



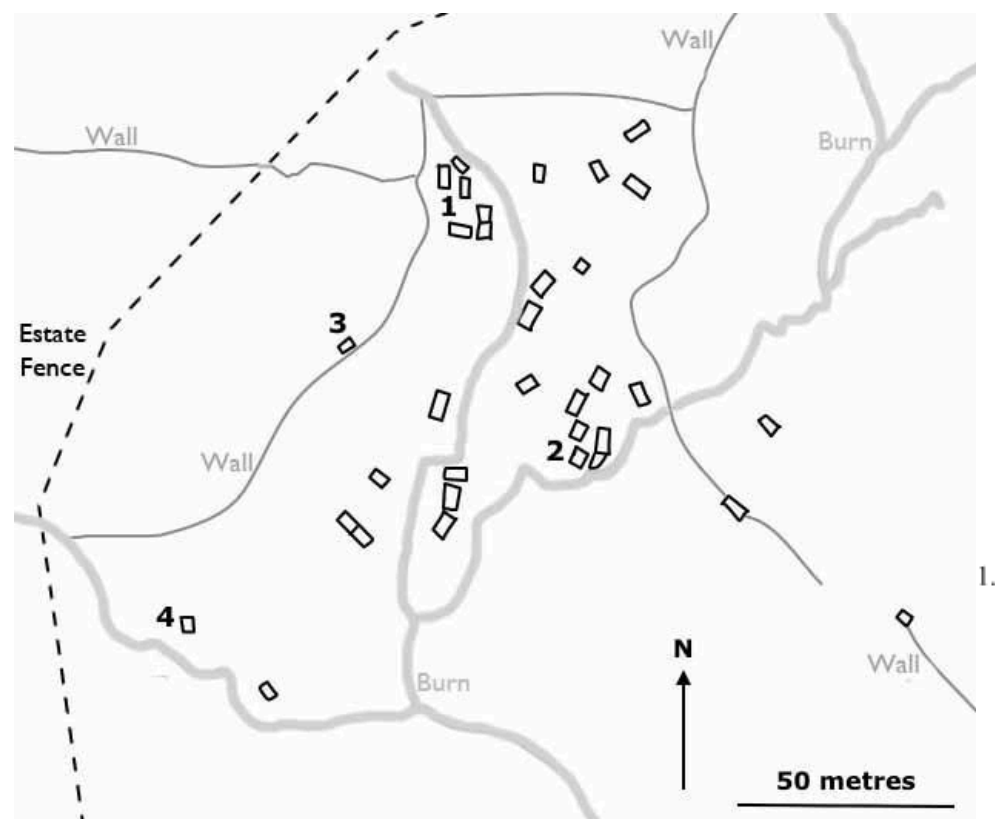
ARDNAMURCHAN HISTORY
& HERITAGE ASSOCIATION

A LOCAL GUIDE TO *Bourblaige*

Booklet 4 of local guides by the Ardnamurchan History & Heritage Association (AHHA)



A MAP OF BOURBLAIGE



Bourblaige is the best-preserved of the Ardnamurchan villages which were forcibly cleared, in its case in 1828. Its people were removed very suddenly and, unlike neighbouring Tornamona, the area was not redeveloped, so Bourblaige buildings can be seen much as they were almost 200 years ago. As a result, it is now protected as a national scheduled monument. Located to the east of Ben Hiant in a wide fold in the landscape, it consists of the remains of some three dozen stone structures of different ages scattered across an area approximately 400m x 300m.

The map shows the most visible of these structures. (*Fig. 1*) Most of the buildings are either dwellings, byres or store houses made of unmortared stone, their walls standing to a height of one or two metres. They are organised into groups, each of which was occupied by one of the seven or so families typically resident in the community – two examples of these groups, 1 and 2, are marked on the map. Many also have associated 'kale yards', walled areas close to the houses which were used to grow vegetables. There are also some isolated buildings. 4 is an example of what may have been the dwelling of a cottar, a landless man who was given a limited area of land on which to build a house and develop small fields of arable in return for work for

the community. Other buildings include an exceptionally well-preserved example of a corn-drying kiln, 3, and, along the burn to the northwest of the buildings, what may be the remains of a horizontal water mill, 1, in which the corn would have been ground.

The derivation of the name Bourblaige is very uncertain. Angus Henderson in his 'Ardnamurchan Placenames' describes it as, 'more difficult to account for than any other name in the district', but suggests it may be formed of three Norse words, borg+bol+vik, meaning 'fort-steading-bay', a reference to the nearby fort, to the community's farming, and to the bay below the village.

2.

The community on this site is certainly very old. If Henderson is correct, its name suggests Norse settlement, which would have occurred in the years between 800 and 1000AD. However, it may be even older: it has been suggested, by the writer M.E.M. Donaldson, as



the site of the Battle of Muirbulg fought in 731AD between the Picts and the Dalriadic Scots.

Fig. 2

Jim Kirby in his 'Lost Placenames of Ardnamurchan' traces the village back in written records to 1541, when its principal tenant was Alester McRanald McKane. At that time, Ardnamurchan was still in the hands of the Clan Maclain, who had held it from the early 14th century, the name McKane being a variant on the spelling.

Bourblaige, then and for years both before and after, would have been a 'clachan', a small, communally-organised settlement which, through men like Alester McKane, would have been responsible for paying rents, in kind rather than in cash, to the Maclain chief at Mingary Castle, and for providing warriors in the time of war.

The clachan continues to be mentioned in records through the 17th and 18th centuries. On 27th April 1716, following the Jacobite rebellion, all the men of Ardnamurchan, on whichever side they fought, were required to hand in their weapons at Mingary Castle. From these records, we know that seven Bourblaige men attended on that day,

mostly McPhails and Campbells.

Considerably more detail is given in a survey of Ardnamurchan carried out in 1737 for Sir Alexander Murray of Stanhope. Bourblaige is recorded as having seven families, comprising 9 men, 11 women and 15 children, a total population of 35. While it is also recorded as having 60 cows, 60 sheep and 16 horses, these are probably broad estimates.

Prior to Sir Alexander's tenure as laird of Ardnamurchan, it is very likely that Bourblaige's buildings were relatively temporary structures of wood, mud and thatch. Under him, and certainly by 1767, the houses were 'improved', the old ones being replaced by two-roomed stone and thatch structures typically measuring about 10m x 5m, with
4. rounded corners, rafters in cruck couples, and hipped roofs.



Fig. 1 – A sample of Bald's map

Bald's 1806 map of Ardnamurchan Estate, commissioned by Estate owners the Riddell family, shows the clachan, at X, its surrounding 5 arable fields, the rig and furrow fields which are still clearly visible today on the hillsides around the village, and the extensive area of common grazings which included all the eastern slopes of Ben Hiant. Bald recorded the clachan, whose tenants were John Stewart and nine others, as holding almost 100 acres of arable land and some 450 acres of pasture. In his report to the Riddells the following year, Alexander Low wrote of Bourblaige, "This is a very pleasant sheep farm, but oppressed with too many tenants," and recommended that it be joined

with Tornamona. “Both together,” he continued, “would make a good sheep walk fit for Cheviot sheep, but the junction would occasion the removal of a number of poor tenants.”

In 1828 Bourblaige and Tornamona were, on the instructions of Sir James Milles Riddell, duly and brutally cleared. A report says, “The process was attended with many acts of heartless cruelty on the part of the laird's representatives. In one case a half-witted woman who flatly refused to flit, was locked up in her cottage, the door being barricaded on the outside by mason-work. She was visited every morning to see if she had arrived at a tractable frame of mind, but for days she held out. It was not until her slender store of food was exhausted that she ceased to argue with the inevitable and decided to capitulate.”

Another observer recorded, “To clear Bourblaige, the laird's men shot the dogs, and they shot the goats, and they drove away the cows. And then they took the roofs off. It



Fig. 4

was in the wintertime that they did it. Ploughs were put through the potato pits so that they would spoil in the frost. And the people walked to Swordle (on the north coast) through showers of snow.”

Of those who were cleared, while many went to the Swordle clachans, from which they were again cleared in 1853, some went to places like Acharacle or Glasgow, and some took ship from Tobermory to the

6. New World.

John McColl was responsible to the laird for the clearing, and he then rented Bourblaige and Tornamona until 1833. His 'sheep run' was centred on Tornamona, where a large animal enclosure was built using the stones from the Tornamona clachan's buildings. No new walls were built around Bourblaige, so the old buildings were left untouched.

Bourblaige clachan had access to some two kilometres of coastline, including a sheltered bay called Port a' Chamais. A number of structures are to be found on the land immediately behind the beach, two of which are well-made stone houses right on the shore. It is possible that these were occupied after the clearance, though by 1872



they are marked on the Ordnance Survey maps as roofless.

Fig. 5 – The Beach at Bourblaig



Fig. 6

The tenant sheep farming project was not a success, so the settlement and its land reverted to the Estate, later becoming part of an extensive sheep and cattle operation, while the red deer which are frequently to be found browsing between the ruins are now part of the Estate's deer stalking enterprise.



Fig. 6



*Prepared & printed by the
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