

From Clan MacLeod society South Australia Newsletter Feb 2013

ISLE OF BERNERAY AND MACLEODS

reprint of NSW Clan MacLeod Soc News

The Isle of Berneray is in the Sound of Harris, Outer Hebrides, and regarded as part of Harris. However, now it is connected by a causeway to North Uist.

Historically, the island is held by the MacLeods of Berneray under MacLeod of MacLeod. The Berneray Historical Society has started a project :- A'tilleadh ar n-eachdraidh dhachaigh (Bringing our history home), exploring the historical and cultural impact of emigration from the Isle of Berneray.

The Society has identified 95 individual MacLeods out of about 500 people who have emigrated to known destinations, mostly in the 18th and 19th centuries. Details of those who departed in the 20th century are less known. Peter Kerr who represents the Society, is very keen to hear from anyone whose ancestors once lived on Berneray. They are gathering details of ancestor stories and want to hear if any Berneray tales, legends, poems, or songs, have survived. They are also interested in artifacts, traditions, practices and festivals that have connection to Berneray.

If you have Berneray links then inform Peter, as it could be beneficial and rewarding.

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The search for Berneray people prompted a look at this oft forgotten MacLeod Isle.

Berneray, Norse for Bjorn's Island is about 10 sq km.

The highest point is Beinn Shieibhe (Moor Hill) at 93m. the population of 137 is spread throughout several small villages.

Notable features on the island are the long white sandy beaches and dunes, behind which is the machair, the coastal plain supporting rich grazing pastures and plentiful wildflowers.

Over time, careful management by crofters has enriched the machair by application of seaweeds and manure. Fallowing and rotation has ensured sustainable agriculture.

Wildlife includes the common grey seal, and otter. The birds list the corncrake, hen-harriers and golden eagle, plus shore waders:- redshanks, sanderlings, turnstones, oystercatchers, curlews and herons. On the lochs are mute swans, greylag and barnacle geese, mallard and eider ducks.

Berneray made news in 1987 when Prince Charles lived with a crofter for a week of normal Berneray life. The visit prompted the documentary "A Prince among Islands" 1991. He returned in 1997 to open the causeway connection to Nth Uist. Islanders can now drive to Lochmaddy and the ferries to access the mainland in shorter time to get their fishery harvest to market.

The Isle has been populated for over 5,000 years by native and invading people attracted by the fertile land. Evidence of occupation includes Cnoc Na Greine (Hillock of the sun) a hilltop stone circle, perhaps once a centre of pre christian sun worship. There is Cidhe mor Mhicleoid (Big Quay of MacLeod), a mostly submerged Viking pier near the youth hostel. South is Beinn a'Chlaidh a great standing stone, and the site of a Chapel to St Columba.

Nearby to the west is the Bronze Age chambered cairn where kings were buried with their treasure. Another standing stone "The stone of the king" has the imprint of a foot and inscriptions.

On the machair are a collection of rocks said to be where Vikings held their trials.

In 1827 engineer Thomas Telford built a church with 2 doors, one for the Berneray locals and one for the folk of the nearby Isle of Pabbay, who rowed boats over for the services.



