

Fetlar2013

The Clearances

The Clearances refer to a period of time during the 18th and 19th Centuries when residents were forcefully displaced from their homes and lands to make room for sheep grazing. The act was carried out by landowners in all parts of Scotland, and was the result of an agricultural revolution supported by the government, who gave financial aid for roads and bridges to assist the new sheep-based agriculture and trade.

Sir Arthur Nicolson

In 1805 the Nicolson family came into possession of parts of the island; the landowner, Sir Arthur Nicolson, designed and commissioned the building of Brough Lodge, which was completed c. 1820 – 1825, and still stands today on the west side of Fetlar.

During the 1820s, the Clearances began to be emulated by Fetlar landowners. Nicolson began enclosing ever larger portions of the island, displacing many families in the process. Many of these families migrated to other parts of Shetland and some even further afield, to places like Australasia and North America. Eventually, Nicolson began to forcefully evict his tenants, so that even more land could be turned over to the grazing of sheep.

Many ruins of old crofting houses may now be seen on the island. It is reputed that walls and other buildings were made using stone from these buildings, as at the Round House on the east side of Fetlar.

The Effects of the Clearances

Although the Clearances reached Shetland later in comparison to the Scottish highlands, the effects can still be seen today. In Fetlar, the Clearances contributed to a decline in population from which Fetlar has only recently begun to recover.

A major contributory factor to this continued decline was the lack of a pier or natural harbour. Many of the other island communities that existed during the time of the Clearances were able to supplement their income and provide additional foodstuffs for trade through working at sea – in some cases, this became the main source of employment and industry for those communities, and continues to this day.

In the case of Fetlar, there was a tradition of haaf fishing – but this dangerous occupation came to an end in the 19th Century with the arrival of new technology. Because there was no pier or natural harbour at Fetlar, the larger boats could not be kept year round in safety, and the community became almost totally reliant on crofting. With pressure from the lairds to pay rent, and fear of falling into debt, this made life extremely difficult – and so many more families were forced to leave Fetlar in order to find greater opportunities elsewhere.

Today, Fetlar remains mainly a crofting community, with a large amount of land given over to the raising of livestock. However, unlike in the past, the opportunity for part-time work both on and off the island is greater – and it is hoped, given time, that the island community will complete its recovery.

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