the well of the lint pools, above Wester Rarichie, was clearly a place where flax was steeped; and another place name, Balintore, occurring near Culnald in the 1783 Pooors’ List, may also indicate flax growing. A letter of the Rosses of Pitcalnie which is now in Tain Museum shows that flax was grown in the Carse of Bayfield in the 1700’s, and some of the weavers in the parish, of whom there were fair numbers, worked with linen, although many were occupied with woollens or worked for the hemp manufactory at Cromarty.

A heavy linen cloth with lead weights sown into the corners was found about 1973 in the loft of Nigg Old Church and it is thought to have been for covering the elements at outdoor Communions. It is now in Tain Museum and may well be an example of local weaving of locally-grown flax..

Turnips as already said, were being gradually introduced as a field crop in the mid-1700’s, but they are not mentioned in the parish in the Statistical Account, although by the time of the New Statistical Account in 1841 all kinds, including Swedish, were common.

Grass

Enclosures of grass had begun by 1794 according to a case which came before the Associate Church Session that year, and gradually husbandry of this important crop improved. Hay was not mentioned at that date, although some twenty years later, due to lack of markets, Easter Ross as a whole was said to be laying down land with mixtures of red and white clover, rye and rib grass, suitable for grazing and hay making. (8) Things must have changed in the next thirty years or so as the New Statistical Account for Nigg says that there was no market for hay, one of the reasons for the land not being allowed to lie long enough under lea. Nevertheless, at that date, the value of cultivated hay in the parish was put at £1250 out of a total of £16380.

Potatoes

Were becoming common in Scotland after 1750 and had become a “usual crop” in Nigg by the 1790’s. (7) They were planted from mid-April to mid-May; in June they were “cabbed” and two or three weeks later, weeded. Then they were hoed twice, and lifting began in October. They were carried home in creels, panniers or carts. Some of the varieties grown were Champions, Maincrops, Langworthys, British Queens, Fortyfolds and Blacksmiths. (19) People still remember the days when many farm carts went to collect “grassy ware” below Balnabruach to cover potato pits to keep out the frost, although in some cases bracken was thought sufficient protection.

With fishing such a fickle occupation, the potato was a godsend to fisher folk, and when the fish “left the coast” about 1778 they kept themselves and their families chiefly by growing potatoes (7) on which they could exist for nine months of the year. Fishing revived, only to fail again before 1841, so it is no wonder that “multitudes of fishers and others” were busily occupied in growing potatoes in order that they might eat. (10)

The fisher folk rented rigs of ploughed land from nearby farms. A rig was about 11 feet wide and ran the length of the field, possibly 100-120 yards. The rent varied from 7/- to £1 per rig, equivalent to £3-4 per acre. (10) Both farming and fishing communities relied heavily on the potato which assumed such an important role in the diet of the people that disaster was inevitable, and it came in the form of the potato famine of 1846-7, and its good nature was never again taken for granted as it had been. (23)

The importance of potatoes in the scheme of things is made plain in school log books. Practically no children attended school during planting or lifting time – their help was essential to parents growing potatoes for their own consumption, and also to farmers growing for sale. Headmasters were philosophical about non-attendance, realizing that if the children were to eat, they must also plant and lift the crop. The tattie holidays, official or not, were keenly looked forward to and the money earned lifting for farmers bought the children’s winter boots which had to see them through the cold weather until they could go barefoot again in summer.

Bear

Was an early form of four-rowed barley commonly grown in earlier times. In the 16th and 17th centuries it was far and away the chief grain crop in this area – “the victual” – as it ripened early and was best suited to the simple farming of the times. In this district at one time the quantity of bear required to sow an area was practically the only land measure (2-M.407); in 1612 an area was designated as “twenti bolls bear sowing” near Shandwick. (2-M.922) Bear was used as food for humans and animals as well as for brewing and it is frequently mentioned in Kirk Session records as, for instance, when John Forrester of Dunskeath mortified five bolls of it for the poor of the parish in 1706; in 1707 there is a reference to animals “betwixt the bere feed and the oat feed,” while the following year a woman was in trouble with the Session for carrying a peck of bere from Easter Rarichie to Shandwick on the Sabbath to make ale. What was grown in the parish and at Rarichie in particular, must have been of good quality as in 1751 Lord Ross of Balnagown wrote, “I shall be glad to get a boll of Rarichie bier for a tryall heir.” (2-M.444) Bear is not mentioned in either of the Statistical Accounts as its use in the area gradually died out.

Barley

Was another usual crop at the time of the Statistical Account, planted during April and harvested between 20th August and mid-November. Its initial growth was slow at that time due, oddly enough, to the strength of the soil and, more understandably, to any northerly exposure, but as the sun grew stronger, it grew fast and well. (7) Harvest could be even earlier than the dates already given: by 4th August, 1881, grain of some sort was being cut in the parish. Nigg School log book records on that day, “Shearing commenced last Wednesday on Pitcalnie Farm, the earliest cutting in the parish.”

By the middle of the 19th century the parish had been noted for the excellence and quality of its barley, but in saying this the New Statistical Account implies that at that date it was no longer so. It had been quite common for it to weigh 56 lbs the bushel (? Very wet) and, when distilled, to give 3 Scots gallons (24 English pints) of good whisky per boll. Perhaps it was the clamp-down on illicit distilling and the activities of the guagers that had something to do with the reduction in barley growing by the time this Account was written. It is certainly said that farmers felt the pinch when smugglers were restrained. But in 1841 Chevalier barley had just been introduced and promised to become a staple article of produce and certainly barley continued to be a principal crop in the parish, as it still is.

Wheat

Had been tried in Nigg before the end of the 18th century but was not considered worthwhile. Although it had been fairly successful, it was found that spring sowing was too late to allow it to ripen properly and this, along with the lack of enclosures, made farmers give it up. Another factor was that though a little more profitable than barley, it was found to be very scourging to the land. (7) But things changed and by 1810 wheat was a “chief export” from Easter Ross as a whole, and Murray of Westfield was growing it at Pitcalzean in 1831 and offending local people by closing their public track through his wheat fields.

By the middle of the 19th century, wheat was the mainstay of farmers in Nigg its quality as excellent as its quantity was great. Unfortunately, because there was little demand then for other farm produce and yet rent money had to be found, wheat was greatly over-produced to try and make up value, and so the price fell. (10) Similar ups and downs have continued but wheat in limited amounts continues to be grown.

Oats

Were a “usual crop” at the end of the 10th century but had been grown in the parish long before that, and oatmeal appears frequently in Kirk Session records of distributions to the poor, as part of the school master’s salary, and so on.

By the middle of the 19th century, both Angus and potato oats had been tried and Hopetoun oats were coming into fashion. With oatmeal such a vital part of the diet, a considerable amount of oats was grown, even on top of Nigg Hill, and a man now eighty years old remembers seeing oats being carted from Caanruidh – where the Picts so many years before had made scratches to sow seed in. (13)

Rye

Was another “usual crop” in the late 1700’s (7) but is not mentioned later. The last know crop – and it was regarded then as being unusual – was in the Rock Field at Castle Craig in the 1939-45 War.

Pease

Is included with grain crops as it was ground at the mill and along with beans, regarded as a bread crop, usually mixed with bearmeal. Session records show that it was grown for a considerable time and was still a common crop at the end of the 18th century, although there is no mention of it in the New Statistical Account. So far as is known, no one grew it again after the fate of one crop of "peachacks" in a gale in the 1860's. They were growing on the slope above Dunskaith Castle and had been cut and safely stoked, only to be blown clean away by a great wind.

Beans

Were said to be a "grain" commonly grown in Easter Ross by 1810 (8) and on a farm adjacent to the parish of Nigg (Arabella), twelve women hoed beans every day for seventeen days in 1833 (21) which represents a great amount of them. In Nigg itself a few years later it appears that "beans were much attended to by high and low." (10)

Grain was such a precious commodity that Kirk Session records have various references to the troubles that arose then "horses trespass on corns." Other grievances to do with grain might arise at a later stage of proceedings, as this one in 1774: Cleaned barley had been riddled, half through a narrow and half through a wide riddle, but when it was shared out, one woman thought that she had not been given her fair share from each riddling "and there was strife betwixt the families for a long time." (6)

The cutting of the grain at harvest time was called shearing, and was so often done by hired men that conditions applying to both man and master were laid down by the Justices of Ross in 1665. Every shearer completing the task from start to finish was to receive a boll of victuall, and every woman 3 firloths, "and whoso refuses or craves more to be imprisoned." In order that employers would not be tempted to poach the labourers of others, it was stated that "no persone is to give or promise more yn is above set doune under the paine of 12 libs Scots qrop the half to the discoverer."

(2-M.215)

An elderly man in the parish tells of how his great-aunt used to cut grain with a heuk (sickle), working on her knees, reputedly from 4-10 am and from 4-8 pm to avoid the heat of the sun. These unlikely hours were surely in a heatwave, as the heat of the sun is seldom so severe and, in any normal harvest, dew would be on the crops at 4 am. (22)

Although scythes were generally common in the 1800's, it is said that they were only introduced to the parish between 1860-70 (22). Progress continued and by 1892 the "burr of the reaper" could be heard on Pitcalnie Farm, and the school log book at Nigg recorded the fact. By 1910, Danny Adams had a binder at Balaphuile, such a good one that he was still using it forty years later.

The NSA for the Easter Ross parish of Tarbat says, "The corn stacks were generally three in number; one for the laird, one for seed and sale, and one for the family use ... In the case of the larger farms a stack sometimes consisted of as many as sixty bolls of bear, with twenty of pease on the top and was never thatched – the pease being considered sufficient protection for all injury." The fact that the Associate Church Session minutes mention pease being brought in from a corn yard in 1773 seems to indicate that in Nigg as well, pease was stored in the form of thatch for a corn stack.

Stackyards were enclosed and contained a number of circular bases made of large field stones, on which bracken was often placed before the sheaves were stacked upon them.

It was at this point that the proofman might come into his own, Proofmen were chosen by the community to do a variety of responsible tasks, including valuing unthreshed corn for sale. They were in fact arbiters, and assessing the contents of a stack was done by taking one sheaf out of perhaps twenty-four, having it threshed by flailers after which the proofman winnowed it and measured the quantity and from this calculated the value of the whole stack.

Donald Roy, the Seer of Nigg, was a proofman in addition to all his other activities in the parish in the 18th century. Notes from the Pitcalnie Estate papers say,

“1731. Pitcalnie, November the thirteenth. That day proofed in the Barn of Wester Pitcalnie one stack of oats.” The detail with which this proofing was done on the Pitcalnie Estate appears in proofing of stacks at Arbol, one of the properties they owned in the parish of Tarbat:-

| | | Bolls | Firlots | Pecks | Lippies |
|-------------------|-------------|-------|---------|-------|---------|
| First bear stack | 64 sheaves | 10 | 3 | - | - |
| Second bear stack | 128 sheaves | 20 | 1 | - | - |
| Third bear stack | 155 sheaves | 24 | 3 | - | - |
| Fourth bear stack | 181 sheaves | 29 | - | - | - |

After all was safely gathered in, the next stage was threshing, which is mentioned later, drying and grinding. When only small amounts of grain were needed, as for home use, a simple method combining drying and threshing might be used, called graddaning. A bunch of unthreshed grain was held by hand and the ears set alight. At the right moment, the fire was beaten out and the hot grain fell out, ready for grinding. The oatmeal made from this scorched or parched grain was known as graddan. (23)

A similar method may have been used for pease – certainly there was a case of Sabbath profanation in 1773 involving burning a small quantity of pease which had been brought in for the stack yard. (6) Another possible reference seems to appear in the place name, Culderare, which has to do with the process of parching corn. (1)

Winnowing followed drying, a process usually done by women, and Pitcalnie Estate’s accounts refer to payments made to “winnowing wives.”

For larger quantities, kilns were used for drying. Unthreshed corn was supported above a smouldering fire and, when dried, was ground by hand in a quern. Such querns were introduced into Britain about 100 BC and were used comparatively recently in the Highlands – when Robert Adams left the Hill of Nigg for Balaphuile at the end of the 19th century, he took with him the quern which had been used there for grinding barley. (24) Another form of grinding by hand was the knocking-stone, and this was yet another thing that Widow Denoon at Rarichie possessed.

While farms came to be thirled to estate mills with kilns attached, it does not seem that crofts were, and it was common to find here and there kilns for croft use. In 1634 there was one at Culnald (1); and one is mentioned at Cullisse in 1706. (25) The menfolk usually stayed close at hand during the drying process in case of fire, which was not at all unusual, but there were other hazards as well in communal drying – in 1783 a man admitted slandering another by alleging that he had “embezzled” grain drying on a kiln. (6)

Grinding grain by hand was slow and hard work and in order to save this unnecessary labour, lairds began to build mills for their tenants. Understandably perhaps, but also unfortunately, they compelled their people to use their mills for all their grain, except that for rent, teinds, seed and animal food. This compulsion was to justify the building and upkeep of the mill, but it very quickly became a great burden for those obliged to use it. The practice was called thirlage and certain duties were laid down which the tenants had to pay for milling to be done. There was considerable profit so that the millers who received this payment offered high rents for the lease of a mill. The higher the “multures,” as the dues were called, the higher the rent the laird got, and in Ross-shire it was usual to pay an eighth part as “multures” although elsewhere it was usually only an eleventh.

The Statistical Account in Nigg refers to this: “One great disadvantage which the farmer in this place labours under is the high multure which he pays to the mills. If he send eight bolls of corn to the mill, he must leave one of them for mill dues.” Another problem was lack of water and, according to the New Statistical Account, mills seldom had “water in summer or harvest and multure payable is so high that they are avoided as much as possible by those who are not thirled to them.”

In addition to paying multures, thirled tenants had to perform various services to keep the mill and its dam and lades in good order. The earliest mention of a mill in Nigg so far found is the “myllne of Culless” in 1563 (2-M.135), and here in 1678 repairs involved twenty days’ work for forty men and forty horses. Even if a mill was out of action because of drought or any other cause, those thirled to it usually still had to pay its dues even if they went to another mill. (23) When the mill at Cullisse was being repaired in 1678, they presumably still rendered their dues

to it even though they “were necessitat to go to oyr milns ... wt all the toyll and trouble ... of going over the sands to the milns of Morvie and Milntown. (2-M.420) Although there has been a water driven mill in the Cullisse area for very many years, perhaps it was trouble over water that caused the building of a windmill there by 1736. (25)

Mill stones may have come from several sources but the Division of the Commonty included rights for several proprietors in 1770 that “they shall severally have and retain the privilege of winning and carrying away Millstones for the use of their respective milns only out of the Millstone quarry at Portintruy in all time coming.” As Portintruy, or Port an Righ, lies at the foot of the cliffs not far from Shandwick, with difficult access, it was almost certainly easier to “win” than to “carry away” the stones.

Near Ankerville by 1664 there was the Mill of Morvich, almost certainly the Hill of Morvie, mentioned above, and to it a large number of places in the parish were thirled. In that year, Sir George Mackenzie of Tarbat lodged a complaint, saying that he owned this mill with “indoubtit right of the particular thirlage ... and speciale in the lands of Pitcalnie, Culdene, Cunahall, Culnald, Pitkyllian, Nigg, Annat, Sandwick ...” but that two men named Malcolm Ross and David McCulloch had built a new mill on the commontie “beyond all rule of law,” and it appeared that people from Pitcalnie and elsewhere had begun to “withdraw to the new Miln.” (2-M.888) This shows the extensive area thirled, how jealously the proprietor held on to his mill rights and how readily those thirled went elsewhere.

A map of Ankerville in 1759 (26) shows a mill and mill dam on the flat land below the present farm house – there had been a kiln there in 1706 (25) – and it seems very probable that this was the Mill of Morvich or Morvie, especially as the adjacent Carse of Bayfield was formerly called Mor’oich Cinndeis or just simply a Mhor’oich, while Morvie Water was part of Ankerville.

Although Pitcalzean was one of the places thirled to the Mill of Morvie in 1664, it appears that it had its own mill by 1732 (25), which was still working in 1779, when Mrs Fraser of Pitcalzean brought an action for multures against Hugh Ross of Aitnoch, claiming a “muttie to the boll,” an action resisted on the grounds that the mill often lacked water and could not grind. (2-M.423) Nothing remains of this mill.

In 1826, Macleod of Cadboll was proprietor of the Milns of Kindeace (Bayfield) and Pitcalnie, the latter also presumably a meal mill. It may have been one of the three meal mills working in the parish in 1841 (10) although the site of this mill is not known now. It could have been the one built in 1664 upon the commontie to the affront of Sir George Mackenzie, and certainly at Strath of Pitcalnie there is a mill lade loading water from the hill into a small mill dam at the farm. This would certainly tie in with the commonty, although it would have placed all three mills very close to one another, but certainly at Pitcalnie farm itself there is nothing in 1872 maps to show any evidence of a mill there.

The second of the three 1841 meal mills was at Balaphuile and may have a very long history. Balaphuile lies between Cullisse and Wester Rarichie and several references to mills are thought to apply to it, even if other names are used. There is a reference to a mill in 1583 in this area when “700 merks ... dewtie of Easter and Wester Rarichies, tolly and myln thairof” were paid out. (2-M.1007) Wester Rarichie was given in 1895 as the address of the Balaphuile Mill (27), and the name Balaphuile comes from Bail’a’phuile, Pool town, and applies to Lower Rarichie (1) so all in all, it seems more than likely that the Rarichie mill of 1583 was the one which later came to be called Balaphuile and continued in use till the 1890’s. Whether it had any association with Achrailean Mill (Muileann Ach-railean) which was sited somewhere near Cullisse at an unspecified date is another matter. (1)

Maps of 1872 show that the water supply for this mill came from a stream on the hill, leading straight into the Balaphuile mill dam – now a mass of wild flowers – and from there sluices released it for the corn mill. From there the water flowed on to the mill dam at Cullisse for them – no longer a meal mill – and went from there to the Fearn mill lade and thence to the Pot.

The Miln of Kindeace (Bayfield) was certainly established by 1732 (25) and thereafter appears in various church records. Its water supply came from Bayfield Loch, running first of all to the Culnaha mill dam and thence to the Bayfield mill dam which lay some little distance behind the old coach house. It ran by mill lade from there to the steading, and underneath it to the corn mill which had a very good fall, tucked in as it was below the raised beach. Culnaha’s mill dam was there by 1841 (9) and it was usual for them to notify Bayfield when they were threshing so that they could prepare for a flow of water.

The last miller in the parish was John Munro at Bayfield Mill. His son still lives in Nigg and speaks of farm carts off-loading half their burden on to a platform at the foot of the raised beach so that they could get up the very steep slope to the mill. Grain was dried before milling on a kiln, laid on square sheets of perforated metal above a fire of grain husks. These husks were the shells of the grain obtained in the first process of milling, when a light stone was used for shelling. Although this mill would have ground barley meal in earlier days, latterly it was producing only oatmeal.

By 1912 the mill needed repairs but Mr Humphrey, the proprietor, was not prepared to undertake the work and that was the end of milling in Nigg. The miller and his family moved for a time to a flat-roofed house below the mill, a little house which was demolished in the 1950's.

During the later life of the mill, John Munro had bought in supplies from Milton Mill in Logie Easter for resale. In 1897 he took 6 bolls of flour @ 29/3, as well as other varieties – 3 bolls Arminta @ 33/6, 4 bolls Murdoch @ 31/6, 3 bolls Emerald @ 25/6 – all at a commission of 3d per boll. (28)

Even before the mill closed in 1912, a few people in the parish patronised Milton Mill and some not only bought from it, but took grain to be milled there, at a charge in 1906 of 1/- per quarter. (28)

Threshing of course, preceded milling. For many years, the flail was used for this, and on small farms it continued to be so used until about 1900. Along with his quern Robert Adam took his flail with him from the Hill to Balaphuile, and one from Cullisse is now in Tain Museum.

Water-driven threshing mills became common on large farms between 1800-50, and by 1841 there were four of these in the parish, at Bayfield, Cullisse, Nigg and Pitcalnie. This Pitcalnie is perhaps Strath of Pitcalnie, as there is no evidence of a mill dam at Nigg Farm, unless the mill lay near the raised beach and was supplied by a dam which lay in, and gave its name to, the Dam Field. This dam served a mill at Mullineoin, now called Brae Cottage. (22) Maps of 1872 show a dam at the foot of the raised beach here, in front of Seaside Cottage, but it is hard to see how a mill could have been sited just there. As Culnaha is known to have had a mill dam in 1841, it is strange that it was not listed thus, unless the NSA which mentioned the four mills was written very shortly pre-building of the one at Culnaha.

Old Shandwick is not listed as having a water-driven mill of any sort yet in 1808 there was an "old mill dam" near the Shandwick Stone. Perhaps it did not prove satisfactory as maps of 1872 show that there was by then a horse mill at the farm steading; there was another at Broomtown, where a very small indication of it still remains. (29)

Horse mills were commonly used for threshing where there was insufficient water or the land was too flat to give sufficient fall to such water as was available. Few crofts could spare land for a dam, though a horse mill might mean keeping an extra horse or two. In some cases, horse mills were used for grinding and it seems that Robert Adams had one such on the Hill, for when he came to Balaphuile, he took the millstones that had been turned by a horse.

By 1895, John Mackenzie, Ashcroft, started a threshing mill business in a yard at Ankerville corner, just opposite the storehouse. The arrival on a farm of the traction engine pulling the mill was an awe-inspiring sight and a day of bustling activity with extra hands fed in the farm kitchen and a great killing of rats as the speedy threshing gave them little time to make a more leisurely escape. Normally almost the whole stackyard was threshed when a visiting mill came in and the grain was stored in heaps on the granary floor, turned as necessary.

Straw was originally desperately needed for feeding such stock as were kept through the winter, but as farming methods improved and more straw was available, it could be used to feed bought-in animals for sale in spring and summer. It was also of use for covering potato pits, wheat being preferred; when chopped it was an ingredient for clay and mott in buildings; and very importantly, it was a basic requirement for making dung.

The effects of the Agricultural Revolution appear in the gross amount of raw produce in Nigg in the middle of the last century:-

| | |
|-----------------------|--------|
| Grain | £10800 |
| Potatoes and turnips | 2240 |
| Cultivated hay | 1250 |
| Grazing cattle, sheep | 850 |

With the addition of gardens and woods, and of fisheries, the total came to £16380, a surprisingly high figure.

After the 1939-45 War, agricultural production came on by leaps and bounds. Thanks to the myxomatosis outbreak of 1954, rabbits were virtually eliminated and local farmers, led by R H S Gordon, formed the Nigg Rabbit Clearance Society to employ a trapper and police the whole parish to ensure that no rabbits returned. This was the first such society in Great Britain. Selling of rabbits was forbidden lest there should be any tendency to breed them. There is an argument here, of course, as to which is the best source of food —grain saved from the rabbits; or the rabbits themselves.

To start with, each member of this Society paid a levy of 1/3d per acre which covered running costs, and all went well. Later on they joined with other societies and received grant aid from the Government which was not really a good thing as the spirit of self help was lost and trapping areas became greener, and rabbits multiplied greatly in the year or two up to and including 1975, when myxomatosis once again attacked them.

After the myxomatosis outbreak of 1954, it became practical to reclaim land previously too heavily eaten by rabbits and considerable area on the Hill were brought back into production of good grass. In some places, this involved hauling out trunks of old fir plantations, and on Castlecraig the loch was drained which greatly dried up the boggy land lying between it and the sea. In a few years, much of the hill land was useful once more, with silage being grown there and fed to out-wintered cattle.

The figures for 1938 and 1965 show the difference in production, largely due to reclamation:-

| | 1938 | 1965 |
|---------------------|------------|------------|
| Wheat | 116 acres | 227 acres |
| Barley | 271 acres | 1071 acres |
| Oats | 855 acres | 215 acres |
| Potatoes | 257 acres | 195 acres |
| Turnips and swedes | 486 acres | 255 acres |
| Grass for mowing | 459 acres | 572 acres |
| Land not for mowing | 1676 acres | 2335 acres |
| Rough grazing | 2976 acres | 1936 acres |
| Woodland | ? | 100 acres |

| Labour | | |
|----------------------------|----|----|
| Men over 21 | 68 | 56 |
| Men under 21 | 12 | 5 |
| Women and girls | 7 | 2 |
| Casual and part time men | 7 | 3 |
| Casual and part time women | 3 | 3 |

| Stock | | |
|-----------------------|----|-----|
| Dairy cows in milk | 46 | 179 |
| Dairy cows in calf | 8 | 6 |
| Dairy heifers in calf | 5 | 68 |
| Total dairy cattle | 87 | 258 |

| | | |
|---------------------|-----|-------------|
| Beef cows in milk | 179 | 364 |
| Beef cows in calf | 45 | 26 |
| Beef heifer in calf | 30 | 26 |
| Bulls | 3 | 18 |
| Total beef cattle | 665 | 1127 approx |

| | | |
|---------------|------|-------|
| Breeding ewes | 2504 | 3512 |
| Rams | 238 | 156 |
| Total sheep | 7092 | 10302 |

| | | |
|------------------------|-----|---|
| Pigs – breeding sows | 38 | - |
| 2 months old and under | ? | 6 |
| Boars | 4 | - |
| Total pigs | 272 | 6 |

| | | |
|---------|------|-----|
| Poultry | 2887 | 884 |
|---------|------|-----|

| | | |
|----------------|-----|---|
| Working horses | 126 | - |
|----------------|-----|---|

In 1967 the production on farms was as follows:-

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Castlecraig | Dairy (Friesian cattle), silage |
| Pitcalzean | Potatoes, commercial cattle, pedigree North Country sheep, Barley, with turnips and hay and silage for home feeding |
| Nigg | Potatoes, barley, South Country Cheviot sheep, half-bred ewes For fat lamb production, commercial cattle, silage |
| Pitcalnie | Pedigree blackfaced and Leicester sheep, barley, silage, milk and eggs |
| Culnaha | Potatoes, wheat, sheep, commercial cattle |
| Bayfield | Pedigree North Country Cheviot sheep, cross cattle, wheat, barley, silage |
| Ankerville | Pedigree Suffolk sheep, fat lambs, cross cattle, barley, wheat |
| Cullisse barley, potatoes | Pedigree Aberdeen Angus cattle, pedigree Suffolk sheep, cross sheep, cross cattle, |
| Wester Rarichie | Cross sheep, fattening cattle, barley |
| Easter Rarichie | Potatoes, wheat, barley, cross sheep, cross cattle, pigs, silage, bulbs |
| Old Shandwick and Broomton | Farmed in association with Cullisse |

At this date, Castlecraig had only recently changed to dairy cattle from a beef herd, and Ankerville had only shortly before given up its dairy of Ayrshire cattle.

The arrival of industry in 1971 and sales of land had an effect on farm population. Both Pitcalnie and Pitcalzean had or have grass parks let in summer, while Pitcalzean which was acquired for industry is let year by year to a farming company who are cropping it severely in the expectation that it will not be in agricultural use much longer.

The 1976 farming picture is as follows:-

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Castlecraig | Dairy, pigs, silage, and rock extraction |
| Pitcalzean | Barley, wheat, potatoes |
| Nigg | North Country Cheviot sheep, suckler herd, barley |
| Pitcalnie | Grass parks, barley |
| Culnaha | Suckler cattle, sheep, barley, hay, turnips |
| Bayfield | Blackfaced and North Country Cheviot sheep, suckler cattle, potatoes, turnips, barley, forestry on hill land |
| Ankerville | Pedigree Suffolk sheep, fat lambs, barley, wheat, potatoes |
| Cullisse | Pedigree Aberdeen Angus cattle, pedigree Suffolk sheep, cross sheep and cross cattle, barley, wheat, potatoes |
| Wester Rarichie | Suckler herd, blackfaced ewes, barley, turnips |
| Easter Rarichie | Barley, wheat, potatoes, suckler herd |
| Old Shandwick And Broomton | Farmed in association with Cullisse |

Virtually no-one now keeps poultry and almost everyone buys their milk in bottles from the Milk Marketing Board depot in Tain which delivers to a central point for each farm. The last milk cart in the parish was one which delivered milk from Old Shandwick farm in the 1930's. With the departure of the Macraes from Pitcalnie in 1974, butter-making became a lost art, yet another country skill falling before the march of progress.

Farming I and II – References:-

- 1 "Place names of Ross and Cromarty," W J Watson
- 2 "Old Ross-shire and Scotland," W MacGill. Numbers given; in the case of M.394, it appears on page 169
- 3 "Church Chronicles of Nigg," Rev J R Martin
- 4 "Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland," Hugh Miller
- 5 "Letters from the Highlands, 1750-90," Rosa Williamson-Ross
- 6 Associate Church Session Minutes
- 7 Statistical Account
- 8 "A General View of the Agnarlare etc of the Counties of Ross and Cromarty," Sir George Stewart Mackenzie
- 9 Sanitary Report, 1841
- 10 New Statistical Account
- 11 Miss Helen Macleod, formerly of Ivy Cottage, Nigg
- 12 Statistical Account for the parish of Tarbat
- 13 Mr Alex Macrae, formerly of Pitcalnie, Nigg
- 14 They are described in "Old Dovecotes of Scotland," p 404, A Niven Robertson
- 15 Map in the possession of the late Hugh Rutherford, Culnaha, Nigg
- 16 Late Alex Mackenzie, Lower Pitcalnie, Nigg
- 17 Shandwick Estate Feu, 1841
- 18 Decreet of the Division of the Commonty of the Hill of Nigg 1770
- 19 "A Backward Glance," Class III (1965), Hilton School
- 20 "Scottish Country Life," Alexander Fenton
- 21 Arabella State of Labour, 1831-2
- 22 Mr Alex Fraser, formerly of Honeysuckle Cottage, Nigg
- 23 "Scottish Farming," J A Symon
- 24 The Misses Adams, Balaphuile, Nigg
- 25 Nigg Old Church Session Minutes
- 26 Plan of part of ye lands of Ankervil and Meikle Allan, 1759
- 27 Baptismal Register of the U P Congregation
- 28 Ledgers of Milton Mill, Kildary
- 29 Plans of the Estate of Balnagown, surveyed by George Brown, 1808
- 30 Valuation Rolls
- 31 Dogs Act records
- 32 "A Small Highland Farm," I F Grant
- 33 Pitmaduthy (Logie Easter) Rent Book
- 34 Pitcalnie Estate papers
- 35 Plan of the Boundaries between Cullis and Meikle Allan, 1761

Farming II

The Hill of Nigg that came to be known as the Bishop's Hunting Forest, was in all probability covered from early days with trees and scrub. People gradually encroached on this land, much of which was common land, and in time, whatever its vegetation had become, it began to be an attractive proposition for tree-planting.

In the 18th century, timber began to assume importance and in 1735 George Ross, Tutor to Charles Ross of Balnagown, instructed "that all woods of all kinds shall be preserved" and ordered all tenants on the estate, which included Easter Rarichie, to collect from the nurseries at Balnagown "twenty young trees of such kinds as shall be given them... to be thereafter duly preserved by them." Along with the trees, the tenants got the liability to pay ten pounds Scots for every tree that died through their fault.

While these trees were supposed to be planted in gardens, it was the thin edge of the wedge and perhaps it was with the prospect of large-scale plantations on the Hill that the common land there was divided among the proprietors between 1763-70.

Waste land originally belonged to no-one but as feudalism developed, so did a new idea about the ownership of waste land. Lairds considered that they owned all land, cultivated or not, and commons were regarded as the undivided property of adjoining landowners, and agreement among them was all that was needed for a division to take place. (23)

The Decree of the Division of the Commonalty of the Hill of Nigg was drawn up in 1770 although the relevant plan is dated 1763. It was then that the basic pattern of the modern farms was established, each having both hill and arable land, Cullisse and Ankerville included, even though they no longer have hill land.

Small farms continued to exist on the Hill, particularly near Bayfield Loch and on the more kindly slopes, but by 1794, sheep had been ousted from some parts to make way for large plantations of thriving firs. There was still some summer grazing for cattle there at that date, and even 100 acres of undivided common in the middle of the 19th century. But in 1841 there were 1000 acres under trees and sawyers and wood merchants began to make their appearance in Kirk Session records. (7 and 10).

It was during the 1914-18 War that a large number of trees on the Hill were cut and sawn up at a sawmill on Pitcalzean, marked well into the 1930's by a large pile of sawdust. People still remember a black wooden hut at Alec's Corner that was a wartime woodman's hut, later used by a rabbit trapper. After the 1939-45 War, more woodcutting was done on Culnaha by men who lived in temporary huts at the "triangle," but a fair-sized wood east of Bayfield Loch was untouched.

Not only was Balnagown encouraging forestry in 1735 but at the same time that estate was promoting enclosures of land, saying, "all good and sufficient tenants who shall inclose and endeavour to improve their possessions shall be continued in their tacks without removeall, but if they fail, any man offering to inclose... shall be preferred." (2-M.1116) This did not mean, of course, that those enclosing and improving would be given leases, nor that they would not have their rents raised.

While farmers in the parish had been able to send their stock away for summer grazing, they knew that their crops at home were safe from them, but by the end of the 18th century these grazings were being given over to sheep, and some fresh approach was needed. The answer was enclosing fields at home, something which had already begun in a small way in the 1790's.

Turnips were another matter, however; to protect them after harvest and the return of stock from the "high lands," it was imperative to enclose land, and this led to the consolidation of farms. By 1800 the large farm system was well begun, but not without bitterness and hardship. "The improvement of the soil was much required at that time, as it still is," said the NSA, "but its improvement may be carried on at an expense of morals and human comfort which no pecuniary advantage can counterbalance. Many families were driven from their homes, a few strangers were introduced in their room, and poverty succeeded in the train of almost all the actors and sufferers in the scene."

By 1810, though large farms in Easter Ross were almost all enclosed, the smaller ones were still almost entirely open field. (8) By the middle of the 19th century, in Nigg itself farms varied from 30-400 acres. There were five farms of 200 acres each and two of 100 acres each, with most of the rest on a smaller scale. One man had three farms, totalling about 1000 acres. (10) This may have been the man who was referred to in a Report of that time which said, "The farms of Wester Rarichie and Cullisse in the parish of Nigg, lately occupied by one person and paying a rent of about £1300, were formerly divided into seventeen farms supporting seventeen families." These small farmers had "lived comfortably and maintained a spirit of independence equal at any rate to that of their more refined and ambitious successors," and moreover, they had educated their children well. Nevertheless, this Report admitted that their successors were far superior in farming science and artificial refinement, and were as good citizens, as kind masters and as skilful as any in Scotland. (9)

In the middle of the 19th century, 2500 acres were being tilled in the parish out of a total of about 7000, but in spite of new ideas, 1000 acres that were capable of production, were lying waste. (10)

There were still a considerable number of crofters, usually tenants at will, paying high rents for about 1-5 acres which was so small an acreage that they usually had some other occupation, such as a trade, or else worked on the farms. (9)

An idea of the number of small farms and crofts which continued to exist after the introduction of the large farm system appears on various farm maps. A plan of the Estate of Nigg in 1864, now the modern farm of Nigg, shows ten crofts in addition to the main farm:-

| | |
|---------------------|----------------|
| James Mackenzie | 2 acres |
| Catherine Macdirmid | 1 acre |
| Alex Munro | 2 acres |
| Alex Fraser | 3 acres |
| John Macleman | 2 acres |
| Jasper Graham | 1 acre |
| John Macleod | 1 acre |
| Jane Fraser | 18 Poles |
| Andrew Ross | 13 and 2 acres |

A similar map of the Estate of Westfield (Pitcalzean) at the same date shows eight farms or crofts on what is now one farm. Two more crofts lay on the hill land, Simon Fraser's and James MacDirmid's, each with less than an acre of land. Those on the lower part of the farm were:-

| | |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Alex Ross | 116 acres, a farm rather than a croft |
| Alex Fraser | 42 acres, Mullinoein |
| Donald Gair | 26 acres |
| Hugh Gallie | 7 acres |
| Roderick McCulloch | 5 acres |
| William Duff | 6 acres |
| Alex Ross | 8 acres |

Over and above, this estate had a considerable number of cottages and crofts close to the sea – thirty in 1898, falling to eighteen in 1919.

Small farms in existence at the end of the 19th century were four at the Loans of Rarichie valued between £90 and £12; Mullinoein, mentioned above, £52; Culnald £120; Strath. of Pitcalnie £75; Chapelhill £25; two farms at the Carse of Bayfield £20 each; Blackhill £20; Lower Bayfield £28; and Lower Pitcalnie £8. The picture after the 1914-18 War was very similar. (30)

Two particularly small farms must have been those of Donald Ross, a farmer at Cromarty Ferry in 1908, and Jane Cameron, also a farmer at the Porter's Lodge, Nigg. This is not the only instance of a woman farmer – in 1912, Catherine Ann Ross was described as a farmer at Broomton. (31)

The 1914-18 War was followed by the break-up of a number of estates and buying of farms by tenants. Land leaguers moved in on Pitcalnie Farm which was turned into small holdings, and by the 1960's only three farms were tenanted, Wester and Easter Rarichie and Old Shandwick. Only five crofts of any consequence survived, at Lower Bayfield, Lower Pitcalnie, Chapelhill, Lower Pitcalzean, and one lying below Pitcalnie Brae.

Lack of leases was for many years a very serious handicap to farming progress. Without some form of security, no farmer was going to risk improving land and even promises such as Balnagown's that improving tenants would not be removed were of no value unless backed up by a proper lease. According to the Statistical Account, the rent of the parish had not been increased for two hundred years, yet was as high as the land could possibly bear, thus emphasising the lack of improvements from, say, 1590. It was into the 19th century before 19-year leases became common.

Another very serious disadvantage was the high rate of multures operating in Ross-shire, as mentioned elsewhere; but the principal handicap to farming in the parish was lack of fuel. There was no suitable peat in the parish which meant that people had to obtain it from other parishes, particularly Logie Easter, with all the worry of crossing the ford over the Bay or Sands of Nigg at the right state of the tide. This took up so much time in summer that the people could do nothing else but neglect farms and crofts and, in addition, it took a heavy toll of carts and harness due to going so far on bad roads, if roads they could be called. Once again, it was into the 19th century before sea-borne coal became available and saved the people from this most burdensome work which greatly retarded improvement. (7)

Absentee landlords were a further problem. Not one out of nine lived in the parish at the end of the 18th century, although some fifty years or so later, three out of seven did so. (7 and 10) This well-known Highland affliction meant, in the case of Nigg, that some estates were managed by lawyers who did not have a free hand and were too restricted by arbitrary and possibly unwise instructions. (7) In the mid-19th century, two of the largest estates were entailed under peculiar conditions with the result that any encouragement given to improving tenants was too little; indeed, the main object seemed to get in as much rent as possible for as little outlay as could be got away with. (10)

Although many crofts survived the introduction of the large-farm system, there is no doubt that from that time on their lot became more anxious, never knowing when they would be incorporated into the big farm, and given, not surprisingly in the circumstances, no encouragement to improve. (9) The New Statistical Account remarks on this lack of encouragement to cottars, adding that their superiors obviously forgot just how useful these people might be in cultivating waste ground, given proper direction.

A further aspect of failure to improve came as a result of good prices in the earlier years of the 19th century, when many farmers did so well that they were able to save money and consequently became careless and indifferent about improving. (10)

One form of tenancy was the tacksman system which operated in the parish as Kirk Session records and gravestones show. A tacksman was a principal tenant, often though not necessarily, a member of the laird's family, and frequently keeping up a laird's style. He had sub-tenants from whom he usually received enough rent to cover his own rent, leaving his larger land area in the clear. This could obviously lead to abuses but from the laird's point of view it was most convenient. It eased the worry of rent collecting and as the principal tenant was usually a man of higher standing and financial soundness, he could usually pay rent in bad as well as good years. For the same reasons, he could organise the sub-tenants' work, should that be necessary. (32)

For many years rents were paid largely in kind. While there might be a little money forthcoming, it was mainly meal, sheep, hens, eggs, pigs and so on that were handed over, as well as several days' work on the lairds' land. Baron Courts were held on the various estates when the settlement of outstanding rents was arranged, as well as other matters of jurisdiction.

As transport and communications improved, export of produce began and storehouses or girnels were built for landowners to keep their grain rents prior to use or shipment. These were usually tall, narrow buildings "the strong box of the time," as Hugh Miller put it (4) and were usually to be found near the sea. The parish of Nigg had unusually good facilities for export when ships thought nothing of landing on beaches, and this must have been a great attraction for land-owners. "The girnel of Nigg" at or near Nigg House is mentioned in 1569 (2-M.874) and there the Bishop of Ross was able to store his share of the produce of the parish.

The crow-stepped building at the present Ferry Hotel was one such girnel or storehouse, with the date 1712 over a low door. The Storehouse at Ankerville, now a row of farm cottages, belonged to the Balnagown Estate until at least the end of the 19th century.

An idea of the items appearing in old rents appears in an "Account of Customs paid by tenants of Pitcalnie" in 1785, a time when annual rents were paid but there were still no leases:-

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| "From Francis Hendry | 8 hens one wintering two wedders 3 pints honey in all £-.18.9_d |
| From Hugh Ulin | 10 hens 2/6 wintering 1/1_ two wedders 6/6 40 eggs 20 yards plaids for the Lady @ 10d in all £1.7.8 |
| From George Munro | 2 hens 100 eggs 4 wedders 2 swine £3 |
| Widow Gow | 2 hens |
| From John Hendry | 13 hens 120 eggs 1 wintering £-.5.2_d |
| Charles Sutherland | 21 head of sheep 2 custom wedders 2 hens One wintering £2.19. 9_d." |

In 1763, Lady Pitcalnie was asked if she would rent a croft to a man who would pay two hens and forty eggs, with the added inducement that he would have "kine" in and "be helpful upon the ground."

As already said, rents might include so many days work for the laird and thus it was that John Ross, Arbol, in the parish of Tarbat, wrote to the laird of Pitcalnie asking him to ensure that this work would be forthcoming: "As the harvest is now coming on fast it is necessary for me to trouble you a second time for a letter to Robert Donaldson about the shearers from the parish of Nigg. I beg leave to acquaint you that I am intitled to the shearers from the parish of Nigg by my tack of Arbol which I am sorry to tell you needs all the help possible to make it answer." (34) Such demands on people who had their own harvest to gather in must have made things very difficult.

In addition to their rents, tenants had to bear their proportion of certain assessments upon the lairds, once these were introduced. A Balnagown rent book shows how a tacksman in the 1830's paid a rent of £98.5.2 plus £1.17.3_ for this proportion of the schoolmaster's salary, £2.2.6 for road assessment, and 13/3_ for cholera assessment. (33)

Much earlier, in 1606, it appears that estates operated a form of death duties upon their tenants. When a man died at that date at Rarichie, his goods were valued at £360 but after fermes and customs had been paid to the laird and teinds to the collector, there were only £20 left, and all his son received was "twa auld hors and four bollis aitis (oats)." (2-M.425)

No wonder that the laird was so often an unloved figure but, though many faults can always be found with them, they still had a large role to perform. They were Commissioners of Land Tax and of Supply, had to arrange the supply of provisions for garrisons (2-M.566), had to suppress marauders and, much as they hated doing it, were required to finance the educational system, repair the manse and build schools. They served on road committees, sometimes advancing money for this work; they served on famine relief committees and took an active part when cholera broke out in 1832. Admittedly, some of these financial dues were passed on in rents, as has been said. They were very jealous of their boundaries, but that is something that occurs at all levels of the social scale – at Balnabruach crofter-fishermen had 1' strips of land dividing each croft, known as "claytons," and many an argument blew up over them. One elderly man there says a book could be written on "The Wars of the Claytons."

Farm workers' wages at the end of the 19th century are difficult to ascertain because, as the Statistical Account put it, "though their fee is inconsiderable, yet they have a great deal of perquisites," which made the value of what they received up to about 12 – 14 bolls of victual annually. Because they were usually married, they preferred to be paid mainly in food. Such low wages almost certainly explain why the Account went on to say that it was usual to

employ too many servants. At that time, day labourers were paid for 6d to 8d a day, while maid servants received £1.6/- to £1.12/- per year. (7)

In the middle of the 19th century, for a working day from 5 am to 6 pm with time off in the middle of the day (principally for the sake of the horses) ploughmen were paid £6 - £7 in cash, along with a cottage and the following perquisites:-

7-10 barrels of coals, equal to 10 to 15 imperial measure
 6 bolls of oatmeal, each 9 sts. Dutch weight
 5 bolls potatoes, each boll equal in bulk to 2 qrs. of wheat
 1 Scotch pint (1 English quart) of skimmed milk daily during summer and harvest. (10)

Cattlemen were paid the same as ploughmen; herdboys received £3 to £4 annually plus food in the house, all unmarried men living in bothies. (9) Day labourers were paid 1/- per day for work such as fencing, digging and so on, while threshers with the flail were paid according to which grain they were working on:-

Per boll of wheat 1/-; barley 10d; oats 9d. (10)

Women day-labours received 6d. per day for hoeing, weeding and similar jobs, but for reaping they were paid 1/- a day. (9)

Other workers might be called in for special jobs. Masons were paid 1/6 per rood with materials provided; carpenters, smiths etc. made the best bargain they could with their employers, often up to a daily income of about 2/-, although most of them would have preferred, according to the New Statistical Account to have settled for 1/6 a day in return for regular work.

Men's clothing consisted of corduroys or coarse woollen stuffs, strong worsted stockings, thick shoes or half boots. Women dressed in flannel petticoats and cotton prints, usually with warm blue cloaks on top; they were either bare-headed or wore the mutch, which they took particular pride in keeping clean. Young women went barefoot in summer. Unfortunately, though well enough dressed, they tended to get wet and not change and suffered in health as a result. Their food was mainly farm produce "but they were not strangers to the luxury of a cup of tea." (9)

Though the perquisites system in wages had been appreciated in earlier times, workers did not latterly like it and decided nationally to dispense with it and have their full pay instead. This was a great boon to farmers as, until then, everything had had to stop when meal was required for the men and, more especially, when the coal boat or train came in, however urgent farm work might be.

The constant movement of farm workers at every term largely ended with the stand-still order of the 1939-45 War, as a result of which they settled down on farms and usually stay a number of years. This has had an excellent result, as they join in community life and their children's education is not continually interrupted by moving from school to school.

A comparatively modern commentary on the state of farm workers comes in the minutes of Nigg Parish Council. In 1922, when the new cemetery at Chapelhill was opened, there was a special charge for graves "for farm servants, labourers etc" of 5/3 as opposed to the normal charge of around 7/6 to 9/9.

Drainage has always been a matter of concern in the parish, as Nigg is noted for its springs, having more for its size than any other parish in the county. No wonder that the Statistical Account said that much of the land was wet in winter due to the rains "which falling on the hill and distilling through the earth ooze forth in springs in many parts even of the arable lands."

The first steps towards draining the countryside are believed to have been taken by the monks of Fearn Abbey who dug, or caused to be dug, the great drainage channel from Fearn to the Pot, also carrying the water from the mill at Fearn to the sea.

Even so, a great deal of water still lay on flat land and in hollows, and steps had to be taken to carry it off. A plan of 1759 shows a tangle of waterways lying on the flat land of Ankerville, but even at that date a considerable amount of canal work had been done there and careful levels taken, such as:- “The water at the Milns of Fearn is higher than the Miln Dam of Ankerville when full 19’ 1”,” and “Sands of Nigg is lower than Miln Dam 14’ 6”.” (26)

In 1761 there was a proposal to straighten the march between Cullisse and Meikle Allan and to do drainage work at the same time. A ditch was to be dug not less than 18’ to 20’ at the top, this being the width presumably, 4’ deep, its banks to be sloped down to prevent them falling in, and it was advised that the excavated earth should be ridged up and sown with grass to preserve the bank. (35)

Even so, low-lying land continued for many years to be very wet, as early 19th century plans of the Lones of Rarichie and Toran show. Near Wester Toran there was an 11-acre loch called Fea Creaich – where in fact water still lies after very heavy rain. Other parts of these plans have annotations such as “Good land tho’ wet;” “Wet good land;” “Wet moor and some grass pasture, would improve if drained;” “Wet sandy moor, yielding little pasture, might improve if drained.” (29)

On the Lones of Rarichie there were five patches of standing water, and comments such as “Wet clay land, the north end all flooded in winter;” “Pretty good land but wet;” “Wet ground, partly covered with water” – and one surprise comment of “Pretty dry land.” (29)

This state of affairs was in no ways helped by the lack of leases and lack of encouragement to improve, but by the middle of the 19th century along with 19 year leases, draining, trenching and embanking had begun on some scale, with many drains laid, some of a good size, but many more were obviously still needed. (10) At this date, Hugh Rose Ross had established a tile works in Logie Easter and its tiles were extensively used for drainage throughout the country (9) so it is possible that this may well have been of great assistance in this work.

About 1860 or so, a Government draining scheme resulted in 2” x 15” tiles being laid 7 to 11 yards apart and 4 to 5 feet deep, running straight down hill. This was a well-planned scheme of great benefit and well carried out. It is not unusual even now to come across old stone drains, made by digging a ditch, laying stones in it to make some sort of channel for the water to run through, and then filling it all in again with earth.

Drainage is a continual process and as equipment gets better, so do the drainage systems, but the most important one in the parish is still based on the drainage channel of the monks, now called the Nigg Valley drainage scheme. The main ditch was widened and deepened after the 1939-45 War and as a result low-lying land has been greatly improved.

The first land reclamation scheme took place about 1818 when a large embankment was formed at the side of the sands on the Bayfield Estate and 120 acres of the sands brought in to agricultural use. But costly though it was, this embankment was not properly built and within twenty years it was giving away fast. (10) Nevertheless, it survived and as a result of various repairs, is still there, holding back the incoming tides. The earliest divisions between farms and fields were fael dykes made of turf, possibly with some stones included, and there are many of them still to be seen on the Hill especially. Later on, stone dykes were used as march divisions; if any were used as field enclosures, none now remain. Many of the old fael dyke marches now have a fence superimposed upon them which is most effective for keeping animals where they should be, but they are exceedingly difficult for humans to cross over.

The only fair in the parish was Hugh’s Fair, a general one held in November, originally at Wester Rarichie and latterly at Ankerville. There was a summer market at Fearn every July, and Parkhill (Kildary) had a regular stance. The nearest market towns in the mid-19th century were Tain and Cromarty – in the case of the latter, animals and produce, as well as people, got there by boat, possibly an easier matter than walking about ten miles to Tain. (10)

According to Hugh Miller (4), Cromarty was particularly well-situated for holding a fair or market, having sea on three sides and barren land behind, so that traders could sail in without passing through any of the dangers of the Highlands. As late as 1730, one shopkeeper served this town with everyday needs and for other things, they relied on the fair, until such time as shops supplanted travelling merchants. Even so, fairs continued to have a role to play, with another class of traders, dealing in the produce of the countryside and bringing in supplies that country folk required.

Among these were traders who sold a kind of crude harness for horses and oxen, made of ropes and hair and twisted birch; others dealt in a type of conical-shaped cart fashioned of basket work, such as was used on the sands of Nigg in the meal mob of 1740. Access via the ferry, gave Nigg the opportunity to go to the fair and buy these goods. (4)

Back in 1606, Alexander Ross Johnstone had implements of a sort including “*two pleuchis wt yr ironis*” and “*four iron harrows;*” much later, early in this century, seven to eight wooden ploughs were still in use at Wester Rarichie. (13) The “horse-mechanical” age brought hay mowers, self binders and horse-drawn bogies to carry stock. A haulage contracting business began in the late 1930’s, almost as great a boon as the introduction of rubber tyres was for farm carts.

The earliest mention of a tractor seems to be about 1928 when two children had their fingers crushed in it, as the log book of Pitcalnie School reports. But horses were still in regular use and the annual ploughing match was a great occasion as the following report from the “*Ross-shire Journal*” of 19th February 1932 shows:-

“Fine weather favoured the Nigg Ploughing Match on a field granted by Mr Joseph Budge, Easter Rarichie. Thirty-three ploughs were present, the chief honours being carried off by Wm. Pirie, Loans of Rarichie, who won for the third successive year the handsome cup presented by the Association for the most points in ploughing and harness. The trophy became his own property. Principal winners were:

Peak collars: 1. Hugh Robertson, Pitcalzean; 2. Wm. Pirie.

Low Collars: 1. Alex Ross, Broomton; 2. Alex Robertson, Culnaha.

High cutters, open: 1. Alex Murray, Balmuchy; 2. George Ross, Tomich;
3. Don Sutherland, Invergordon Mains.

Local: 1. A Robertson, Culnaha; 2. A Ross, Broomton; 3. Al Findlay, Wester Rarichie.”

Regrettably, it is now over forty years since a ploughing match was held in the parish.

For all that the farming and fishing communities were very different and completely separate, they were remarkably interdependent. Because fishing was a seasonal occupation, there were times when the fisherfolk wanted supplementary work. Most convenient for both sides, the herring fishing ended as harvest and potato-lifting came on, and farmers needed the help of the fisherfolk as much as they for their part wanted temporary farm work. Afterwards, they returned to white fishing until the spring, when their own and farmers’ potato-planting came conveniently just ahead of the early-summer preparations for the new herring season. Casual workers such as fencers, drainers and thatchers were to be found among the fishers and the country folk relied greatly upon them.

Meanwhile, fisherfolk depended on farmers for potato rigs; the farmers must have been only too glad to rent them such land as the fertility they gave it by massive amounts of seaware dug in, carried on into the following years. It was to farms that fishers went for horse hair to make “tippings” for fishing lines; for chaff for tick mattresses; for piglets to fatten; and for access to woods to gather sticks or cones for smoking fish. The fishers were entirely dependent on the country people as a market for their catch, just as country people depended on the regular supply of fish brought round weekly by fishwives and many a farm worker was glad to barter some of his perks of meal and potatoes for fish.

Two of the disadvantages listed almost two hundred years ago in the Statistical Account were absentee landlords and lack of leases and interestingly enough, both have increased as a result of the industrial development which came to the parish in 1971 in the wake of North Sea oil.

Pitcalzean is now owned by Cromarty Petroleum, a US subsidiary, and its absentee landlords let it on an annual basis – no lease – to a local farming company.

Furthermore, there is other land let out as grass parks for summer use, again without leases and with no improvements done.

The flood of land speculators in the early 1970’s was very disturbing to those who wanted to farm, as was the plethora of planning applications for this, that and the other, including large new villages. A certain amount of land changed hands; a forestry scheme was begun on Bayfield’s hill land; and there is a suspicion, unproved as yet,

that the constant pumping-out of the graving dock at Highlands' Fabricators is drying out the hinterland which, if it turned out to be true, could have unfortunate farming consequences.

Farming II References:-

2. "Old Ross-shire and Scotland," W MacGill. Numbers given.
- 1 "Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland," Hugh Miller.
7. Statistical Account.
8. "A General View of the Agnarlare etc. of the Counties of Ross and Cromarty," Sir George Stewart Mackenzie.
9. Sanitary Report, 1841.
10. New Statistical Account.
13. Mr Alex Macrae, formerly of Pitcalnie, Nigg.
23. "Scottish Farming," J A Symon.
26. Plan of part of ye Lands of Ankervil and Meikle Allan, 1759.
29. Plans of the Estate of Balnagown, surveyed by George Brown, 1808.
30. Valuation Rolls.
31. Record of Dogs' Act.
32. "A Small Highland Farm," I F Grant.
33. Pitmaduthy (Logie Easter) Rent Book.
34. Pitcalnie Estate Papers.
35. Plan of the Boundaries between Cullis and Meikle Allan, 1761

Farming – Appendix

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| Kilns: | Cullisse 1706, Kirk Session; Culnald 1634, Watson, 1706 Kirk Session; Little Kindeace, Kirk Session. |
| Meal Mills: | Miln of Culles 1563 (M.135); Achrailean, ? date, Watson; Rarichie 1583 (M.1007) and Balaphuile 1841 (NSA); Morvich 1664 (M.888), Pitcalzean, 1732 (Kirk Session and 1779 (M.423); Pitcalnie, 1826 (Val. Book), Kindeace 1732 (Kirk Session) till 1912. |
| Wind mills: | Cullisse 1736, Kirk Session. |
| Horse mills: | Broomton and Old Shandwick, OS 1872. Robert Adams on the Hill. |
| Water threshing mills: | Cullisse, Pitcalnie, Bayfield and Nigg 1841 NSA; and Culnaha 1841 (Sanitary Report). Castlecraig and Wester Rarichie and Strath of Pitcalnie, map evidence. Old Shandwick mill dam 1808 Balnagown map. |
| Traction mill owners: | John Mackenzie, Ashcroft, 1895 (Milton Mill); Jas Allan 1898 (Val. Book). |

In 1633 (M.64) the stipend of Wm Ross, minister of Nigg, gives an idea of produce in the parish: Culderare and Pitcalzean 34 bolls ... Eister Rarichie 7 bolls 2 firlots ix£ 14s money ... Wester Rarichie (same), Culless 2 bolls 2 firlots and £3 12s money ... Litill Kindeace 2 bolls 2 firlots £4 17s money ... Pitcalnei and Culnaha 4 bolls 1 firlot £3 12s 9d ... Nigg 4 bolls and £4 17s ... Meikle Kindeas 2 bolls 1 firlot and £3 12s 1d.

In 1698 prices were: Beef carcase £1, capons 4d; eggs 1d per doz; Mutton carcase 2/6; farmyard fowls 2_d; boll of oats 5/-; load of peats 2_d (Kilmuir Easter, by Helen Myers Meldrum).

In 1759 grain generally was £5 Scots of 8/4d.

In 1793 a boll of barley, meal, pease for 15 years had been 12/6 (Helen Myers Meldrum); the SA put victual between 10/6 and 13/4 generally per boll. According to Helen M Meldrum potatoes were 8/- to 10/- per boll of 9 stones; beef, mutton, pork and veal were 3d per lb for best, 2d for inferior from October to January, but more later. Fresh butter 9d per lb; salt butter 10d; Cheese 4/- to 6/- per stone; a good hen 6d; duck 8d; chicken 2d; eggs 1d per dozen.

In 1838 according to Helen M Meldrum prices were: oats per quarter £1 5/-; barley per quarter £1 13/-; wheat and rye per quarter respectively £3 and £1 14/-; Potatoes were 10/- per boll; hay 9d per stone; turnips £5 per acre; and beans £3 per quarter.

Pitmaduthy Valuation of 1846 gives barley meal at 14/8 per boll, oatmeal 21/6 per boll, potatoes 12/- per boll, hay stack of 800 stones @ 7d per stone.

Gross amount of raw produce in Nigg in 1841 was:

| | | |
|--------------------------|--------|-------|
| Grain | £10800 | |
| Potatoes and turnips | £ 2240 | |
| Cultivated hay | £ 1250 | |
| Grazing cattle and sheep | £ 850 | |
| Gardens and woods | £ 240 | |
| Fisheries | £ 1000 | |
| Totalling | £16380 | (NSA) |

A breakdown of farm workers' numbers in the Valuation Roll of 1898 gives the following, but it must be remembered that these are householders, and there would have been more workers in fact. 1919 figures are alongside.

| | Grieve | Shepherd | Cattleman | Ploughman | Labourers | Outworkers |
|---------------------|--------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Cullisse | 1/1 | 2/1 | 1/3 | 7/3 | 2/2 | 2f/0 |
| Ankerville | 1/1 | 1/0 | 1/1 | 2/3 | 4/0 | 2 |
| Old Shandwick | 1/0 | 1/0 | 1/0 | 4/1 | 1/0 | 2? |
| Wester Rarichie | 1/1 | 1/0 | 1/0 | 3/1 | 1/1 | -/- |
| Easter Rarichie | 1/1 | 1/1 | 1/1 | 5/1 | 2/3 | 3/0 |
| Broomton | 0/1 | 0/0 | 0/0 | 2/1 | -/- | -/- |
| Loans of Rarichie | 0/0 | 0/0 | 0/1 | 0/1 | 1/0 | -/- |
| Pitcalzean | 1/1 | 1/1 | 0/1 | 2/1 | 1/1 | -/- |
| Nigg/Culnald | 1/1 | 0/0 | 0/1 | 4/1 | 3/2 | 2/0 |
| CastleCraig | 1/1 | 1/1 | 1/1 | 2/1 | 0/0 | 1/2 |
| Culnaha | 1/1 | 0/1 | 1/1 | 2/1 | 1/0 | 3/2 |
| Pitcalnie | 0/0 | 0/0 | 1/0 | 2/0 | 1/0 | 0/0 |
| Strath of Pitcalnie | 1/0 | 1/0 | 0/0 | 1/1 | 0/0 | 0/0 |
| Bayfield | 0/1 | 0/0 | 1/2 | 2/1 | 3/0 | 0/0 |

Fishing and the Sea

Being surrounded on three sides by the sea, it is natural that fishing was one of the principal activities in the parish of Nigg. The Cromarty Firth was the Portus Salutis of the Romans and continued in this role of giving shelter to fishing and other fleets for very many years. Indeed, its qualities as a good harbour are still making it attractive for sea borne transport, even though fishing has now died out.

Narrow though the Sutors are, they had one singular advantage to seamen wishing to pass through them. In the brow of North Sutor, fronting Cromarty there was once a wondrous gem which at night emitted a light more brilliant than the zeolite of Iceland or the carbuncle of the Wardhill of Hoy and many a benighted boatman gazed upon it gladly as he neared home. Strangely, though it could be seen from below, it always became invisible to those who tried to scale the rocks towards it. Thus wrote Hugh Miller about the 1830's, but even by that time the Diamond Rock of Cromarty, as it was called, had ceased to shine. Whatever it was, it added to the safety of the firth and safety was of vital importance to fishermen.

There were always in the old days, ships lying in the Cromarty roads. One man only recently dead remembered about a hundred years ago when two and three masted ships, brigantines and others, lay there (1) and others speak of local fleets coming in for shelter in rough weather. (2) These were frequently increased by the arrival of foreign fishing fleets, largely Scandinavian, wintering in the firth up till the time of the Great War. The last of these was repaired by John Watson of Cromarty, a shipwright. (2)

Even within the safety of the Sutors, storms blew up and did damage to ships taking shelter, On one occasion a Norwegian ship was driven up behind Pleasant Cottage where it was stuck fast for six months. In the end, trenches were dug and a high tide managed to take it off. On another occasion, ten ships were driven up on to the shore by Geordie Gibson the Ferryman's house, roughly where the Hifab Training School is now. (1)

Occasionally, even with the Diamond Rock, boats could not get through the Sutors if the weather were too severe. Cromarty fishers were said to have been very timid in their very small boats until the late 1700's when they began to venture out into the Moray Firth in larger boats. (3) Thereafter they became remarkably skilled but even they sometimes could not get home, and when this happened they took refuge in a cave with five entrances near the searchlight huts below North Sutor. There is a little island of rock in the cave and on it a refuge from a high tide could always be found. (2)

And with the expanse of sand at Nigg Ferry and the Sands of Nigg, fishing villages grew up nearby. There was once one called Dunskaithness which the Ordnance Survey place as being at the extreme south west tip of the parish, but some local traditions place it immediately below Dunskaith Castle, where the foundations of a ruined cottage may still be seen and where the New Statistical Account says the village colonies of Balnapaling and Balnabruach originated. Some people say Dunskaithness was right at Nigg Ferry while Rev J R Martin considered it to be the present Balnapaling. Whichever it was, it is shown on present day maps in the Ordnance Survey's site.

Cromarty Ferry is the proper name of Nigg Ferry, lying adjacent to the fishing villages of Balnapaling and Balnabruach. Balnapaling is the area around the former White House, while Balnabruach ran from there northwards to around Red House, also a small "village" but never regarded as a fishing village as such. Balnabruach appears in some Session Minutes as the "fisher town of Pitkeilan" as it lay on that estate.

But not all of the parish faced the Cromarty Firth. The Eastern part of Nigg has high cliffs overlooking the Moray Firth and as these fall away to the north towards Shandwick Bay, there too fishing communities developed, making use of a much larger expanse of sea and good landing places on the bay. Shandwick is one village of the trio of "Seaboard Villages," the only one lying in the parish of Nigg. Hilton and Balintore both are in the parish of Fearn but though separate in many ways, nevertheless these three villages have an entity of their own.

There was in addition a small harbour about the 1770's below the cliffs at Port an Righ where the lairds of Kilravock and Balnagown, then landowners in the parish, had the sole privilege of keeping fish boats. (4) A plan of that area in 1763 shows a road running right round the foot of the hill to "auld Portintruy" at a time when roads were few and far between, so with a form of access and the need for this access, this little harbour had perhaps a greater importance than one would believe possible nowadays. (5)

In the 19th century Nigg Bay was a rich source for bait gathering and to it came not only the local fishers, but those of Fearn and Cromarty as well as many from Banffshire. There they found in abundance “in the respective season, cockles and mussels and flounders and sand-eels” (26) and that most valued of summer bait, lugworm.

Bait gathering was on such a scale that one laird in the neighbouring parish of Kilmuir Easter claimed part of the Firth as his and endeavoured to make the fishers of Cromarty pay a tax which they refused to do. He retaliated by forbidding them to gather bait on the sands and put a man with a gun on guard. Unfortunately for him, an English visitor was driven off and was so angry that he offered to finance the fishers’ case in court. The Court of Session found in their favour and the Cromartie Estate lost income. (6)

Though the people of Nigg are said to have objected to others claiming their mussels, that did not prevent them taking other people’s and in 1712 the Town Council of Tain ordained that new lawburrows (writs requiring security against doing violence) be raised against the tenants of various places, including Rarichie and Shandwick, “Such as has taken away the mussels.” (7-M.1190)

Bait gathering was a difficult and most tiring job, usually entailing a start between 1 or 4 am depending on the tide, and a long walk as well. But hard and tiring though this was, quite the worst part was running the gauntlet of the farm workers on the way and hearing their disparaging comments on the “fishers.” (8)

Fishing was a seasonal occupation. The main catch was white fish, and no wonder when the NSA described the neighbouring firths, now so empty of fish, as abounding with them – turbot, cod, haddock, mackerel, whiting, cuddies, crowners, sole, flounders, skate, dogfish, as well as salmon and herring in season. Herring fishing began in the northern isles about May and June and there the local men might go if they wished; by July the herring arrived in the Moray Firth and everyone went after them; by the autumn they were moving south and some followed them right down the coasts till they got to Yarmouth, Lowestoft about November. For the rest of the year, the men were catching white fish interspersed with casual work on farms – planting and lifting potatoes, harvesting and draining.

The life of a fisherman was hard but it was nothing to the life of his wife. She ran his home and bore his children, cultivated the potato strip with the children’s help while he was at sea, got up before dawn to walk miles each way to fetch bait, baited the lines and if she was also a fishwife, she prepared white fish and smoked speldings to take round the country herself in a creel. The greatest profit went to the man whose wife was a fishwife as there was no middleman and thus there was every encouragement given to her to add this work to her already heavily burdened life.

Even allowing for infant mortality, there were large families. Seven or eight children were common in a family and ten or twelve by no means unheard of. The fisherman, unlike the farm worker, had no fixed wage and perquisites and his earnings, apart from casual work, depended on his catch and that, in turn, depended very largely upon the weather. (9) With so many hungry mouths to feed, no wonder the woman folk worked so hard, and not surprisingly they often died young, and it was not uncommon for the men to live much longer and to marry more than once. Indeed, four out of six fishermen at Balnapaling and Balnabruach who came before the Session in 1831 for certain help, were in their seventies. (10)

Fisher folk usually intermarried for the very good reason that few country girls would put up with the intolerable work. The daughters of fishermen, however, often married those on the land but it was very common for at least one child of such a marriage to hanker for the sea. (11) In spite of marrying among themselves, fisher folk remained a fine looking lot and gave no evidence of deterioration according to the NSA, and this is something that still applies today.

One of the most astonishing pieces of work the fisher women were called upon to perform was carrying their men folk into the boats. (11) Even after the harbour at Balintore was built, this was being done on the shore at Shandwick – presumably the men did not want a longer than necessary walk to work. An astonished Englishwoman, married to a local man, saw her mother-in-law carry her father-in-law ashore as late as 1925. No wonder that a fisherman’s proposal is said to have been arranged by his mother who would ask the mother of the prospective bride, “Can she bear my son’s burden?” (weight)

The argument put forward for carrying the men into the boats is that it saved them from getting wet at the start of a night’s fishing, but a photograph, probably from the Morayshire coast, shows that the women carried the men

ashore too, which weakens this case. It is said, however, that in the days before gum boots, the men tried at all costs to prevent their long leather boots from getting wet as this made them crinkle and become difficult to wear.

The fishwife carrying her creel was a common sight in the roads and lanes of Easter Ross, especially after the opening of the Highland Railway line enlarged her horizons and opportunities for travel. Many of them went from Seaboard Villages to Fearn Station by carrier's cart and thence went north or south, sold their load of fish round their own particular district, and caught the train home in the evening. Their creel usually returned as full as it went. Eggs, oatmeal, fruit might be given as barter or as little gifts and were very welcome as an addition to the diet at home. Any spaces in the creel usually found themselves filled with firewood, peats and cones for smoking – no fishwife believed in carrying an empty creel. (13)

The fishers of Nigg Ferry usually sold their catch to a fish curer in Cromarty (9) although there was at least one fishwife there about 1898, Sarah Macleod (14) who may have been the fishwife remembered as having a bothan for smoking fish just east of Ivy Cottage. (15)

Shandwick produced a number of fishwives, usually the wives of fishermen, although there were two unmarried sisters working there on their own behalf around 1898. (14)

While white fishing should have been the mainstay of the fisher folk, they helped out by herring fishing and by cultivating potatoes after their introduction in the mid-1700's, and it may be that over-dependence upon these two alternatives did no good to white fishing.

Be that as it may, herring fishing proved to be a great boon – and a great disaster. Even its staunchest advocates described the herring in 1791 as a "whimsical and migrating animal." (16) In good years they were plentiful and there was great prosperity, and then for no apparent reason they disappeared from around the coasts, leaving a trail of poverty and misery behind them.

Herring used to come into the Cromarty Firth but according to one tradition a great shoal of them was driven by whales and porpoises on to the shore just east of Cromarty. They covered the beach to a depth of several feet and in spite of gallant efforts to salt them, most went bad and had to be used as manure. Shortly afterwards, following a successful season, the herring left the Firth in one night and never returned in any numbers. (6)

According to Hugh Miller, they were plentiful between 1702-14 and had certainly failed by 1788. They revived again and Balintore "was much frequented during the fishing season; and there is an extensive building for packing and preparing red herrings, which being now disused serves only to indicate former prosperity." Those words were written in 1841 (17) by which time they had failed yet again.

During this boom time, however, the average number of boats engaged in herring fishing in Easter Ross was about three hundred and fifty, of which eighty-seven belonged to the district, the rest being from the south. The average amount made by the crew of each boat during the year did not come to more than £160 stg. Which had to be divided between four. Out of this they had to pay for repairs of boats and fishing tackle about £20 annually. These figures are given by James Cameron in the Report he made on the conditions in Easter Ross in 1841. The New Statistical Account did not put the profit so high – "The Expense of boats, nets, etc, has been great, and though perhaps each may have, in favourable seasons, averaged above £20 profit, it is questionable how far the herring fishing has been in reality a benefit to the parish. It is true, indeed, that many of the fishermen were enabled by their success, occasionally, a few years since, to build nice cottages and improve their furniture (and there was abundance of need) but the ordinary fishing for haddocks, cod, etc, was a good deal neglected, debt was in many cases incurred, high ideas were raised, and now there is a lamentable degree of poverty, in consequence of the almost total failure, for some years back, of the herring fishing on this part of the coast."

James Cameron describing the benefits of this particular herring boom, wrote, "The fisher folk had for long had miserable cabins of the lowest description, receptacles of filth and nauseating effluvia, but recently there has been a great improvement, with those on the shores of Nigg and Fearn especially being often well and comfortably built, many indeed being superior to those of the rural population." (17)

But fickle as ever, herring fishing revived again only to fail about 1869, resulting in considerable poverty which had consequences on Chapelhill Church. In October 1869 its Minute Book contains the following entry, "Took into consideration the low state of the funds of the congregation arising from the fact that the Herring fishing has been a total failure in this quarter for the last two years, resolved to petition the Presbytery to get relief from the Mission Board to the extent of £25 till such time as they are relieved of the burdens now resting upon them." (18)

However, the herring returned once more, enough to justify the building of a herring yard at Balintore about 1880. This was not as previously for red herrings (cured and dried, of a reddish appearance) but for salt herrings, which were salted and packed there for sale at home and abroad. In 1841 there had been thirty-two boats, large and small, in the parish of Nigg, according to the NSA; there were now seventy-one boats and two hundred men from the three Seaboard villages engaged in fishing, and it was a time of tremendous prosperity. Cromarty was also a very busy herring port and the herring fishers from Nigg Ferry had the choice of taking their catch there or to Balintore.

The school log books both for Hilton and Nigg reflect the bustle and activity of the herring fishing. The children were absent barking the nets, preparing the boats, waving goodbye to their sisters as they went off to the gutting at other ports, and so on. Of the forty-two Shandwick children of school age about that time, practically none of them were going to school, so involved were they with herring fishing and potatoes.

The Nigg School log says in August 1885, "The attendance pretty steady tho' in nowise indebted to the Ferry children who come up to the school with the utmost irregularity ever since the fishing commenced." In July 1891 the headmaster wrote, "Ferry children irregular – the herring boats are being launched this week and the parents make that a sufficient reason for keeping the children at home." And a week later the great attraction of watching their parents' preparations for herring fishing was still the excuse for absenteeism.

At the end of June two years later, it was still the same story. The Ferry children were "quite absorbed with their parents' preparation for the East coast herring fishing" which excuse must have lasted them for some time as in the following month the headmaster was writing, "The Ferry district is quite a drag upon the school, elsewhere the children attend with laudable regularity."

The log of Hilton School that served Shandwick also, contains very similar entries. Fishing came first with the children, and school a very poor second.

But the herring boom ended. The herring yard in Balintore closed as did the packing station at Cromarty. By the time of the 1914-18 War local men had given up herring fishing altogether.

Oddly enough, no one speaks of the active herring fishing of Nigg Ferry and it is only through reading school log books that one becomes aware of it. The only reference that one is likely to hear is to do with herring boats taking shelter in "the docks" which were a natural lagoon, now under Highlands Fabricators' works. This was considered a safe refuge until a gale blew these boats ashore, after which they were taken further up the firth to below Foulis where some of their hulks may just be distinguished at low tide. From what local people say, it seems that these boats had been laid up at the docks after the end of the herring fishing by non-local fishermen.

One result of herring fishing was that it widened the horizons of local girls who would have had no other opportunity to travel so far afield. As it was, off they went to Shetland and to Caithness, moving south with the herring as far as Yarmouth and Lowestoft. So far as one can discover, these girls came from the Shandwick end of the parish, not from Nigg Ferry.

Every assistance was given to them. The Highland Railway offered cheap fares to fisher folk (19) and the employers provided accommodation that the fisher girls still speak of as being very good. It was for their sake that Chapelhill Church held Communion early in 1909 so that those going to the fishing would not miss it. (20) They were happy times, looked back on with nostalgia even though the work was hard and cold and hands were sadly chapped with salt. It was a chance to see life and many took the chance.

But while fisherfolk depended upon white fish and herring, another element had come into their lives, and by the 1780's they were to a large extent keeping themselves by growing potatoes, especially so each time the herring deserted the coasts. (21) From that time on, the potato played a most important part in their lives and no wonder, when such a useful crop could provide good meals for nine months of the year.

According to "Scottish Farming" by J A Symon the potato became the mainstay of the common people of the Highlands and Islands and "assumed the dominating role in the food habits of the Highland people – so much so as to invite disaster in the event of a crop failure." And disaster came in the form of potato blight and the resultant famine of 1846 when it was discovered that the previously always good natured crop was susceptible to disease.

Nevertheless, it still continued its importance in the lives of the fisher folk as school log books show. The help of the children was vital at planting and lifting time. In 1879, Nigg School log recorded during the spring, "Ferry children do not come out regularly, at present they are employed planting the potato crop." The older children were also absent at potato weeding during the summer and in the autumn of 1893, the headmaster wrote, "The fisher children were in great force assisting their parents at potato lifting." The following spring, somewhat philosophically he said, "Potato planting is the season's work from Red House to Ferry point and as the youngsters help to eat them they must help to plant them – hence irregular attendance may be expected for the next month." But it was longer than a month, so perhaps the herring fishing was the reason for entries in May and July, "The Ferry children attend so badly that it's no use mentioning their names now," and "Ferry children baffle all art to bring them out." The situation was just the same in Shandwick, with the children and their parents putting what they considered to be first things first.

The fisher folk at Nigg Ferry had strips of land adjacent to their houses where they grew their potatoes but those at Shandwick rented "rigs" of land from nearby farms, which were always ensured of excellent crops from those particular fields the following year, thanks to the heavy manuring of seaweed put on them by the fishers. The seaweed was often carried to the fields in creels by the women, who did almost all of the work of potato cultivation, with the help of the children. Even heavily pregnant women worked in this way; indeed, several babies were nearly born in the fields.

Before moving on to the decline of white and herring fishing, it is worth reading James Cameron's description of the local fisher folk in 1841:

"The men always wear stout shoes or tall sea-boots; the women, except in winter or on Sundays, generally go barefooted. They have the reputation of being a very prolific race; intermarriages with the rural population are very common; and it is seldom that the children deviate from the perilous craft of their fathers. They are characterised by peculiar notions and practices; and they have a certain feudal spirit or pride of order which tends to preserve them as a separate community, and to promote concord among themselves. Their morals are not below those of any class of the community; and the villages of Shandwick and Balintore deserve to be particularly noticed for the respectability of their appearance, the cleanliness of their habits, the civility and decorum of their manners, the purity of their morals, and the exemplary attention to religious duties whether at sea or on land." (17)

But while these good qualities remain to this day, the fishing itself did not, dying out firstly at Nigg Ferry and then at Shandwick. So far as herring were concerned, they came and went in such a manner that it was always a case of boom or bust, and unfortunately in the boom years, rather like the potato, they assumed such a dominating role as to invite disaster when they failed. In addition, as the NSA said, "high ideas were raised and debt incurred; others say that with more money in their pockets, much of it went on drink and lazy habits resulted, the ordinary fishing was neglected and the people found it hard to go back to it when the herring failed.. To neglect a traditional way of living that has previously served one well, is obviously unwise but it appears that this is what happened. (22)

Nevertheless, white fishing did continue and especially just after the 1914-18 War, prices were good and there was prosperity until in the 1930's seine netting was introduced, mainly by boats from elsewhere, in the Moray Firth and very shortly thereafter their depredations ended white fishing also.

Why did fishing die out in Nigg before it did in Shandwick? Could it have been because in Shandwick the people owned their houses while, according to the 1898 Valuation Roll, those at Nigg Ferry were tenants? This would have made the Shandwick folk feel more thirled to the occupation on their doorsteps than did those of the Ferry, who are all shown as tenants, not as proprietors, a situation still shown on the Roll of 1919. At what point they obtained feus is not clear, but the situation was definitely different between the two districts.

In 1841, there were only three names among the fisher folk of Nigg Ferry – Ross, Skinner and Macleod. At this date, 1976, there are two Ross households; the members of two Macleod households left the area due to the

presence of Highlands Fabricators; and the last Skinner died in the 1960's. (23) Although one or two married women had these names before marriage, there are now only two households bearing the 1841 names.

The situation is different in Shandwick. In 1841, there were three common names there – Vass, Skinner and Ross – although they were said to be of the same stock as the people at Nigg Ferry. (NSA) Vass and Ross are still the most usual names there, with one household of Skinners.

The 1898 Valuation Roll shows that there were twenty-one fishermen in Shandwick and nine at the Ferry, numbers which fell by the 1919 Roll to sixteen in Shandwick and three at the Ferry. This conflicts slightly with an account of the Ferry in 1913, which says that by then there was no commercial fishing from Balnabruach or Balnapaling, although salmon nets were drawn near the Ferry itself from time to time; "There were only two Nigg-based boats at Balnapaling, one a derelict coble upturned on the green near the Inn, and one practically derelict, the property of Geordie Gibson, ex-ferryman, who was then a very old man indeed. I recall clearly only two boats off Balnabruach, one a sailing yawl with cabin, the Stormy Petrel, owned by the Romanis family ... and a rowing boat belonging to the gentleman with very large moustache who owned the Balnabruach shop." (24)

Thus it is seen that numbers were falling as herring declined at the end of the 19th century; the occupation of "fishermen" was dying out in the parish steadily over the next twenty years, followed by an even greater decrease into the 1930's.

With the decline in fishing went an increase in poverty. In 1898, as already said, there were twenty-one fishermen in Shandwick, but there were also eight paupers. There were nine fishers in the Nigg Ferry area, but for the whole of the rest of the parish apart from Shandwick, there were only eight paupers, ie the whole landward area produced the same number of paupers as the village of Shandwick. (14) Or to put it another way, Shandwick had double the number of fishers as there were at the Ferry, and equal the number of paupers in the whole of the parish.

In 1841, the three fishing villages of Shandwick, Balnapaling and Balnabruach contained four hundred and twenty people out of a population for the whole of the parish of approximately fourteen hundred, in other words, between a quarter and a third. In 1972 (before the advent of Highlands Fabricators complicated the situation) there were about eighty in Shandwick, nine in Balnapaling and fourteen in Balnabruach, out of a parish population of four hundred and thirty or so, again about a quarter.

It is interesting that the fall in population between fisher and farming folk has been more or less equal in proportion. Much is made nowadays of farm mechanization as the reason for depopulation but few people living locally seem aware of the numbers of fisher folk that there used to be. Nor do they realize the great decline in the number of children in fisher communities. There were "fully 50" at Nigg Ferry in 1877 of school age, and forty-two in Shandwick in 1886, showing that the three fishing villages between them produced about a hundred children of school age less than a hundred years ago.

This detail is given to show that the decline of fishing, due to lack of herring and then to the cleaning out of the Moray Firth of white fish and the reputed laziness and drinking when the herring seemed the answer to all problems, is an equal reason for parish depopulation as the reduction of farm staffs; to be exact, it has caused a very slightly higher decline.

Oddly enough, the building of harbours and piers also coincided with the decline of fishing. Balintore's harbour was built between 1890-6 and Nigg Ferry pier was begun in 1913 and finished the following year, though it was most probably built with defence reasons in mind.

There are, however, other forms of fishing in the area. Salmon fishing began on a commercial basis certainly by 1866 when Miss C C Ross of Old Shandwick, as well as others, appear as lessees of Crown fishings. Salmon fishing usually belongs to the Crown but this is one of the areas where landowners often have rights over the foreshore adjacent to their property. Thus the Valuation Roll of 1898 shows that Sir Charles Ross of Balnagown held salmon fishings ex adverso Rarichie which he let to A P Hogarth, an Aberdeen firm handling much of this type of fishing on the north-east coast in the latter years of the 19th century. The same firm leased the Shandwick Estate fishings at the same time – these belonged to the Crown.

The Moray Firth Fishing Company was formed after the First World War by General Sir Walter Ross of Cromarty and several other landowners, who all pooled their fishings into one company, with General Ross as Chairman. The Castlecraig fishings, then on the Cromarty Estate, were valued at £30 and these were held; also by 1919 the Crown fishing of the Estate of Shandwick; and unspecified "fishings" of Pitcalzean valued at £2. (25)

That company is no longer working. By the early 1970's all the salmon fishing is in the hands of A Paterson & Sons, although a local family, A and J Vass worked some of them in the parish of Nigg until then. The operations are nowadays carried out from Balintore harbour although for a year or two in the 1960's salmon were being landed at Nigg Ferry pier as well, and they occasionally caught grilse in the little bay below Dunskaith Castle by drawing nets with the aid of a tractor.

It was the arrival of motor boats that made it possible for the salmon fishers to work from a central point, such as Balintore Harbour. When they used sail, they could not possibly go from there out to the nets thrice daily and, to solve the problem, they lived near the area they were working, spending the week in bothies and returning to their villages on Saturday night, ready for the Sabbath at home. Their catch was collected by boats or by people engaged to carry them in by creel, leaving the fishermen to get on with the job of fishing.

There was a bothy – and it is still there, and was being used well into the 1930's if not later – below the Castlecraig-Bayfield march. It must have been a weary task carrying a creel of salmon up the 300-400 feet cliffs there, across the hill and in to Balintore. But this was done, and people in Shandwick say they remember the people doing this work pausing to rest their heavy creels against a bank on the way.

Salmon fishing is still a thriving business and is the only fishing of any commercial value, apart from lobsters, surviving on this once busy coast. The early 1970's saw some very profitable years but disease, which has hit all parts of Scotland, has reduced catches somewhat, and 1976 has seen a new threat. The nets have been poached, either by boat or by underwater swimmers, and at the time of writing this is a problem causing some considerable concern.

Shell fish have always occupied a small role in the area. About 1800 or so, there were plenty of lobsters which were mainly sent to London but by 1841 they were almost unknown. (26) They revived, however, and particularly around the Shandwick end of the parish there are very many lobster pots out, usually put there by individuals who then sell their catch to fish merchants. By 1970, it is said that there were pots out every twenty yards from North Sutor to Tarbat Ness.

In the middle of the 19th century, there were also plenty of crabs around the rocky parts of the shore (26) but they are not fished for on any great scale, but a local sport was hooking them out from under stone with a piece of wire during a May mist, when they seemed to "come in." The May mist was also called a "cuckoo mist;" doubtless because that was the month when the cuckoo was first heard. (15)

There used to be good sized oysters in the Cromarty Firth back in the middle of the 19th century (26) but at that time they were seldom dredged for, and did not seem to be multiplying. Nevertheless, though no one gathers them, there are still many oyster shells of a good size to be found lying on the surface of the sands of Nigg Bay, but not at Shandwick.

Cockles and mussels were there in abundance in the middle of last century and Nigg Bay was a rich source for them (26) and in the 1870's they were being freely gathered, along with whelks. In 1875, gathering whelks for the Fearn Summer Market was one of the many reasons for absenteeism of school children from the villages; (27) and in 1878 the Nigg School log said in August, "Scarcely any children from Ferry this week ... they have been employed collecting shellfish." As this was the time when there were fully fifty children there, the shellfish-gathering must have been considerable. Whelks and other shellfish could be sold or bartered at local shops that then sent them on to Billingsgate, though fish merchants might take them as well.

Even now, they are still being gathered by individuals who send them straight to London at prices between £2 and £2.25 per cwt. Though this is not being done on any large scale.

The early 1970's saw a fishing boat based at Nigg Ferry pier equipped to suck cockles off the sea bed, and thus considerable numbers of them were collected. The venture was short-lived, possibly due to the arrival of industry at Nigg Ferry when the boat found a new use as a workmen's ferry.

Another brief resurgence was that of bait-gathering. While one or two people are often seen digging bait on the sands of Nigg, in 1968 and 1969 this was done on a larger scale, with a tractor and plough turning up the sands and women employed to gather the lug worms thus exposed, rather like potato lifting. The lug so gathered were taken to Tain to be frozen before being sent as bait for coarse fishing. This brief revival did not last, however.

The fishing villages, particularly those of the Seaboard, are an example of the saying "Fish makes brains." It is very noticeable that in these villages the young people have for years had an astonishingly high academic record that is not matched in the landward areas. One feels that the meaning of the saying is demonstrated because, poor though they might be, fisher folk always had fish of a sort available and thus they had protein in their diet. Farm folk largely existed on oatmeal and potatoes that did not give them the same amount of protein. In addition, people in fishing villages stayed where they were and their children had continuity of education, whereas until the 1939-45 War, farm folk were constantly on the move with the result that their children's schooling was gravely affected.

Fishing and the Sea - References:-

- 1 Late Tom Macleod, uncle of Miss Helen Macleod, formerly of Ivy Cottage
- 2 Mr Alex Fraser, formerly of Honeysuckle Cottage, Nigg
- 3 Statistical Account for the parish of Cromarty
- 4 Decreet of the Division of the Commonty of the Hill of Nigg, 1770
- 5 Plan of the Hill of Nigg as divided, 1763
- 6 "Kilmuir Easter," Helen Myers Meldrum
- 7 "Old Ross-shire and Scotland," W MacGill. Numbers given.
- 8 Late Mrs Mackenzie, Balnabruach, Balintore
- 9 "A Backward Glance," Class III (1965), Hilton School
- 10 Nigg Old Church Session Minutes
- 11/22 Late Nicholas Vass, Mid Street, Shandwick
- 13 "Down to the Sea"
- 14 1898 Valuation Ross, Sarah Macleod was the fishwife at Nigg Ferry.
- 15 Miss Helen Macleod, formerly of Ivy Cottage
- 16 Crofters' Commission Report, 1884
- 17 Sanitary Report 1841
- 18 Minute Book of the Managers of the U P Church
- 19 "North Star and Farmers' Chronicle," 15 Aug. 1895
- 20 "Church Chronicles of Nigg," Rev J R Martin
- 21 Statistical Account
- 23 The names of these people are:- Mrs Ross, Pleasant Cottage, and Mrs Ross, Broomhill; Mrs Macleod, Shop House, and Miss Helen Macleod, Ivy Cottage; and the late Arthur Skinner, Briar Cottage
- 24 Mr Leslie Gilsland
- 25 1919 Valuation Roll
- 26 New Statistical Account
- 27 Hilton School log book

Poverty

At the time of the Reformation, the church had offered to care for the poor by supporting them out of its own funds but this proposal was in a great measure prevented by the Crown and landed interests seizing church property. However, the Presbyteries appointed collections to be made for poor relief and Church Courts instituted Deacons for the management of the funds raised, and thus from the Reformation to the Restoration in 1660 the poor were comparatively well cared for. But when Charles II disestablished the Presbyterian Church in 1661 and established the Episcopal Church instead the poor were sadly overlooked. Under Episcopacy their supervision was entrusted to Justices of the Peace who appointed overseers in every parish, but this was not effective and by the time of the Revolution about a fifth of the population was on the verge of starvation. The re-establishment of the Presbyterian Church in 1690 again brought the care of the poor into church hands and it is from this point that there are any records of their care and welfare in the parish. (1)

Those who talk of poverty in a modern context have no idea of what it really meant in these days. Modern poverty starts at a much higher level and is cushioned with unemployment benefits, social security and the Health Service. In former times, the standard of living was subsistence level, with very poor housing, often a background of family ill-health such as TB, and acceptance of infant mortality, no sanitation, bare feet for much of the year so that cuts and sores on them were common, poor clothing and a diet so inadequate as to contribute to ill-health which in turn contributed to more poverty. Conditions such as club feet or epilepsy went untreated and prevented the victims from earning a living and thus they became a burden of the parish. This was the norm for the "common people" and those who appeared on the poors' list were below the norm; in fact, they were starving.

Remembering that this was the basic standard of living, it is almost impossible to imagine the effect which the Seven Years Famine, which lasted from 1694 to 1701, must have had on the community. This terrible famine occurred before the introduction of the potato when people were still dependent of grain for food. Not surprisingly, it was followed by pestilence that broke out in November 1694. (2) The poverty was appalling and regrettably a source of relief that the church might have provided was not forthcoming. In February 1698, the Kirk Session had made an act regarding the charges for hiring their mort bell, the money from which went to the poor, but it appears from the Kirk Session Minutes of 1708 that the officer responsible for it denied having received any such payments, so there was lamentably little relief for the poor during this dreadful time.

According to the New Statistical Account, many died of want during this awful time, the rich became poor and the whole face of society was changed and the famine left its mark on the identity and character of the whole of the population, with a great lowering of standards and vices of all kinds.

The records of Nigg Kirk Session only begin in 1705 but thereafter there are abundant references to poor relief. In order to carry out various works, the first requirement was to raise money and this was in several ways:

- 1 Church collections
- 2 Hiring the mort bell (little bell)
- 3 Hiring the mort cloth
- 4 Mortification (legacies)
- 5 Delinquents' fines
- 6 Special Sabbath collections for special needs
- 7 Contributions from the heritors

The money brought in by collections in church went firstly to pay salaries such as those of the Session Clerk and the Kirk Officer and similar expenses, but what remained went to the poor, and it must have been a serious matter when there was no sermon and consequently no collection. Nigg suffered considerably in this way - Rev George Munro (1705-28) was absent from the parish on his own law affairs for a total of two years between 1715 and 1724; There was a four year vacancy between the death of Rev John Balfour and the appointment of Rev Patrick Grant in 1756; and in the vacancy after the departure of Rev Lewis Rose there were thirty-two Sundays with no sermon between January 1836 and April 1837.

Even when there was no vacancy, there might be Sundays when the Kirk records show “No Sermon” and therefore no collection. Although collections rose to an average of £16 a year under Rev Lewis Rose, there were still a good many Sundays, as many as eight in a year, when “No Sermon” appears in the minute book. Mr Rose was obviously a popular preacher and was frequently at the Gaelic Chapel in Cromarty or assisting at the Sacraments in other parishes. While there may have been a Sabbath meeting held in Nigg by the reader, this was evidently not worth a collection. (3)

Another problem to do with collections was the bad copper often in them, but some income might be got by selling it – in 1787, Rev Patrick Grant got 3/6 for copper sold to George Rainy, a travelling chapman, and this went to the funds.

Special collections were sometimes held as people left church; as these usually had to do with health matters, they are mentioned in the appropriate chapter.

Hiring out the mort bell was another fund raiser, as has already been mentioned. It was used by bereaved families to be rung by the beadle to announce a death, and also to be rung at the head of the funeral procession. At the time records began in Nigg, those living in the parish had to pay half a merk for its use, but those outside paid one merk. Half the income went to the poors’ box and half to the officer, who was meant to keep a list of all who hired it and, presumably to prevent a repetition of what had happened earlier, the Session forbade the officer to allow its use unless he had been paid for it. (3)

There was good sense and real need in hiring the bell and advertising a forthcoming funeral as widely as possible, as without undertakers and transport, it was essential to have a good number of strong men to carry the coffin, allowing for changes of team. This necessity therefore made the mort bell a good source of income.

According to Rev J R Martin, the use of the mort bell was universal in Scotland and continued till the end of the 18th century. Nigg’s mort bell is still in the possession of the church but is on loan to Tain Museum where it may be seen. “It is of good bell-metal with an iron stirrup handle, somewhat rusted, and an iron clapper. Apart from the handle, the bell stands 5_” across the mouth and has a pleasant clear tone.” (3)

It was also traditional to use a mort cloth as a funeral pall to lay over the coffin. This may have partly been because many coffins were pretty roughly made and the mort cloth added dignity and appearance to them.

Until 1729, mort cloths in Nigg were in private hands and hired out for private gain. In that year, however, the Session insisted on buying them up and hiring them out themselves for the benefit of the poor (a form of compulsory purchase by the Session). John Vain in Little Kindeace (Ankerville) was paid £12 Scots for his one (£1) but for some reason, Janet MacCullough was allowed the life rent of hers.

The mort cloth was made of black material, usually with a fringe, and there were usually two, a best and a second best, so that people might choose whichever was within their means. Maintaining them in good condition involved some expense, however. In 1731, the minister was instructed to “buy two yards and a half Cloath with lynning (lining) conformat” for one of the mort cloths, costing a total of £26.7/- (Scots) or £2.3.11d stg., so there cannot have been much profit for the poor that year. In 1822/3, relining a mort cloth cost 18/- stg., and in 1842 a bag for it cost 3/6 stg.

Nevertheless, the mort cloth did help the poors’ funds. Like the mort bell, the income from it depended on the number of deaths, and it also depended on which cloth was the most used. An idea of what income it provided appears in the records – in 1771 for instance, it raised 14/-; in 1833, £1.10/-. In 1826 the charge for the best cloth had risen to 5/- a time while the second best was for 3/6 stg. In addition, it was stated that “if it be required to give either of the Mortcloths to be sent to another Parish he (Kirk Officer) is to accompany it and to charge four pence for every mile. He is to give to the Treasurer immediately after the funeral payment for the Mortcloth to be added to the poors’ funds.”

Latterly, it appears that the mort cloth was kept in the grave-digger’s shed and just put over the coffin at the churchyard gate. (3) One was certainly used at a funeral at the Old Parish Church this century and the last one was found in the loft of that church in 1948 and was burnt by the former minister’s widow as an old rag.

Mortifications and legacies sometimes came to the poor in the form of meal, and sometimes as money. Early in the 1700's, John Forrester of Dunskeath mortified five bolls of bear to the poor of the parish and this was distributed to them in the kiln of Culnald. When food was often of greater use than money, it is not surprising that in 1731, the Kirk Treasurer "reported that he had bought a Chest for keeping the poors' meal, containing 8 bolls and an half, and paid three firlots 2 pecks for the same;" and that same year the Session distributed 5 bolls 2 pecks of oatmeal to the poor of the parish.

On one occasion, however, the Session converted meal to money. This happened in 1730 when the treasurer reported that he had sold 2 bolls of bear for ready money that went into the poors' box. This meal had been collected in the neighbouring parishes of Kilmuir Easter and Logie Easter, showing that assistance came from outside as well as inside the parish.

In 1791, Mrs Gair of Dam made a mortification of £20 to be used for the poor of the parish with the name of Gair, and in the early 1800's, Anne Taylor of Castle Craig who was secretly married to Mr Ross of Nigg, left £100 to the poor. This was a remarkably forgiving gesture on her part after the treatment she had received at the hands of the Kirk Session when they thought her child illegitimate. Both these funds experienced strange turns of fortune, which are fully dealt with by Rev J R Martin in his "Church Chronicles of Nigg," but both the Gair and Ross funds are still in existence and contributing to voluntary agencies for the elderly and less fortunate.

Fines were another source of income. These were imposed by the Session for improper behaviour and went partly to pay Kirk officials but anything that was over went to the poors' money. The scale of fines was laid down officially and brought in a fair income.

In the early 1800's, Col. Ross of Nigg gave fines he received for impounded cattle to Nigg Kirk Session for the use of the poor, which makes one wonder whether he himself imposed fines or whether this was a form of compensation which he exacted for the keep of strayed beasts.

These were the usual methods of raising money but, in addition, the heritors might be called upon to help, something they were usually most unwilling to do. Admittedly, they did give meal and money as needed, but there was a definite lack of enthusiasm.

There was one way of helping the poor to help themselves and this was by authorized begging. After the '45, the Presbytery were very concerned about the ravages of the rebels "whereby the poor in the country may be brought to very straightening circumstances" and consequently they ordered all Kirk Sessions to summon their "begging poor" to special meetings when proper certificates were to be given to those, and only those who they found to be "indigent and unable to earn their bread by labour." These certificates were to show the extent of their indigence and the number of their dependants and were to last for a year, after which they had to re-apply for their renewal. (1)

At the same time, the Presbytery instructed ministers to tell their congregation "not to encourage idle beggars by giving alms to any beggar whatsoever who has not a certificate." (1) In 1757, the Synod passed an Act, "appointing the several Sessions to distribute badges to the poor of their respective parishes that vagrant beggars may be discouraged and the poor ... having attended at this time by appointment, badges were accordingly given them conform to a list made out." This extract from the Kirk Session records of the parish of Tarbat applied to the parish of Nigg as well and shows how a parish's own beggars might beg with the blessing and protection of the Kirk Session within the parish bounds, while preventing other beggars from doing so.

There is no direct reference in the Nigg Session records to the issue of begging badges, just the indirect one from the Tarbat records and the known fact this was the custom in the Presbytery. Several references to beggars in the poors' lists occur and presumably these were the ones who had been authorized. The importance of authorization in the form of badges is clear when one remembers that in 1682 parish constables had been ordered to arrest all "sturdie begers" and those without means to live who would not take up any trade or occupation. (4-M.224) This applied to the unauthorized beggars – having one's badge was a protection as well as an authorization.

The Statistical Account of 1793 reported that the poor connected with the Associate Church received no public charity as that church's weekly collections were used for another purpose and as a result, "their only resource, therefore, on which they depended for subsistence is begging from house to house." This shows an approval of begging; it also shows that in order to receive parish charity at that date, one had to belong to the right church.

In all these various ways, money for the poor was gathered in for them, or by them. Beggars kept what they got for themselves while all the rest was kept in the poors' funds – but unfortunately there were some vagaries in its use.

The chapter on church buildings tells of the erection of the poors' loft in the Old Church, with the original intention of setting it apart for their use. The poors' money was used to build it but in the end, the need for the Session to square their accounts caused them to let the pews, or possibly sell them outright. (3) What is not clear is whether this income from the loft went back to the poor specifically, or into general funds, or was swallowed up in paying for the loft. Whichever it was, there is no mention in the poors' money of money from the loft, built with funds raised for behoof of the poor.

There was another abuse of the poors' money. Because there were no banks in those days, these funds were frequently regarded as an unofficial bank and it became customary to lend out to various people money that rightly belonged to the poor. It was usual to put an IOU in the poors' box and to pay interest on the loan, but when the poor got so little it does seem very wrong that money meant for them was lent to those with so much more. It also meant that when an urgent need for repayment of loans arose, such as famine years, it was usually at a time when it was all the more difficult to repay it.

There are frequent references to this practice. In 1678, 500 merks mortified for the poor (possibly of Cromarty) were lent to Clunes of Dunskeath (4-M.74); in 1705 a man paid in to the Session £6.8.6d which he had had of the poors' money and was discharged, while another managed to return £28 out of £32 due. In 1729 the Session had to start a legal process to get back money from Ross of Ankerville which he had borrowed and could not pay. As a result, he issued a bond assigning the rents of Ballachraggan to the Session for three years, to be paid every Whitsun. (3)

Even members of the Kirk Session borrowed from the poor. It appears that in 1729 Andrew Fearn, one of the elders, had borrowed money at a time when there was a good deal out at interest. But he paid his debt, and did so with interest, in the proper manner, which is more than can be said for one of the ministers of Nigg.

Rev Patrick Grant came to Nigg when it was split by a secession with no one to preach and no Kirk Session. The only responsibility left was that of the poor, a responsibility made virtually impossible by the lack of collections. The heritors who bore some responsibility for his being there in face of local opposition, came to his rescue with a loan of £50, from the interest of which he was to look after the poor. He seems to have lent this money to himself and paid interest intermittently as and when required, so that by the famine year of 1782/3 when the poors' money was urgently needed and all those who had loans were being asked to repay them, he had to account to the heritors for a total of £65.15/-. (3) He died in 1788, in debt to the tune of £401 stg. so it is not surprising that the poor had not been receiving their due.

And having collected funds, the next matter was distribution. As has already been said, the first call on church moneys was for running costs such as salaries of the Session Clerk and Kirk Officer. These always came first in the accounts. Thereafter what was left was divided among the needy – as the Session minutes put it in 1705, the poor were given help "according to their relative necessities and what the Box would spare." A little money was always kept back each year as the start of a new fund, but it can have been of little value, as the amount was usually made up of Harper's dytes or doits, the smallest of all the coins and practically worthless, as well as bad copper and impassable money.

The annual distribution day was notified in church beforehand, when the names on the poors' list were checked and there is no doubt that extreme poverty had to exist for anyone to qualify.

The numbers of the poor fluctuated considerably. In 1788 there were sixteen names on the list who shared 8/- between the lot of them, all that was left after paying salaries. Ten years later there were forty-three with the annual distribution a "scanty pittance" ranging for 3/- to 10/-. (5) In 1805, fifty-one people shared £12 between them, and in 1836 sixty-two names were on the list, receiving from 4/- to 10/- each. (6)

As already said, there was a time when the members of the Associate (Secceeding) Church did not receive any charity from parish funds, but the Nigg Kirk Sessions' accounts in 1837 show that by that date at any rate they obtained parish help, even if on a lower scale – the parish church poor received 4/- each, while nineteen Secceeders were given 2/- each, in addition to meal. The following year the two groups were given 6/- and 3/6 respectively.

Generally speaking, the able-bodied poor got no help, at least until ill-health was added to poverty. The poors' list of 1830 in the Nigg Kirk Session accounts make this plain: the names, including four Secceeders are listed, but alongside them in pencil are comments like, "Able to work," "Offered 6d. a day for work," "Have an able family," "Stout person living with her," "Should not receive – has an able family," and two names have "Not admitted" alongside them. It appears that in this case, even after the Session had stringently examined the applicants and their Clerk had written their names in the book, someone else went over them even more stringently. Could it have been the minister?

Six years later, the New Statistical Account said that the Kirk Session "did not take any concern in the division of what is called the poors' funds." This seems odd as it was still one of their duties at that date and one can only assume that perhaps the minister or someone else preferred to do it themselves. If the foregoing comments are anything to go by, it was being strictly done.

The terrible famine of 1694-1701 had already been mentioned, but famines were frequent and it was at such times that the Kirk Session really came into its own and in caring for the poor carried out the duties of a local authority. There was a famine in 1708, and another in 1801 when the poor of the parish were suffering so badly that the heritors were moved to contribute ten bolls of meal. There was a further one in 1837 when the Session spent £3.7.11d. on meal for the poor, and there were other crop failures and partial failures besides.

But another dreadful famine was the Black Year which would have been even worse without potatoes which had been introduced by then, fortunately. This was the time when the heritors were trying to get the poors' money back from the minister, Patrick Grant. It was food, not money, that the people needed, but money was required to pay for meal which the Government was sending north, and so great was the size of the task that the Kirk Session formed a committee of local people to decide on the measures to be taken.

The Black Year produced the highest-ever total of poor. There were 113 heads of households on the poors' list which meant a total of 163 people, plus two families which for some reason were otherwise unspecified. All of these were destitute.

There was a habit at that time of calling the poor "objects of charity" and the term was used in this list. To start with, the 113 objects of charity were given 2/6; then from that number were selected "forty greater objects" to receive a further 2/- each; and the balance of the available money went to "still the greater objects." It is horrifying to ponder what must have been the circumstances of "still the greater objects." All the needy in the parish were included in this poors' list of 1783, irrespective of which church they attended, although at this date, as already said, the members of the Secceeding Church usually relied on begging, and certainly two of those listed are described as beggars.

Two of the most active on the local committee were Lord Ankerville's factor and Hugh Rose of Aitnoch. They helped to organize the distribution of the Government meal which was delivered to Cromarty – "There are immediately expected to Cromarty twenty-eight bolls and one firlot of meal, sent by the Barons of His Majesty's Exchequer for the use of the poor of this parish (Nigg) to be sold to them at eight shillings and eight pence the eight stone." The meal had to be fetched from Cromarty first of all before the task of dividing it out began.

This famine year prompted Naomi, Lady Pitcalnie, to write a touching letter which gives a vivid impression of the situation, as well as expressing her concern for the poor: "There is nothing so scarce and Ill to be got as meal and Flower (flour) and what we get Bad and Bread so very Bad and the Size so small that it is of no service in a Family, and the Cays (cause) of the Poore is most Lamentable so that to any feeling heart it is most distressing." (7)

At other times various people on the poors' list might ask for immediate help if they were in special need and could not wait for the annual distribution day to come round. And help was usually forthcoming. One poor man sought help in 1706 and was given not only 1 boll of victual but the Session also undertook to maintain one of his children for a year, which was a very practical piece of assistance.

That same year a firloft of victual was given to another man, “he being a poor Sick man,” and shortly thereafter, 3 firlofts of victual and 2/- was given to “a great object of Charity, being almost blind and his wife confined to her Bed those several years.” In 1729, ten pence of the income of Little Bell (mort bell) was given “to a poor indigent person.”

When there was no way of insuring one’s self against fire, here again the Kirk Session might step in with practical help to those who had suffered through such a disaster. In 1706, 20/- Scots was given to a man due to his “loss by fire” though the loss is not specified, while in 1730 the Session contributed 1/- stg. to a man “who had his house consumed by fire.”

And there were other practical ways in which the church cared for the poor, such as the following:-

- 1729 “Paid 2/- stg. to a poor scholar to buy him a Bible.” This occurs also in 1731 when they bought a Bible for Jean Munro, a poor scholar – a Bible being a school text book.
- 1782 “Bot. To Dond. Cilm, cloth 5/-.”
“Pd. William – for mending his clothes 1/-.”
- 1820 Money given to a “gentle beggar.”
- 1822 Two sailors with a pass, 6d.
Coals for 6 poor, £1.2.10d.
Coals for 2 people, 9/4.
School fees for poor children £1.
- 1836 1/6 given to a “gentle beggar.”
- 1837 14/6 given to clothe a poor idiot in the parish (almost certainly Angus from Sutherland, a gentle soul who was given a home at Nigg House).
To Widow Campbell to repair her house, 8/-.
- 1842 Coals for the poor, 17/6 (9d. per cwt.)

In addition, caring for the poor included helping to bury them or their dependants:

- 1782 “To poor object to help bury her daughter 1/-.”
- 1822 “Christy Greasach’s funeral expense 16/6.”

But a cross entry in the Old Kirk records shows that a strict, not to say harsh, attitude prevailed – while Widow Munro’s funeral cost 19/- in 1836, they “received from Wdw. Munro’s effects, 19/-.” But when money was desperately short this approach to parish help was understandable if they were to be able to help all who needed it. They were still paying for paupers’ graves and coffins until 1837 or later.

Care for the aged poor also appears. In 1827 the Kirk Session paid a widow’s funeral costs, someone for mending her house, and a woman for attending on her. Odd though it is, this is the order of events given in the Session minutes.

And even more surprisingly, they provided old people’s housing: in 1847, the Session paid for two widow’s houses at £3.10/- each.

Orphans were a special concern and in 1782 there is an entry in the list, “Paid the three orphans out of the box 3/-.” Foundlings were cared for by the Session though this meant getting the heritors to pay for their maintenance, however unwillingly. They were obliged to do so about 1820 when the Court of Session ordered them to pay ailment for a foundling in the parish.

Where there was a very poor widower, his motherless child might come under the Session's care. In 1731, they paid three pecks of victual to William McAllesteraig's wife, to complete the six firlots due to her in payment of "half a year's nursing of a motherless child belonging to Thomas Roy of Culnald who was so poor and destitute himself as that he could not bestow upon nursing his child."

It has already been said how parishes collected for each other in necessity and how Nigg received meal thus collected; but Nigg also contributed to the less fortunate of other parishes as well. 1/- stg. was allocated to a man in the parish of Logie in 1729 after his house was burnt, and two years later "by a recommendation from the Presbytery for charity" they gave 6d. to a man also in Logie. With all the calls upon them, it is remarkable that they did so much.

The Communion season was always a great occasion but it was also a great expense in giving hospitality to visitors who flocked in from other parishes. In itself, it was a cause of poverty as the services lasted the better part of a week when no work was done and no money was earned, a time therefore of high costs and no income. This may be the reason why Communion, especially early on, was not held very frequently.

Nevertheless, when they did occur fairly large collections were taken and were largely distributed on the spot. The Communion collections in 1729, for instance, amounted to £86.14.8 Scots (about £7.5/-) "whereof there was distributed to the common beggars on Monday after the sacrament £6.8.0 (10/8) and sundry godly poor people £5.4.8 (9/-) and to the poors' box effeirent (equivalent) to the daily collection for the poor of the parish £7.4/- (12/-) and £36 Scots (£3) appointed to the godly poor of the several parishes within the bounds of the Presbytery and the surplus was distributed among the godly poor of the parish." There is an interesting differentiation between "common beggars" and the "godly poor." Almost half this collection went outside the parish on top of entertaining the visitors as well, so that poverty was probably increased rather than alleviated by the Sacraments.

Under special circumstances, certificates of poverty could be issued by a Kirk Session. If poor people wished to raise an action or to appeal to the Court of Session but could not do so due to poverty, they were authorized by an Act of Sederunt to get themselves put on the roll of pauper litigants. The one thing necessary for this was to get a certificate from the Kirk Session of their parish testifying three things: that they were poor and unable to defray law expenses; that their moral character was irreproachable; that they were not known to be a litigious person. (8)

A road closure by Mr Murray of Westfield (Pitcalzean) is mentioned in the chapter on transport and it was over this that six men came before the Kirk Session asking for certificates to enable them to sue Mr Murray in forma pauperis before the Supreme Court for the oppression he had been exercising towards them. In each case they declared before the Session that they had no property "excepting the little old furniture in the house." It appears that the Session agreed to their request. But one wonders what would have happened had they wanted to sue a member of the Session or a heritor on good terms with them.

(As late as 1918 a soldier, stationed in Nigg, asked permission to sue in forma pauperis. (3))

The fracas that resulted after Mr Murray's road closure in 1831 brought charge and counter charge between the heritors and the Session until the Session prepared a statement to be presented to the Sheriff making various points, including the following:-

"The conduct of the heritors towards the poor of the parish is brought to the Sheriff's notice. When the heritors during the past twelve years have collected about £54,000 from the parish as rents, they have not given more than £40 to the poor with the exception of the ailment of a foundling child (already mentioned) ... This £40 was procured under threat of assessment and if this year the heritors have assessed themselves as they say, in the sum of £25 for the support of forty-nine poor, their list, this is because they know that a compulsory assessment would have been much greater."

According to Rev J Martin, all this showed that the support of the poor was getting beyond the resource of the church. Collections came largely from people who were poor themselves and were never enough. The heritors, being non-resident, gave little to the collections and preferred to assess themselves voluntarily for as little as possible. (3)

The NSA, written in 1836, said that at that date there was no fund for the poor except £20 left by the late Mrs Gair of Nigg (Dam) – which is strange as Mrs Ross’s legacy of £100 should also have been mentioned. The NSA added, “The heritors have of late been induced to give £30 a year to the poor. There seems no indisposition on the part of the poor to take.”

The following extracts from a Report on the sanitary conditions of Easter Ross in 1841 gives a picture of pauperism at that date:

“The number of real paupers is known to be double that of those who actually apply for relief. Delicacy, or a species of pride, or commiseration for those who are more depressed and wretched than themselves, prevents the former from becoming candidates for the miserable pittance doled out to them by the Kirk Session. Indeed, from the scantiness of the funds, it often happens that importunate applicants are sent away unrelieved ...

“It must not be supposed that poverty is confined to the enrolled paupers. It may be often found in the turf cabin of the lower sort of crofters, whose few acres of sterile ground are not sufficient after the most patient cultivation to yield even a supply of potatoes, the only or principal article of their ailment. How are these, when infirm or old, enabled to pay their rent, except perhaps by begging in a quarter where they are not known?” This reads rather differently than the NSA’s comments. The Report continues,

“The only other resource” (apart from Kirk Session pauper funds) “is mendicancy. The houses of almost all the respectable inhabitants of the district are open to vagrant beggars. Considerable sums are often collected in this manner by the poor. Some respectable families in the country contribute largely to the vagrant poor – much more so than they would have to do were a legal assessment in force. The expense of supplying wandering mendicants falls most heavily and disproportionately on the benevolent and kind hearted.”

Nevertheless the number driven to vagrancy was fairly small, “but those suffering from want of the means of proper and sufficient diet very considerable. Kirk collections are not sufficient and not applied wholly to the support of the poor. It appears that at certain seasons the district is overrun with clamorous vagrants from other quarters; - convinced that if the alms of the parish were given to its own poor, they would suffice but a first step would be to prevent the intrusion of beggars of any description from elsewhere.” (9)

Proclamations were constantly made in the newspapers against vagrants, but without a police force to implement them, they were mere idle threats. (9) This then was the position, not just in Nigg, but in the whole of Easter Ross; and throughout the country it became manifestly clear that the system was unsatisfactory, that the burden of caring for the poor was too much now for the heritors and Kirk Session, and thus things changed. After the introduction of the Poor Law in 1845, parochial boards took over the responsibility of caring for the poor, assessing property owners to produce funds for their work. The church had no further direct responsibility after that, but they continued to administer the Ross and Gair funds in Nigg, and still do.

Almost the first thing that the Parochial Board had to face as a result of this reorganization was to pay their proportion towards the building of the Easter Ross Poorhouse. A minute in 1850 shows that the sum due came to £283.8.3, with interest from 30th June 1849, but the Rev David Fraser had an inspiration about how to solve the problem. The Ross legacy was lying in the bank and had grown to £180 and Mr Fraser proposed that the interest should be given to the parochial board and the capital lent to them at 5% interest to be paid to the minister and used in terms of the legacy. This highly improper proposal was agreed and the heritors doubtless breathed a sigh of relief. Rev J Martin chronicles the vagaries of this action in “Church Chronicles of Nigg.”

Expensive though the Poorhouse may have seemed to the heritors, it was a dreaded and degrading institution, feared by all. It was a bitter thing for a respectable person to be taken there “in a ramshackle conveyance provided by the Parish Council” and at least one minister tried to do what he could about this. The Rev D C Gollan of the United Free Church at the beginning of this century would not allow this indignity to add to the misery already experienced, and he used to hire a carriage and go with the old body to the Poorhouse and see them settled in. (10)

Illegitimate children of the poor were born in the Poorhouse – a domestic servant in 1918 had her baby there, a sad and debasing start to any life. (11)

Before moving on to the work of the Parish Council one must mention something about the distribution of the Ross and Gair legacies under the new system. As said, the church continued to distribute them and the extra money they provided was welcome indeed to those who received it. In 1877, for instance, these legacies provided 8/- each to nine people, one of whom was the mother of a dwarf. At this date, also, there is mention of Lady Anne Stewart's bounty, giving 7/- each to eight people. In 1895, when the interest of Mrs Ross's legacy was very small, the minister, Rev John Fraser, put in 21/- himself so as not to curtail the list of the poor – a change from the attitude of his predecessor, Rev Patrick Grant.

As said in the fishing chapter, herring fishing was running down at the end of the 19th century and the result was great poverty, especially in the fisher communities. The 1897-8 Valuation Roll gives the following numbers of paupers:

| | |
|---|----|
| Shandwick: | 10 |
| Nigg Ferry (Castle Craig and Westfield crofts): | 4 |
| Rest of the parish: | 5 |

This shows that fourteen paupers came from areas where the fishing recession had hit hardest whereas in the landward areas, with farm work available, the position was not so severe.

The minutes of the Parish Council of Nigg exist for the years 1916-17 and show how the poor, and others were cared for. In 1916, the Council consisted of Rev S M Johnston, U F Church, Rev N D Mackay, Established Church, Robert Mackenzie, Lower Bayfield, and John Ross, carpenter, Carse of Bayfield, so at least there was a 50% church influence still. A list of Resident Registered Poor was compiled, followed by the Lunatic Poor, and the income needed was worked out.

Once again, it is clear that the greatest poverty existed in the fisher communities, and this list makes it clear how often ill health contributed to poverty:

Shandwick had 3 blind people, receiving 2/- to 2/6 per week
 7 "not able bodied" receiving 2/6 to 3/- per week
 1 "ill health" receiving 2/6 per week
 1 cripple receiving 1/6 per week
 1 "weak mind" receiving 2/6 per week
 1 dumb receiving 2/- per week
 3 widows with young children, receiving 2/- to 6/- per week

Nigg Ferry had 1 "debility" receiving 3/- per week
 1 "not able bodied" receiving 3/6 per week
 1 old age pensioner receiving 10/- per week

Upper Westfield 1 "ill health" receiving 3/6 per week

In addition there were three Lunatic Poor, boarded out at home, all of them epileptics, receiving from 2/- to 4/- per week. To cope with all this work, the Parish Council worked out the needed income in 1916 thus:

| | |
|--------------------------|------|
| Outdoor relief | £230 |
| Lunatic poor | 150 |
| Poorhouse expense | 80 |
| Salaries, collector, etc | 70 |
| Other payments | 34 |
| | £564 |
| Deduct Estimated income | 244 |
| Sum needed | £320 |

To raise the sum needed, they reckoned that a rate of 1/8 would be required.

Accounts paid included:

| | | | |
|---|-----|----|---|
| Board in Poorhouse for a quarter | £21 | 15 | 0 |
| Interment of Dnd. -, a pauper | 1 | 6 | 0 |
| Clothing for a poor family | 3 | 2 | 9 |
| Clothing and boots for a poor family | 1 | 16 | 6 |
| Clothing, boots and ailment for a poor family | 6 | 19 | 0 |
| Boots for a girl | - | 9 | 0 |
| Clothing for Mrs - | - | 7 | 3 |
| Boots for a girl | - | 10 | 6 |
| Boots for a boy | - | 18 | 6 |
| Board in Asylum, one quarter | 20 | - | 6 |

When the new cemetery was opened at Chapelhill in 1922, the Parish Council fixed the fees for burial, adding, "In the free ground no fee will be made for the interment of any pauper belonging to the Parish of Nigg. A fee of 3/3 will be made for the interment of any pauper belonging to another parish."

Parishes could claim for paupers from other parishes, and their income included Government grants, which in 1916 provided £48 for lunatics.

By 1925 the poor got from 5/- to 12/6 a week although one woman in Nigg got 24/-. It is very noticeable that by far the greatest number of paupers were women.

Responsibility for some paupers might be passed from hand to hand. In one case, the Medical Officer of Health visited two mental defectives and declared that these two pauper children were congenital imbeciles but should be trained and educated under the Education Authority. That Authority, however, refused saying the children were therefore certified so as to enable a claim to be made on the Government, in other words, this was the most economic way of dealing with them.

In 1926 a man claimed on behalf of two illegitimate grandchildren of his, who were living with him. As a result, they were offered accommodation in the Poorhouse which he resisted, and as a result other relief was refused. While it seems terrible nowadays to think of children being sent to the poorhouse, this was not unknown even comparatively recently. In 1928 two children of a widower were taken there, and their father who was able-bodied was asked to help pay for them there and as late as 1938, two children from the infant class at Nigg School were sent to the Poorhouse for a month. (12)

The "legal poor" were treated free in the Ross Memorial Hospital which was supported by voluntary contributions, and it was for this reason that the Nigg Parish Council gave £5 in response to the Lord Lieutenant's appeal for that institution in 1929.

The Parish Councils gave way to County Councils in May 1930, at which time there were the following poor in the parish:

| | | | |
|-------------|----|-----------------|---|
| Shandwick | 10 | Wester Rarichie | 1 |
| Balnabruach | 1 | Ankerville | 1 |
| | | Nigg Hill | 1 |
| | 11 | | 3 |

This shows that the pattern of fishing poverty was still continuing with eleven poor in these communities, and three in the rest of the parish. In addition there were seven in the Asylum and five boarded-out lunatics, a horrifying total in such a small parish.

Although it is mentioned in the chapter on education, it is relevant to say here how poverty affected education.

The Nigg School log books refer to this in various ways. Although education became both free and compulsory under the 1872 Education Act, books were not free and in 1877 the log says, "A hardship bitterly experienced here is the parents' inability to provide books ... for the children. A number of the poorer children attend wanting (lacking) books." The following year it was, "... the parents' reply is that they cannot afford to supply them."

Poverty also meant that the children were inadequately clad so that they either did not go to school, or if they did they became very ill with the cold. Again an entry for 1877 says, "Ferry children come out very badly and a number of them is destitute of proper clothing." Not surprisingly then the entry in 1881, "Ferry children unwell all winter." In November 1890, "A number of the younger children absent owing to colds caught through imperfect cladding." In 1900 the log refers to "a few infants who on account of poverty and travelling long distances to school are not always in a fit state to receive instruction and soon show signs of exhaustion and weariness."

Thus poverty affected their education and lack of education affected their future chances, and poverty continued to beget poverty – although it is astonishing what remarkable families were brought up in these circumstances. What is surprising, however, is that as late as November 1942, Pitcalnie School log shows that three children were absent through lack of clothes.

It is changed days now, however, and poverty no longer exists. It is good to know that no one needs to undergo the scrutiny of the Kirk Session or the Parish Council to enable them to have a little help, however well these bodies carried out this task when it was entrusted to them.

Poverty - References:-

All information on help given by the Kirk Session to the poor comes from Nigg Old Church Session Minutes; that to do with the Parish Council assistance comes from the Nigg Parish Council Minutes 1916-30.

- 1 "Church Life in Ross and Sutherland," Rev Colin MacNaughton
- 2 "Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland," Hugh Miller
- 3 "Church Chronicles of Nigg," Rev J R Martin
- 4 "Old Ross-shire and Scotland," W MacGill. Numbers given.
- 5 Statistical Account
- 6 New Statistical Account
- 7 Pitcalnie Estate papers
- 8 "Memorabilia Domestica," Rev D Sage
- 9 Sanitary Report 1841
- 10 "Leaves of Remembrance," the life of Rev D C Gollan
- 11 Baptismal Register of the U P Congregation
- 12 Nigg School log book

Appendix to Poverty:-

1783 Poors' List:-

Dunskaitness, 12

Wm McAlasteraig, bedridden and wife and child
 Effie Greasach, single
 Widow of Dond. McLaeman and 3 children
 Widow of And. McLaeman and 2 children
 Widow of Alex. McAndie, single

Balnabruach, 3

Widow McComash, single
 Marion Vaus, ditto
 John McLaeman, old, ditto

Pitcalzion, 6

(This included the fishing villages of Balnabruach, which has already been mentioned as well, and Red House, both on the Pitcalzean Estate.)
 Widow Greasach and child
 Widow McComash, single, lame
 John Noble
 Kath. McCandy and a child, sickly

Rait, 4

Alex Hosack and wife
 Wm. Fletcher and wife

Tore, 13

Dun. Davidson's widow, single
 John Gallie's widow and 2 children and another child of ...
 Anne Ceanach and a child
 Walter McComash's widow
 Dond. Munro and wife, both bedrid.
 Anne Sutherland, single
 John Noble's two children

Dam, 1

An orphan at Donald Mackenzie's

Culnald, 18 + a family

Margaret Gair, widow, single
 Jean Greasach, Tore, single
 Donald Calm, foolish
 Christian McLaeman, ditto
 Angus Mackenzie's widow and 2 children
 John Dingwall
 Janet Gow, single
 John Roy, his wife and 5 children
 Kath Vaus at the shore, lame
 Isobel McKinlay, Balintonie, old, single
 Thos. McWilliam's family

Corncairn, 36

Christian Toy in Corncairn, single, old
 John McFinlay there
 Widow Vass in the Strath, single
 Malcolm Ross, there, bedrid. and under a cancer
 Kath. Ross, widow and 2 children
 Kat. Ross, widow, single
 Margt. McEan, allopicken, single
 Janet Mcleod, allopicken, single
 Marion Sutherland, widow, Pitcalnie, single
 Dond. Fraser, a lame boy
 Christian Manson, Drumduile, single
 John Roy, Strath, single
 Thos. Ross's widow, Strath, and a child
 Walter Sutherland's widow and a child
 Geo. Greasach and daughter, Culderary
 Mary Taylor
 Mary Munro in Corn Cairn and a child
 Malcolm Christie and 3 children
 Widow McInoul in the Hill of Nigg and 5 children

Kindeace (Bayfield), 7

Kath. McEaan, lame
 Janet McAlaster, Kindeace, single, bedrid.
 Isobel Miller, there, single
 Isobel Bane, single
 Kath Vaus there, single
 Isobel Graham, single, sickly
 Janet Munro, widow there, single

Ankerville, 29 + a family

Widow Cunningham, single
 Marion Roy, bedrid. for a year
 Anne Roy, single
 Anne Ross, single
 Dond. Roy's widow, single
 Wm. Gallie's widow and 2 children
 Widow of David Ross and 2 children
 Dond. McCulloch, Knockbreak, old
 John McEan, old man, bedrid.
 James McIntyre's widow, single
 Kath Roy, single
 And. McInnes's widow, single
 Janet Stephen and sister, old
 Wm. McCulloch and 2 children
 Geo. Henry, lame
 Widow McConnachy, single
 Wm. Fraser, sickly
 Helen Bane and a child
 Dond. Roy and wife, both old
 Alex. Munro and family
 Helen Ross, widow, single

Rarichie, 15 and a family

Al. McEan, single
Dond. Hosack and wife
Walter Ross, blind and family
Widow McEan, an object, bedridden
Andrew McKenzie, wife and 5 children
Betty Smart, single
Christ. McRobert and Daughter, bedrid.

Easter Rarichie, 11

John Smart, single, old
Kath. McIntyre, widow with a sickly child
Helen Gow, single, sickly, bedrid.
Margaret Ross, old and poor, single
Geo. McAndrew, old and weak, single
Widow Henry, old
Dond. Ross, lame
Janet Greasach, single
Kath. McWilliam, single
Widow McCurchie, old

Shandwick, 11

Dond. Skinner, weak and old
Helen Skinner, bedrid. eleven years
Helen Skinner, an old widow
Isobel Oag, lame
Christian McEan, single
Chris Tarlar, single
Donald McCurish, lame
Margt. Skinner, old, single
Anne McAlasteraig, diseased
Anne Skinner, single
Janet MacCurchie, a beggar

All of these were destitute, but a breakdown of the list shows 7 lame, 11 bedridden, one with cancer and one for eleven years; one "old, single, almost bedridden;" four sickly and one diseased; one orphan, two foolish, one blind and two beggars.

Health and Sickness

While sickness could occur without any other agency, it is clear that poverty was a major factor and the poor suffered greatly from illnesses of all sorts. Lack of medical care meant that conditions that would be cured nowadays went untended, epileptics were regarded as lunatics, such people could not earn a living and poverty resulted, with an ever-increasing build-up of ill-health.

There are two particularly good sources of information about this. The poors' list of 1783 shows that in that year, admittedly one of famine, there were seven lame people, eleven bedridden – one for eleven years and one with cancer –, one person described as “old, single and almost bedridden,” four sickly, one diseased, two “foolish,” and one blind. There were others as well on the sick list, but taking those listed along with the 1794 population figure of 1133, they produce a percentage of 2.3, approximately.

There is a big gap until another comprehensive list appears and that is in the Parish Council minutes of 1916 which showed three blind people, eight “not able bodied,” one cripple, one “weak mind,” one dumb and with an ulcer, two “ill health,” one suffering from debility, and three lunatic poor. (2) Taking the 1911 population figure of 827, this produces a very similar percentage of ill folk in the community to that of 1783.

Nor is this a total of the ill in the parish at that time; it is the figure of those appearing in the poors' lists only, and in the earlier list only the most critical examples have been cited.

In 1841, James Cameron, a surgeon in Tain, prepared a report on the sanitary condition and general economy of Tain and Easter Ross, and some of his information is relevant here. (3) To start with, he was very concerned about housing. The chief defect was lack of ventilation because the windows, often made wholly of wood, were far too small and so seldom left open that “the want of a free circulation of air, besides predisposing to disease, is most prejudicial to invalids, and especially to the bedridden. He appreciated, however, that the reason for these closed windows was the need to conserve warmth, and indeed every possible gap was kept closed.

Lack of cleanliness was a great problem. Even the most respectable houses often had heaps of stinking garbage, mixed with various sorts of filth, accumulating nearby and loading “the air with unwholesome effluvia.” Dughills and cesspools at the door, and cattle under the same roof as the occupants, were common in farm houses and cottages, although this practice was beginning to die out, perhaps due to the cholera outbreak of 1832.

The fisher folk had for long had “miserable cabins of the lowest description, receptacles of filth and nauseating effluvia, but recently there has been a great improvement, with those on the shores of Nigg and Fearn especially being often well and comfortably built, many indeed being superior to those of the rural population.” This was due to the herring boom that had occurred not so long before, Nevertheless, many of the huts were “mere hovels, with scarcely any provision for admitting light and fresh air.”

James Cameron realized that the health of the fisher folk could not be improved until these matters were put right and the people learnt the importance of cleanliness, though he noted that there was a tendency in the right direction, which he welcomed as “More attention to these matters would make disease less frequent and less fatal among them.”

Oddly enough, he found that though the fisher folk were more exposed to damp wet than any other group, they seemed to suffer little from it, probably due to early and continued habit. Farm workers, however, exposed to damp and wet were not careful enough of the consequences, and this combined with the lack of medical aid, caused many young deaths. He believed it was the duty of employers to advise them about changing into dry clothes and not standing about getting chilled.

Poor food played a large part in ill health. Indeed, James Cameron thought that the poor quality and insufficiency of diet – largely potatoes with an occasional herring – caused more illness than the filthiness of both bodies and homes. The poor food “caused disease of the digestive organs, weakened and deteriorated the whole system, making it impossible to resist the simplest contagion. There was indigestion, organic disease of the lungs, liver, spleen and kidneys,” and also of the mesenteric glands, something frequently occurring among children. The

poorest class, in time of scarcity, ate crabs, limpets, periwinkles, cockles, mussels and seaweed. The lack of gardens with vegetables was a glaring defect, and James Cameron felt that this was something else that proprietors should encourage for the sake of health and morals. The very long working hours from 5 am to 6 pm on this very scanty diet did not help good health either. Butcher meat, at 4d to 6d per lb. was hardly ever seen except at weddings and other high days and holidays such as the New Year.

Another wretchedly poor class was the “lower sort of crofter” and among them there were cases of “continued fever” at all seasons but mostly from October till April, and when any epidemic or infectious disease began among them, it spread with fearful rapidity and malignity.

Fevers were the most common disease among the poor, so James Cameron found, though typhus was not often seen. Frequently, however, synochus in its last stage assumed typhoid symptoms and at this stage invariably proved fatal among the poor folk.

He was sure that disease usually spread from town to country. As an instance of this he mentioned that there were three lodging houses in Tain, chiefly occupied by beggars and hawkers in summer. During the week these people went on their rounds in the country districts, returning to Tain on Saturday night, “and they were the means of introducing infectious diseases such as fever, smallpox and measles.”

If these conditions existed as late as 1841, during the reign of Queen Victoria, how much more so must they have done so in earlier years, with proportionate effects on health.

In the earlier days of the Roman Catholic church those who were sick often sought cures by praying to saints, touching relics and making pilgrimages to holy places, but the Reformation swept away all such Popish practices with the result that in the subsequent period people reverted to magic charms and superstitions, a little herbal lore and a considerable increase in witchcraft. This is not to say that these had not existed before, they had; but there was an increase in them when the people lost the tangible elements of the church in which they had had such faith.

People very often resorted to wells for cures, believing that these bubbling sources of water represented life and a spirit and that they had an inner power of their own. So much did they venerate certain wells that early missionaries often dedicated them to saints, and Nigg has two such holy wells, Cormac’s Well near Old Shandwick and John the Baptist’s near Strath of Pitcalnie.

The Well of Health at Shandwick was reckoned to have healing properties, as well as magical ones, and a less well known Well of Health which lay below Dunskaith Castle was also valued for the quality of its water. Those who lived nearby used to walk there on Sundays and thought that a drink of its water in addition to chewing some dulse would keep them fit throughout the coming week. They used to carry water home from it, well into this century, for the same reason. (5)

Another healing well was Tobar na h-iu, just to the west of the Danish Fort. It was overhung by a tree and while the tree stood, the water cured “white swelling.” (6)

In the early days of the 1700’s many diseased people were in the habit of flocking to the well, Sul na ba or Sul ba, which was highly esteemed for its curative powers. The fact is that this well did indeed contain magnesia (7) and most of the other wells were Chalybeate (containing iron) according to James Cameron. A spring at the western end of the mill dam above Culnaha had Chalybeate water of considerable strength and he felt that this might prove of public advantage. Thus though superstition took people to wells in the first place, it was often their genuine health-giving properties that kept them going to them.

But wells could provide another form of cure if the name, Tobar nan geala mora, well of the big leeches, between Wester Rarichie and Cullisse, is anything to go by, (6) and good medical leeches may still be found in Bayfield Loch. (8)

Some strange and unsavoury cures were used, combining superstition and religion, some using black cockerels and others using garters, and more besides. Some were performed by wise women and wise men too, who used a native instinct in conjunction with herbal remedies to help their neighbours. The gully above Wester Rarichie was

particularly good for finding certain herbs but unfortunately no one knows just which were the particular plants that one particularly skilful woman found there. (9)

Doctors there were, but their charges made them prohibitive to the poor people until comparatively recently. From accounts entered by Hugh McFarquhar, surgeon, Tain, for attendance on Mrs Grizell Forbes, Lady Kindeace, the following remedies and costs appear:-

“Tincture of Rhubarb, sp. Lavender, Mendereris Spirit, a mutskin Anemetick spirit, Camamil flowers, oyl of mace, Large glass Sacred Tincture. A vial tincture of caster, Spirement water, Cepholich Drops, Quitting Drops, Cooling Diuretick Salts, Cere Cloath and trimmine ye body, £5. 13 visits and long attendance £10.10/-” (10-M.194). No wonder local help was sought by the common people.

Apart from wise men and women, great reliance was placed on the howdy, just one of the ordinary wives but with some skill and willingness, who attended at births and deaths, and it is said that there were remarkably few cases of sepsis, all things considered.

The bone setter was another man of natural skills and John Matheson from Wester Rarichie Smithy in the late 1800's, was one such, said to have set bones as well as he made whisky though his real trade was blacksmith. He was also said to have been in great demand by the women of Fearn as a midwife. People would go long distances to obtain the help of a bone setter; indeed, if John Matheson were not available, people from the seaboard villages were known to go as far as Evanton, after the opening of the railway line in the 1860's made such a journey feasible.

There is no knowledge of any blood stoppers in Nigg itself, although they certainly existed in the seaboard villages. In fact, it is particularly difficult to find out much about people with the remarkable gift that this was. People seem to think it slightly shameful, smacking of witchcraft, whereas it was a very wonderful power with which they had been endowed, especially when it was virtually impossible to get a doctor or pay them if you got them.

The dependence of the sick on good neighbours is highlighted by an entry in the Associate Church minutes of 1821 when a woman was reported to the Session for being unneighbourly in not visiting a sick neighbour for eight weeks.

But James Cameron in his Report had hard words to say of unqualified help in sickness. According to him, in 1841 the district was considered to be well supplied with medical men but it was also unfortunately “infested by a set of empirics or quacks, and of ignorant midwives, who though they have never received any medical education, nor indeed any education whatever, yet practised largely and lucratively among the country people, pretending to understand the most difficult and complicated cases.” There was local prejudice against doctors and the tendency to encourage and confide in quacks caused many a death and he regarded “this class of impostors” as most mischievous and dangerous. For good measure he added that whenever a doctor was ultimately called to attend any of their patients, his first duty was usually to announce imminent death.

As to howdies, he said the following: “The want of a provision toward woman lying-in is much to be deplored, this important duty being in general intrusted to a set of inexperienced old quacks who call themselves midwives. Death is a frequent consequence of their mode of treatment; and the wives of the district have to thank their constitution and hardy habits that it is not more frequent. It is seldom indeed that medical skill is called in till the manifest symptoms of death have frightened them to try the last resource.” (3)

He also mentions another interesting aspect of illness – “Old persons when attacked by illness, however slightly, generally betake themselves to bed with the expectation and intention of not rising again. This bane custom, which prematurely prostrates strength and causes much inconvenience ought to be discountenanced.” (3)

The fact that he himself was a surgeon or doctor probably influenced James Cameron's rather caustic comments. The fact was that the poor could not afford medical treatment and in many cases, there was no means of getting in touch with them in time to be of help. Roads were virtually non-existent, and poor people had no transport whatsoever. It was James Cameron's understanding that medical men “when they had time” were always ready to advise the poor gratis; unfortunately, illness among the poor did not always coincide with the spare time of “the doctors.”

But James Cameron was aware of the needs of the area, and stressed the urgent need for a Board, which had been proposed, to engage a medical person bound to attend the poor of the parishes when called on to do so. He was also very concerned that there was no institution affording medical aid to the sick poor, the nearest infirmary at that time being Inverness. (It was well into the 20th century before the Ross Memorial Hospital was established at Dingwall where the “legal poor” could be treated free.) As it was, in 1841, among the poorer classes possibly nineteen out of twenty died without having had the benefit of medical advice. (3)

About the same time as James Cameron wrote his Report, the New Statistical Account was written, confirming what he said – nervous disorders, coughs and asthma were the common illnesses, caused largely by damp houses and poor food. The latter two were particularly bad on the north west face of the hill where the sun did not strike till late in the day and where the land was very damp. The fisher folk, though inter-marrying, were a fine-looking people, but suffered from rheumatism and scrofula (King’s Evil), a form of TB affecting the neck glands. (7)

It was not uncommon for people to reach a good old age, varying from seventy to eight-five years, though there were few cases of extraordinary longevity, according to the NSA. Perhaps this was because the best only survived infancy, and if they survived that there was every reason for them to live out a good long life.

Where the NSA and James Cameron differ is on the matter of epidemic diseases, the NSA saying that they were not common while James Cameron mentions many instances of them. There were epidemics of smallpox, measles, fevers of various sorts, and only four years before the Nigg NSA was written which was actually in 1836, there had been the cholera outbreak which had taken a terrible toll both locally and nationally on the eastern coasts.

The NSA also says that there were no blind, deaf or dumb persons in the parish apart from one fatuous individual, Angus from Sutherland who sounds rather charming, preferring a halfpenny to a shilling, delighting in solitary rambling among the tombs, incapable of comprehending one abstract idea and a perfect pattern of innocence, devotion and love to all that was good. He was given a home at Nigg House and clothed by the Kirk Session.

Once again, one is surprised that the NSA reports that there were so few handicapped people when other available records show a high proportion of such cases, especially as epileptics were regarded as lunatics. Could the reason for the lack of figures be that the NSA for Nigg was written by Rev Lewis Rose in 1836, though he had already left the parish by January of that year and is described in Account as “now minister of Duke Street Church, Glasgow?” If he had no access to the figures, it is not surprising that he did not give them.

Many cases involving the sick poor have been mentioned in the chapter on poverty but it is worth repeating the fact that the Session would provide nursing care where needed. In 1827, for instance, they paid a woman for attendance on a sick widow, in addition to mending her house, but to no avail, as later they paid her funeral costs. (1)

Those in need of operations were also helped by the church, who would organize special Sunday collections for such causes. The accounts for 1827 (1) show that such a collection would be carried out, though very probably in Inverness. In the Portmahomack area a similar collection was held in 1780 to enable someone to go to Aberdeen for a cancer operation – that may be a reflection on the transport situation which made a sea journey to Aberdeen a practical proposition for the sick. (11)

Certain aspects of sickness in Nigg deserve special mention and one of these is the cholera outbreak of 1832. Cholera had broken out in India in 1826, gradually spreading westwards until by 1832 it reached France and England. It moved up to the south of Scotland and was brought north to Helmsdale about July of that year by a boat from Prestonpans during the herring fishing. It spread very quickly through the fishing communities of the east coast and came to the parish of Nigg in August.

It did not come unheralded and with plenty of warning of its spread, Nigg had a Board of Health already making preparations at least eight months before cholera broke out in the parish. Their first meeting was on 10th January. They must have been a purely local committee since a Session Minute in August referred to there being no “regularly constituted Board of Health.” The members were Mr Murray of Westfield, Ross, tenant of Rarichie, Brodie of Pitcalnie and Gallie of Shandwick, all of whom must have been very efficient and far-seeing.

Inspectors were appointed to investigate conditions and a meeting was held in January to hear their reports. The Session Clerk, John Swanson, was also clerk to this Board of Health, and his notebook containing the minutes tells us of the arrangements that were made. Thomas Logan and William and William Ross, the inspectors for Dunskaithness and Westfield, were able to give good reports of the cleanliness and health of their area although there were three people in need of bedding and one was ill, but not with cholera. (12)

John Stuart and Alex Hay reported for the Nigg and Culnald district where they had found the people unwilling to remove dunghills to a proper distance from their houses. This was perhaps understandable as dung was a valuable resource, carefully husbanded for the all-important potato crop. (3) Houses at Pitcalnie needed to be white-washed with lime, and a total of thirteen people needed bedclothes but on the whole things were satisfactory. Lime was promised and a subscription opened for blankets and flannel. (12)

At another meeting in January, the committee received reports showing that dunghills had been removed everywhere except at Nigg and Culnald. Mr Swanson, the clerk, was asked to get Mr Taylor of Nigg to use his influence to persuade his people to remove the dunghills, and also he was directed to write to the absentee heritors for subscriptions. At the next meeting on 31st March, flannel was distributed to forty-one people.

On 2nd August, the Kirk Session came into the picture, petitioning one or more JP's to prevent the burial in Nigg churchyard of a Shandwick fisherman who had died of suspected cholera, since carrying infected bodies through the parish might be dangerous. They also ordered that the mortcloth which had been used for this death should be "quarantined" for fourteen days, and its further use for cholera victims was forbidden. (12)

The next meeting of the Board of Health took place after that Session meeting; it was a general gathering of tenants and heritors, with John Munro the Secession minister also present. The Board decided to buy medicines and instruct their inspectors how to use them and also to engage the services of a medical man.

On the 21st August, they decided on further measures for the protection of the parish. A death had occurred at the Whins of Nigg and they decreed that the house should be immediately cleaned and fumigated by the relations, the furniture washed and the clothing burnt, failing which the house itself would be burned by the constables.

Four constables were to be sworn, two for each end of the parish, to be assisted by two pensioners and two other people to watch over the "present seat of the disease" where two patients were being completely isolated. The constables had to make a daily report to John Swanson, the clerk, who had to copy and distribute the rules.

Obviously agreeing with the Session that carrying bodies through the parish was dangerous, and to prevent any ill effects from burials in the churchyard where so many people were wont to gather, the Board decreed that cholera victims from the east end of the parish were to be buried at the old burying ground at Clachcarry (the Shandwick Stone), and at the west point of Dunskaithness for the west end. Some people still speak of the burials at Dunskaithness, and also at Balnabruach (13), and it is thought that some may have been buried below Briar Cottage. (14)

For all the supervision and night work involved, the constables were paid – getting 6d extra for night duty. (12)

By the time of this meeting, however, cholera was raging. On 8th August several cases had appeared in Hilton not far away and the "Inverness Courier" reported, "So great is the terror attendant upon the pestilence that the people can hardly be persuaded to bury those who die of it." Tain threw a "cordon sanitaire" around the infected areas with constables there to prevent anyone who might carry infection from coming in.

On the 15th, the "Courier" reported that the disease was raging, but not severely, a picture which changed dramatically very quickly thereafter. On the 17th, twenty-one cases occurred in Hilton and on the 18th, five deaths. In the few days up to 20th August, twenty-one people died in Hilton and twenty others showed little prospect of recovery. By the 23rd a total of twenty-seven had died there.

The picture was the same in Balintore. Seven died there on the 19th and fifteen on the 22nd, and many more caught it. It was at this point that people took to the fields and put up tents to shelter there and hope to escape infection. Four died on the 24th and one on the 27th, and gradually the position improved.

These villages are outside the parish of Nigg, but are given for comparison. In Inver half the population died and in Portmahomack a fifth. We do not know the exact total of deaths in the parish of Nigg but, though it is spoken of as having suffered greatly, it does appear to have escaped much more lightly than neighbouring areas, and it must be assumed that this was thanks to the foresight of the Nigg Board of Health.

Certainly the areas already mentioned suffered from a lack of medical aid. A letter to the "Courier" dated 20th August complained that no such help was available apart from two visits by Dr Munro of Tain on the 9th and 11th August before the disease really reached its peak. Out of four doctors in Tain only one, Dr Macandie, was really willing to attend cholera patients. Mr Murray, a banker in Tain and a member of the Murray of Westfield family, made an effort to get a doctor and finally sent for one from Inverness. Shortly afterwards, at the request of Mr Macleod of Cadboll, the Government sent a Dr Evans to look after the patients of Portmahomack, Balintore and Shandwick, but by the time he got there the disease was abating anyway.

Remembering that Nigg's Board had bought medicines and instructed their inspectors in their use in early August, one wonders whether one of these inspectors was Charles Ross, described in the "Courier" of 15th August as a very intelligent local man appointed to attend the sick in both villages. His treatment was simple but successful and the people were readier to accept his prescriptions than those of a "regularly bred physician," which was just as well with so few doctors willing to help.

Nevertheless, the parish of Nigg did lose people with cholera during this outbreak. In Shandwick, a fisherman died at the very beginning of the month, as already said, and according to the "Courier" three died on the 19th, although there may have been other deaths in the intervening period. The "Courier" of the 22nd August said of this village, "Although there has been some deaths and new cases here, the disease has not got such a footing in it as the other villages ... this place is in a very clean state in comparison with those of its neighbours." It goes on to say that one of the victims was an outstanding Christian, Alexander Fraser.

The west of the parish also had its share of victims, mainly at Culnald and Nigg Ferry. As already said, someone died at the Whins of Nigg by the 21st August and about that date the "Courier" reported several cases and another death. The dead man was David Mackenzie, a fine strapping fellow, the last person thought likely to catch it. He was engaged in herring fishing in the same boat as a man who had died the previous week, Archibald Fraser. Mackenzie brought cholera with him from Portmahomack, to his little cottage within forty yards of Cromarty Ferry. He arrived there on Sunday afternoon and died on Monday night, attended only by his wife as all the other neighbours had fled. She was assisted by Dr Smith of Cromarty on the Monday. The "Courier" goes on, "After the death of Mackenzie, the poor woman, his wife, might be seen from the town of Cromarty, during the whole day, flitting about the cottage like an unhappy ghost, no one venturing to approach her. The body was suffered to remain unburied until the evening of Tuesday, when it was committed to the earth in a piece of waste land at a little distance from the cottage."

The next issue of the "Courier" on 29th August, said of Nigg (the west end of the parish), "Although the disease has not fortunately extended very far in this parish, it does not appear to have altogether disappeared. A fatal case occurred at Culnald on Saturday. This was a woman who caught the infection from washing, instead of burning, the clothes of a young girl who died a few days preceding. The deaths now amount to four."

As said in the case of David Mackenzie, the Nigg Ferry end of the parish was looked after during this epidemic by Dr Smith from Cromarty, who came complete with his horse to Nigg by ferry boat, and then rode round the district. It has been said that Mr Rose was zealous in attending the victims though he attended none of the Health Board meetings (14) but in fact this was not so. The minister of Nigg was terrified of cholera and remained firmly in his manse grounds, but being hospitable, he considered it his duty to give the doctor some refreshment on his rounds, and to achieve both ends he always placed whisky and oatcakes on the wall of the manse garden so that the doctor could eat and drink without risk of bringing infection to the minister. (15)

On the 28th August, with cholera dying down and all that could be done having been done, officialdom stepped in. A letter came from the Clerk of the Privy Council appointing the two ministers and the heritors and tenants to be a properly constituted Board of Health. All these people had (with the exception of the Rev Lewis Rose) been taking an active part in anti-cholera work for eight months!

But as a result of this, a meeting was held on 4th September when it was decided to fit up a hospital, and the place chosen was the storehouse at Nigg Ferry as this would be handy for the doctor from Cromarty. Another place, unspecified, was offered and accepted as a place of quarantine for anyone coming into the parish without a clean bill of health, and it was agreed to make an assessment on landowners and tenants to meet the costs.

But the people living near Nigg Ferry were not a bit keen on the idea of having a cholera hospital in their midst and at a meeting on 13th September, they petitioned against it. Consideration on the matter was deferred as one case only remained and that person was getting better.

Just as Tain had thrown a cordon sanitaire round infected areas earlier (16), Nigg did all it could to keep out people from Cromarty after cholera developed there in late September. On 5th October they held a meeting and arranged that watchmen should be posted at Dunskaithness, Balnabruach and Red House to see that no one came across from there, or from the east, as by then the parish was free from the disease.

Some say that cholera ran its course and died out naturally, but local tradition says that it left the parish thanks to Jasper Vass, the Kirk Officer. He saw it floating round Nigg as a small yellow cloud and with great courage, caught it in a vast linen bag and buried it under a stone in Nigg Old Churchyard. Whatever the truth of this story or of what Jasper Vass saw, the fact is that the Cholera Stone is still there in the graveyard and everyone knows that it must not be disturbed lest the cholera escapes once more. It is very noticeable that there are no graves immediately adjacent to it. School children used to run down from school in their dinner hour and jump on the stone, spitting if it squeaked, thus spitting out evil and using saliva as the greatest possible protection.

A little sidelight comes in James Cameron's Report – while snuff-taking had been almost universal among men, the tobacco pipe came more into use after the visitation of cholera. (3) He also mentioned how dunghills and cesspools at the door were beginning to die out, and that too is very probably attributable to cholera, as said earlier.

Cholera caused great terror, partly because of its nature and partly because it so often carried off the breadwinner or the mother of a family or even both parents. Perhaps this is why, a hundred and forty years or more since the outbreak, it is still spoken of with almost bated breath. Oddly enough, no one seems aware of the terrible toll that smallpox took in the area, but that was probably because it so often killed children and infant mortality was largely expected and accepted. There are no figures for smallpox victims in Nigg but there are for other parishes: Tarbat lost seventy-five children from smallpox in 1757; forty-six in 1768; thirty-eight in 1791; while Cromarty lost fifty in 1792.

By 1792 vaccination had been introduced but many people were frightened of it or disliked it on the grounds of religious prejudice, although each epidemic reconciled people to it a little more. But unwillingness to allow their children to be vaccinated continued and it was to combat this attitude and the deaths that followed from it, that the minister of the Associate Church in Nigg, Rev John Munro, made an intimation from the pulpit about vaccination in 1806. This caused considerable offence to two of the elders and several members showed their disapproval of this worldly interruption of worship by rising from their places at the beginning of intimations the next Sunday, and leaving the building. (12)

At a Session meeting, the people concerned said that they thought practice of vaccination sinful and not something to be mentioned at public worship. This took careful handling on the part of the minister, who explained to them how useful it had been found in preventing a fatal disease and he reminded them that he had clearly stated that anyone with conscientious objections should not use it. He showed great patience and firmness which not only saved a split in the church, but did much to promote the use of vaccination.

Nevertheless, there was resistance to vaccination right into this century, as the Parish Council minutes show. In 1916, nineteen vaccination defaulters were reported and the Inspector was instructed to take usual proceedings against them. Smallpox could still strike, and did.

In 1920, Blind Benjie, a fiddler who played round the streets and pubs of Cromarty on Saturday nights, got smallpox. Along with others who got it there, he was sent to Nigg to be isolated at the specially fitted "Smallpox Hut" on Pitcalnie Brae just above the Nut Woodie. If the people of Nigg had been annoyed about having a cholera hospital in their midst, they were just as angry about having Cromarty's smallpox victims sent over to them.

In September the Parish Council acted and “having taken into consideration the arbitrary action of the County Public Health Committee in taking a Hut at Nigg Camp as a smallpox Hospital for the county of Ross and Cromarty and having in view the fact that the Easter Ross District Committee who have not been consulted, are the only Local Authority empowered by Statute to deal with the Public Health matters affecting the parish, and that the County Public Health Committee have no jurisdiction or resolve to communicate with the Rt. Hon. Robert Munro, KC JP Secretary for Scotland and President of the Scottish Board of Health; the Rt. Hon. Ian Macpherson, MP for the County, and the Sec. of the Scottish Board of Health demanding they should at once prohibit the County Council of Ross and Cromarty from using the hut as a smallpox hospital. The Council further resolve to take any further action that may be necessary to prevent this violation of the rights of the inhabitants of this parish ...” (2)

But this did not get the Hut removed, and a smallpox panic prevailed. The log book of Nigg School says, “15 Sept. There is a very bad attendance ... 20 pupils absent ... parents will not allow the children to come to school as cases of smallpox have been taken to the Isolation Hut in the vicinity of the school ... Steps are to be taken to get all the pupils vaccinated.”

On the 16th September only eight children came to school, but the teachers had no powers to close – this was something that needed the authority of the Medical Officer of Health. Dr A K Mackenzie, Tain, wrote to say that he was prepared to vaccinate at the school any day, but that this was in the hands of the “Authority” and Public Health Committee and “until they settle their differences we cannot act.” (17)

Next day, only four children turned up and the log said, “A panic has arisen among the people owing to the placing of this Isolation Hut for Smallpox in the vicinity of the School ... The school will not, therefore, be open on Monday or Tuesday of next week but at a fixed hour on Tuesday the children who have not yet got vaccinated will get it done on that day.”

On September 20th, twenty-four children were vaccinated, three doctors taking part. All those at Pitcalnie School were done about the same time too. During the “smallpox scare” the children had got medical certificates but were now warned to come to school next day or be prosecuted. Three remained unvaccinated but “parents are determined not to send their children back to school as long as there are patients in the Isolation Hut.”

A small attendance on a rainy day was attributed to parents’ fear that their children after being vaccinated might “not be feeling very well,” but right on into October parents still did not send their young ones to school – only about a third of the children on the roll appeared.

More than the parents were frightened. On one occasion a telegram came for one of the nurses at the Hut and the postmaster, George Rose, loath to deliver it himself, summoned the local policeman, Tom the Bobby, from Balintore, to do so. Tom the Bobby refused, and in such terrible language that the air was said to have been blue around George Rose’s head that day! (18)

It is said that the first burials in the new Chapelhill cemetery were smallpox victims from Cromarty, but this is not borne out by any gravestones there; indeed, the cemetery was only opened two years later.

Just what happened about the Smallpox Hut in the end is not recorded, but it certainly was not used for very long, however drastically its brief presence affected the parish. What is surprising is that after all this concern, there was still resistance to vaccination and up to 1925 the Parish Council Minutes continue to show that there were defaulters.

The fact that the doctor came to Nigg Ferry from Cromarty during the cholera epidemic has already been mentioned, but this was something that continued to happen for many years. It was so much easier to get a message across by boat and for the doctor to come that way too, than it was to make the longer journey to Tain before there were proper roads. As roads improved, however, people began to call in the doctor from Tain but during a serious measles outbreak during the 1914 War, there were still some people who were attended by Dr Johnstone from Cromarty. Doctors from Fearn looked after the people of the Shandwick area in later years.

The arrival of the Rev D C Gollan as minister of the U F Church in 1902 was a great boon to the sick of the parish as he was a great cyclist and was always willing to cycle into Tain to get a doctor, and was even willing to go once again to fetch any prescription that might be needed, completing the job by administering the medicine. (19)

The infirmary at Inverness has been mentioned, and also the Ross Memorial Hospital, but Cromarty provided a further form of medical aid in the shape of its Cottage Hospital which people from Nigg Ferry could attend. It took maternity cases as well, and the son of the inn-keeper at Nigg Ferry was born there in 1938. (20) But even with these hospitals, poor patients might be treated at the workhouse and illegitimate babies born there. (20)

Children went barefoot from spring until the money earned lifting potatoes paid for their winter boots, and this lack of footwear caused many foot troubles, and sore or cut feet were quite often an excuse for absence from school, at least up till the 1914-18 War. (17) Sore feet were a condition which the workhouse (poor house) treated and one boy or man from Cullisse spent a fortnight there in 1929 for this treatment.

The care of lunatics has been mentioned in the chapter of poverty, and the efforts of the church and the parish council in the care of the sick were considerable. What is also remarkable is the way in which individual people have contributed to health matters, though admittedly this is also a commentary on social conditions. Mrs Romanis appears in an old account book of the Ferry Inn as paying for a regular supply of milk throughout one winter for a woman who had been sick, and she is also remembered for sitting up at night with a sick child to let the mother have some rest. (21)

In the mid-1930's another of the local ladies, aided by her nanny, ran what can only be called a ringworm clinic for the farm children who were badly affected by it. There were between twenty and thirty of them, all of whom were ordered to appear and did so, at the outdoor wash-house for treatment every morning before setting off for school. (22)

The role of private people also appears in the formation of the local District Nursing Association. While the movement was a national one, it depended upon individuals within the parishes to promote it and raise the necessary money. In Nigg, the first nurse was engaged in 1922 and lived in various cottages until the present nurse's house, a very nice one was built in 1932. Having a nurse in the parish was a great boon and her contribution to health cannot be over-emphasized. After the Health Service took over, the cottage was sold to them and the capital from it provides the fund for the Benevolent Association which gives help to those within the old District Nursing area which extended beyond the parish boundary into all the Seaboard villages.

Even in the 1970's miners' strikes meant a severe lack of coal and there were a number of elderly and infirm people suffering very much because all their heating was coal-fired. While the local authority Social Work officials were still gathering in the names of those in need, members of the Nigg Friendship Committee were bagging and distributing coal which they had bought ahead and stored for just such an emergency. This was reminiscent of the cholera outbreak when local foresight and help far outweighed that of officialdom.

In common with most fishing villages, Shandwick has produced a high number of nurses, and even in 1974 the village could boast of thirteen nurses either living in the village, or who have for various reasons moved elsewhere.

Health and Sickness - References:-

- 1 Nigg Old Church Session Minutes
- 2 Minutes of Nigg Parish Council
- 3 Sanitary Report 1841
- 4 Fasti of the Church of Scotland
- 5 Mrs Dallas, Oakbank, Alness
- 6 "Place Names of Ross and Cromarty," W J Watson
- 7 New Statistical Account
- 8 Dr W Rankine, Glasgow
- 9 "Down to the Sea"
- 10 "Old Ross-shire and Scotland," W MacGill. Numbers given.
- 11 Tarbat Kirk Session Minutes
- 12 "Church Chronicles of Nigg," Rev J R Martin
- 13 This was said by the father of Miss M Mackenzie, formerly of the Bungalow, Nigg
- 14 Rev J R Martin
- 15 Late Miss J Ross, Millbank, Evanton, who was grand-daughter of Dr Smith of Cromarty
- 16 "Inverness Courier"
- 17 Nigg School log books
- 18 "Parish of Nigg," W R I
- 19 "Leaves of Remembrance," the life of Rev D C Gollan
- 20 Baptismal Register of the U P Church
- 21 Mrs J Munro, Rose Cottage, Nigg
- 22 This was Mrs P D Robertson, Castlecraig, Nigg