

NUMBER IX.

PARISH OF CANISBAY.

*(County of Caithness.)**By the Rev. JOHN MORISON, D. D.*

Origin of the Name.

IT is not known that the parish ever had any other name, than what it now bears. Canisbay has been supposed by some to have been originally written Canonisbay; others conjecture it to have some connection with the Latin vocable *Canis*. It is, however, more probable, that Canute's-Bay was its first appellation, in honour of the arrival of some Norwegian chief of the name of Canute. There is indeed no account of the descent of such a chief upon the coast, nor is there any bay in the parish now denominated Canisbay. But as all the places of the least note in the parish, are clearly of Norwegian derivation, it cannot be supposed, that the name of the district itself should be an exception.

Situation and Extent.—The parish of Canisbay being the most northern land in the island of Great Britain, is situated in the latitude of 58° 45' N., about 2° of W. longitude from London.

London. The figure of the parish is remarkable for its regularity, exhibiting to the eye the exact quadrant of a circle, the arch of which divides it from the neighbouring parishes towards the land, and the two containing sides from the seas that wash its coasts; Dungisbay Head is in the vertex of this quadrant, from which the coast stretches in a straight direction due S and due W. till it meets with Wick parish on one hand, and Dunnet on the other. Each of these lines may be reckoned 8 English miles in extent. The whole surface of the parish may be computed to occupy about 50 square miles or upwards.

Soil, Surface, &c.—Canisbay is rather a level than a hilly district. The Warth Hill is of considerable height and magnitude, and is the only one in the parish deserving the name. The Loch of Mey is about 2 Scotch miles in circumference. There is no river, and only a few rivulets (the chief of which is the Burn of Frefwick), in the whole parish. A single stone (sea-rock excepted) of any considerable magnitude, is no where to be seen above the surface of the earth. There are mineral and fresh water springs in abundance. The former are all of the chalybeate kind. There is one of excellent quality near the old castle of Frefwick. Heath in general prevails, where agriculture has not reached. There are, however, considerable tracts of green pasture land, in different districts of the parish, which require only the advantages of cultivation to be made productive. A light black loam, with an intermixture of moss, is, where cultivation prevails, the general character of the soil. The rest is entirely moss, reaching, in some places down to the sea brink, and yielding peats in the greatest abundance, and of as good quality as any in the kingdom.

kingdom. The lands about Mey, belonging to the Earl of Caithness, have an intermixture of clay.

Climate.—The climate is distinguished by variable, rather than tempestuous weather. Remote from the mountains, which attract moisture and occasion rain, fair weather is not unusual. The winters are generally mild and open, frosts are seldom intense, or of long continuance. The snow never thickens to any depth, and the coast is scarcely sprinkled by it, while in more inland parishes it lies to a considerable depth. The level situation of the parish, and the sea surrounding it on every side but one, may be regarded as the causes of this temperature. The summers in Canisbay, for the same reason, are temperately cool; and high winds are, in general, more prevalent than heavy rains. The Aurora Borealis begins to exhibit itself about the middle of harvest. In no part of Britain is it to be seen to more advantage. At times, from the shifting brilliancy of its vivid corruscations, the whole heavens seem to be in motion: at other times a settled bloody tinge prevails over all the sky; and on these occasions, the whole phenomenon appears truly awful and magnificent. All its appearances seem to prove that it is the effect of electricity.

Longevity and Diseases.—There are few districts where more good health is enjoyed than in Canisbay. The inhabitants in general live to a good old age. There are several at present in the parish betwixt 90 and 100. Many die at an advanced age, without the recollection of a day's illness in the course of their lives. The most prevalent illnesses among the people, are those arising from obstructed perspiration, owing to the variableness of the weather, and perhaps still more, to the raw and unwholesome vapours transfused into the atmosphere they breathe, from the extensive tracts of fen, muir and moss in
their

their vicinity, while colds, coughs, and rheumatisms are not unfrequent. Fevers prevail as little here, perhaps, as in any corner of the world. Inoculation is not yet in general practice; but though few escape the small pox, the disease is seldom mortal. Indeed, most other diseases are extremely rare. Few parishes, therefore, give less trouble or emolument to physicians, than Canisbay.

Population. There are 382 families in the parish, including those in the island of Stroma. The number of males is 881, and of females 1069, total 1950. The return to Dr. Webster in 1755, was only 1481 souls. The population has therefore increased 469 within these 40 years. The advancement of civilization, the free enjoyment of property, a better cultivated soil, the multiplicity of families on small farms, and more extensive employment in fishing and the other maritime occupations, may be considered as the operative sources of this increase. As these causes acquire additional energy, proportional effects may be expected. Were the waste grounds cultivated, and some little branches of manufacture established, the yearly produce of the soil, and the number of souls in the parish, might amount to a third more, than what they now are. The following list shews the number of births, deaths, and marriages, for the last 4 years.

<i>Years.</i>		<i>Births.</i>		<i>Deaths.</i>		<i>Marriages.</i>
1787	-	65	-	19	-	12
1788	-	70	-	23	-	13
1789	-	66	-	18	-	12
1790	-	73	-	27	-	16

Rent and Proprietors —The whole valued rent of the parish amounts to 3855 l. 3 s. 6 d. Scotch. The real rent may be computed at about 1300 l. Sterling. From 1200 to 1500 bolls of victual are yearly exported, besides maintaining the inhabitants. Land is divided into what are called penny lands, halfpenny lands, faithing lands, and octos. Eight octos are reckoned equal to 12 acres. The rent of an acre, at an average, is not below a guinea. In some places it is 30 s. or upwards. The Earl of Caithness, Robert Sinclair, Esq. of Frefwick, and the family of Brabster, are the only proprietors in the parish. Brabster is an inland property, lying in the centre of the district. All the other cultivated lands are situated on the coast, extending, at an average, about half an English mile from the shore. There are also frequent interjections of moss and moor, reaching down to the sea coast, and dividing one cultivated district from another —Hence it is apparent, how small a proportion of this extensive parish is as yet brought into cultivation.

Cultivation and Produce.—The medium extent of farms does not exceed the sum of 9 l. Sterling yearly rent. By this multiplicity of families, the soil is brought up to the highest pitch of cultivation.—Oats and barley, in alternate crops, with the addition of some flax and potatoes, are the sole objects of agriculture. The soil, at an average, yields about 5 returns of oats, and above 7 of barley; but in some particular spots, no less than 11 returns of barley have been reaped.—From Martinmas till spring, the dung of the cattle is left in the byre; a bedding of dry earth or peat mold is thrown above it every day, which mixes with the dung, and, at the same time, keeps the cattle warm and dry. A cart load of this compost is reckoned more valuable as a manure, than three of pure dung, particularly, if thrown out and exposed to the weather through

through the winter; but the principal manure along the coast, is tang or sea ware: it comes ashore in the greatest abundance during the spring months, when it is most needed. A wind blowing from the land brings the ware from the sea.— This manure is solely appropriated to the barley crop. It is a powerful cleanser of the soil, coalesces with it in the shortest space, exerts and exhausts its nutritive virtues in the nourishment of one crop. In whatever manner it is laid upon the field, it is a manure of the first estimation. Dunghills consisting of earth and ware, of 6 or 12 month's standing, seem the most eligible preparation of this valuable manure for the soil. From the constant use of sea-ware as a manure, along with the constituent qualities of the soil, the cultivated lands in most parts of the parish, are as fine and friable as garden mould, and are cultivated in general with less strength, than, comparatively speaking, is found requisite in other places of the country. The soil being perfectly clear of latent rock, the plough is made of the slightest construction; and, in general, both plough and cattle do not exceed 10 l. Sterling in value*.

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Proposed

* Oats are begun to be sown about the first week of April, and barley about the 12th of May, nor is the season gone for the sowing of the latter so late as the 21st of June. Harvest begins about the 1st of September, and is in general finished in the course of a month. Gray and black oats are the common growth of the parish, as they are over all Caithness. They unquestionably accord better with the soil and climate, than the white oats. The latter is not only a greater robber of the soil, but is far more liable to shake in harvest, than the former. Bread of the white oats is stronger, and perhaps somewhat fairer, but by no means superior in taste and mellowness.—A man servant gets little short of 3 l. Sterling *per annum*, and a woman half as much. Day labourers are seldom employed: They may be had at about 9 d. *per day* without victuals. Mason and joiner work is fully higher than in any part of Scotland. Carts are in common use throughout the parish.

Proposed Improvements.—As neither inclosures nor winter herding, have as yet taken place, green crops are of course unattended to, among the common people. The proprietors and gentlemen, whose attention is directed to farming, carry on their operations on a more liberal and extensive plan. Improvers, conversant in every branch of agricultural employment; with farms worth 100 l. or upwards, of yearly rent; inclosures, green crops, implements of the most approved construction, and labouring cattle of due size and estimation, are what justly entitle them to the appellation of farmers. Their praise would be great indeed, if, by granting longer leases to the tenants, they could persuade them once to begin the business of inclosing, and the culture of waste ground, which cries aloud, and has cried for ages, for the advantages of the spade and the plough. In former times, and even these not long elapsed, unlimited services were unquestionably a part of the equivalent, which tenants paid for the lands they occupied. Besides money and victual, a vast variety of different articles was demanded from the farmer. A system of that sort suggests a variety of reflections, with which the dignity and happiness of man are deeply connected. These customs, as they are called, are now for the most part converted into money. Unlimited services are no longer exigible. In one half of the parish, two days in spring, and two in harvest, are the stipulated service; nor is this invariably exacted. From the operation of present arrangements, in a very short time the other half will be equally free. *Emancipation* is every where prevailing, and the monster *Feudalism* is hiding his head in shame.

Black Cattle and Pasturage.—Canisbay, notwithstanding its boundless extent of hill pasture, is not to be reckoned a cattle parish. To descend to a particular enumeration, of the horses
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and black cattle in it, could answer little purpose, when it can be asserted as a fact, that not above one third, of the foals or calves, is reared and brought up in the parish, that are necessary for the culture of the soil. Grass is one of the principal wants we have to complain of. The arable soil is so precious, that the farmer thinks, he could not bear turning any part of it into grass. The want of inclosures and winter herding, precludes him from the advantages of green crops. The best grass farm in the parish lies on the north coast, about an English mile from Dungisbay Head. It is sufficient for the support of 20 cows, and is better, which, for colour and quality, is deservedly held in the highest estimation.

Sheep.—It is not believed, that the whole sheep in the parish at present exceed 2000. Foxes, dogs, bad seasons, and, above all, the inattention of the owners, are the causes of the diminution of their number, to a third part of what they formerly were. They are far from being of a very good quality, either for wool or mutton; nor has any attempt been made to meliorate the breed. The parish in general is not naturally possessed of pasturage favourable for the rearing of sheep. There is one place in it, however, that seems to recommend itself for the pasturage of sheep, and for nothing else.—This is *Dungisbay Head* and its environs, which might be adequate to the support of 600 or 700 sheep. The Head itself is every where covered with green to the very brink of the surrounding rock, with an intermixture of short young heath. The situation is dry and the air wholesome. The Head communicates with the *Wartb Hill*, which would relieve the pasturage occasionally. Upon the whole, it is hardly to be doubted, that sheep would prosper on this pasture, if duly attended to; and it were greatly to be wished, that the proprietor or possessor would make the experiment.

Swine,

Swine, &c.—There is a superabundance of swine throughout the parish: they are of a small size, fatten well, and their flesh is peculiarly tender and delicate; but the damage they do, in the winter season, to the grass and corn lands, as they are allowed to roam at large, far exceeds any advantages, that can accrue from the rearing of them. Geese and other poultry are also in great plenty, though not above half the number are reared, since what was payable in kind to the proprietor, has been converted into money.

Average value of the above Animals.

		<i>L.</i>	<i>s.</i>	<i>d.</i>	
An ox,	-	3	0	0	Beef sells at 2½ d. per lb.
A cow,	-	2	10	0	
A horse,	-	3	0	0	Mutton at 2 d.
A sheep,	-	0	6	0	
A sow,	-	0	12	0	Pork at 2 d.
A goose,	-	0	1	6	
A hen,	-	0	0	5	A dozen of Eggs, 1½ d.

Coasts.—Dungisbay Head, the *Brubium* of Ptolemy, is situated in the N. E. corner of the island of Great Britain, where the line of the coast, from a northern direction, turns directly due west, and continues its course, till it reaches Cape Wrath, with little or no variation in its rectilinear direction. This beautiful promontory is of a circular shape, about 2 miles in circumference. Towards the sea, which encompasses two thirds of the Head, it is one continued precipice. On the land side, you descend by a gentle slope into a deep valley, having a small mossy rivulet running through it, which terminates the Head on that quarter. Near the top of the rock, and on that side which faces the Orkneys, there is a vast gulph or cavern, (called, by the neighbouring inhabitants, the *Glup*), stretching all around perpendicularly down, till its
dusky

dark bottom comes on a level with the sea, with whose waves it holds communication, by an opening at the base of the intervening rock. The bridge betwixt this fearful chasm, and the edge of the main rock, towards the sea, is about six yards wide. On the highest part of the head, about 50 yards from the edge of the precipice, there are to be seen indubitable marks of some house, or mansion, heretofore erected by the hand of man. Its base, which is all that now remains, is perfectly circular, and about 20 feet wide. It has probably been occupied as a watch tower, or place of observation, corresponding with another, the vestiges of which are to be seen on the top of Warth hill, at about the distance of 2 miles.

South from the Head, for about 5 miles, the Warth hill extends its base to the sea brink. The coast is every where exceeding bold, and the wild and varied magnificence of the rocks are peculiarly striking to the eye of a stranger. Beyond, for about a mile, the coast subsides into a beautiful sandy beach winding around the bay, till it reaches the mansion-house of Freswick. Here the coast again resumes its boldness, which continues with little variation, till it reaches the confines of the parish. The lands adjacent to the shore, for the last 3 miles, (a little moor south of Freswick excepted,) are all under cultivation. The coast is beautiful; the soil luxuriant and productive.

The north coast has but little of that stupendous boldness, for which the eastern one is so remarkable. In coming down from the Head, and travelling westward for two miles, the walk is extremely pleasant. The greatest luxuriance of growth prevails, extending from the shore about a mile inland. The beach itself consists wholly of shells and shell sand, of the purest white, which contribute alike to beautify the coast, and to enrich the soil. In the middle of this delightful walk, you approach the celebrated residence of JOHN O'GROAT; but,
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although his name be still illustrious, the spot is scarcely distinguishable where he dwelt. Westward from the burn of Dungisbay to Huna, moss prevails to the sea brink. From Huna to Gills, is one of the most fertile districts in the parish. The church is situated in the middle of it, on a green rising ground, close by the shore, the manse about a quarter of a mile inland from the church. Beyond Gills, there is, along the west, a large tract of waste ground, though very capable of cultivation. *Mey*, part of the property of the Earl of Caithness, terminates the parish on the west. This is an exceeding populous and fertile district; there are above 100 families on this part of his Lordship's estate. What he farms himself might rent for about 100 l. a-year.

Maritime State.—There are no ships belonging to the parish, nor harbours in it to receive them. The bays upon the coast are those of Gills, Dungisbay, and Frefwick, in all of which, if the weather be tolerably moderate, vessels can lie in safety, and take in their cargoes; but, none of them are to be regarded as eligible stations in rough weather. Gills Bay is preferable to the rest.

Kelp and Minerals.—The shores of Canisbay are exceeding valuable, yielding about 100 tons of kelp in a favourable season, which is near as much as is made in all the rest of Caithness. They afford freestone for building, and ware for the land in the greatest abundance. The shell shore of Dungisbay, yields lime of the first estimation for purity and whiteness, and, in some parts of the world, would turn to considerable account to the owner. The adjacent lands are altogether impregnated with the sand of these shells, which gives a peculiar activity and cleanliness to the soil. The superior
luxuriancy

luxuriancy of the grafs in this diftrict, feems wholly owing to the quickening influence of this calcareous manure in its neighbourhood. Near Barrogil Castle, is found a fpecies of coal which emits a hot vivid flame in burning, but without much diffolution of parts, or diminution of fize, after it becomes extinct. 'It is got near the furface of the earth; and, in all probability, coal of a better quality may be found under it; but, the fuperabundance of peat fuel, in the moffes of Canisbay, in a great meafure fuperfedes the neceffity of digging for it.

Boats and Fifhing — There are about 60 boats around the coaft, and yet not one man who lives entirely by fifhing in the whole parifh. Each of thefe boats is the joint property of, perhaps, 6 or 7 different owners. The fifh are divided according to the value of their refpective fhares in the boat; and, the object of fifhing is not fale, but the fupport of their families. The bufinefs of agriculture, from the benignity of the foil, and the number of hands employed, being foon and eafily difpatched, they have abundance of leifure every good day to go a fifhing. Hence, every farmer in the parifh, (the inland eftate of Brabfter excepted,) is a fifherman, and every fifherman a farmer. There is, perhaps, fcarce an inftance known, of one parifhioner ever felling a fifh to another. Fifh-mongers have of late engaged fome boats, on the coaft, to fifh cod and ling at a ftipulated value; but as this branch of induftry is yet but in its infancy, it merits no particular defcription on the prefent occafion. On the north coaft, the rapidity of the tides in the Pentland Frith is altogether unfavourable to fifhing. In very ftormy weather, cod and ling are, by the force of the billows, frequently thrown in alive upon the fhore, and taken up by the people, who on thefe occafions go in queft of them. On the eaft coaft, the fame difficulties not occurring, fifhing might unquestionably turn to good account, if proper exertions were

made, and boats accustomed to make a greater stretch from land, before they dropt their lines. Gray fish, as they are called, of all kinds, abound every where around the coast, and constitute a great part of the sustenance of the inhabitants. The shoals of young fish that pour into every creek and bay, about the beginning of September, are such, that a boll of them may be caught at a few hauls, in the course of one evening. They seem to be the intermingled fry of various genera, and are called by the inhabitants *Sellacs*. They are tender and delicious in the highest degree, and, in general, between 3 and 4 inches long. While the rapidity of the tides on the north coast is much against the fishing of cod and ling, there is perhaps no station in the world, where a lobster fishing might be more successfully carried on. The bays of Mey, Gills, and Dungisbay, abound in lobsters to a great degree.—A few boats at Mey, for the behoof of Messrs. Selby and Co. of London, have been employed for the first time, in this branch of industry, this season; and, from the success they have had, it is to be hoped, this species of fishing will soon become general around the coast.

Church, Schools, and Poor, &c.—The session records reach as far back as the restoration, but are not continued down without many gaps and mutilations. The whole inhabitants of the parish profess the religion of the established church, except a few of the Anabaptist persuasion. The first rise of that sect in Caithness, was in a part of the parish of Wick, where a gentleman of landed property resided, whose views of religion inclined him to profess and propagate the Anabaptist system: From that district, bordering on Canisbay, it was imported into this parish: It is now greatly on the decline, and never was accompanied with any sort of outrage, wildness, or violence in its professors. The stipend of Canisbay,

bay is at present 6 chalders of victual, one half meal, and the other half bear, with 200 merks of money, and the small tithes of the parish, accounted, though not equal to, 200 merks more.—Besides the parochial school, there are two society-schools in the parish, with a salary of 10 l. each. The parochial school may be worth about 18 l. Sterling. The church has very lately received a good repair, and the minister has been extremely well accommodated with new office houses. The manse, unless attended to, will not be of long duration. The glebe is a very small one, and there is little or no grafs annexed to it.—The poor, from the session funds, and various collections, receive, at annual distributions, about the sum of 10 l. or 12 l. Sterling. The indigent are indeed numerous, yet there are few or no strolling beggars in the parish *.

Dress, Customs, &c.—In Canisbay there are no manufactures. Their common apparel is of home growth and texture, generally dyed black. Their dress cloaths are all imported, and in general of better quality, than their circumstances can well afford. Both sexes are alike ambitious to appear fine. Few country congregations are more crowded,

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* The present minister has been 11 years in office, and has not been asked for above half a dozen certificates, in behalf of indigent persons, necessitated to throw themselves upon the alms of the public. The parish, at the same time, comparatively speaking, is far from being a rich one. The sea is its great support, without which, at the rate the lands are rented, it would be impossible for the inhabitants to live. The sea not only supplies them with fish, but with bread also, from the great abundance of tang-manure, which even, in bad seasons, seldom fails to ensure a crop. It also affords them employment, with suitable wages during summer, in the manufacture of kelp. A good deal is gained by pilotage, and not a little by sea expresses. From these combined causes, and their being inured from their earliest years to habits of sobriety and temperance, they may be said to live in a state equally removed from want and from abundance.

or brilliant in the summer season. Meetings for dancing are very common in winter. It is then, too, that they generally marry. Their weddings are often crowded; but the entertainment is always gratuitous. There are annual emigrations from the parish, both of males and females in the menial line, who leave the place of their nativity, in quest of superior wages in the south of Scotland. Many of the young men become soldiers, preferring the land to the sea service. Their character in that capacity has always been to their credit. There are few superstitious usages among them*: ghosts and fairies are believed to manifest themselves occasionally. There are three popish chapels mouldering into desolation in the parish, one at Frefwick, another at Brabster, and a third at St. John's Head. Some superstitious rites, now in total disuse, were wont to be performed, by the ignorant vulgar, on particular days, at these sanctified ruins. At present, not a vestige of popery seems to intermingle in the creed of the people. There are no wells of preternatural efficacy in the parish. There is no day in the year accounted inauspicious, or, (Sundays excepted) held in higher estimation than another.

Character.—In point of stature, there are few of the inhabitants either much above or below the middle size. Being
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* No gentleman, however, of the name of SINCLAIR, either in Canisbay or throughout Caithness, will put on *green apparel*, or think of crossing the *Ord* upon a *Monday*. They were dressed in green, and they crossed the *Ord* upon a *Monday*, in their way to the battle of Flowden, where they fought and fell in the service of their country, almost without leaving a representative of the name behind them. The day and the dress are accordingly regarded as inauspicious. If the *Ord* must be got beyond on *Monday*, the journey is performed by sea. A superstition thus derived from the heroism of their ancestors, and so well calculated to excite a similar spirit in their offspring, philosophy itself will allow to be preserved from oblivion.

seldom employed in any sort of labour, whose progress from its difficulty is necessarily slow, and equal, if not superior, to every task incumbent on them to accomplish, they often manifest the greatest activity, alertness and dispatch. Hence, while occupied in walking, or speaking, their motion and their utterance is rather quick than slow. This may be partly owing to their living so much at sea, where the greatest possible dispatch is so often necessary. The climate, with a train of local circumstances, serves to give a particular activity to the blood and spirits of the inhabitants of the north. Notwithstanding this alertness and promptitude in all their operations, unless impelled to action from necessity, or the excitement of some particular interest they have in view, there are no people in the world fonder of doing nothing. During their hours of idleness, which are many, languor and lassitude are never observable about them. The mind, having no interests of its own to fasten upon, exerts its power, for the sake of employment, in making investigations into the condition and character of others. Hence that solicitude after news, that spirit for prying into the most hidden concerns of their neighbours, with the view of gratifying curiosity rather than malevolence; and hence also, a more enlarged knowledge of their country, and a more extensive acquaintance and correspondence with one another, than obtains among the peasantry of any other part of Great Britain. In the presence of their superiors, their self-possession, recollection and faculty of utterance never deserts them. Their discernment of the purposes of others, and dexterity in concealing their own, are no less remarkable. What a pity such respectable endowments, should be left to waste themselves on objects, neither of public utility nor of private emolument. Were they properly called forth, and engaged in branches of commendable industry,

try, the gain would be great indeed, both to themselves and to their country.

Antiquities and Natural Curiosities.—Houses, said to have belonged to the Picts, though in no respect remarkable, except for their antiquity, are to be seen in different parts of the parish. The prospect from Dungisbay Head, may be well reckoned a curiosity of the first distinction of its kind. It commands the whole of the Pentland Frith, and as far beyond it as the eye can stretch. The Orkney Isles appear spread out in that happy point of vision, in which such objects are contemplated with the greatest pleasure and delight. The German Ocean to a great extent, the Murray Frith, and the hills of Banff, Aberdeen, and Murrayshire, are all under view. No traveller, when he comes to John O'Groat's, will repent a visit to the Head. The *Stalks* of Dungisbay, as they are called, are two piramidal pillars of naked freestone-rock. They rear their fantastic summits a great way into the air, and strike the eye of a stranger in approaching them, as the huge spires of some old magnificent Gothic pile. They are frequented in summer by innumerable sea fowls, who hatch and bring forth their young about their sides, while the eagle sits in royalty upon their summits. Near to St. John's Head, upon the north coast, is one of the pleasantest spots in the whole parish. It affords evident tokens, of having been, in former ages, a residence of great respectability; from a burying ground, and the vestiges of an old chapel in the neighbourhood, now in total ruins, as well as from the name it bears, it would seem to have been consecrated to religious purposes. From the vestiges of a ditch and draw-bridge, defending it on the land side, it must have been occupied as a place of strength and security; but, whether it has been the residence of saints or heroes, it affords ample proof, that neither taste nor judgment
were

were wanting, in the choice of it as an habitation. The decorations of art are alone wanting to render it one of the loveliest spots in Caithness. In the burn of Stempster, is found white spar of the purest quality. When put into the fire, a very slight degree of heat makes it throw out a considerable portion of phosphoric light, which gradually decays as the stone cools, and is again recruited as the stone is heated a-new. When reduced to a powder, it puts on an exceeding brilliant and beautiful appearance during ignition. In electrical experiments, it is a non-conductor, nor does it seem soluble in acids. About a quarter of a mile east from the church, there are 2 springs of fresh water, at least 30 yards within flood mark. Betwixt Brabster and Frefwick there is a deep hollow, called, in the dialect of the parish, the *Wolf's geo*, which must have derived its name from being the haunt of wolves in former times. There are other circumstances handed down by tradition, which tend to prove, that this ravenous animal was once an inhabitant of Canisbay.

Wild Animals.—The quadrupeds are foxes, hares, otters and weasels.—Adders are sometimes found in the mosses, but they are not numerous. In the links of Frefwick, Dungisbay and Huna, there are plenty of rabbits, but they turn to little account. There are also moor-fowl, plovers, snipes, some partridges, and multitudes of wild pigeons in the rocks. Birds of passage are, the green plover, wild goose, snow-fowl, wagtail, swallow and rail. The snow-fowl, in the winter, are inconceivably numerous. The hills are exceedingly well stocked with the moor game above mentioned. The coasts, throughout the year, abound in multitudes of sea-fowl. In the summer months, the swarms of scarfs, marrots, faiks, &c. that come to hatch in the rocks of Dungisbay and Stroma, are prodigious. They in a manner darken the air, when, on
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any sudden alarm, they take wing in a body from their nests. The gun makes frequent and bloody havock among them. They are shot for amusement from boats, and the common people appropriate their flesh and feathers to their own use. The sport is cruel and unprofitable, as numbers die upon their young in the nest, or expire before they reach the edge of the projecting shelve.

Planting.—There is no planting in the parish. A good many years ago, an experiment was made on a part of the Warth Hill. A few acres were planted with firs.—They throve very well while young; but the fence being insufficient, and soon mouldering away, and the plantation exposed to all possible injury, the whole perished, and at present no vestige of it is to be seen. The spot was well chosen, and had the plantation been attended to, there is hardly a doubt, but that it would have prospered. No charge ought to be brought against the soil and climate, as long as the exertions of industry are wanting to overcome the obstacles complained of. Without a suitable choice of ground, both as to soil and shelter, and without proper inclosures, what success can or ought to be expected? The burns of Freswick, of Dungisbay, and the winding braes of Gills, where, in defiance of the depredations, both of man and beast, some natural brush-wood maintains its residence, seem to claim a preference in experiments of this sort.

Roads, Inns, Traffic, &c.—The public roads in the parish are those leading from Huna to Wick and Thurso, both lying along the coast, the one in a southerly, and the other in a westerly direction. They have never been completed, and are very uncomfortable in the winter. A third from Huna, leading into the middle of the country by Brabster, would be a great

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conveniency

conveniency to other parishes, as well as to Canisbay. Tippling houses are by far too numerous in the parish: They have undoubtedly a bad influence on the industry, as well as morals of the people. Three, besides the ferry houses, are all that ought to be allowed. From Huna, the ferry boat crosses with the mails for Orkney once a week. From Burwick in South Ronaldshay, the Orkney mails in like manner cross to Huna. The distance there, being the shortest betwixt Caithness and Orkney, is reckoned 4 leagues in extent. If a passenger goes along with the mails, the freight is 1 s.; but if he hires the ferry boat for himself, it is 7 s. Although the Pentland Frith may be deservedly accounted the most tempestuous piece of sea, around the island of Britain, it is remarkable how few accidents happen in crossing it; but the danger it threatens, suggests the means of preventing it. The time of tide is observed to a minute, in putting out to sea. The boats are strong and of good construction; the boatmen perfect masters of their business, and acquainted from their infancy with every circumstance, respecting the variation of the tides they have to go through. In the summer season, there is almost a continued communication betwixt Caithness and Orkney, in the traffic of horses. Colts from the highlands of Caithness, from Sutherland and Strathnaver are sold to Orkney; and these very colts, when past their prime, are again brought from Orkney, and re-imported into Caithness. By far the greatest number of these cross to and from the shores of Canisbay, on account of the shortness of the passage. Large boats are made for transporting them; and the freight of each colt is 1 s., and a full grown horse 1 s. 8 d. to the nearest land. There are 2 petty markets in the parish, in the course of a year, one in December, and the other in February.

Language &c —The Scotch, with an intermixture of some Norwegian vocables *, is the only language spoken in the parish. The pronunciation, as well as language of the peasantry, is better than what prevails among the vulgar in more southern counties.

* The names of places seem to be derived from the Norwegian language. *Sier*, which signifies an *estate*, is the terminating syllable of an immense number of the names of places in, Caithness and elsewhere. They consist for the most part of two syllables, the first most probably being the name of some distinguished possessor. Many maritime places, both in Caithness and Orkney, derive their names from some peculiarity respecting the coast or the tides. *Aae*, in the Danish tongue, signifies a current of water, or the particular course of a tide. It seems to claim an affinity with the Gaelic *amhne* and the Latin *amnis*, both signifying a river.—Where *wick* is the terminating syllable, the place is not only maritime, but there is always, in its vicinity, an opening of the coast, larger than a creek, but smaller than a bay, whose two containing sides form an angle, similar to that of the lips, terminating in the cheek. It is remarkable, that, in the Scotch dialect, this is always termed the *wick* of the mouth. It does not therefore appear, that there is the least affinity between *wick* and *vicus*. The former vocable is for the most part, if not always, maritime: the latter, from the meaning of the word, can have no possible respect to local situation. If *wick* were derived from *vicus*, we would find *wicks* as generally inland as upon the coast; and every place bearing the name of *wick* ought either to be, or to afford some evidence, that in former ages it had been a village. In Orkney, there are a great number of wicks, and in Caithness two. They are all upon the coast, and every one of them characterised by an opening in the rocks, of the particular figure above described.

From the above observations, the names of most places in Canisbay are of easy derivation. *Huna* is made up of the word *buln* and *aae*. The former is the same as *hollow* in English, and *bow* in Scotch: The latter is the tide stream, or current, opposite to the coast. In confirmation of this etymology, *Huna* is one of the lowest lying places in the parish, and where the tides are less rapid than on other parts of the coast. *Stroma* is compounded of *Strom* and *aae*; the former, in the Danish tongue signifying impetuous, and the latter, a current, as already observed. The tides around *Stroma*, are supposed to run at the rate of near 10 knots an hour. *Freswick* is the *green wick*, from *frisb*, signifying green, and the figure in the coast strikingly defined in its vicinity, which is found in every place,

counties. The better sort, and especially the fair sex, speak as well, and with as little peculiarity of accent, as their equals in any part of Scotland. There is scarcely a place in the whole parish, whose name is not of Norwegian derivation. The Gaelic is totally unknown in Canisbay; nor is there a place throughout the parish, whose name indicates the least affinity to that language.

Mansion Houses.—The house of *Freswick* is a modern building, sufficiently commodious and elegant. About 25 years ago, in the month of February, the thunder broke on one of its wings, threw down a chimney top, and rent the wall from top to bottom, besides damaging the greatest part of the

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windows.

place, where wick obtains. Perhaps it is from *fjof* that the English word *fres* is derived, which sometimes bears a meaning little different from *green*.

Dungisbay Head is called, by Ptolemy, *Βαρυέση*, a word evidently formed from the name it bore, in the days of this geographer. The Greeks had no word, in their own language, having *m* for the terminating letter; but in writing of persons or places, among barbarians, they frequently end the vocable with *m*; perhaps that it might appear as a barbarism, compared with the musical sounds of their own harmonious tongue. The word *Bery* would seem to have been a common appellation to such places as Dungisbay Head in those times. At this day, a similar promontory, in the island of Walls in Orkney, is termed the *Bery*. The word is clearly of Norwegian derivation. It signifies a place of observation; or a principal station, for discovering the approach of an enemy by sea, when at a great distance. The evident remains of a watch tower, on Dungisbay Head, are a proof of what is here asserted. *Beretter*, in the Danish tongue, to this day signifies to communicate intelligence, to warn or give notice. The name of Warth or Varth Hill is of similar derivation. *Varter*, in the above language is to attend, to wait on, or to watch for. Hence the speculum on the Head, being the principal station, was to discover and communicate to that on the Varth Hill; whereas the office of the latter was, to stand in waiting for such information, from the former, to receive and transmit the discoveries communicated from the *Bery*. *Mey* would appear to have its name, from the early and luxuriant verdure on what is called the Bank Head, in the spring months. *Bialga* is the estate or possession of *Bial*.

windows.—*Barrogil Castle* is an old aristocratic pile ; but, renewing its age apace, under the additions and embellishments it is daily receiving from its noble owner. The mansion house of Brabster is old, and situated in the most inland part of the parish. The ruins of three ancient towers or castles are still to be seen ; one in Mey, another south of the present mansion house of Frefwick *, and a third situated on the west side of the island of Stroma : They are all built upon rocks rising out of the sea, have been occupied as places of defence, and, in all probability, inhabited by heroes.

Island of Stroma.—The island of Stroma is situated in the Pentland Frith, about a league from the shore of Canisbay. It is a mile long, and half a mile in breadth. It contains 30 families, 97 females and 73 males, and rents at about 120 l. Sterling *per annum*. It is very productive in corn ; but the inhabitants are obliged to supply themselves with fuel, from the mosses on the main land. The tenth sheaf was heretofore taken in part payment of the rent. This, with all other customs and services, has of late been converted, by the present proprietor, at the desire of the people, into money. There are few discriminating features in the character of the Stromarians from the other inhabitants of the parish. They speak the same language, wear the same apparel, and observe the same customs. The sea is one of their principal sources of support. They are dabbling in salt water from their childhood upwards. From their political situation, and the simplicity, sobriety and industry, natural to them, there are perhaps few islanders on earth happier than those of Stroma. They have a society school in the island, and they come very regularly by sea to church, when the weather allows them to cross the foun^d. On the west of the island, there is a vast cavern

* For a view of the old Castle of Frefwick, see Pennant's Tour.

cavern, (or *Glupe* as it is called,) at about 30 yards from the beach. It stretches down to a level with the sea, whose waves are seen pouring into it, by a narrow opening at the bottom. The sea is often exceedingly tempestuous, around the island in the winter months. The coast on the west is exceedingly bold. The tremendous elevation of the billows, that beat against it during a storm, from that quarter, exceeds all power of description. Although the rocks are only inferior to those of Dungisbay Head, the spray is tossed above their loftiest summits, and falls in such profusion as to run in rills to the opposite shore. A reservoir, in a commodious situation, is made to receive it, together with the rain which the clouds impart; and hence, a mill is kept going in the winter months, for grinding the grain of the island. The agitation of the spray is often so great, that the water in the spring wells becomes brackish, and a salt taste prevails in the air. The tide is supposed to rise to the height of 6 fathoms from lowest ebb. During a storm from the west, the rise of the sea, on that side, is more than 2 fathoms higher, than on the east of the island. From the antiseptic influence of the salt particles, perpetually floating in the air, mummies were preserved for a great length of years, and were wont to be exhibited as curiosities, in a chapel situated in the island. The mummies are now destroyed, and the chapel is unroofed and mouldering into ruin.

Pentland Frith.—The Pentland Frith is reckoned 24 miles in length, and varies from 4 to 5 leagues in breadth. It has the Orkney Isles on the N. and the coasts of Caithness on the S., and forms a communication between the German and the Atlantic Oceans. In the mouth of the frith, and nearly half way between Dungisbay Head and the Orkneys, are situated the Pentland *Skerries*. These are two small uninhabited islands, the one considerably larger than the other, and stretching

ing a little eastward of Dungisbay Head, the island of Stroma lying about two leagues to the west. The parts of the frith, most dangerous to navigation, are two currents, stretching from Dungisbay Head and St. John's Head, to a considerable distance from land. The former is called the *Boars of Dungisbay*, and the latter the *Main of Mey*. The billows in them are often swollen to a monstrous size, even in the finest summer day. They seem to arise from the collision of tides in opposite directions, and recoiling with increased impetuosity from the head lands above mentioned.—Without the aid of skilful pilotage, they are hazardous even in the calmest weather. The tides in every part of the frith are various and irregular, and of course the navigation dangerous, especially in the night, where a very small deviation from the proper course may be attended with fatal consequences.

A Light-House Proposed.—For the above reasons, and many more that might be advanced, there is not, around the island of Britain, a station where a light-house is more requisite, than in the mouth of the Pentland Frith. A year does not pass, without some fatal accidents to shipping, from the want of it. Either Dungisbay Head, or the largest of the Pentland Skerries, is the station where a light-house ought to be erected. A light on the Head would serve to illuminate the Pentland Frith to the west, and the German Ocean to the east, as far as the eye could discern it. No doubt its altitude in foggy weather is an argument, against it, as a station for a light house; but, from the prevalence of winds in this quarter of the world, fogs would very rarely obstruct the light. The Skerry also, would unquestionably be, in many respects, an excellent station. It is east of the Head, and of every part of the coast. From its local situation, it would probably yield, as sure a guidance to shipping, as could be expected

expected from a light-house on the Head. It promises, indeed, many advantages as a station for a light-house ; and the principal objections which can be argued against it, are, the great difficulty there would be, to find a person willing to accept of so tempestuous a residence in the winter months ; and the expence, which would be at least 6 times greater than at the Head. These points being considered, perhaps, it is upon the Head where the experiment ought first to be tried. A light-house on either of these stations, would be an infallible safeguard to vessels from mistaking the bays of Reifs and of Freswick in the night, for the Pentland Frith. This has been often done, and the most fatal consequences have ensued. All mariners declare, that they would have no more hesitation in sailing through the Pentland Frith, at the dead of night, than at mid-day, had they the guidance of a light-house to direct their course. The number of vessels, that pass and repass in the Pentland Frith, during the course of a year, may be reckoned about 2000, or even upwards.

Account of JOHN O'GROAT'S HOUSE.—We shall conclude this paper, with an account of the most memorable place in the parish, which has often been visited, by travellers from very distant countries, who, it is believed, have rarely been made acquainted with the peculiar circumstance, which first gave rise to its celebrity ; its fame having been in general erroneously attributed, to its mere local situation, at the northern extremity of the island ; whereas, it originated in an event not unpleasing to relate, and which furnishes a useful lesson of morality.

In the reign of James IV. of Scotland, *Malcolm, Gavin* and *John de Groat*, (supposed to have been brothers, and originally from Holland,) arrived in Caithness, from the south of Scotland, bringing with them, a letter written in Latin, by that prince, recommending them to the
countenance

countenance and protection of his loving subjects, in the county of Caithness. They purchased, or got possession of, the lands of Warfe and Dungisbay, lying in the parish of Canisbay, on the side of the Pentland Frith ; and each of them obtained an equal share of the property they acquired. In process of time, their families increased, and there came to be eight different proprietors of the name of Groat, who possessed these lands amongst them ; but, whether the three original settlers split their property among their children, or whether they purchased for them, small possessions from one another, does not appear.

These eight families, having lived peaceably and comfortably in their small possessions, for a number of years, established an annual meeting, to celebrate the anniversary of the arrival of their ancestors on that coast. In the course of their festivity, on one of these occasions, a question arose, respecting the right of taking the door, and sitting at the head of the table, and such like points of precedency, (each contending for the seniority and chieftainship of the clan,) which increased to such a height, as would probably have proved fatal in its consequences to some, if not to all of them, had not John de Groat, who was proprietor of the ferry, interposed. He having acquired more knowledge of mankind, by his constant intercourse with strangers passing the Pentland Frith, saw the danger of such disputes ; and having had address enough to procure silence, he began with expatiating on the comfort and happiness they had hitherto enjoyed, since their arrival in that remote corner, owing to the harmony which had subsisted among them. He assured them, that, as soon as they appeared to split and quarrel among themselves, their neighbours, who till then had treated them with respect, would fall upon them, take their property from them, and expel them from the county. He therefore conjured them, by the ties of
blood,

blood, and their mutual safety, to return quietly, that night, to their several homes; and he pledged himself, that he would satisfy them all with respect to precedent, and prevent the possibility of such disputes among them, at their future anniversary meetings. They all acquiesced, and departed in peace. In due time, John de Groat, to fulfil his engagement, built a room, distinct by itself, of an octagon shape, with 8 doors and windows in it; and having placed in the middle, a table of oak, of the same shape, when the next anniversary meeting took place, he desired each of them to enter at his own door, and to sit at the head of the table; he taking himself the seat that was left unoccupied. By this ingenious contrivance, any dispute, in regard to rank, was prevented, as they all found themselves on a footing of equality, and their former harmony and good humour were restored. That building was then named John O'Groat's house, and though the house is totally gone, the place where it stood still retains the name, and deserves to be remembered, as long as good intentions, and good sense, are estimable in a country*.

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* The particulars above mentioned, were communicated to John Sutherland, Esq of Wester, above 50 years ago, by his father, who was then advanced in life, and who had seen the letter wrote by James IV. in the possession of George Groat of Warfe. The remains of the oak table have been seen by many now living, who have inscribed their names on it.