

## Rubh' an Dùnain: A Short Historical Perspective

The following document is an extract from an archaeological field study by the respected Morvern Maritime Centre on behalf of Historic Scotland in 2009. It was researched and written by Dr Paula Martin, former editor of the International Journal of Nautical Archaeology and currently editor of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland's, Scottish Archaeological Internet Reports.

---

Paula Martin, 21 September 2009

Presented below are the results of preliminary historical research into the history of the site. There is no doubt that further work in the archives at Dunvegan, the National Archives of Scotland and the Highland Archives would yield further information.

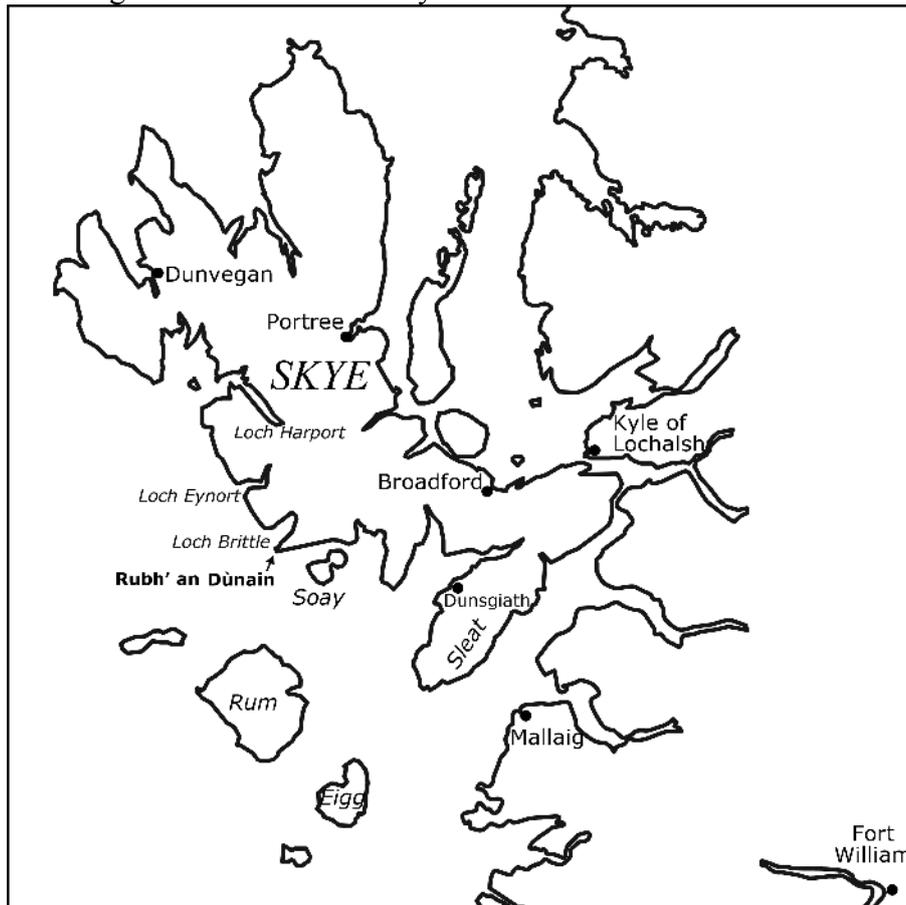


Figure 21. Location map.

### Landownership

The land of Rubh' an Dùnain has always belonged to the Macleods, whose first chief was said to have lived between 1200 and 1280. Their main base on Skye is at a very sheltered natural anchorage overlooked by a dun/castle. However, Dunvegan looks north and north-west, while this site, towards the south-western limit of their lands (from the later medieval period) looks out towards the Small Isles.

The site is traditionally the home of the MacAskills, thought to be one of the oldest families in Skye and, like the Macleods, of Norse origin. 'From very early times this sept occupied the district of Rudha 'n Dùnain, where the ruins of the family residence may still be seen. Before the MacDonalids took possession of Dun Sgathaich [on the west side of Sleaf], it is said to have been held by the MacAskills as wardens of that fort under the Norse kings of Man. In after days, when reiving prevailed, they filled the office of *comes litoris*, or coast-watcher, to

the MacLeods; and one of them always did duty as commodore on board the principal galley of the chief of that clan' (Nicolson 1930, 361–2). Most of them were buried in the churchyard by Loch Eynort. The first MacAskill named in historical documents is William, seneschal of Dunvegan and foster-brother of Malcolm, the third chief (c.1296–c.1370).

If other timbers from the site are also dated to c.1100, this raises the question of whether they relate in any way to either the Macleods or the MacAskills. at least in terms of present historical knowledge.

### **Macleods and the sea**

Like other clans on the western seaboard, there is no doubt that the Macleods built and maintained galleys/birlinns for their own use. According to the Privy Council Records in 1613, a galley had 16–24 oars, a birlinn 12–16 (Grant 1959, 16). The finest surviving representation of a west highland galley is on the tomb built by Alexander MacLeod (c.1455–1547), 8th chief, at Rodel, on Harris.

Under the feudal system subordinate landowners had a duty to provide vessels when required by their overlord. There are four references to boat-service in the Dunvegan archives. NRAS2950/1/1/1–3 [1329–1371], is an 18th-century copy of a charter by David II in favour of Malcolm, son of Tormod MacLeod, of 8 davochs and 5 pennyland of the tenement of Glenelg for reddendo of service of one ship of 26 oars. NRAS2950/1/2/1–4, 15 Jun 1498, is a charter by James IV to Alexander MacLeod, son and heir of deceased William John MacLeod of Dunvegan, of lands commonly called Ardmanach in Lewis, with the islands pertaining thereto, and of 6 unciates of the lands of Duirinish, 4 unciates of the lands of Minginish, 4 unciates of the lands of Bracadale, 1 unciate of the lands of Lyndale and 2 unciates of the lands of Trotternish with the office of baillie of the latter, lying in Skye in the lordship of the Isles. Part of the reddendo is the maintenance of a ship of 26 oars and 2 ships of 16 oars to be at the service of the kings of Scotland in times of peace as well as war.

There is a reference to a large galley being built below Dun Sgathaich in 1506 (Nicolson 1930, 47). In the mid-16th century, 'an injunction was served on Donald Gormeson, to restrain him from taking timber 'for long faddis (galleys) from the MacKenzie's territories' (Nicolson 1930, 100). NRAS2950/1/37, 15 Feb 1613, is a contract of marriage between Rory MacLeod of Harris and Moir, his daughter, and Donald MacAllan Vicean of Island Tirrim and John (of) Moidart, his son. Rory binds himself to provide for his daughter's tocher, nine score 'quick ky' together with other 20 should they be desired and a 24-oar galley with sails and rowing gear. NRAS2950/4/70/1–2, 6 May 1693, is a letter from John Moore to Roderick MacLeod of Dunvegan borrowing a saw and some rope for use on his '8 oared' boat.

The last known mention at Dunvegan relating to a galley is recorded by I. F. Grant in her history of the Macleods (1959, 360) from the accounts for 1706 (though the document she refers to has not yet been identified by the present archivist). MacLeod's birlinn cost 24 merks for 30 yards of white plaiding for her sails, 80 merks for 'wages for beating the said boat', 39 merks for 6 dozen of oak, 18 merks for 3 stones of oakum (for caulking), and 18 merks for 600 seams and roof to the said boat, and for 300 double-plencher nails, a total of 179 merks (about £119 Scots or £10 sterling). 'In the epic tales there are many 'ranns' describing the lofty, peaked, smooth galleys with their speckled, bulging sails, and, alike in the classic poetry in praise of the chiefs and the less formal rowing and 'waulking' songs, the qualities of the galleys are a constant theme. There are many allusions in MacLeod poetry, notably in the Songs of Mary Macleod' (Grant 1959, 16–17).

### **Rubh' an Dùnain in context**

'towards the base of these bare and precipitous crags [Cuillins], the ground, enriched by the soil washed away from them, is verdant and productive' (Scott, 1998, 84). The farm of 'Rhudunan', as it is generally referred to in estate documents, lies in the barony of Minginish and the parish of Bracadale. By modern roads, via Sligachan, it is slightly closer to Portree than Broadford. The old parish church stood on the shore of Loch Eynort, and would have been accessible by boat from Rhudunan, weather permitting.

As the farm has always lain within the lands of the Macleods of Dunvegan, no specific records have so far been identified from before the 18th century. It is good arable land, and has long been associated with the island of Soay, which provided pasture. Martin Martin described the island, which he called 'Soa-Brettil', as 'full of bogs, and fitter for pasture than cultivation' (1716, 161). He also noted that 'there is an Anchoring-place for Barks, between *Skie* and the *Isle Soa*' (1716, 138). Because of the quality of the land at Rhudunan, tracing its history is complicated by the fact that as small farms were combined, the name was sometimes applied, as is Glen Brittle today, to a wider area than the original farm. Indeed when Glenbrittle House was first built it seems to have been called Rhudunan House.

According to the *Old Statistical Account*, 'The greatest number of farms in the parish have no kelp, and such of them as have any, manufacture it only once every two or three years'. Loch Bracadale and Loch Harport are safe anchorages, Loch Eynort less so, and Loch Brittle 'an open bay, and not a safe harbour'. The islands of Haversay, Vulay, Oransay and Soay were not inhabited, just used as pasture (*OSA* 153–4). The population of the parish was estimated at 2250, despite emigration (128 people had left between 1771 and 1774, about 200 in 1788, and about 200 in 1790). All attended the Church of Scotland except for 2 Episcopalians. The main agricultural product was black cattle, with a few sheep and horses, some grain, oats, barley and potatoes, but no flax or hemp. Macleod of Macleod was patron and sole heritor. There were no roads or bridges; 'there are in general no stone inclosures; there are some feal dykes, which get an annual reparation. There are some other kinds of ditches, or feal dykes of a more durable form'.

Although the *Old Statistical Account* stated there were no towns or villages, the situation was changing. Sir James Macdonald (1741–66) was an improver and 'among his many projects was the building of a large village at Portree, in order to stimulate local industries and to foster trade' (Nicolson 1930, 282). In 1787 the British Fisheries Society bought land at Stein to build a fishing station, to be called Lochbay. They built a quay, stores and dwelling-houses (Nicolson 1930, 298).

By the time the *New Statistical Account* was written in 1840, the population had decreased to 1769 at the last census, due to agricultural changes. There was little arable land, and the annual exports included *c.*4500 sheep and *c.*450 black cattle. The only modern buildings were 'the church, a distillery, two slated houses on feued ground lately built, and some farm-houses, all of the ordinary materials'. There was a Post Office at Struan, half a mile from the Parliamentary road, of which there were about 20 miles within the parish. 'The road and bridges are always kept in good repair'. The church had been built in 1831, the manse about 40 years ago, with additions and repairs in 1828. There were 5 schools in the parish (*NSA* 298). 'The only fuel used in the parish, except in gentlemen's houses, is peat'. The presence of the distillery was seen by the minister as 'a curse', and the excessive availability of whisky 'to the manifest injury of the temporal interests of the people, and the progressive and sure destruction of their morals' (*NSA* 299).

By the 1890s there were cattle markets at Broadford in May, August and September, at Portree in May and August, and at Sligachan in August and September. The lime produced in Broadford and Vaternish was not 'of a quality very suitable for agricultural use, and much of what is so employed is brought in from the N of Ireland'. Sheep were sold at Inverness, Muir of Ord and Falkirk. The only woollen manufacture on the island was at Portree, where there was also a sheriff court. Of the 19 first-class, 343 second-class, and 503 third-class fishing boats registered in the Skye and Loch Carron district in 1894, probably only a third belonged to Skye. In 1892 the Fisheries Board erected a 700-ft-long stone pier at Broadford.

Glen Brittle saw increased activity in the 1930s, when the beach at the foot of the glen was for a number of years the calling-place for 'planes flying between Renfrew and the Outer Isles. The most suitable landing-ground in Skye, it was probably the most inaccessible by road' (MacPherson 1946, 161).

### Rhudunan—tenancy history

Tacksman named in estate records include John MacAskill c.1640; Kenneth, his son, 1644; John Dhu, another son, 1683, and John (Iain Mor), son of the above (Murray 2002). The lands in the barony of Minginish in 1708 (*Book of Dunvegan*, 79) consisted of 23 named farms, of between 1 and 6 penny value, with 23 tenants: Rhudunan was a 3-pennyland paying 110 merks, 8 bolls of grain/meal and one mairt (beef killed and salted in the autumn, for eating over the winter), the only one of the farms to contribute a mairt). This John was succeeded by John (Iain Og), his son (1721–1775) who held Rhudunan from 1754 to 1791 (NRAS 2950/2/66.). From 1769 he also rented Leasol (NRAS 2950/1/987/1–2; 4/290; 2/66).

| Farm                | Penny-lands | Rental 1664–1724 | % of total | Farm                | Rental 1784 | % of total |
|---------------------|-------------|------------------|------------|---------------------|-------------|------------|
| Rhudunan            | 3           | £11 5 4          | 12         | Rhudunan and Leasol | 40          | 17.5       |
| Leasol              | 3           | £8 15 10         | 9.4        |                     |             |            |
| Achshard            |             | £8 15 0          | 9.3        |                     |             |            |
| Bualintur           | 3           | £8 5 8           | 8.8        | Bualintur           | 14          | 6          |
|                     |             |                  |            | Glenbrittle         | 20          | 8.7        |
| Kraiknish           | 3¼          | £11 16 4         | 12.6       | Kraiknish           | 30          | 13         |
| Brunal              | 3½          | £8 9 8           | 9          | Brunal              | 20          | 8.7        |
| Grula               | 3½          | £10 2 0          | 10.8       | Grula and Clachan   | 34          | 14.8       |
| Brae Eynort         | 3½          | £6 4 8           | 6.6        | Brae Eynort         | 20          | 8.7        |
| Meikle Carbost      |             | £4 13 1          | 5          | Meikle Carbost      | 10          | 4.3        |
| Merkadale and Trien | 1 + 1       | £8 17 0          | 9.4        | Merkadale           | 7           | 3          |
|                     |             |                  |            | Trien               | 15          | 6.5        |
| Satran              | 2           | £6 11 9          | 7          | Satran              | 20          | 8.7        |
| <b>Total</b>        |             | <b>£93 16 4</b>  |            |                     | <b>230</b>  |            |

*Table of rental values of farms in the Rhudunan group (NRAS 2950/2/510/2)*

In 1791 John was succeeded by Kenneth MacAskill (1756–1841), a soldier, who rented Rhudunan, Leasol, Bualintur, Soay and part of Glenbrittle for 19 years from Whit 1792, for a rent of £130, rising to £150. At the same time he arranged to lease 'Glenbrittle and Forest of Culline', in partnership with Norman Macleod at Islandreoch, for 19 years at £50 per annum, presumably for sporting purposes (NRAS 2950/2/148.). From 1808 and 1811 there are records of a John Stewart, described as 'merchant of Glenbrittle' (NRAS 2950/1/1132). The front (west) part of Glenbrittle House dates from the late-18th century, and may have been built by Kenneth MacAskill (Miers 2008, 243).



Figure 22. The main farms associated with Rhudunan..

In 1810, when his lease came up for renewal, Kenneth MacAskill offered £700 per annum for 14 years for Rhudunan along with Soay Island and Glenbrittle (NRAS 1950/2/196/1–2), but he subsequently wrote asking for the rent to be reduced to £600 (NRAS 1950/2/208/1), and mentioned the possibility of emigrating to America. He asked for the kelp to be included in the lease, without any extra payment. He also asked for permission to start building houses of stone and lime, provided he was allowed half their value when his lease expired. The agreement included sowing a green crop every third year, no ploughing without manuring, and replacing turf dykes with stone ones (NRAS 1950/2/196/1–2).

Another of Kenneth MacAskill's initiatives was to establish a fishing community on Soay. In 1811, however, he chartered an emigrant ship, and went with his people to Carolina, but returned in 1821 (Murray 2002). In 1821 he asked to renew the lease of Rhudunan, Glenbrittle, Bualintur, Kraiknish, part of Brunal, Brae Eynort with Grula, and the rest of Brunal, Satran with extra muir ground, Trien, Merkadale and Meickle Carbost for 15 years from Whit 1825 for £1260 annual rent (NRAS 2950/2/271). The lease stated that any new buildings were to be of stone, lime and slate, and he was to provide accommodation for an SPCK missionary.

In 1831 Kenneth MacAskill and his son Donald offered to purchase Rhudunan. Three years later Donald offered to purchase 3 acres of Rhudunan. Donald subsequently renewed his lease for 15 years from Whit 1840, for the lands of Rhudunan, Kraiknish, Grula, Brae Eynort,

Carbost Beg, Carbost Mor, Trien and Merkadale, Satran, Salachary, Brunal and Bualichill (NRAS 2950/2/287; 2/387/1–3; 2/310). Donald Mor had 28 tenants at Camus a-Mhoran (the beach at the west side of the headland, here used to describe the tip of the headland, almost an island at high tide) (NAS GD403/87/28–9).

In 1844 Donald and Hugh MacAskill (the founder of the distillery at Carbost) offered to renew the lease for 15 years for £1200, the land including Rhudunan and Soay (NRAS 2950/2/219/1–2). Later that year, however, Hugh MacAskill asked for a 15-year lease only on the ‘north part of Rhudunan’, bounded by the March of Kraiknish to Beallach then down in a line to the river of Brittal, and by Allt Leary across the Cuillins to Coruisk, including the island of Soay (another list refers to Rhudunan, Soay, Kraiknish and Trien), offering £780 (NRAS 2950/2/320). He was to allow the working of stone quarries in Soay or elsewhere, provided he was paid for any damage. He was also to repair the ‘house of Eynort’, and keep it in repair until the owner wanted it back, and meanwhile it was to provide accommodation for the minister (NRAS 2950/2/319–20). The back (east) part of Glenbrittle House dates to the earlier 19th century, and is built of red stone from Soay. This red stone can also be seen in the lintels of the farm steading (Miers 2008, 244; pers. comm. Hugh Macrae). Hugh is said to have used all his money on poor relief during the potato famine. The old farmhouse on the headland was abandoned. Hugh, the last MacAskill of Rhudunan (though he lived at Glenbrittle House, then known as Rhu an Dùnain House), died in 1857.

In 1854 a lease of Kraicknish, Bualintur, Leasol, Rhudunan, the Cuillin hills and the Island of Soay (the implication being that he already farmed this) for £625, and the north part, formerly farmed by Hugh MacAskill, consisting of Glenbrittle, Eynort, Carbostmor, Merkadale, Trien, Satran and the North Cuillins was granted to Donald Charles Cameron of Glenbrittle, nephew of Ewan Cameron, tacksman of Talisker, for 15 years for £775 (NRAS 2950/2/346). In 1869 despite a rival offer, Cameron's lease of ‘Glenbrittle and Rhudunan’, with the shootings and fishings of Borline (in fact the whole of the area once split between him and Hugh MacAskill), was renewed for 10 years (NRAS 2950/2/360; 2/346/8; 2/367/1–3, he offered £1750 for the first five years and £1800 for the next five). He also asked for reimbursement of costs incurred for drainage. The rent for the whole block of land had therefore risen from £93 16 4d in the second half of the 17th century to £1800 by 1884.

| Farm      | No. of residents   | Occupations   | Comments   |
|-----------|--|---|--|
| Soay      | 54 (7 families, 2 single men; 2 cottars, rest landless)      | Neil Campbell, 'a competent boatbuilder'                                    | an encumbrance because does not pay rent, so 'is a fit subject for emigration' |
| Rhudunan  | 46 (10 families, 1 old maid; 7 crofters/cottars, 2 landless) | Donald McRae  | 'this man is hard working and would do well in Canada'                         |
| Satran    | 9 + 59 + 16  | 'a good quarrier'   |  |
| Soay      | 15   |   |  |
| Leasol    | 25 + 23  | 1 shoemaker, 1 fisherman  |  |
| Kraiknish | 46 + 6   | 1 mason, 1 shepherd   |  |
| Grula     | 44   | 1 tailor  |  |
| Carbost   | 41   | John Maclean 'boat carpenter', 1 merchant, 1 mason, 1 carpenter, 1 shepherd |  |

*List of residents in 1881. The list does not include 'necessary working people' (shepherds and a smith), and it was noted that most of those listed were 'an encumbrance' (NRAS 2950/2/644/7/1–2).*

In 1902 there were 20 tenants on Soay (including 6 widows), 4 on Coul, 4 in Bualintur and 1 in Grula. Together they paid £12 10sh in cash and £41 15sh in cattle, and owed arrears of £121 17 6d (NRAS 2950/2/510/1-2).

In 1921 Glenbrittle had about 5000 sheep, and had the potential to be divided into seven farms. Glenbrittle Lodge was described as having Dining Room, Drawing Room, Smoking Room, kitchen, four bedrooms, one dressing room, and two attic rooms. Adjacent were a gamekeeper's house, and the manager's house 'to which the tenant farmer retires when the shooting tenants are in the Lodge'. There were also kennels, stables, byres, and a threshing mill (NRAS 2950/2/383/1-2).

In 1930 there was correspondence between the Macleod estate and the Department of Agriculture. The estate was struggling to find an agricultural tenant, and wanted to sell Glenbrittle (except the Lodge, which was needed for shooting tenants), but not the Cuillins. The Department of Agriculture pointed out that including the Cuillins would make a neat block of land which would not need much fencing, as animals could not cross the river Drynoch. However, without the Cuillins the cost of fencing would be prohibitive. Some points raised include 'The Department again suggested that it might make the land at Glenbrittle easier to let if the motor boat service from Mallaig to Soay could be extended to Loch Brittle' (20/03/1930). In reply the factor wrote (26/03/1930): 'The Bay of Glenbrittle is open to the prevailing winds from South to North West, and consequently for weeks on end the Mallaig motor boat would be unable to call. I do know, however, that the repair of the road from Glenbrittle to Carbost would be of great assistance' (NRAS 2950/2/391/1-35).

There are the remains of a stone jetty at the mouth of the river, of uncertain date, though it is marked on the 1st edition 6" Ordnance Survey map of 187?. It has been covered in sand, and the top stones were removed by the present farmer's father to construct a boathouse to the east of it (now itself ruinous) (pers. comm. Hugh Macrae).

### **Note on place-names**

The farms in the Carbost group are still named on the modern 1:25000 OS map, as are all the Eynort group (though Brunal has been lost under forestry). Glen Brittle, however, is very thin on surviving names. Leasol was found on Thomson's County Map of 1832, and I was unable to find what the ruined settlement in the glen was called, unless that was the original Glenbrittle farm, and the name subsequently migrated seawards.