



Ripples Crafts

Yarn Notes from Assynt

August – The Split Rock and Clachtoll

Welcome to this month's Yarn Notes from Assynt, and a special welcome if you have just joined this club. This month, we will be as close to home as possible, because Clachtoll is where we live, and where Helen dyes your yarn. Crofting townships like Clachtoll vary in layout, but Clachtoll is typical of the type, as the houses are stretched at a distance from each other off a common main road, in a ribbon development. Clachtoll stretches for about a mile and a half, but most houses are in a half-mile strip where the road approaches the sea.

Clachtoll gets its name from a feature on the headland dominated by the dramatic split rocks that are the focal point of this month's card. But the name almost certainly does not come from the rocks themselves, which, it seems, only took that shape in the early 19th century, following a catastrophic geological event. *Clach* means a stone, but *Toll* means to exhale, or vapour. Some sources claim it should be *tuill*, meaning a flood, and make a reference to a rock arch, but it may be that this is not the only error creeping into the narrative of Clachtoll's claims to fame. If we assume that local people actually know the name of their township, then *Clach Toll* it is, in Gaelic, and when you know that there is a deep cave nearby the split rock, with a blowhole grassed-over but visible in the cliff above, you can see that, in stormy conditions, when the waves beat into the rock, salty water-laden air sprays through the blowhole, it is not the dramatic rock that gives the place its name at all. A reason that the blowhole is less noticeable these days is that, over the years, shepherds blocked access to the hole, which was at one time more significant than at present, to prevent livestock from falling through the hole.

I believe the rock arch erroneous description mentioned earlier is the result of a poor translation of the sayings of that remarkable fortune-teller, The Brahan Seer. Known in Gaelic as Coinneach Odhar, he originally came from Lewis, but made many of his predications while living near Dingwall, just north of Inverness. He used to look through a hole carved into a pebble so that people understood he was seeing the future, and in one prediction, spoke of ships sailing around a hill near Inverness, thus foretelling the construction of the Caledonian Canal. He also told of the rocks in Clachtoll splitting, when, he said, the rock would fall with a noise so loud that the cattle at Ledmore, 20-odd miles away, would get a fright. Now one translation of book by Alexander Mackenzie, who documented, or who may or may not have "invented", the Brahan Seer story, talks about the "The natural arch, or 'Clach tholl,' near Storehead in Assynt" falling in with a great noise, thus fulfilling the prophesy. This sentence has been repeated in other texts, so that some assume there must have been an arch there.

But if you look closely at your card this month, you will notice in the foreground, where the high water mark makes yellow, then blackened colours against the rock, that the layers of rock have been tipped at a strange angle, and slopes steeply towards the sea. The split rock itself is at the same angle and is part of the same geology. We have spoken about the "Moine Thrust" as a geologically significant event in earlier notes, and the angle of the layers of rock is the result of this convulsion in the surface of the planet. There is no real evidence of an arch, but it does seem plausible that the rock gave way, allowing that huge piece to slide down the slope, further into the sea. It would still have been a mighty bang, but it is probably an assumption that the *Clach Toll* is the big rock, that lead people to make up the rock arch part of the story.

As far as visitors are concerned, other than the spectacle of the split rocks, two things in

Clachtoll are of particular interest; the beach and the camp site. Visit Scotland describes the beach like this: "With white sands and idyllic turquoise water, Clachtoll Beach is an unspoilt paradise in the Highlands." Visitors, it seems, are happy to share their photographs of the beach, and putting "Clachtoll Beach" into the search engine of your choice shows some wonderful images. A link to the Bing search engine is in the "Additional Information" web page, the address of which is at the end of these notes. Every year in August, the local Highland Council Ranger service holds a sandcastle competition on the beach, with the usual tension such events engender between creativity and competitiveness. But it is a great day out, even if perfect weather is not always guaranteed. At the height of the tourist season, as it is now at the time of writing, a rough estimate suggests that there are six times as many people on the camp site as there are permanent residents of Clachtoll. Just less than half the houses here are permanently occupied, the remainder being holiday houses. People come to the camp site year after year for their holidays. Who can blame them, with such a beach just a couple of minutes' walk from their tents and caravans. Frequently, when we are away from Assynt, when people find out where we live, they will say "Oh yes, I've been camping there. What a fantastic beach." In the early season, one can often see examples of the resilience of youth, as children venture into the cold sea for a swim or a paddle, while their parents remain on the beach, wrapped up against any weather. One wonders what delightful happy memories these families are creating and storing, and it is important to remember that when we get frustrated when the roads are full of tourists, and perhaps the courtesies of driving our single-track roads have not yet been learned. Just recently a little shop has been opened near the campsite, selling coffee and toasted sandwiches for older folk, and an assortment of sweeties suitable for relaxed rules of nutrition on a camping holiday for those a little younger, served in little paper bags. It is a delight to see happy faces running back to the camp site, clutching their little bags amid squeals of sugar-charged delight.

But what of other aspects of Clachtoll around the split rocks? We know that the area has long been populated, and some marks of human settlement remain in the landscape. The most prominent of these is a series of ridges in the landscape leading up to the rocks themselves. These are the remains of cultivation beds, laboriously created by digging ditches, then piling the earth to one side to create a depth to the shallow soils that is the best that Assynt can do. We discussed cultivation beds in an earlier set of Yarn Notes from Assynt, but to summarise, this method of cultivation became known as lazy beds during the 19th century, when the powerful in society were trying to develop the impression that Highlanders were indolent, as part of their attempts to justify the social experimentation that prevailed to increase the profits of the landlords. One look at why and how these cultivation beds were made makes it clear that they were not the product of lazy people at all, but a clever adaptation to dreadful conditions under which to feed a family. It is also worth while thinking about the conditions that had people growing essential food crops just metres away from the sea, where winds and salt burn must have played havoc with the crop. They did not choose these places for convenience, but had no other choice. The ecologist Frank Fraser Darling notes some areas in the Highlands and Islands where a piece of ground was cultivated that was so small, it produced just a single bucket of potatoes, yet was still of necessity worked.

Another, much older, piece of evidence that people have lived here for thousands of years is a "vitrified fort" on the split rocks themselves. Vitrified forts are small rock enclosures that have had intensely hot fires built in them, the fires being maintained for long enough partially to melt the stone from which the enclosure is built. The term "fort" cannot be proven, as we do not have any idea what the purpose of these enclosures may have been. This practice seems to have been one of those strange fads of technology that spread across Europe in Neolithic up to Iron Age times, much like the technology to make beakers spread fast across Europe. The enclosures are difficult to date, though, because the fires destroyed any datable evidence. It is interesting to dwell for a moment the assumption that the structures must have had an aggressive purpose, and one wonders whether this says more about Victorian and early-modern society than about the society that built these enclosures. Vitrified fort remains are hard to see to the unpractised eye, but are marked by a glassiness of the rocks, usually done by the partial melting of small pebbles. Archaeologists assure us that this was the technique used at the split rocks, where the soil in the immediate vicinity of the small

section of vitrification remains darker from the charcoal and burning, in comparison with the other soil nearby. The location of this structure suggests that the point of land at which the split rocks stand has for a long time been significant, no real surprise given its prominence.

On the opposite side of the beach to the split rocks is a stretch of land along the coast that eventually leads to Stoer beach. On the section just above Clachtoll beach is a series of large, angular rocks arranged in an incomplete, but easily seen, wall, known as a Dragon's Teeth Wall. These types of walls are found elsewhere in Scotland, and some of these date back to the Neolithic period, 3800 – 2400BC. Nearby is the remains of what is known as a “cist” burial, dating to the Bronze Age, 2400 – 700BC, when burial practices developed to include a stone lining to a grave, the occupant lying curled up in a foetal position, along with grave goods. The remains of the person are long gone, but whoever was living here at the time took a lot of trouble to ensure that the death of one of their number was marked in an appropriate way.

On the heights above the beach at Clachtoll, adjacent to the beach, a complex series of tall wooden poles has been erected. Nearby is a building. This was a salmon bothy, a small dwelling used to house the people who worked at a salmon netting station, which was operational from the mid 19th century right up until 1994. The poles were once rigged with blocks and ropes to haul the nets into the air to dry. The building was in danger of falling into ruin completely, but *Commun Eachdraidh Asainte*, the Assynt Historical Society, restored the building and kitted it out to help visitors understand this form of economic activity that was such an important part of Clachtoll. The fishing business was, of course, not owned by the fishermen, but rather by the landlord who owned the entire area. The work was seasonal, with no security, but still local people were given a hard time over even this form of income. In the 1950s, a nearby land owner got grant funding to plant trees around his huge estate, and needed labourers for the work. This was good, but the planting season and the salmon fishing season overlapped slightly. Each landlord, or his agents, threatened the local people that if they took work for the other, they would not be allowed to work for them, so people had to choose between the insecurity of seasonal planting work versus the insecurity of seasonal work at the fishing. One of those involved, whose grand-niece still lives in the area, wrote a biting satirical poem about this event, but the poem is unpublishable, as the strength of feeling meant that rather choice language was used to describe the arrogant actions of the landlords.

Associated with the salmon bothy is an ice house, a semi-underground building in which ice was stored in winter so that the salmon could be packed in ice for the journey to the southern markets. Such ice houses are fairly common near fishing related places in the north of Scotland. Ice was usually cut from shallow ponds in winter, and there was so much of it packed into the ice house that it survived the summer. The large ice house at Helmsdale, on the east coast, has been used by the local museum, Timespan, to host concerts and multimedia events in its ethereal interior, a strange and other-worldly experience in the dripping darkness.

Co-incidentally, just a couple of weeks ago I received an email from someone in Devon, in the south of England, who visited Clachtoll in 1986, who was taken out by the salmon fishermen, and who had photographs of their day out. He has very kindly donated the pictures for inclusion in our digital archive here in Assynt. The images show a group of people and a way of life that is so recent, but now gone. They are especially interesting because the style of fishing, the boats, nets and processes, changed very little over the years, so they capture a bygone age.

Near the split rock itself are the remain of an old croft house, long since abandoned. It is likely that the cultivation beds were made by the people living at that house. In the area of the house, an energetic couple have built a new house in the last few years, and set up a thriving agricultural business, raising rare-breed pigs and Highland cattle, whose meat they sell to restaurants up and down our coast. They also offer a bed and breakfast service to visitors, who are inevitably charmed with the proximity of (very) free range cattle, hens and

pigs, and of course, the location of their house has stunning views. It is wonderful to see the continuity represented by this couple's initiative.

The name MacLeod is a long-established local name. One of the most significant events associated with Clachtoll was the story of locally-born Rev. Norman MacLeod and his wanderings with his loyal flock of adherents over half the planet's surface, looking for a place to settle and live according to the way of their own choosing. Norman was born in 1780, possibly in Stoer, rather than Clachtoll, though some sources say Clachtoll. This was a time before the dreaded Highland Clearances were to reach their peak, and there were settlements and people throughout Assynt, with perhaps as many as four times the population as currently lives here. When Norman was 27, he decided to embrace the teachings of Calvinism, the austere "pure" reformist religion championed by the Swiss, John Calvin, in the 16th century, and which found very fertile ground in parts of Scotland. He went to Aberdeen University to study for a Master of Arts degree, and was good enough to have been awarded a Gold Medal in Moral Philosophy. He went on to Edinburgh to study to become a minister in the Church of Scotland, but left owing to his view that the Church of Scotland did not meet the moral standards he felt were required. He came back north, and when he could, preached in the local church around Ullapool, where he had settled, criticising the local minister in spite of the fact that he was dependant on the church, working as he did as a local teacher. His stand against the local minister allowed him to gather local supporters, and when he came back to Clachtoll to work as a fisherman, he continued to preach a fiery message, and gathered more supporters.

During this time, the Clearances were gathering pace, and rather than being sent away by the landlords, he chose to emigrate. In 1817, the little barque *Frances Ann* left Clachtoll with MacLeod, his family and some supporters on board, bound for Nova Scotia in Canada. They arrived in Pictou County, where he took up his zealous preaching once again, attracting more emigrants from north west Scotland to his cause. But the group, now known as Normanites, could not find enough land on which to settle, and made plans to move again. In 1820, 700 of MacLeod's supporters settled at St Anne, Cape Breton, where the community developed entirely around MacLeod's religious convictions. By this time, he had been ordained by the Presbytery of Geneva in New York State, which gave him authority independent of the Canadian church, and he was made magistrate and teacher as well. In short, he ruled the settlement by his own moral standards, even criticising his own wife for her choice of bonnet, from the pulpit one Sunday. For reasons which are not obvious, but are usually stated to be associated with a famine in the late 1840s, he decided once again to move, this time to Australia, where his son had settled, and who had written warmly about his life there. Many Normanites followed, but this was the time of the Victorian Gold Rush, and land was impossibly expensive. MacLeod wrote to the governor of New Zealand, George Gray, who allowed them allotments of land around the Waipu River. More ships arrived from the original Nova Scotia settlement, with eventually more than 800 people taking part in the exodus.

Norman MacLeod lived for 13 years in New Zealand, where he continued his crusade, and where he died in 1866. He maintained his "reputation as an autocratic demagogue", as one biography put it, to the last. One of his people wrote of him that "His nature and temper were very mysterious, often almost clashing with each other. One side was mild and lovely as could possibly be while the other was autocratic as could be."

And it all started near the split rocks in Clachtoll, where a monument to his wanderings stands above the shore.

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