

The 2018 David Boyd Event

Part 5 : The South Uist Machairs & Beaches





Tobah Mor church

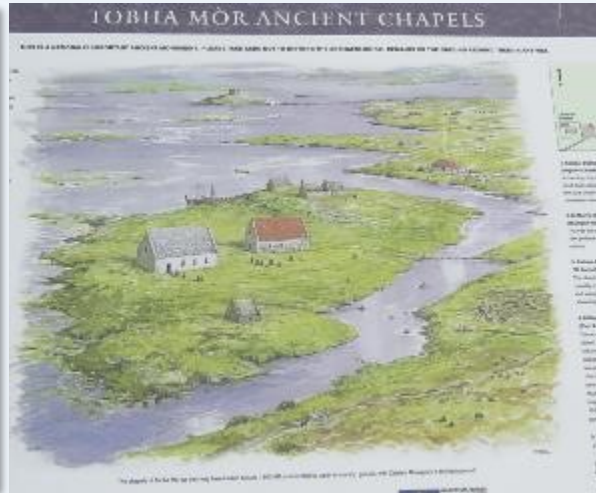


SUNDAY 24 JUNE 2018

Howmore Machair and Beach

Sunday morning started with a heavy sky but better weather was forecast. Most of us dressed in wind proof gear and hats till later in the day. We were to meet on the west coast of South Uist at Howmore Machair at Tobah Mor, a beautiful scenic area above the long beach at Howmore Bay. There was restored thatched house by the road on the way in.

The present local church, was a large plain white painted building with plain glass windows. It is the landmark and key to finding the machair. Services were held on alternate Sundays and we were instructed not to obstruct the car park. Matt encouraged us to go inside to see the lay out of the communion table and pews. This area has a long Christian tradition. The parish system was established towards the end of the Norse period (9th -13th) century. On a hillock behind the church lies the site of Tobha Mor ancient chapels. An outlined stone slab incised with a cross may have been there since before the 9th century. Later a series of chapels was built and the remains of four of them can be seen. They are similar to Irish Celtic monastery sites.



Tobah Mor ancient chapels





Tobha mor 'village' is a scattered community like most other settlements on the Uists. You can see your neighbours house but it remains a distance away. Each family has almost enough land to raise some crops and feed some animals but most need to have other sources of income. Each croft has some land beside the house and farm buildings, the in-bye land and a strip of machair down by the beach. Different communities distribute the land in different ways. The strips of Machair land are regularly remeasured in case some crofters gain more land at others' expense.

To the west of Howbeg and neighbouring Howmore machairs, the heights of Hecla (606m), Choradail (527m) and Beinn Mhor (620m) dominate the horizon. To the west, where we were, the hills slope down to a countryside with as many lochs as there is land. The waterscape does not end till the band of machair on the coast forms a solid coastal barrier to the Atlantic. The land looks flat but is actually quite undulating with hillocks and valleys. On the east coast these mountains become seaside cliffs and headlands. Not much there in the way of sandy beaches! Mariners beware! There is no road there on the east, so I suppose only intrepid walkers and shepherds will have been there. Our walking on the west coast beach and machair was much easier.

The machair sloped away from the church which stood on a rise, A track ran down to a photogenic bridge over a small river. This is notable because although there are hundreds of lochans on the island there are few rivers. Paths led to the beach on either bank of the river.

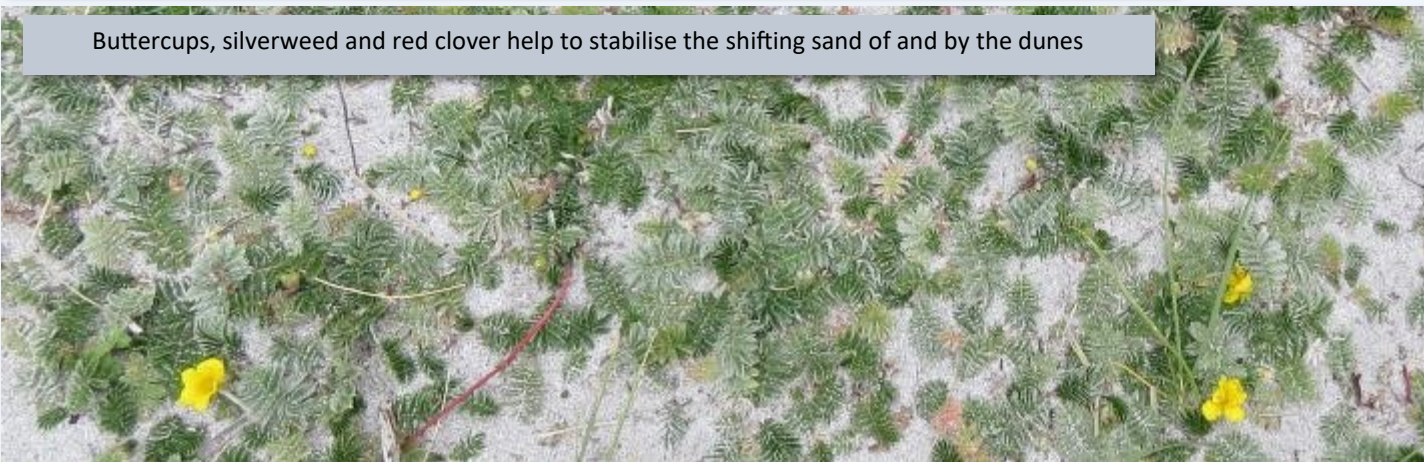




We chose to walk along the beach on the north of the river while others headed for the south shore. We soon came upon several piles of seaweed which was being left to be washed free of salt by the rain. The vegetation near the old seaweed was much coarser and taller, showing that the seaweed is a rich fertiliser. Short willows thrived along the sheltered river bank. I spent some time photographing washed up seaweed on the white sand. Always the three Beinnns formed the eastern horizon. Our legs were getting tired and the day was getting hotter.



Buttercups, silverweed and red clover help to stabilise the shifting sand of and by the dunes



Cakile maritima (Sea Rocket)

The riverbank had quite coarse vegetation...nettles, burdock and wild carrot



(Lesser Burdock) *Arctium minus*



Wild carrot (*Daucus carota*) has flowers which often start pink and as they age become white





Vicia cracca (Tufted vetch)



Galium verum (Lady's bedstraw)



Plantago lanceolata (Ribwort Plantain)



Seaweed tangle washed up on the beach



Some of the seaweed looked like works of modern art



Marram grass from the dunes can be woven to make rough mats for floors or saddle blankets. It is also used for making grain baskets called 'ciosans'. Seaweed is gathered and used as fertiliser once the salt has been washed out of it. When burned it is a source of potash used to make gunpowder.





The 'in-bye land' is the land beside the farm buildings. It is good to see that many 'abandoned' buildings on South Uist are being repaired. Some with modern materials and roofs, whilst others are repaired with traditional thatched roofs





Yellow was the colour of the day! I expected to see the buttercups and irises. In addition a nice patch of strongly growing Yellow Loosestrife (*Lysimachia vulgaris*) lit up the roadside near Howmore. I think the willows were Osier Willows (*Salix viminalis*). The 2 year old stems were used to make barrel hoops in past times and thinner one years old stems are still used to make baskets and hurdles for fences. Peat creels [baskets for carrying cut dry eat blocks are still amd from Osier





By late morning the sky became bluer and the sun shone brightly for the rest of the day. Wind proof clothing was discarded as summer weather returned. We were to drive south towards Garrynamonie Machair. We had the promise of coffee at the museum at Chill Donnan on the road south. On the way we passed a brown sign pointing out "the French Macdonalds". That made me wonder but I needed the coffee and did not stop.

Uist folk museum at Kildonan

You can't miss the museum. It is big modern building with a huge Viking boat outside. The South Uist flag flew from the flagpole. It is dark green with a blue cross outlined in white. In different colours it would have been Norwegian. I recall seeing many flags in Orkney all based on the many variations of the "Nordic Cross". The museum is well laid out and its cafe has good ales and coffee. Guess which we visited first, the cafe or the museum?



On the left is the information board which brought together many strands of south Uist's wildlife – flowers, birds insects etc prominence given to the endangered Great Yellow Bumble Bee. Matt had asked us to be on the look-out for one but I did not see any.





In Chill Donnan museum there are several exhibitions laid out in six or seven areas.

A photographic description of 'St Kilda Relieved', a mercy mission mounted by the Daily Mirror to St Kilda in spring 1912 when the people were starving after months of bad weather prevented the supply ship reaching the island.

Another area was devoted to 'Wildlife of the Hebrides', the centre piece of which was a wonderful information board illustrating birds and plants of the island.

The bones of Kilphedar Kate in their case were a bit gruesome for a sunny Sabbath morning.

Representations of Croft living featured furniture including box-beds with stone pig hot water bottles, kitchen ware, mangle and scrubbing board, Pots and pans and chinaware, as well as agricultural tools. I thought 'weapons' might be a more appropriate description of some.



Kilphedar Kate

These are the bones of a Pictish woman, aged about 40, who lived around 1300 years ago.

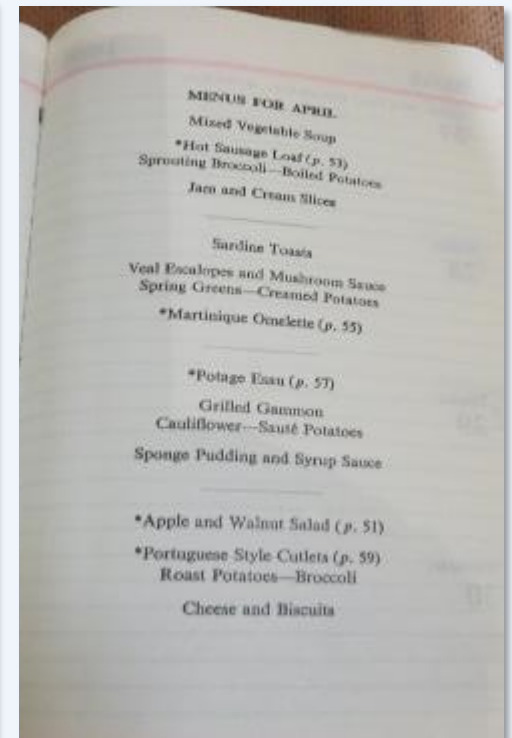
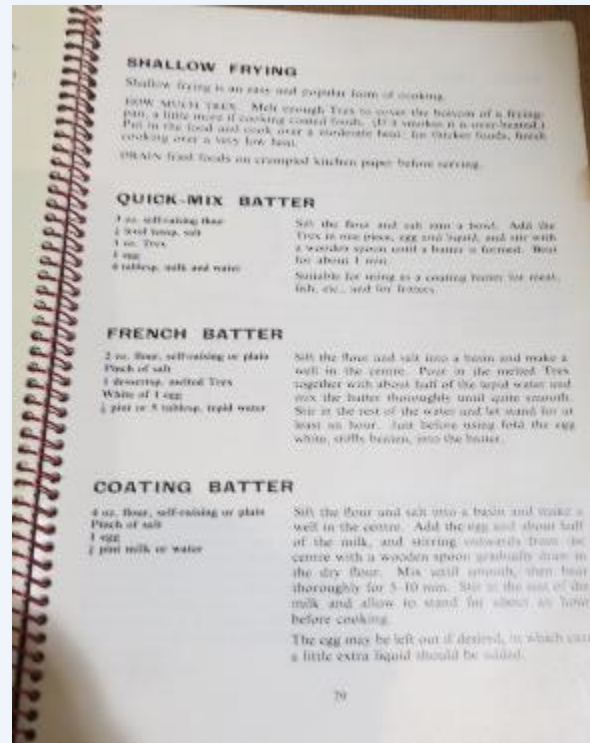
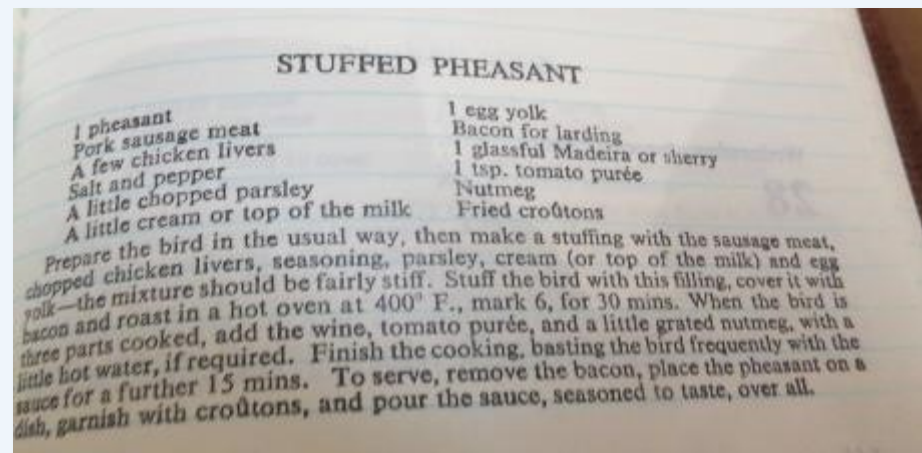
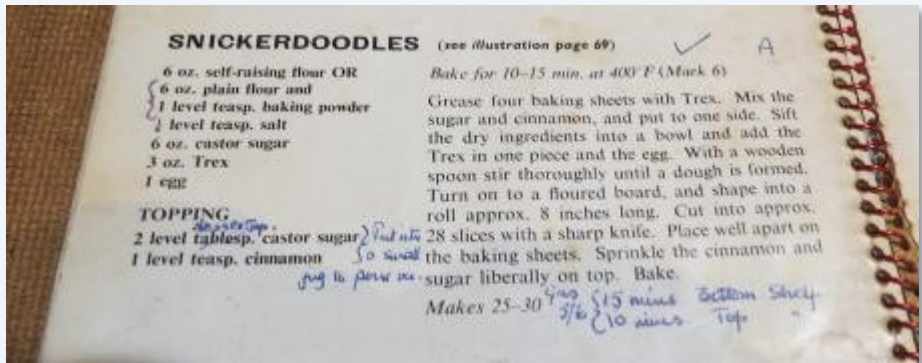


RECIPES FOR CROFT LIVVING

A couple of recipe books were open at tasty pages. I wonder what Snickerdoodles might taste like. They featured in an one recipe book. Ingredients:- TREX, an egg, two sorts of flour, baking powder, sugar and salt. They need castor sugar and cinnamon to make them taste good. 'I fancy 'good' is a relative term. I preferred the idea of stuffed pheasant. There was also a book which listed recipes for meals suitable for each month of the year. The ingredients

More tempting was a stoneware flagon of usquaebach described as Grand. It is strange to see items from ones childhood as exhibits in a museum. Life was simple after the war and exciting in the 60's. The museum stocked a range of guide books. Two guides, Mr and Mrs Docherty were very helpful. After a short discussion of where are you staying? and where do you comment from? etc. We discovered that her son and his family live near us in Dunblane! It's a Small world!

A poignant picture showed the departure of emigrants from Lochboisdale pier on their way to Canada in 1923, less than a hundred years ago. Nowadays their descendants will be making the reverse trip!





Flora Macdonald's birth place

At the museum I learned about Flora's life.. She was born in the parish adjacent to Chill Donnan namely Milton parish. Her birth place is signposted. It is now a ruin but the house walls were probably not much higher back in her time. All the walls are still standing and if someone took the trouble to raise some timbers and thatch the roof then it would be as good as new.

Flora was born in 1722 and grew up in Milton parish. She got involved in Prince Charles Edward Stuart's escape through her clan loyalties and family connections. Flora's father Hugh MacDonald was a captain in the Skye militia. However he was secretly a Jacobite supporter. A cousin of Flora's was Neil MacEachen (also known as MacDonald) from Howbeg (where we had just come from). He left Uist to study for the priesthood at the Scottish College in Paris, which was a centre of Jacobite intrigue.

Neil returned to Scotland in 1737. He was the perfect person to liaise between the local Jacobites and ships from Catholic France or Spain. He became Prince Charlie's minder for the two months he was in the Uists. He stayed with Prince and sailed with him to France after his defeat at Culloden Moor. He later joined the French Army and his son became a Marshall in Napoleon's army.

As the Uists became increasingly unsafe for the Prince, a plan was hatched with Lady Clanranald and other sympathisers in Benbecula for his escape. The Prince was disguised as Flora's female servant 'Betty Burke' and this is how they, along with 6 crewmen, sailed from the Benbecula "over the sea to Skye". Flora and the Prince parted in Portree on Skye from where the prince sailed to Raasay. Flora was arrested and taken to the Tower of London but released without charge in or punishment in June 1747 after The Act Of Indemnity.

Aged 28, on 6th November 1750, she married Alan MacDonald, a captain in the British army. They had 5 sons and 2 daughters. The emigrated to North Carolina in 1773. In the American war of Independence they supported the British side and as a result they lost their American estates. She returned to Scotland in 1779. Flora died in 1790.

As we drove through Skye we passed signs for a Flora MacDonald's grave. So thanks to the SRGC, I have learnt a lot.





Garraynamonie Machair

We drove south past the Borrodale hotel, which looked inviting to Garraynamonie Machair. Beside the road we passed the ultramodern new church. This building provoked strong opinions. Some loved it while others would bulldoze it. Swans were swimming in one of the fresh water lochs. Another has a beautiful colony of water lilies. We had noted these in several places.

Another good side road took us past several houses, including a dilapidated thatched stone house. On either side of the road the buttercups were fabulous. At the beach we could see Barra on the southern horizon. There were even picnic tables for lunch





The long white sandy beach curves out westward at its northern end towards Orasay Island. At low tide you can walk to the island. We hear a lot about plastic rubbish in the sea. There was little evidence of this on the beaches we visited. Perhaps there is a continuing clean up. We did see quite a lot of discarded ropes and stuff from fishing boats. At one end of the beach the dunes were eroding badly. Conservationists had piled straw bales and old nets against the dunes to try to capture more sand. We carefully made our way up through the shifting sand to reach the solid ground of the machair. The walk back to the car was easy along a well worn track. We made occasional forays into the fields to examine plants. By now we were a bit choosy. It needs to be an orchid at least to tempt us to leave the path as the sun beat down. Above the beach the machair here had plenty yellow rattle mixed into the vegetation. again there was a lot of silverweed which along with the buttercups and irises made this a yellow day.





The beach at Garrynamonie was idyllic. Members walked and stopped and looked every few minutes. The white sand and blue sky coupled with the lapping of the white Atlantic waves combined to make this one of the most beautiful places in the UK.





My old legs did not take me to the island but we covered a lot of the beach and machair. We enjoyed our lunch by the beach on one of the picnic tables. Further back from the beach the damp fields were full of ragged robin and cotton grass interspersed with flag irises with the stalks of mares' tails permeating the whole area. The machair flower meadows are beautiful but so are the areas behind the machair.





The different green shades in strips of land indicate individual crofter's strips of machair

