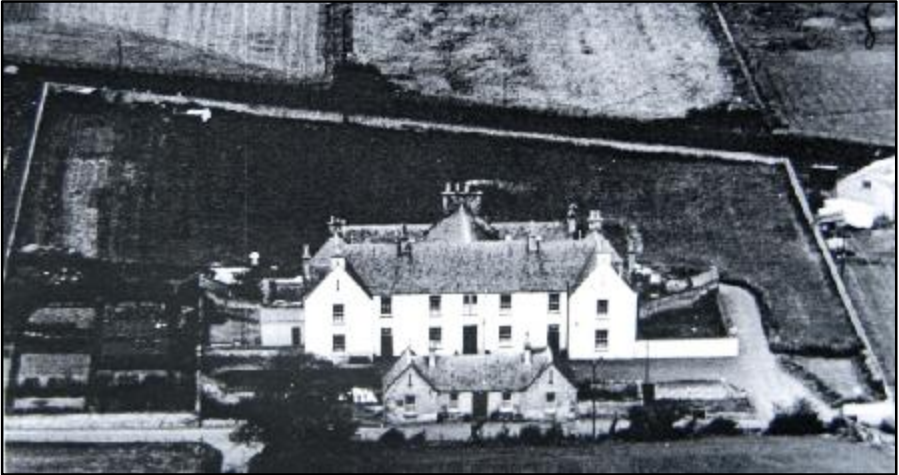


Nairn Union Poorhouse (Balblair Home) 1861



Nairn Union Poorhouse

Most poorhouses in Scotland were formed after the 1845 Poor Law established Parochial Boards to administer poor relief in each parish, a function previously carried out by the Kirk. Poorhouses had to have ‘...proper arrangements for dispensing and supplying medicines...’ and could ‘...nominate and appoint a properly qualified medical man’ to regularly visit poorhouses. After 1848, a medical relief grant assisted Boards to provide medical aid to all paupers. Medical officers assessed poorhouse residents for work but, since paupers were often infirm, poorhouses, in effect, became partly hospitals for the chronic sick.¹

Parochial Boards continued to support the poor at home or in cottages but there was government pressure to build poorhouses and local parishesⁱ combined to build the Nairn Union (Combination) Poorhouse in 1860-1 at Balblair (see map on next page). The architects were

ⁱ Ardcloch, Ardersier, Auldearn, Cawdor, Croy, Edinkillie, Nairn, Petty; and later Abernethy, Cromdale, Duthil. The last 3 seem to have withdrawn by 1874.

Matthews and Lawrieⁱ and the trades are shown below with an estimated cost of £3120.²

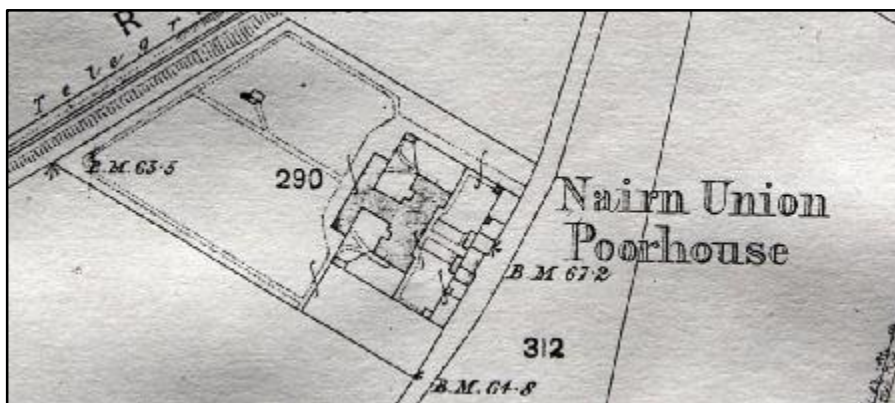
Mason	James Squair, Nairn	Slater	John Russell, Inverness
Carpenter	John Mackenzie, Elgin	Plasterer	D. Hogg & Co, Montrose
Plumber	John Gordon, Elgin	Blacksmith	Smith & Mackay, Inverness
Painter	H Tough & Sons, Inverness		

The poorhouse was complete by 1st November 1861 and officially opened in February 1862.ⁱⁱ Its official capacity was 75 residents but was usually less than half full.ⁱⁱⁱ In 1873, the Ardcloch schoolmaster visited, noting that it contained 20 men, women and children and describing it as a ‘plain but substantial building’ with ‘ample grounds’ and ‘spotlessly clean warm and light apartments’.³ The photograph on the previous page shows a H-plan building, typical of poorhouses, set in about an acre with a further two acres of garden. The gatehouse contained the porter’s lodge and bathhouse.⁴ The parishes had to borrow money to build the poorhouse and the loan was still outstanding in 1874 when £220 was repaid. Other expenses that year were £365 for general expenses and £182 for aliment and clothing to paupers.⁵

ⁱ William Lawrie ran the Elgin office for James Matthews’ Aberdeen based firm. They also designed the Poorhouses at Fortrose and Inverness.

ⁱⁱ Kellas notes that the official opening was delayed until 26th March 1862.

ⁱⁱⁱ From 1874 - 1900 Auldearn Parish had an average of only 2 paupers in the poorhouse out of a total of 30-40 on their parish roll of paupers.



Nairn Union Poorhouse

OS 6 inch Map 1871

Poorhouses were initially run in a similar way to prisons. The governor's authority was absolute and buildings were bare and inhospitable with basic accommodation and food. However, it was not all bleak and the residents were remembered at Christmas e.g. in 1881, a Lady Glentworth gave the men tobacco, the women snuff and the children toys; in 1889, Lady Campbell gave tea and sugar to the women and tobacco to the men, and Col. and Mrs Grant of Househill donated a large number of rabbits.⁶ In August 1904, Mr Alexander Mann, benefactor of the Town and County Hospital, financed the annual picnic lunch at Fort George and tea at Cawdor as well as entertainment at New Year in 1904 and 1905.⁷ William Munro was first governor at a salary of £50 pa and his wife matron at £20 pa.ⁱ There was a housemaid, cook, porter and sick nurse by 1881 and this level of staffing continued for at least 50 years. The porter seems often to have been elderly.

Poorhouses tried to be self-sufficient and residents carried out domestic tasks and maintained the building and household items. As at other poorhouses, pigs were kept (the piggery required renewal in 1936) and the land was cultivated.

ⁱ They continued until after 1901. Husband and wife teams were actively sought.

Nairn Union Poorhouse. Residents and staff⁸

Year	Residents		Notes
	M	F	
1871	14	11	9 residents over 60 years old. 10 children.
1881	16	10	13 residents over 60 years old. 8 children.
1891	22	19	27 residents over 60 years old. 3 infants.
1899	14	16	Also 2 children on 28 th May. ⁹
1901	14	18	24 residents over 60 years old. No children
1911	23	11	18 residents over 60 years. 6 children, possibly 5 orphaned.
1921	12	8	
1931	12	20	
1951	11	18	

In the late 19th century, there were several attempts in Highland to utilise spare poorhouse capacity for mental health patients since such accommodation was under pressure. In 1877, a proposal to combine Inverness and Nairn poorhouses and convert Nairn poorhouse into a 'house of reception for harmless and incurable lunatics' was approved by the Board of Supervision in Edinburgh. This apparently would have saved around £320 pa. The Board of Lunacy, however, refused to sanction the proposal unless additional land was purchased at Balblair to provide 'airing courts' (exercise areas) and cultivable land (to provide beneficial manual labour) and this appears to have killed off the idea.¹⁰

Following the 1929 Local Government Act, Nairn Poorhouse was run by Moray and Nairn Joint County Council Public Assistance Committee and the impression from council minutes is that it was given a low priority by the council. From the 1920s, poorhouses had tried to modernise and reduce the stigma attached to them by rebranding, symbolised by a change of name. However, Nairn Poorhouse was not officially renamed Balblair Home until 1934 although it had been known locally as such from at least 1924.¹¹ Compared with the Elgin poorhouse, run by the same authority, records are brief or absent and key reports such as the governor/matron's annual report appear not to have been produced. The picture from the 1930s and 1940s suggests an

underfunded and under-resourced institution even by Highland poorhouse standards. Mrs Robertson, a former matron, remembers that the Home had a reputation in the 1920s as the finest in the North but it declined, particularly during the early 1940s.¹²

By the 1930s, there were considerable numbers of sick cases, mainly diseases of age and deprivation (see table on next page). The earliest description we have of sick accommodation is from 1938 but it is likely that this had not changed for some time. The medical officer, Dr Wilsonⁱ, who visited two or three times per week, reported that the maternity ward had two beds and that there were two male and two female sick wards with a total of 22 beds which he considered sufficient although there was no separate provision for sick children or acute cases. There was also no isolation facility for sick patients. Tuberculosis cases went to Elgin, venereal disease cases to Aberdeen, surgical to Nairn Town and County and eye cases to the Royal Northern Infirmary in Inverness.

Of the 50 medical cases in 1938, 26 were over 70 years old and 10 were in their 60s (i.e. over 70% were elderly). 15 had been sick for more than six months. The numbers of sick and the relatively low level of staffing, virtually unchanged since the 19th century, indicate the difficulties under which the Home operated although the annual Local Government Board inspection reports praised the quality of the Home, given its circumstances. Difficulties were compounded by accommodating homeless families. Two families with several children were resident for around two years, one occupying the female sitting room to the detriment of the other residents and the apparent stress of matrons who often did not stay long.

ⁱ Dr Eric Wilson had joined Dr Cruickshank's practice in 1912. He succeeded him as medical officer presumably after Dr Cruickshank's death in 1925

Medical Cases in Balblair Home 1932 - 1938

	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938
Senility/Debility	17	6	0	0	-	17	-
Hemiplegia	7	-	3	5	4	2	-
Bronchitis	3	2	-	-	-	-	-
Rheumatism	2	-	4	9	5	2	-
Heart Disease	-	-	6	7	8	-	-
Chest	-	-	9	11	8	2	-
Births	-	10	12	4	8	2	3
Others	15	-	-	-	-	-	-
Died	12	15	-	11	12	-	-
Total Cases	44	62	71	89	64	-	50
Sick at 31 st Dec	17	15	19	24	14	-	-

Source – Balblair Home Medical Officer Reportsⁱ

In 1934 the Nairn group of Toc H presented a wireless.¹³ Despite apparent community indifference to many of the Home's problems, the management committee successfully defended some of its interests. In 1942, the Nairn lodging house for vagrantsⁱⁱ was closed and the proposal to transfer this function to Balblair, re-enforced by the local authority, was strongly and apparently successfully resisted. Later, the committee also resisted the transfer in of mentally ill patients.

The Home usually contained a small number of children and/or infants who were looked after by the matron and nurse in the nursery.¹⁴ In 1943, there were nine children resident which caused concern because there was considered to be neither the staff nor the accommodation to deal with them adequately. In April 1944, there were no cots for babies who had to sleep in washing baskets. The issue was that this caused a problem on washing day and the solution was to buy three more washing baskets! A further problem was identified in 1946. Maternity cases arrived without warning much to the inconvenience of the matron who

ⁱ The reports seem to change the classification of patients year on year and the annual figures are therefore not directly comparable.

ⁱⁱ Local authorities had to provide such accommodation and often used poorhouses.

compared the situation unfavourably with the well announced arrival of maternity case at the Nairn Town and County Hospital. However, any pre-planning was thought to be impossible. In 1945, there were three nurses but no sitting room for them or the domestic staff and, as elsewhere, there were constant staffing shortages which extended into the 1950s.

In the 1940s, Balblair was described as ‘a poorhouse institution of the old type, two storey of roughcast and stone, accommodating indigent poor (including children), mental defectives, harmless lunatics, chronic sick and occasionally illegitimate maternity cases’. It had 52 beds. Apart from the matron, it had no trained nursing staff and, although it was well run, it did not have suitable accommodation or equipment.¹⁵ From 1946, a strong case was made to install electricity which, after further exhortation, was installed in 1949, quite late compared with similar establishments. Heating by open fire continued into the 1950s. From 1949, maternity cases were, at last, no longer admitted.

After 1948, the new NHS took over responsibility for the chronic sick. In former poorhouses, where more than 50% of residents were bedridden, then the whole establishment was transferred to the NHS otherwise they stayed with the local authority as ‘Old Folks Homes’. Balblair became a local authority home with 30 beds run by Moray and Nairn Council. Mrs Robertson, former matron, remembers that when she took over in 1948 the Home was in a very poor state and everything was bare and comfortless. After 1948, it took some time to make changes but eventually ‘the place was torn apart’ and electricity and central heating were installed and the whole building decorated in the final transition from Poorhouse to Home. A Comforts Committee was also established consisting of local ladies who were an effective pressure group on the council to make improvement in furnishings and the Home environment.¹⁶

In 1948, there was much pressure on chronic sick beds within the new NHS and it took some time for the situation to improve. Balblair

retained 10 ‘chronic sick’ NHS beds and, although these gradually reduced in number, the arrangement continued until 1969. In 1968, the local authority tried, unsuccessfully, to purchase the Marine Hotel, Nairn as a replacement for Balblair but, by 1974, Corsee Home in Nairn was almost complete and Balblair closed in the late 1970s. It was sold and used for wood storage from the nearby sawmill. After lying empty for ten years, the main building was demolished in 2000.

Governors and Matrons¹⁷

1861-1904	Mr and Mrs William Munro. Appears that Mrs Munro ceased matron duties in early 1860s - by then had several children. Mrs Munro died in 1908. Mr Munro died in London in 1912. ¹⁸
?-1864-65	Miss Gill. Resigned. ¹⁹
1865-?	Miss Christina Reid, Nairn. ²⁰
1908-1930	William and Jean Cran. Came from Shetland. ²¹ Mr Cran died in 1922 ²² and Mrs Cran continued in the combined post.
1930- 42	Mrs Meadows from Lochmaddy North Uist. ²³
1942 - 43	Mrs Keillor. Left within a year.
1943 - 49	Mrs Glennie.
1949 - 53	Mrs Robertson.
1953 - 54	Miss Richardson. Stayed 7 months.
1954 - 56	Miss Macdonald. Former nurse in Home. Gap in provision when she left.
1957 - 57	Mrs Ross. Left to get married after 2 months.
1957 - 78	Mrs Forsyth. Organised the move to Corsee.

Medical Officers²⁴

1860	Dr Grigor.
1867	Dr Alexander (died 1880) who had been Dr Grigor’s assistant.
1881	Dr Cruickshank (died 1925).
1925-38-?	Dr Wilson. May have succeeded Dr Cruickshank earlier.

References

- ¹ Poor Law (Scotland) Act 1845; Medical Relief Grant 1848
- ² Morayshire Advertiser 4 July 1860
- ³ A Salmon for the Schoolhouse. The diaries of Robert and Elsie Thomson Love and McMullen (Editors) Edinburgh 1994 p38
- ⁴ Nairnshire Telegraph 1862 quoted in Kellas, Margaret Unpublished research.
- ⁵ Inverness Advertiser 11 September 1874
- ⁶ Aberdeen Weekly Journal 30 December 1881: Aberdeen Journal 9 November 1889
- ⁷ Nairnshire Telegraph 5 January 1904: 23 August 1904 10 January 1905
- ⁸ National Decennial Census
- ⁹ Northern Scot 26 August 1899
- ¹⁰ Aberdeen Weekly Journal 30 August 1877
- ¹¹ Nairnshire Telegraph 19 February 1924
- ¹² Kellas Margaret, Local Welfare History unpublished research
- ¹³ Nairnshire Telegraph 25 December 1934
- ¹⁴ Medical Officer of Health for Nairn Annual Report 1933
- ¹⁵ Scottish Hospitals Survey (1946) Report on the Northern East. Edinburgh
- ¹⁶ Kellas *op. cit.*
- ¹⁷ Moray & Nairn Public Welfare Committee Minutes: Daily Record 24 May 1943: Kellas *op. cit.*
- ¹⁸ Forres News 19 September 1908: Forres , Elgin & Nairn Gazette 17 January 1912
- ¹⁹ Glasgows Morning Journal; 31 March 1964: Inverness Advertiser 20 May 1865
- ²⁰ Inverness Advertiser 20 May 1865
- ²¹ Forres News 14 March 1908
- ²² NT 18 April 1922
- ²³ NT 9 September 1930
- ²⁴ Inverness Advertiser 1 Nov 1861, 6 December 1867, 14 January 1881: Nairnshire Telegraph 12 May 1936