

-1Gaelic in Galloway and Carrick

Four years ago, one of my sons spent a very hot two weeks helping archaeologists re-excavate Trusty's Hill near Gatehouse of Fleet. The excavations confirmed that in the sixth and seventh centuries, Trusty's Hill was a high status, possibly even royal, site. The Mote of Mark between Kippford and Rockcliffe was a similar high status site in the same period. Both sites were small hillforts surrounded by stone walls and about the same time, towards the end of the seventh century, the stone walls were destroyed by fire and became vitrified.

From experiments carried out by archaeologists, we know that this must have been a deliberate act of destruction with timber piled up on the walls before being set on fire. It is likely that their destruction was the result of the westward expansion of Northumbria. Although there are no records of their destruction, we do know that by the beginning of the eighth century, Whithorn had become a Northumbrian religious centre and was recorded as such by Bede in AD 730.

However, although the Old English of the Northumbrians then became the language of the ruling elite in Galloway, the ordinary folk would have still spoken a British language related to Welsh.

Quite when and how the era of Northumbrian power ended is uncertain but by the tenth century Gaelic was emerging as the dominant language in Galloway and was to remain so for almost 500 years before it faded away as Scots became first the language of Galloway's rulers and then of Galloway's people.

The history of Gaelic in Galloway is important for two reasons. The first is that without Gaelic there would not be a place called Galloway,. The second is that the history of Gaelic Galloway is closely bound up with the critical period of Scotland's history- the Wars of Independence.

To begin with we need to try and understand how Galloway became a Gaelic speaking land. Confusingly, the people who began the process were Norse speaking Vikings. Although the Vikings started off as raiders, they soon began to settle in Ireland and along the north and west coasts of Scotland.

One group of Vikings, either in Ireland or more likely on the west coast of Scotland, became Gaelic speakers and were given the name Gall-Gael in Irish records in AD 856. However this is nearly 300 years before the Gall-Gael can be linked to Galloway and gave their name to Fergus of Galloway's kingdom.

Before then, probably before the end of the ninth century, Whithorn and Wigtonshire had become part of the sphere of influence of Dublin based Vikings. While the leaders of the Irish Vikings would have spoken Norse, Irish Gaelic would also have been spoken.

One of the later rulers of Viking Dublin and the Isle of Man was Echmacarch mac Ragnaill who died in 1065 while on pilgrimage to Rome. Although he was no longer Dublin's ruler, he was described as 'rex inna renn' -king of the Rhinns. This kingdom of the Rhinns extended beyond the Rhinns of Galloway to include Whithorn and the Machars. Although probably descended from Vikings, both Echmacarch and his Wigtonshire kingdom would have been Gaelic speaking.

But what about the Stewartry? We don't know. Unlike Wigtonshire where we know from Irish records and from the archaeology of Whithorn at least something of what was happening between the ninth and the twelfth centuries, the Stewartry is a blank. Or rather it was until a major Viking treasure hoard was discovered in Balmaghie two years ago. Unfortunately, to deter treasure hunters, the actual location of the hoard was kept secret. So although some historians were aware of its location, they could not speculate about its significance.

However its location does change some of what we know about the Vikings in Galloway. Norse place names are found along the Solway coast with a cluster around Kirkcudbright and a few in the Machars. This used to be taken to mean that there was only minor Viking settlement which did not extend inland.

However, Balmaghie is ten miles upstream from Kirkcudbright. North of Balmaghie the Dee/Ken river system is navigable to the head of Loch Ken. To the south, a ridge of rock at Tongland was an obstacle to navigation, but the Vikings were used to porting their boats around such obstacles. A powerful Viking lord based at Balmaghie could therefore have controlled the central Stewartry.

The dating of the Balmaghie hoard is still vague- between 850 and 950, but if its in from the period 900 to 950, Gaelic could have been spoken in the settlement there.

That Gaelic speakers rather than Scandinavian, Old English or British speakers left the strongest impression on the place names of Galloway is shown by the thousands of Gaelic place names which survive here. However, the place names are widespread and were still being created in the fourteenth century. This makes it difficult to trace a pattern of Gaelic settlement unlike the few Scandinavian and Old English place names which can be used in such a way.

On the other hand, among the many Gaelic place names there are two land use related place names which might be useful. These are eileirg- a deer trap and airigh- summer pasture. Michael Ansell has mapped the deer trap place names across a deer hunting area of Galloway, mainly in the uplands. I have looked at the many summer pasture place names, many of which fringe the upland deer hunting area.

What is interesting about the spread of these Gaelic land use place names is that their distribution is mainly inland and well away from the coastal and lowland settlements of the pre-Gaelic period. My assumption from this is that the pre-Gaelic population of Galloway did not exploit the uplands so there was an untapped resource waiting for someone to take advantage of.

As the Gall-Gael moved south into Ayrshire they would have discovered that the Carrick and Galloway uplands were full of deer and rough grazing land but almost empty of people. With a joint heritage of land use from people who had lived in uplands rather than lowlands, they would have been perfectly placed to make the best use of Galloway's upland zone. To hunt deer and raise livestock in the hills.

Once established in the uplands, they could then extend their power and influence down towards the river valley and coastal settlements of Galloway. With the Northumbrians having lost power to the Vikings and the Dublin Vikings under pressure from the Irish this would not have been very difficult to achieve during the eleventh century.

Gall-Gael control of Galloway and Carrick was then consolidated

by Fergus of Galloway in the twelfth century. It is possible that rather than inheriting an already unified Galloway, Fergus was the first person to rule over both Wigtownshire and the Stewartry.

Although Fergus is never described as a king in any Scottish charters in a charter granting land in Galloway to the Knights Hospitallers he is described as 'Rex Galwitensium' -king of Galloway while his grandson Roland or Lachlann who died in 1200 and great-grandson Alan who died in 1234 are described in Irish records as kings of the Gall-Gael.

Fergus contemporaries were David I and Malcolm IV of Scotland and Henry II of England. At the beginning of David I reign in 1124, Renfrewshire, Ayrshire and Nithsdale were all part of a 'greater Galloway'. By the end of Henry II's reign in 1189, greater Galloway had been absorbed into the kingdom of the Scots. Present day Galloway survived, but as a lordship subject to the King of Scots.

Within lesser Galloway and the earldom of Carrick which had been detached from Galloway in 1185, Gaelic remained the language of the people and their rulers. But in what had been greater Galloway, Gaelic began to be replaced by Scots.

Why did Gaelic survive in Galloway and Carrick? I think the survival of Gaelic was due to the close relationship between the rulers of Galloway and the leading kindreds or clans of Galloway. The lords of Galloway were powerful enough to keep the former kingdom intact as distinct region. They were able to do this because they had the military strength to keep successive Scottish kings at arms length. This military strength did not come from Norman style feudal knights, but from the soldiers and sailors the leading kindreds were able to provide them with.

Under the system of feudalism which David I introduced to Scotland,, land ownership was gifted by the king to a loyal subject via a written document, a legal charter. The first of this style of charter dates from 1124, when David 1 granted Annandale to Robert Brus.

But in Galloway the McDowalls, the McCullochs and other families held their lands by traditional rights established long before Fergus became Galloway's first and only king.

These traditional rights were rooted in the Gaelic culture of Galloway but would have been preserved orally. This means there are no written documents which would allow historians to reconstruct this vital aspect of the past.

In other words, there was a circular process in which Gaelic survived in Galloway because Galloway survived as a distinct region under its traditional lords. Lords who in turn relied on the loyalty of Galloway's Gaelic people as the source of their power.

This circular arrangement can be seen in the career of Edward Baliol. In 1332, Edward Balliol tried to reclaim the Scottish Crown which his father John had briefly held. In Scotland Edward had to rely on English support but in Galloway the people hailed him as their 'special lord' and continued to support him for the next 20 years. The last places Edward hung on to were Buittle castle and Hestan island.

Even after Edward gave up his claim to the Scottish Crown in 1356, Galloway remained loyal. David II was unable to hold law courts in Galloway and as part of a peace treaty with England in the 1360s, David offered Galloway to John of Gaunt, Edward III of England's son.

Edward Balliol died in 1365 and 4 years later, Archibald the Grim became lord of Galloway. Most accounts say that Archibald was gifted Galloway by David II after he defeated English forces there. David had appointed Archibald as Warden of the West March in 1364 and tasked him with the job of retaking Lochmaben and other castles in the west march still occupied by the English.

However none of the castles in Galloway were occupied by the English and there are no contemporary accounts of any fighting against the English taking place in Galloway.

Instead, it is also possible that Archibald took over western Galloway- the Stewartry- on his own account and the 1369 charter from David II was a recognition of this. Archibald then bought Wigtownshire from the earl of Wigtown in 1372. Archibald was then able to declare himself 'Lord of Galloway' but just as no Scottish records gave Fergus the title 'King of Galloway', Archibald does not appear as 'Lord of Galloway' in Scottish state documents.

In 1388, Archibald inherited the title Earl of Douglas and along with the total acquired a huge swathe of lands across southern Scotland. While Galloway was still a key territory for Archibald, it did have the effect of downgrading the importance of Galloway's Gaelic families like the McDowalls, McCullochs, Adairs and McLellans within the earldom as a whole. Now the majority of the people in the lands Archibald and his successors controlled were Scots speakers and Galloway's Gaelic speakers were a minority.

The Douglas Lords of Galloway were Scots speakers and the period of their rule coincided with a shift from Latin to Scots as the language legal and administrative documents were written in. So in 1376, a rental roll of Douglas lands in Buittle parish was written in Latin but by 1393 a Douglas document for Buittle was written in Scots.

This shift to Scots can also be traced in farm names. First seen in 1306 on lands belonging to Dundrennan abbey, through the fourteenth century the Scots words meikle, little, over, middle and nether are found applied to farms with originally Gaelic names.

By 1456, when the Douglas lordship of Galloway ended and a list of all the Douglas owned farms was compiled by the abbot of Dundrennan for king James II, even farms in the Glenkens had been given these Scots affixes.

Unfortunately only a handful of documents from the Douglas lordship of Galloway have survived, but in the hundred years that separated the end of Edward Balliol's influence in Galloway and the end of the Douglas lordship the power of Galloway's Gaelic kindreds had faded away.

In 1234, when Alexander II attempted to apply feudal law to Galloway, dividing Alan of Galloway's Gall-Gael kingdom between the husbands of his three daughters, there was an uprising against him. Rather than see the realm divided, the community of Galloway wanted Alan's illegitimate son Thomas to inherit.

But in 1455, when James II besieged Threave castle, there was no similar uprising in defence of William, the last Douglas lord of Galloway.

This suggests that the centuries old connection between land and language had been broken. While many of the people of Galloway

may still have spoken Gaelic in 1455, the once great families of the McDowalls and McCullochs and the others had become indistinguishable from the Scots speaking tenants-in-chief of the Douglasses and no longer saw themselves as Gall-Gael first and Scots second.

So even before James II gained control of Galloway in 1455, Gaelic was becoming a second class language, the language of the country folk in contrast to the Scots of the land owners and of the burghs of Whithorn, Wigtown and Kirkcudbright- a process that had already happened with Ayr and Dumfries.

The burghs were situated in areas of better quality land, dominated by arable farming. Arable farming in turn was more labour intensive than the livestock farming of the uplands so these were also areas where most of the population lived. The burghs were also where the markets were held.

Through the fifteenth century it is likely that Gaelic was in retreat in Galloway. As early as 1438, an inquest into a dispute between two tenants of Whithorn priory was written in Scots and then publicly proclaimed. By 1475 tacks (leases) were being written in Scots. The records of Wigtown Burgh Court survive from 1512 to 1534 and have been analysed by a linguistic historian. The records are in Scots and the analysis showed that the Scots used was 'standard' with no signs of Gaelic influence on the language structure.

In 1500, the population of Scotland is estimated to have been 500 000. By 1755, based on a more accurate figure, it was 1 265 380. And the population of Galloway was 47 000 which is 3.7%. If Galloway had 3.7% of the Scottish population, this gives a figure of 18 500 living here. Although Wigtownshire is smaller than the Stewartry, it is not so mountainous so we can guesstimate that there were just over 9000 people living in each of the two counties.

New Luce, Kirkcowan and Penningham are the upland parishes in Wigtownshire, Minnigaff, Kells, Carsphairn and Dalry are the upland parishes in the Stewartry. In eighteenth century the Wigtownshire parishes had 13% of the population and the Stewartry ones 16% .

In 1500 then, the three upland parishes in Wigtownshire are likely

to have had a combined population of 780 and the four Stewartry parishes 960. Per parish, this gives 260 people in Wigtownshire and 240 in the Stewartry or between 40 and 50 families per parish.

These parishes are the most remote from the Scots speaking burghs of Wigtown and Kirkcudbright and so are the parishes where Gaelic is most likely to have still been spoken in 1500.

This raises the question of how long after 1500 did Gaelic survive? There are three pieces of evidence from the sixteenth century for the survival of Gaelic in Carrick and Galloway.

The first is a poetical exchange between William Dunbar from the Lothians and Walter Kennedy from Carrick. In the poem Dunbar claims that Kennedy's 'Irish', meaning Gaelic, means he cannot compose good verses in Scots. Kennedy replies that Gaelic was the good language of all this land.

The second is a report by an English agent in the 1560s which mentions in passing that in Carrick the people for the most part speak 'Irish', again meaning Gaelic.

The third is from the 1580s when historian George Buchanan claimed that great part of Galloway still used its ancient language.

The Flyting of Kennedy and Dunbar was written between 1504 and 1508, at time when Gaelic could still have been spoken in the uplands of Carrick. However Kennedy himself composed his verses in good Scots, despite Dunbar's assertion.

The English military report is more puzzling. It was written between 1563 and 1566 but John Knox in his history of the Reformation in Scotland states that in 1562 he preached to the common people in Galloway, Nithsdale and Kyle while his associate George Hay preached at all the kirks in Carrick. These preaching would have been in Scots using English versions of the Bible. If the common people of Galloway and Carrick had 'for the most part' Knox and Hay would have noticed and commented on this problem for them. It seems more likely that by the 1560s, Scots not Gaelic was the language of the common people in Galloway and Carrick. Indeed, according to tradition, as early as the 1520s, Alexander Gordon held illicit meetings in the Glenkens

where he preached from an English translation of the Bible. This would have been rather pointless if his audience only understood Gaelic.

With George Buchanan's claim that a great part of Galloway still used its ancient language in 1580, the passage occurs in a section of his history where he links Galloway with Cornwall and Wales. Buchanan believed that the 'ancient language' of Galloway was related to Cornish and Welsh, not Gaelic. So what he was actually claiming in 1582 was that the people of Galloway still spoke a form of Welsh or Cornish rather than Gaelic.

Gaelic could still have been spoken in the sixteenth century here by families living in the upland parishes. But the upland farms were not self-sufficient. Their tenants had to do business with Scots speaking land owners, to sell their cattle and sheep to Scots speaking traders and buy their oats and barley from Scots speaking merchants. Changes in tenancy would have introduced Scots speakers in to the uplands as would marriages to Scots speakers.

By the time John Knox and George Hay went on their preaching tours in 1562, it is likely that Gaelic had all but vanished from Galloway and Carrick.

Except, of course, it hadn't. Across Greater Galloway the names of streams and rivers, hills and lochs, farms, villages, towns and parishes reveal the enduring impact of Gaelic. McDowalls, McCullochs and McLellans along with a host of other descendents of the Gall-Gael still live and work here.

However, although Michael Ansell and Alan James have published really excellent work on the region's place names, the only books on the place names of Galloway and Dumfriesshire were published in the 1930s and no similar study of Ayrshire's place names exists.

Family history research has produced a huge volume of online information, some of which includes references to the most obscure historical documents. However, this source of information on the Gaelic speaking people of greater Galloway is by its nature informal and random rather than formal and academic.

While British and Northumbrian and later medieval sites like the Mote of Mark, Trusty's Hill, Whithorn, Buittle and Threave have been investigated by archaeologists, Gall-Gael settlements like the

various airigh farms have not.

This frustrating. It means that we simply do not know if the cultural difference between the Gall-Gael and other Gaelic speakers was carried over in to their physical or material culture. If we could go back in time 1000 years and visit a Gall-Gael settlement what would it look like?

In conclusion then is the hope that as more people start to learn Gaelic in Greater Galloway that this can be translated into recognition that a better understanding of the Gaelic history and archaeology of south west Scotland is an essential part of Gaelic's historic role as the national language of Scotland.