

## **Skye or Portree Union Poor House 1859 12 Shulishader (now Hedgefield Road), Portree**



Most poorhouses in Scotland were formed after the 1845 Poor Law which 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, this was supported by a medical relief grant which assisted Boards to provide medical aid to all paupers in the parish. In the poorhouse, medical officers assessed inmates for fitness to work but, since many paupers were sick and infirm, poorhouses, in effect, became partly hospitals for the chronic sick. No medical records appear to have survived from the Skye Poorhouse but we do have some information on numbers of sick as shown below. It appears that it was normally the Portree Parish Medical Officer who attended the Poorhouse.

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### Sick numbers Selected years<sup>1</sup>

Year	Total Residents	Total sick	Sick on 1 <sup>st</sup> July
1895	12	7	1
1896	4	2	0
1900	13	9	2
1901	11	6	0
1905	13	3	1
1906	13	4	0
1910	13	10	3
1911	18	10	5
1914	13	9	8
1915	12	9	3

Parochial Boards continued the tradition of supporting the poor at home or in cottages but there was government pressure to build large poorhouses and the Skye parishes formed a combination or union<sup>i</sup> in 1852 and had their plans for a poorhouse approved the same year.<sup>2</sup> In 1859, they began to build the Skye Union Poorhouse with Ross and Joass<sup>ii</sup> as architect.<sup>3</sup> It is thought to have been a T shaped building - partly single storey - with a a separate laundry and small mortuary (see photograph above.<sup>4</sup> Poorhouses in Scotland were run in a similar way to prisons. The Governor's authority was absolute and early poorhouses were initially often bleak, inhospitable places with basic accommodation and food although, by 1900, many were being described as more comfortable. Although no descriptions of life in the Skye poorhouse seem to have survived, there is no reason to suppose that it was any different from others.

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<sup>i</sup> It needed a minimum population to support an official poorhouse and most rural parishes were too small on their own. However, this meant that most paupers were too remote from the poorhouse to make use of it, hence the low occupancy. The Skye Combination consisted of the whole Island of Skye i.e. Bracadale, Duirnish, Kilmuir, Portree, Sleat, Snizort and Strath parishes.

<sup>ii</sup> Alexander Ross, Inverness, and William Cumming Joass, Dingwall. Their partnership ran from 1859 until 1865. Thereafter they continued separately.

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The poorhouse appears to have opened after June 1861. That month, a large advertisement appeared for furnishings and clothes, including 20 double and 30 single beds, indicating an optimism about inmate numbers which was not realised for very long.<sup>5</sup> The photo at the top is from around 1920<sup>6</sup> and, although it has been extended and heightened, the original building can still be discerned in the photograph below from 2011.



The Skye poorhouse could accommodate 51 residents<sup>i</sup> but was little used as can be seen from the table below. In 1870, it was said that many would rather starve than enter the poorhouse and that residents included the old and infirm as well as widows and mothers with illegitimate children.<sup>7</sup> In 1878, Stornoway Parochial Board wished to send their paupers to Portree which may have augmented numbers of residents but this was not allowed by the Board of Supervision because it considered Lewis was too far away to monitor those whom they sent.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Although the Board of Supervision noted that it was built for 75 residents.

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In 1890, a description appeared in the press. The writer had been shown round by the 'lady in charge.' It was clean and bright but only had seven or eight inmates and there were two empty wards of 12 beds each which had never been used. The writer made a strong case for it to become a hospital noting that the Gesto was the nearest. Strangely, although the writer makes a strong case for it receiving fever cases, he makes no reference to the Ross Memorial Hospital. The article was signed by R.McN which seems suspiciously like Dr Roger McNeil who was medical officer to the Gesto at the time. A note in the next edition of the newspaper – designed to correct the article - states that there had been 34 paupers at one time in the poorhouse and that the highest annual daily average had been 28.<sup>9</sup>

**Skye Combination Poorhouse: Some resident and staff numbers**

	Residents		Note
	Male	Fem.	
1871	6	12	2 old men, 1 widow with 2 children, 2 unmarried mothers with 1 child each, 4 apparently unattached children under 16, 5 other women - 4 of whom are over 70. 1 servant from now until at least 1891. <sup>10</sup>
1881	1	2	All elderly
1883	2		On 4 <sup>th</sup> April when Mr Peterkin, General Superintendent of the Poor visited. <sup>11</sup>
1896	4		Includes 1 child. Numbers on 1 <sup>st</sup> July. <sup>12</sup>
1890			Only 7 or 8 when a visitor described it in the press. <sup>13</sup>
1891	5	3	All elderly.
1892			Never more than 12 residents. <sup>14</sup>
1901	5	4	4 men and 2 women elderly, 1 single mother with 2 children.
1906	13		Includes 2 children. Numbers on 1 <sup>st</sup> July. <sup>15</sup>
1911	11	3	One family with two children. 6 are aged over 60.
1915	13		Includes 4 children. Numbers on 1 <sup>st</sup> July. <sup>16</sup>
1921	4	0	

**Resident numbers are from the decennial census unless otherwise referenced.**

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In 1892 there were never more than 12 inmates and the Board of Supervision agreed to the Portree Parochial Board request to use it for emergency cholera accommodation on the condition that there was alternative accommodation for the inmates. There is no record of the poorhouse being ever used for this but presumably it saved the local authority the expense of building and maintaining an emergency hospital.<sup>17</sup>

In 1915, the Skye District Committee<sup>i</sup> was seeking hospital accommodation for tuberculosis patients who, at that time, were being sent to the Citadel Hospital in Inverness. The unused smallpox hospital at Stein was thought unsuitable and the following year it was proposed that a ward at the poorhouse be converted into two tuberculosis wards. Such was the bureaucracy of the time that the District had to negotiate with the Parish Council which ran the poorhouse and which, in turn, had to consult the supervisory Local Government Board in Edinburgh. During 1916, the financial arrangements were finalised and the first patient was admitted to the ward in January 1917 although alterations were not finally complete until May. There is no reference to nursing and it is probable that, given the low numbers in the poorhouse, it was done by the matron. This arrangement continued throughout 1918 but, by January 1919, the ward was standing empty and there is no more reference to tuberculosis patients except that the advertisement for Governor and Matron in April 1919 still included attending the phthisis ward.<sup>18</sup>

By the early 1920s at least, the poorhouse was known as Cruachan House. This change of name would be in common with many other poorhouses in an attempt to reduce the stigma of the term 'poorhouse' for residents especially when it occurred on a birth certificate.<sup>19</sup>

By 1929, the poorhouse, like many others, continued much underused and in poor condition. That year, the new Local Government Act

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<sup>i</sup> This was the local authority with responsibility for public health.

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transferred responsibility for poorhouses to County Councils and Inverness County closed the Skye Poorhouse presumably after a review of its underused facilities.<sup>i</sup> In 1933-4, with Carnegie Foundation funding, it was converted to a school hostel to accommodate Skye children attending school in Portree and called the Margaret Carnegie Hostel.<sup>20</sup> The ground floor was extended and a second storey was added as can be seen in the photograph above. It was used by Portree High School as a girls' hostel until April 2016. Planning permission to demolish the building and redevelop the site for a new Gaelic School was granted in 2015.<sup>21</sup>

There is some evidence of a second poorhouse in Portree parish from 1883 with, in 1904, accommodation for over 20 adults and children.<sup>22</sup> The location is unknown but it would be highly unusual to find this size of poorhouse close to the official poorhouse in Portree. In 1912, there was also a corrugated iron hut near Skeabost which functioned as a poorhouse.<sup>23</sup> Few details of these facilities remain.

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<sup>i</sup> It is not listed in the Valuation Roll after 1929

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### Governors and Matrons

1861-67	<b>George &amp; Janet MacGregor.</b> <sup>24</sup>
1868-82	<b>James &amp; Maria Grant.</b> Mr Grant died May 1882 of heart disease aged 57. <sup>25</sup>
1882-1914	<b>John &amp; Helen Cameron</b> and cook. Mr Cameron formerly Inspector of Police, Skye. Both retired aged 70.
1914-19	<b>Mr Bowman</b> appointed Governor from 64 applicants. Ex assistant governor at Dundee Poorhouse. Advert says wife preferred with nursing qualification. £90 p.a. joint salary. <sup>26</sup>
1919	Advert includes attending phthisis ward. £115 pa. <sup>27</sup>
1919-23	<b>Mr &amp; Mrs William Brodie Cameron.</b> Mr Cameron was about 25 years old when appointed. He had served in Flanders in the First World War then trained as a psychiatric nurse. Mrs Cameron was a state registered nurse and midwife. Both trained at Gourrock where they married in 1919. This seems to have been their first professional post which was quite unusual although they were well qualified. They were appointed to Moray Poorhouse (Craigmoray) in late 1923. <sup>28</sup>

### Medical Officers where known

1853	Medical gentleman required for Portree Parochial Board. <sup>29</sup>
1873-81	<b>Dr Carmichael.</b> Married then shortly afterwards moved to Glasgow. <sup>30</sup>
1881-87	<b>Dr David Ross.</b> Died of fever Dec. 1887 (see Ross Memorial Hospital). <sup>31</sup>
1890-1909	<b>Dr Dewar.</b> Died. <sup>32</sup>
1909	<b>Dr Fletcher.</b> Went to WW1 (presumably in 1917 – see below) and his locum was Dr Hastings from Sleat who died 1919. Not clear when Dr Fletcher stopped in Portree. <sup>33</sup>
1917	Advert for Parish Medical Officer includes attending the Poorhouse. <sup>34</sup>

### References

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- <sup>1</sup> Local Government Board Annual Returns
- <sup>2</sup> Edinburgh Evening Courant 28 Dec 1859
- <sup>3</sup> Dictionary of Scottish Architects 1840 – 1980 [www.scottisharchitect.org.uk](http://www.scottisharchitect.org.uk)
- <sup>4</sup> Photograph courtesy of Mrs H van den Berg-Cameron. Thanks to Peter Higginbotham of [www.workhouses.org](http://www.workhouses.org) and for facilitating this and for additional information.
- <sup>5</sup> Glasgow Herald 19 June 1861
- <sup>6</sup> [www.workhouses.org](http://www.workhouses.org)
- <sup>7</sup> Martin, in Report on the Poor Law (Scotland) 18 July 1870
- <sup>8</sup> Banffshire Journal and General Advertiser 8 Jan 1878
- <sup>9</sup> Inverness Courier 21 Oct 1890:24 Oct 1890
- <sup>10</sup> Thanks to Mr Neil Kennedy for pointing out an error in the previous version.
- <sup>11</sup> Board of Supervision Annual Report
- <sup>12</sup> Local Government Board Annual Report.
- <sup>13</sup> Inverness Courier 21 Oct 1890:24 Oct 1890
- <sup>14</sup> Glasgow Herald 6 September 1892
- <sup>15</sup> Local Government Board Annual Report.
- <sup>16</sup> Local Government Board Annual Report.
- <sup>17</sup> Glasgow Herald 6 September 1892: Inverness Courier 20 Sep 1892
- <sup>18</sup> Skye District Committee Minutes Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre: Scotsman 19 Apr 1919
- <sup>19</sup> Information courtesy of H van den Berg-Cameron
- <sup>20</sup> Highland Historic Environmental Record
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>22</sup> Higginbotham *op. cit.*
- <sup>23</sup> Evidence to the Dewar Enquiry p309
- <sup>24</sup> Am Baile.org.uk: Inverness Courier 7 Mar, 7 Oct 1861, 6 Feb 1868: Saturday Inverness Advertiser 19 May 1866: Glasgow Herald 20 October 1867
- <sup>25</sup> Inverness Advertiser and Ross shire Chronicle 9 May 1882: Banffshire Journal 16 May 1882: Decennial census 1871
- <sup>26</sup> Highland News 25 April p7 1914: Scotsman 14 Mar 1914
- <sup>27</sup> Scotsman 9 Apr 1919
- <sup>28</sup> P&J 20 Oct 1923: Forres News and Advertiser 27 Oct 1923: Information courtesy of Mrs H van dan Den Berg-Cameron
- <sup>29</sup> Inverness Courier 25 Aug 1853
- <sup>30</sup> Inverness Advertiser and Ross shire Chronicle 16 Dec 1873, 3 May 1881: Inverness Courier 7 May 1874:
- <sup>31</sup> Weekly Free Press and Aberdeen Herald 31 Dec 1887



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<sup>32</sup> Inverness Courier 2 Dec 1890, 15 Jan 1909

<sup>33</sup> Dundee Courier 16 June 1910; Highland News 4 Feb 1911; P&J 24 Dec 1919

<sup>34</sup> Scotsman 20 Jan 1917