

Talking Bealachs



Bealach Heabhal, viewed from the Loch Aineort shoreline

The hunt for the Milton bothain àirigh
and their potential interactions

ABSTRACT

A bealach, the Gaelic term for a pass between hills, is one of the most useful geographic features, facilitating movement of both people and animals between areas while using minimum energy climbing and reducing exposure to extremes of weather.

By their very nature *bealaichean* (plural) are usually found at the head of a glen, allowing access to another glen beyond the watershed. Often, it is the bealach which is named and not the adjacent glens, despite it being those glens which often provided the summer pasture areas – the shielings. As such these areas will usually have one or more areas where *bothain àirigh* (bothies or shieling huts) were built and their ruins, often forgotten and unrecorded, can still be found.

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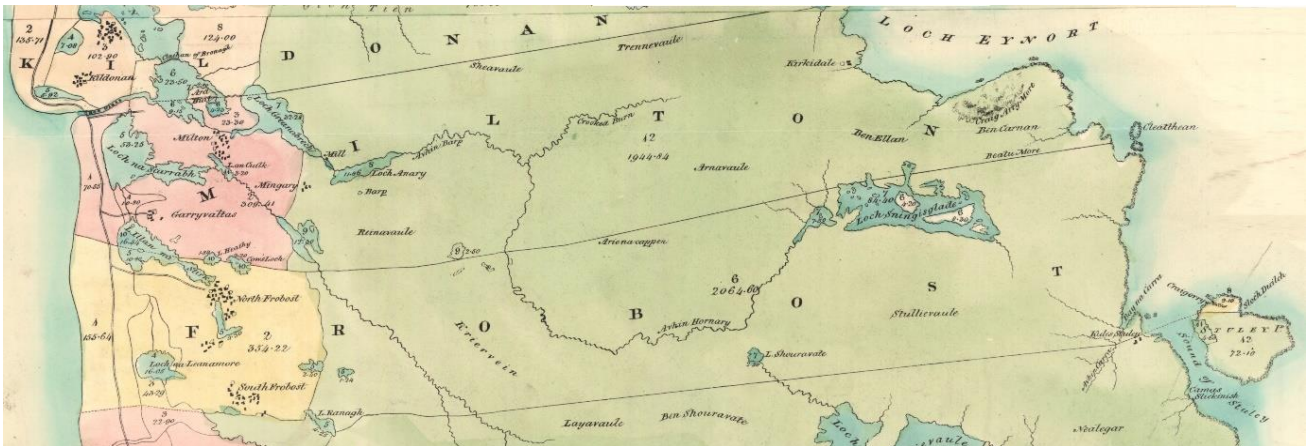
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(Nothing new there then)

Introduction

A bealach, the Gaelic term for a pass between hills, is one of the most useful geographic features, facilitating movement of both people and animals between areas while using minimum energy climbing and reducing exposure to extremes of weather. By their very nature *bealaichean* (the plural) are often found at the head of a glen, allowing access to another glen on the other side of the watershed. Often it is the bealach which is named and not the adjacent pair of glens, although the glens were often used as summer pasture areas or shielings. As such these areas will usually have one or more areas where *bothain àirigh* (bothies or shieling huts) were built and their ruins can still be found.

It is reasonable to assume that if geographic features are given a name, these will be areas considered important by the indigenous people when the name was attributed. It was the presence of two adjacent named *bealaichean* at the north-eastern ‘corner’ of the Mingearaidh plateau which caught my interest. The Mingearaidh plateau is reminiscent of an amphitheatre of pasture to the south of Kildonan and bounded by the hills of Beinn a’ Mhuilín, Sheabhal, Trinneabhal, Airneabhal, Hurabhat, Leathabhal, Crìribheinn and Reineabhal. This wide, mostly flat area has much ground which would have made good summer pasture and surely would have been a valuable township resource in pre-clearance farming communities.



Section of Wm. Bald's 'Plan of the Island of South Uist' showing Milton and Frobost township territories,
Reproduced with permission of the National Library of Scotland

Bald's 'Plan of the Island of South Uist' shows that it was shared between the township areas of Milton and Frobost and there is still the boundary dyke present drawing a line across the landscape to denote this territorial border. The south-eastern ‘corner’ of this area holds a large number of shieling huts along the Abhainn Hornaraidh – the Frobost shielings but, apart from two groups of bothies along the Abhainn a’ Ghleannainn, the small group at Loch Àirigh na h-Aon Oidhche (see SMD in DES 2019) and a further group of turf-walled bothies on Benn a’ Mhuilín, above Loch an Ath Ruaidh, there were no other *bothain àirigh* recorded in the area, leaving the majority of the Milton common pasture apparently unused. It is unthinkable that this would be the case, so the challenge was to rediscover the site(s) of *bothain àirigh* which would offer accommodation to the women and children during the summer transhumance relocation.

The First Site

Over several years I have spent many hours exploring the South Uist landscape, particularly those areas which are less well visited. During my explorations of Kildonan Glen and its protective ring of hills, I had observed, from Sheabhal's summit, a prominent green mound in Bealach Sheabhal, the pass between Sheabhal and Trinneabhal. This is such a prominent feature that it can be clearly seen from the Frobost peat track almost two kilometres distant.



Bealach Sheabhal - Sheabhal (left) and Trinneabhal (right) - with the distant Beinn Mhòr showing behind. The green mound is visible against the darker heather in the bealach © SMD

A field visit to the mound confirmed that it was indeed a site of multiple ruined *bothain àirigh*, with a mixture of building styles. Four of the bothies were mostly masonry built, excavated into the surface of the mound while many others were formerly turf-walled and now remained as enigmatic outlines of set-stones, the foundations used to stabilise the turf structures. The mound itself is ovoid in shape and approximately forty-five metres (north-south) by sixty metres and rises to about ten metres above the surrounding ground surface.



Panorama showing the southern aspect of the Bealach Sheabhal mound site. Multiple bothy ruins and foundations can be seen against the vegetation. The stone-lined, excavated bothain occupy the central, higher section of the mound. © SMD

Because of the deterioration of the site and the overgrowth of vegetation associated with the typical settlement enrichment at shieling sites, it is not possible to be certain of the exact number of *bothain* originally on the site, but there were fourteen which could be identified with a high level of certainty and several more 'possibles' along with some smaller, stone lined features, probably structures used as produce clamps for storing dairy produce on the site until they could be transported back to the township.



Some bothies were primarily stone-built © SMD

This main site is one of the larger shieling mounds on South Uist, in keeping with the importance of the Milton township. Construction of such a large mound and its population of *bothain* would require



Others were enigmatic stone settings in the grass © SMD

considerable endeavour by the community. There has been speculation that many shieling mounds were re-occupation and re-purposing of earlier, prehistoric structures; they would offer a raised, well drained foundation/building platform and a ready-made quarry for building masonry, much of which might be already roughly dressed, or preselected for suitability as laid masonry in stable structures. Such hypotheses make good pragmatic sense and there are many examples of portions of well recognised prehistoric ruins, particularly barps (chambered cairns) being ‘repurposed’ in this way, but this theory has yet to be confirmed (or denied) by forensic excavation.

An incomplete story

It might be tempting to consider the matter of the Milton shielings to be closed after finding such a rich mound-site. However, this did not seem to be the case, as only a limited area of the available grazing would be visible from the shieling mound, and most bothies are sited to afford an overview of the grazing area that would be used. It therefore seemed likely that there may be further bothy sites to be found.

My next trip to the locality was to the summit of Trinneabhal to try to get maximum view of the shieling pasture area, and to perhaps identify potential *bothan àirigh* sites. The day was not perhaps the optimum weather for the purpose, with low cloud and mist obscuring the view from time to time, but a potential site was noted on the far side of Bealach Airneabhal, to the south of Trinneabhal’s summit, but a visit to the site itself was deferred for hopes of better weather conditions on another day. The site occupied an area adjacent to a stream which has carved out a significant valley down the northern face of Airneabhal.



Site2, viewed through the mist from Trinneabhal © SMD

A visit to Site2

A couple of days later the weather had settled and it seems a good time to check out Site2. Access was made via Site1, to see if there was inter-visibility between the sites. On most occasions where a single township occupies multiple bothy sites, care is taken to ensure they are inter-visible such that it would be possible to signal between the sites. However, there appeared to be nowhere on or near Site1 that afforded a view of Site2, which was a little unsettling. The walk between the two sites was not easy. The absence of regular grazing by cattle has caused the pastures to deteriorate and tussocky grass, rushes and lank heather now occupy much of the former pasture areas. The exclusive grazing of pastures by sheep, even today’s diminishing numbers, does little to keep them in good condition. This is attributed

to the differing grazing habits of sheep and cattle. Sheep bite off favoured single plants, allowing the less palatable vegetation to survive and thrive. Cattle prefer to wrap their tongue around a clump of long, mixed vegetation and pull or tear the plants, taking a wide range of vegetation with each mouthful, helping to create voids for further infill with diverse plants. The weight of cattle helps by enabling hooves to penetrate the ground, breaking through the root-mat, damaging, or destroying, bracken rhizomes and creating voids and aeration, encouraging diversity of regrowth, not the selective removal of the nutritious plants by sheep, leaving a diminished pasture over time. In short, cattle grazing improves pastures by both their feeding and manuring, whereas sheep cause pastures to become vegetative deserts. The grazing habits of red deer is similar to sheep, as is their long-term influence on the pastures. The only relatively easy way through the degenerated pastures was to follow the red deer's game trails, and after quite a while I was finally able to see Site2 across the other side of the glen.



Site2, viewed from across the glen - main bothies in the foreground and the 'sight stone' visible, top left © SMD

On reaching Site2, it was certainly no disappointment. There were the outlines of seven main bothies,



The 'sunken' stone lined twin bothies on the northern leg © SMD

three of which appeared to be mostly stone lined and set into the enriched mound(s). There were two elevated intersecting ridges almost at right angles to one another, in the form of an approximate letter 'L'. The longer leg runs north to south and holds two 'figure of eight' style structures, one stone built, the other turf. The shorter east-west leg has three subcircular bothy ruins, two seemed to be mostly masonry with the third one again as a turf structure. The partly enclosed area

between the legs is now overgrown with lank heather but at least two further bothy footprints were discernible under the vegetation. Looking at the wider landscape confirmed that, from the main bothy group, site1 and site2 were not inter-visible. However, set back from the site, and adjacent to the stream which flows along the back of the site there was a large (about 3 x 2 x 1 metre) boulder, flat topped and lying on its edge a little higher up Airneabhal, directly above the bothies. Once at this elevated position, there was a clear view over to Site1, hence this was



*The 'back' of the sight stone with Trinneabhal in the background
© SMD*



View across the sight stone (front right) towards Sheabhal and site1, visible as a pale area in the heather of the plateau © SMD

dubbed the 'sight stone'. To the east of the sight stone, alongside the stream, there was the stone setting of a single bothy, confirming that the intervisibility of the sites was both known and deemed important. The stream which serves this group of bothies is small but is fed from a small pond close to Airneabhal's summit, ensuring a constant water supply throughout the summer. Along its course through the site there were several wider, deeper pools which would facilitate drawing water.

Complacency can be dangerous

To avoid additional wear and tear to my legs, I chose a route back to my vehicle 'contouring' around the west flank of Trinneabhal, following a well-used game trail created by local red deer, congratulating myself for solving the riddle of the Milton Shielings. However, my complacency was shattered around halfway home when I encountered a third group of bothies, built immediately below a small crag which would afford them some protection from the weather. At first sight the site appeared to be a single large mound with two bothy compartments sunk into its summit with a smaller raised green area closer to the crag with a further two stone settings. Much of the ground surrounding the main mound was overgrown with dense *Juncus effusus* (soft rush) and lank heather, thigh-deep in places, obscuring many of other structures. In total the positions of ten *bothain* were identified, many of which were only apparent as rough circles of stones within the heather-clad mounds.



Site 3 from the north, with Airneabhal in the background © SMD

So, was this the final piece in the jigsaw of the Milton Shielings? Finding Site3 was completely unexpected and it turned out to be as extensive as Site2, but it also raised a further question. If the intervisibility of sites was so important, why was this isolated site here? It was out of sight from both Site1 and Site2, and neither site was visible from this new Site3 – even the Site2 ‘sight stone’ was obscured by the south-western flank of Trinneabhal. Obviously further field work would be required to try to solve this apparent riddle. Surely it could not be simply that this group of the Milton population were just dour or antisocial, wanting only their own company... However, the site was well chosen, allowing observation of large pasture areas hidden from the other two sites.



A stitched panorama, looking down at site3 from the top of the protective crag with the structure positions marked © SMD

The Keystone site

The next field visit was focussed on linking the sites. Was there a position from where all the sites might be seen? From just above site3's protective crag, it was possible to see a sliver of the left side of Site1's mound, but Site2 and its 'sight stone' were still obscured behind Trinneabhal's south-west flank. Contouring south from this position allowed improved visibility of Site1 and soon a flat area, backed by a further rocky crag, was found where the entirety of site1's mound, site2 and site3 could all be seen. This flat area has a small heather-clad mound which was found to conceal a single stone setting for a further bothy or shelter – the Keystone Site.



Graham pointing out the sightlines to sites2 & 3, alongside the heather mound which conceals the Keystone bothan © SMD

Additionally, from this point a very prominent 'skyline stone' pointer on the eastern extremity of Airneabal's eastern ridge came into view. I had previously noticed this prominent rock formation from the An Gleannan area, east of Bealach Airneabhal. If one moves further south from the keystone site, it is impossible to see Site3, which again reinforces the suspicion that the Milton shieling users not only knew the position but considered this point as important enough to build a *bothan* there.



The prominent skyline stones on the west ridge of Airneabhal', above and visible from An Gleannan, as seen from the Keystone site © SMD

Crossing the Watershed



At the crest of the Bealach Airneabhal watershed, looking east - note the seriously flat valley bottom with sides rising steeply to north and south making it unsuitable for settlement, which is sited on the main Abhainn © SMD

Continuing around Trinneabhal, making use of the prominent game trail left by generations of deer, and probably following a former anthropogenic pathway established when the shielings were in full use, it becomes apparent that this is at the same altitude as the watershed of the Bealach Airneabhal, and quickly pass through onto the eastern side of this natural divide, and into the An Gleannan shieling area. It is initially surprising to observe that there are neither mounds nor groups of bothain àirigh in the eastern side of the bealach, however, it is noticeable from the terrain that this side is flat bottomed, with steep sides, and the only areas flat enough to exploit for settlement would be subject to potential flash flooding in wet seasons. The bothain are therefore reserved to the areas closer to the north-flowing Abhainn a' Ghleannain, where more suitable safer ground could be exploited. The main group of bothain was found on a mound to the east of the Abhainn with several more individual structures

closer to the upper reaches of the stream. One ruined stone-built structure was found isolated on the crest of the An Gleannan ridge, but this site was found to have a site line to the 'sight stone' at 'Site2' in the western Bealach Airneabhal, as well as having sight lines to the previously found bothies.

More careful examination of the western landscape from the An Gleannan ridge revealed a further group of bothies - in the form of a small settlement group, with turf-walled huts on individual small, enriched mounds, and encircled by a low turf enclosure wall in a manner similar to that noticed during examination of the bothain àirigh at Allt Bholagair on the North side of Loch Aineort. This group was not noticed at my previous visit to An Gleannan, probably because the visit was in the late winter when vegetation was at its minimum, and the low sun could not illuminate the site directly leaving it in the shadow of the Airneabhal ridge to the South (left).



The stone-built ruin atop An Gleannan Ridge - the only significant stone structure in this area and the one point from where all other local bothain groups and the Sight Stone at Site2 is visible © SMD



The Western settlement group of bothies, their individual mounds and the peripheral enclosure ridge-wall visible in the favourable lighting of late summer, viewed from the ruinous stone bothan atop the An Gleannan Ridge © SMD.

The Skyline Stone

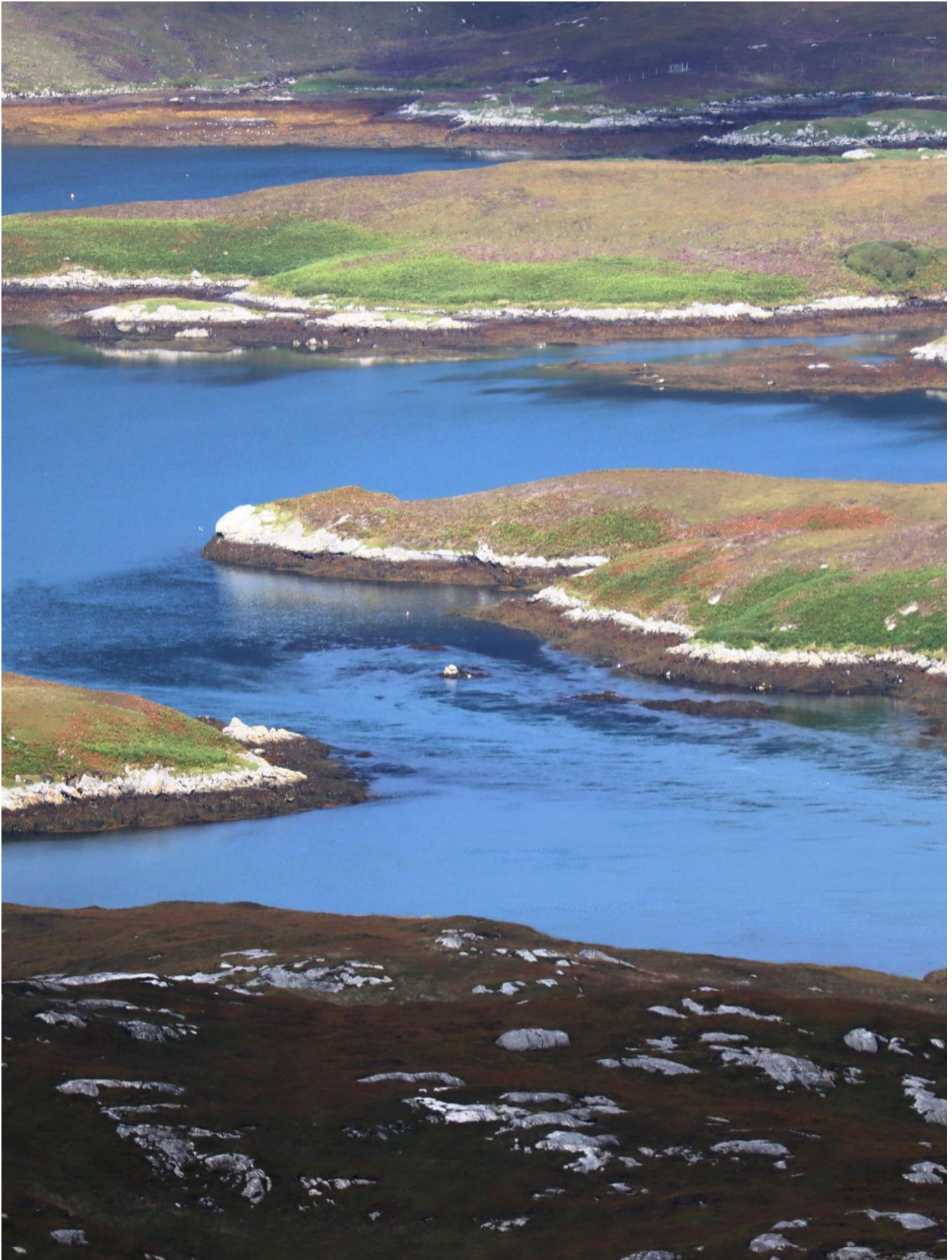
Airneabhal, in common with several of Uist's hills, has a complex summit consisting of five individual high points, ranging from 230metres to the highest peak at 257metres. Between these peaks, there are peat hags, soft ground and several ponds, one of which feeds the stream flowing past Site2. The skyline stone is not on any of the peaks, nor even on the true crest of the ridge, but has been carefully sited on the extreme edge of the north facing escarpment – on the visual ridge when viewed from anywhere on the Milton Shieling area. It is a large block of Lewisian gneiss which appears to have been raised on



Airneabhal's Skyline Stone showing some of the supporting boulders. One of Airneabhal's summits visible behind, to the left and Trinncabhal to the right with Beinn a' Mhuilinn & Sheabhal partly hidden behind the stone. © SMD

one edge and supported by several smaller boulders, seated in a small depression in the bedrock which immediately slopes steeply away some 10-15 metres. Although the stone appears to be a natural erratic, it seems unlikely that it is positioned here by glaciation alone, but rather has been moved to this prominent position and placed in this balanced, almost perpendicular, position supported by the adjacent masonry. Given that from this one position no fewer than eight groups of shieling huts can be seen and potentially signalled to, it seems unlikely that the choice of positions for this 'skyline stone' and many of the Milton shieling settlement sites were random, but were, in fact, carefully chosen to enrich their summers at the shielings by facilitating communication by signalling between families and neighbours. There is, however, no sign of any built structures close by this rock, so if it were to be used for 'universal' signals, the ascent would need to be made on each occasion.

From this stone, there is also a commanding view of Skye, Rum, the Minch and the approaches to Loch Aineort to the East, as well as clear views across the Northern Loch Aineort plane over to Beinn Mhor, Bheinn a' Chaora and the other defining hills on the northern limits of the central quarter, the Loch Aineort hinterland. To the west, on a clear day, the Atlantic Hebridean isles of the Monachs and Hirta, the St Kilda group, can be seen. A spectacular panoramic view all round!



Looking across from the Skyline Stone to the dangerous waters of the Loch Aineort's narrows at Sruthan Beag, with Rubha nan Sruthan behind, Rubh' Airigh an Sgadain beyond and Sloch Dubh in the far distance. Twice a day up to 10,000,000 m³ of tidal water flow in and out of Loch Aineort through this gap which is less than 100 metres wide. © SMD

There appears to be a complex network of sight-lines (shown in green on the map) allowing good communication opportunities between the groups across the entire Milton shieling territory, with the Skyline Stone on Airneabhal's Eastern ridge playing a possibly significant role.

The recently identified bothain àirigh, designated as the Main Group are found as follows.

- Site1 - Bealach Sheabhal mound NF 7705 2677
- Site2 - Bealach Airneabhal group NF 7801 2608
- Site2 - the 'sight stone', 'S' on map NF 7803 2601
- Site3 - Triannabhal, west flank group NF 7759 2663
- Site4 - designated the 'Keystone' NF 7781 2639
- Skyline Stone on Eastern Airneabhal Ridge NF 7879 2584

Two groups of bothain have been identified on and below the southern face of Beinn a' Mhuilinn. Both groups feature only turf-walled structures which are heavily overgrown by vegetation. The upper group consists of six to eight sub-circular huts built under the shelter of a four to six metre escarpment on the hillside. This group is, in summer, heavily clad in chest-deep bracken. The lower group is on the summit of a low ridge. It is of similar size and character to the upper group, but in this instance the covering is of knee or thigh deep heather, completely concealing the outlines (until you fall into one!).

- 'U' - Upper Beinn a' Mhuilinn NF 7587 2650
- 'L' - Lower Beinn a' Mhuilinn NF 7619 2621

The An Gleannan groups were reported in DES in 2019 and are sited as in the table below. A further group of *bothain* have now been identified in An Gleannan to the west of the Ridge Bothan. These all appear to be turf walled, probably over stone-setting foundations for stability. The bothain are grouped together, each on its own individual low enriched mound with what appears to be a peripheral enclosure wall, also of turf construction. There are around six bothies in the group, now eroded to low outlines on their respective mounds.

- 'R' - An Gleannan Ridge bothan NF 7890 2659
- 'N' - Abhainn a' Ghleannan northern & mound group NF 7896 2670
- 'S' - Abhainn a' Ghleannan southern group NF 7902 2651
- 'W' - An Gleannan western settlement NF 7877 2648

There are further, more distant bothies in the Milton territory at

- Loch Àirigh na h-Aon Oidhche, (see DES 2019) NF 7959 2579
- The chambered cairn, south of Kirkidale, below Beinn Ailein NF 7979 2644

Both these groups are isolated remote sites (nowadays), but the Àirigh na h-Aon Oidhche site would certainly be able to access the Arneabhal Ridge although the skyline stone is not visible from the bothy mounds. It is possible that these bothies were not true shielings, but huts used for possible distilling, and a good horror story to discourage prying eyes! It is likely that the Kirkidale site was exclusively used by the nearby coastal farmsteads, also marked on Bald's plan, but who would probably have little routine contact with the Milton shieling communities.

The Route to the Shielings

For most townships the route followed to the shielings is quite easy to discern, and often leaves the main settlements along a well-marked track. However, the only candidate track does not head in the direction of the pastures, but to the south-east towards Loch nan Caorach and the boundary with Frobost territory, which is more or less the lower border of the map above. This area south of the significant stream (designated as 'Avhin Barp' by Bald) which feeds Loch an Àth Ruaidh might also have been shieling pasture historically, but has, in more recent times, been extensively used for peat extraction, and any evidence for shieling activity has been destroyed by this action.



The southern boundary dyke, the border with Frobost, runs from Reineabhal (west & left) to Aimeabhal in the east © SMD

Furthermore, there is no easy crossing points over the stream, which is generally quite deep and in parts runs through a shallow 'gorge', the steep sides of which would be a significant impediment for the passage of stock herds.

Given the distribution of the shieling settlement groups, it seems much more likely that the route to these would be crossing the waterway between Loch an Àth Ruaidh and Loch a' Muilne, close by the mill, and then follows the trail still marked today through the now fenced fields below the southern flanks of Beinn a' Mhuilinn. The position of this route is 'preserved' by the positioning of the modern gate placements in the fields. Such preservation of ancient tracks and paths is not unusual, as the former frequent usage and maintenance would give a lasting foundation for ongoing use. Similar route preservation can be found along the route of the 'Kelp Road' to the North of Loch Aineort. The use of the northern route would eliminate the problem of crossing Avhin Barp, which may have necessitated the building of a bridge – a lot of effort for merely seasonal transit. As much of the bank area away from the gorge section is soft and marshy, this too would pose a problem for any building structures. Most of the shieling pasture north of Avhin Barp is firm and easy to cross on foot by both people and

stock, so no additional infrastructure would be necessary. Along several parts of this route, there are groves of willows and areas rich in both *Phragmites australis* (common reeds) and *Juncus effusus* (soft rush), all of which would have been useful for gathering of withies and thatching materials for the annual roofing of the bothain àirigh.

Conclusion

It has become apparent that the Milton territory, with its three *bailtean* was an important holding in the South Uist estate. Its people were both resourceful and sophisticated to the point where they planned and sited their infrastructure so as to facilitate not only sites where stock might be properly overlooked and tended, but also developed good lines of communication with their families and neighbours whilst still taking the fullest advantage of the pasture resources allocated to them.

In more recent times the pasture has deteriorated, due to the cessation of cattle grazing and the introduction of flocks of sheep and, later, deer herds following the Clearances of the 19th Century. Restoring the pastures would be difficult today, and is unlikely to happen, so the land will continue to deteriorate becoming, at best, a boggy heath area offering only poor acidic grazing.

It is also likely that the area between the south bank of Avhain Barp and the Milton-Frobost boundary dyke was formerly used as a sheiling area for the Milton townships, hence the well-made track leading to Loch nan Caorach, but any structural remains from this activity have been destroyed with more recent peat extraction across this part of the landscape

Reference Sources

Bald, William (surveyed 1805) 'Plan of the Island of South Uist' available at <https://maps.nls.uk/counties/rec/657>

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