

ULTACH GHILLE MHOIRE (THE WEIGHT/BURDEN OF MORRISON)

ISLAND OF BERNERAY

The island of Berneray is linked to North Uist by a causeway and is well worth visiting as the island itself has a flavour and a culture far different from its near neighbour. In Gaelic and Clan ownership terms, although closer to North Uist, Berneray is part of the Island of Harris estate and the indigenous people of the island see themselves as more attached to the culture of the Island of Harris than they do North Uist with which they are now linked.

This aspect of its culture is actually shown in its proper Gaelic name *Beàrnaraigh na Hearadh* meaning Berneray of Harris although the roots of its name are indeed old Norse meaning Bjorns Island.

Geographically, until the early 1900's most people on the island resided on its flat west side, covered in machair the fertile land was farmed extensively however most of the current population of just over 100 are now found on the island's east coast. In stone lifting history, our emphasis is on the now remote west side of the island.

Little remains of the community that existed near Loch Beag Bhuirgh but the remains of the crofts and buildings can be clearly seen around the area of the curiously styled stone chair. Within this area sits Ultach Ghille Mhoire or the weight or burden of Morrison. The stone is still there, it is just that the local inhabitants have through the passage of time lost the knowledge of what stone was that which was lifted.

The only description of the stone is that it was a large white stone and there are a few scattered about the remains of the former community situated some 400 feet south of the lochan.



The Curious Stone Chair

The stone was first lifted by Donald Morrison and was named after him. Very little is known of Morrison himself other than the fact he was an islander and exceptionally strong however more is known of his death. In 1842 the sailing ship "Sir William Wallace" floundered off the west coast of Berneray. Morrison and another man were chosen to guard

the vessel during the night however both died through exposure put down to the fact that in severe weather they were wearing only mogan, a heavy knitted woolen stocking worn without shoes.

There are many suitable white stones that match the description with the best example lying slightly north east of the stone chair. Perhaps further investigation will reveal the true stone but the site is still worthy of visiting.

A White Stone and a reasonable possibility

I am sure that one may be asking why should I visit this stone lifting site to lift a stone that we are unsure of ? However the answer to this question could have been answered by the Giant Angus MacAskill who was born and was raised for the first 14 years of his life only a half mile from this very community.

Angus would have known well the stone and the timelines of both he and Morrison and indeed the size of the island make it more than reality that they actually knew each other. MacAskill was born near Cnoc nan Claigean and his birthplace is marked with a standing stone cairn exactly the same height as the man himself. The memorial looks over turquoise waters to the northern shores of North Uist and the solitude and indeed the tranquillity of this location should be experienced.



The memorial to Angus MacAskill.

One should note that per chance there are a large number of stones lying immediately outside the memorial. If visiting the testing stones of North Uist it would be remiss of the stone lifter not to make the short journey to Berneray and pay respect to Angus MacAskill. I could think nothing better than lifting any of the stones with the memorial in the back ground.