

4 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

4.1 Introduction

Brunary Burn was likely to have been constructed in the early 19th century, as part of the attempted development of the Highlands by landlords keen to maintain population and bring marginal land into cultivation. The poor nature of the land on which the houses are located would suggest it was not possible to make more than a partial living from it. This in turn suggests that the excess labour was being used in collecting kelp, a valuable (for a time) cash crop for Highland landlords.

The property does not appear on any maps or plans of the area before it was abandoned, indicating that it was not regarded as being of much significance or financial worth. The buildings first appear on the First Edition Ordnance Survey map (1876), and are shown as two unroofed buildings, indicating that the buildings had been abandoned by this point. No buildings are shown here on Roy's 1747 map of the area. Census records reveal that part of the property (Structure A) was inhabited by a crofting family, the McEachans, in 1841 but, thereafter, there is no mention of it in subsequent censuses. In turn this suggests that the property was abandoned in the 1840s during the years of the great Highland famine, possibly through forced eviction. Research suggests that the family moved to another croft nearer the village of Arisaig, though it is likely that some of the inhabitants emigrated, with Canada as their most likely destination (Dobson 1984, 108–10).

4.2 The broader picture

Beginning in the 1760s the intrusion of sheep farms began quietly but inexorably, and took over the Highlands and Islands in a series of waves over the following decades. It is important, however, to recognise the other forces at work. Eviction and clearance were not necessarily linked to sheep; basic enclosures on the pattern of southern improvement were common, creating larger farms for cattle and arable production. Within the broad sweep of clearance each locality had distinctive experiences. The New Statistical Account (NSA 1845) provided a basic valuation of the produce of Moidart, Arisaig and South Morar according to the average prices for the 25 years preceding 1833. This reveals the significance of sheep, cattle, kelp and potatoes (Table 1). Kelp was collected on the shore at Arisaig and Rhu, only a short distance from the house at Brunary, and played a particular role in the history of the area. During the time of the kelp boom (1790s to 1815)

the principal landowner of the area, Clanranald, depended far more on this industry for his wealth than land rentals.

Table 1 Value of the produce of Moidart, Arisaig and South Morar, c 1807–33

Produce	Value
Wool	£2800
Oats	£700
Bear [barley]	£300
Potatoes	£2250
Hay	£833
Pasture, sheep	£4375
Pasture, cattle	£3000
Gardens & orchards	£150
Woods & plantations	£500
Fish	£150
Kelp	£2600

Clanranald's affairs became 'embarrassed' in 1811, and he 'conveyed all his estates to trustees'. The collapse in the price of kelp after the defeat of Napoleon saw Clanranald's embarrassment only deepen, and in 1824 his estates were being advertised for sale. Selling had become a necessity because the depreciation of the value of Highland property after 1815 meant that the estate could not meet its outstanding debts, and selling part of the estate was a strategy to try and protect the inheritance of the younger children. The price agreed was £49,300, and the bulk of this, £44,500, was paid in November 1827. Thereafter a lengthy dispute occurred between the two sets of trustees, with the issue going to arbitration before the final settlement in Clanranald's favour in 1833.¹

Even this injection of new capital proved unable to save the estate, which was back on the market soon after. With this the role and very presence of the Clanranalds came to an end, and Arisaig and the other parts of the estate experienced a new wave of outside proprietors. The local minister of the Church of Scotland spoke at the Napier (or Crofter's) Commission in 1884:²

The estate of Arisaig and South Morar has the misfortune to have passed more than the ordinary changes of proprietors and factors within a couple of generations . . . It is not so very long ago since Clanranald reigned here, followed by Lady Ashburton, Lord Cranstoun, Mr MacKay, and FDP Astley. Then came a trusteeship during the

minority of Mr Frank Astley, who succeeded. He was not long in possession when he was succeeded by his sister; and now the estate has the further change incident of that lady's becoming Mrs Nicolson.

While there seems to have been some affection held by the tenants for FDP Astley, there was little for Lord Cranstoun, who was the proprietor during the famine years. In the evidence to the Napier Commission, clearance tended to be associated with Cranstoun's time. Denis Rixson, however, using the evidence collected by the Deer Forest Commission in 1894, identifies clearances in Arisaig as early as the 1820s, that is, during the Clanranald/Ashburton proprietorship (Rixson 2002, 126, fig 12). Nonetheless, most of the various clearances during the later 1830s, 1840s and 1850s did occur under Lord Cranstoun. Cranstoun was certainly not a popular proprietor, and a negative view of his stewardship was not the preserve of displaced tenants. During the famine Cranstoun was seen as one of those landlords who failed to make an effort to bring relief to his tenants. It was recognised as early as the autumn of 1846 that there was 'a great deal of destitution' in Arisaig and that there was a total lack of work on Cranstoun's estate.³

The potato blight reduced the population to near-destitution, trying to survive on birds, fish and even edible seaweed. The recently created Free Church of Scotland was the first body to get relief into the Highlands and Islands. Its Destitution Committee raised £15,000 and sent provisions into the affected areas aboard the schooner *Breadalbane*. The Church concentrated its efforts on the cottars, the poorest class and most vulnerable, and, to its great credit, brought relief to the worst affected localities regardless of denomination; Catholic Arisaig was helped when the *Breadalbane* docked at Rhu. The government officials in charge of the national relief effort were determined not to provide 'gratuitous' relief. Their view was that the 'natives' had brought much of the misfortune on themselves, and any 'charity' had to come with conditions attached, in particular a demand that work be done for aid given. They were equally determined that the proprietors should not be given a blank cheque; they should be encouraged to improve their estates through drainage and road works via loans rather than grants. The success of such a strategy relied on the willing cooperation of the landlords, which put Arisaig in an unfortunate position. Cranstoun did grudgingly offer some road work on the estate but refused to supply the tools for the job (Devine 1988, 126).

Cranstoun was alive to the predicament he faced as a landlord, and there was a flurry of evictions and clearances in 1843 (Rixson 2002, 126). Unfortunately for our immediate purposes, there is no mention of Brunary Burn in the sources on Arisaig's clearances, but given that we know it was definitely inhabited in 1841, and disappears from the census

thereafter, it is likely that the McEachan family was one of the many cleared in 1843.

At the Napier or Crofters' Commission in 1884 one of the witnesses was an Alexander McEachran, then 51 and a cottar. Alexander recalled being evicted from his family's croft at Kinloid about 30 years previously when he was nearly 20.⁴ The census of 1851 reveals that an Alexander MacEachan, 19, was resident at 'Farm of Kinloid' with his father, mother and three siblings. Their near neighbour, also at 'Farm of Kinloid' was the MacEachan family ex of Brunary Burn (as revealed by the information contained in the enumerator's schedules for both census years); the two families, who were likely related, had shared the same experience of clearance, not once but twice. After being put out of Brunary Burn, the MacEachans were then cleared from Kinloid and in 1861 were still in Arisaig, but at Back of Keppoch.

Arisaig, as with the rest of the Western Highlands and Islands, experienced continuous population growth for the best part of a century, from the mid 18th century till the 1840s. The rate of growth, however, was not as dramatic as that for the Lowlands and the central belt of Scotland. The census figures from the early part of the 19th century for the Inverness part of Ardnamurchan Parish reveal a slight increase between 1801 and 1841. The break came in the 1840s, with the population figure for 1851 being exactly the same as it had been 30 years previously (2,333).⁵ The population continued to decline thereafter: in 1881 the census recorded the population of 'Arisaig' as 1,136, and in 1891 as 929. At the latter date this population comprised 207 families of 447 males and 482 females. There were 204 inhabited houses, with 19 uninhabited, and none in the process of being built. The sharp disparity in wealth and comfort was revealed in the figures for the size of houses: 26 families lived in one-roomed houses, while 63 lived in two-roomed houses (the largest single category). At the other end of the scale were the big houses: there were 13 families living in houses of more than ten rooms, including two houses with more than 30 rooms.

At the sitting of the Deer Forest Commission in Arisaig in 1894, the crofters and cottars were examined. Both cottars and crofters desired land. In the case of the former there were some who had no land whatever, and the rest had only small patches of land or gardens where they grew potatoes. Their desire was for smallholdings which could provide part of their needs, with the rest provided by work elsewhere. The wish of most of the crofters was to have a new croft, larger than the smallholdings they currently held. Another witness (another MacEachan), Allan MacEachan from South Morar, explained that his croft had one acre of land only, plus the right to graze one cow on a neighbouring farm. In general the crofters in the area had no sheep or grazing land, only arable. Allan was 64 and had five sons aged between 13 and 21, all but one of whom were still living at home. His croft was unable

to support his family and he and his sons made their living by labouring. There was little if any work provided by the estate and they got only the odd day's work wherever they could, which meant travelling 'throughout the country'. Allan would have preferred a new croft nearer the sea, because he had worked at fishing previously, though his sons had no experience of it.⁶

Covering Arisaig and South Morar, the estate of the Nicholsons in 1901/02 was a mixture of sheep farms, deer forest and crofts.⁷ Contrary to the crofters' claims that new, enlarged crofts could pay an economic rent, the Nicholsons were adamant that crofting rents could never match the money got from the hill farms with their sheep, or the shooting rights for those willing to pay for the 'pleasure' of hunting the deer. The estate, therefore, was dependent for a large part of its income on catering to the sporting enthusiasm of the wealthy. Many of the evictions in the area were done in order to create space for the deer, and it is likely that Brunary Burn was one of these clearances.

4.3 *The inhabitants of the house at Brunary Burn*

It is in this state of flux that we find the McEachen family residing at Brunary Burn in 1841. In this census the only occupations recorded were those of the head of the household, in this case Angus McEachen, a crofter. As explained above, crofting was a term used to encompass a variety of occupations necessitated by the uneconomic size of land on which to subsist. We can only speculate regarding the composition of this mix of activities. The possibilities might have been any of the following: work in and around the Arisaig estate and nearby Arisaig House in the form of labouring (or more skilled work such as stone masonry), shepherding and domestic service; fishing; seasonal migration to the south of Scotland. Most of these occupations are recorded in the McEachen family groupings identified in later censuses.

By 1851 John McEachen had taken over as head of household and they occupied a farm at Kinloid.

Further details of the family after they left Brunary Burn are included in the archive report.

Despite all the limitations imposed by the lack of specified relationships in the census of 1841, each individual was assigned a relationship in a way in which it is believed, on the balance of probability, reflects the most likely set-up:

Angus McEachen, aged 60, **Father**
Sally McEachen, aged 50, **Wife**
John McEachen, aged 30, **Son**
Sally McEachen, aged 35, **Daughter-in-law**
Donald McEachen, aged 10, **Grandson**
John McEachen, aged 5, **Grandson**
Cirsty McEachen, aged 4, **Granddaughter**
Angus McEachen, aged 1, **Grandson**
Jannet McEachen, aged 10, **Granddaughter**
Kate McEachen, aged 20, **Daughter**

Since the patch of land around the buildings at Brunary Burn is boggy in nature, it may be assumed that it was not suitable for keeping animals, rather for cultivation of potatoes in a ridge and furrow system commonly employed in the area known as 'lazy beds'. Lazy beds were a method of growing crops in poor soil and are normally found in the north-west. They were effectively raised seed beds of between two and five metres wide, with steep drainage channels running between and seaweed often used as the fertiliser to improve the ground. Made with the spade, lazy beds were 'more labour-intensive than ploughing, though more productive, an important consideration if arable is at a premium' (Dixon 1994, 51). The actual human effort involved has been described as 'a backbreaking attempt to wring a living from a difficult environment' (Whyte & Whyte 1987, 267). This method of cultivation was also suited to marginal land such as the kind at Brunary Burn. Also, if this area had been used for cultivation, as suggested by the finding of ridge and furrow remains, it would be incompatible with the keeping of large animals as they would trample the crop. Added to this, the presence of plentiful bracken on this plot is also an indication of former lazy-bed cultivation, as bracken is known to prefer such soil.