It is not surprising that Scotland has more sheep than people - 5,949,959 to be precise, at the last count. The Highlands offer grazing to about one third - 1,889,110 - which makes the sheep population outnumber humans by about 5:1. Here, in one of the most comprehensive articles on the subject, Malcolm Bangor-Jones traces the history of sheep farming in Sutherland.

The Coming of The Great Sheep

by Malcolm Bangor-Jones

No one can doubt that the introduction of commercial sheep farming brought momentous changes to Sutherland. But for all the interest in the Clearances it is surprising how much remains to be discovered. This is even true of areas such as Strathnaver where some of the most notorious clearances were carried out.

It will be some time before everything has been learned about this period of Sutherland's history. The following account, which presents some new information along with more familiar material, is therefore no more than a temporary one, to be improved upon as further evidence becomes available.



Top Tup from MacRae, Rheanbreck

This NCC tup lamb after a Forrest Farm tup took the sheep championship for Donny MacRae, 62 Rheanbreck, at last year's Lairg Crofters Show. Holding the champion is his father-in-law, Mr John Davidson.



The Early Beginnings

Sheep Farming on the Sutherland Estate

The Year of the Sheep

Elsewhere in Sutherland the introduction of sheep farming continued. The Mains farm on the Strathy-estate of George Honeyman, Lord Armadale, was advertised in 1788 for letting as a "sheep and grazing farm" and although it does not appear to have been occupied solely as a sheep farm the neighbouring farm of Armadale soon was. First advertised in 1790, Armadale was let in 1794 on a 19-year lease to Andrew Korr who stocked the farm with Cheviots, possibly the first in Sutherland. In 1797 the farm was taken over by the Reids from Northumberland. Gabriel Reid later married a daughter of Mackey of Bighouse and became one of the leading sheep farmers of the north. A number of families cleared from the interior of the sheep farm were resettled on the coast at Armadale and Portskerra.

A smell sheep, farm was belonged to the Murros of established by George Dernater. Powraticht was adversated from

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ween 1819 and 1821.

doise schemes while Sellar was and taking over Achmore sheep clearly an unsuitable person to farm in 1831. represent the estate in its. Two new sheep farms were doing of James Loch, commis-

which Loch intended the Borgiebeg bought from Lord clearances to be carried out. For Reay. this reason it was not until 1819 the estate was begun.

in the heights of Assynt formerly held by the bankrupt John Mackenzie, tenant

Inverkirkaig prior to 1812. the estate management decided, worth £10,000 to allow him to take over their farms. The same year he also entered possession of the eastern half of Unapool as subtenant to Isaac Jopling who by then had ceased all attempts

to quarry Assynt marble. In 1819 Clarke took over halves of Kirktown, formerly occupied by the minister and 29 sheep farm on the Reay estate. subtenants and, according to the allowed to remain as subtenants. Clunes' farm. In the meantime the farm of cant through the bankruptcy of Sutherland in 1819

Stronechrubie sheep farm.

Strathnaver were in 1814 let to far the pocrest and most Captain Kenneth Mackey, miserable in the parish" but tacksman of Torboll, However, which he reckoned would make this farm, later known as an "excellent wintering". After Mudale, was only cleared bet being cleared in 1821 Loch Boannach was taken by the Young and Sellar's manage- factor, George Gunn, who proment was not a great success, ceeded to expand his sheep far-Young failed to attend to the ming operations, becoming te-detailed execution of his gran nant of Little Assynt in 1829

dealings with the people. Their created in Strathnaver in 1819 replacement was largely the - Skelpick on the east side of the Naver and let to John Patersioner to the Sutherland family son who had made an unsucsince 1812 and one of the cessful bid for Rhillolsk in 1813. foremost estate managers of his and Langdale on the opposite bank and let to Patrick Sellar. Although Loch may be said to Langdale included not only the have inherited the policies of old farm at Langdale, formerly in Young and Sellar and Indeed the possession of Robert Gordon their predeccessors, he was, who had gone bankrupt in 1817, nevertheless, convinced of the but also all the other townships necessity for further clearances, from Grummore in the south to The difference between Loch Apigill near the mouth of the and the others lay in the careful Naver, with the addition, in planning and orderly manner in 1820, of some lands adjacent to

The resettlement arrangethat the final reorganisation of ments for the 250 families cleared in 1819 - 1822 The local background to the necessitated that Strathy Point, changes in Assynt consisted of a part of Armadala farm which the fact that Charles Clarke, the was in the hands of William sheep farmer at Glendhu on the Innes of Sandside, be repos-Reay estate, had in 1818 taken sessed. Innes agreed to relinover the large sheep farm of quish these lands in return for Achmore after the previous te. which the sheep farm of Arnant, James Scoble, had gone madale was considerably exbankrupt in 1817 and also the tended by the clearances of small adjoining farm of Little some 30 families from the inland Assynt and the farm of Cromalt townships of Dail teine. Achrugan, Bowside, Dallangwell

The further reorganisation of Kildonan included the extension Clarke had been security for of the existing sheep farms and both Scobie and Mackenzie and the creation of an entirely new one. In 1819 the lands between on account of his "active exer- the Rivers Helmsdale and Frith tions" and possession of stock were added to Reid's farm of Kilcalmkill. The same year the sheep farm of Knockfin, situated between the existing farms of Suisgill and Rhiloisk and bounded on the south by the River Helmsdale, was established for Thomas Houston, formerly tenant of Lothbeg, and the new Cullin and Camore, the two possessor of the arable farm of Kintradwell as well as Ribigill

and Brarathy.

A total of 128 families were factor, yielding the "finest cleared from townships in pasture imaginable". The follow- Kildonan in 1819. The following ing year a further 29 families year 50 more families were were cleared when Clarke cleared from the townships entered into full possession of around Kildonan itself when Unapool, although some were those lands were added to

There were two other sheep Inchnadamph had become va- farms established in eastern the tenant, George Mackenzie of Sciberscross, let to John Hall Leckmelm, and, apart from a from Roxburghshire, and the small possession set aside for smaller farm of Morvich, let to the inn, was added to Patrick Sellar. The clearance of Morvich which included 28 The past farms to be affected families from Wester Aberscross were Loch Beannach, Brackloch and 23 from Easter Aberscross, and Bad a Ghrianan - a district was carried out in 1819 while described by the factor as "by the clearances in Clyne extended

over three years with 42 families removed in 1819, 95 in 1820 and 34 in 1821

Although the use of fire to destroy the house timbers was found to be a necessary step to prevent the people reoccupying their homes, it was an action which attracted a good deal of bad publicity for the estate management and the Sutherland family received a number of anonymous letters. One such letter referred to the Countess as a 'damned old cat'' who deserved "to be worried and burnt, for burning out the poor

Despite the activities of the Sutherland and Transatlantic Friendly Association and the presence of disturbances on relatively peacefully. However, 1821 the people of Ascollemore in Strathbrora put

Highlanders'

The intent look on the faces of buyers around the sales ring at Lairg. when 32,500 lambs went through in one day. Sellers had plenty to smile about later, when good prices

Sheep Farming on the Reay Estate

After the death in 1797 of the mentally incapable Hugh, Lord Reav, his successor, Lord Eric, made agreements with his tenants terminating the existing leases. George Brown, a well known land surveyor offered the choice of any farm to take in additional lands, either from Elgin, inspected the estate and in July 1799 'extensive grazings and farms" which "would maintain an immerse number of sheep as well as black cattle, and must the attention of those who wish to rear and deal extensively", were advertised to be let the following year.

the estate, the fast that some of neighbouring estates, the clear- the local tacksmen were absent ances of 1820 passed off on military service, and also the the local tacksmen were absent sion, it was claimed that "a refusal of the possessors of farmers of capital and spirit, Balnakeil to relinguish the farm either in the agricultural or without being ordered to do so grazing line, of being amply acup a considerable resistance and by the Court of Sission made it it required the assistance of necessary for the new troops before their removal was arrangements to be postponed until the next year

Reay Forest which, it was con-

However, the bad winter of afford to each the proper propor-1799-1800, which prevented tion of upland summer pasture, "several enquirers" from visiting and of safe lowland wintering, along the sea shore." In conclumore favourable opportunity for commodated, has not occurred for some time.

Lord Reay, whose usual residence was in London, came only other "strangers" were the In July 1800 it was advertised north to spend the summer Orrs, tenants of Mussel, Merkan that many "celebrated" farms months at Tongue and receive and Brigisgil, and in 1803 they on the Reav estate as well as the offers. A number of egreements gave up these lands in favour of with tenants were made in sidered, could itself pasture August 1800 for entry the Cameron from Ross-shire. 20,000 "of the larger of Cheviot following year but progress was breed of sheep", were to be set not as good as had been anas sheep farms. As the whole ticipated and in 1801 Lord Reay estate was out of lease Lord asked John Dunlop of Moreham. Reay intended that the farms in Ayreshire, to take charge of

introducing a new and more Between 1805 and 1809 the oproving system of manage- arrangements were extensively

As an inducement Dunlop was agreements were renegotiated on the estate at a moderate rent whole townships or merely hill and in consequence accepted a grazings, and also to place much 57-year lease of Belnakeil, higher rents in the sheep farms, formerly possessed by Donald For instance, in 1808 Charles Forbes as successor to his late Clarke was given possession of father-in-law, Roderick Macleod, Mavidy and Kylestrome in addiand the lands of Parph which had tion to his lands of Glencoul and bean possessed by the late Col- Glendhu. His lease was still to however, lasted only a year.

Charles Clarke, Eriboll by Donald from £2978 to £4426. Mackay, Keoldale by John Clarke, Ribigill by Donald Forbes and Skerray by Captain John Mackay. Apart from Dunlop, the Donald Forbes and Alexander

The financial benefit to Lord Reay may be judged from the fact that the estate rental, which had already crept up from £1321 in 1797 to £1903 in 1800.

onel Mackay of Bighouse, terminate in 1815 but the rent Dunlop's period of management, was increased from £140 to £380 for 1808-1811 and to Most of the sheep farms were £480 for the remaining years, a number of sheep farmers, intaken by former tacksmen on the Largely as a result of this proestate - Audinriny by William cess between 1804 and 1809 Munro of Achany, Glencoul by the rental of the Reay estate rose Inevitably, both the establishment and extension of the Reay sheep farms were accompanied by clearances, although many families were allowed to remain for some years as subtenants, albeit with reduced grazing rights. Lord Reay's interest in the kelp industry demanded that

most of those who were cleared chant at Rispond who held a were resettled in the crowded number of farms on a lease coastal townships, for instance around Scourie and on the northern shore of Loch Inchard. The leases of all the sheep farms excepting Balnakeil and

with the prices of meat and wool at an all-time high, it was a Clarke obtained another 19-year lease of Glandhu but at a yearly rent of £1400 for the first five years and £1600 thereafter. Elsewhere there were some changes - Donald Forbes formerly at Ribigill became tenant of Moiness, John Clarke moved from Keoldale to Erribol, mostly comprised several Mackay Scobie formerly at anciently cleared townships, Melness was given possession such as Clashmore, Claisfeam, of Keoldale, while Ribigill was Trantlemore and Trantlebog, but taken by Thomas Houston, was extended by the clearance tenant of farms on the of eight tenants from the island Sutherland estate. In 1820 of Handa in 1848 along with Dugald Gilchrist became tenant some of the townships from the of the grazings of Ben Hee.

Lord Resy took a direct interest in sheep farming when he went into partnership with William Munro of Achany in the farms of Badnabay and Aultinniny (a substantial part of

these farms formed what became known as Scourie sheep farm), Ralph Reid, who had been in the employ of Atkinson and Marshall, was appointed manager: one of his first priorities being to replace the mixture of Blackface and Cheviot with a wholly Cheviot

stocking. The agricultural depression which followed the end of the Napoleonic War was particularly severe in its effects on the Reay estate. In spite of rent reductions cluding William Munro of Achany, Charles Clarke and Donald Forbes, went bankrupt. Lord Reay had relinquished his share of Scourie sheep farm in 1818 but was forced to take the farm back into his own hands in 1824. The extension of sheap farm-

ing, however, continued after the Reay Country was bought by the Sutherland family in 1829. James Anderson, the fish mergranted in 1818, decided to turn his attention to sheep farming. Between 1839 and 1841 he cleared 32 families from various farms but when he attempted to Skerray fell out in 1815 and, evict a further 31 families he was met with strong resistance. The military were called in with golden opportunity to increase the result that the people were sheep rents still higher. Charles given a respite until 1842. The whole episode was highly embersasing to the Duke of Sutherland.

The other major change centred on Scourie sheep farm which had come into the possession of Evander MacIver, factor for the Scourie district. The farm neighbouring mainland.

Conclusion

The history of the introduction of sheep farming in Sutherland is much more than the story of the Sutherland Clearances. As may be gathered, the establishment of sheep farming was both earlier and more extensive than is often assumed.

The landlords were involved from the start, either taking a direct interest by running sheep farms on their own account or by reorganising their estates and letting farms to substantial tenants. But it is also necessary to emphasise the contribution of the local tacksmen in introducing sheep flocks onto their existing holdings. Moreover, it is evident that tacksmen provided a significant proportion of the tenants under the new arrangements. Both landlords and tacksmen though, were motivated by the financial possibilities of

sheep farming. There is no doubt that the introduction of sheep, whether by tacksmen or landlords, was accompanied by the clearance of the small tenantry. The manner in which these clearances were carried out has not been examined in detail here, but the history of riot and resistance suggests that the people did not readily accept the changes to their way of life which were occasioned by the coming

