

## HISTORY OF REARQUHAR PUBLIC SCHOOL

Rearquhar school was formerly an important institution in the Dornoch area, however, attempts to discover the reason for building it, to know something of its teachers, pupils, problems, quality of education and all the minutiae of day-to-day school life proved difficult. The Dornoch Library and Dornoch Heritage Society could not provide any information and the Inverness Archives did not know it ever existed. Despite the lack of official information, research was greatly assisted by former pupils and relatives of people associated with the school. Through these local sources, information was obtained on the architects, opening, number of children, activities and its closure. Altogether a picture emerges of aspects of a departed way of life.

Locally the Free Church School at Birichen provided education until the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872 made education and the building of new schools the responsibility of School Boards under the Scottish Education Department. Rearquhar School was built in 1877 as a result of this Act. A firm of architects (1) was given the contract to build a number of schools in this county, all of a similar design and of sandstone, this school may have been one of these.

Rearquhar for census purposes is described as an area in Enumeration 4 in the Registration District of Dornoch (Refer to source material map for boundaries). The School was erected in a sheltered spot opposite the River Evelix and a copse of birch trees and in one corner of a Y-Junction. It was central to Rearquhar and the surrounding area. These points may have influenced the choice of site.

On 2nd July 1878 the children arrived at Birichen School, collected their slates and slate pencils and in procession led by Senior boy Thomas Mackay and with another Senior boy James Hendry carrying the blackboard, they walked down the Achuan Road, (today it remains an untarred right-of-way) to the opening of their new school. Officials present included members of the School Board, the Chairman, Rev, M Kennedy and the Clerk to the Board, Mr Leslie. (2)

An Ordnance Gazetteer, Scotland Vol 2, 1801 - 1899, states that Rearquhar School in 1891 could accommodate 100 pupils. The School had only two classrooms. From an examination schedule for 1893 (3) the number of pupils examined was 61 and seven grades from Infant to Standard VI, aged 6-16 years, were taught.

(1) Personal Communications - Lawrence Jamieson, Community Education Services, Brora.

(2) Personal Communications - Jessie Bell, Catherine Murray, Ebenezer McLean. All informants agreed.

(3) Schedule available Education Dept., Brora

FOOTNOTES

The Rearquhar Census for 1881 gives the population as 124, of whom 31 were scholars. The catchment area for pupils attending Rearquhar School however included Proncy, Evelix, Birichen, Astle, Achvaich, Fleuchary and very occasionally from distances such as Clashmugach, Poles and Embo.

The school log books recorded day-to-day events in school life. They were required to be stoutly bound, contain not less than 300 ruled pages and be kept by the Principal Teacher (1). He had to make weekly entries detailing progress of pupils attendances, visits of School Board and Compulsory Officer, information about new teachers and pupil teachers, variations in attendance and an explanation of any deviations from normal school routine and the granting of new equipment and illness or failure of duty of any member of staff. Dimensions of school rooms were also recorded.

At intervals the school was white-washed and cleaned, this resulted in a crisis in 1900 (2). The workmen were three days whitewashing and plastering. The school could not re-open because everything was covered in dust. The Headmistress, Miss White, sent words of complaint to the School Board that afternoon and also tendered her resignation which the Board accepted, but absolved her from any blame and the school was washed-out and cleaned. At the end of term pupils gave their slates a good scrubbing in the burn at the back of the school (3).

Throughout the schools existence the poor attendance was always a problem for the School Board and Head Teacher and a laborious, thankless task for the Compulsory Officer. Log books contain almost daily reports of absences with the school requiring to close at times from lack of pupils. Weather conditions, poor roads, lack of transport, poor health and child farm labour all resulted in low attendances. Despite home visits from the Compulsory Officer any improvement was short term. Another constant complaint was the refusal of some parents to send their children to school before their sixth birthday. There was a belief in the area that children did not start school until age six (4). School routine was also disrupted by epidemics of usual childhood illnesses and in February 1919 80% of pupils and 2 teachers were ill in the influenza epidemic (5).

FOOTNOTES

- (1) Information at front of Log Book, Education Dept., Brora
- (2) Oral communication Mrs. Fenelon, granddaughter of Thomas Mackay.
- (3) Oral communication Jessie Bell, relation of William Grant, Achosnich - first Headmaster.
- (4) Recorded oral history Ebenezer McLean
- (5) Oral communication Jessie Bell.
- (7) Oral communication Jessie Bell and recorded oral history Ebenezer McLean.

FOOTNOTES

Annual holidays were in April for potato planting, six weeks summer holidays and holidays in October for potato lifting. School also closed annually for approximately four days for communion in June and December and also for Harvest Thanksgiving in December and Skibo Estate gave a school treat each July. Queen Victoria's Jubilee on 21st June 1887 and the Silver Jubilee of King George and Queen Mary in 1935 were Royal occasions meriting school holidays. On the 31st March 1903, the then Chairman of the School Board, Donald Grant was conferred with the degree of Doctor of Divinity and to celebrate the children were given the day off. The children were present at the ceremony <sup>in 1903</sup> of the opening of the new railway at Dornoch on 15th May 1900 and at the unveiling of the Dornoch War Memorial in 1922 and again at the septcentenary celebrations for Dornoch Cathedral 1924. Holidays to celebrate Christmas are not mentioned until 1908 (1). In addition to official holidays there were unofficial holidays as when school closed early in August in 1900-1907 because the children wished to go sand eel fishing and again when they wished to visit Clashmore Market and the Ploughing Matches at Evelix Farm. These times of closure seemed to be at the discretion and goodwill of the teacher (2).

William Grant was Headmaster at Birichen School and transferred to Rearquhar in 1878 leaving in 1900 for Halladale. He taught all basic subjects and was qualified to teach Latin and Greek. He did not live in the Schoolhouse, but being a bachelor, lived at home at Achosnich. He walked to and from school, sometimes doing a bit of fishing in the Evelix on the way home. Every Friday night he walked to Dornoch to help his brother John (John Grant and Sons) with his book-keeping (3). Miss Mary Matheson taught from 1901-1940 and pupils remember it was happy school then. She had a high fender (? Nursery Fireguard) and on wet days wet clothes were stripped of and hung round to dry. She lived in Dornoch travelling first by bicycle later by car (4). William Macbeath is the pupil teacher best remembered. Reports state he was unable to receive payment because "he was not required under Article 32(c) 1." He was killed in action in 1914-18 war (5). Thomas Mackay had a distinguished career in the Ministry and in 1936 was Moderator for the Presbyterian Church of England (6). James Hendry lived locally, married and raised three children. His daughters died unmarried and his son married but had no children (7).

John O Sutherland, Margaret Mackay and William

MacBeath - Teachers

FOOTNOTES (1) Oral communication Jessie Bell and Log Book Education Dept., Brora

(2) and (5) Oral communication James Bell.

(3) and (4) Oral communication Jessie Bell.

(6) Oral communication Mrs. I Fenelon

(7) Oral communication Jessie Bell and recorded oral history Ebenezer McLean.

Christmas parties were fun in the 20's and 30's. The local S.W.R.I raised money for presents and Skibo Estate provided the tree. Parents decorated the school and made a platform. All pupils were encouraged to take part. John O. Sutherland, who later had a career in Education, remembers his panic when he had to give a recitation. The Mackay family, who came to Dalchiel from Canada after the death of their parents had to sing " O Canada" on their first Christmas at Rearquhar. One of these girls, Margaret Mackay, going on to higher education at Dornoch Academy, won the Dux, Maths and English medals in 1931. These medals have been presented to Dornoch Academy this year (1).

The Compulsory or Attendance Officer visited school every 1-2 weeks. Chairman or School Board members visited weekly, signed the register and wrote their comments on pupils progress and any criticisms of staff or teaching methods, the state of the school and its equipment. H.M Inspector of Schools paid an annual visit when children were examined in all subjects and a report submitted. Local Ministers examined the children in Religious Knowledge and these reports, unlike the reports on other subjects, were always satisfactory (2).

The only Log Book report available is from 1925 and finishes in 1945; The two years before the school closure on 14th April 1947 are missing.

The only information regarding its closure is a public notice, in the Northern Times newspaper on 3rd April 1947, from the Sutherland Education Committee to parents in Rearquhar, intimating children being conveyed to Dornoch are to board the bus at Rearquhar School playground.

A number of former pupils who entered the professions of medicine, teaching, banking etc were taught their three R's at Rearquhar School (3).

#### FOOTNOTES

- (1) Oral communication Jessie Bell
- (2) Log Book - Education Dept., Brora.
- (3) Gordon Grant - Banker  
John O Sutherland, Margaret Mackay and William MacBeath - Teachers.  
Thomas Mackay - Presbyterian Minister.

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The response to requests for help have been overwhelming, and revealed a school history and local way of life not available from written sources. Everyone was eager to assist, and others have been very interested even if unable to provide information. Further research will involve the firm of architects who built the school and more information about pupils and teachers. Access to School Board Reports, which would give some information about the two missing years of the last Log Book, would be very helpful.

Today Rearquhar children still board the bus at the former playground, now the gardens of the houses converted from the former school.

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*Presented to the Society  
by Helen Graygrove*

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*Footnotes*

- (1) Personal Communications - Lawrence Jamieson, Community Education Services, Forres.
- (2) Personal Communications - Jessie Bell, Catherine Murray, Elizabeth McLean. All informants agreed.
- (3) See available Education Dept., Forres

