

On the Verge of Loss: Lesser Known Place-names of Barra and Vatersay

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BARRA can be reached by various means of transport. The traditional way is by boat. The first settlers must have arrived by boat; the Norse came by boat, the Admiralty as they chased Bonnie Prince Charlie across the Hebrides travelled of course by boat, as do the majority of tourists today. The view from the ferry as it carefully navigates the curve into Castlebay is usually the first impression one has of Barra: a picturesque rocky bay surrounded by villages and hills scattered with houses. No doubt the most spectacular way to travel to Barra is by plane and on a clear day it reveals a stunning view onto the maze of hidden bays, rocks and deserted islands. Many of them have names but nowadays not many people know them.

Maps and charts of Barra give evidence of 500 officially recorded place-names covering the most prominent natural features and settlements. Between 1995 and 1999 a total of 97 inhabitants of Barra and Vatersay contributed more than 2000 previously unmapped place-names, thus helping recreate parts of the place-name fabric that once covered the entire group of islands. A number of gaps on the map could be closed and names of less prominent sites and features could be traced down to the some of the smallest microtoponymics. During the collection, discussions arose regarding the quality of names – for example, should a place-name that was used or remembered by only one family qualify to as a name in its own right? The question arose as to whether a name had to be used for a certain length of time before it was worthy of being entered into the collection. This in turn could have questioned the validity of including features that had been named but that had since physically disappeared as a result of erosion or disuse. Would their names be less valuable than younger names? The quality or credibility of a name was most often questioned when it was only one

of several names for a particular feature, alternative names having been given by various ethnic groups or, as in the case of younger names on Barra, by inhabitants of different townships.

The following definition of the term *name* formed the terminological base for the collection and examination of Barra's place-names:

A place-name is a label that in its spoken and written form designates an identified location, real or imaginary, and reflects the culture and history of an area. The application of a label to a user's association of place eases reference and provides a basis for communication.

This paper presents a selection of place-names which for various reasons may have changed their names, become obsolete or have never been entered on a map in the first place. This includes features for which there are several alternative names, prominent features whose names have been forgotten and places whose naming was inspired by an incident or a story. The names are discussed clockwise round the island and are grouped according to their geographic location.

The West

One of the most prominent lochs on the west side, *Loch Tangasdail* (NL645998), has five competing names. The specific *Tangasdail* is derived from ON *tangi*, m, 'headland' and possibly from Old Norse (ON) *dalr*, m, 'valley' and is the name of the township on whose land the loch is located. The 1991 Ordnance Survey (OS) Pathfinder Map, however, lists two names for this location: *Loch Tangusdale* in its pre-Gaelicized spelling and *Loch St Clair*. The name *Loch St Clair* was an invention of a Victorian novelist which found its way onto the maps¹ but is no longer mentioned on the 2003 OS Explorer map although it still appears to be used among some locals. Another name for the same feature is *Loch MhicLèoid*, 'MacLeod's loch', a name very likely to have been inspired by the remains of the tower located on the picturesque island in the loch, *Dùn Mhic Leòid* (NL647996). The late Roderick MacNeil, whose croft in Kinloch adjoined the loch, remembered that the "tower was built by a Maclean, Iain Garbh, and he was the son of Mor nan Ceann. He came to Barra with her. [...] They lived at first in Castle Kisimul and then he built that castle

¹ I am grateful to Roderick MacNeil (Ruairidh Fhionnlaigh) for this piece of information.

for himself there. The island is artificial.” However, no explanation was given as to why the tower was named after MacLeod and not after MacLean, who built it. Some people call this loch *An Loch Mòr* ‘the large lake’ which suggests that there must be a comparatively smaller loch nearby. And indeed, just 300m northwest lies *Loch na Doirinn* ‘lake of the isthmus’, whose alternative name is *An Loch Beag* ‘the small lake’. The fifth and least known name is *Loch an Eas Dhuibhe* ‘lake of the dark waterfall’.² The location of this lake at the bottom of the steep slope of *Beinn Tangabhal*, with two streams running from the hillside into the lake, contributes to the credibility of this name although no informant was able to identify the location of the ‘dark waterfall’ on the map.

Travelling north just past the Isle of Barra Hotel and before the turn-off to Borgh lies a small stony bay on the left hand side of the road. There are two little rocky points jutting into the sea but only one of them made its way onto the map. Its name, *Stoung Mòr* (NF650013), is paralleled by its smaller counterpart, *Stoung Beag* (NF652011) a name remembered by just one informant. It is derived from ON *stöng*, f, ‘mast’ which is a popular place-name element in Norway for islands and peninsulas. Whereas *Tràigh Tuath* ‘north beach’ at the outskirts of Baile na Creige and the mouth of may be a name remembered for its association with dangerous quicksand, one of the most dramatic and picturesque beaches of the island, at the foot of Beinn Mhartainn just below Father MacMillan’s cottage, could no longer be remembered by name. Its mapped name, *Tràigh Hamara* is a Gaelic Norse hybrid and has the meaning of ‘beach of the steep rock’ from the ON generic *hamarr*, m, ‘steep rock’ or ‘steep hillside’. Its exposed location at the Atlantic coast led to much of the adjoining land being washed away in the January gales of 2005. Erosion, consequent loss of land and an inevitably changing coastline is a sad reality for Barra’s westside.

The North-west

The old coffin carriers’ route, *Ciste na Clithe* ‘pass of the cliff’ used to run from Cliaid to Suidheachan and ended at the graveyard of Cille Bharra in Barra’s north saving the carriers a four-mile detour on the conventional road. During the strenuous walk the coffin carriers took regular breaks, and the resting places along the path received names. Contrary to popular belief the first element of this name, *ciste* is not related to Gaelic *cist*, f, a loanword from Latin *cista*,

2 The name was initially collected by the father of the present chief MacNeil of MacNeil from a local Barraman.

‘chest, coffin’. The name in its current grammatical constellation strongly suggests a derivation from the ON place-name generic *kista*, f, ‘pass’, ‘narrowing’.³

One of the names along this path is *Coireachan ‘ic Nèill* ‘MacNeil’s kettle stand’ (NF681052). The large stones at this site form a circle and are said to have been the hearth for a gigantic kettle owned by the MacNeil of Barra whose supposedly grand lifestyle was occasionally ridiculed by the local population. *Dùn an Ruadh* ‘red little fort’ (NF683054) is an alternative name of *Dùn Chliobh* ‘fort of the cliff’ which is a mapped name. *Leac nan Leannan* ‘flagstone of the lovers’ (NF674048) is a reminder of the tragic story of two underaged lovers who escaped their followers on horseback. Approaching the rocks at the cliff, the horse slipped and the lovers and the horse fell and died. *Spòg a’ Deamhainn* ‘the devil’s paw’ depicts a rock on which the devil supposedly left his footprint. It is in immediate vicinity of *The Lamb’s Footprints* (NF680051) which is listed in the Maclean manuscript 8233 as *Leac Luirg* ‘flagstone of the footprint’⁴. *Creag Labhar* at the northwest end of Tràigh Chliaid (NL626963) has the meaning of ‘speaking rock’. Sound is an element that is rarely used in naming. In this case sound may have been created by water running over the rock or by noise caused by strong wind. Legend has it that “one day when a procession passed, the man in the coffin spoke and said that the rock would fall one day on a MacNeil woman. Hence its name.”⁵

Nowadays coffins are transported in hearses and the original motivation to use the path no longer exists. Only the occasional hill-walker walks along this route, the track has faded and is in most parts no longer traceable. Here, too, the coastline is subject to heavy erosion and some of the named features along the path can no longer be identified, whilst others may have disappeared into the sea.

Another rock, only three kilometres east of Leac Labhar, is *Clach Mhòr nan Gleannan* ‘big rock of the little valleys’ (NF702047). In the Ordnance Survey Object Name Book, the original hand written collection of place-names to be suggested for entry on maps, the stone is described as a “large ice-carried

3 See Cox, 1987, II:63 and see Rygh, *Norske Gaardnavne*, V:335.

4 Maclean manuscripts, 8233, University of Edinburgh Library, Special Collection.

5 Story by Flora Boyd, Sound Archive of the School of Scottish Studies, Department of Celtic and Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, SA 1974/112/A9.



Ciste na Clithe

boulder on the eastern shoulder of Beinn Eireabhal. It is about 30 feet long, 20 wide and 18 feet high". According to folk-etymology once the stone rolls downhill, Barra will be doomed.⁶

Halfway between Beinn Eireabhal and the caves at Tràigh Chliaid is a small loch just northwest of *Loch Cuilce* 'loch of reeds'. On the map it is nameless but among locals it is known as *Loch an Eich Uisge* 'lake of the kelpie' (NF682046). The story goes that a girl who was herding sheep met a beautiful horse at this loch. She became very friendly with the horse, stroked it and when she eventually mounted it, the horse ran into the loch and the girl was never seen again. Stories of kelpies, water-horses, are told throughout the Highlands and Islands and the common name for these lakes -as in Barra- is *Loch an Eich Uisge*. In Scottish folktales kelpie lakes and haunted shielings are often situated close to each other and this is also the case in Barra. *Àirigh na h-Aon Oidhche* 'shieling of the one night' (NF703037) is located less than 500m

⁶ Ordnance Survey Object Name Book, Barra Parish, 1878, Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh, RH4/23/106.



Clach Mhòr nan Gleannan

to the north east of Loch an Eich Uisge and is a place where visitors hardly dared to stay longer than one night.⁷

The caves at Tràigh Chliaid, *Uamh Chliaid* (NF673049), are said to be another haunted site. There are several stories of underground passages leading from the caves in Cliaid to other caves on the island even as far as *Uamh an Oir* 'gold cave' (NL682972) at Rubha Mòr, a large headland in the south-east of Barra. Various people are said to have been lost in the passages, including a piper whose bagpipes, according to legend, can still be heard around Loch an Dùin. His accompanying dog, however, managed to return – hairless.

The North

The northern part of Barra is less haunted⁸ and its naming is straightforward. *Vaslain* (NF693054), an area which inspired the secondary name *Beinn*

⁷ According to Ronald Black in folklore this place-name is generally connected with a kelpie who attacked the inhabitants of the shieling in order to suck their blood, just like vampires.

⁸ With exception of Eòlaigearraidh Primary School which is reported to have a presence.

Bhaslain, was mentioned in the Craigston Register of Births, Marriages and Deaths⁹ as early as 1823. Its name is derived from the genitive case of ON *vatn*, n, ‘water’ and ON *land*, n, ‘piece of land’. *Suidheachan* ‘seats’ (NF688055) is the name of the former shell factory at the Tràigh Mhòr and was initially built by Compton MacKenzie, the author of Whisky Galore. As is often the case with house names, inspiration was taken from a nearby natural feature. *Suiachan*, just a few hundred metres west of the building, used to be one of the coffin carriers’ traditional resting places.

A feature which most visitors of Tràigh Eais, the large beach opposite the airfield, come across is called *Stobs a’ Bhodaich* ‘fence posts of the old man’ (NF695067) which are at the very end of the main path leading towards the Atlantic. The ‘old man’ in question is Michael MacLean, a former grazing constable, who erected wooden fences as protection from erosion.¹⁰ One of the very few names including a preposition is found not far from this spot. *Eadar an Dà Bheinn* ‘between the two mountains’ (NF704071), is also known as *Bealach an Dà Bheinn* ‘pass of the two mountains’ and is likely to have been the old main footpath leading from Sgùrabhal and Eòlaigearraidh to the local primary school. This path is located between *Beinn Eòlaigearraidh* ‘mountain of E.’ (NF701072) and *Beinn Bheag Eòlaigearraidh* ‘small mountain of E.’ (NF705071), or as locals call it *A’ Bheinn Mhòr* ‘the large mountain’ and ‘the small mountain’, *A’ Bheinn Bheag*. The more familiar people are with their surroundings the fewer specifics are required in naming of their local natural features. This is also the case with a stretch of shore which inhabitants of Sgùrabhal and Eòlaigearraidh call *Mol Sgùrabhail* or simplified *A’ Mhol*, a loan from ON *möl*, f, ‘gravel bed’ (NF695084).

Nowadays its official map name is Gaelic (G) *Bàgh nan Clach* ‘bay of stones’, a descriptive term for the beach which is entirely covered in stones and pebbles of varying sizes. The earliest written record of this area can be traced back to 1874 when the Admiralty charted this area - unsurprisingly in English language – as *Stoney Bay*.¹¹ This name is the only name in the entire Barra

9 Roman Catholic Diocese of Argyll and the Isles Records, 1805/1944, Craigston, Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh, RH21/50/1, 2, 3.

10 I am grateful to Michael MacKinnon (Michel Nialtaidh) for supplying this information.

11 See 1861-62 Admiralty Chart no. 2770 “Scotland West Coast, Hebrides, Sound of Barra”, small corrections in 1874, scale 1:15000.



Beinn Sgùrabhail

group¹² which means exactly the same in all three languages involved in the naming process, English, Gaelic and Old Norse.

Sgùrabhal the name of the northernmost settlement of Barra (NF700092) is likely to have undergone significant contraction. Borgstrøm who carried out a linguistic analysis of the Gaelic dialect of Barra derives this name from the ON *Skaga-rif-fjall* ‘hill near the reef of the promontory’¹³. While a descriptive name for this important shipping mark appears logical, it is not possible at this stage to definitively identify the meaning of the first element of this name. Possible interpretations include a derivation from ON *skör*, f, ‘prominent hill’, or a link to ON *skor*, f, ‘cleft’, which if used in its plural form *skora* would translate as ‘hill of the clefts’, which, too, would make onomastic sense in this location.

Names such as *Gob Sgùrabhail*, *Beinn Sgùrabhail*, *Tràigh Sgùrabhail* and *Dun Sgùrabhail* form part of a name cluster, a naming strategy which is rarely used in Barra but which is common on the mainland. Name clusters

¹² I define the Barra group as all islands between the Sound of Barra and Barra Head.

¹³ Borgstrøm, 1937:292.

indicate that an area received its names within a relatively short period of time. Indeed the north of Barra, one of the most fertile areas on the island, was at one stage cleared to make way for a large farm with *Eoligarry House*, also known as *An Taigh Geal* ‘the white house’ or *An Taigh Mòr* ‘the big house’ (NF703077) at its centre. In the Parish Register of Barra, reference is made to four settlements that were formerly located in that area. They are *Vaslain*, *Chiall*, *Kilbar* and *Eòlaigearraidh*. The name that appears least frequently in the register,

Eòlaigearraidh,¹⁴ nowadays refers to the whole district of North Barra, whereas the names of other settlements in that area are in danger of falling into disuse. Although the area in which *Chiall* is located is inhabited and its name is mentioned on the OS map (NF717067), it is no longer used as a landmark for local orientation. The name *Vaslain* is a combination of ON *vatn*, n, ‘water’ and ON *land*, n, ‘piece of land’ (NF694055) and means ‘wet land’. The name occurs in earlier forms as *Vaslan* (1823) and *Vaslin* (1825). The place was still inhabited by a shepherd in 1878, but is nowadays an empty stretch of land. *Scalavaslain* (NF687057) is the name of a nearby hill which contains the settlement name *Vaslain*, but with the decline of intensive land use, the names of smaller elevations are increasingly falling into disuse and *Scalavaslain*, too, can be expected to be forgotten once it disappears from the map. *Kilbar*, once the name of the local church and of the entire district of North Barra, has now been reduced to only the name of the church and a street called *Cille Bharra*, but in contrast to *Vaslain* and *Chiall*, it is still part of the postal address. The dominance of the name *Eòlaigearraidh* was made possible in 1919, when *Eòlaigearraidh Farm* was raided and eventually purchased by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. The land was divided into crofts and the postal address has since consisted of the croft number and the name *Eòlaigearraidh*. Although residents of Barra are fully aware where *Sgùrabhal* is, its written representation is neither reflected in the postal address nor the local telephone directory, nor in any place-name signs in the village.

The North-east

The journey leads back via the rocky, indented East coast.

Due to the new ferry link between Barra and Eriskay the peninsula of *Aird Mhòr* meaning ‘large headland’ (NF713039), formerly a cul-de-sac, has recently become a major traffic hub on the island. Places, once almost forgotten, are now

¹⁴ Or in variations of its Anglicized spelling ‘Eoligarry’.

passed by many people on a daily basis. One of the former inhabitants of this peninsula, Ronald MacKinnon, known as Raogan, was particularly knowledgeable on place-names of this area. Due to his contribution the point immediately north of the new jetty can be identified as *Rubha Carrraig nan Coineanach*, ‘promontory of the fishing-rock of the rabbits’ (NF720040) the area south of it as *Rubha Pheadair*, ‘Peter’s point’ (NF723037) and the site of the jetty itself as *Carrraig nan Coineanach*, ‘fishing-rock of the rabbits’ (NF721039).¹⁵

Aird Mhidhnis, the headland south of Aird Mhòr is immediately associated with the fish factory. Jonathan MacNeil (Eoin Feannag), a local of this peninsula, pointed out a place he remembers being called *Cnoc na Brataich* ‘hill of the flag’ (NF716033). Here a flag used to be raised to announce the arrival of herring shoals. Those among the temporary curers who lived on the west side of Barra only had to walk as far as *Beul an Fheadain* (NF683033) just west of Loch an Dùin, from which the flag was visible, to find out whether their work was required. If it is was, the flag would be raised. This simple measure prevented west coast people from walking all the way to Aird Mhidhnis in vain.

Drochaid nan Coineanach ‘bridge of the rabbits’ (NF710038) is located on the right hand side just before the Aird Mhidhnis road swings back round to merge with the main road and *Tobar nan Coineanach* ‘well of the rabbits’ (NF709037) is located on the left hand side of the road. Leaving the Aird Mhidhnis road and waiting to turn onto the main road one’s eye is immediately drawn to a green patch of land midway up Beinn Eireabhail, the grey rocky hill straight ahead. This place is known as *Na Horgh* ‘heap of stones’, ‘cairn’ (NF704040) from ON *hörgr* and in Norway this element usually depicts important sites of heathen worship.¹⁶ Nowadays it is difficult to imagine that this almost forgotten spot, and the densely inhabited council house estate of *Horogh* (NL657970) whose name undoubtedly derives from the same stem, must have been sites of extraordinary religious importance.

The very small and yet striking island (NF706032) in the harbour of *Bàgh a Tuath, Northbay*, was given a total of five different names. The island which is too small to be of any economic use, and too far inland to serve as a nautical point, is visible form the main road junction connecting the East and West roads

¹⁵ Ronald MacKinnon passed away in December 1995 just days before his third interview. He placed more than 150 formerly unrecorded names on the map.

¹⁶ See Rygh, 1898:57.

with the northern route to the airport. This island is known as *Eilean nan Gàadh* ‘geese island’, *Eilean nan Rodan* ‘island of the rats’, possibly after sightings of the animals in question, *Eilean na Craoibh* ‘tree island’, after its vegetation and in contrast to the remaining bare rocks in the harbour, *An t-Eilean Beag* ‘small island’, a descriptive and obvious choice and the undoubtedly youngest name among the five, *Statue Island*, as it is home to a statue of St. Barr created by Northbay artist Margaret Somerville in 1975.

Bruairnis is the largest of the three headlands in the north-east. Its name is a combination of ON *brúar*, f, gen, ‘bridge’ and ON *nes*, n, ‘headland’ and is clearly named after man-made construction to help people pass the muddy dip between Bruairnis and Bogach. The headland itself has three striking elevations on which there are cairns with *Beinn nan Càrnan* ‘mountain of the cairns’ (NF727011) to the south, *An Cnoc Mòr* ‘the big hill’ (NF730013) in middle position and *Meall na Meadhanach* (NF727017) to the north. *G meadhanach* is usually translated as ‘middle’. Although *Meall na Meadhanach* is clearly not in middle of the three hills, its specific may refer to its position relative to other nearby hills. The cairns on the three hills will have played some part in orienteering but it is not clear whether they were used as fishing marks or in order to help pilots find their way to the Tràigh Mhòr airfield. As with many villages on Barra and Vatersay the main settlement on this peninsula is named after the natural feature in whose proximity it is located. *Rubha Chàrnain*, the ‘stony promontory’ (NF723025), designates the rocky stretch of shore used by boats as a navigation guide as they enter Bàgh Shiarabagh and used also to be the name for what is now known as Lower Bruernish. The upper part of Bruairnis is known among locals as *Cnoc nan Caorach*, ‘sheep hill’ (NF725019). The entire area received its nickname ‘Little England’ because it was a favourite among English holiday homebuyers in the 1960s who may have encouraged the use of English names for the upper and the lower part of the village. Like Eolaigearraidh and Vatersay Bruairnis suffered from a complete loss of population during the clearances.

The East

The name *Buaile nam Bodach* ‘milking-place of the old men’ (NF713015) was first recorded in 1814 as *Bualenanbodach* and appeared on the Admiralty Chart in 1874 as *Old Mans Fold*. Legend has it that

MacNeil of Barra's wife was through the buaile (fold) when the women were milking. It was the custom to offer a drink to anyone who passed but for some reason she was not offered it. She cried at the top of her voice: "Bithidh fein Buaile nam Bodach!", 'May yourselves be the fold of the old men!', which was understood to predict for them belated marriages, and unhappy homes afterwards.¹⁷

Loch nic Ruaidhe (NF702018), also known as *Loch na h-Ighne Ruaidhe*, 'loch of the red-haired girl' and *Loch na h-Ighne Bàine*, 'loch of the fair-haired girl' is a rather large loch located in the hills above Loch na h-Obe Cottage. The specific of the name refers to a red-haired girl who supposedly lived at this place and who fell in love with the son of the MacNeil of Barra. When the girl became pregnant, she and her lover escaped by boat and are said to have settled on Colonsay.

Lochan nam Faoileann (NF709014) refers collectively to two lochs located just above the radio transmitter in Buaile nam Bodach. The G word *faoileann* means 'common seagull', 'mew'. However, a derivation from ON *vaðill*, m, 'ford', seems onomastically more appropriate and the G name may have developed as a result of folk-etymology. Dwelly lists *fadhail*, f, with the meaning of 'ford' which suits the geographical setting perfectly as there is a little ford between the two lochs. Locals distinguish between *Loch na Fadhlainn Àrd* and *Loch na Fadhlainn Ìseal*, the 'high' and the 'low loch of the ford'.

Past the township of Buaile nam Bodach at Rubha Lìos lies another loch and at least one of its competing names is of historical interest. Some people call this lake *Loch an Rubha*, 'loch of the promontory', (NF706007) due to its proximity to Rubha Lìos. Others name it after its vegetation *Loch nan Lilies* 'loch of the water lilies' or a name with a less distinctive specific, *Loch nan Flùraichean*, 'loch of the flowers'. The official Ordnance Survey (OS) name - but probably least known - is *Loch Scotageary*. The specific element of this name refers to the settlement *Scotagearraidh* (NF711004) which is said to have been cleared within 24 hours. Whereas foundations of houses can still be traced, nowadays only one family remembered that a settlement by this name ever existed. The generic of this name is derived from ON *gerði*, n, 'enclosure', 'fenced field', 'garden'. The meaning of its specific, however, is uncertain. It may be associated with G *sgot*, m, 'small farm' or 'small flock', which combined with the above generic would result in 'enclosure of the small flock'

17 Farquhar MacRae, Maclean manuscripts, P.8103.

or ‘enclosure of the small farm’. Nevertheless the word order with the generic in second position points rather at a specific of Old Norse origin. Heggstad¹⁸ lists the ON noun *skot*, n, ‘projectile’, ‘shot’. Eysteinnson derives the similar looking specific of the Harris place-name Scotasay from ON *skot*, ‘neuk’, ‘corner’¹⁹, which would also match the geographic location of this name.

The South-east

Allt Heisgeir (NF695006) is a confluence of two rivulets in the valley between Bheinn Ghunaraigh and Thartabhal, and its mouth marks the northern boundary of Earsairidh. Old forms of this name are *Aulthaichair* (1823) and *Allt Haichair* (1901). Whereas the first element, ‘*allt*’, is Gaelic and means ‘stream’, its second element may be of ON but is obscure. The commonly used form of this name is its shortened form *Allt*.

Halfway House is a low-lying cottage in Earsairidh and its location marks the exact midpoint of the journey between Bruairnis and Castlebay. This name was coined in the days when walking long distances was the rule and parts of the journey had to be broken down into measurable units.

One place may have several competing names which were inspired either by different ethnic groups inhabiting the same area, or given by members sharing the same cultural background but living in different communities. In Barra it is not unusual to find several different names in use for one geographical feature. In all known cases these entities are located on or close to township boundaries and consequently must have been in the geographical scope of at least two communities. A local from Gearraidh Gadhal remembered three different names for a bay located south-west of Beinn nan Càrnan: *Bàgh na Teileagraf*, ‘telegraph bay’ (NL690973), *Port a’ Bhuailte*, ‘bay of the hut’, and *Bàgh Hòraid*, a name with an obsolete specific. The first name, *Bàgh na Teileagraf* can be directly linked to Barra’s telegraph connection, which was established in 1884, and is probably the youngest name of the three. *Port a’ Bhuailte* is the name that residents of the township of Gearraidh Gadhal applied to the place, whereas people living on the north side of Beinn nan Càrnan in Brèibhig used *Bàgh Hòraid*, a name most likely of ON origin.

18 L. Heggstad, 1930:610.

19 O. Eysteinnson, 1992.



Halfway House

The South

A name may fall out of use although the place continues to exist. In other cases a name can survive, although the feature it originally referred to may be less and less used and eventually disappear. In Barra this is the case with a stretch of the old road leading from Breibhig to Castlebay. Whereas the new road branches off left to lead down to the village of Castlebay, the old and now overgrown, but still visible, footpath leads to Castlebay via Gleann. Although very few people walk the old path, its name, *An Leathad Cas* ‘the steep slope’ (NL676988), is still known by locals.

The south is dominated by Barra’s capital, Castlebay, which stretches around a sheltered bay at the foot of the island’s largest hill, Sheabhal. Here the name of the village has been taken from the major natural feature nearby. The



Castlebay

village of *Castlebay* has two alternative names, *Baile MhicNèill* ‘MacNeil’s village’, a name listed in Dwelly and remembered by some very old local informants, and *Bàgh a’ Chaisteil*, the Gaelic translation of ‘Castlebay’. The earliest documentation for the name *Castle Bay*, the name actually depicting the bay and not the village, dates back to 1854. An earlier entry on the Maclean map of 1823 calls this area *Kissimul Bay*. *Kisimul*, the rock on which the castle stands, was mentioned for the first time in 1549 as *Kiselnin* and in 1695 as *Kisimul*. The essential clue to solving the derivation of the first part of this name was supplied by Father Allan McDonald, priest of Eriskay, in a list of names dating back to 1903.²⁰ Here he gives *Ciasmul* as an alternative spelling which points at a derivation from ON *kjóss*, m, ‘small bay’ and ON *múli*, m, ‘headland’ or more appropriate in this case ‘sea-rock’. *Kisimul*, ‘rock of the small bay’, provides an accurate geographic setting for this derivation. Another term for the same rock is *A’ Steinn*, a name remembered by the late Malcolm MacAulay, who belonged to an old family of tradition bearers in Castlebay²¹. *A’ Steinn* derives from ON *steinn*, m, and may be translated as ‘stones that cannot be moved’, ‘hill’, ‘rock’, and, as in this location, ‘small rocky island’.

20 A. McDonald 1901-03:432f.

21 Malcolm MacAulay, Sound Archive, Celtic and Scottish Studies, School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures, University of Edinburgh, SA1976/9.

There are a number of rocks at the entrance to Castle Bay and in the bay itself that deserve further discussion. An important nautical marker for boats entering and leaving Castle Bay is the beacon rock which appears on maps as *Sgeir Dubh*, G for ‘dark skerry’. Local fishermen, however, call this rock *Dubhsgeir*, an inversion of *Sgeir Dubh* (NL667967). Travelling around the bay in an anticlockwise direction there is the small island of *Orasaigh*, on which another *An Taigh Geal* (NL666971), ‘the white house’ was located. The southerly tip of *Orasaigh* is called *An Rubha Dubh*, ‘the dark point’. There are four islands in the Barra group alone called *Orasaigh*. They all share the same geographical peculiarity, i.e. being an island at high tide and being connected to a larger island at low tide. This is reflected in the name which is translated as ‘ebb-tide island’, a combination of ON *órför*, f, ‘ebb-tide’ and ON *ey*, f, ‘island’. *Orasaigh*, or in its Anglicised spelling *Orosay* or *Oronsay* are frequently occurring place-names in the Western Isles, Norway and in Iceland. The small rock to the west of *Orasaigh* is *Innisgeir* (NL664972) whose generic is clearly derived from ON *sker*, n, ‘skerry’. Its first element is likely to be of ON origin but cannot be clearly identified. There is *Eilean nan Rodan* ‘island of rats’, just south of *Leigemul* (NL665975) whose first element is obscure. Its generic - as in *Kisimul* - is based on ON *múli*, m, ‘headland’, or here ‘rock surrounded by the sea’. The small rocks between the castle and *Ledaig* are called *Sgeirean Cùil a’ Bhaile*, ‘skerries at the neuk of the village’, or simply *Na Sgeirean* (NL666978). *Bun na h-Aibhne*, ‘mouth of the river’ (NL669981), depicts the area at which *An t-Allt Ruadh* ‘the red stream’ (NL673982) runs into the bay. This river has various names depending on its location in the village. Its upper section is *Allt a’ Ghlinne* ‘stream of the valley’, which changes into *Allt Alasdair* ‘Alexander’s stream’ and eventually becomes *An t-Allt Ruadh* beside *Morag MacNeill’s* croft.

The stretch of harbour outside the main shopping area of Castlebay is named *Port na h-Àirde* ‘port of the promontory’ (NL666982) after *An Àird Ghlas* ‘the grey headland’ (NL666983) at the foot of which the ferry terminal, the post office and the bank are located. This area used to be called *Cnoc na Féille*, ‘market hill’, but the market has long gone. Unsurprisingly the names for this area have almost been forgotten. The headland has been so dramatically transformed and built over with houses, shops and tarmac that its original specific, the colour of the headland, is no longer the main distinguishing factor. People orientate themselves by the position of the shops in the street rather than any natural features.

The South-west

The south-west is dominated by one large and several small mountains and a treacherous coastline indented with extremely dangerous *slocs*, the long, narrow, deep inlets carved into the stone by the sea. The highest elevation is *Beinn Tangabhail*, a Gaelic-Norse composition derived from G *beinn*, f, 'mountain' and the ON specific composed of ON *tangi*, m, 'headland' and ON *ffjall*, n, mountain. What is now the ON specific would originally have been the full name assigned to the feature with ON *ffjall* 'mountain' acting as generic. As over the centuries the ON name became obsolete, and Norse was no longer understood, the name transformed into an onomastic unit and knowledge of its meaning was no longer essential. The original ON name became a specific and the new generic, G *beinn*, 'mountain', was added. *Beinn Tangabhail* also has a purely G alternative name, *A' Bheinn Mhòr* 'the large hill'. A secondary peak, just 200-300m west of the highest one is named *Beinn na Cailliche* 'hill of the old woman' or *A' Bheinn Bhreac* 'speckled hill'. The hill around which the road leading from Nasg to the causeway bends is named after a small loch south-west of its peak. The name of the mountain is *Beinn an Lochain* 'mountain of the small loch' (NL643985) and the name of the loch on the mountain slope is *Loch Bheinn an Lochain* 'loch of *Beinn an Lochain*' or - if the specific is broken up into its components - 'loch of the mountain of the small loch'. In the name of the loch the specific, *Beinn an Lochain*, has become an onomastic unit, a tag, whose meaning is no longer of importance to the name user and therefore the element 'loch' occurs in the name of the loch twice, once as a generic and once as part of the specific, both referring to the same feature.

Looking across to *Beinn Tangabhail* from *Caolas* in *Vatersay* there are patches of particularly green grass sloping down to a sandy beach. These are the remains of a settlement named *Goirtein* from G *goirtean* 'enclosure' (NL635982), a cleared area. Before *Barraigh* and *Bhatarsaigh* were connected via a causeway in 1991 cattle used to be swum across *Caolas Bhatarsaigh*, the 'sound of *Vatersay*', and regularly landed at *Làimhrig nam Mart* 'landing-place of the cows' (NL634978).

Vatersay (Bhatarsaigh)

Vatersay, the island that lies just south of *Barra* has had a vivid past and has been home to a number of tragedies, clearances, raid and eventually re-settlement. Its

permanent connection to Barra had pros and cons: Before the causeway was built its irregular ferry service to Barra meant that people could not always rely on goods being shipped across on time and they had to make their own way to attend dances and celebrations in Castlebay which in a few occasions resulted in tragic drowning accidents. However, in general the islanders enjoyed a status in which the law was not always as readily enforced as on the its neighbouring island.

The three settlements on Vatersay have straightforward names. *Caolas*, the village to the north of the island, is the Gaelic word for ‘sound’ (NL633973) and takes its name from the *Sound of Vatersay, Caolas Bhatarsaigh*. *Uidh*, the most easterly village, is derived from G *uidh*, f, a loan from ON *eið*, f, and means ‘isthmus, neck of land’ and is a perfect description of its geographic setting. Historic forms of the name include 1823 *Uiehead*, 1833 *Uigh*, 1836 *Aoidh* and 1851 *Uie*. *Bhatarsaigh*, or *Vatersay Village* (NL633943) is the largest settlement and lies in the southern part of the island. An old name for this village is *An Scarp*. There is an island in Harris called An Scarp and the element is also reflected in historic spellings of a neighbouring island in Barra that is now known as *Maol Dòmhnach*. Earliest written records refer to *Maol Dòmhnach* as 1549 *Scarpanamutt* and 1654 *Scarpa*. However, the meaning of this element remains obscure.

A chain of mountains dominates the northern part of the island. The highest mountain at 190m is *A' Bheinn Mhòr* ‘the big mountain’ (NL626964) which appears on Sharbau’s estate plan of 1901 as *Bein a' Carnan*, a composition of G *beinn*, ‘mountain’ and G *càrn*, ‘cairn, rock, pile of stones’. Its smaller counterpart, *A' Bheinn Bheag* ‘little mountain’, is 149m high and lies just west of *A' Bheinn Mhòr* at NL619965. On maps the OS incorrectly list the highest mountain of Vatersay as *Theiseabhal Mòr*. *Theiseabhal Mòr* is 172m high and lies in fact further east (NL638961) where the OS placed *Theiseabhal Beag* on the maps. This in return lies still further east (NL641962) and is the elevation round which the road to Vatersay Village leads. Whereas the specifics of the previous two mountain names, *beag* and *mòr*, are G and mean ‘small’ and ‘large’ respectively, the first element is clearly related to ON *Heistafjall* with ON *hestr*, m, ‘horse’, and ON *fjall*, n, ‘mountain’. It was at the slope of this mountain that a Catalina sea plane crashed on 12th May 1944 with six of the nine crew members surviving the impact. The remains of the plane can still be seen scattered between the road and the shore (NL640956).

Between the peaks of the chain of mountains there are a number of passes which people used as shortcuts. They are particularly visible when travelling from Caolas in a southerly direction. As might be expected the most easterly pass between *Theiseabhal Mòr* and *Theiseabhal Beag* is called *Bealach Theiseabhail* ‘pass of Theiseabhail’ (NL639963). The pass between *Theiseabhal Mòr* and *A’ Bheinn Mhòr* has a descriptive name, *Am Bealach Uaine*, ‘the green pass’ (NL634961). The most prominent pass of this mountain range is *Bealach nan Daoine* ‘pass of the people’ (NL624964) and separates *Theiseabhal Mòr* to the east and *A’ Bheinn Bheag* to the west.

Although Bhatarsaigh has a number of small rivulets there is no substantial lake on the island. The three lochs indicated on the OS map are shallow. Two of them, *Loch Dhòmhnail a’ Bhealaich* ‘lake of ‘Donald of the Pass’ (NL634974) and *Loch Bean Iain* ‘lake of Bean Iain (Ian’s wife)’ (NL632973) lie just beside the road in Caolas, the third one, *Loch Pheigi* ‘Peggy’s loch’ (NL631943) lies at the end of the road in Vatersay Village. *Dòmhnail a’ Bhealaich* is the nickname of Donald MacDonald who was one of the first people to resettle on the island after its compulsory purchase by the Congested Districts Board from Lady Gordon Cathcart. It is striking that the names of all the lochs on Vatersay have specifics that refer to people, rather than the more common situation where specifics refer to the shape of a loch, vegetation or other natural feature. It would be very interesting to trace the names of the two pools (NL623938 and NL623945) at the slope of *Beinn Ruilibreac* just south west of Vatersay Village which remain unidentified.

Conclusion

The place-names of Barra and Vatersay give evidence of the inhabitants’ history, their perception of their surroundings, their work and social life, their superstitions, customs, beliefs and most of all their attachment to the land. Changes in land use, in climate, social life, technology and transport have all contributed to places being visited less often and their place-names as an inevitable result being on the verge of being forgotten or place-names already lost. But not all is bleak. Work life on Barra has changed dramatically and the arrival of the internet means that more people can choose to stay and work on the island and although most new jobs are being carried out indoors these people will spend at least part of their leisure time outdoors. The internet also facilitates research into and publication of relevant place-name material which can be accessed by people from anywhere in the world.

Barra's leisure industry has experienced an amazing boost and organised kayak tours take place throughout the summer permitting access to coastal features which are difficult if not impossible to reach from land. To the visitor the most obvious change in the attitude to place-names on Barra is no doubt the erection of numerous place-name signs stating the names of villages and townships in Gaelic and English. The recent acknowledgement of Gaelic as one of the official languages of Scotland by the Scottish Executive has helped to strengthen the status of Gaelic on the islands and to ensure at least equal treatment of English and Gaelic. The Ordnance Survey, in the past guilty of rather crude Anglicisation of Gaelic names, has responded with the publication of the new Explorer Series in which the majority of major place-names appear in both English and Gaelic and most names of smaller features in their modern Gaelic spelling.

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List of abbreviations

f	feminine
G	Gaelic
m	masculine
n	neuter
ON	Old Norse
OS	Ordnance Survey

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Maps

- 1823: Maclean "*Map of Barra*" as part of John Thomson, "Southern Part of the Western Isles", scale 1 2/3 miles = 1 inch.
- 1861-62: Admiralty Chart no. 2770 "*Scotland West Coast, Hebrides, Sound of Barra*", small corrections in 1874, scale 1:15000
- 1901: Plan of the Estate of Barra belonging to John Gordon of Cluny, surveyor H. Sharbau, RHP 44187, West Register House, Edinburgh.
- 2003: *Barra & Vatersay / Barraigh agus Bhatarsaigh*, Explorer 452, 1:25 000, Ordnance Survey.

Sound Archive

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