

## Tradition and change in the age of Improvement: a study of Argyll tacksmen's houses in Morvern

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper is an historical and architectural case-study of the remaining Argyll tacksmen's houses in Morvern, built during the first phase of agricultural Improvement between 1754 and 1819. It is argued that this group of buildings represents the last phase of clan warfare in the region, built by tacksmen acting as colonizing agents of Campbell control and polity over relatively recently acquired MacLean territory.*

From Lochaline following the Sound of Mull westward to the headland at Drimnin and returning eastward along Loch Sunart the fertile foreshore of Morvern is punctuated by a series of similar farmhouses dating from the mid- to late 18th century. Neatly slated and harled, regular and symmetrical, the houses built by the Dukes of Argyll's Morvern tacksmen form an architectural group that embodies the spirit of late 18th-century 'Improvement' in Scotland, modern buildings that stood at the vanguard of the agricultural reforms that were sweeping the Highlands from the south. Between 1754, when the Morvern tacks were reset by the third Duke of Argyll, and the Argyll sales of 1819 a new generation of entrepreneurial, improving tacksmen reorganized their farms from traditional, subsistence based *bailtean* into efficient, profitable sheep and cattle ranches (Gaskell 1968, ch2). These tacksmen built themselves houses appropriate not only to their status and wealth but also to their view of themselves as modern men; houses that were in every aspect of their build and design the very symbol of agricultural improvement in Scotland and

totally alien to the environment, culture and building traditions of the West Highlands. The Morvern Argyll tacksmen's houses provide a point from which to examine the origins of this quintessentially Scottish building type and its specific relationship to Morvern, a relationship that perhaps also represents a continuation of traditional Campbell political activity in the West Highlands disguised by and absorbed into the process of 'Improvement'.<sup>1</sup>

Amongst the large Highland landowners, the Dukes of Argyll had a reputation for leading the way in economic and agricultural improvement throughout the 18th century, initiating schemes and reforms throughout their massive estates, which stretched from Kintyre to Mull and Morvern and much of Highland Perthshire (Creegen 1964, 19–101). 'Improvement' in mid- to late-18th century Britain was an ideal, a shared vision of social and economic growth and renewal realized through the sweeping away of ancient customs and the introduction of rational, modern, efficient practices (Smout 1970, 75). Pamphlets were published, lectures given and ideas debated at clubs in Edinburgh and London

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such as the Highland Society and the Agricultural Society of Scotland, both of which boasted John, fifth Duke of Argyll, as their chairman. Something of this ‘Spirit of Improvement’ can be taken from a paper presented to the Highland Society in London by the retired Edinburgh bookseller and political economist John Knox in 1786:

The courses of rivers have been directed into new channels, internal navigations have opened from sea to sea through seemingly insurmountable difficulties, and in many parts the face of Nature hath undergone a total change. Immense tracts of desert land have been brought into cultivation, and regions, which served only to give shelter to the wild animals, became, through the persevering hand of man, the seats of populous cities, of science and refinement.<sup>2</sup>

‘Improvement’ was, in turn, also a practical reality, with quasi-governmental institutions and private landowners implementing improvements the length and breadth of Britain. Even within a single Highland estate such as Inveraray, plans for ‘Improvement’ took many forms, from agriculture with field enclosures, the introduction of new crops, sheep and land drainage, to new enterprises in the textiles industry, fisheries, kelping, road and bridge building, the founding of the new planned town of Inveraray as a centre for these new industries and the Dukes’ continued rebuilding and landscaping of the castle and grounds at Inveraray.<sup>3</sup> Of the 18th-century Dukes of Argyll, John, the fifth Duke in particular was, ‘recognised as one of the great exponents of highland affairs’ (Cregeen 1970, 21). However, improvement was not simply a question of enclosing fields, digging drainage and building modern mansion houses. The driving force behind improvement, in the Highlands as elsewhere, was not merely lofty idealism but the landowner’s desire, or need, to increase the revenue from their lands, with the tenant being obliged to carry out the infrastructure work of improvement in order to meet higher rent

demands; a simple economic case for reform. But there was a particular complication for the Highland landowner as, unlike in the Lowlands, the principal tenants were not simply leaseholders but tacksmen; a social as well as economic role. Traditionally the tacksmen, or *fir-tacsa*, were the lesser gentry and military captains of the clan structure as well as the large farm holders, and the role and future of the tacksmen lay at the heart of agricultural improvement in the Highlands (Devine 1993, 5). The tacksmen held their lands through tacks, a form of lease, directly to the clan chief, in this case the Duke of Argyll, in return for monetary rent and military service. The tacksmen in turn sublet his, often considerable, holding to numerous subtenants who worked the land and lived in small traditional settlements or hamlets, the *bailtean*. As the agricultural and industrial revolutions of the 18th century gradually brought the Highlands into the modern world, the clan chiefs became British aristocratic landowners, in need of money not men-at-arms, and the traditional role of the tacksmen, the Highland middle class, was in jeopardy. The second Duke of Argyll (1680–1743) was the first Highland landowner to mount an attack on the tacksmen in the search for higher rental when in the 1730s he attempted to increase the return by letting directly to the subtenantry and excluding tacksmen altogether. To counter this attack on their position, the tacksmen themselves could adapt and become modern gentlemen farmers, offering higher rents by aggressively modernizing their lands to retain their farms and wealth but in so doing breaking their bond of responsibility to their subtenants who were inevitably squeezed to marginal land to make way for sheep pasture.<sup>4</sup> This eventually emerged as the preferred mode of reform, as by the later 18th century it had become clear that large, single tenant farms were more profitable than numerous smallholdings, especially when converted to sheep ranches. The tacksmen’s role as military captains and social leaders within the clan was

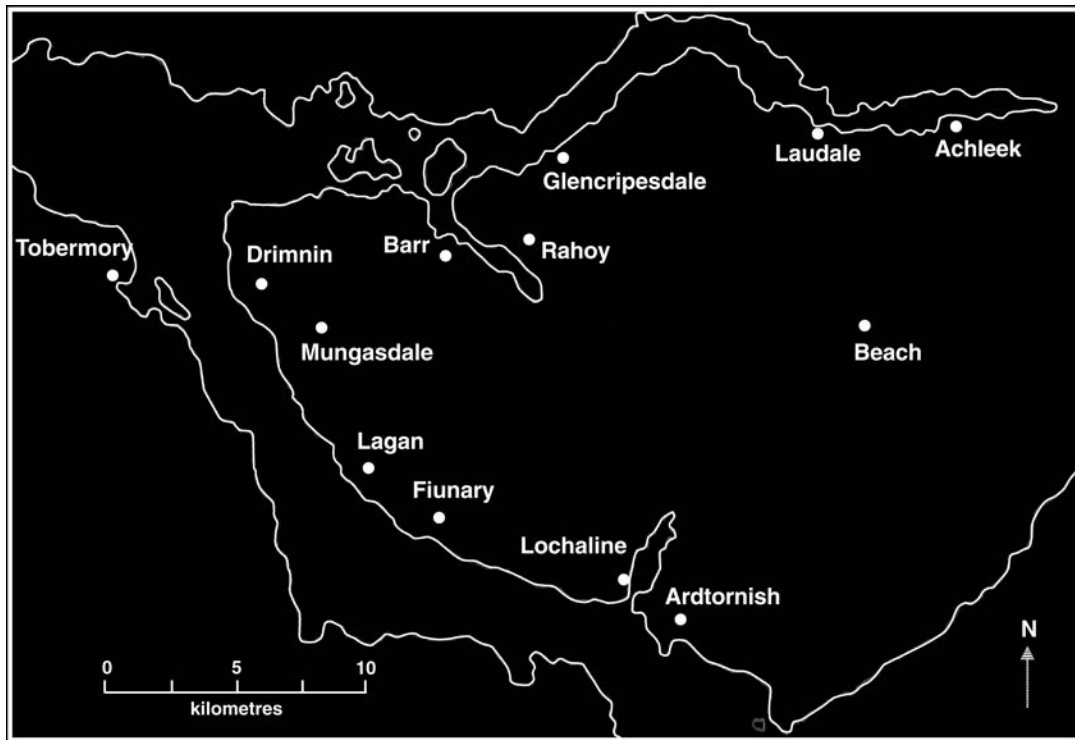
moribund and the class faced extinction or adaptation (Devine 1993, 6). Therefore, as the clan chief became landowner and aristocrat, demanding efficiency and profitability not political loyalty, tacksmen became leaseholders and sometimes wealthy gentlemen farmers, a situation observed and lamented by the great observer of men, Samuel Johnson (1775, 50):

Next in dignity to the Laird is the Tacksman; a large taker or lease-holder of land. . . These tacks have long been considered as hereditary, and the occupant was distinguished by the name of the place at which he resided. He held a middle station, by which the highest and the lowest orders were connected. . . This tenure still subsists, with its original operation, but not with the primitive stability. . . I have found in the hither parts of Scotland, men not defective in judgment or general experience, who consider the Tacksman as a useless burden on the ground, as a drone who lives upon the product of an estate, without the right of property, or the merit of labour, and who impoverishes at once the landlord and the tenant. The land they say, is let to the Tacksman at six-pence an acre, and by him to the tenant at ten-pence.

Being remote from Inveraray, improvement came late to Morvern in comparison to the rest of the Argyll estates, though still ahead of much of the Western Highlands, but the pattern was established and the issue of tacks, as ever, was central to reform (RCAHMS 1980, 37–9, 43). A late addition to the Campbell empire, only being annexed in the late 17th century, Morvern was remote, untamed and in the mid-18th century still very much unimproved. The House of Argyll was, by its own standards at least, slow to turn its attention and improving zeal to this outermost region and it was not until 1754 that the first agricultural reforms were carried out by Archibald, third Duke of Argyll (1682–1761) with the resetting of tacks. The old hereditary tacksmen were removed and the new tacksmen, men willing to adapt, were rewarded with vast tacks, often comprising several adjoining

farms, in return for previously inconceivable rentals, their success being confirmed when their tacks were, for the most part, renewed by John the fifth Duke (1723–1806) in 1773–5. The principal tacks in Morvern, those over 1000 acres, comprised: Ardtornish, the largest of the group with 9965 acres set to Donald Campbell of Airds, stretching southward along the shore of the Sound of Mull from Lochaline round to Loch Linnhe; Glencripesdale, 7834 acres set to Duguld MacLachlane, on Loch Sunart on the northern shore of the peninsula, reset to Duncan Campbell of Glenure in 1775; Liddesdale, 7508 acres set to Lieut Colin Campbell, later subdivided in 1807 into Liddesdale set to John Campbell and East Liddesdale, or Achleek, set to Allan MacDougall; Laudale, 7284 acres, set to John Campbell of Ardsignish; Barr, 4224 acres set to Duncan Campbell; Rahoy, 3059 acres, facing the small inlet of Loch Teacuis, set to Archibald Campbell; Beach in the central fertile strip of Glen Geal bordering Ardgor, set to Ewen McFie; Lagan, 2681 acres, set to John Campbell; Mungasdale, 1459 acres of land set to John Beatton bordering the Drimnin peninsula, which was still held by the Macleans of Drimnin (illus 1) (Gaskell 1968, 244).<sup>5</sup>

Amongst the various improvements carried out by these new tacksmen, and their only lasting testament when even the sheep pastures have declined, was the building of large, modern farmhouses.<sup>6</sup> The houses these tacksmen built were purposefully and without exception archetypal late 18th-century, 'improved' farmhouses 'of neat modern fabrick' (Johnson 1775, 50). Solid buildings of squared, quarried stonework, harled white with a well-slatted gable roof, typically two storeys high, three bays wide with regular fenestration around a central doorway, perhaps with an additional gabled porch and single storey pavilion wings to the sides. All the houses faced the sea whether on the north or south side of the peninsula. In architectural terms each house was a natural combination or partnership of late 18th-century neo-classicism: the lean,

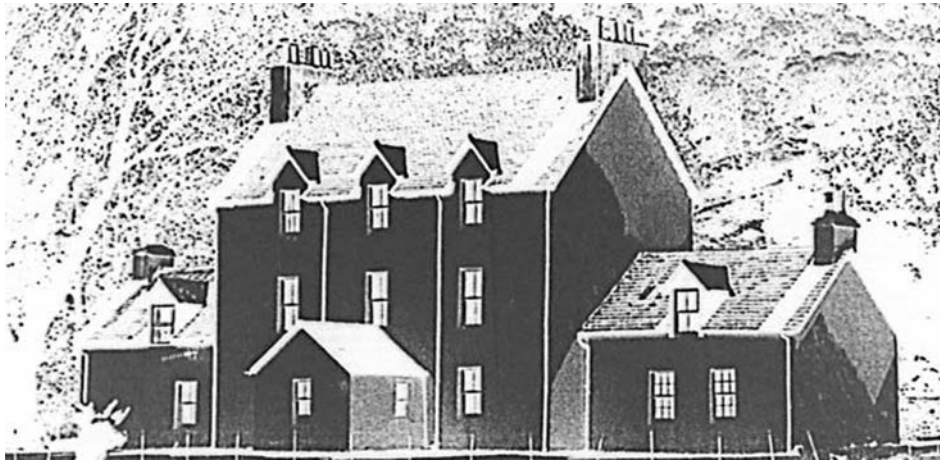


ILLUS 1 Morvern and the surrounding area

stripped-down successor to Palladianism, and the practical, efficient demands of the 'Age of Improvement'. Such buildings are familiar to anyone who has travelled through the Scottish countryside. Of the major Argyll tacks in Morvern, four Improvement-era houses survive today: Glencripesdale House; Laudale House; Mungasdale House; and Achleek House, the whole group built to an architectural sliding scale of size and proportion. The largest of the group, Donald Campbell of Airds' house at Ardtornish (NM 6910 4430), was demolished in 1907 to avoid tax on unoccupied property by the then proprietor Valentine Smith (Gaskell 1968, 244). This was particularly unfortunate as it was the keystone of the whole group. Although of the same basic design, Ardtornish was larger and grander in proportion than all the others, representing the top end of the scale; a position fitting to the size and potential wealth of the

tack and of Campbell of Airds' additional position as the Duke of Argyll's Morvern factor. Built between 1755 and 1770, significantly by 'a parcel of Low Country masons', it was described as 'a handsome mansion house', two storeys, harled white with three broad symmetrical bays to the front elevation and a large, M-gabled wing to the rear, some three bays deep (Cregeen 1964, 101). A building that not only reflected the status of its owner but set the example for the other tack holders to emulate.<sup>7</sup>

Laudale House (NM 7490 7980) is the largest surviving house of the group, although the tack itself had slightly fewer acres than Glencripesdale, and was also the most architecturally perfect of the group (illus 2). A settlement has been recorded at Laudale since the 15th century but the present house was built by John Campbell of Ardslygnish between 1755 and 1790 (Gaskell 1968, 244). Laudale



ILLUS 2 Laudale House, Morvern, c 1930 (*Iain Thorber*)



ILLUS 3 Glencripesdale House, Morvern, 2002

House has three storeys with the gables of the third storey dormer windows breaking the roofline. All the windows have four-pane sash-and-case frames. There is a bowed stair tower to the centre of the rear elevation, capped with an elegant swept roof and lit with small square stair lights. Unlike all the other buildings in the group, the rear elevation is also fully fenestrated featuring wallhead dormers, similar to the front elevation, that flank the stairtower. Laudale is of typical symmetrical, three bay design but the proportions of the

front elevation show particular refinement, the windows decreasing slightly in size at each storey, with a good sized gabled porch. The roof ridge of the porch is in alignment with the eaves of the flanking pavilion wings and the eaves of the porch match the line of the pavilion wing windows. The pavilions are identical and again perfectly proportioned, with smaller gabled roof dormers to centre and small gable end chimney stacks.

Glencripesdale House, (NM 6630 5940) although the largest tack after Ardtornish, is a



ILLUS 4 Mungasdale House, Morvern, 2001 (*Iain Thorber*)

half storey smaller than Laudale and not as well balanced architecturally having only one oversized, pavilion wing (illus 3). The farm of Glencripesdale is shown on a 1733 military survey map of Loch Sunart but the present house, like Laudale, dates from the late 18th century and was built by Duncan Campbell of Glenure c 1775.<sup>8</sup> Typically harled and slated, Glencripesdale House has three broad bays to the north-east facing, front elevation and stands two-and-a-half storeys high with a row of four small, neatly gabled dormers punctuating the roof which are set perfectly to the larger proportions of the three windows to the first floor below, the windows to the ground floor flanking a gabled entrance porch. The rear elevation has only a single, central stair window to the upper storey, while there is a large window to the ground floor of the south-west gable end. The original four-pane sash-and-case windows remain intact as do the roofing slates and broad stone gable chimney stacks. A large one-and-a-half storey, gable roofed pavilion adjoins the house to the south-east gable end, with two roof dormers and an additional cross bay to the gable end forming an overall T-plan. The interior is based on the same standardized plan as Laudale but slightly trimmed, with the central cross passage terminating in an internal staircase to rear and with apartments to left and right, front and back.

Little is known about Mungasdale other than it was a small-to-medium-size tack, at

1459 acres, leased to a Lowland farmer, John Beaton, when first reset in 1754 and was later packaged together with several other smaller tacks at the Morvern sales in 1824. Like the other houses in the group, Mungasdale House (NM 5670 5370) probably dates from between 1755 and 1770 (illus 4). Of similar design to Laudale and Glencripesdale it provides an example of the medium-size farmhouse, reflecting the size and revenue of the tack. Typically two stories high and three broad bays wide, harled and slated, south-west facing Mungasdale has a rectangular porch to centre, with piended roof and slightly smaller windows to the upper storey. The window to the left bay of the ground floor has been enlarged and all the windows are modern replacements. The rear elevation has two windows to the ground floor and a central stair window to the upper floor, as at Glencripesdale. There is a single storey pavilion wing with lean-to pitched roof to the south-east gable end. The roof is the only house in the group to feature raised skews to the gable ends, which suggests the work of different masons, possibly from the Lothians.<sup>9</sup>

The original house for the large 1754 tack of Liddesdale was converted from an existing storehouse, built by the short-lived Morvern Mining Company in the 1730s, now a ruin of rectangular-plan foundations and one gable end; however, Achleek House further along Loch Sunart to the east has survived (illus 5).<sup>10</sup> Achleek House (NM 7940 6010) was built by Allan MacDougall, c 1807, when the Liddesdale tack was split into West and East Liddesdale, of which Achleek was the principal farm. North-facing across Loch Sunart, Achleek House is the last and also the smallest of the Morvern group and, accordingly, also the simplest. Typically harled white and slated, with broad gable end chimney stacks, two storeys high, three symmetrical bays and a central doorway reached by four modern concrete steps. The most distinctive feature is that the smaller size of Achleek sees the proportions of the windows differing from the larger



ILLUS 5 Achleek House, Morvern (*Iain Thorber*)

houses, being smaller in dimension on the ground floor and having square, not rectangular, upper storey windows, but all still house the original four-pane sash-and-case frames. Both gable ends are blank, as would be expected, with only two windows and an upper storey central stair window to the rear. The wall to the west of the front elevation suggests the former presence of a small single storey pavilion as at Mungasdale, or an enclosed yard. The slightly overhanging eaves and exposed rafters of the roof at the gable ends reflect the beginning of changes in house design in the early 19th century. Of the other houses belonging to the large Argyll tacks, those that have been lost include: Barr House, built in the late 18th century by Duncan Campbell and demolished in 1930; Archibald Campbell's Rahoy House, demolished in the

mid-19th century; and Beach House, demolished c 1870.<sup>11</sup>

Together the Morvern tacksmen's houses form a group of buildings of standardized design but for which the precise architectural origins are unclear. The two storey, three bay symmetrical house harled white with one or more pavilion wings was certainly not unique to Morvern and the Argyll tacks, and numerous examples can be found throughout Scotland (Naismith 1981, 6). It is a building type that originated in the Lowlands and Borders and was particularly associated with the 'Age of Improvement', not just agricultural improvement and farm buildings but all schemes of improvement and modernization. In the rural areas particularly noticeable is the abundance of farmhouses, manses and inns in this style. Houses of similar date and design can be found

anywhere from Ayrshire to Aberdeenshire. In Morvern, the model was repeated on the neighbouring Achranich estate with the erection of a new farmhouse by Macdonald of Borrodale, c 1815, similar in scale to Mungasdale House (Gaskell 1968, 259).<sup>12</sup> Another lost Improvement-era house in Morvern was Fiunary Manse, built in 1779 for Norman Macleod, the Presbyterian minister installed by the Duke of Argyll to 'improve' the religion of the largely Episcopalian population of Morvern. Manses were built by the Established Church throughout rural Scotland between 1770 and 1830 to attract learned civilizing ministers to remote parishes, all in the same simplified neo-classical style as the farmhouses of the period and equally numerous (Naismith, 1981, 28). Dalzell Manse, Motherwell, for example, was built at the same time as Fiunary Manse and sits very well in the architectural sliding scale between Laudale House and Mungasdale House. Indeed the two storey, three bay with wings formula is often popularly referred to as the 'Manse' or 'Telford Manse' type, although Telford's version of the design was not approved by the Church of Scotland until 1828 and was not widely available until the publication of the *Atlas to the Life of Thomas Telford* in 1838 (Maclean 1989, 14).<sup>13</sup> For stylistic comparison, a model example of the late 18th-century rural Scottish inn can also be found close to Morvern across the Sound of Mull in Tobermory. Built in 1790 by Stevenson of Oban for the British Fisheries Society to a design by Robert Mylne, the inn was considered 'an example of neatness' by James Maxwell, the Duke of Argyll's Chamberlain for Mull and Morvern and the Society's agent for Tobermory (NM 5053 5529).<sup>14</sup> Although much modified in recent times, Mylne's original plans for the inn show a design that could have been for Laudale House if an extra storey was added, or Mungasdale if a pavilion wing was removed (illus 6).<sup>15</sup>

A rationalized building for a rational age, a blueprint to provide houses fit for all modern,

forward looking professional men – but where did the design come from? It has been argued that the prevalence of such plain but perfectly proportioned buildings in Scotland from this period can be ascribed to the skills of masons (Naismith 1981, 145):

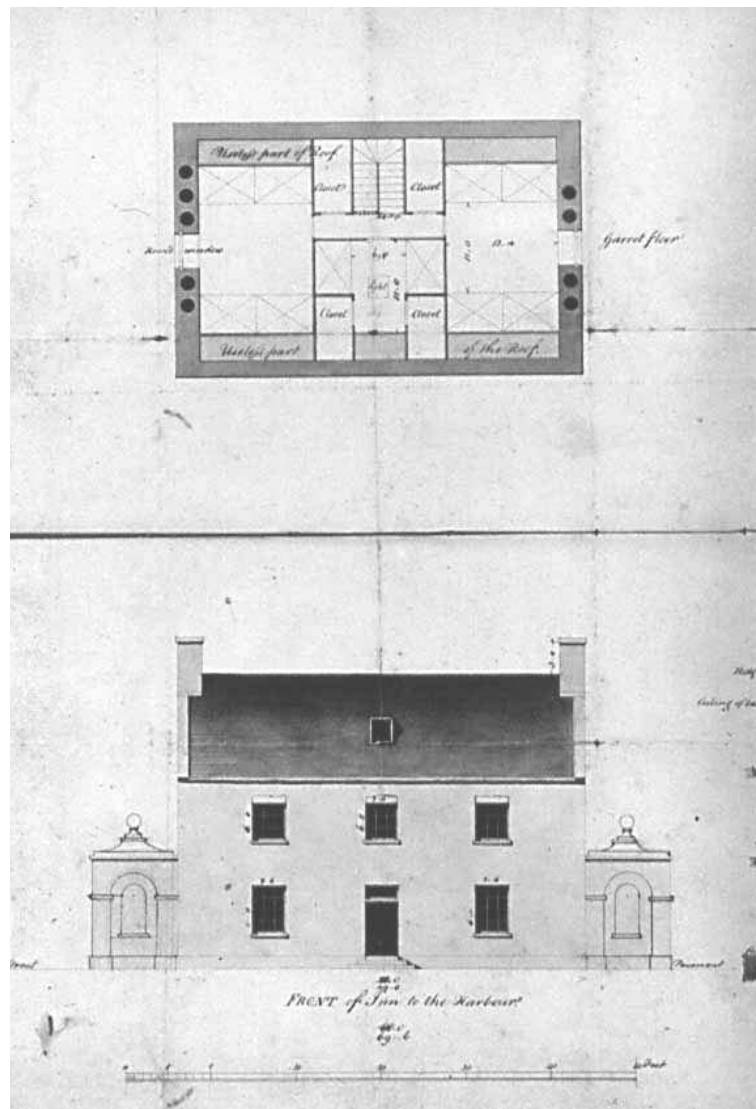
Their natural instinct for disciplined thinking coupled to the spirit prevailing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for classical order and balance. . . It would not be beyond expectation to find that the builders of the Scottish countryside, working in an age when order and balance were regarded as imperative, created well proportioned designs without effort. . . All of it down to earth and practical.

Scottish masons of the period, such as Stevenson of Oban or the Lowland masons brought in to build Ardtornish House, operating at a level beneath that of the trained architect, often with land surveyors, were probably using published pattern books of designs and builder's manuals such as the *Rudiments of Architecture*, first published in Edinburgh in 1772. Books such as the *Rudiments* included chapters on proportion, scale and trigonometry as well as illustrations of the classical orders and designs for buildings (Walker, 1992, preface):

Its five Scottish printings must have ensured that virtually everyone engaged in building or land management must have had a copy, it was a hard used book which was discarded when it was either completely worn out or finally became obsolete from the 1840s onwards.

Indeed, the house design illustrated as *Design X* in the *Rudiments*, for example, provides the perfect template for the tacksman's houses in both plan and elevation (illus 7). In the early-modern period of the late 18th century, before the introduction of mass-production and transportation methods, pattern books provided building contractors across Scotland with simplified, watered-down versions of the popular, fashionable styles of the day, viz the



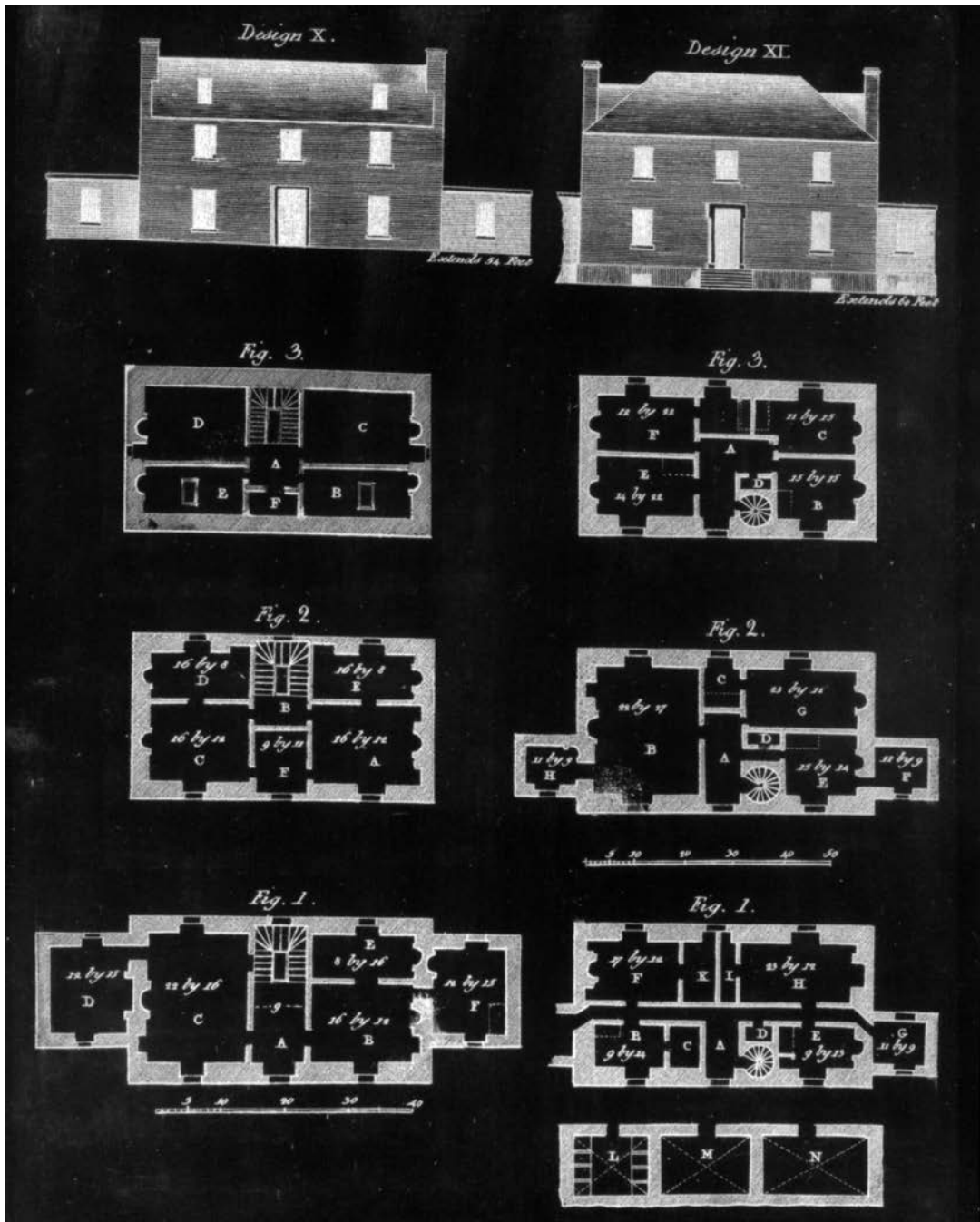


ILLUS 6 Robert Mylne, Plan for Tobermory, 1790 (*National Archives of Scotland, GD9/3/553*)

stripped down Neo-Classicism of Robert Adam, Samuel Wyatt and Robert Mylne.<sup>16</sup>

Within this context, it is not actually known who built or designed the Morvern tacksmen's houses, or whether many different contractors were involved, as the Argyll estate rentals did not record the costs or details of house-building by tenants.<sup>17</sup> However, it is possible that the uniformity of design could,

to some extent, have been regulated by the House of Argyll, in the form of an imposed house style, by the Morvern factor Donald Campbell of Airds or his superior James Maxwell (Gaskell 1968, appendix 3, 124).<sup>18</sup> This would follow the practice for new building works established by the Dukes of Argyll at Inveraray and Tobermory, whereby the tenants paid a basic annual rent for their land,



ILLUS 7 Design X, *Rudiments of Architecture*, second edn 1778 (Crown copyright: National Archives of Scotland)

were then responsible for building their own house at their own cost but only according to certain building regulations that generally prescribed materials, such as stone and slate, and that buildings should be 'neat and regular' in design (Maudlin 2002, 43–65). This practice would become widespread through promotion by august landowning members of the Highland Society such as Sir James Grant of Grant:

[The landowner] should interfere as little as possible with building. It will inevitably bring them into a great deal of useless expense . . . those [houses] that are provided will not be taken near so much care for or so much enjoyed as those which they [the tenants] build for themselves.<sup>19</sup>

However, in the final analysis, whether the tacksmen appointed architects or surveyors to draw up plans, the builders picked a design from a pattern book, or design parameters were prescribed by James Maxwell is unimportant, as the same house would have been built. The idea for a gabled, two storey, three bay, symmetrical house in harled stone could have been derived with equal success from any of these sources, such was the popularity of the type amongst the improving classes in Scotland. The significance of the buildings as a group lies in their architectural uniformity. Taken together the houses form a coherent architectural group of buildings that embody the advent of Modernity in Morvern, a deliberate aesthetic subgroup or spin-off from the swathes of similar houses being built by improving farmers in the Lowlands of the mid to late 18th century (Kostof 1991, 72). The tacksmen knew they were the northern front-line troops of agricultural improvement in Scotland bringing new, innovative farming methods from the south and introducing them to the unimproved wilds of Morvern and their houses needed to reflect this self-image (Markus 1982, ch 1). The front-line character of these modern farm houses going up across Morvern in the latter half of the 18th century

is perhaps more fully understood when considered against the nature of the existing building stock. The appearance of the homes of the subtenantry that made up the built environment of the typical Highland settlement or *bailtean* is well known through the travel writings of the period. Edward Burt, Thomas Pennant, James Hogg and, of course, Johnson and Boswell, all generally appalled, provided descriptions of the ordinary dwellings of the Highland population (Burt 1724–8; Pennant 1769; Johnson 1785; Boswell 1785; Hogg, 1803). Pennant, for example, wrote that:

[The] houses of the common people in these parts are shocking to humanity, formed of loose stones and covered with clods, which they term devots, or with heath, broom or branches of fir; they look, at a distance, like so many black molehills. . . The most wretched hovels that can be imagined.

Recent research of this Highland vernacular architecture can also be found (Fenton & Walker 1981). In Morvern, as elsewhere in the mid- to late 18th century, many of these traditional settlements and their population were moved to the unfertile fringes of farms and estates to small crofts, to fish and harvest kelp, making way for sheep pastures. However, although ancient settlement patterns were permanently lost, building traditions, in terms of materials, construction and form, continued and survived late into the 19th century wherever an indigenous population remained, whereas the house of the successful tacksmen changed as quickly and dramatically as the role of a tacksmen itself changed (Smout 1975, 99). The typical house of the pre-Improvement tacksmen was as traditional as his role in the clan structure and was for the most part a house of similar design and build to that of his subtenants, single storey but considerably larger and better furnished. A good description of such a house was provided by John Macleod, minister for Morvern, who described visiting the home of Cameron of Glendessary as a youth:<sup>20</sup>

He resided at Ach-a-charn and occupied a house of very peculiar construction; formed of oak beams placed at regular distances; the intervening spaces being closely interwoven with wicker work. The outside was wholly covered with heath, and the interior was divided into several apartments, and finished in a style of style of taste and elegance corresponding with enlightened refinement of the occupants (Macleod 1843, 177).

In contrast, when Macleod visited Achranich in the 1770s, the Duke of Argyll's tacksmen were building their new houses and such a house as Ach-a-charn had already become a rarity as a residence suitable for a 'gentleman' in Morvern, though perhaps still relatively common elsewhere in the West Highlands as the Dukes of Argyll had put Morvern considerably ahead of the typical pace of improvement in the region. Similarly Dr Johnson also described staying in, or visiting, several tacksmen's houses of this ancient type, 'lined with turf and wattled with twigs' while in the West Highlands and Islands, also in the 1770s (Johnson 1775, 30). Caisteal nan Con, Killundine provides a further example of the pre-Improvement tacksman's house in Morvern itself (RCAHMS 1980, no 337). The new white harled, two storey houses were certainly different from such tacksmen's houses that the people of Morvern would have been familiar with and must have appeared strange and unsettling, enforcing the feeling of alienation amongst the subtenantry from the tacksmen class which had traditionally provided a paternalistic leadership but which now, through architecture, declared itself to have different, economic allegiances.

The rapid construction of large, modern houses was the architectural manifestation of 'Improvement' in Morvern by the Dukes of Argyll's new tacksmen and can therefore be viewed as a small part of a process that was increasingly taking grip of the Highlands in the late 18th century spreading from the Lowlands, at first through Argyll and Perthshire, to the north and west until it had reached the

most remote areas of Sutherland by the mid-19th century (Cregeen 1970, 21). The easily defined geographic area of the Morvern peninsula and the predominance of ownership of the area by the improving Dukes of Argyll provide excellent conditions for a case-study of this process. But the change of Morvern from clannish backwater to modern efficient farmland is perhaps not that simple; a note of doubt is raised by the fact that on both occasions of the tacks being re-issued, in 1754 and again in 1774, over half were awarded to established Campbell tacksmen from elsewhere within the massive Argyll estates (see above), replacing the hereditary holders whose family tenure of the tacks often dated back to the 17th century when the area was entirely owned by the MacLeans of Drimnin. Certainly, these new men were modern gentlemen farmers, men keen like the dukes on the latest agricultural reforms but, as other Highland landowners discovered, if high rents were the only imperative higher bidders from the southwest of Scotland and the Borders, eager for comparatively cheap pasture land, could easily be found. It has been argued, however, that the third Duke was 'likely to have been influenced more by the economic than by the political reliability of kinsmen' (Gaskell 1968, 5). And that even if he had not yet fully relinquished the family's political role, John, fifth Duke of Argyll, did, and as such was, 'the first of his house to be completely free of a political role' (Cregeen 1970, 19). But perhaps even if the old territorial politics were gone and as long as the pursuit of modern efficient farming practices was not affected, even he was not averse to showing a little favouritism to his kinsmen, old lingering loyalties still quietly at work. This was certainly the case across the Sound of Mull at the new planned village of Tobermory, strategically positioned opposite the Drimnin headland of Morvern, where as late as 1788 James Maxwell was instructed by the fifth Duke to favour prospective settlers, 'that are friendly to my name' (Dunlop 1978, 134).<sup>21</sup>

However, when the history of the peninsula is considered, between the late 17th century and the installation of the new predominantly Campbell tacksmen in 1754, the particular case of Morvern suggests that this was not simply a result of extended nepotism on the part of the Dukes of Argyll but that there was still a last piece of Campbell political policy to be played. As has been argued, it was clear by the mid-18th century that the traditional role of the tacksmen was under threat but there was still one traditional role, in Morvern at least, that a Campbell tacksmen could play: that of the clan colonizer. Historically, it was an established practice of the clans to colonize newly acquired territory with tacksmen of their own clan in order to pacify and control unstable and potentially volatile outposts and this was a widespread practice in the 17th century amongst 'the more imperialistic clans such as the Mackenzies and Campbells' (Devine 1993, 10). The ninth Earl of Argyll, for example, had rapidly introduced Campbell tacksmen upon annexation of the MacLean lands on Mull in the late 17th century. But in the newly-won MacLean lands in Morvern, hostility to Campbell rule was so violent that implementation of this policy had proved impossible. By the mid-18th century the long-established MacLean tacksmen may have had the Dukes of Argyll as a landlord but this was largely an academic matter; they still gave their loyalty and often their rent to the MacLeans of Drimnin, the hill pastures and arable coastal fringes of Morvern remaining wild frontier lands, populated with disloyal Jacobites and non-jurors, only loosely under Campbell control (Cregeen 1970, 8). For the House of Argyll this unsatisfactory situation came to a head during the Jacobite Rising, 1745–6, when the supposedly Campbell tacksmen and subtenantry of Morvern came out in support of the rebellious MacLeans of Drimnin. This outrage to the Dukes of Argyll finally provided the opportunity to start the process of bringing Morvern and the MacLeans under control. It was General John Campbell, Marquis of

Lorne, later the fourth Duke, who personally led the Argyll Militia force that undertook the Duke of Cumberland's orders to waste Morvern, destroying over 400 properties, and who wrote to Cumberland that, 'I have a scheme of banishing all the rebellious habitants of Morvern so to have a new set of people there'.<sup>22</sup> This exact policy was, we have seen, carried out by his brother Archibald, third Duke, when the tacks were reset in 1754, an action that neatly addressed the problem of Morvern and the MacLeans and was at once both a traditional Highland tactic and the very model of modern estate improvement. Likewise, the renowned humanitarian, his son John, the fifth Duke who renewed the tacks in 1773, was the same Colonel John Campbell who only 27 years earlier in 1746 had led the Argyll Militia in the disarming and routing out of MacLean rebels in the region (Gaskell 1968, 3). Peace and then 'Improvement' was brought to Morvern by the same men who brought it under the sword. Whether 'Improvement' or pacification, the very traditional role of the Campbell tacksmen as clan colonizers was particularly well-suited to the demands of agricultural reform where one of the primary objectives was the eviction of the MacLean subtenantry.

If the start of the process of the final subjugation and control of Morvern was the burning and laying waste of settlements, crops and forests, then the end was the building of the new tacksmen's houses and the buildings thus take on additional architectural meaning and symbolism. The houses of the Argyll tacksmen in Morvern operate on two levels, as symbols of the new economic imperative but also marking the end of a smaller but long-standing territorial clan war. Consider the impact they would have made on the MacLean population when first built, stretched out in a chain along the Sound of Mull and Loch Sunart, controlling the land and watching the shipping lanes from Oban to Tobermory and out to the Islands (Maudlin 2002, 66).<sup>23</sup> Tall and massive, symmetrical, shining white stone buildings standing at each loch head, strath

and headland, like new teeth against a landscape of browns and greens; the consolidation of the victor's peace by soldiers turned farmers, their power over a landscape of clustered low turf walls and thatch nonetheless absolute.

The sixth Duke of Argyll's Morvern estate was parcelled up into five smaller estates and sold off at the Argyll sales, 1819–25. The fall in wool prices in the mid- to late 19th century saw the emergence of sporting estates with the last of the Highland landowners and large tenants selling up, as well as the Lowland sheep farmers. With the sporting estate came a new, Victorian style of architecture and a new type of house, the comfortable gentleman's retreat such as Ardtornish Tower (Gaskell 1968, ch 4). In turn many of these estates have since dwindled from their Edwardian heyday and economic concerns have returned in the form of forestry and fish farming. After almost two centuries of continuously changing landownership and estate boundaries, the houses built by the Dukes of Argyll's Morvern tacksmen stand as an architectural and historical group that represents the massive social and economic change that agricultural improvement brought to the Highland landscape in the late 18th century and Morvern's role in the final act of the centuries old Campbell territorial wars.<sup>24</sup>

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#### NOTES

- 1 A particular debt of gratitude is owed to Eric Cregeen and Philip Gaskell whose pioneering work in relation to Morvern (Gaskell 1968) and the Argyll estates (Cregeen 1970) provided the starting point for this paper.
- 2 NAS/GD9/1/1.
- 3 A full account of works at Inveraray by a range of fashionable architects from John Adam to Robert Mylne can be found in Cosh & Lindsay 1973.
- 4 Many of the tacksmen class chose a different route and were the first to lead Highland emigration parties to North America, where on arrival they perpetuated their role of community leader. Removal to poor quality fringe land was the start of the crofting system but was not quite the same as the wholesale clearances and forced emigration of the 19th century as the people were still considered a valuable part of the estate but were expected to embrace the spirit of Improvement and earn their rent through other new means such as fishing or kelping.
- 5 NAS/RHP/3600.
- 6 While sheep farming persists in Morvern much of the land is now turned to deer stalking and forestry.
- 7 The only surviving evidence of the character of the original Ardtornish House is a family photograph by Gertrude Smith, c 1864, reprinted in Gaskell (1968, 259, pl 12).
- 8 NAS/RHP 3260.
- 9 Common to Edinburgh and the Lothians, raised stone skewers are not usually found in West Highland buildings of this period. The exceptions proving rule, for example, many of the older buildings in Ullapool, Loch Broom feature skewers as masons were brought in from Dunbar by the British Fisheries Society whereas at Tobermory they are largely absent as the principal contractors were Stevenson of Oban, with the exception of the inn designed by Edinburgh-born Robert Mylne. (Maudlin 2002, 207)
- 10 NAS/RHP 3260.
- 11 The irregular ground plan of the present Beach House, by the Ardtornish estate architect

- Samuel Barham, can be seen in the First Edition OS map, 1872. I am grateful to Iain Thornber for information relating to the history of the existing houses from his own research in letters to me, April to September 2001.
- 12 Achranich was not an Argyll tack and was purchased by Macdonald of Borrodale from the Camerons of Dessary in 1775. The house was demolished in 1880. Achranich House would have been built in direct emulation of the neighbouring Argyll tacksman's houses. Just as many improving Highland landowners took their lead and example from the Dukes of Argyll, so they took theirs from improving Lowland landowning peers such as Sir John Clerk of Pencuik.
  - 13 The design then not by Telford himself but by his long-term assistant, the surveyor Joseph Mitchell.
  - 14 NAS/GD9/289.
  - 15 NAS/GD9/3/553.
  - 16 Robert Adam's Bellevue House, Edinburgh, 1774; Robert Mylne's Pitlour House, Fife, 1786; Samuel Wyatt's 'Gentleman's farmhouse', Kempstone Lodge, Norfolk, 1788.
  - 17 As was common practice this suggests that building work was the responsibility of the tenant and could not be set against rent and was therefore not the estate's concern.
  - 18 'Sett & Rental Mull and Morvern for 1754', 'Instructions to Chamberlains, 1804–1811, proposed schemes of rents for Rahoy and Laudale, 1807', Inveraray Castle Papers.
  - 19 NAS/GD9/3/95. Further information regarding the improving works of Sir James at Grantown-on-Spey can be found in (Woolmer 1970, 238–45).
  - 20 The Glendessary estate, owned by the Camerons of Glendessary, formed an independent island in the centre of House of Argyll-owned Morvern, and hence remained untouched by the surrounding change until it was sold in 1775, and although a small landowner not a tacksman Cameron of Glendessary would have been of similar social status and wealth to a prominent Campbell tacksman. As described above a new modern farmhouse, Achranich House, was built c 1815.
  - 21 NAS//GD9/4/47. Unlike George, the sixth Duke, the fifth Duke was, despite his London residences and 'Improving' zeal, still a Campbell chief by birth and upbringing imbued in centuries of history and tradition as well as modern economic realities. Perhaps he achieved a perfect synthesis of 'Improvement' and Campbell advancement in Morvern as at Tobermory. This is also suggested by the number of Campbells who sat as JPs, chaired government commissions and Improvement boards and ran businesses in Argyll in the early 19th century.
  - 22 Letter from General Campbell to the Duke of Cumberland, 7 June 1707. Quoted in Gaskell 1968, 4.
  - 23 Tobermory was nominally funded by the British Fisheries Society, of which the fifth Duke was chairman, but the entire process of the town's founding was directed by the Duke or on his behalf by James Maxwell, official correspondence pertaining to the settlement passing directly between Tobermory and Inveraray, bypassing the Society's London offices altogether.
  - 24 The importance of these buildings as an architectural group was recognized in 2001 when Mungasdale, Achleek and Glencripesdale were listed together by Historic Scotland thanks to the petitioning of both architectural historians and Morvern residents. Both Glencripesdale and Achleek were awarded category B listings and Mungasdale category C(S), they joined Laudale which was listed, category C(S), in 1971.

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- GD9 Papers of the British Fisheries Society gifted by the Dukes of Argyll.
- GD9/1/1 Extract from *A Discourse on the Expediency of Establishing Fishing Stations in the Highlands of Scotland*. John Knox 1786.
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