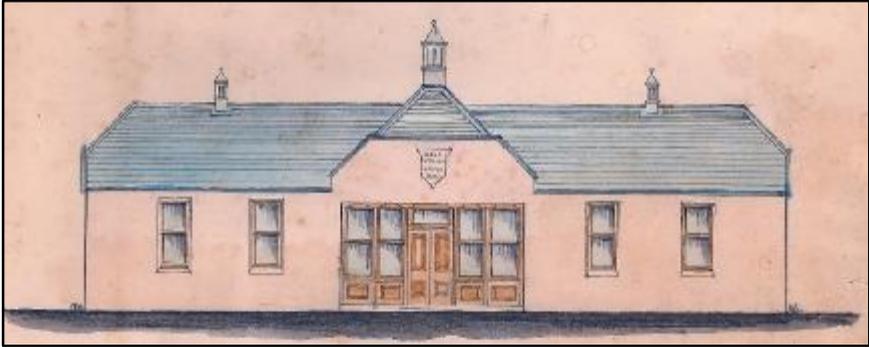


## Ross Memorial Hospital 1894 Portree



**Ross Memorial Hospital Architect's Drawing**  
Courtesy of Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre

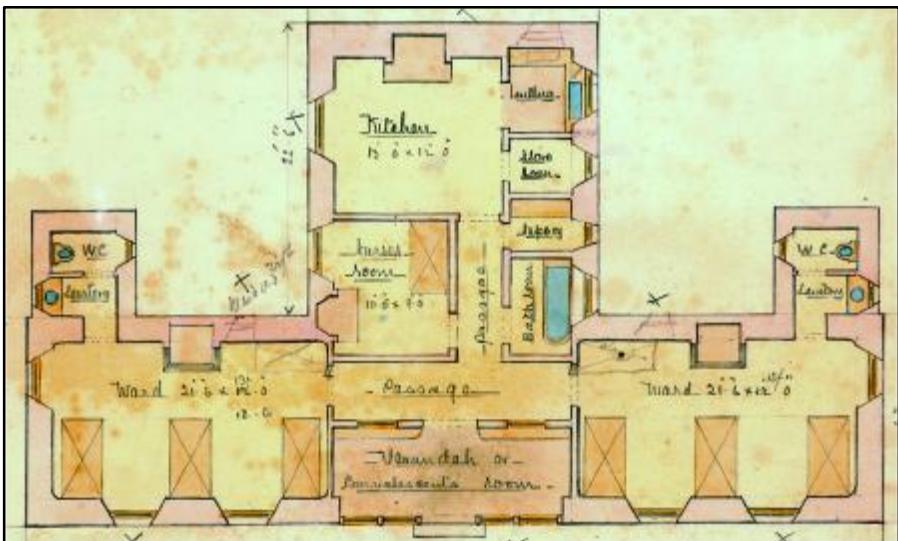
Dr David Ross (1841-1887)<sup>1</sup> (below) was Dux of Glasgow High School at age 16 and graduated MD from Edinburgh aged 21. He married and emigrated to Nickerie, Dutch Guiana (now Surinam), passed a medical exam in Dutch and served in the plantations. He returned to South Shields then moved to Skye in 1881 to take up the post of medical officer of health for Portree Parish. He died on Christmas Eve 1887 in the midst of treating an outbreak of typhus fever in Bayfield, Portree.<sup>2</sup> A Committee of Ladies of Portree was formed to raise money to fund a fever hospital in his memory and, by the end of 1889, they had raised over £500, including £140 from a bazaar. It was reported that the prime mover for this was Mrs Reid, wife of the Free Church minister in Portree.<sup>3</sup> By then, around



## History of Highland Hospitals

£47 had been raised in a separate venture for a Jubilee Hospital<sup>i</sup> and the funds were amalgamated.

In November 1889, the Ladies decided that they had done their work and they handed over to a newly formed Committee of Gentlemen whose job it was to secure a site and ensure the construction of the hospital.<sup>4</sup> However, the Gentlemen decided that they had collected insufficient funds for a general hospital and instead could only fund a small local one.<sup>5</sup> Lord MacDonal applied to resume the holding of a piece of common pasture to provide the site. Local crofters objected on the grounds that their holdings were already small enough and they did not want a fever hospital in such close proximity.<sup>6</sup> However, they were unsuccessful and the Ross Memorial Hospital was built between 1892 and 1894 at a cost of just over £600.<sup>7</sup>



**Ross Memorial Hospital Plan 1891**  
Courtesy of Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre

<sup>i</sup> Queen Victoria's golden jubilee was in 1887

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The architect was John Mackenzie of Portree<sup>i</sup> and all the tradesmen were Portree based. It was single storey with six beds in a typical two ward design with accommodation for a nurse. The 1891 plan (above) shows water closets which we know were still not installed by 1912 suggesting that perhaps funds were insufficient to fully complete the hospital. The 1889 Infectious Diseases Act required local authorities to provide fever hospital accommodation and the Hospital Committee noted that its aims were identical to that of the Skye District Committee, the public health authority. Accordingly, the new building - which was ready by August 1894 - was gifted to the local authority in October, the only proviso being that the District Committee may have to pick up a bill of up to £75 for the final fitting up of the hospital.<sup>8</sup> The District also had to arrange the erection of the outhouses (all Portree tradesmen) as well as site levelling and fencing at a cost of £263.<sup>9</sup>

Like all small fever hospitals, its use was variable in amount of patients and frequency of occupancy and often unexpected. In 1896, it opened three times and nurses were specifically employed suggesting it opened only at need, in common with many fever hospitals.<sup>10</sup> In 1902 it was described as having two three bed wards and two single bed convalescent wards. In 1908, it was described as 'staffed only when required'<sup>11</sup>

In November 1897, there was a serious outbreak of typhus at Sconser - the worst on record there. Dr Dewar initially diagnosed four cases in two houses and arranged to have them transferred to the Ross Memorial Hospital in the new hospital van. However, although there were several offers of horses to pull the van it took two days to find someone to take charge and not until Lord Macdonald's factor loaned two horses and two workers. By then, a 26 year old young man had died and two more cases were reported. Two nurses arrived from Edinburgh and had considerable difficulty in getting four patients into the hospital van but they eventually arrived at the hospital 'in a very critical state'. Meanwhile,

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<sup>i</sup> The Dictionary of Scottish Architects has no details of John Mackenzie. It lists his projects, mainly domestic and schools, but not the Ross Memorial Hospital.

## History of Highland Hospitals

Dr Dewar had found ten more cases - now well beyond the capacity of the hospital's two 3 bed wards and indeed only four cases could be accommodated there. However, the school at Sconser had been closed due to the outbreak and it was used for fever cases. In all, 17 people were infected of whom four died. Six nurses altogether were employed one of whom was infected but recovered. The infection source was traced to a single house which was so insanitary that it had to be burned down. Dr Dewar, Medical Officer, concluded that the hospital facilities were very limited.<sup>12</sup>

In 1900 it was not used. In 1903, it accommodated a family from Earlish with enteric fever. Their house was considered so in-sanitary that, with the proprietor's permission it was burned down and the family accommodated in the poorhouse.<sup>13</sup>

The hospital was unoccupied at the 1911 census. That year, the Medical Officer of Health reported that there had been 37 cases of infectious disease of which only five were treated in the hospital, the rest remaining at home. This typifies the problems of access to infectious diseases hospitals as well as the strong desire of patients to stay in their own beds.

In 1913 it treated six tuberculosis cases, seven scarlet fever and one enteric fever (typhoid).<sup>14</sup> Thereafter, it seemed to stop accepting tuberculosis cases which were sent to the Citadel Hospital in Inverness or, in 1917, to a converted ward at the Skye Poorhouse. During the First World War (1914-18), it was used mainly for scarlet fever and diphtheria but also measles and polio.

The hospital was not listed in the census of June 1921 suggesting it was empty on census day but, at the 1931 census, it had four in-patients.

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In 1912, it was ‘overhauled’ but still lacked a water closet<sup>i</sup> prompting the apparently frustrated medical officer to comment ‘The pail system for a fever hospital is, to say the least of it, ancient’. By then, it had a horse ambulance although access to the hospital was still seen by some as a problem in serving the whole of Skye.<sup>15</sup> In 1913, it was described as only able to deal with a very limited number of patients.

The debate about employing a full time matron continued during this time, the problem being the sporadic nature of patient numbers but, by the time agreement had been reached and an advertisement placed in May 1916,<sup>16</sup> the war had made finding one extremely difficult. There is reference to the Nurse Mackinnon Home as a source of nurses at that time.



**Ross Memorial Hospital in the early 1950s<sup>17</sup>**

There are few records of the use of the hospital in the 1920s and it is likely to have been sporadic. In 1931, Inverness County Finance

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<sup>i</sup> Water closets seem to have been installed in 1915 (Public Health Committee Minutes)

## History of Highland Hospitals

Committee was quibbling with the accounts which suggest it had patients.<sup>18</sup> In 1932, a tonsillectomy was carried out there.

It was described in 1933 by Major Hilleary as ‘in a deplorable state of repair...the boilers would not hold water, the kitchen range would not work and the nurses’ rooms were open to wind and water and practically uninhabitable’.<sup>19</sup> A letter of 1936 on the hospitals of Skye does not mention the Ross Memorial.<sup>20</sup> In the late 1930s, it was available only in time of need and, in the 1940s, it opened on average about three months every year to accommodate diphtheria and scarlet fever cases. Accommodation was now eight beds with space for four cots. Electricity was from a neighbour’s private supply, drainage was to a nearby stream and it was heated by coal fires.<sup>21</sup> The hospital was empty in the late 1940s and a neighbour was employed to go in twice weekly and light fires.<sup>22</sup>

In September 1948, the Skye Board suggested it be used for physiotherapy and the infectious diseases patients be accommodated in huts.<sup>23</sup> The huts seem to have been purchased but not erected but physiotherapy<sup>i</sup> (photo above) was based at the hospital from the start in April 1950 until the Portree Hospital opened in 1965. The physiotherapist worked mainly at the hospital but also at other medical centres such as Uig and Edinbane using a van and equipment provided by the Red Cross who administered the service. However, an early report said her role would be to visit homes of recently released patients in order to help free up beds at Skye’s four hospitals. The Health Board met the running costs and salary, including that of the van driver. The Red Cross continued to run the service until at least the mid-1960s when the Health Board took over.<sup>24</sup> By then, a similar service had been introduced into the Uists (the Skye service had been the first in Highland and an original intention had been to see it as a pilot for other areas). From 1954, the physiotherapist lived at the Ross Memorial despite the building’s poor physical state.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> The first Physiotherapist was Miss M Singman.

## History of Highland Hospitals

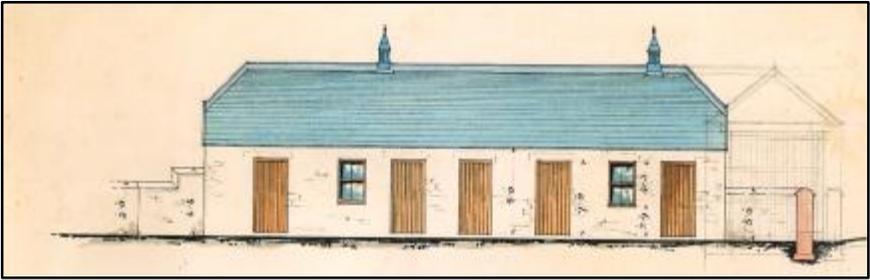
In 1956, the wards were considered to be so poor that it would not justify the expense of bringing them up to standard and they were to be kept wind and water tight in case of an infectious disease outbreak. However, they were not used during a later scarlet fever outbreak when the hospital's role was confirmed as a transit point for any transfer of patients to Inverness<sup>i</sup>. The hospital closed in February 1965 when Portree Hospital opened and it lay derelict until being taken over by local arts group, An Tuireann, in 1988. With Lottery funding, it was refurbished as an arts centre in 1997 (photo below) but, due to financial difficulties, had to close in late 2007. It was acquired by UHI and extended and opened as the new West Highland College.



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<sup>i</sup> The main infectious diseases hospital was at Culduthel in Inverness.

## History of Highland Hospitals



**Ross Memorial. Wash House and Mortuary Elevation 1891**  
Courtesy of Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre

Comparing the above elevation from 1891 with the photograph below from 2008 suggests that the outbuildings had changed little. In the photograph the wall projecting from the left of the building was the ash pit, the mortuary was on the right<sup>i</sup> and the projecting section on the far right held the ambulance which as can be seen is not fully drawn in the original. The photograph gives some indication of the character of the original hospital which seems to have been somewhat lost in the modern refurbishment of the main building into the An Tuirean Arts Centre (previous page), attractive as the design is.



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<sup>i</sup> Information from an early ground plan (Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre)

## History of Highland Hospitals

### References

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- <sup>1</sup> Photograph courtesy of Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre
- <sup>2</sup> Ross Cowie, great grandnephew, personal communication
- <sup>3</sup> Inverness Courier 9 Dec 1902
- <sup>4</sup> Ross Memorial Minute Book 1889 – 1896 Skye and Lochalsh Archives
- <sup>5</sup> Scotsman 18 Apr 1888
- <sup>6</sup> Crofters Commission Report 1892 Am Baile
- <sup>7</sup> Inverness County Council Legal Papers Highland Archive Centre
- <sup>8</sup> Ross Memorial Hospital Minute Book *op. cit.*
- <sup>9</sup> Inverness County Council Legal Papers Highland Archive Centre
- <sup>10</sup> Medical Officer of Health Annual Report 1896 p21
- <sup>11</sup> Medical Officer of Health Annual Report 1908 p31
- <sup>12</sup> Scotsman 2 Dec 1897: Dewar J Outbreak of Typhus in Skye Caledonian Med. Jour Vol. III 7 Jul 1898: County of Inverness MOH Annual Report 1897: BMJ 12 Feb 1898
- <sup>13</sup> Medical Officer of Health Annual Report
- <sup>14</sup> Medical Officer of Health Annual Report 1913 p11;76;148
- <sup>15</sup> Fletcher Dr Evidence to Dewar Enquiry
- <sup>16</sup> Scotsman 13 May 1916
- <sup>17</sup> Courtesy of Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre
- <sup>18</sup> Press & Journal 3 Jul 1931
- <sup>19</sup> Scotsman 18th October 1933 - Page 14
- <sup>20</sup> Gilbert R in letter from Baillie and Simpson, Edinburgh 12 Sept 1932
- <sup>21</sup> Scottish Hospitals Survey Edinburgh 1946
- <sup>22</sup> Skye Hospitals Board of Management 10 January 1949
- <sup>23</sup> Northern Region Health Board Minutes Book 2 p15
- <sup>24</sup> Northern Region Health Board Policy sub Committee 23 July 1964
- <sup>25</sup> Scotsman 3 Mar 1950