

Siabost Norse Mill – Postscript

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Keith and I visited the Western Isles in September. On the Isle of Lewis we went in search of the set of 4 Norse mills that the guide book mentioned at **Valtos**, and for which it gave an apparently very clear set of instructions to get there. We eventually found the lowest mill but could not get near it or to see the other 3 mills higher up the stream because heavy rainfall had enlarged the intervening marsh and bog, and a stile at the start of the walk had been removed, which caused us to set off in the wrong direction.



We were more successful at collecting information. I bought *The Norse Mills of Lewis* by Finlay MacLeod (a member of TIMS) with drawings by John Love (Acair 2009, ISBN 978086 1523627, also available in a fully Gaelic version) which was a good purchase. As the book reports, in 1850 there were 114 intact and 58 derelict sites on Lewis alone. Today over 250 are known, almost all of which now have very little or no remains.

There were also 5 vertical mills which were built by proprietors or other wealthy individuals and collected a levy of 1/16 of the grain milled. They were situated at Stornoway 1718, burnt down in 1890, and replaced by Garabost; Griaies 1820 (*right*); Nis 1830; and Breascleit.



The Norse mills were local and free, and suited the relatively small quantities of bere and oats being grown in 'lazy beds' on the crofts, and so continued to be used until about the first world war. The book relates that the wife of a fisherman could reap, dry, sieve, and mill the barley, and bake it into a bannock all in the time that it took the fisherman to get ready. Once he had caught his first cod he would insert the fresh liver into the bannock and sit on it on the thwart to allow the melting liver to infuse the bannock; and then eat it!

The book also provided more information on kilns. The kiln 'bowl' or recess was topped by two boulders supporting a wooden cross beam with shorter beams forming a miniature roof.

This was then covered in straw and the grain was scattered in top to a depth of 3in. Sheaves were placed on the platform to stop the grain from sliding off. When it was dry the sheaves were removed, allowing the grain to slide off onto the platform.



From theardbernera.com

It was in 1970 that Siabost Junior Secondary School rebuilt the mill at Siabost (Muileann nan Gobhaichean) and a new kiln was later built from scratch alongside.

Something similar has happened on Great Bernara at **Breacleit (Muileann Bhreacleit)** which the book describes as "a most attractive mill in its perfect setting" (*left*). Unfortunately we didn't manage to get there either as it is difficult to reach across several wild and stony hillsides despite the signed footpath. I can only salute the local historical society who undertook its restoration.

All the Norse mills on Lewis seem to have had similar boulder-built walls with wood and straw domed roofs which do not survive well, while the millstones tend to end up miles away as garden ornaments and such like. So Siabost is a noteworthy survival.



Mill site at Einacleit compared with restored mill at Siabost

However, after our failures on Lewis, we did come across one site with the remains of the mill building and water course on the west coast of Sutherland at **Clashnessie**, which we later confirmed from Canmore (National Record of the Historic Environment, Scotland) to be a Norse mill dating from the 18th to 19th century.



