

FAMINE AND VICTUALS ON THE GRAEMESHALL ESTATE

Sheena Wenham

In Orkney the primitive practices of subsistence farming remained inflexible nearly everywhere until the nineteenth century. Bere, a primitive form of barley with a seed yield of approximately 1:4, was planted alternately with oats, which had a seed yield of about 1:3. Rent was paid in kind, principally in grain, for it was upon the production and export of grain that the economy of the islands depended. In good years there was a considerable surplus of grain, and Orkney, with its equable climate and varied resources of land, sea and shore, provided an attractive environment for pre-modern man. In bad years it might be possible to survive one crop failure, but when the harvest failed over several consecutive years, disaster threatened. Acute shortage of food supplies, rising prices and ultimately the consumption of essential seed grain led to famine conditions and an escalating death rate, if no relief was available.

The islands of Orkney appear to have been visited by famine and/or pestilence about twice each century. As far back as 1492 the lingering effects of the Black Death can be identified by the large areas of Orcadian farmland which still lay ley and uncultivated at that time (Thomson 1996: xiv). During the 1620-40s the whole of Britain was in the grip of ferocious weather conditions (Lamb 1982: 209) and there was also the threat of plague. Severe frosts, snowfalls and floods swept the land, the River Thames froze over and frost fairs were held on the ice (Stratton 1969: 47-48). In a peripheral area like Orkney, the consequences of deteriorating climate were severe.

Orkney's Country Acts speak bleakly of many lands 'laid lay and weast by the frequent death of the labourers of the ground, thro' the great scarcity, famine, and death of the land' (Barry 1805: 470). People grew desperate: some tried to subsist on seaweed; some ate their dogs; others, destitute and suicidal, threw themselves into the sea. Many died in the open fields, the minister and his servant going about among them, burying them where they lay (*RPC*, 2nd ser v: 284). A charitable fund was set up at Holyrood, because this was a disaster on a national scale. The price of imported Baltic grain ran high and the Privy Council could do little more than initiate measures to restrict vagrancy and to compel parishes to care for their destitute poor (Smout 1976: 23). It was later estimated that some three to four thousand Orcadians perished as a result of famine in the 1620s to 1640s (*OSA Cross & Burness*: 286).

Brand's Years

Towards the end of the 17th century there were again atrocious weather conditions and another period of dearth. Known nationally as 'King William's Ill

Years', this grim period in the 1690s was known in Orkney as 'Brand's Years' after the tacksman of that name who, despite severe shortages, continued to export grain from Orkney. Others too were keen to acquire Orkney's scarce resources and there was the constant threat of raids on the islands' farms and storehouses by French privateers. Orkney clergy found it impossible to collect their vicarage teinds or tithes in customary kind. One of them, Alexander Pitcairn, was convinced that his South Ronaldsay parishioners had been visited by famine as divine retribution for their failure to support the Jacobite cause. He had their personal possessions seized in lieu of payment, carrying off anything from a workman's spade to blankets from a bed (Thomson 1988: 72).

Many of the population survived the period on sillocks or young saithe 'almost as their only food' (Brand 1883: 31). Living conditions remained wretched for some years:

'A universal sterility prevailed . . . and the lands were laid waste for want of strength both of man and beast'. Again much land went out of cultivation, and the skeletons of long-abandoned rigs from that period could still be distinguished a century later (*OSA Birsay & Harray*: 153).

The Government took steps to address the problem of food shortages nationally, allowing the import of victual duty free, paying bounties to encourage the meal trade, and imposing searches of private warehouses for hoards of corn (Devine 1996: 120). Despite these measures and the importation of several thousand score bolls of meal to Scotland (Smout 1976: 23/4), it has been estimated that as many as one in seven of Scotland's population died of want during these years (Houston 1988: 15). Orkney on this occasion, however, measured the mortality of its population in hundreds rather than in the thousands of the former era¹ (*OSA Birsay & Harray*: 153).

The Years of the Short Corn

The 17th century had been a cold epoch and, in general, the 18th century was more benign (Lamb 1966: 24-25). However, between 1739 and 1741, a series of long cold winters followed by short cool summers brought the worst harvests for forty years. The consequences of this famine, though, were less severe than during the 17th century and there were several reasons for this: the famine period was less prolonged; measures were taken by Government to curtail the exportation of grain (D38/2552/6); some Scottish burgh councils and landowners bought up grain to sell at less than market price; kirk sessions and proprietors were beginning to realise they too had social obligations (Smout 1976: 24-26).

-
1. The introduction of the cabbage to Orkney in the 17th century, attributed to a body of Cromwell's soldiers (Miller 1976: 94), would have provided an additional source of nutrition.

On this occasion no one in Orkney attributed the cause of famine to divine retribution. This time many put the blame on the clouds of acrid smoke that billowed from the kelp fires which had burnt tang around the Orkney shores since 1721, when kelp was first manufactured in the islands. Rather than see this new industry to their economic advantage, tenants perceived it as the cause of all ills. As hardship increased, so panic and alarm spread among the local population and, in a series of incidents, kelp tools were destroyed. Protests escalated into riots, the most notable being on the island of Stronsay. Peter Fea of Dunatoun, a leading protester insisted the burning of tang had caused not only the failure of crops, but also disease and death of cattle. The shores had become sterile and, with the seaware gone, fish had been driven from the shores, and limpets, 'being sometimes the food of the poor,' from the rocks (Thomson 1983: 76). Others claimed the kelp smoke had made their womenfolk barren (*OSA Kirkwall & St Ola*: 37).

Evidence of organised relief in Orkney during 'the years of the short corn' is sparse, and it seems likely that hunger and helplessness drove the protesters on. This period of dearth, though, was not so prolonged as those of the previous century, with deaths in Orkney probably numbering less than one hundred.

By the late 1770s the Scottish economy was expanding and in Orkney the kelp trade flourished with prices kept artificially high during the French and American wars, most of the profits going to maintain the extravagant lifestyle of Orkney's merchant lairds. There was also the linen industry, introduced to Orkney in 1747, with intermittent success. Neither industry required heavy investment or infrastructure. Despite these new resources, emigration caused a drain of young men from the county. Many signed on in service of the Hudson Bay Company; others enlisted or were impressed into military service, particularly in times of war. Whaling and fisheries offered seasonal work, while agriculture remained nearly everywhere at subsistence level, primitive and unimproved.

Famine conditions on the Graemeshall estate

In 1778 and 1782/3 Orkney experienced disastrous harvests, and these crisis years were surrounded by a general run of poor or failed crops. The survival of the Graemeshall papers enables us to make a close examination of how one particular Orkney parish coped with famine conditions in the period between 1778 and 1785. The Graemeshall estate lay in the East Mainland of Orkney, feued by Bishop Graeme to his relatives in 1626. Unlike most Orcadian estates, the property was consolidated in area, occupying nearly all the fertile parish of Holm and Paplay, including the island of Lambholm. By 1782 the estate dominated the parish, owning 94 of the 108

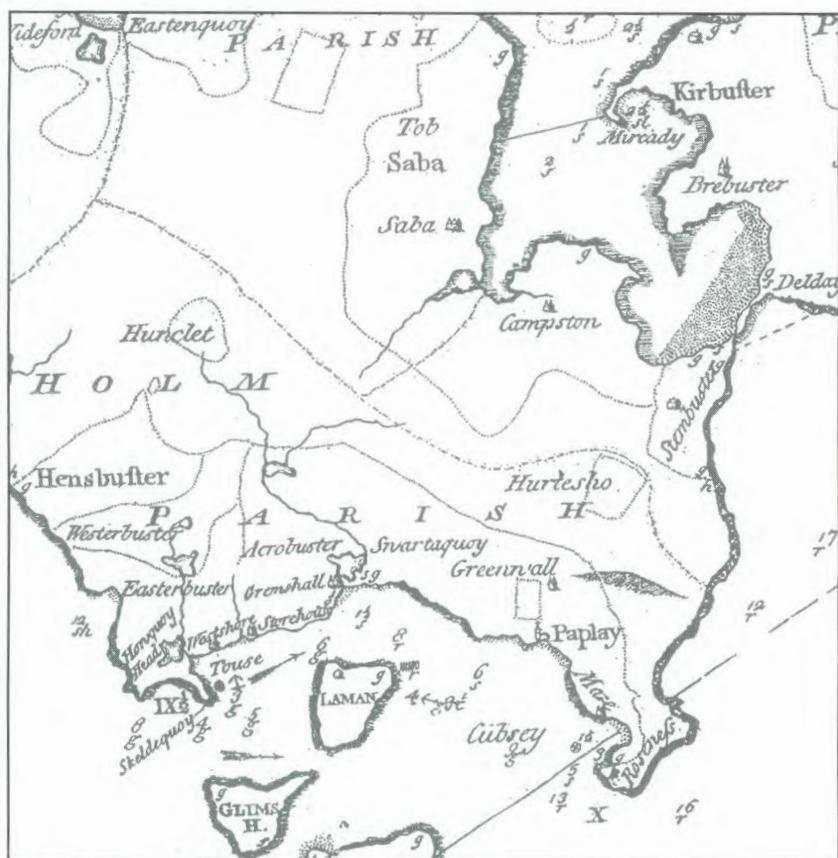


Fig. 1. The parish of Holm and Paplay, 1750, from the Charts of Murdoch Mackenzie.

pennylands.² Crown lands accounted for nine-and-a-half pennylands, with seven heritors owning the remainder (D5/34/1781). Farms varied in size.

Sea charts, drawn up by Murdoch Mackenzie in 1750, identify the six parish townships (Fig. 1). The great turf rampart of the hill dyke can also be seen, snaking its way across the landscape, dividing arable land from rough hill pasture, and separating livestock from the growing crops. Substantial buildings are featured, including the Storehouse, built in 1649. During the 1690s famine of 'Brand's Years', this building had been ransacked by French privateers

2. Township land was measured in pennyland shares. The size of a pennyland varied from place to place. In the township of Hensbister one pennyland was equal to 12½ acres of arable land, plus 12½ acres of outfield.

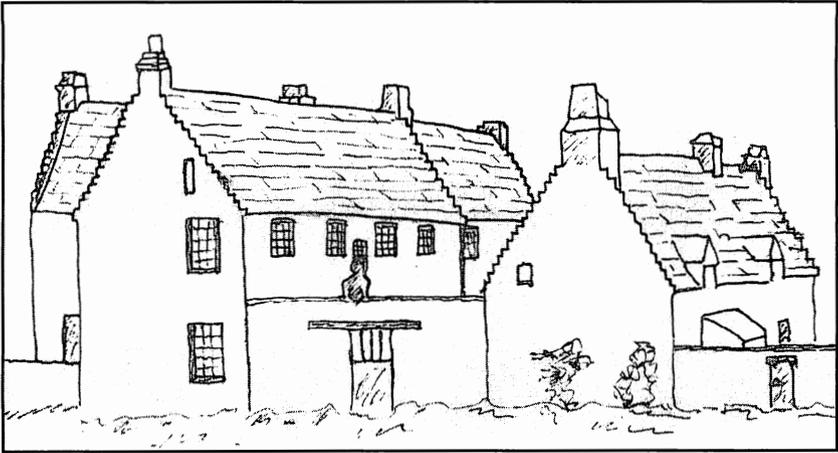


Fig. 2. Sketch of Graemeshall before nineteenth-century reconstruction.

who came ashore under cover of darkness, broke down the door with axes and made away with the grain, meal and butter stored inside (D5/1/10/1). It was to these premises that rent in kind was paid.

The laird at this time was Patrick Graeme of Graemeshall, Sheriff Depute of Orkney. Traditional runrig farming methods were still practised on the estate, although some farmland had been planked to create more consolidated blocks of land for each farm. The potato had been introduced in 1765 following failure of the corn crop that year³ (*OSA Holm & Paplay*: 21). During the kelp-making season each stretch of Holm shoreline was set at an agreed price to a particular tenant. It was his/her responsibility to hire a gang of workers, and to pay them in the cash, grain and meal the estate supplied. The 35-50 tons made each year probably employed a similar number of people, since it was estimated that one person could make one ton of kelp per year (D5/11/5).

Linen-making also flourished in the parish, while in recession elsewhere in Orkney. This was because the Board of Trustees in Edinburgh each year sent lintseed, spinning wheels and reels to be distributed gratis on the estate (Wenham 1994: 20-37). Tenants could trade their linen cloth with the estate for rent, but they also sold it on the domestic market, to dealers in Orkney for the Lammass fair, or they took it to Shetland where it was bartered or sold for cash.

The annual Graemeshall estate rental was in the region of £300, but a certain level of arrears was tolerated, as was the case on other 18th century estates in Orkney. There were 106 tenants, the population of the parish being somewhere

3. By the 1780s potatoes were being cultivated in most Orkney parishes.

in the region of 700. Some attempt had been made to move the estate towards a cash economy; six farms and ten quoy/crofts had had their rent in kind converted to an equivalent payment in cash only. Of the 24 cottars, 19 paid their rent in cash only, plus services varying in extent from three days in the week to two days in the year (D5/33, 34).

| | |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| Farms of more than 2 pennylands | 14 |
| Farms of 1-2 pennylands | 31 |
| Farms of less than 1 pennyland | 16 |
| Quoy ⁴ /Crofts | 21 |
| Cottars ⁵ | 24 |
| Total | 106 |

Fig. 3. Table of properties on the Graemeshall estate.

For the cottar population of Orkney, diet was poor at the best of times. On the island of Sanday a piece of bere bannock was commonly eaten on rising, although a substitute bread, made of wild mustard seed, was occasional fare; a few hours later a breakfast of porridge with milk was taken, if the cow was in milk; for dinner, fish or shellfish, sometimes with nettle broth, was prepared and supper generally consisted of cabbage boiled in the fish water. Nothing was wasted. Next morning the oatmeal for breakfast porridge was mixed, somewhat unappetisingly, with the previous night's food scrapings and washing up water. Meat was saved for high days and holidays (Traill Dennison 1883: 54-55). Such frugality left small room for economy when famine threatened.

In 1778 a sudden, devastating local storm caused great distress throughout the islands. On the frontispiece of the Graemeshall estate crop book is written:

The crop for this year having been almost entirely blasted and destroyed by a dreadful gale of wind which happened on Friday 14th August (D5/34/1778).

-
4. Quoy⁴s generally originated in peripheral areas of a township, being smallholdings created out of areas where the cattle were 'quoyed' or enclosed at nights. Such quoy⁴s were not valued in pennylands, and had no share of the township's arable land.
 5. On most estates cottars were sub-tenants. On the Graemeshall estate there were 24 cottars who were direct tenants, owing their services to the estate.

Swift action was required and in the months following, Patrick Graeme imported four shipments of grain and meal from Caithness at his own expense, to be sold at prime cost. Victuals worth a total of £97.19.7d were purchased (Fig.4) by 104 individuals, of whom 74 are listed as tenants (D5/11/7). The remainder included members of the tenant's extended family, sub-tenants, servants, and Holm parishioners who were not tenants of the estate.

Each consignment, the amount sold and method of payment was itemised in the estate victual book (D5/33/20). People paid as they could: Peter Petrie paid for his grain and meal in geese and lime, Peter Crear by dyeing cloth, and John Laughton by three day's work on the horse boat. Those unable to pay, were given victuals on credit. A remarkably high proportion of payment, however, was made in cash and linen cloth (Fig. 4) (D5/33/10).

Following 'the blasted crop' of 1778, tenants were given a rent reduction for that year totalling £56.1.8d 'on account of the badness of the crop' (D5/11/1). The efficient and effective management of this crisis in Holm was no doubt made easier by the fact that this was a storm local to Orkney, and relief supplies were readily available from elsewhere.

Famine conditions 1782/3

The crop failures of 1782/3 were not just local but national disasters. Following a cold, wet spring in 1782, there was incessant rain in July and August, and in many parts of Scotland it snowed before what remained of the harvest could be taken in. The growing Scottish economy meant that famine conditions were confined mostly to the North, and in the more inaccessible Highland areas there were many deaths.

By this time attitudes towards famine relief were becoming more enlightened. For one thing, people were beginning to be seen as a resource, both as a means of production for manufacture, and as potential manpower for the armed services. In previous famine periods the Government had taken indirect action, curtailing the export of grain, and giving bounties to encourage its import. Now, for the first time, with scarcity of meal and escalating prices (D5/6/4), the State became directly involved in famine relief. Negotiations to end the American war meant the Government could draw on considerable surplus military stores of white pease, which could be mixed into a heavy porridge, and £17,000 worth of these were distributed nationwide. A grant of £10,000 purchased further provisions which were distributed by the clergy gratis to those on their poor lists, while subsequent government supplies were sold at prime cost.

Besides crop failure, death of cattle from starvation and disease was prevalent in Orkney. In 1784 William Watt commented:

You cannot conceive the situation of this country at present: there is not above an article it produces but has failed as well as the crops. The death of cattle has been a sore strock to the poorer sort of people. The butter debt which they pay to the

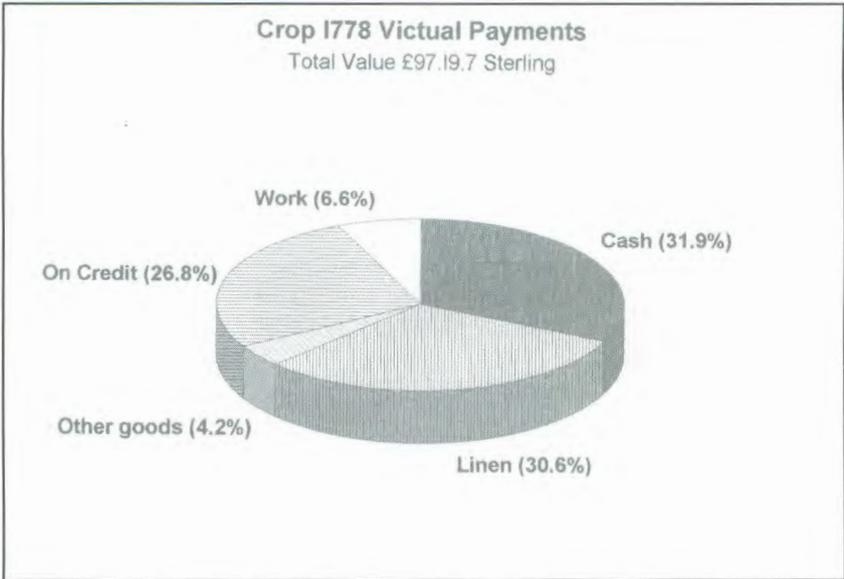


Fig. 4. Methods of payment by tenants for victuals in 1778.

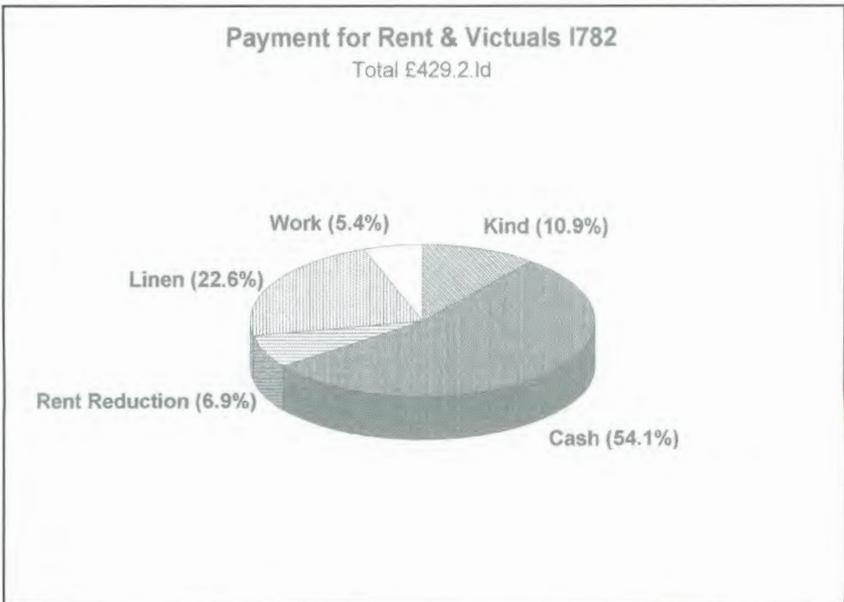


Fig. 5. Methods of payment for rent and victuals by tenants in 1782.

Supr and Masters has ruined them. Of rabbits which this Country abounded with, there is none in the warrans, the badness of the season has killed them all, so that the bread is not left (MacGillivray 1956: 68-9).

Again Patrick Graeme bought in substantial relief supplies at his own expense. Seed corn and meal were in demand, and bere and oats were purchased from Caithness. On this occasion 105 individuals purchased victuals from the estate to a value of £127.11.3d.⁶ Estate rent rebates for that year totalled £32.8.6d. Only a tiny proportion of payment was made in traditional kind, which included such goods as grain, malt, butter, geese, poultry, flesh and peats and, although a substantial amount of linen cloth was traded for rent and victuals, by far the largest proportion was paid for in cash (Fig. 5) (D5/34/1782).

Magnus Gadie — a case study

This case study illustrates how one tenant survived the difficult period between 1778 and 1785. Magnus Gadie was a cottar who lived in an estate cot house, close to the hill dyke in the township of Hensbister. For this he paid a rent of two-and-sixpence plus 12 days' services to the estate per annum. Nearby his parents had constructed a house which they occupied rent free, because his father had 'built the house himself' (D5/34/1779). Magnus also had a brother, John, who was tenant of Midhouse of Dishon, a farm in the same township. In Orkney, farmers and cottars were from the same stock and often related. Magnus and his father had been employed to build a barn at Midhouse in 1772, soon after John had taken over the tenancy. For this they were each paid two-and-sixpence by the estate (D5/34/1772).

Like his father before him (D5/33/9), Magnus supervised a stretch of kelp shore during the season. Work at the kelp was not necessarily close to home. Twice during this period he supervised the shores of Scapa outside Kirkwall, where the estate had property, and twice he was responsible for the island of Lambholm where he and his company of kelp workers were given house room (D5/11/5). However, outside the kelp season, he and his household were also engaged in linen making. (D5/34/1778-85).

Throughout the period of crop failure and poor harvests, Magnus Gadie purchased a variety of victuals from the estate (Fig. 6). For these he paid mostly in linen cloth, but following the harvest failure of 1782, he found himself quite heavily in arrears, owing £1.4.0d for victual. By 1784, however, conditions were improving and he was able to pay off not only his own arrears, but also the nine shillings his mother (now widowed) owed for victuals. That same year he bought a variety of supplies including seed corn, oatmeal, beremeal and half a barrel of potatoes (D5/34/1778-86). Income derived from his work

6. On this occasion there was no separate victual book, monies owing being recorded in the estate rental book.

| CROP YEAR | VICTUALS Purchased from the estate | LINEN Sold to the estate | ARREARS |
|------------------|---|---|---|
| 1778 | ½ boll Bere 6s.8d ½ boll Beremeal 5s.0d ½ boll Oatmeal 6s.4d | 13 ells at 10½d 11s.4½d | 6s.8½d |
| 1779 | 1 meil 2 settens Malt 10s.0d ½ boll Raw Bere 3s.9d 2 meil Meldar Corn 15s.0d | 29 ells at 10½d £1/5/4½d | 1s.5½d |
| 1780 | 3 meil Malt £1.2.6d 4 settens Seed Bere 6s.0d 6 settens Oatmeal 6s.0d | 25 ells at 10½d £1.1.10½d 30 ells at 11d £1.7.6d | No arrears |
| 1781 | 1 meil 2 set Meldar Corn 7s.1d 3 st Oatmeal 5s.0d 3 set Seed Bere 4s.6d 2 bushels White Oats 3s.4d 1 st Pease 1s.9d | None traded | 1s.9d |
| 1782 | 1 meil 1 set Meldar Corn 9s.8d 1 set PM Ritch Seed 1s.8d 1 boll Caithness Bere 11s.4d ½ boll Caithness Oats 4s.0d 3 st Beremeal 5s.7½d | 22 ells at 11d £1.0.2d | £1.4.0d |
| 1783 | 4 set 21 mks Meldar Bere 8s.11d 4 set Seed Bere 5s.6d | 24 ells at 11d £1.2.0d | 10s. |
| 1784 | Half-barrel Potatoes 1s.3d 1 boll Caithness Bere for seed 11s.0d 4st Oatmeal 5s.4d 2st. Beremeal 2s.4d Corns bought at Roup £1.2.0d | 60 ells at 11d £2.15.0d | No arrears (mother's victual arrears 9s.2½d also paid off by him) |
| 1785 | No victuals | No linen traded | No arrears |
| TOTAL | £9.10.0½d | £9.3.3°d | TOTAL |

**Fig. 6. Victuals purchased by Magnus Gadie Junior 1778-1785
Cottar tenant living in township of Hensbister
(Balance of rent payments by cash from kelp work).**

during the kelp season generally covered the cost of Magnus Gadie's rent. However, during the years of dearth between 1778 and 1785, the total cost of the victuals he purchased is almost balanced by the price of linen he traded with the estate and such a case is not untypical of other small tenants in Holm.

Estate involvement in parish life

The Graemeshall household accounts of the time show no signs of an economy drive, and involvement in the traditional activities of parish life shows no interruption. Each year snuff was purchased for the peat cutting. The customary drink money was given to estate workers on completion of specific tasks, usually in cash but occasionally in gin or ale (D5/6/11).

Shortly before the Lammas Fair, the house servants were paid a portion of their wages. Every August Patrick Graeme painstakingly recorded in his accounts the purchase of a fairing for each of them from 'Old James Johnston' down to 'Little Andrew'. The only sign of inflation is in the size of the annual prize for the tenants 'playing at the football', presumably at the quoy of Ball Green in Swartaquoy, at Christmas or New Year. In 1778 the prize amounted to seven shillings with one shilling to pay the piper. By 1785 this had trebled to one guinea for the men's game, and two-and-sixpence for the boys (D5/11/7).

There is evidence of a resilient sense of humour surviving in the names of cothouses which appear in the victual lists, such as Tumbleup, Stickfast and Swilout (D5/34/35); in fact the general impression gained is that many people in Holm survived these difficult years remarkably well.

For some though, there was undoubted hardship. The total rent arrears remained high for the rest of the decade (Fig. 7), but in fact only a comparatively small number of farms were responsible for a high proportion of these. For example in 1784 just six farms accounted for 50% of the total arrears owed the estate. The consequences of severe financial difficulty could be harsh. Between 1778 and 1785 eight tenants with the heaviest debts were removed from their farms, their crops and stock sold off to neighbours. Most of them were rehoused within their home township, but in croft or cot house, bringing a reduction in both status and living standards. In 1786 ten of the poorest subtenants had the arrears they owed for victuals given down. By that time 52 tenants, nearly half, were clear of arrears. More surprising, perhaps, is the fact that 20 of these had managed to remain without debt to the estate throughout the entire period. The total sum paid to the estate for rent and victual between 1778 and 1785 was equivalent to £2754.1.3d. The composition of these payments and the pitifully small proportion paid in traditional kind following the harvests of 1778, 1782 and 1783 can be seen in Fig. 8. It can also be observed that a significant contribution was made by trading linen cloth for rent, but most surprising of all is the large proportion of rent paid in cash, a total of £1,348.13.5d over the years. Where did all this money come from?

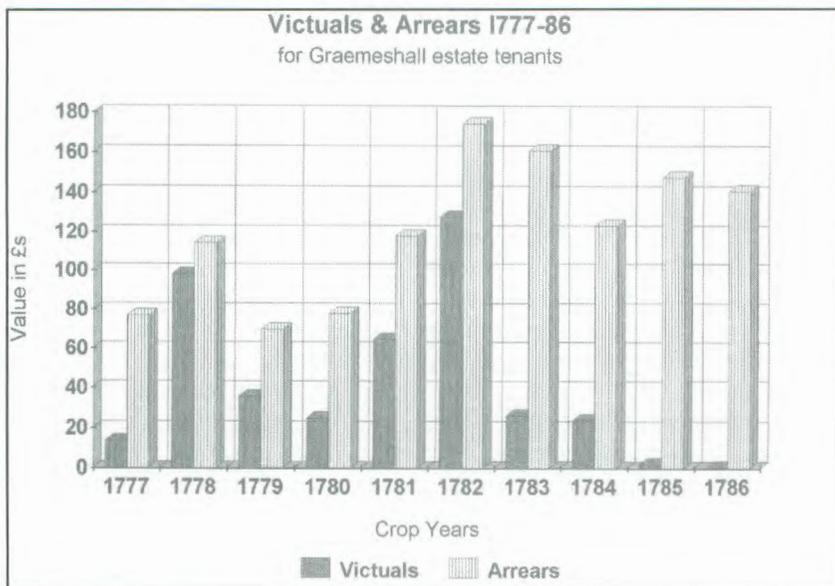


Fig. 7. Value of victuals on credit are included in rent arrears.

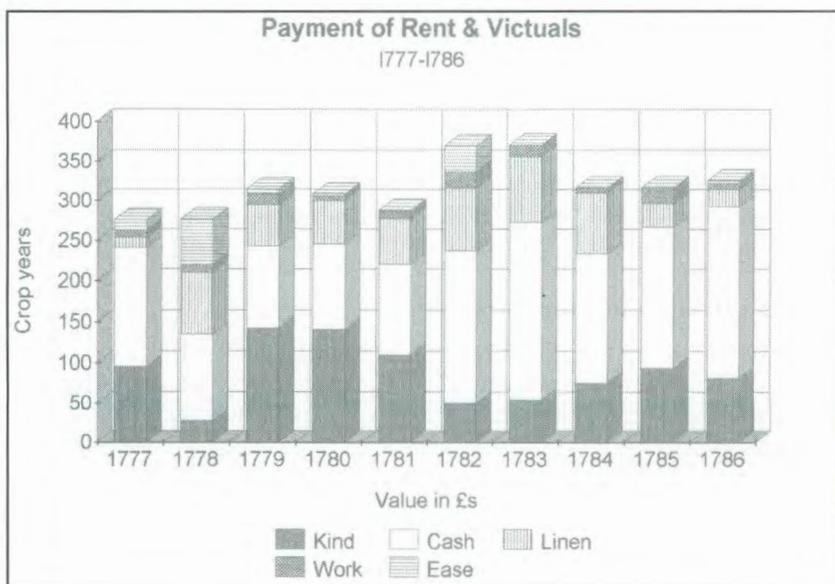


Fig. 8. Total amounts paid by tenants for rent and victuals.

Between 35 and 50 tenants would each have received around 25 shillings per annum for making kelp, although during 1782 some 15 more were employed gathering and burning dingle on an individual basis (D5/1/1/5). Money was also sent back to family from those who had emigrated or enlisted. In 1781 Eupham Anderson, a cottar in Paplay, was sent £20 by her natural son, a sailor; probably more money than she had seen in her life before (D5/34/1781). In 1783 James Louttit, a sailor aboard the armed ship 'The Three Sisters', left £3 for his widowed mother, Marjorie Gorie in Swartaquoy, to purchase victuals (D5/34/1783).

Quite often it was death overseas that brought financial benefit. In 1780 James Crear in Little Dukrow received £11.7.6d, the outstanding wages due his deceased brother Mungo Crear from the Hudson Bay Company (D5/1/1/7). Likewise in 1785 the Sinclair family in Holm shared £15.14.6d following the death of their brother aboard the man-of-war 'Valiant' (D5/35/1785). There was also input from the black economy. The people of Paplay, and in particular the Gariochs of Cornquoy, were known smugglers, ideally situated as they were near the headland of Roseness, with its deep geos which could easily conceal a sailing vessel (D5/7/89).

Primarily though, it was the linen industry in Holm that provided a cash income and thus a lifeline to hungry tenants. Patrick Graeme, writing to the Board of Trustees in Edinburgh in January 1786, neatly summed up the benefits to the parish:

The manufacture (of linen) in this place of late evidently increased the substance of the people and introduced cleanness and neatness among them indeed in these past years of scarcity I cannot conceive how they could have existed without dependence on this manufacture and most of them now in this parish are getting free of arrears which they were due to me for the grain and meal which I brought to this place and gave to them in these times (D5/6/6/2).

The people of Holm were well known in Orkney for their enterprise, not only in trading linen with the estate, but also in marketing the cloth themselves (Low 1774: 51; Fea 1775: 98; Barry 1805: 360). They were in a fortunate position compared to some Orkney parishes.

Famine conditions in other parts of Orkney

How were famine conditions alleviated and victual paid for in other parts of Orkney? Patrick Graeme, as Sheriff, was responsible for the delivery of Government relief supplies to the clergy for distribution to those named on their poor lists. However, this was the State's first experience of direct involvement in famine relief, and the organisation left something to be desired.

The clergy lists were muddled. Some named only each head of household; others listed whole families, with a resulting imbalance. When the exchequer meal eventually arrived in July 1783, it was found that two Orkney parishes had been omitted altogether, but supplies destined for the parish of Dunrossness in Shetland had been sent to Kirkwall together with the Orkney quota, so a new

scheme had to be drawn up to apportion this consignment of 800 bolls. An additional 700 bolls which followed in November was sold at prime cost (D5/6/4).

In Kirkwall there was more than a hint of profiteering. William Watt complained:

Of late we have got a number of upstart merchants. There is no less than twenty four open shops in Kirkwall at present, and mostly every family dale something (Macgillivray 1956: 69).

Prices were inflated, and people grew desperate for food. There were rumours that relief meal had been smuggled from storehouses in the night-time and distributed to necessitous families (D3/78). Certainly a hungry mob broke into the storehouse of Thomas Balfour and made away with his meal. With surprising understanding of the plight of the people, he acquainted the procurator fiscal he could not concur with a prosecution. He knew many of the offenders to be 'usefull harmless men' never accused of housebreaking before and all he required was payment for the missing meal (Sutherland Graeme notebook).

Until supplies of exchequer meal arrived, the Kirk Session in Kirkwall purchased pease and other cheap food from the South. To temper the risk of epidemic, they agreed to bear the cost of smallpox inoculation for the children of the poor (*OSA Kirkwall & St Ola*: 38). In 1784, in face of continuing want, the Synod of Orkney petitioned the Government for further supplies 'in this year of great shortages'. It is more than a little ironic that, throughout these years, national Fast Days continued to be proclaimed in Kirkwall.

Orkney's clergy at this time were for the most part enlightened men, with an intimate knowledge of their parishioners' lives, and ideal people to distribute the government relief supplies. Some wrote of their parishioners' sufferings. On the island of Sanday, for example, the distress of the Revd. William Clouston's parishioners was great because farms that would have ordinarily produced 100 bolls did not produce 20 bolls and what was produced was of inferior quality. There were no resident lairds, and help from these absentee landlords was minimal. However the brother of one of them, James Traill, factor of Westove, acted swiftly, importing pease, grain and meal from Leith and selling it at prime cost not only to estate tenants, and on credit if need be (*OSA Cross & Burness*: 286).

From his parish of Birsay, the Revd George Low wrote to a friend, 'Nothing but poverty and misery here'. Birsay was an Earldom parish where Lord Dundas, an absentee, remained remote from the concerns of his tenants. With only a small kelp trade, and no other landed proprietor, the people suffered badly. It was here that the one death from starvation in Orkney was reported, 'though many more were like to die' (*OSA Birsay & Harray*: 155).

George Low was also Minister of Harray, Orkney's only inland parish. There he found himself dividing just eight bolls of exchequer meal into 96 small portions, giving each impoverished person according to his allocation. Otherwise the people of Harray survived these famine years, for the most part, on milk and cabbage (*OSA Birsay & Harray*: 165). Harray had always suffered

badly in periods of dearth. There could be no income from kelp here, neither was there any large landowner with capital sufficient to import victual. Memory of a previous famine period, handed down in the oral tradition, recalls a party of Harray men who set out for the 'Harramen's Ebb', a small section of shoreline on the Rendall shores which the Harray people were permitted to search for food for their starving families. Returning home across the hills, they were caught in a blizzard. Trapped in the snow in a weakened condition, all of them perished. Discovered when the snow melted, they were buried where they lay on the hillside. Stones near Queenamiddo mark their traditional burial place (Spence 1994: 17), a stark reminder of the potential for tragedy in times of dearth.

During these years the merchant lairds of Orkney imported a large amount of grain, meal, pease and potatoes. Those with philanthropic motives sold supplies at less than market price (MacGillivray 1956: 69). Some, doubtless, had profit in mind (*OSA* Birsay & Harray: 161); others remained indifferent (*OSA* Cross & Burness: 286). Thus the availability and affordability of such provisions to the population of Orkney depended to an unacceptable degree upon the disposition of the local laird. The quality and quantity of famine relief in Orkney, therefore, varied greatly from place to place. This is demonstrated by the huge disparity between the provision of supplies and purchase of them by the people of Holm, and the sufferings of the people of Birsay, where one died but many others narrowly escaped starvation.

Conclusion

It is not possible to generalise about conditions throughout Orkney at this time, but it is possible to identify factors that helped diminish famine's fatal consequences. The effect of payment in cash for work at kelp and linen making, from fisheries and whaling, or money sent from overseas should not be underestimated. For the first time some of the population had a little purchasing power and it was possible for some to buy meal, grain and seed corn for money. In addition, the cultivation of the potato in many Orkney parishes provided a nutritious alternative staple food. The Church was active in the distribution of relief to the poorest members of society, in attempts to alleviate the misery of their people, and in lobbying the authorities for further provisions. In areas of Orkney where no alternative supplies were available for the poverty stricken, the direct intervention of Government and the decisive action of some Orkney landowners in providing famine relief was vital and probably lifesaving.

These then were the factors that combined to ensure that the catastrophic effects of previous dearths were not repeated in these islands during this period of acute shortages between 1778 and 1785. The death from starvation of George Low's one parishioner in Birsay was a death too many, but it is possible to conclude that by the late 18th century some of the worst symptoms of famine in Orkney had begun to be alleviated.

Bibliography

- Barry, G., 1808: *History of the Orkney Islands*. Kirkwall.
- Brand, J., 1883: *A Brief Description of Orkney, Zetland, Pightland Firth and Caithness*. Edinburgh.
- Burton, J. L., et al., 1877- : *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*. Edinburgh.
- Devine, T. M., 1996: *The Great Highland Famine*. Edinburgh.
- Fea, J., 1884: *The Present State of the Orkney Islands Considered*. Edinburgh.
- Gribbin, J. and M., 1996: 'Weatherwatch'. *The Times*. London.
- Hossack, B. H., 1900: *Kirkwall in the Orkneys*. Kirkwall.
- Houston, R. A., 1988: 'The Demographic Regime'. In: T. M. Devine and R. Mitchison (eds.), *People and Society in Scotland*, John Donald, Edinburgh.
- Lamb, H. H., 1966: *The Changing Climate*. London.
- Low, G., 1774: *Orkney and Schetland*. Kirkwall.
- MacGillivray, E., 1956: 'Letters of Thomas Balfour to William Watt, 1784-87'. *Orkney Miscellany*, Kirkwall, 68-79.
- Miller, R., 1976: *Orkney*. London.
- OA = *Orkney Archives*.
- OSA = *The Old Statistical Account* = J. Storer Clouston, 1927: *The Orkney Parishes*. Report of the Napier Commission.
- RPC = *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, 2nd series v, 284.
- Smout, T. C., 1976: 'Famine and famine-relief in Scotland'. In: T. C. Smout and L. M. Cullen, *Comparative Aspects of Scottish and Irish Economic and Social History 1600-1900*, Edinburgh.
- Spence, M., 1994: 'The Harramen's Graves, an Update'. *Vintage Club Newsletter no 11*.
- Steven, M., 1995: *Parish Life in Eighteenth-Century Scotland*. Aberdeen.
- Stratton, J. M., 1969: *Agricultural Records*. John Baker.
- Thomson, W. P. L., 1983: *Kelp-Making in Orkney*. Kirkwall.
- Thomson, W. P. L., 1988: *History of Orkney*. Edinburgh.
- Thomson, W. P. L., 1989: 'The Eighteenth Century Church in Orkney'. In: H. W. M. Cant, *Light in the North*, Kirkwall, 57-79.
- Thomson, W. P. L., 1996: *Lord Henry Sinclair's 1492 Rental of Orkney*. Kirkwall.
- Traill, Dennison, W., 1884: 'Remarks on the Agricultural Classes in the North Isles of Orkney'. In: F. Napier, *Evidence Taken by Her Majesty's Commissioners of Inquiry into the Condition of Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland*, Edinburgh, 270-280.
- Wenham, S. B., 1994: 'From Lintseed to Linen'. In: W. P. L. Thomson, *The Making of Modern Orkney*, Aberdeen, 20-32.

Manuscript Sources

Orkney Archives (Kirkwall)

- D3 Watt of Breckness and Skaill Papers
- D5 Graemeshall Papers (Sutherland-Graeme)
- D38 Morton Papers
 - The Murdoch Mackenzie Charts 1750
 - The Minutes of the Synod of Orkney 1784

Sutherland, Graeme: *Notebook of transcriptions*.