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PARISH OF LOTH.

(PRESBYTERY OF DORNOCH, SYNOD OF SUTHERLAND AND CAITHNESS, COUNTY OF SUTHERLAND.)

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Extent, Rivers, Fisheries, &c.

THE parish of Loth lies on the N. side of the Murray Firth. The arable or inhabited part is bounded by the sea on the S. and S. E. and on the N. and N. W. by a ridge of high mountains running parallel to the shore. The length of the parish is 14 miles, and the breadth, where broadest, not above $\frac{3}{4}$, and in some places not $\frac{1}{2}$ of a mile. The river of Helmsdale, in the Celtic *Avonullie*, near the northern extremity of this district, issues from a number of lakes in the parish of Kildonnan; the most distant of which, for they are joined together, borders on Strathnaver, in the parish of Far. Its course, from the last lake to the sea, is from N. W. to S. E. for the length of about 20 miles. It is a pity there is no bridge at Helmsdale; as all travellers, to and from Caithness and Orkney, are obliged to cross the river, which they do either by a ford, or in a passage-boat; but in a spout, the one method is impracticable,

practicable, and the other very difficult. About a mile from the mouth of the river are cruives for intercepting the salmon; and the privilege of fishing here is rented from the Sutherland family by a company, for L. 133 sterling *per annum*. This company has of late erected a boiling house at Helmsdale, where not only the salmon of that river, but likewise those of Brora and Shin, are boiled for the London market. The river of Loth, near the other extremity of the parish, has no permanent source, and very little water in summer. It rises in the neighbouring mountains; and has two branches which meet at a small village called the Glen, about a mile above the place where it falls into the sea. This Glen, or Glen-loth, is a small farm, fitter for producing grafs than corn, and has for a long time past been the residence of one tenant; but of late, several families have begun to build and take up their residence to the N. of the old farm house, and to extend their cultivation towards Duchal. The number of inhabitants at present in this tract, which may be called the highlands of the parish, including men, women, and children, amounts to 68 or 70 souls. It is upon the spot where the hunting house, mentioned by the late Mr Alexander Pope, minister of Reay, in his account of Sutherland and Caithness, published in the Appendix to Pennant's Tour, stood, that one of these colonists has pitched his tent, by which that monument of antiquity is destroyed. The Pictish castle of which Mr Pope speaks, is on the N. side of the river, about a furlong below the place where the two branches meet; a little below this building, is the cataract he mentions. It is impossible to conceive what could induce him to talk of fine fishing in the river Loth, for there is no such thing, though, perhaps, a salmon might have been caught in it occasionally, or by accident. One summer, the Helmsdale company employed a boat and crew for about 2 months in the mouth of the Loth: they caught several salmon;

but the success was not such as to tempt them to continue their operations. This river falls into the sea, in a channel cut through a rock 20 feet high, by Lady Jane Gordon, Countess of Sutherland*. Before this channel was cut, the course of the Loth was eastward through the low grounds of Crakag and Lothmore. This river is very rapid, and sometimes impassable in speats; upon these occasions it is more formidable to travellers than Helmsdale, because on the latter there is a passage boat, whereas on the former there is no resource but to encounter the stream. A Caithness post was drowned in attempting to cross it in 1755, and an excise officer's servant perished in it in the same way soon afterwards. There are four rapid burns in the parish to the S. of Helmsdale, besides the burn of the Ord to the N. of it; in the last a young man and his wife perished in a speat, being carried down by the stream over a high precipice, about 20 years ago. The rivers and burns abound in trout. The road through the parish is dry, and would answer well for travellers on horseback and on foot, if there were bridges over those streams; but it is not adapted for wheel carriages.

S. of Manure, Produce.—The soil is generally good, and the arable part of it in constant culture, producing a crop every year, as far back as the memory of the oldest men or even their fathers. All the tacksmen and tenants have one half of their arable land in bear, and the other half in oats and pease. The bear land gets two furrows and is manured, but that for oats and pease gets only one furrow without manure; so that the land is manured every second year. The ordinary manure, and what answers best for bear is sea-ware, but it is believed to have lit-

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* This useful work was executed by that lady, during her son's minority. She was likewise the first that began to dig for coal, at Brora in the neighbouring parish of Clyne.

tle effect on the second crop, so that in most places the oats turn to a poor account; they are also frequently infested with a kind of small vetch that over-runs the ground and destroys the crop. Some years the pease answer extremely well, but at other times they entirely fail. The same may be said of the beans, of which a few are sown instead of oats or pease in deep or very wet grounds. The great dependence of the farmers, therefore, is upon the bear, of which the parish yields near 3000 bolls yearly. When well dressed, each boll is seldom below 18 stone weight, and often a stone or two more. The soil in some places is said to be well adapted for lint, but hitherto the attempts to rear that useful plant have been few and feeble, and therefore not followed by any beneficial effects. There is very little pasture ground in the low parts of the parish, and therefore few cows are maintained in it in summer. A great quantity of potatoes are raised, hardly an inhabitant of the parish but has a plantation of that useful root, which is generally planted after a crop of bear, and prepares the ground for another crop of grain. The deer of the forest of Steitil are very troublesome to the people of the glen in summer and harvest, by eating their corn.

Rent, Stipend, &c.—The Countess of Sutherland has the whole property of the parish, but there are 6 wad-setters, of whom 2 reside. Several gentlemen of property have taken farms in the parish; these farms are provided with good houses and offices, and some are inclosed with stone dykes. Some tacksmen have the whole, and others a part, of their victual-rent converted at 10s. per boll. The valued rent is L. 2264 : 4 : 8 Scotch. The real rent is in victual 583 bolls, 1 firiot, 3 pecks, and 2 lippies, in money L. 288 : 12 : 1½ ster. and the fishing on the river of Helmsdale the third part of L. 400, or L. 133 : 6 : 8 ster. all which, converting the victual at 10s. per boll, amount

to

to L. 713 : 13 : 5½ ster. The stipend, including L. 50 Scotch for communion elements, is L. 26 : 7 : 9¾ ster. and 5 chalders of bear. The schoolmaster's salary is only 100 merks Scotch, and there was no proper school house till last year, on which account the parish frequently wanted a schoolmaster. At present there is a decent school-house, and betwixt 30 and 40 scholars attend it. The registers of baptisms and marriages have hitherto been ill kept, and frequently neglected. The number of baptisms, at an average, amount to about 40, of marriages 24, and of burials 16. There is no fund for the poor but the weekly collections, which are very small, little is given in silver, and the copper is frequently bad. The tenants give their alms in meal at their houses or at the mills, and the gentry are frequently their own almoners. There are 5 millers, 3 smiths, and 7 or 8 wrights; but some of them have land, and hardly any have constant employment in their different departments. There are also taylor, shoemakers, and weavers; but these, for the most part, are likewise labourers and cottars. There are 2 or 3 pedlars that import from Aberdeen or Glasgow such things as the common people have occasion for; but hardly one of them depends entirely on that commerce for his living*.

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Fisheries,

* All the tenants, cottars, and fishers, pay bodily service, or what is called carriages, to the landlord or tacksmen. The incumbent having applied to a parishoner in whose knowledge and integrity he had great confidence, for information on this subject, received this answer: "Your inquiries as to services
 " or carriages performed by the subtenants and cottars on my farm, in conse-
 " quence of Sir John Sinclair's Statistical queries, having suggested the follow-
 " ing thoughts on that subject, you are at liberty to use them as you please.
 " Whatever the nature and extent, use or abuse of services were formerly, I
 " believe they are now generally a kind of commutation-rent, which the
 " possessors of narrow and detached spots of arable or grass ground, on the
 out-skirts

Fisheries, Fuel and Minerals.—Some years ago, there were several fishing boats and crews of fishers in the parish, but now there

“ out-skirts of a property or farm, pay by mutual agreement to the pro-
 “ prietor or tacksman in lieu of money or victual rent, or in part of the
 “ rent. The services performed by such as pay no other rent are always
 “ personal, and commonly not limited to a certain number of days, though
 “ restricted to certain seasons of the year, and to particular kinds of work,
 “ viz. shearing in harvest; carrying the corn from the stacks to the barns in
 “ the winter; delving or turning with a spade such corners or angles of a
 “ field as the plough cannot reach, in spring; planting potatoes, cutting or
 “ spreading peats, and weeding in the fields and gardens, in summer. As
 “ these services, however, and the culture of their own small possessions,
 “ take up but little of their time, and as the produce of such possessions,
 “ commonly does not serve to maintain the possessors, they subsist chiefly,
 “ the men, by being employed as day-labourers by their master or the
 “ neighbouring farmers; the women, by spinning lint or wool for private
 “ families, or such as are concerned in manufactures.

“ But the services of such as pay either money or victual-rent are com-
 “ monly limited to a certain number of days; and the work which they
 “ with their cattle are bound to perform, is specified, such as ploughing or
 “ carrying manure, cutting and carrying home a limited quantity of peats,
 “ and shearing or stacking corn and hay. When these services are perform-
 “ ed faithfully and cheerfully, and when the master, whether proprietor or
 “ tacksman, demands no more than an equivalent for what rent the ground
 “ so possessed is worth, both parties are benefited by the bargain; as the
 “ master could not always get his work so quickly or so cheaply done by any
 “ other hands, and as it is easier for most of our small tenants and cottars
 “ to pay the whole or part of their rent by their personal labour, or that
 “ of their cattle, than to pay the full value of their possessions in money or
 “ victual. I know that this opinion of mutual advantage from services has
 “ been controverted, and the practice in general condemned as oppressive
 “ by our southern neighbours; nor will I deny, that where such manufactures
 “ are established as are fit to employ persons of both sexes and all ages;
 “ and that, in the neighbourhood of towns or populous manufacturing vil-
 “ lages, where a farmer could get any number of labourers wanted for a par-
 “ ticular purpose for a few days, the small tenants and cottars might find
 “ it more for their interest to pay a proportional rent without any services;
 “ and the proprietor or tacksman might bring his outfields to a better
 “ account,

there is only one crew, and the remains of another; and though they go sometimes to sea with small lines, their subsistence does not depend on their success in fishing; there are several other small boats, in which the tenants and cottars fish occasionally with hand lines, near the shore, when the weather and their other business permits them to be so employed. For the two years past, the inhabitants derived little advantage in the way of fishing from their vicinity to the sea, as they had not their usual success; but appearances begin now to be more favourable. — It is an ordinary custom with the fishers on the south side of the Firth, and on the Firths of Inverness and Cromarty to repair to the coast of the parish of Loth to fish in the spring and summer seasons, whence they generally carry home their boats fully loaded. The coast is in some places rocky, in others, a sandy beach. There are several boat-harbours on the shore, but that of Culgour is accounted the best. Connoisseurs say, that a pier for ships could be erected at

“ account, than by letting them for occasional services. But where there
 “ are neither populous towns nor villages in a neighbourhood, nor manufac-
 “ tures of any kind introduced, except perhaps a little spinning of lint, and
 “ where the country is at the same time populous in proportion to the de-
 “ mand for labouring and to the means of subsistence, I see no other alter-
 “ native in the power of small proprietors or tacksmen, than either to al-
 “ low these poor people to continue in their possessions as formerly on equi-
 “ table terms, or by removing them from, and depriving them of, present
 “ means of subsistence, to force them to emigration or beggary. Which of
 “ these alternatives is most consistent with the feelings of humanity, or most
 “ likely to be conducive to the public interest, is not difficult to determine.
 “ It is devoutly to be wished that manufacturing villages were established in
 “ every corner of our country, so that the lower class of people might have
 “ it in their power either to continue as they are, or to earn their livelihood
 “ entirely as day labourers, or by carrying on some useful branch of manu-
 “ facture.” After all, a few only are so indulgent to the poor as my corres-
 pondent, yet they seem to enjoy life under those that treat them with
 severity.

at a very moderate expence in that bay. In the summer time, the people fish sand eels in the sand, and lobsters and crabs amongst the rocks in the ebb. Fuel is an expensive article on account of the distance of the peats, and the badness of the road; so that all the peats are carried home in back loads on horses. Some of the gentlemen have of late begun to import coal, which though dear, they have found to be very convenient. There are quarries of lime stone and free stone on the shore; as also some detached blocks of a very hard and beautiful kind of granite, which Jones, who travelled the country lately in quest of natural curiosities, says, is susceptible of a fine polish, and the best he ever saw except the Italian. There are some rocks of parrot-coal in the sea under Crakag, which are accessible at ebb. The bell-ware on the shore is cut every third year, and made into kelp.

Population, Horses, Cattle, and Sheep.—As there are no manufactures or fisheries established in the parish, or any improvements in agriculture introduced, the number of inhabitants has not increased or diminished much since the commencement of the present century. There is a yearly emigration of young people of both sexes to the south of Scotland; few of whom return. No account has been kept of these emigrants, and therefore their number cannot be exactly ascertained. It appears by a decret of locality in 1722, that the number of catechizable persons at that time was 1000. The return to Dr Webster in 1755 was 1193 souls. And in spring 1791, the number of the whole inhabitants amounted to 1370.—They purchase yearly several horses at the Dornoch markets, as the manuring the ground with sea-ware, which, as well as peats, they carry on horse back loads, occasions a great consumption of that species, of which there are about 500 in constant work, and very few of them are reared

reared in the parish itself. Besides these, the gentlemen keep riding-horses, which are occasionally used in the harrow; some of the tacksmen have likewise begun to use carts and wains for carrying manure, but that method of labouring has hitherto made very little progress. There is a good deal of the land ploughed with horses, but still more with oxen, of which there are about 300 kept for that purpose alone. The number of milch cows is above 200, and that of sheep, betwixt 1500 and 2000. There are likewise a good many swine reared; they are all consumed in the parish.

Miscellaneous Observations.—The climate seems to be upon the whole healthy. The people in general live to a good old age, though they are not instances of remarkable longevity here. The most common diseases, especially amongst those of advanced life, are coughs, asthmas, and the rheumatism. As to the moral and religious character of the common people, they are generally sober, serious, and industrious, attentive to their business and credit, humane in their deportment, respectful to their superiors, and ready to shew kindness to strangers. No doubt there are exceptions, especially amongst the lowest class; of whom there are many addicted to pilfering, when they expect to escape detection, or to come off with impunity. The better sort have an high veneration for the forms of religion, and are very strict in the exercises of devotion in their families, and in attendance on public worship, of which there is no form but that of the established church in the parish. This uniformity of opinion as to doctrine and worship is not confined to this parish, but extends over all the country; which is an uncommon appearance in a free nation, and amongst protestants, not owing to any thing peculiar in the inhabitants of Sutherland, but entirely, to their local situation, and external circumstances. However though there be no open schism to di-

vide them in public worship, they have their lay-leaders, some of the boldest and most conceited speakers at fellowship meetings, whom they implicitly believe, merely on account of their high pretensions and affected sanctity, by which they impose upon the people, and frequently mislead them. Of late they have begun to keep fellowship meetings amongst themselves, without the presence of a minister. To these meetings they convene at certain fixed periods from different parishes, propose questions in divinity, explain scriptures, and give a sanction to any doctrines or opinions that are considered as orthodox by the presiding saint.—The evil consequences of these meetings on the heads and hearts of the people are begun to be too clearly seen by the clergy; but they have not been able as yet to devise a method of suppressing them; if they are allowed to proceed, it is not easy to say, in what they will terminate at last*.

There

*The remains of several Pictish buildings are to be seen; one on the shore below the church, which with its out-works, covered a great extent of ground, is almost effaced, as most of the stones used in building the manse and church were dug out of its ruins, as were likewise very lately the stones of a farm house. In digging these last several deer-horns and human bones were found.

A green mote stood on the banks of the river of Loth, which the gentleman that now possesses Lothbeg ordered to be dug up. There appeared a subterraneous dwelling, furrounded on the outside with large flat stones, which seem to have made a part of the wall; the rubbish was cleared away, and the stones left in the same situation in which they were in the old fabric.

In an adjacent field, the same gentleman having ordered the ground to be cleared of some cairns, in order to inclose it, there were two stone-coffins found, and in them several urns of clay-ware, which the workmen broke with their spades before they discovered them. On the shore, in several places where there was a beautiful surface of grass about 36 years ago, breaches have been made by sand-blowing, that have discovered about ten or twelve feet below that surface, of which some detached spots remain, an area of

sand

There have been only three Presbyterian ministers in the parish, prior to the present incumbent. The first was Mr. Robert Robertson, who was settled in 1717 or 1718, and transported to Eddertoun in Ross-shire in 1730. It was during the ministry of this gentleman, and from this parish, that the last unhappy woman that suffered for witchcraft in Scotland was executed. She was burnt at Dornoch; and the common people entertain strong prejudices against her relations to this day.

land, on which are cairns of stones close by one another, which appear evidently to have been heaped up to cover dead bodies, some of whose bones are still to be seen. A number of these tumuli lie on the shore of Wester Garty, which is said to have been the field of a bloody battle, betwixt the Sutherland and Caithness men; the particulars of this engagement, under the name of *Stronrunkie*, used to be a frequent and familiar subject of conversation in the young days of the oldest men in the parish; but they themselves remember nothing but the tradition of the battle. On this spot are the remains of an edifice resembling the other Pictish buildings in the parish; in which was found some years ago, the entire skeleton of a man, who, by the size and length of the bones, must have far exceeded in bulk the common standard of the present days. There is a pretty extensive plain in the moor above Garty, to the west of Helmsdale, which is said to have been the field of another battle, fought at an earlier period than that of *Stronrunkie*. A number of tumuli are still to be seen in this place which is called *Lauribomast*. In a valley, betwixt two high hills, is a large stone fixed in the ground, and standing pretty erect, evidently raised by art, as it is of a cylindrical form, and more than ten feet high above the level of the ground; it has no discernible inscription, or carving of any sort; neither is there any tradition as to the cause for which it was erected. Near it are other two stones of a smaller size erected in the same manner.