

Chapter Seven

The Study of Deserted Medieval Settlements in Scotland (to 1968)

I. Rural Settlement

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I. Rural Settlement

As yet, very little has been written on the vernacular architecture and rural settlement of Scotland in periods before the nineteenth century, and for the medieval period strictly speaking, the dearth of information is almost complete. Partly this is a result of lack of interest, partly it is due to the poverty of the country during the centuries between the outbreak of the Wars of Independence and the Act of Union in 1707. Over and above that, however, the nature of the settlement itself, the impermanence of the building materials in use and the lack of documentary evidence, all create difficult problems. The study of medieval rural settlement must develop along specialised lines and rely upon evidence of a different nature from that available for England and Wales.

It must be emphasised from the outset that documentary evidence relating to rural conditions appears to be extremely scarce and any discussion based on this information alone would have to be largely hypothetical. It is true that publication of medieval charters and records has been assiduously carried out by societies such as the Spalding and the Maitland Clubs; we have a concise survey of the history of lands and their owners in *Origines Parochiales Scotiae*¹ where it is possible to follow the various transfers affecting even remote townships in the Highlands. There is, however, strangely little

1. C. Innes and J. E. Brichan, eds., *Origines Parochiales Scotiae*, Bannantyne Club, (2 vols., 1850 and 1855).

reference to details of farming, settlement and rural conditions generally. Much of the land remained the property of a relatively few great landowners and the individual tenant farmer acquired no customary rights over the long period of time, comparable with those of the English villagers.

In sharp contrast to the earlier periods, a wealth of material begins to be available from the late seventeenth century onwards. The information is of the greatest importance, for until this time rural conditions seem to have been stagnant for long periods and all writers imply survivals on a large scale from medieval times. It is hardly necessary to stress the dangers of projecting this state of affairs, these anachronisms of the eighteenth century, indefinitely backwards into the past, but, *faute de mieux*, the data must be examined before turning to the alternative approach through archaeology.

The literature of the “Age of the Improvements” has been summarised recently (Handley, 1953). Special mention, however, must be made of *The Statistical Account of Scotland*² published in the 1790’s in which each minister of every parish wrote a description at a very interesting period of change. Much of the old still survived and many of the accounts are written with deep insight into rural conditions. Attention must also be drawn to the numerous large-scale estate surveys which date back to the latter half of the eighteenth century. Modernisation by many of the larger landowners was literally a planned operation and the first step was often to arrange for a professional survey of the existing state of affairs. Some of the plans are exquisitely drawn and show the dimensions of houses and the individual rigs; others seem to have been rather casual in this respect as though the surveyor knew that much of the old settlement pattern was soon to be replaced (Third, 1957, and Fairhurst, 1964).

Much regional variation undoubtedly occurred, but broadly speaking there was a degree of uniformity in settlement form in Highlands and Lowlands alike (Grant, 1930). Apart from the large and small burghs, the castles of the great landowners and the houses of the lesser lairds, the recurring settlement unit was not the village in the English sense, but a small cluster of houses and associated buildings forming a group-farm. In the Lowlands these agrarian units were called *fermtouns* and in the Highlands the Gaelic word *clachan* is often used (Fairhurst, 1960). These were occupied normally on a yearly basis, by tenants jointly responsible for the rent and maintaining the common plough. Numbers within the group varied but three to eight tenants were usual. In addition, there might also be several cottars there on sufferance to provide additional labour.

These small clusters of dwellings might also be the site of a church (a *kirkton*) Plate 21, a mill (milton), a smiddy or a school. Usually, however, each of these institutions would serve several group farms and they were not regular features in any one unit; a settlement with all of them would be an outstanding centre such as would normally have been granted the rights of a burgh. Conversely, many small burghs in Scotland long continued to attach great importance to their farm lands and were in fact an integral part of the rural settlement pattern.

There is every reason to believe that many of the group farms were in existence in the medieval period though there is so little reference directly to their functions in the documentary record. The village in Scotland is generally regarded as a very late

2. Sir John Sinclair, *The Statistical Account of Scotland* (21 vols., 1791–99).

feature for the most part, often associated with industrial or fisheries development and showing a planned lay-out. All the same, in that area south of the Firth of Forth where Anglian influence was strong, some settlements may have approached in size and organization the villages of northern England (Barrow, 1962), but much more study of this question is needed. Moreover, sites of a number of possible medieval villages are known both in the Lothians and in southwest Scotland, but none has yet been subjected to systematic archaeological excavation. In some cases, as for example at the two neighbouring Kirkcudbright villages of Galtway (NX 706487) and Dunrod (NX 699459), considerable surface remains are visible, and it is clear that sites of this nature provide extensive opportunities, not only for field investigation, but also for documentary research.

Returning to the group farm, however, the morphology of this settlement unit must be examined in the light of geographical conditions. The cooler summers and especially the rain and cloud of much of the west and north of Scotland made extensive grain production more difficult than on the English Plain. An emphasis on stock-rearing may well have been characteristic since prehistoric times. Then too, the rugged nature of so much of Scotland, and especially the Highlands, tended towards a relative fragmentation of the arable lands.

Perhaps both this fragmentation and the relative importance of stock-rearing favoured the emergence of a small settlement unit, as compared, for instance, with the village communities of the English Midlands where a three-field system was characteristic. There is no geographical determinism about this, however, as the comparatively small group farm was to be found in the areas where the arable land might be continuous as in Strathmore; ingrained tradition obviously enters into the problem.

Very extensive common grazings were a characteristic feature of the old farms particularly in the upland areas. The practice of sending the cattle away to summer pastures at the shielings must once have been universal, judging by the *shiel* names in the south; in the Highlands, the old habit survived to the end of the last century and a pale reflection of it persisted in the Outer Islands until very recently.

The much restricted arable land of the Scottish group-farm was usually in the form of infield and outfield, but sometimes there was only the one or the other, as is shown, for instance, by the Tayside Survey of 1769.³ The infield comprised the best land, normally close to the clustered dwellings, which was kept under constant tillage without fallow; this was made possible by the regular application of all the available dung. The outfield was cultivated without dung except perhaps from tethered animals; it was divided into patches each of which was kept under cultivation for several successive years and was then left to recover fertility for as many seasons as possible. The plough on the group farm was jointly maintained and the arable of the tenants was in *run-rig*, i.e. in intermixed strips in the form of narrow, high ridges or *rigs*.

The location of a great many of the fermtouns and clachans in the mid-eighteenth century is known partly through the estate plans and also from the Military Map of Scotland surveyed immediately after the Rising of 1745 (*Roy's Map*). Here the clusters are indicated by a little group of dots, but clearly, from available evidence, these are diagrammatic, not representative of individual houses.

3. Margaret M. McArthur, ed., *Survey of Lochtayside, 1769*, Scot. Hist. Soc. 3rd. ser., xxvii (1936).

What is going to be very difficult to establish is the precise location of the fermtouns and clachans at earlier periods. Charters of medieval date may make specific reference to “the lands of” such and such a township where the site of a late cluster of dwellings can be found without difficulty, but continuity of occupation is another matter. The late literary references make it obvious that the vernacular architecture was in flimsy materials including dry-stone or mud-mortared stone, clay, wattle and daub, turf and probably wood in earlier times (see below). Particularly under a system of yearly leases, these buildings must often have been abandoned or fallen into disrepair; continual rebuilding may well have allowed some migration of site and little of the older periods has survived. Fieldwork to date has made it abundantly clear that it is going to be difficult to find even the vaguest traces of medieval settlements, even on known and accessible sites.

In the Lowlands, many of the old fermtouns were modernised out of recognition in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The rural landscape today is in many ways surprisingly modern. No great difficulties were experienced by the landowners in the process of enclosure of the common fields; the tenants on the old Scottish group farm rarely held on more than a year’s lease, and they had no long-standing customary right to protect them against eviction. A short series of Acts, passed just before the independent Scottish Parliament ceased to function, was all that was needed for the landlord to abolish the group-farms and run-rig. So thorough was the obliteration of the old that now it is wellnigh impossible over wide areas to find a site of even a single one of the fermtouns which is at all representative of the old settlement unit. Sometimes the buildings of the new consolidated farms occupied the old sites, but sometimes not even a modern cottage marks the position of the old cluster.

In the Highlands, change came more slowly but it was apt to be catastrophic. After 1745, under the peaceful conditions and with the coming of the potato as a new food crop, population at first began to increase very rapidly. The old clachans swelled in size and overpopulation occurred before improved techniques of farming could provide any solution to the problem. Then in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century there commenced an era of depopulation. Often it was a matter of rising standards of living and a harsh environment with a drift away either to the Colonies or to the growing industrial areas of the south. In many cases, however, widespread and thoroughgoing evictions were initiated by the landlords to provide sheep runs in view of the high prices of wool for the new textile mills. These clearances have left a very bitter memory.

On some of the old clachan sites of the Highlands, occupation has lingered on into this century; the much modified buildings of the now-deserted settlements date back perhaps a century and a half, but rarely so far back as 1750. In other areas, as for instance in Sutherland, where whole glens and straths were cleared at one time, the ruins of the old clusters can still be seen in the midst of the sheep walk or grouse moor, little disturbed since they were deserted a century and a half ago. The dwellings were abandoned before modernisation had had any marked effect on either the lay-out or building technique.

This type of deserted settlement site in the Highlands is almost unique in Europe. Many at least of the place-names can be traced back to medieval times; many must represent perfect examples of the rural settlement of the Highlands in the eighteenth

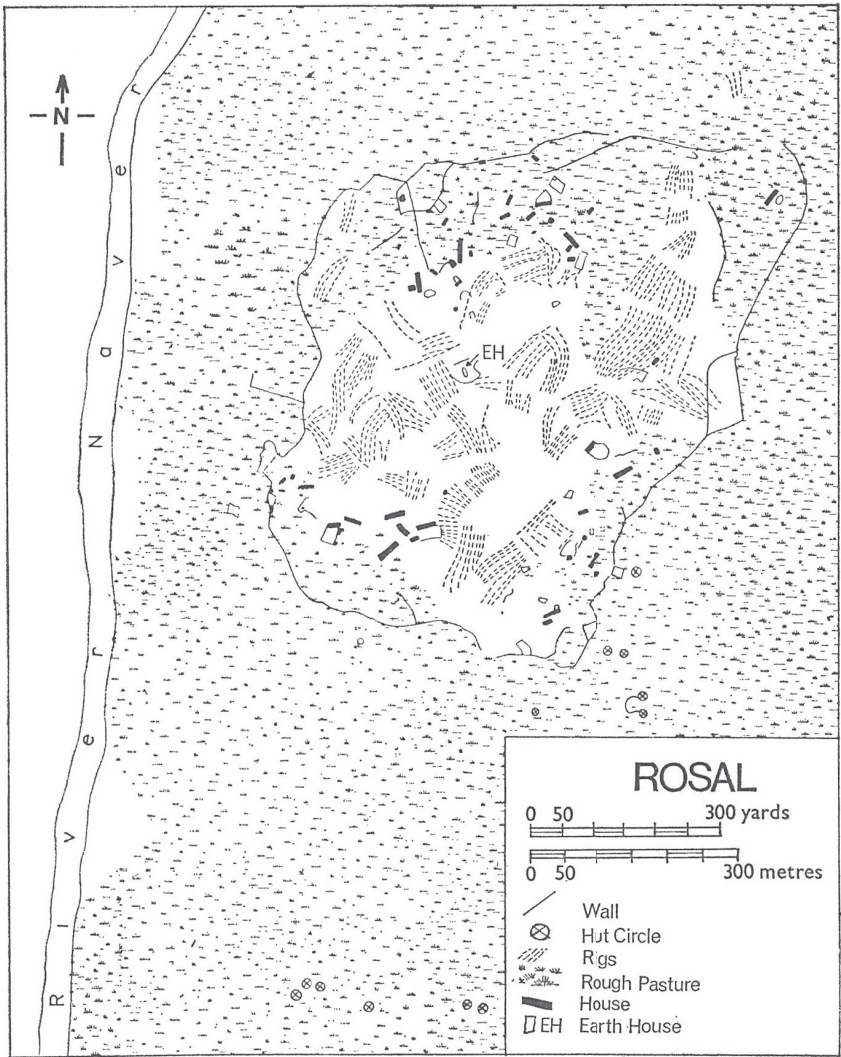


Fig. 31. Rosal, Sutherland.

Plan of township

century, bearing in mind, however, that the old clusters had in many cases, grown to unhealthy proportions in the last phase of occupation. Some pioneer investigations with very limited excavation, have been attempted at Rosal, in Strath Naver, and Lix, in West Perthshire, but as yet only a preliminary report has been published (Fairhurst and Petrie, 1964).

Rosal was cleared in 1814–18 and the old arable land now appears like a green island

in the surrounding moor (Fig. 31). Temporarily, it has been preserved from planting by the Forestry Commission after its significance was recognised. The rigs of the eighteenth century are clearly traceable, measuring some 3-6 m. to 7-6 m. wide between furrows, and sometimes stretching continuously for over 100 m. mainly at a very slight angle to the contour. Heaps of stones piled into elongated cairns indicate the effort expended on field clearance. The old buildings were of turf on a stone foundation and though the outlines are but little disturbed since the evictions, it is surprisingly difficult without excavation to differentiate between some of the smaller examples of long-houses, and the barns, stables and cottages. A corn-drying kiln was apparently shared by several tenants but each farmer had his own stackyard to keep out grazing animals when the whole township was thrown open after the harvest. About seventeen families seem to have been in occupation latterly, the dwellings being very loosely distributed in three groups around the periphery. The individual structures are so widely separated, however, and the spacing is so haphazard that it is quite difficult to recognise the farm buildings which belonged to any one tenant.

Apart from some very vague traces here and there of older foundations the extant structures clearly belong to the last phase of occupation, though the lands of Rosal are mentioned in a charter as early as 1269.⁴ An *earth house* within the arable lands, and a number of hut circles not far away, indicate prehistoric occupation of the same general area, but no direct continuity of settlement can be postulated.

The shielings at Rosal occur in several locations about a mile or so distant from the main settlement. The huts are recognisable as rectangular stone settings about 5 m. by 2.5 m. located within a green patch in the moor, due to the congregation of stock in the locality. Some had become the sites of tiny permanent settlements at the time of the Clearance, presumably due to pressure of population. Place-names elsewhere in Strath Naver show that this hiving-off process had also occurred at earlier periods.

Undoubtedly the details had changed at Rosal since medieval times and indeed the first signs of modernisation of the traditional way of life could be detected, for instance, in the quantity of mass-produced pottery from kilns in southern Scotland. Nevertheless it is doubtful whether the general pattern of the settlement had changed radically for centuries. Such sites as Rosal are of exceptional interest when continuity of occupation over a very long period is apparent from the documentary record. With more developed techniques of excavation, much might be learned of earlier settlement phases which at present seem to have left no superficial trace.

Investigations at Lix illustrate different phenomena. The first documentary records appear to go no further back than the mid-sixteenth century, but the little barony of Lix was by then a defined entity and may well be much older. A relatively full description can be compiled of the three group farms of West, Mid and East Lix for the years just before 1745 from the Breadalbane papers, and there is a small-scale plan for 1755 when the lands were under the administration of the Commissioners for the Forfeited Estates. Sometime shortly after 1790 the whole settlement was reorganised and the old clustered dwellings were broken up. The position of some of the old buildings of 1755 at Mid and East Lix can be fixed with some accuracy on what is quite open ground, but no trace can now be detected of the foundations. Subsequently a

4. *Op. cit.* in fn. 1, 1, 175.

second reorganisation, to give the three modern sheep farms, took place between 1828 and 1845, and the ruined and deserted settlements now visible belong to the short intermediate period. Excavation showed that even in these dwellings of the early nineteenth century very primitive features occurred within what were indubitably long-houses. One suspects that Lix is far from unique in having two reorganisations in this way and clearly illustrates the difficulty of penetrating backwards towards medieval times.

Summarising the position of Scotland with regard to the survival of medieval settlements as a whole, as distinct from house types, it must be emphasised that only a relatively few sites comparable to the deserted villages of England can be expected. These must be looked for primarily in the Border counties and the Lothians where Anglian and later English influence was at its strongest. Elsewhere the medieval *fermtoun* and *clachan* can have left only slight traces, especially in view of the flimsy building materials which appear to have been employed and of the short term leases of the tenant farmer each of whom maintained the fabric of his own dwelling.

The many hundreds of surviving examples of deserted *clachans* in the Highlands often stand in open sheep walk. Excavation is perfectly feasible, unlike the English village today, and might prove very rewarding on carefully chosen sites where long continuity of occupation can be proved from the records. From personal experience, it must be emphasised that some of the contemporary documentation for the last phase of occupation is of the utmost importance in excavation.

Some of the ruinous clusters provide very impressive memorials of the Highland group farms such as they existed, as anachronisms, just before desertion. Tirai in Glen Lochay, West Perthshire, with its widely spaced, well preserved long-houses, standing in green pastureland, is a remarkable museum piece by any standards (Plate 22). Auchindrain near Inveraray in Mid-Argyll, which was occupied until the last few years, still keeps to a surprising extent the pattern of the old group farm (Dunbar, 1965): attempts are being made to create here a museum of the countryside for Argyll. Rosal and Grummore in upper Strath Naver are two rather contrasting types of Clearance settlements; at the moment, both have some degree of protection. A good example for the south eastern Highlands occurs at Dalforth in Glen Esk, Angus, near the small folk museum; it seems to have been preceded by shieling huts, traces of which still remain, and the *clachan* may not be very old. In the island of Rhum the Nature Conservancy have under their protection the two settlements at Harris and Kilmory, deserted early last century. All round the latter two are the distinctive narrow ridges produced by foot plough cultivation.⁵

No doubt more extensive survey will yield other excellent examples, but meanwhile some degree of preservation of selected sites is abundantly necessary (see Appendix II). With adequate plans and notice boards, a number of these, including shieling sites, could be made attractive to the student and tourist alike. So many foreign visitors to Scotland are of Highland descent and come with a desire to see the old home district, often remembered over several generations; these ruined deserted settlements require no embellishment to tell their story.

5. Detailed plans, as yet unpublished, have been drawn of both settlements under the supervision of Mr. G. Petrie, Dept. of Topographic Science, Glasgow University.