

Journeys to the Little Bay-----*An t'Òban Latharnach*

Man has been making journeys to *an-t'òban* for more than 10,000 years.

When Scotland emerged at the end of the last Ice Age, liberated from the weight of her mile thick frozen tomb, melt water, tide, wind, rain and glacial creep eroded and sculpted the land. Left behind was the magnificent landscape we see today---deep, fiord-like sea-lochs, rugged, tortuous coastlines, imposing, dramatic mountains and a ribbon of raised beaches strung along the shore.

As the weather warmed and life returned, hunter-gatherers arrived in their primitive dug-outs from the south, looking for sources of sustenance and shelter. These were the Mesolithic or Middle Stone-Age people who found a ready supply of food on the land and in the sea and ample sanctuary in the caves and rock-shelters round Oban Bay.

Sea-level was around 30 feet higher than today and, from the midden heaps discovered in MacArthur's, MacKay's and the Distillery Caves, we know they lived on a diet of oysters, mussels, cockles, venison and other hunted animals. Tools fashioned from deer antler, bone and flint along with harpoons, pins, shells and human remains testify to regular habitation.

The raised sea flooded the lower parts of Glen Shellach and Glen Cruitten, creating a sheltered loch which provided protection for these nomadic visitors at Raschoille and Drimvargie. Fishing, hunting and the gathering of berries and plants sustained the early travellers while the coastline from Dunollie to Gallanach housed them in shelters, adequate, certainly in summer, against extremes of climate.

By 3000 B.C., the land around *an t-òban* was home to Neolithic or New Stone Age people. They settled, farmed the land, grew crops and kept animals. Although not much tangible evidence remains, there are enough clues to point to settlements around the bay.

Opposite the farm at Gallanachbeg, on *Dùn Fheurain*, a slab tomb containing a burial urn was discovered in 1897. The urn, decorated with straight lines, was a duplicate of one found when the Argyllshire Gathering Halls were being built in Breadalbane Street. The discovery of chambered tombs, cairns and artefacts such as charm-stones, querns and horn needles with 'eyes', indicate a settled community who respected their dead and could make garments by sewing pieces of hide together—a great advance in keeping warm.

Also at Gallanach, articles of iron and bronze were unearthed, including a ring and three inch long pin. Bronze is an alloy of copper and tin and, while there are many veins of copper in Scotland, the nearest tin mines are in Cornwall. Even in these early times, trading was taking place, undoubtedly by sea. At Dalrigh, at the foot of the Bealach an Rìgh, peat cutters dug up an incredible log coffin, hollowed out from a trunk of an oak tree and having pieces of wood inserted into grooves at each end. A fragment of the bark has been radiocarbon dated to the first quarter of the second millennium, B.C.

The land round Oban Bay was obviously suitable for settlement and these early peoples left behind evidence of individual burial cists, cremations and trade with Ireland, Cornwall and France, all of which suggested long term occupation.

The next thousand years saw peoples from north and south travelling to our little bay.

The Iron Age heralded the arrival of more hostile peoples from an area called Dál-riata on the Antrim coast. These Celtic tribes brought with them sophisticated weaponry, using an evolving technology which converted iron ore into a usable metal. Undoubtedly by trial and error or accident, the discovery of how to make iron involved heat to a high temperature, a source of carbon-probably from charcoal-, rocks containing iron ore and a source of limestone. When these elements combined, the result was a discovery that changed the world.

Armed with swords, axes and spears, the Celts were minded to conquer the native Picts and built *dùns* or hill-forts to defend their territory. The place names round Oban –Dunollie, an Dùnan, Dùn Fheurain and Dungallan are a lasting reminder of these early visitors. In 1888, while draining Loch a Mhuillin, remains of a crannog were discovered. These were island forts situated in lochs and marshy ground and ideal as defensive dwellings. The Celts, also called Gaels, brought with them their language-Gaelic- and their religion. Their legacy to us, among many things, is the name Argyll--*Earra-Ghaidheal* and the land of one of the tribes, the *Scotti*-Scotland.

As the first millennium A.D. rolled on, summer reivers ventured south from their Scandinavian fastnesses. The Vikings - *Na Lochlannaich*- came originally in raiding parties but quickly settled much of the western seaboard and islands from Unst to Man. Their fast, adaptable long-ships made it easy to control the coastline and fruitful pickings were found in the many ecclesiastical buildings and monasteries.

Norse influence was felt up till the middle of the 13th century when King Haakon of Norway navigated his dragon-crested longships to anchor in Horseshoe Bay off Kerrera on his way to the Firth of Clyde. Bad weather and the ailing king contributed to their defeat at Largs in 1263.

One of the jewels in Oban's crown is Dunollie Castle.

Dubgall, a son of the great Somerled- *Somhairle mac Gillebrigte*- founded the powerful MacDougall dynasty. Ewan, the grandson of Somerled, the first Lord of the Isles, built many great castles in Argyll, including one at Dunollie around 1164. The present building dates from the 15th century but there is evidence that a *dùn* or fort existed on the site-unquestionably ideal for the purpose-since the 7th century.

By 1222, Alexander 11, King of Scots, had driven the Norsemen out of mainland Argyll. He was minded to take the islands back by force and assembled his fleet in the Sound of Kerrera, intending to visit Ewan to persuade him to support him. Unfortunately, he died on the island in 1249 on a field still called *Dàil Rìgh*-Field of the King. (*The history of Clan Dougall, and many artefacts, can be found at Dunollie and is well worth a visit.*)

Cattle trading in Argyll existed as early as the mid-16th century. Beasts from Coll and Tiree would join those from Mull to be ferried from Grasspoint to Bàrr nam Boc on Kerrera. They then either swam across the Sound of Kerrera to join the drove road through Glenmore, along the String of Lorn and across Loch Awe or swam across the narrows below Dunollie Castle at the point called *Àrd an Snàmh* (Ardantrive—high point of the swimming) through Glen Lonan, Dalmally and Tyndrum to make their way to trysts or markets in Falkirk, Crieff and Stirling. Occasionally, inns accommodated these hardy drovers and, even at the end of the 18th century, in the nascent village of Oban, they made use of *taighean* such as *Taigh Clach- a-Gheòdha* where Aulay's bar now stands- as did the notable Gaelic poet, Duncan Ban MacIntyre, who is reputed to have passed 'ambrosial nights' there in the company of the landlady, Mary Campbell, apparently berating the Jacobites for their effrontery.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, early cartographers, such as Pont and Blaeu, did their best to map the area but the only place-names they left behind were *Glenshelloch, Soirbe, Dounoldyf and Inchshog*, which was in Oban Bay. Herring fishing was increasing and the little bay provided shelter for the many fishermen, local and foreign, who followed the shoals round the coast. By 1700, the beginnings of a settlement, to complement those in Glen Shellach and Glen Cruitten, were evident.

The Renfrew Trading Company set up a store and trading station and ships began to use the bay as a safe anchorage for the burgeoning trade with the new colonies. Smuggling was also a profitable industry and by 1760, the Duke of Argyll had the Customs House moved from Fort William—at a cost of £80-7s.

The first Collector of Excise in Oban was Duncan MacVicar and he was given authorisation to enclose the land where Loch a Mhuillin emptied into the sea. His niece, Anne, who became the writer Mrs. Grant of Laggan, was the first recorded tourist to Oban. In April 1773, she travelled as a young woman to visit her uncle and her journey, on horseback, took her on the drovers' road from Inveraray by Loch Awe, Midmuir and Kilmore.

'I arrived here last night at eleven after a tedious journey in a very rainy day through the Mona Lia [across] an endless moor, without any road except a small footpath, through which our guide conducted our horses with difficulty.'

Six months later, Johnson and Boswell arrived in the village on their way south from their journey to the Western Isles. They crossed from Grasspoint on Mull on seats of rough brushwood and, the best *taigh* being full, found a 'tolerable inn'- a slated house of two storeys- thought to be situated at the bottom of High Street. The following day, they continued south on their shelties to Inveraray on a rough track, beset by high winds and torrential rain and with only one bridle between them for their four ponies.

"The Collector's dwelling-house forms part of the Custom House: it stands on the verge of this fine bay. (The railway station now occupies the site). The tide flows up to the door, but retires half a mile back and discovers a scene very new to me, who have never been at the seaside except in embarking and debarking. Vast stones, where the footing is difficult, mixed with gravel, shells and sea-weed, compose the extensive beach which the ebbing sea leaves naked. Behind the house is an excellent though, as yet, infant garden, for this is quite a new establishment; a range of offices stretch along the shore on each side; the king's wherry and other boats, and such vessels as may chance to arrive, lie a little westward and animate the spot where the joint wisdom of the Duke and the Collector have projected a future village, the rudiments of which already begin to appear. From this chosen spot, where a large brook (the Back Lynn) discharges itself into the sea, a peaceful, long, green valley (Glen Shellach-Glen of the Willows) opens from the shore, of which the Duke has given an advantageous lease to the Collector, who is a great favourite.

The cottages lie in clusters on the sides of the sloping hills or in sequestered nooks, below rocks interspersed with patches of earth tufted with yellow broom or mountain ash.”

‘Letters from the Mountains ‘ by Mrs. Grant of Laggan 1773.

Perhaps the most influential 18th century traveller was Joseph Banks. He had visited Staffa while returning from Iceland in 1772. A geologist and explorer, his descriptions of the rock formations on the island created a huge amount of interest in scientific and literary circles, declaring - ‘compared to this, what are the cathedrals or the palaces built by men!’

In 1780, a Frenchman, Barthelemy Faujais Saint-Fond and his entourage, left Taynuilt in the company of the Dalmally school master, Patrick Fraser, who acted as his guide all the way to Iona. They apparently lost their way in the mist around Glencruitten Summit and their carriages got embedded in a burn. In response to their shouts, ‘semi-nude natives’ appeared out of the dark, one of whom was an old, grey-bearded man in a white sheet. St. Fond, obviously of romantic bent, exclaimed that he must, indeed, be Ossian, the divine poet and was all for falling at his feet. It was, in fact, the local miller, still in his working clothes! The party reached Oban and rescuers and rescued knocked up the landlord of the Old Inn in High Street at half past one in the morning in a ‘pitiable’ condition. The following day, St-Fond unsuccessfully tried to dissuade the local piper from serenading him all day with the same tune-at least it sounded like the same tune! Despite his mishaps, the account of his experiences was published in London in 1799 and led to waves of visitors eager to visit the Hebrides.

John Knox,-not the religious reformer- who paid frequent visits from 1764, suggested that the mill loch be used as a royal dockyard and brought the town and seaboard to the notice of the government of the day. Thomas Newte, in 1785, described the harbour as the best port in the west and recorded that there were ‘a few fishing boats, chiefly for the fishing of herrings, a business which is carried on with some success.’ He attributed the growth of the village to the endeavours and enterprise of one family in particular-the Stevensons.

Early in the 18th century, Mrs. James Stevenson made the journey to Oban from Dumbarton, by way of Port Appin, where her husband was employed as a mason rebuilding Airds House. Tragically, he died young, leaving his widow destitute but responsible for raising her five sons.

The family acquired a house of sorts near *Àrdchonail-a-mhuillin* or Ardconnel Mill on the back road from Connel to Oban. It was the custom to give a house to those in poverty near a mill so that farmers coming to grind corn might give them some meal. She was a feisty but frugal woman who ensured her sons were given an education and apprenticed to a skilled trade. Hugh became a mason and took on Glencruitten Farm, while also opening a store licenced to sell spirits. John trained as a joiner and acquired Glenshellach Farm, Thomas became a fish curer at Bonawe. The Stevensons eventually expanded into boat-building and trading, opened a tannery and brewery, ran a dairy as outlet for their farming produce, became involved in the slate and kelp industries and traded in llama wool. Their hospitality became legendary and they played host to many famous visitors, including the Honourable Mrs. Murray Aust of Kensington who declared:

“I am very attached to the little town of Oban and its inhabitants, particularly the families of the Stevensons. There is a simplicity of manners, a strength of mind and judgement and a friendly hospitality innate, I believe, in their dispositions, which is rarely met in any station. They have been the founders of Oban“

Another entrepreneur, William Cumstie, arrived in the village from Ireland with his wife and eight children and, within a short space of time, had established a grocery and drapery business in George Street. The family, over the years, set up a fleet of sloops which traded up and down the coast and to Ireland and William later became the growing town's first Chief Magistrate in 1833.

By 1800, a *balure* or new town had grown up near the mill loch, providing homes for some of the many people drifting in from the surrounding countryside and islands. The population doubled in ten years. From 1809, the headquarters of the Argyllshire Local Militia was based near Quarry Road and would also have contributed to the rise in numbers substantially-directly and indirectly.

The Crinan Canal opened in 1801 and allowed ships like the Comet-the first commercially successful steam ship in Europe- to bring passengers from Glasgow on a regular basis. Before that, Perth was usually the starting point for journeys to Oban, by way of Loch Tay, Glen Dochart and Loch Awe and it was thus that the fledgling poet and author, Walter Scott--not yet a Sir--brought his family en route to Mull, Staffa and Iona in 1814. He was impressed by the 'industrious villager', Thomas Kennedy, who had come from Ayrshire in 1800, and had set up a nursery for young trees where Nursery Lane still stands.

The first half of the 19th century brought increasing numbers of travellers and tourists to the little bay. Arrivals of writers, artists, musicians and royalty became almost commonplace. Among them was Felix Mendelssohn, who composed his Hebrides Overture having visited Fingal's Cave in 1829. J.M.W. Turner, the famous painter, arrived in Oban in 1831 by land and he left behind a series of sketches of the town. William Wordsworth came ashore from the *Maid of Morven* and wrote his poem, *Eagles*, while at Dunollie Castle. In 1844, both Hugh Miller the renowned geologist, visited the town and King George of Saxony, on board the paddle-steamer, *Brenda*, was greeted with 'rounds of hurrahs from a great multitude of very orderly people and the inn-keeper and his family dressed for the occasion in full Highland costume'.

But it was, perhaps, the visit of Victoria and Albert on the royal yacht in 1847 that confirmed Oban as 'one of the finest spots we have seen'. Few would disagree.

Fleets of steamers were calling regularly, bringing thousands of visitors from the Lowlands and the south. In 1847, the Marquis of Breadalbane purchased an American sailing ship, the B.C. Bailey, which had gone aground off Lismore and had it towed to the bay, turned over and sunk to form a new jetty where the North Pier is now. This provided a landing stage for larger vessels and increased shipping.

Meanwhile, new routes to Oban were opening up. In 1868, it became possible to travel from Glasgow to Ardrishaig and then on via Loch Awe. The 'Queen of the Lake' carried passengers from Ford to the old pier in the Pass of Brander where a coach took them onwards. David Hutcheson had already established the 'Royal Route' by the Crinan Canal and excursions were enjoyed to Glencoe, Fort William and even Stornoway by way of Skye. In the twenty years before 1880, when the railway arrived, the population of Oban doubled to 4000. Thereafter, the growth of the town was unstoppable.

In 1851, G&J Burns had formed a company, David Hutcheson and Co., to handle West Highland steamer routes and he, along with his brother and Burns' nephew, David MacBrayne, ran and expanded the company until 1879, when MacBrayne took sole charge. New ferry routes were added and Oban became very much the centre of operations. Writers began extolling the beauty of the area and produced colourful descriptions:

“Every variety of pleasure-seeker is to be found there and every variety of costume. Reading parties from Oxford lounge around , sportsmen in knickerbockers stand in groups at hotel doors; Frenchmen chatter and shrug their shoulders; individuals who have not a drop of Highland blood flutter about in the Garb of the Gael and tipsy porters abuse each other in Gaelic.”

Notable visitors kept coming:-Bismarck, Garibaldi--and David Livingstone, in search of his ancestors.

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