

# UNITED PARISHES OF WALLS AND FLOTTA.

PRESBYTERY OF CAIRSTON, SYNOD OF ORKNEY.

THE REV. WALTER WEIR, MINISTER.

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## I.—TOPOGRAPHY AND NATURAL HISTORY.

*Name, &c.*—THESE parishes consist of three, or more properly speaking, of four inhabited islands. Walls comprehends the greater part of the island of Hoy, which, in the group of the Orkneys, is considered to rank next to Pomona, or the Mainland, in point of extent. It is probable that Walls derives its name from "Voes," which signifies a bay or inlet of the sea. It was anciently called "Valis," "Wacs," or "Waas." The last mentioned is still retained in pronunciation, although Walls is the name by which it is designated in all written documents.

*Extent and Boundaries.*—The parish is about  $7\frac{1}{2}$  miles in length from north to south, and about 6 miles in breadth from east to west. It is bounded on the north, by the parish of Hoy; on the east, by Scalpa Flow; and on the south and west, by the Pentland Frith. The parish is nearly divided into two portions by the bay of Longhope, which extends about five miles from east to west. At one part, on the south side of the bay, the waters of Longhope almost meet those of the Pentland Frith, which at that place extend through a bay, and are only separated by a very narrow strip of land, generally not exceeding 200 feet, even at low water, while at spring tides it is for several days overflowed at high water, so as often to be impassable except by a boat. Hence Walls is sometimes spoken of as a separate island from Hoy; and certainly, so far as regards the convenience of the inhabitants, the facilities of communication are not greater than if they formed two distinct islands. This narrow strip of land, which is covered with stones, and constantly exposed to the waves of the Pentland Frith, seems to retain the same form which it did nearly three centuries ago, as Buchanan, in his *History of Scotland*, describes these islands

thus:—"Hoy and Valis, or Waes, which some make two and others but one island, because about both equinoxes, at which time the sea doth most tempestuously foam and rage, the tide falling back, and the lands being bared, they stick together, and are joined by a very narrow neck of land, and so make one island; but upon the return of the tide, and the sea coming afresh between them, they again represent the form of two."

Hoy may be termed the highlands of Orkney; and although the south part, where this parish is situated, does not contain hills of equal height with those in the parish of Hoy, a great proportion of the island may be considered as mountainous. The headland of the Berry rock is a magnificent promontory, corresponding in some respects to that of Dunnet-head, on the Caithness coast; and these rocks appear like two vast pillars forming the mouth of the Pentland Frith, through which the waters of the Atlantic rush with awful impetuosity. It is not improbable that, at some distant period, these islands were torn from Scotland by some convulsion of nature, and that the hills which bound the western coast of Scotland, and those of Hoy, formed one range. In proof of this supposition, it may be mentioned, that Dunnet-head and the Berry nearly correspond in their geological properties; and that the same position of the western hills is carried forward from the Berry head along the west coast of Hoy, and from thence in the same position through Pomona. Besides the Berry, there are other headlands which present their bold fronts to the waves of the Pentland Frith. The extent of coast bounded by the frith is about twelve miles, nearly the whole of which is precipitous, and in which have been formed several caverns by the action of the waters.

*Hydrography.*—There is a great extent of excellent anchorage-ground in the various bays or harbours of this island, all of which afford a safe retreat to shipping of almost any size. The principal of these is the harbour of Longhope, which has been already mentioned as being about five miles long, and which is, in some places, one and a half broad. This harbour is land-locked by the Island of Flotta; and perhaps, there is not in the kingdom a better place of safety for shipping. During the last war, it was a rendezvous for vessels waiting for convoy. At that time 40, 50, or even 100 sail might be seen in the bay. In the spring of 1840, there were congregated between 60 and 70 vessels, the greater number of which were of a large description, bound for various parts of the world.

The Pentland Frith, to which allusion has been made as bounding the south and west of the parish, yields to none in the rapidity and strength of its stream. At spring tides, it runs at the rate of nine miles an hour; and has been known even to exceed that rate. On these occasions, it is impossible for ordinary vessels to withstand the force of the current. The depth is generally from 50 to 65 fathoms, and the waters flow from north-west to south-east. The navigation of the frith is not so dangerous as is generally supposed. There are three islands, viz. Stroma, Swona, and the Pentland Skerries, and these contribute to lessen the danger, as the tide, impetuously rushing against the islands, rebounds, and thus produces eddies, and causes the stream to run in different directions at the same time. The pilots, being well acquainted with this circumstance, are thus enabled to guide their charge in safety. In fact, the very danger to be apprehended in so formidable a sea, constitutes its safety, as the seamen, aware of the hazard they would run if overtaken by improper tides, study their time so well that accidents rarely happen. As an instance of this, it may be mentioned, that, although the post-boat has crossed between Huna and South Ronaldshaw three times a week, and now daily, I believe that only one boat has been lost during a century. Were it not that the pilots are excellent judges of the weather, and attend to the circumstance which we have stated, the accidents would be numerous, as the sea is frequently so tremendous, especially when the wind blows against the tide, that no boat can live.

The parish is plentifully supplied with water, which is obtained from springs, and from the quantity of rain water which descends in streamlets from the rising grounds. There are two small lakes beautifully situated among the hills.

*Climate.*—The cold in winter and the heat in summer are more moderate here than at three degrees further south. The frost does not continue long, and the snow remains but a short time on the ground. This equability of climate may be accounted for by the proximity to the sea. The easterly wind is the coldest, the south and west winds, particularly the latter, the most boisterous, and the north wind generally brings dry weather. To the state of the atmosphere, so purified by strong winds, may in some degree be attributed the absence of epidemic diseases, which seldom prevail to any extent, the good health generally enjoyed, and also the longevity of the inhabitants.

*Geology.*—Allusion has already been made to the magnificent

rock-scenery with which this parish abounds. Some of the precipices on the west side are of sandstone, intersected by amygdaloid, and these again are in one place intersected by a white dike almost straight and perpendicular. Sandstone succeeds, with argillaceous schist, together with strata containing lime. Round the west and part of the north banks of the Longhope, the shore is composed of the schist and sandstone; when, after two or three miles, the former recommences, and is supposed to extend almost to the north-east extremity of the parish. Lime is to be found; but it is not thought that its manufacture would be profitable; and there are distinct traces of iron and lead. The article of most value to the inhabitants is the inexhaustible store of excellent peat fuel on the north side of the Longhope, which all are allowed to cut and convey to their homes without cost, excepting their labour, and the expense of carriage.

*Zoology.*—There are no animals of prey in this parish, nor are there any poisonous reptiles. There is a considerable number of sheep reared on the island. They are allowed to roam at large over the hill pasture, and each proprietor has a particular mark by which his property is known. The black-cattle are also numerous. They are generally of a small size,—both they and the sheep being of the Highland breed. The horses are numerous; and, though larger than those of Shetland, they are smaller than those of the south.

*Ornithology.*—There is a very great variety in the feathered tribe. The domestic fowls are the same as on the mainland of Scotland. Grouse are abundant; and the birds of song are somewhat similar to those further south. Hawks are common; and a beautiful species of falcon is found, bold and fierce in the extreme, and of a large size. There are several kinds of eagles, which frequent the lofty rocks towards the west. These commit great depredations upon the grouse, which would be much more numerous but for such formidable enemies. It is alleged that the number of the eagles has never been known to increase or diminish.

The sea-fowl are very numerous. The ember-goose is often found in winter, and the shear-water abounds, to which might be added a numerous list of others, which derive their subsistence principally from the sea. When the winter is severe, white swans are occasional visitors.

*Ichthyology.*—In nothing does the kindness of Divine Providence towards the inhabitants appear more than in the great sup-

ply of the finest fish with which the waters around the parish abound. The cod-fish taken in the Pentland Frith are not surpassed by any found elsewhere in Britain, and are so much prized, that a number of Well-smacks are sometimes here fishing for the London market. Lobsters are also taken and sent to the same mart. Cockles and spout-fish are abundant.

The herring-fishery is carried on to a considerable extent. The fish are not cured on the island; but the fishermen, at the proper season, proceed to the different stations, where they are always sure to find purchasers. This fishery now promises to be more lucrative, as some time ago the fish came almost to the edge of the shore at the east point.

The cuthes or sillocks are abundant at all seasons, and afford excellent food, besides yielding oil from the livers; and thus may the people generally procure a plentiful supply of what furnishes both food and light.

*Botany.*—There are no large trees in the parish, though, among the hills, shrubs and plants abound, which afford much scope for the researches of the botanist. In others of the Orkney Islands, there are found the remains of large trees, which would lead to the conclusion, that, if proper care were taken in selecting those trees best fitted for the soil, and planting them in sufficient numbers, the Orkney scenery would, ere long, be greatly improved.

The garden fruits are various, viz. apples, pears, and plums, also gooseberries, currants, and strawberries.

## II.—CIVIL HISTORY.

Considering the warlike transactions which took place in Orkney during many centuries, when these islands were governed by earls, and subject to the kings of Denmark, we are surprised to find in this island so few remains of fortification, especially when we consider its proximity to Caithness, and the continued hostilities which were maintained between the inhabitants of that part of Scotland and the Orcadians. There are, however, remains of several ancient buildings. Near Snelsetter House, formerly called the House of Walls, is a very large rock, separated from those on the land which bound the Pentland Frith, there are several traces of ancient fortifications. There are also the remains of what appear to have been chapels. One of these is curiously situated on a peninsular rock. There are a few tumuli; but I am not aware that any of them have been explored.

*Mansion-Houses.*—The House of Snelsetter, before-mentioned,

was, for several centuries, the seat of the family of Moodie, and bears the marks of strength and antiquity. The mansion-house of Melsetter, formerly occupied by the late Major Moodie, the last proprietor of the name, and now by his son-in-law, Robert Heddle, Esq. of Melsetter, is beautifully situated at the farther extremity of Longhope Bay, and commands a view of the entrances of the Pentland Frith, the coast of Caithness, and the high lands of the west coast of Sutherland.

*Land-owners.*—The whole parish of Walls, with a small exception, belongs to the Crown and Mr Heddle,—the latter being the proprietor of fully two-thirds of the property.

*Parochial Registers.*—Unfortunately, there are few records in the parish, and these do not extend to a remote date. It appears that there have been five incumbents of Walls and Flotta, besides the present minister, since 1688. The dates of the two first inductions previous to 1707 are not given; their names, however, are mentioned,—Mr Dalgarnock and Mr Andrew Kerr. Mr John Keith was inducted in April 1707, Mr Edward Irving in August 1747, Mr James Bremner in March 1772, and the present minister in July 1837.

### III.—POPULATION.

	South Walls.	North Walls.	Total.	Flotta and Pharay.	Total.
In 1788,	451	283	684	296	920
1794,	449	302	751	240	991
1831,	.	.	1067.	There appears to have been no other census.	
1838,	683	443	1126	400	1526
1841,	714	438	1152	448	1600

Increase since 1788, being 53 years, 680.

The births registered during seven years are,

	In Walls,	221
	Flotta,	68
		— 289
Marriages registered in Walls, are		56
	Flotta,	15
		— 71
Deaths registered in Walls,		86
	Flotta,	33
		— 121

I have not been able to ascertain with satisfaction to myself the number of deaths, nor do I know whether those in Pharay are included, nor if all those who have died or been lost at sea are registered.

With few exceptions, the employments of the people consist of farming and fishing, the same individuals generally pursuing both occupations. Straw-plaiting is also carried on to a considerable extent by the women.

The farms are almost all small, and the farmers tenants at will. The people are shrewd and intelligent, but strangers cannot fail to remark a want of in-door comforts, which might be attained by better habits of domestic economy.

#### IV.—INDUSTRY.

*Agriculture.*—It is impossible to state, with any degree of correctness, the number of acres contained in the parish of Walls. Almost none of the farms are let by the acre, but are taken at so much for the whole steading and ground. There may be about 700 acres of arable and 1000 of pasture, besides a great extent of undivided common. How much of this land might be redeemed from waste, we cannot say; but that it is practicable, may be inferred from what has been already accomplished by the spirited exertion of Mr Heddle, who is carrying on improvements on a large scale and at great expense, in the immediate vicinity of his farm of Melsetter.

*Wages.*—The value of labour may be stated as 1s. 6d. per diem in summer, and 1s. in winter, without food.

The grain produced in this parish is bear and oats. In quality it is equal to any, and superior to most, in Orkney. We cannot state the quantity raised, as the small farmers generally consume the most of what they grow, and no account is kept of it. The crop of potatoes is sufficient for the consumpt of the inhabitants.

There is no village, properly so called, in this parish, although the different farms go by the name of towns, and may consist of two or three steadings at a little distance from each other.

The post is conveyed by a boat, which crosses from St Margaret's Hope, in South Ronaldshay, once a week. This conveyance was established, some years ago, for the convenience of the numerous shipping resorting to the well-known harbour of Longhope.

#### V.—PAROCHIAL ECONOMY.

*Ecclesiastical State.*—The church of Walls is a neat and comfortable building, erected in 1832, and capable of containing upwards of 500 people. The church of Flofta is a much older building, and tolerably comfortable, but too small for the population, containing only about 180. The people of both parishes attend the church well.

There is an excellent manse. It is situated in the south of Walls, about a quarter of a mile from the church.

The stipend is paid partly in grain, butter, and oil, which is

commuted into money at the fair prices, and partly in money by the heritors of Walls. Flotta is held *cum decimis inclusis*. The deficiency is made up by the Exchequer to L.158, 6s. 8d.

The glebe consists of 8 acres of arable, besides pasture land, and is furnished with a complete steading for a farm of that size.

*Education.*—There are two parochial schoolmasters, in Walls, who are entitled to the legal salary due to schoolmasters in a parish divided by an arm of the sea. There is also a subscription-school, supported by the inhabitants in a district of the parish remote from any of the other schools; but the advantages enjoyed by the people, notwithstanding the number of schools, are limited, owing to the distances at which they are situated, and their being often separated by morasses or water. Notwithstanding these difficulties, there are few to be met with who cannot both read and write.

Flotta being more compact is more advantageously situated. The teacher in this parish is supported by the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge. The school fees in both parishes are moderate. Pharay has no school.

#### PARISH OF FLOTTA

Is bounded on the north and east, by Scalpa Flow; on the west, by Longhope; and on the south, by the Pentland Frith. It is similar, in situation and climate, to Walls. The land, however, is much more level. The soil is considered good. It is between two and three miles long, and in some places nearly two broad. The rocks are chiefly composed of sandstone, but are not so precipitous as those in Walls. There is an excellent harbour, called the Panhope, from a salt-pan which was at one time worked at this place.

It is said, that there was formerly a long house or church on the island, where the surrounding clergy were wont to assemble.

What has been said of Walls, in regard to the variety and plentiful supply of fish to be procured at all seasons, and the abundance of peat fuel, applies to Flotta. This island is particularly well situated for fishing; and the inhabitants, who are very enterprising, have excellent boats, and yield to no seamen in managing them. They are industrious, and when not detained at home by their farming operations, they are engaged in fishing, which is to them a more pleasing and profitable employment. The herring-fishery has of late years been vigorously prosecuted by the people of Flotta, as well as the fishing of cod, of which they cure

a considerable quantity. On the success of their fishing, both here and in Walls, the people depend in a great measure for their ability to discharge their engagements for the year.

The number of inhabitants by a census in 1838 was 851. In 1841, there were 493 persons; forming 81 families. The Earl of Zetland is the sole proprietor of this parish.

Pharay is an island to the north of Flotta, about two miles long, and nearly one broad; regarding it there are no peculiarities to be noticed. The population in 1838 was 49. In 1841, there were 55 persons, forming ten families. The island is the property of Robert Heddle, Esq. of Melsetter. These are the inhabited islands, besides which there are three which belong to the parish, and which are uninhabited, but afford pasture for cattle and sheep; these are Rysay Little, to the north of Pharay, and Switha, to the south, and Flotta Calf, to the east of Flotta. The first of these also belongs to Mr Heddle, the other two are the property of the Earl of Zetland.

#### MISCELLANEOUS OBSERVATIONS.

There was formerly Divine service in Walls two successive Sabbaths, and in Flotta every third Sabbath. It is almost unnecessary to remark that in a double parish, where there is a distance of nearly five miles between the two churches, and that space intersected by rapid tides, and the passage often dangerous, this order of things must be frequently broken in upon; and no minister but one who has been actually so circumstanced, can imagine the distressing state of affairs caused by this arrangement, by which, of necessity, one church is left vacant every Sabbath; besides, the minister cannot possibly maintain pastoral superintendence over a people removed at such a distance, and that by water. So convinced was the present incumbent of this, that, after his induction four years ago, his first attention was directed to remedy an evil which had been the cause of much demoralization in these parishes. After considerable exertion, he succeeded in obtaining an ordained missionary, under the auspices of the venerable Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge, who, along with the Right Honourable the Earl of Zetland and ourselves, contribute to his support.

An invaluable blessing is thus conferred, not only upon the people of Flotta and Pharay, but upon the 1150 inhabitants of Walls, who now enjoy Divine service every Sabbath. All the ordinances of religion are now regularly maintained in Flotta; and we have

had much gratification in witnessing the Lord's Supper dispensed on two successive summers in a place where it was never before known to be within the memory of man.

Mr Macintosh, who is ordained as the minister, has done much for the religious instruction of the young, and promoting a desire for reading amongst the people. The happy termination of these efforts calls for much gratitude, as the effects are already visible in inducing a much more regular attendance upon ordinances in both the parishes than when Divine service was so much interrupted as under the former system. There are five licensed public-houses in Walls, principally intended for the use of the shipping which frequent the Longhope ; but I am happy to say, that the sin of drunkenness, as well as of swearing, is now greatly reduced, and we have good reasons for hoping, that there are indications of a very considerable improvement not only in morals, but in religious feeling.

*July 1841.*