

An Litir Bheag
le Ruairidh MacIlleathain

An Litir Bheag is a shortened and simplified version of Ruairidh's Litir do Luchd-ionnsachaidh (also available on the BBC website), designed for those who are at an earlier stage of learning Gaelic. The topic each week is the same as Litir do Luchd-ionnsachaidh so that, once the Litir Bheag is mastered, a student of the language might wish to try the full Litir. This is Litir Bheag 277 (which corresponds to Litir 581). Ruairidh can be contacted at roddy.macleon@bbc.co.uk.

I like the place name Steòrnabhagh. What is your opinion of it? I reckon that it's attractive in English as well. Stornoway. It's a Norse name. It was Stjórnarvágr. That means the bay of the rudder or the bay of the steering – in English, rudder bay or steering bay.

There is another Stornoway in Scotland. It's a sea loch. Loch Stornoway, or Loch Stornua in Gaelic, in Argyll. It's in the south of Knapdale.

What was there in common between the two places? Why did the Norse mariners call the two places by the same name? I'm not sure. The sea loch in Knapdale is just to the west of West Loch Tarbert. Were the sailors who were making for Loch Tarbert steering towards Loch Stornua? If you're sailing from the south, Loch Tarbert is not visible to begin with. The Isle of Gigha is in the way.

I read a book about Stornoway, Lewis recently. The book – The Castles of the Lews by Peter Cunningham – is full of information about the town's history. And I learned an amazing thing. That's

Is toigh leam an t-ainm-àite Steòrnabhagh. Dè ur beachd fhèin air? Saoilidh mise gu bheil e tarraingeach ann am Beurla cuideachd. Stornoway. 'S e ainm Lochlannach a tha ann. 'S e Stjórnarvágr a bha ann. Tha sin a' ciallachadh bàgh na stiùrach no bàgh an stiùiridh – ann am Beurla, rudder bay no steering bay.

Tha Steòrnabhagh eile ann an Alba. 'S e loch mara a tha ann. Tha Loch Stornoway, no Loch Stornua ann an Gàidhlig, ann an Earra-Ghàidheal. Tha e ann an ceann a deas Chnapadail.

Dè bha anns a' chumantas eadar an dà àite? Carson a chuir na maraichean Lochlannach an t-aon ainm air na dhà? Chan eil mi cinnteach. Tha an loch mara ann an Cnapadal dìreach gu siar air Loch an Tairbeirt an Iar. An robh na seòladairean a bha a' dèanamh air Loch an Tairbeirt a' stiùireadh a dh'ionnsaigh Loch Stornua? Ma tha sibh a' seòladh bhon cheann a deas, cha bhi Loch an Tairbeirt anns an t-sealladh an toiseach. Tha Eilean Ghiogha anns an rathad.

Leugh mi leabhar mu Steòrnabhagh Leòdhais o chionn ghoirid. Tha an leabhar – *The Castles of the Lews* le Peter Cunningham – làn fiosrachaidh mu eachdraidh a' bhaile. Agus dh'ionnsaich mi rud iongantach. 'S e sin gun robh

that there was an attempt to change the town's name. I myself like Stornoway. But, apparently, not everybody was happy with it.

The Procurator Fiscal in Stornoway, Thomas Drummond, wrote in 1834 to the member of parliament, James Stewart-Mackenzie. He was recommending that the town have a new name. "Respected Sir," he wrote, "... In the first place I would suggest the propriety of changing the name of Stornoway, which has no meaning whatever so far as I can learn, and which to the ear of all Lowlanders sounds harsh, and indeed is often pronounced "Stormaway" and gives strangers a wild idea of this country which it is undeserving thereof..."

But what name was he wanting for Stornoway? I'll tell you next week.

oidhirp ann ainm a' bhaile atharrachadh. Is toigh leam fhèin *Stornoway*. Ach, a rèir choltais, cha robh a h-uile duine sàsaichte leis.

Sgrìobh Fear-casaid a' Chrùin ann an Steòrnabhagh, Tòmas Druimeanach, ann an ochd ceud deug, trithead 's a ceithir (1834) don bhall-phàrlamaid Seumas Stiùbhart-MacCoinnich. Bha e a' moladh ainm ùr a bhith air a' bhaile. "Respected Sir," sgrìobh e, "... In the first place I would suggest the propriety of changing the name of Stornoway, which has no meaning whatever so far as I can learn, and which to the ear of all Lowlanders sounds harsh, and indeed is often pronounced "Stormaway" and gives strangers a wild idea of this country which it is undeserving thereof..."

Ach dè an t-ainm a bha e ag iarraidh an àite *Stornoway*? Innsidh mi dhuibh an ath-sheachdain.