THE LEWIS BLACK HOUSE IN 1980: THE END OF AN OLD TRADITION.

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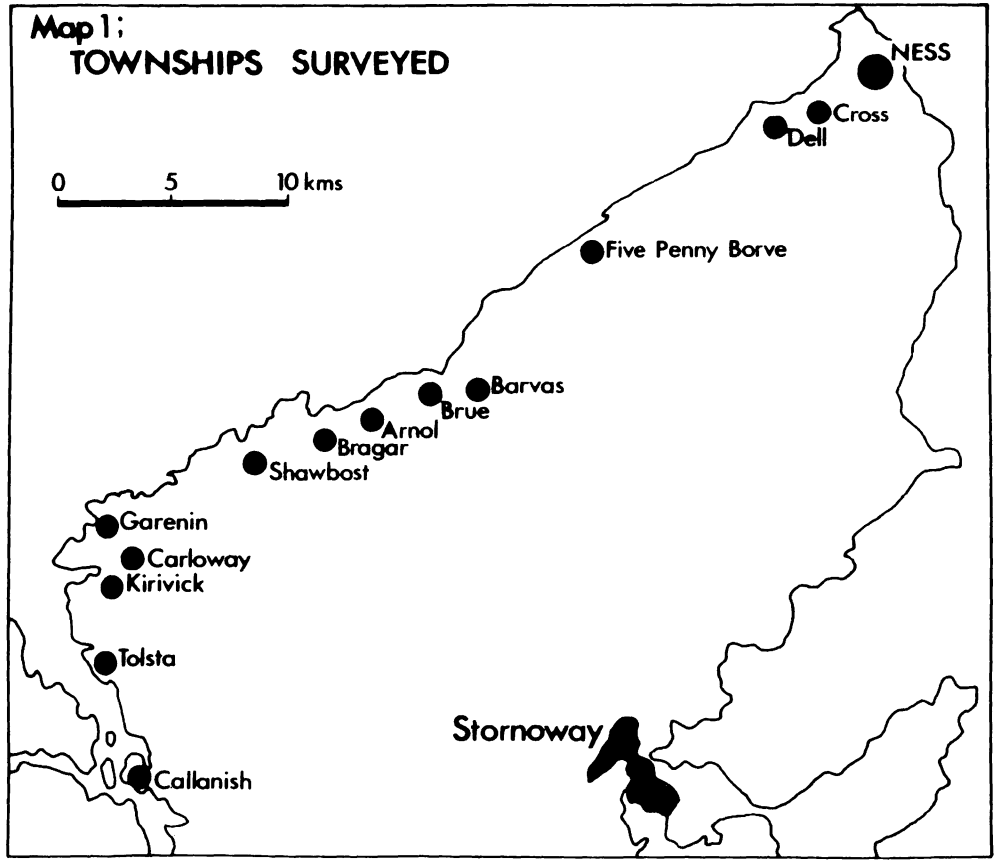
The Hebridean black house has attracted much attention during the past century as one of the most distinctive types of traditional dwelling in Western Europe.[1] Its survival as the standard house type in many parts of the Long Island into the twentieth century has allowed its plan, methods of construction and social milieu to be studied in detail. The appearance of modern black houses suggests an ancient origin and some early writers, particularly Roussell,[2] believed that there was a direct link between their plans and construction techniques and examples, both ancient and modern, in Scandinavia, Iceland and Greenland, reflecting a continuity in tradition from Norse times. The excavations of Crawford at Udal in North Uist[3] have, however, indicated that the fully-fledged black house was essentially a nineteenth-century development and that earlier house types were simpler in plan. Nevertheless, despite modifications in the layout of Hebridean houses during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries their construction features are certainly much older. While the design of the black house may have evolved through time modern examples represent the later phases of a continuous vernacular tradition adapted to local materials and local conditions.

While black houses have been studied from the viewpoint of material, culture, and their place in the traditional society and economy has been discussed, less effort has been made to chronicle the survival of the black house tradition into the last quarter of the twentieth century. It was clear that the use of black houses was dying out but it was uncertain how rapidly this was occurring. A survey was undertaken in April 1980 by students from the Department of Geography at the University of Lancaster of a series of townships in western Lewis. The purpose of the survey was to establish whether any black houses were still in use as dwellings and how many others continued to serve other non-residential purposes and were being actively maintained. Details of the external state of buildings were


Map 1;
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Stornoway
Callanish

recorded and, where possible, the owners were interviewed in order to obtain information concerning the use to which the buildings were being put and the degree of maintenance.

Map 1 shows the townships which were surveyed. Details of 130 buildings were recorded although for about a third of them it was not possible to interview anyone who could supply details concerning their present use or former occupation. Only three black houses were found to be still inhabited along the whole coast of western Lewis from Callanish to Ness. One of these was located in Carloway, one in Garenin and one at Callanish. In all cases the inhabitants were elderly and the condition of the house at Callanish had deteriorated noticeably since a visit six years previously. It is likely that within a very few years all three of these houses will have been abandoned as dwellings.

Most of the surviving buildings whose abandonment could be dated had not been used as homes for a considerable time. Only 5% of the structures recorded had been used as habitations during the 1970's and another 10% during the 1960's. Most of them dated from the immediate post-war period and there were several instances of buildings which had been abandoned for 30 years or more still being actively maintained as outhouses. In some cases black houses had been vacated when their owners had left the township to move to Stornoway or to the mainland but a considerable number had been replaced by more modern houses built on the same croft. This was particularly evident at Barvas, where a line of black houses stood back from the road serving as outbuildings to new cottages which had been constructed in front of them, or at Upper Barvas where old and new dwellings were mostly set side by side.

Roofed black houses were found in all the townships which were surveyed but their number and quality of preservation varied. Ness, the largest township, and one with a relatively prosperous air, had very few traditional houses surviving in relation to the size of its population whereas in Arnol and Barvas a considerable number remained. In Arnol, however,

surviving black houses were almost universally in a poor state of repair while in Barvas, where there were about the same number, standards of maintenance were much higher with the thatch being replaced more frequently. Bragar, south of Arnol, had very few roofed black houses and none in active use for any purpose although there were many derelict roofless examples.

Superficially the impression might be gained that the difference between traditional and modern building techniques is so great that black houses would be left undisturbed in the landscape and would decay slowly under the impact of wind and weather. In some townships this certainly appeared to be the case, the old houses surviving alongside the new even when their roofs had gone, producing a complex palimpsest of a landscape. In other townships it was discovered that the stone walling of abandoned black houses was found to be useful for providing sound foundations for modern buildings and there was evidence of a considerable amount of stone robbing. In Ness this had proceeded to such a stage that in some cases only the remains of the earth core between the stone layers indicated the presence of a former house.

The functions of black houses which had been abandoned as dwellings followed the traditional downhill progression of vernacular buildings which has been recorded from other parts of Western Europe in recent decades.[4] This involves a gradual decline towards uses which require less and less maintenance with a structure which becomes progressively less weatherproof and eventually ends up as a derelict shell. Many of the buildings which were being actively maintained were used as byres, for the storage of fodder and potatoes, or in one or two instances as garages and tractor sheds. Two particularly well-kept examples were reputedly used for illicit drinking sessions. Only two black houses were recorded as having been converted into sheds for the weaving of Harris tweed, principally because of the lack of light in traditional structures and the availability of government grants for the construction of purpose-built loom sheds. As buildings became increasingly derelict and wholly or partly roofless they degenerated into sheep pens and eventually into dumps for unwanted rubbish.

Standards of maintenance varied greatly. Nearly two thirds of the black houses which were still roofed retained a thatch. Comparatively few people had turned to corrugated iron or asbestos as a more durable roofing material which required less maintenance, possibly because the initial cost outweighed the longer-term disadvantages of keeping a thatch. The thatch on many roofs was, however, in poor shape, not having been properly replaced for up to five years or more. Several people were, nevertheless, still renewing their thatch annually using materials from their own crofts although a number of elderly crofters, especially widows, had recently ceased to rethatch annually due to the labour involved. Roof timbers were rarely being replaced and had generally been in position for many years. The same applied to the drystone walling which was often kept in place by a patchwork of rough mortaring. The future of most of the surviving structures appears to be precarious. For every black house which was being regularly maintained and whose owners claimed that they intended to use them indefinitely there were several which were merely being used with no repairs until they fell down, or whose owners were only waiting to demolish their old outhouse until they could obtain a grant for a new one.

It is probable that within ten years or so only the black house museum at Arnol will survive as a memorial to a vanished housing and social tradition. Some residents in Arnol expressed dissatisfaction, however, at the way in which the Arnol black house had been restored to its original nineteenth-century condition by the removal of wallpaper, panelling and floor coverings. They would have liked to see a 'modern' black house preserved somewhere on the island to show how snug and comfortable they could be when decorated inside. The likelihood of this happening is becoming increasingly remote, especially as interiors have frequently been gutted in the process of transformation from dwelling to outbuilding. Probably the best chance would have been if the black houses at Garenin, forming a complete small township, had been preserved. They were abandoned in 1974 when their occupants were moved to local authority housing nearby and much of the original furniture was left in the houses. Six years of Lewis weather and lack of repair have

reduced most of the houses to an advanced state of dereliction. The thatch deteriorated rapidly when not regularly renewed and once the inner and outer stone walls are loosened by frost the central core is rapidly washed out. The damage is probably too great now for restoration to be worthwhile and in a few more years only the remains of the walls will survive.

The demolition of black houses has been encouraged by the availability of grants towards the cost of erecting new outbuildings and two people in Shawbost were planning to remove their existing black houses in the immediate future. One of the few remaining black houses in Ness was demolished by the local authority while the survey was being carried out.

The people who were interviewed were asked whether they had ever lived in a black house. Those who had done so were asked to indicate their advantages and disadvantages compared to modern housing. Despite the claims which have sometimes been made about the comfort of black houses there was only moderate enthusiasm for them and for the lifestyle associated with them. Many people did suggest that black houses had been warmer than modern dwellings and that the cost of heating them had been less but set against this was a long list of disadvantages. The lack of proper toilet facilities was the most frequently mentioned drawback but the lack of running water also figured prominently. Those people who had lived in black houses with attached byres spoke of the unpleasant effects of the accumulation of dung over the winter. People also referred to the limited space in the traditional houses, to their lack of light, the need to replace the thatch every year and carry out constant repairs on the walls, as well as the propensity of the thatch to leak. Modern housing, whatever its aesthetic qualities, was evidently more satisfactory from a practical viewpoint. Nevertheless, some of the people who had been moved out of the Garenin black houses by the Council said that they had not done so willingly and that despite the convenience of their new accommodation they had found their old homes perfectly acceptable. They also suggested that their black houses had been more carefully sited in sheltered locations and that their new council houses were set in a very exposed position.

A feature which was noticeable in many parts of western Lewis, although insufficient time was available to collect details, was the degree to which the black houses differed in plan and construction features between adjacent townships and the considerable measure of homogeneity in design which often existed within a particular community. The black houses of Brue, for example, were nearly all gable ended in contrast to the hip ended structures in neighbouring Bragar and Arnol. Such 'township styles' can also be detected in the design of shieling huts. While such contrasts may in some cases relate to differences in the period of construction there are indications that they also reflect real variations in community traditions and it would be valuable if further work could be done on this before the houses themselves and the memory of the lifestyle associated with them, could be recorded before they both vanish.

NOTES

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