

PARISH OF THURSO.*

PRESBYTERY OF CAITHNESS, SYNOD OF SUTHERLAND AND
CAITHNESS.

THE REV. W. R. TAYLOR, MINISTER.

I.—TOPOGRAPHY AND NATURAL HISTORY.

Name.—THE name of this parish is taken from that of the river which runs through it. It is made up of the words *Thor*, the name of one of the great northern deities, and *aa*, which, in the Icelandic dialect, signifies a river; and so means *Thor's river*.

Extent and Boundaries.—The mean length of the parish is about 7 miles, and the breadth about $4\frac{1}{2}$, and the area about 34 square miles. It is bounded on the north, by the sea; on the west, south, and east, by the parishes of Reay, Halkirk, and Olig respectively. Its form is that of an irregular quadrilateral figure.

Topographical Appearances.—It rises by a gentle acclivity from the sea shore, and in no part attains to any very great elevation. It presents various irregularities and undulations on its surface; but, speaking generally, the land is flat. The coast, which extends about eight miles, is in general rocky, though, in some parts, especially near the town of Thurso, it is flat and sandy. The bay of Thurso, which forms the coast of the parish of Olig and part of that of Dunnet, forms about five miles of the coast of this parish; and, as seen from the town and neighbourhood, presents a very beautiful and striking appearance. It is included within the promontories of Dunnet-head, (the most northerly land in Scotland), situated in the parish of Dunnet on the east, and of Holburn-head, situated in this parish, on the west. Holburn-head, the only head-land in this parish, is about two miles to the north-west of the town of Thurso. At the extremity of this headland, there

* Compiled by the Rev. W. R. Taylor, Minister, assisted by Hugh Davidson, Esq. Chief Magistrate of Thurso, who furnished the chief part of Head IV.

is a remarkable insulated rock, called the Clett, about 480 feet long, 240 feet broad, and 400 feet high, and distant from the land about 240 feet. This rock is considered a great curiosity, and is frequently visited by strangers. In the summer months, it is covered with flocks of sea-fowl; and this adds considerably to its striking and interesting appearance.

Climate.—It is stated in Henderson's View of the Agriculture of Caithness, that for three-fourths of the year, viz. from September to June, the wind generally blows from the west and north-west; and that, during the other fourth of the year, it is variable from south-west to south-east, and is but seldom northerly. The climate is healthy, though variable. During a great part of the year, the air is keen and piercing; but in summer there is a good deal of mild and warm weather.

Hydrography.—There are two small rivers in the parish. The principal river in the parish and in the county, is the river Thurso, from which the parish takes its name. It rises in the heights of the parish of Halkirk, among the hills bounding Sutherland, and after reaching this parish traverses it from south to north, and flows into the sea in the immediate vicinity of the town. Its length is about thirty miles, and its greatest breadth about 100 yards. It adds much to the beauty of those parts of the parish through which it flows, at least, as much as can consist with unwooded banks. The other stream in the parish, and the fourth in size in the county, is the Water of Forss. It rises in the parish of Reay, and after reaching this parish divides it from that of Reay, forming the boundary between them, and flows into the sea at Cross-kirk Bay, near the House of Forss.

Geology.—The principal rocks in the parish belong to the so-called old red sandstone. The general direction of the strata is from north-east to south-west. The dip on the shore of Thurso is north-west, and the inclination about twenty degrees. In some of the quarries inland, the dip is south-east.

The soil consists chiefly of clay and loam, resting on sandstone flag and slate-clay rock.

Zoology.—The chief kinds of fish in the bay of Thurso are, haddock, cod, herring, and salmon. The herring appear in May, and continue until August. The salmon would go up the rivers to spawn in August, but are prevented till the 14th of September, until which time the rivers are shut. It is considered injurious

that the rivers are not open sooner, as the number of spawning fish is thus reduced. The spawning fish return to the sea about the month of April. The principal crustacea found in the bay of Thurso are lobsters.

II.—CIVIL HISTORY.

Sir John Sinclair mentions that there is an account of this parish in Macfarlane's Geographical Collection, preserved in the Advocates' Library; but it is presumed that the account drawn up by Sir John himself, and contained in his Statistical Account of Scotland, is the fullest that has ever been written.

With regard to the ancient history of Thurso, Sir John observes that the town appears to have been a place of very considerable trade and consequence, many centuries ago; and, in proof of this, states, that, according to Skene's account of the assize of David, King of Scotland, the weight of Caithness was ordered to be observed in buying and selling over all Scotland; which could not, he thinks, have been the case, had not Caithness been distinguished for the extent of its commercial transactions, of which Thurso was probably the centre. It was not, however, till the year 1633, that Thurso was erected into a free burgh of barony. The only other events connected with its history, which Sir John considers worthy of being recorded, are the two following: In the reign of Charles the First, it was visited by the Earl of Montrose; and in the spring of 1746, a band of rebels, under Lord M'Leod, marched into the county, but returned without doing more than obliging the landholders to pay them part of the land-tax, and were, on their return, attacked and worsted near Dunrobin Castle. There is a small map of the parish prefixed to Sir John Sinclair's Account.

Eminent Characters.—Of the eminent characters connected with the parish by birth or residence, the name of Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster, author of the former Statistical Account, whose patriotic and indefatigable labours for the welfare and improvement of his country, and of his native county in particular, are so well known, claims special notice. Nor would it be right to omit the names of his three daughters;—Miss Hannah Sinclair, the writer of a short but very admirable letter on the Principles of the Christian Faith; Lady Colquhoun, who has written two or three pious works of a plain and practical, but very attractive character; and Miss Catherine Sinclair, who has already given to the world

several volumes of tales and travels, and has distinguished herself as a very elegant and lively, as well as instructive writer. Sir John, in his account of eminent characters, states, that the Oswalds of Glasgow, who were eminent merchants there, were originally from Thurso; and that Richard Oswald, merchant in London, and one of the plenipotentiaries from Great Britain in settling the peace in 1783, was an unsuccessful candidate, upon a comparative trial, for the office of schoolmaster of Thurso. He makes mention also of a Mr M'Intosh, son of a schoolmaster in Thurso, who became an eminent portrait painter in Moscow; and of two young ladies of the name of Liddell, natives of Thurso, who had removed to Edinburgh, who showed a great turn for music and painting, and attained to considerable eminence in the latter art.

Chief Land-owners.—The chief land-owners in the parish, besides the Crown, which possesses the lands of Scrabster, are, Sir George Sinclair of Ulbster, the present excellent and accomplished Member for the county; James Sinclair, Esq. of Forss, who is constantly resident, and who deserves much commendation for his anxiety to provide the young on his estates with the means of a proper education; Sir John Gordon Sinclair of Murkle, and Sir Patrick Murray Thrieland of Fingask.

Parochial Registers.—The parochial registers, including the Session records, extend to seven volumes, of about 600 folio pages each. The first entry is in 1648.

Antiquities.—About half a mile to the west of Thurso, in the centre of the crescent-formed bank which skirts the bay, stand the ruins of an old castle, beautifully situated on the sea, once the residence of the bishops of Caithness. Scarcely any of the building remains, but it appears to have been a place of considerable size and strength. About two miles to the east of the town, is the burial place of Earl Harold, the possessor at one time of the half of Orkney and Zetland, and of the half of Caithness, who was slain in battle in the year 1190, while endeavouring to recover his property from the hands of a tyrant, the wicked Earl Harold. Over his grave the late Sir John Sinclair, on the suggestion of Mr Alexander Pope, minister of Reay, one of the greatest antiquaries in the north, erected an edifice, called Harold's Tower, which, as seen from a distance, possesses somewhat of a striking appearance.

Modern Buildings.—The principal modern building in the parish is the parish church, which is a very handsome structure, and a great ornament to the town. It cost about L. 6000.

III.—POPULATION.

The population of the parish, as given in the account of the parish already referred to, as preserved in the Advocates' Library, was 2200, 900 in the town of Thurso, and 1300 in the rest of the parish. The date of this account is not known. In 1755, the population was 2963; and at the date of Sir John Sinclair's Account in 1798, it was 3146. In 1831, the population was 4679, of which 2124 were males, and 2555 females. The number of the population residing in the town of Thurso in 1831 was 2429, and in the country, 2250. The yearly average of births for the last seven years was about 140, and of marriages about 16. The number of persons under 15 years of age is about 1600.

There are very few individuals or families of independent fortune residing in the parish. There are no proprietors of land of the yearly value of L. 50 or upwards, except those already mentioned as the chief land-owners in the parish. They are five in number. The number of families in the parish in 1831 was 1086, 596 in the town, and 440 in the country. The average number of children in each family is two, or rather less. The number of inhabited houses was in 1831, 739; 367 in the town, and 372 in the country. There were 17 houses uninhabited or building in 1831.

There are 2 insane persons, 4 fatuous, 2 blind, and 2 deaf and dumb.

The language generally spoken is the English. The Gaelic is spoken by a few, but it is yearly losing ground.

The ordinary food of the labouring classes consists of meal in its various preparations of bread, pottage, brose, and gruel; milk, potatoes, and herring.

Character of the People.—The general character of the people, intellectual, moral, and religious, no doubt requires great improvement; yet, as compared with that in other parts of Scotland, it is rather above than below mediocrity. The bulk of the people are quiet and orderly, and manifest considerable regard for religion and religious services.

Neither poaching nor smuggling prevails to any great extent.

The number of males employed in agriculture is 386
employed in manufactures and in retail trade and handicraft, 402

The number of professional persons and other educated men,	57
of labourers not agricultural,	218
of other males,	61
of male servants, of whom only three are above 20 years of age, is	13
of female servants,	254

IV.—INDUSTRY.

Agriculture.—

The number of acres, standard imperial measure, which are either cultivated or occasionally in tillage, is about	12,000
The number of acres which have never been cultivated,	10,000
The number that might, with a profitable application of capital, be added to the cultivated land of the parish,	7000

There is no undivided common. The number of acres under wood is 40. The trees planted are, plane, fir, ash, elm, oak, and mountain-ash: the management of which is on the whole tolerably good.

Rent.—The average rent of arable land in the parish is L. 1 per acre. The average rent of grazing is at the rate of L. 2 per ox or cow grazed, and 6s. 6d. per ewe or full-grown sheep pastured for the year.

Wages.—The rate of labour for farm-labourers is 1s. 6d. per day, and for country artisans from 2s. to 3s. The rate of mason-work is L. 2 per rood.

Live-Stock.—The common breed of sheep are the Leicester and Cheviot, and of cattle the Highland and Teeswater; to the improvement of both of which much attention has been paid.

Husbandry.—The most approved system of husbandry pursued is that called the five crop shift, being a rotation of turnips, bear, hay, pasture, and oats. Great improvements are taking place in the reclaiming of waste lands, and in draining, which is practised to a considerable extent on the most improved farms, and is yearly extending to others.

Leases.—Leases generally extend from seven to nineteen years in the larger description of farms. The smaller farms are in general occupied without leases to the great injury of the land, and also of the tenant.

Farm-buildings are improving rapidly, and are in general in a comfortable state. Inclosures are increasing, but not in the same ratio.

The principal improvements which have recently been made in the parish consist in the dividing, draining, and enclosing of commons, and in the building of comfortable cottages for the settlers on their respective lands.

The great want of capital may be stated as the principal obsta-

cle to improvement. To this are to be added the low price of farm produce, and the want of leases.

Quarries.—There are in this parish several slate, freestone, and whinstone quarries. The slate quarries have been for some years extensively worked, and the flags which they furnish have been exported to London, Newcastle, and Glasgow, and other cities and towns in England and Scotland, where they have been used for pavement. About 250 men are employed in dressing these flags.

Fisheries.—The principal fisheries carried on in the parish are, the herring, salmon, haddock, cod, and lobster. The salmon fishings rent at L. 1000, the others are free.

Produce.—The average gross amount of raw produce raised in the parish, as nearly as can be ascertained, is as follows:—

Produce of grain of all kinds,	L. 28000
potatoes, turnips, &c.	6000
hay,	4000
land in pasture at L. 1, 10s. per cow or ox, and 5s. per ewe,	5000
gardens and orchards,	200
thinnings of woods,	5
fisheries,	5000
quarries,	2000
miscellaneous produce,	2000

Total yearly value of raw produce raised, L. 52,205

Manufactures.—The manufacture of straw-plait employs about 58 females; the manufacture of leather 15 men, and a rope-work 12. Linen and woollen manufactures, and the manufacture of herring nets, occupy about 200 persons.

Navigation.—There are 14 ships or vessels belonging to the port. The number trading to the port, but not belonging to it, is about 40.

V.—PAROCHIAL ECONOMY.

Market-Town.—The town of Thurso is the only market-town in the parish. It is pleasantly situated on the sea at the mouth of the river which bears its name. It commands a very noble and extensive sea-view, comprising, first, the beautiful bay of Thurso, included within the two commanding headlands of Dunnet and Holburn; next, the more exposed and stormy waters of the Pentland Frith; and beyond, the islands of Orkney with their lofty and rocky sides, terminating westward in the majestic promontory of Hoy.

Thurso lays claim to considerable antiquity. As already stated, it was a place of some consequence several centuries ago. The

old church, which was only quitted as a place of worship in 1832, and which contained 900 sitters, was said to be upwards of 500 years old.

The town is made up of an old and a new town united together. The new town is built according to a regular plan; and though this cannot be said of the old town, yet it contains a few regular streets, and some good and substantial houses. The new town is yearly increasing in size.

The present population of the town is, as has been stated already, upwards of 2400. It has three magistrates, nominated by the superior of the burgh, Sir George Sinclair.

Means of Communication.—The ordinary means of communication are enjoyed by the parish. There are good roads and a daily mail-coach to and from the south. Three times a week there is a coach between Thurso and Tongue. There are two sailing vessels from Thurso to Leith, and, except during the winter months, there is weekly a steam-boat from Wick to Leith. To Wick, which is twenty-one miles from Thurso, the mail-coach travels daily, performing the journey in two hours and a half.

Thurso is a post-town, and has a daily dispatch and arrival to and from the south. It is itself the most northern post-town in Great Britain. There is a post three times a week to and from Tongue and the places intervening, on the west, and a daily post to and from Castleton and Dunnet on the east.

The turnpike road along the coast of the parish from east to west is eight miles and a half long, of which three miles are to the east of the town, and five miles and a half to the west. Besides this road, there is the mail-road to the south, which traverses about six miles of this parish. There is also another road to the west of the mail-road, and almost parallel to it, on the west side of the river, leading from Thurso to the village of Halkirk. There are only four miles of this road in this parish. From this road, another road branches off to the west, about two miles from Thurso, and joins the coast-road at Reay. Of this branch, there are about two miles and a half in this parish, besides the two miles from Thurso to the point at which it branches off.

The only public carriage which travels through the parish is the mail to and from the south, and to and from the west, as already stated.

There are several bridges in the parish, and all in good condi-

tion. The principal is that over the river Thurso, at the entrance to the town from the south and east. This bridge is a very large and substantial and ornamental one. It was not in existence at the time of Sir John Sinclair's Account, in which much is said of the great inconvenience felt by the want of a bridge. It is difficult to imagine now, how this want could have been so long borne. There are not many fences in the parish; but where they are to be found, they are generally in good condition.

There is a harbour at Thurso at the mouth of the river, where vessels of twelve feet draught land and lie in safety. Scrabster Roads, within the bay of Thurso, distant about a mile from the town, affords good and safe anchorage for vessels of any size; and it is at present in contemplation to erect a pier there.

Ecclesiastical State.—The parish church has been already spoken of as a very handsome structure. It is situated in the town of Thurso, which, considering the number of people in the town, is manifestly the most convenient place for its erection. It is distant three miles from the eastern extremity of the parish, and six from the southern and western extremities. On the north it is within a quarter of a mile from the sea. It was built in 1832, and opened for public worship in January 1833, and is, as might be expected, in a good state of repair. It affords accommodation for 1540 persons. There are but 32 free-sittings set apart for the use of the poor.

The manse was built about the year 1770, and was repaired in 1831.

The glebe consists of about 7 or 8 acres, and may be of the yearly value of L.15.

The stipend is 18 chalders standard imperial measure, half meal, half barley. There being no barley fiars struck in the county, the barley is paid according to the fiars' price of bear. L.10 are allowed for communion elements.

There is no place of worship in the parish attached to the Establishment, except the parish church.

There is no missionary in the parish. There is a catechist supported by the people, with the aid of a small salary from the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge. The office has been for some time vacant, but a new appointment is about being made.

There is a meeting-house in the town belonging to a congrega-

tion of Original Seceders. There is also an Independent chapel. A small Baptist congregation assembles in a room in a private house. The ministers of these places of worship are paid by their hearers.

There is no Episcopalian or Roman Catholic chapel in the parish.

The number of families attending the Established Church may be about 800, and the number of individuals about 2400.

The number of families attending the other places of worship may be about 200, and the number of individuals about 600. Some of these are from other parishes.

The average attendance in ordinary weather at the parish church is from 1400 to 1500; and at the Dissenting places of worship 500.

The number of communicants connected with the Established Church is about 300.

There is a Bible Society in Thurso, supported by Christians of all denominations, which collects about L. 30 annually. There is a Parochial Association for support of the Assembly's schemes, whose funds, except for Church Extension, are derived wholly from collections at the church door. The sum collected may also average about L. 30 per annum. This is independent of an annual sum of L. 38, subscribed for church extension for five years, and which has already been paid for one year.

There is a Society in the parish for the relief of the destitute sick, supported by Christians of all denominations, whose receipts may average L. 15 annually.

The average amount of collections at the parish church for religious and charitable objects, including the L. 30 already specified, and including also the ordinary collections for the poor, is about L. 120. Of this sum the ordinary collections for the poor make up L. 80.

Education.—The number of schools in the parish is about 16, viz. 1 parochial, 12 unendowed, 2 supported by societies, and 1 by subscription. Besides these, an Assembly school is about being opened.

In many of these schools only English reading is taught. In others, are taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, and in female schools, sewing; and in a few, the usual higher branches.

The salary of the parochial schoolmaster is the maximum. The

salaries of the Society teachers are L.15 and L.12. The promised salary of the Assembly teacher to be appointed is L. 20. With the exception of the parish school and two or three others, the amount of fees is very small. The parochial teacher possesses the legal accommodations.

The general expense of education for the year in the parish school, is 10s. for beginners, increasing to L.1, 10s. or L.2 for the more advanced. In inferior schools, the expense for beginners is about 6s. a-year, and 10s. for the more advanced. In female schools, in which the higher branches are taught, the expense is considerably greater than in the parish school.

About 200 children between six and fifteen years of age cannot read; about 600 cannot write. The whole number of children between six and fifteen is about 950. The number of persons above fifteen who cannot read is about 120.

The people in general are alive to the benefits of education, and are anxious to have their children educated.

After the Assembly school is opened, there will be no part of the parish so distant from school as to prevent attendance, nor will there be any additional schools required; but some of the schools in existence are in a very precarious state from the want of any endowment.

Literature.—There are two circulating libraries in the parish, and two reading-rooms.

Charitable and other Institutions.—There is no almshouse, hospital, dispensary, or asylum. There are 5 Friendly Societies, the oldest of which has existed about forty years, and the latest about twenty. Their design and tendency are manifestly good, but they are not by any means in a flourishing state. There is no Savings Bank.

Poor and Parochial Funds.—The average number of persons receiving parochial aid is 160. The average sum allotted to each is 5s. The annual amount contributed for their relief is about L.112, of which there is collected at the church door L.80; L.25 is voluntarily subscribed by the heritors for the support of two lunatics; and L. 6, 18s. is the interest of two sums left as legacies. With a few exceptions the poor do not consider it degrading to apply for parochial relief.

Prisons.—The county jail is in Wick. There is merely a lock-up-house in Thurso, where criminals are confined till they be sent to Wick. Within the last year there were five persons

confined here, three for rioting, and two for theft. The longest period any of them was confined here was ten days.

Fairs.—There are three fairs held in the parish, the Petersmas, in the end of June; the Georgemas, in July; and the Marymas, in the beginning of September. They are intended chiefly for the sale of cattle and sheep.

Inns and Alehouses.—There are 2 or 3 inns and about 30 alehouses in the parish. These last cannot but have an injurious effect; but it is hoped both their number and their influence are decreasing.

Fuel.—A good deal of English coal is used in the town of Thurso; but many of the town's people, and all the people in the country, with a few exceptions, consume nothing but peats. These are to be found in abundance in the parish; and the tenants have a right to take of them at no other cost but that of the time and labour, (which, however, are considerable,) required for casting them and carrying them home.

October 1840.

PARISH OF REAY.

PRESBYTERY OF CAITHNESS, SYNOD OF SUTHERLAND AND
CAITHNESS.

THE REV. FINLAY COOK, MINISTER. *

I.—TOPOGRAPHY AND NATURAL HISTORY.

Situation, Boundaries, &c.—The parish is situated between 58°, 36' and 59° north latitude, and between 2°, 59' and 3° 30' west longitude. The greater part of it lies in the county of Caithness. A part, however, denominated Strathalladale, is in the county of Sutherland. Its length is 18 miles, and its breadth 9 miles. It is bounded on the east and south-east, by the parishes of Thurso and Halkirk, in Caithness; and on the west and south-west, by the parishes of Farr and Kildonan in Sutherland.

Name.—There are various conjectures respecting the etymology of its name. It is supposed to be a corruption of *Mein-Reidh*,

* Drawn up by Mr W. G. Forbes, Parochial Schoolmaster of Reay.