

PARISH OF OLRICK.

PRESBYTERY OF CAITHNESS, SYNOD OF SUTHERLAND AND
CAITHNESS.

THE REV. WILLIAM M'KENZIE, MINISTER.

I.—TOPOGRAPHY AND NATURAL HISTORY.

Name.—THE word *Olrick* (or *Olrig*), is of Norwegian derivation, and may be interpreted “the son of Erick:” it was applied to this parish in allusion to a settlement made by some chief of that name on this part of the coast, about the end of the eighth or the beginning of the ninth century, when an invasion of this northern part of the kingdom is supposed to have taken place.

Extent.—The length of the parish from north-west to south-east is 5 miles, its medium breadth 3 miles: and it contains $15\frac{1}{2}$ square miles, or about 10,000 imperial acres. It is bounded on the west, east, and south by the parishes of Thurso, Dunnet, and Bower,—and the sea is the boundary on the north.

Soil and Produce.—The soil throughout the parish may be considered good; and as improvements in agriculture are carried on, on the most approved plans, perhaps there is not a parish in the north of Scotland where better crops of all kinds of useful produce are raised. There is abundance of marl in the parish,

which, along with sand and sea-weed, afford every facility in the way of manure. The common of Hilliclay being now divided and enclosed by the respective proprietors, and fast yielding to cultivation, very little of the parish can be considered as unfit for husbandry, and what is not already under cultivation, affords excellent pasture for young cattle and sheep,—of the latter of which there is a large increase of late years, and that of the best description.

Minerals, &c.—Limestone and freestone, slates and flags abound in the parish.

In the raising of stone for pavement much has been done for some years back. The finest quality of this is found on the property of Mr Traill of Ratter, the stratification being so very regular and plane, that it answers admirably for streets, without any surface dressing. The layers are from three-quarters of an inch to five inches thick and upwards in the quarry; the colour of the stone from a smoke-gray to blue. This stone is very hard, and exceedingly strong and durable. Some of the oldest houses in Caithness are roofed with it, and it has been employed with advantage for granary floors, being laid on joists at the ordinary distance, in the upper as well as low flats of buildings. The inhabitants of London, Newcastle, Edinburgh, Glasgow, and other towns are now reaping the benefit of pavement exported from this parish. At Castlehill, machinery is employed in sawing the edges and polishing the surface of the stone, which is now used in this prepared form for lobby floors, tables, hearthstones, and mantel-pieces, and other purposes within doors. Upwards of 100 labourers are constantly employed, and numerous cargoes of this useful commodity are exported every season; the proprietor having erected a neat and commodious harbour for his own use, has now the pleasure and advantage of seeing his own and other vessels coming in and going out in safety in the immediate neighbourhood of his mansion-house,—the tonnage required being from 3000 to 4000, and the annual shipment of pavement alone being from 300,000 to 400,000 square feet.

On the estates of Odrig and Murkle, there are also quarries of slate and flag of good quality.

The line of sea coast belonging to this parish is not more than two miles from east to west. At the extremities of this line are the bays of Castlehill and Murkle, both abounding with fish of every kind peculiar to the coast, sought after (with the exception

of the salmon-fishing, let to a respectable tenant), now only by the labourers as a recreation from other work, and for the use of their families.

Allusion has been already made to the harbour at Castlehill; and it is much to be regretted that no steps have been taken for having a harbour also erected in the bay of Murkle, which is so well adapted for the purpose, and which would afford shelter to vessels in distress, or retarded in their progress by contrary winds, being almost naturally locked in from the effects of that dangerous neighbour, the Pentland Frith, and there being abundance of water at all times of tide.

Lakes.—The only lake, that of Durran, mentioned in the former Statistical Account, was drained many years ago, and has amply rewarded the proprietors,—the surface of water being now exchanged for inexhaustible pits of marl and rich meadow pasture.

II.—CIVIL HISTORY.

Parochial Registers.—The earliest date of these is 1700, since which period the record of session, including births and marriages, has been regularly kept; but no record of deaths seems to have been kept in this parish at any period.

Antiquities.—Torfæus mentions a nunnery, the site of which is obviously indicated by the burn of Closters (cloisters), running through the farm of Redlands, on the estate of Murkle, and not far from a green hillock resembling the Pictish cairns, which abound in the county, and of which there are several in this parish.

On the top of the hill of Olrick, on the southern boundary of the parish, there are evident remains of a watch-tower, which, in former times, must have been of no little importance, from the extensive view it commands of the coast and the country round. From this spot the bays of Sandside, Scrabster, Dunnet, Freswick, and Reiss, Dunnet-head, the hills of Canisbay and Noss-head, all in this county, together with some of the islands of Orkney, and also some of the mountainous parts of Sutherland, Moray, Banff, and Aberdeen shires are visible,—affording one of the most extensive and finest views to be found in this northern part of the country.

On the boundary of the parish on the east, towards Dunnet, it is said there existed a church, the position of which is ascertained by the name of St Coomb's Kirk (perhaps in honour of St Columba), being still given to the spot; and there is a farther tradition, that this church and the adjoining manse, sup-

posed to have been the parish church and manse of the united parishes of Dunnet and Olrick, were, in the night season, suddenly overwhelmed with sand during the prevalence of a storm, the minister and his family effecting their escape with difficulty by the roof; and it is probable that it was at this period that the adjoining lands of the property of Tain shared the same fate. The district is now known by the name of the Links of Old Tain.

The only other place in the parish worthy of note is Murkle, on the western boundary; which name is believed to have been originally Mort Hill, or the field of death, applied in allusion to a battle fought between the Danes and natives, in which the latter were victorious. It is said that the Scottish chief, on seeing a large hollow at the head of Murkle Bay filled with the enemy, called out to his followers, "clear the den," which was responded to with such destruction of the invaders, that the place got the name of Clear Den, or Clairden, which it bears to this day.

Land-owners.—The only two residing heritors are, James Traill, Esq. of Ratter, and James Smith, Esq. of Odrig, who have done much for the encouragement and comfort of their numerous tenantry. The other non-residing heritors are, the Earl of Caithness; Sir John Gordon Sinclair, Bart.; and the Trustees of the late George Miller, Esq., who bequeathed the small property of Swarclet for the benefit of the poor of the parish of Thurso.

III.—POPULATION.

By Dr Webster's Report in 1755,	-	875 souls.
By Sir John Sinclair's Statistical Account in 1792,	1001	
By Government census in 1821,	-	1093
By Do. Do. 1831,	-	1146

And by a census taken up by the present parish minister in 1835, in order accurately to meet some Government queries, the population was found to amount to 1352 souls, composed chiefly of farmers, farm-servants, and labourers. This increase is to be attributed to the erection and prosperity of the village of Castle-town, (the only one in the parish,) on the property of James Traill, Esq. of Ratter, and to the employment and liberal wages throughout the year afforded by him to numerous workmen in raising and preparing pavement for the southern markets. The number of inhabitants in this village, which is rising in importance, from the granting of perpetual feus, and several handsome houses being built in consequence, may be computed at 320 souls.

The average of marriages for the last seven years is	-	10
births,	do.	32
deaths,	do.	17

The latter average raised from the effects of small-pox.

In their general character, the people may be stated to be sober, industrious, intelligent, and attentive to the outward ordinances of religion.

IV.—INDUSTRY.

Agriculture, &c.—The extent of the parish being about 10,000 acres, 6000 may be reported as cultivated, and the remainder, with the exception of about 500 acres of links and moss, is capable of cultivation.

There are 20 acres under wood on the estates of Castlehill and Odrig. The oldest was planted by the present proprietor, James Traill, Esq. about fifty years ago, consisting principally of ash, plane, elm, oak, mountain-ash, and larch. Some of the trees have grown as high as 50 feet. The ash seems to thrive the best. Fir does not succeed.

Rent.—The rent of arable land varies much, depending in a great measure on proximity to the sea-coast. Near the sea it may be stated at from L. 1 to L. 1, 5s. per acre; in the interior from 12s. to 15s. is near the average. The rate of grazing a cow is L. 2 in summer, and L. 1, 10s. for wintering. Keep of a Leicester sheep is worth from 15s. to 20s. during the year.

Wages.—Farm-servants' wages are, for men, from L. 6 to L. 8 in money per annum, with 6½ bolls meal, 2 bolls potatoes, house-room, fire, and a chopin of milk daily. Boys less in proportion. Out-door women get L. 3, 4 bolls of meal, with lodgings, fire, milk, and potatoes. House female servants L. 3 to L. 3, 10s. yearly. Harvest labourers are engaged for eight weeks. Men get L. 1, 10s., and one boll meal, with a chopin of milk daily, and a few potatoes; women L. 1, and half a boll meal for the harvest, with potatoes and a mutchkin of milk daily. The price of labour has risen considerably within the last two years, from the great demand for hands at the stone-works, making roads, furrow-draining, enclosing, &c. and may be stated for common labourers 1s. 6d. per day in winter, and 1s. 10d. in summer. Women get now pretty generally 8d. a day for turnip-hoeing, and 6d. in winter for barn-work, pulling turnips, &c. Wrights, masons, and blacksmiths get about 2s. 6d. per day. Mason-work of ordinary wall height and girth measure is done for L. 2 per rood of 36 square yards. Blacksmiths get L. 2, 10s. per annum for each pair of horses. They uphold the horses' shoes, iron-work of ploughs and carts. Saddlers get from L. 1 to L. 1, 5s. for upholding the harness of each pair of horses during the year.

Breeds of Live-Stock.—The common breed of cattle among the proprietors and larger tenants is a cross with the Highland and Teeswater, which Mr Traill introduced some years ago. They have answered very well, and are a vast improvement compared with the old stock. The smaller tenants still keep the old breed, an inferior description of highlanders.

The breed of sheep is the Leicester, which was also introduced by Mr Traill eight years ago: it has succeeded beyond expectation, both as to weight and the quality of the wool. There are now about 1500 sheep of this kind in the parish; and the number is yearly increasing.

Husbandry.—The husbandry of the parish is of all kinds, from the best modern systems to the most antiquated. On the improved farms the five and six shift courses are followed. Turnips eat off with sheep, and business managed much the same as in the southern part of the kingdom. On the lands occupied by the smaller tenantry (they occupy more than one-half of the parish,) the system is continual cropping, or nearly so, viz. bear and oats alternately. Numbers are beginning to sow a few turnips and grass-seeds; but there is scarcely as yet any regular rotation introduced. However, with the great command the parish has of manure, viz. marl, sea-weed, and shell-sand, vast quantities of bear and oats are raised of good quality—Angus oats generally weighing from 40 lb. to 42 lb. per bushel, and bear from 48 lb. to 52 lb. A part of the parish (Murkle) is remarkable for producing black oats. They degenerate everywhere else by repeated sowing except here; the consequence of which is, that the whole county take a change of seed of their oats from Murkle.

The mode of reclaiming waste lands is,—first enclose with ditch and thorn hedge, protected with flags set on edge; then drain out the springs with three feet or four feet drains as required; plough in and allow it to lie a year or more; lay on marl or shell sand at the rate of twenty to twenty-five loads per acre; then cross plough and work it down for turnips with dung, or bone-dust, or both; feed the turnips off with sheep; then oats, or bear and grass seeds; then pasture with sheep for a few years; and the land is generally afterwards fit for any rotation. The quality of the soil being good, considerable progress is made and making in thus reclaiming waste lands. Furrow draining has also been introduced on Mr Traill's estate. The effect is wonderful, and the practice will, though expensive, in a few years, be common.

The principal tenants have in general leases of from fourteen to twenty-one years, with stipulations as to cropping. The small occupiers are at *will*, and are wearing out,—the tendency of the present system of improvement being to throw the whole lands into large farms.

Where the farms are large the steadings are substantial and commodious; slates, flags, and building stones of the best quality being abundant; the fences are also very good, either stone walls or hedges protected with flags. On the small farms the houses are almost wholly built with feal covered with divots,—chimneys few in number—and fences of a very indifferent description.

The principal improvements made in the parish have been done by James Traill, Esq. of Ratter, and James Smith, Esq. of Olig. The other proprietors are non-resident, and do not seem to give much attention to their estates. Mr Traill may well be called the author of all improvements in the county; which a single view of his property in this parish, after surveying Caithness, will sufficiently testify, either as regards culture, plantations, buildings, harbours, roads, live-stock, or crops; indeed, what he has accomplished could scarcely be credited as being the work of one individual, and is and will be a great example to Caithness proprietors in all time coming.

The obstacles to improvements are the state of occupancy by small tenants, and the want of capital.

The rental of the parish is about L. 4000 a year; L. 50,000 laid out on buildings, enclosures, roads, and drains, would not do more than put the parish into a fair state of cultivation. It is, therefore, easily seen that its final improvement must be a work of time. The facilities of procuring manure; the excellent materials for buildings, enclosures, and drains, got from the refuse of the flag quarries, are its great advantages, and will ultimately produce great results. The surface is capable of producing more than double of what it does at present; and as a matter of course will pay double rent; there is, therefore, little doubt, that ere long, in consequence of easy access to the southern markets by the aid of steam-vessels, that capital will find its way to call out the dormant and neglected resources of this and every other parish in the county of Caithness.

V.—PAROCHIAL ECONOMY.

The parish is well accommodated with roads. The county line, from Thurso to Wick, passes through it, and there is no

deficiency of cross-roads. There is a daily post between Castle-town and Thurso; and a regular carrier to Wick.

Ecclesiastical State.—The present church, conveniently situated for the parish, seems to have been built in 1633, and though frequently repaired, has never had any addition made to it. It has never been divided, nor seated at the expense of the heritors. It affords accommodation for only 403 sitters, at 18 inches; and this being far below what the increasing population require of seat-room, the heritors have lately adopted a very handsome plan by Mr David Cousin, architect in Edinburgh, agreeable to which a new church is now building, which will afford the requisite accommodation, and be a great ornament to the village of Castle-town, at the east end of which it is situated. The manse was built about fifty years ago, and along with the offices underwent considerable repairs in 1825. There is a glebe attached to it of 8 Scotch acres, which may be valued at L. 10. The amount of stipend is 14 chalders, half barley and half oatmeal, with L. 8, 6s. 8d. for communion elements. The number of communicants is 120. There is no Dissenting place of worship in the parish; the number of Dissenters is under 100; and these belong to the Original Seceders, Independents, and Baptists, the great majority of whom readily signed a late petition to the Legislature in behalf of the extension and endowment of the Established Church.

Education.—There are one parochial and four other schools in the parish. About one-eighth of the population may be computed as attending school.

The salary of the parish teacher is the maximum. All the usual branches of a classical and commercial education are taught. The fees are moderate, in no case exceeding 7s. per quarter, whatsoever branches are taught. The other teachers are upon their own adventure. There is not a person in the parish above five years of age but who can read, and, with few exceptions, also write. The children of such as are in indigent circumstances are educated gratuitously. There is a Sabbath school, where the youth of both sexes are carefully instructed in the principles of the Christian religion.

Library.—There is a parish library consisting of some hundred volumes of useful books, of a miscellaneous and religious character.

Friendly Societies.—Of these there are three in the parish, from

which much benefit has been derived by the aged and infirm, as well as by widows and orphans. Allowances are also made for defraying the funeral expenses of members and their widows. The Castletown Society alone, since its commencement in 1797, has distributed nearly L. 4000. These Societies have prevented many from being on the poor's roll.

Poor and Parochial Funds.—The average number of persons receiving parochial aid is 35, whose circumstances are taken into due consideration without any special or fixed sum being allotted. There is a mortification of L. 100, left by the late Dr Oswald of Scotstown, the interest of which, along with L. 25 of collections, and some seat-rents in the church, under the direction of the session, placed at their disposal last year L. 36, 12s. 4d. There is no assessment of the heritors. Particular care is taken in the admission of parties on the poor roll—vagrancy is discouraged—no pauper certificate for begging has been granted during the last fifteen years—and in various cases, the heritors and parishioners have subscribed liberally, in order to prevent families from becoming a permanent burden upon the parish.

Fairs.—There are three annual fairs held in the parish; in March, June, and November, for the sale and purchase of cattle.

Inns.—There are two in the parish, which are well kept, but one would be fully sufficient for the accommodation required by travellers.

Fuel.—Moss is not very abundant in this parish; but there is now an abundant supply of English coal to be had at the village of Castletown: it is conveyed in vessels that are constantly arriving at Castlehill for cargoes of pavement.

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