



The Morar Cross

THE MORAR CROSS
A BRIEF HISTORY OF
THE CROSS AND THE MORAR CHURCH

P. Galbraith

This brief historical sketch has been produced to commemorate the unveiling of the Cairn at the Morar Cross; to outline the significance of the Cross, and to remind us of the religious and historical background of the Morar

district.

All proceeds from the sale of this booklet, are to go towards the maintenance funds of the Morar Church. (copyright)

These notes have been compiled from numerous sources, and are not to be copied or used for any other purpose.

CONTENTS

Introductory Notes	iv
The Morar Church	1
The Morar Cross and the Mission	3
The Morar Cross - Notes from the Memoirs of Lady Lovat, Foundress of the Morar Church	9
The Bracarina Church	9
Records of Eilean Ban	11
The Seminary on Eilean Ban	11
Destruction of the house on Eilean Ban	12
Mass Vestments and Chalice preserved in Morar Church	14
The View Indicator Cairn at the Morar Cross	15

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

MORAR

The name MORAR is on record as MORDHOWAR, MORDOVYR, and is plainly MORDHOBHAR - Big Water - the name of the stream (river) from Loch Morar, which though short, is of considerable volume; it seems in fact, that it is the biggest 'Dobhar' in Scotland: probably the district name, originally the name of the river, is an old British name changed into Gaelic.

MORAR is affectionately known as BLESSED MORAR, because in this district one is in contact with a place (and people) which for hallowed traditions and unswerving loyalty, cannot be surpassed in the whole history of Scotland. Morar remained unaffected by the Reformation.

Morar is not only blessed because of its history and traditions, but is blessed with some of the most beautiful scenery in Scotland ... such that inspired the local author to write:

There's a hamlet in the West Where the weary mind finds rest
Far surpassing beauty spots in foreign lands, Where the river meets the sea,
That's the place where I would be, Blessed Morar with its silver sands ...

THE MORAR CHURCH

The opening and dedication of the Catholic Church of OUR LADY and ST CUMIN, at Morar, took place on Thursday 2nd May, 1889.

The following notes are verbatim excerpts from the "TABLET" of the 11th May, 1889:

"The wild and romantic district of Morar in West Inverness-shire was the scene of an unwonted gathering on Thursday 2nd inst., the occasion being the dedication of a new and handsome Catholic church which has been in the course of erection there for some time past.

The late Lord Lovat had it in contemplation to provide for the people of his extensive property (which is inhabited almost exclusively by Catholics) a more suitable place of worship than their former inconvenient chapel at Bracara. The death of the lamented nobleman however, prevented him from carrying out the work, which has since been undertaken and completed by Lady Lovat.

The new church, which is dedicated to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour and St Cumin, measures 100 feet by 26 feet and is built of local grey stone, with granite dressings. The architecture is early English and the plan includes a nave, apsidal chancel, and a detached tower with dwarf spire, in. which will shortly be hung a bell, the gift of the Hon Lady Sausse. The interior proportions of the building are excellent, and the open timber roof, delicately tinted walls and low seats of good design, together with the richly-coloured stained glass windows and encaustic tiles which adorn the sanctuary, combine to produce an effect at once pleasing and devotional. There is an organ gallery at the West end. Adjoining the church and in connection with it a commodious presbytery has been erected in the same architectural style; the general effect of the group of buildings, which are all well situated on a gentle eminence overlooking the island-studded expanse of Loch Morar, is exceedingly good.

By 11 o'clock, the hour appointed for the opening service, a large congregation had assembled, of whom some had travelled on foot upwards of 50 miles in order to be present. The day was a beautifully fine one - a fortunate circumstance for such of the congregation who had come long distances by water.

The preliminary portion of the ceremony consisted of the blessing and dedication of the church, which was performed by the Lord Bishop of Argyll and the Isles, according to the prescribed ritual.

At the conclusion of the Aspersions and Litany of the Saints, the faithful were admitted to the sacred edifice, which speedily filled to overflowing, many being unable to find seats. High Mass was then sung, the Celebrant being the Very Rev. Dom. Oswald Hunter Blair O.S.B., Fort Augustus; the Deacon and Sub-Deacon were the Rev. D.A. MacPherson and Rev. D. MacLellan. The Bishop assisted at the Mass in Rochet and Mozetta, attended by the Rev. A. Macintosh, Fort William, as chaplain. The altar and sanctuary were tastefully decorated with a profusion of hothouse flowers, and the music (Webb's Mass in 'G') was very creditably rendered by The choir of neighbouring parish of Knoydart, led by their pastor, the Rev. John MacElmail. A handsome silver-gilt chalice, the gift of the Hon Lady Mostyn, was used for the first time at the Mass, at the conclusion of which an eloquent Gaelic sermon was delivered by His Lordship the Bishop. After the service, the clergy and leading members of the congregation were entertained to luncheon by Lady Lovat, at Morar Lodge. The evening service was fixed for six o'clock, and the weather continuing exceedingly fine, there was again a large congregation present. The service commenced with a portion of the rosary, recited in Gaelic; a hymn was then sung, after which an impressive sermon was preached by the Rev. Fr. Oswald O.S.B.

The preacher dwelt on the various causes which combined to make the dedication of the church peculiarly a cause for rejoicing. He referred to the tokens of joy which had accompanied the inauguration of the temples of the old dispensation, and pointed out the far higher and truer sense in which a Christian church becomes the House of God and the dwelling palace of His Majesty; and after drawing a picture of the religious state of Scotland in Catholic days, as contrasted with her present condition of division and disunion; the preacher urged his hearers to render themselves worthy, by a consistently Christian life, of the precious heritage they had received from their forefathers.

That day was truly a day of joy - of joy to the scattered people of that beautiful country, who, through good and evil times, had preserved the faith once delivered to the Saints, and who were privileged now, like Zaccheus of old to receive their dear Lord as a welcome guest into their midst; of joy to those whose happiness it had been to erect a new sanctuary to the God of Love, and to witness on that day its dedication for ever to the service of joy, and - might he not say it? - to him who was no longer among them to assist, as he would have loved to be, at their dedication festival; whose first thought and chief happiness had ever been to promote God's glory and the advancement of our holy faith, and who while enjoying, as they humbly believed, the eternal vision of God in Heaven, yet looked down, not unmindful nor unsympathising on their joy that day.

The preacher concluded by exhorting his hearers to the duty of gratitude for the privileges which were theirs as children of *the* Church. At the close of the sermon the Litany of Loretto was sung and Solemn Benediction (during which the Te Deum was chanted) was afterwards given by the Bishop, assisted by the Rev. D.A. MacPherson and Rev D. MacLellan.

Among those present at the services were Lady Lovat, Lord Lovat, the Hon Misses Fraser, the Hon Lady Mostyn, the Hon Lady Sausse, the Lord Bishop of Argyll and the Isles (the Right Rev. Angus MacDonald), Colonel MacDonald of Glenaladale, the Right Rev. A. MacIntosh of Fort William, the Rev. D.A. MacPherson, Arisaig, the Rev. D. MacLellan, Morar, The Rev. John MacElmail, Knoydart, Mr and Mrs MacLellan, Mr Johnstone, Mr Walker, Mr MacNab etc. The congregation also included a large number of persons from the neighbouring districts of South Morar, Arisaig, Knoydart; while others were present from the Isle of Skye, Eigg and places even more remote. The day was truly one to be marked with a white stone in the religious annals of

the West Highlands, and it will be long before the memory of the festival fades from the minds of those who were privileged to assist at it."

THE MORAR CROSS

THE MISSION AT MORAR

The following is also an excerpt from the 'TABLET' of the same year, dated 3rd August, 1889:

"MISSION AT MORAR. Sunday July 21st witnessed the close of a very successful mission to North Morar, conducted by the Redemptorist Fathers, the Very Rev. H. MacDonald (Provincial) Clapham; and Father Samson, Kinnoull.

The service opened on Sunday 7th July, and was held in the new church built by Lady Lovat at Beoraid and opened solemnly shortly after Easter. The services were well attended throughout, not only by members of the congregation, but also by persons from the adjoining districts of South Morar and Arisaig. The Bishop was present at the closing services, and officiated at the principal Mass at 11 a.m., after which he administered Confirmation to about 60 persons.

An interesting ceremony then followed, the blessing of a large cross, about twenty feet high, which had been prepared as a memorial of the Mission. The cross had been fixed up the evening before, in readiness for the ceremony, on a neighboring eminence, commanding a *view* up Loch Morar on one side, and over the Atlantic on the other.

After the Confirmation, the people, about 600 in numbers were marshalled for the procession; Colonel MacDonald of Glenaladale led the way bearing the processional cross, and behind him the long line of three abreast wound its way up the hill; the men in front, the women in the rear, joining aloud in the Rosary, while children in the centre sang hymns appropriate to the occasion. On reaching the top, the people formed in a circle round the brow of the hill; the cross was solemnly blessed, and Father Samson delivered a stirring discourse explaining the ceremony they had just witnessed. Thereupon the people formed again as before, each one as he passed the cross, kneeling down and kissing it and the procession returned to the church in the same order as it had gone up. In the evening at 7 p.m. the Mission was brought to a close in the customary way by Father MacDonald."

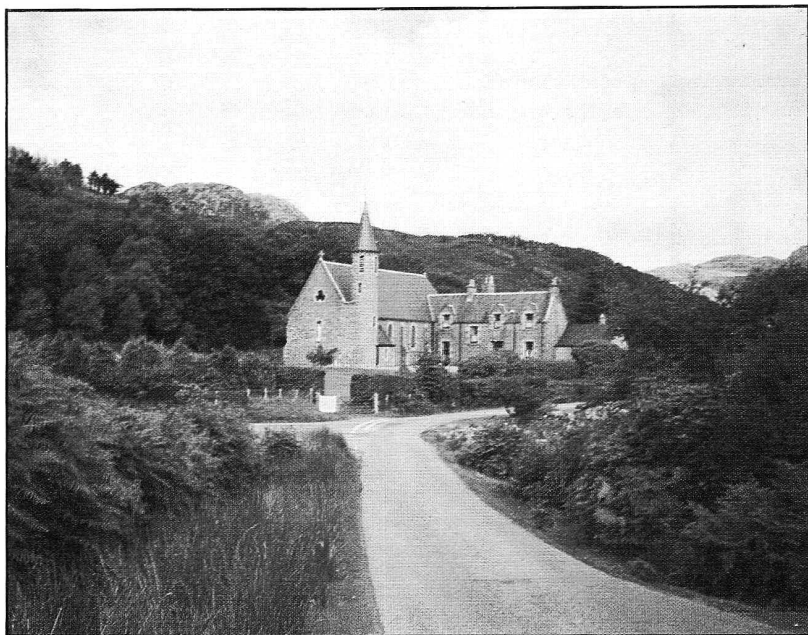
NOTE:

The cross has been renewed several times since 1889; the present one, 17 feet high of 'H' iron, was put up in 1965; the result of the efforts of the parishioners and Canon James Galbraith, their Parish Priest.

There is a story told, that when Canon Galbraith asked local haulage contractor, Donnie Simpson of Mallaig to collect the cross *whenever* one of his lorries went to Glasgow, Donnie understood the request was for a crucifix, which he duly asked his driver to handle most carefully and reverently; and in fact to carry it inside the cab for safety. The driver was slightly non-plussed when he reached Glasgow, to discover his precious load was in fact, two huge iron girders, that could hardly fit inside the cab!

His remarks to Donnie on his return, could hardly be termed 'reverent'!

The girders were subsequently welded into the present cross by the late Duncan MacLellan of Morar.



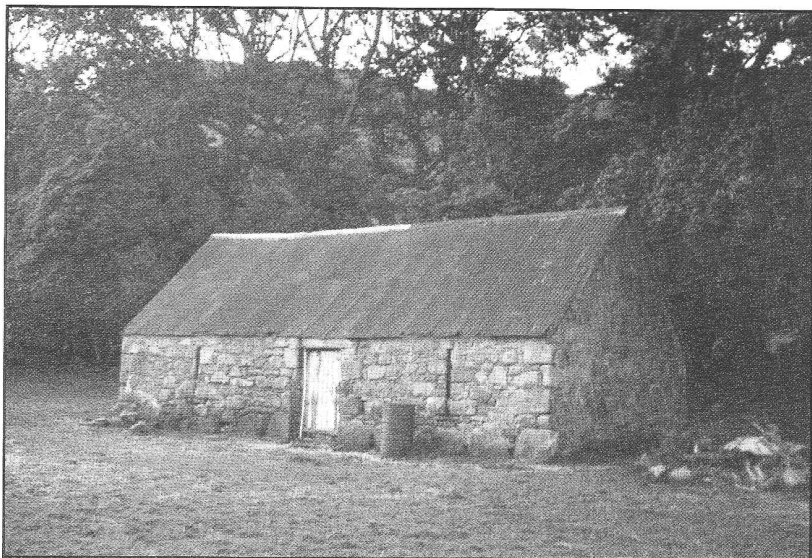
The Morar Church built 1889 and the attached Presbytery.



The ruins of the old church at Inbhir Beag, Bracarina, of dry-stone construction. Some of the walled enclosures to the rear are probably of a later construction, when the ruins may have been used as a sheep fank.



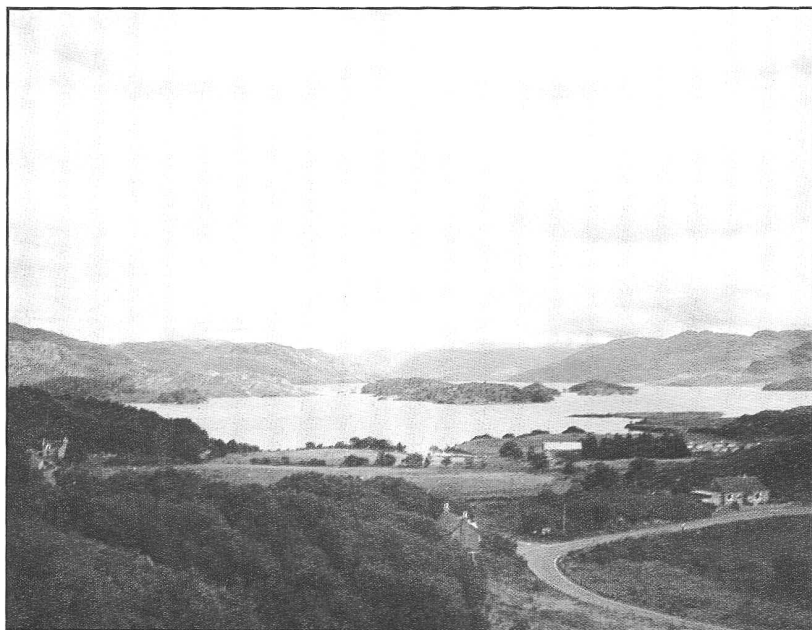
The 1745 Vestments and Chalice in Morar Church.



Rev. Rana/d MacDonell's house at Bracarina prior to his building the Bracarina Church in 1832. Now used as a barn.



The Indicator Cairn at the Cross.



View of Eilean Ban on Loch Morar.



View of Morar village from the Cross.

THE MORAR CROSS

The following notes were condensed from extracts from the Memoirs of Alice, Baroness Lovat, Foundress of the Morar church, to whose descendants we are indebted for the privilege to tell her story:

The Lovat family spent their summers at the newly built Morar Lodge, and as was the custom, the children, after completing their lessons for the day, were taken by their governess and nurse to bathe on the white sands of the Morar estuary. As there was no road along the loch side then the party was taken by boat from the lodge to the Morar River, where they disembarked, and after walking past the Falls, took a sea-boat to the beach.

On one particular outing, the loch was unusually high after a wet June and July, consequently the river was in flood. Returning from the beach, the two younger boys, Hugh and Alistair raced on ahead of the nurse and boatmen, and on reaching the boat in the river, decided on having a row on their own before the rest arrived. Hugh, the elder of the boys took command, and untying the boat, he soon had her in mid-stream. The boys knew nothing of the

dangers of the strong current, especially with the river in flood and in no time the boat was being swept along towards the Falls, and a fearful mishap, had not help been close at hand. Their brother, Simon immediately understood the danger and shouted to Hugh to grasp the branch of an overhanging tree, towards which the boat was drifting, until the boatmen, racing across the bridge and towards the farthest river bank, reached them and grabbed hold of the boat.

Lady Lovat was so overwhelmed at the merciful rescue of her two boys, that she was determined to erect a monument to commemorate the event. The large cross then being erected at the conclusion of the first Mission, served her purpose, and the Lovat family shared in its costs by supplying the materials for it.

THE BRACARINA CHURCH

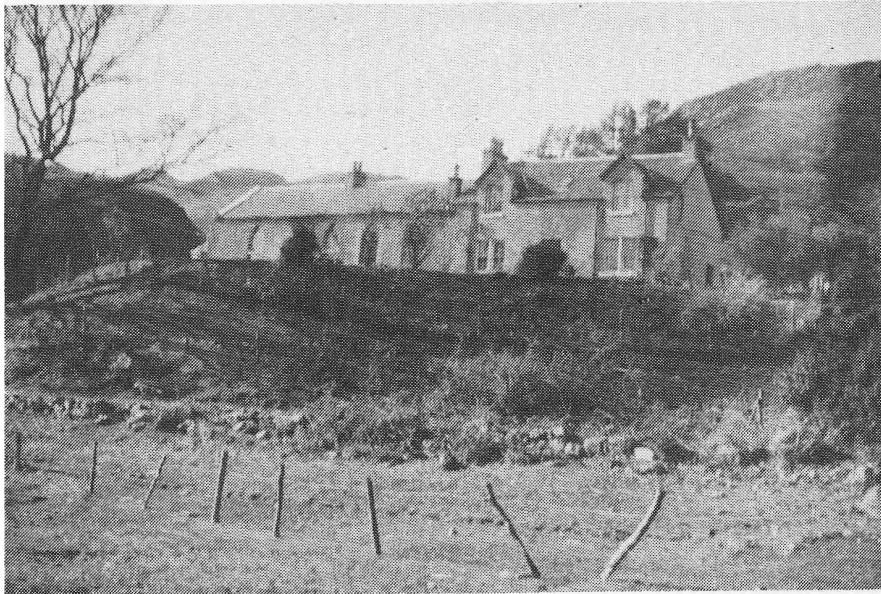
On the destruction of the seminary on Eilean Ban in 1746, the church at Inbhir Beag (beyond the 'white beach at Bracarina) served as the principal place of worship for the people of the area. Very little is known of the origin of the building, as only the dry-stone walls remain. It would no doubt have been thatched. In winter, when the bracken and wild growth has withered, one can more easily identify the layout of the building and see where the original windows and altar had been.

It is likely that the Rev Ranald MacDonell, ordained in Valladolid in 1780, and who served in the area for 62 years, may have conducted his services in that old church. His house, now used as a barn, stands east of the Bracarina burn and near the end of the main road.

While he was the priest in the widespread parish of North Morar, the Rev Ranald with the help of Bishop Scott, built the church and house at Bracarina in 1832. That remained the parish church until 1889 when the church of 'Our Lady and St Cumin' was built in Morar.

On the old church at Bracarina being closed, the building was shortly afterwards taken over as a school and schoolhouse for the village of Bracara. The farm attached to the church, was then leased out, and early in the 1900s taken over by Alexander MacDonell, whose family still work Bracarina. When the church was converted into a school and schoolhouse, the chapelhouse became the farmhouse, and later (about 1932) was improved upon to its present appearance.

The school remained open until June 1952, when due to the declining roll, the authorities decided to have the Bracara children transported to Morar.



The Bracarina Church built 1832 and the attached chapelhouse, modernised around 1932.

RECORDS OF EILEAN BAN - LOCH MORAR

From a letter sent to Rome by Bishop Nicholson. The year of his visit to the island was 1700.

"On the 13th June we arrived at El LEAN BAN on LOCH MORAR.

Here, after consulting Mr (FR.) CAHASSEY, whose infirm state of health obliged him to stay on this island, and with Mr Rattray and some other priests, the Bishop sent all of them to their own districts, except Mr Morgan and Mr MacLellan, whom he decided to take with him to the Isles to serve as interpreters and to help in the functions."

(The Mr Cahassey who lived on EHean Ban was an Irish priest who came to Scotland in 1681. He was not well enough to travel about, and he died in 1704.)

THE SEMINARY ON EILEAN BAN

It is first mentioned in 1712 in correspondence between Bishop Gordon and the Scottish priests in Paris. Fr George Innes was named first Superior in 1712, but did not take charge on the island until 1714. There were seven students, one of whom was Hugh MacDonald, who later became Bishop. In 1733, when he was already Bishop, he wrote to Rome requesting help ...

"I have begun the good work, having set up a large house in a place called the ISLE OF LOCH MORAR, which seems to be the proper place for the purpose in all the nation, considering the present circumstances, it being situated in the heart of our best and surest friends, where by boat all necessities can be brought and all unnecessary distractions can be kept off. I have already got three or four boys together, which is perhaps more than I am able to maintain without some help."

DESTRUCTION OF THE HOUSE ON EILEAN BAN

From the account in the Scots Magazine, May 1747:

"Having apprehended several of the rebels in these parts, (Moidart and Arisaig) they learned from them that Lord Lovat with his servants and guard of well-armed and resolute men had retired into an island on Loch Morar, a fresh water lake twelve miles in length and somewhat more than a mile from the West sea-coast. In this pleasant little island, His Lordship lived with MacOonald of Morar, the proprietor, his brother Bishop Hugh Macdonald and several others of that rebellious family. Here they deemed themselves perfectly secure, and having for that brought all the boats on the lake to their island never once suspecting that His Majesty's forces could bring their boats from the sea over the land to this place to disturb their secure retreat."

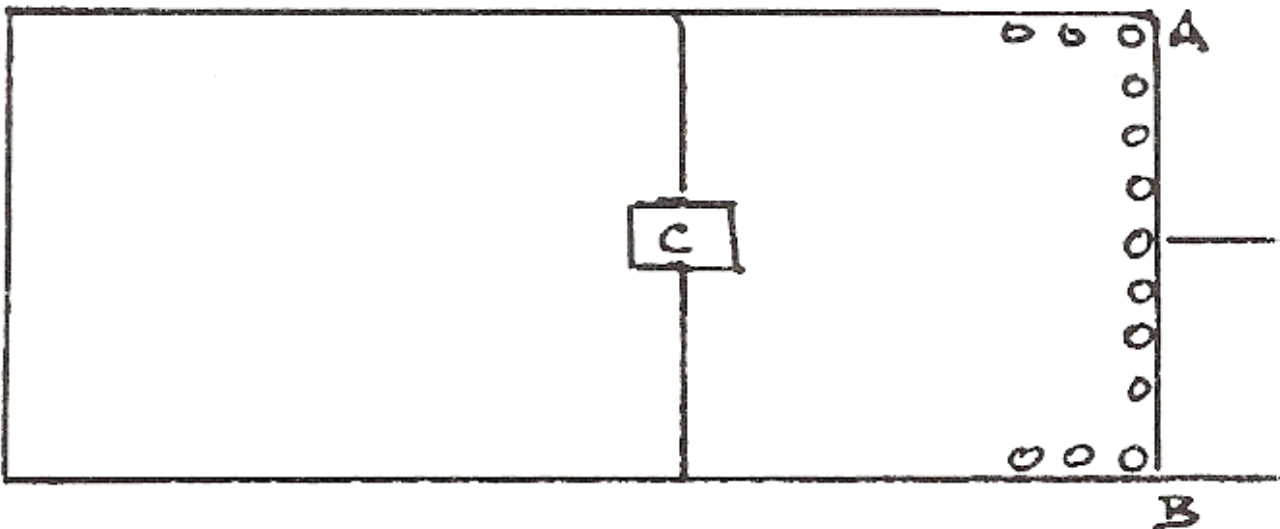
(Add: Bishop MacOonald, the Pope's Apostolical Vicar of Scotland, one Or MacOonald and several others of that rebellious family ...)

(The naval ships landed 300 men, and boats were carried overland to the loch. The people on the island outstripped both the boats and the soldiers who pursued them along the lochside, hoping to cut off any landing.)

The report continues:

"All rebel gentry, MacOonalds, escaped into the mountains, excepting the above mentioned Or MacOonald, whom our people apprehended and brought back to the island together with the boats of these rebels. Here they found the before-mentioned Popish Bishop's house and chapel, which the sailors quickly gutted and demolished, merrily adorning themselves with the spoils of the chapel. In the scramble, a great many books were tossed about and destroyed as well as papers, a few of which were preserved by one of the Argyleshire gentlemen, and these have occasioned this address."

Lord Lovat was captured after a search carried on under Captain Ferguson for three days and nights. The Bishop escaped on a French ship that Autumn, returning to Scotland in August 1749.



The house on Eilean Ban was never rebuilt . A rough sketch of the site:

A wall of stones two to three feet high can still be seen; the area is such that it suggests the perimeter of the garden.

Line A-B marks an area raised above wet ground. There is a line of big stones built with clay and more stones. C is where the fireplace was situated, made of clay, with a chimney of clay and small stones. The walls of the house were made of turf, with posts of alder and birch.

THE VIEW INDICATOR CAIRN AT THE MORAR CROSS

Another interesting ceremony took place in Morar on Tuesday, 7th July 1987, when an Indicator plaque, mounted on a cairn close to the spectacular cross on the hill overlooking the village, and a popular viewpoint, was unveiled by Kate, widow of the late Alexander MacEachen, of Tougal, Morar, and one of the oldest residents in the community. At 87 years of age, the sprightly lady thought nothing of climbing the steps up the steep incline to the hilltop. After the unveiling of the plaque, Kate was presented with a beautiful bouquet of flowers in appreciation.

A crowd of 56 people gathered on the hilltop, and were welcomed by the strains of the bagpipes, so hauntingly played by the young kilted piper, Donald Archie MacLellan of Morar. Mr Alistair MacLeod, on behalf of the Community Council, invited Monsignor Ewan MacInnes to address a few words for the occasion. He spoke of the purpose of the indicator, which clearly shows a map of the surrounding countryside, and pointers to the places of interest to be observed. He pointed out hills to be clearly identified to the north; the islands on Loch Morar and more hills to the east; and the magnificent views southwards and to the west showing the islands of Eigg, Rhum and Canna in the Minch, and the scenic points in Skye.

To add fervour to the occasion, he encouraged the people present to join in songs appropriate to the occasion - the 'Road to the Isles' and the favourite song of Morar - 'The Silver Sands of Morar'. This song was composed by the late Angie MacLellan to console the family of his brother-inlaw, Willie Andrew Fraser, who was on the 'reported missing' list for nine months after the Dunkirk evacuation in 1940. Willie had attempted to escape capture, but was finally caught and he spent the remainder of the war in a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany. He was a noted singer, and still love:: to, give a beautiful rendering of his own song. Unfortunately, he felt too unwell to make it to the cairn that day.

The commanding viewpoint from the position of the cross stirred Mr Gordon Jackson, former local Inverness County Councillor, to suggest the erection of an indicator cairn at that spot. The Highland Regional Council were very interested in the project, and allocated funds for the purpose, but the local Community Council had difficulties in getting the work immediately under way. They started by constructing wooden steps up the steep hill incline, but early this year, the MSC took a hand in the matter. They replaced the wooden steps with concrete ones and a guard rail, which make the climb so much easier.

Mr Pat Ritchie designed the plaque, and with Mr Archie MacLellan, accurately mapped out the various geographical points of interest to be viewed from the hilltop. The plan was then reproduced in stainless steel by designer firm, G. E. Packer of Glasgow. The stone cairn was also built by the MSC, with the plaque embedded in cement. It is a most useful guide to visitors and locals alike, familiarising themselves with the names of all the points of interest to be viewed from the spot, which gives an outstanding panoramic view of the silver sands, the islands on the loch, and the village of Morar.

After the ceremony, all who took part were cordially invited by Mr and Mrs Alistair MacLeod of Morar Hotel, to an enjoyable tea.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Monsignor Ewan MacInnes for his encouragement and help in providing information, and in reading the proof.

Mr Patrick Duffy for information, and Mrs C. MacLellan for the words of 'The Silver Sands of Morar'.

Lord Lovat and Miss Irene Stirling for their kind permission to use the extracts from the Memoirs of Baroness Lovat, Foundress of the Morar church.

Morar Community Council for information relating to the Indicator Cairn.

Messrs Alistair MacLeod and Alistair Gillies for affording the photocopying facilities to produce the proof booklet.



One of the Stained Glass windows of the Morar Church.