Siabost Norse Mill and Drying Kiln, Isle of Lewis

Ivor New

In early May my brother and I set off on a tour of the Islands and Highlands of Scotland. It was the week after the famous spring heatwave and there was a complete reversal in the weather. When the sun was out it was glorious; unfortunately the amount of full sun was at least equalled by the rain, hail, sleet and snow, the remaining time being overcast. Not the best of weather when you are travelling in a camper. We did not get down-hearted, just accepted the walking we intended to do would be curtailed and we would just have to spend more time at tourist attractions and sampling the fare provided by the local hostelries.

We found the Norse Mill at Siabost (Shawbost) by following the brown tourist road sign. The location of the mill is dictated by the course of the nearby stream which flows out of Loch Roinavat. This is not unusual as many similar mills were built on streams fed by lochs and it is easy to find ruins in this sort of location that could well have been mills.

These mills provide an insight into the life of the poor on Lewis and other small communities in the Highlands and Islands. Historically these communities had attributes that can well be described as feudal and life was hard. Early on there were clearances forcibly imposed on the Jacobite supporting communities for political reasons but later the pressures were economic. In common with other poorer areas in Europe the very existence of this type of community became problematical as the social pressures produced by the Industrial Revolution became more intense and landowners increasingly found their tenants were unable to generate income, causing the established way of living to become untenable.

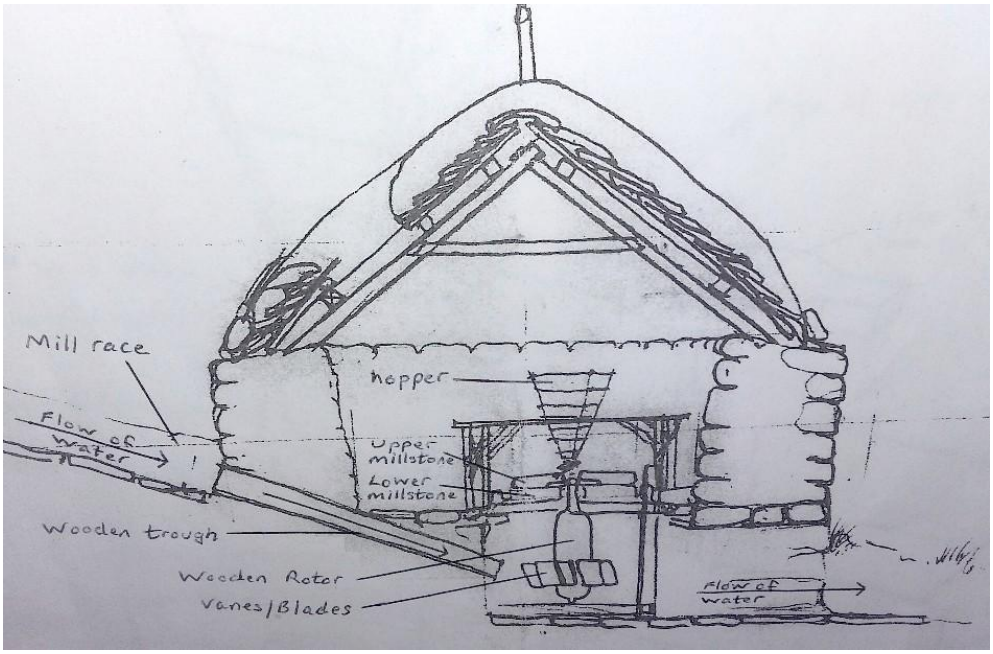
At other times differing pressures provided the main catalyst for the depopulation, the two most significant immediate causes being famine and unemployment. The Irish potato famine is well recognised but the potato blight, fed by a decade of poor harvests, spread over the poorer areas of Scotland and much of mainland Europe. The results were the same – starvation and emigration. The Industrial Revolution also led to depopulation of the countryside and the improvements in hygiene led to an increase in population with no proportional increase in income to support it, which only increased hardship.

The reactions of the land-owners varied from blatant disregard for their ex-tenants to providing them with some support. We found two examples of landlords that actively followed the latter path. In one case tenants were provided with passage to Canada to join established Scottish communities where free land was available. (I'm not trying to justify colonialism, just acknowledging the provision of a new life for impoverished people.) In the other case the landowner built a new harbour for fishing boats with associated housing, thus making available food and income for the surviving population.

In general, the net result was that countless small communities were lost, although some managed to survive well into the 20th century. These were in the minority and most such hamlets have completely disappeared from sight, becoming indistinguishable and

overgrown in the landscape. There were hundreds of grain mills scattered throughout Lewis by the 1840s that were used to mill corn or barley. The Siabost mill and its drying kiln were still in use until the 1930s although they are now the only visible buildings on the hillside.

Restoration of the mill and kiln was started in the 1960s, however the buildings as they stand now were completed in 1995, although they have been rethatched recently. The interiors of both buildings are quite dark as there are no windows. The two oval buildings have rubble dry stone double skinned walls and have well-constructed traditional thatched roofs which are roped down about twin crowsticks. This can be seen in the pictures.

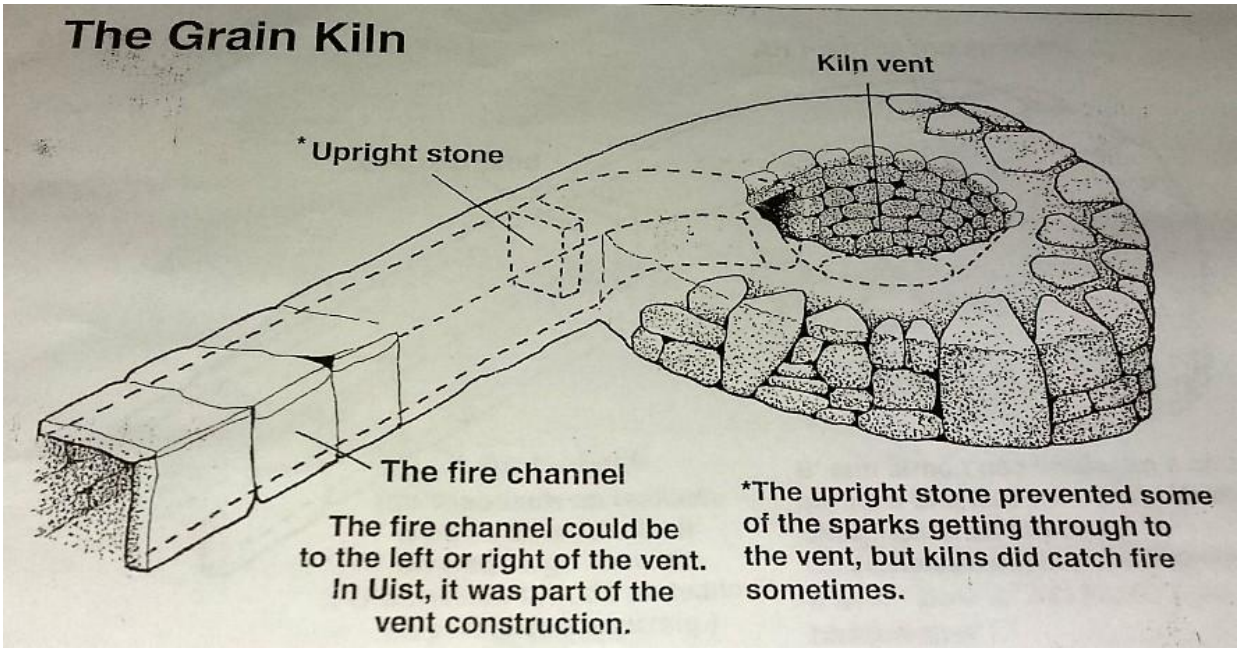


The design of this and many of the mills around Lewis is ancient and date back to the Vikings or possibly even the Iron Age.

Editor. There is a set of 4 such mills at Valtos on Lewis (my guide book says). I have seen other examples in Orkney and Shetland, and also in Bosnia and Montenegro (the last as described in my article above). They are also in the Faroe Islands, which I plan to write about in the next newsletter.

Grain is fed from the hopper to a spout attached to it which is vibrated by the clapper peg which runs on the uneven surface of the running stone and so feeds grain into the throat of the upper stone at a rate proportional to the speed of rotation of the stone. The grain then proceeds between the stones and appears as meal at the periphery of the bed stone and falls into a channel from which it is swept into a waiting bag or basket.

Water from the loch is channelled to the top of the mill race just behind the mill. Here the land slopes downward to the mill where the fast-flowing water is used to turn the millstone. In the mill undercroft the water drives a vertical shaft with a set of paddles (*tirl*) beneath the mill floor which directly drives the running stone. This is visible through the gap in the undercroft wall that accommodates the tail race. The tentering mechanism can also be seen which comprises a simple lever arrangement that raises the whole of the vertical paddle shaft and running stone, so adjusting the separation of the stones and hence the fineness of the meal produced.



It is not obvious from the diagram how the kiln operates. Externally there is a channel which presumably provides fresh air for the fire and drying process, something like a Roman hypocaust. Inside there is a round stone-lined pit which is connected to the outside channel.

Clearly the grain would be laid out to be dried in the building, although it is not clear how this would have been arranged in detail, but nonetheless the grain must have been dried adequately to be milled effectively.

Editor: I suspect that there was some sort of platform supported on the ledge above the bowl of the kiln. This ledge is visible in the photograph, but not in the diagram.