

SEANCHAS SGIBNIS¹

Mar a dh'fhalbh cànan²

Part 1

By CHARTS' Gaelic Culture Officer Àdhamh Ó Broin

As part of Seachdain na Gàidhlig 2025, CHARTS collaborated with the Kintyre Rainforest Alliance and Skipness Estate to create an opportunity for local people and visitors to Argyll to come together in Skipness Woods and Village Hall and explore Gaelic culture, environment and demographic changes down the decades since 1881 and the first Gaelic language census return. This blog is part one of two exploring these themes.

[NB The blog is written in English with all Gaelic names - proper or otherwise - in italics to emphasise the difference in language and how often this occurs when speaking of Gaelic people and places within Gaeldom. All derivations and recognised English language corruptions are placed in footnotes below as follows: "derivation" (English corruption)]

I first visited *Sgibnis*³ in 1992 as a 12 year-old boy. My father had a meeting with Argyll & Bute Council in *Ceann Loch*⁴ and so we made a roadtrip of it, leaving from *Taigh na Bruaich*⁵, travelling through *Meathan Arra-Gháidheal*⁶ and down the west coast of *Ceann-Tir*⁷. I clearly remember running through the cold Atlantic shallows at *Muasdail*⁸ beach in nothing but my swimming trunks and in what were considerable winds. Now, this wild dipping is all the rage but the truth is I've lost my bottle and wouldn't last a Spring minute in there.

(photo of À running in sea at 12 TBC)

¹ "Skipness Lore"

² "How a language departed"

³ "Ship-point" (Skipness)

⁴ "Loch-head" (Campbeltown)

⁵ "House [of] the Bank" (Tighnabruaich)

⁶ "Middle Gaels' share" (Mid-Argyll)

⁷ "Land-head" (Kintyre)

⁸ [derivation obscure]

Before passing back through *Ceann Loch*, we headed south and camped at *Maol Chinn-Tire*⁹. I am able to place this as early April due to the fact that my father and I had been discussing the UK election which was just about to take place. Our return trip took us east and up the opposite coast this time, culminating in an inspection of *Caisteal Sgibnis*¹⁰ and a visit to the local shop for a can of fizzy juice and a Caramel Wafer.

I don't remember much of what I thought about *Sgibnis*, but I do remember thinking that there weren't many people there. According to the 1991 census, the population was just short of 120. By 2021, this had plummeted to a mere 70. If we look back in time however to when the first Gaelic language enumeration was done in 1881, we find that the population of the area from village to castle and hamlets beyond was a very healthy 215.

The other palpable difference, had my 12 year-old self been aware, would have been the complete lack of local dialect to be heard. Although there were 6 people in *Sgibnis* noted as having some ability to speak Gaelic in 1991, it is unlikely that any of them were speakers of *Gàilig Sgibnis*¹¹. When the Gaelic Linguistic Survey visited *Ceann-Tir* in the early 1950s, they did not make recordings with anyone in this north-east corner of the peninsula, presumably because suitable speakers could not be found. The desired informants were those who had been brought up in *Sgibnis* and whose parents belonged to the district, too, and by the 1950s, this was nothing if not a tall order.

⁹ "Land-head Promontory" (The Mull of Kintyre)

¹⁰ "Ship-point Castle" (Skipness Castle)

¹¹ "Ship-point Gaelic" (Skipness Gaelic)



Sgibnis in days gone by (courtesy of Duncan Shaw)

To explain how this happened, we can't get more relevant than the testimony of those who belonged to *Ceann-Tir* and who saw the change taking place. A lady who did find herself recorded by the Linguistic Survey was *Mórag Nic Phàil*¹², or Sarah as she was known in English. Sarah belonged to *Port a' Chaolain*¹³, close to *An Clachan*¹⁴. Before she and her sister sat by the reel to reel tape recorder brought from Edinburgh by the School of Scottish Studies for their survey, Sarah had spent time with Swedish linguist Nils M. Holmer. This was in the late 1930s. She gave the following statement about the linguistic norms of a few decades earlier, which Holmer described as “a story about the time when Gaelic was generally spoken by the children of Kintyre”:

¹² “Paul-son” (MacPhail)

¹³ “Port [of] the Narrows”

¹⁴ “The Hamlet”

*Bha seo deich 'us ceithir fichead blian' air ais. Nair a bha mo mháir anns an sgoil, cha robh de chridhe aig a' chloinn a bhith air an cluinntinn a' cainnt na Gàilig nair a bhiodh ead a' cluich, na gheobhadh ead an gabhail ora. Bha 'd ri innseadh air a cheile nair a bhiodh ead air an cluinntinn a' cainnt Gàilig. Bha cail' anns an sgoil air a cluinntinn ag uisinneachadh na Gàilig agus dh'innis beana-chompanach do'n mhaighstear-sgoil' agus fhuair i gabhail uire.*¹⁵

(This was ten and four score years back. When my mother was in the school, the children hadn't the heart to be heard speaking Gaelic when they were playing, or they would get a thrashing. They were to be telling on one another when they would be heard speaking Gaelic. There was a lassie in the school heard using Gaelic and a friend told the schoolmaster and she got a thrashing.)

This atmosphere of intimidation and practice of child abuse appears to date from the late 1840s. It was during an era when many parishes still taught Gaelic in the parochial schools, operated as they often were by well-meaning local Gaels. We can only assume from the above account that this was not the situation in the parish of *Cill Cholman Eala*¹⁶. The important thing to keep in mind is that the people suffering this fate were indigenous to the place in which they went to school. Gaelic People were the aboriginal stewards of the land and keepers of the culture, customs and language, yet their children were being taught to look upon one another with suspicion for speaking the only language they knew. In this day and age it seems unthinkable, but the truth is that Gaels were suffering the fate of indigenous people the world over; they were being beaten into submission and assimilation to the language and culture of the British colonial institutions that presided over their lives, whether in Scotland, Ireland or Man.

Returning to *Sgibnis* where the situation is unlikely to have been much better and one might expect the local Gaels to have begun to relinquish their language. Happily, this was not the case. The interesting thing about the 1881 census - the first that recorded Gaelic usage in Scotland - is that the question was not as it is today, and I paraphrase: "do you have any ability in Gaelic?" to which people now reply according to whether they can speak, understand, write or read it. The question in the 1881 census

¹⁵ Nils M. Holmer "The Gaelic of Kintyre" (Dublin Institute, 1962)

¹⁶ "St Colman's of Eala's Cell" (Kilcalmonell)

was about whether a person was a habitual speaker. My own suspicion as to the real reason for this question being brought in was to assess how quickly Gaelic's removal from school life would result in its disintegration as part of home life after the omission of the language from provision within the 1872 Education Act.

| The undermentioned Houses are situate within the Boundaries of the | | | | | | | | | | [Page 5] | | | | | |
|--|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|------|----------------------------------|----------------|--|---------------------------|---------|--|----------------------|--|
| Civil Parish of | | Quoad Sacra Parish of | | School Board District of | | Parliamentary Burgh of | | Royal Burgh of | | Police Burgh of | | Town of | | Village or Hamlet of | |
| No. of | ROAD, STREET, Etc., and | HOUSES | No. of | NAME and Surname of each | RELATION | CONDITION | AGE | Rank, Profession, or OCCUPATION. | WHERE BORN. | Whether | Rooms | | | | |
| schedule | No. or NAME of HOUSE. | Inclosed | Inclosed | Person. | to Head of Family. | as to Marriage. | Year | | | 1. Deaf and Dumb. 2. Blind, Imbecile or Idiot. 3. Lunatic. | with One or more Windows. | | | | |
| 17 | Claonaig | 1 | | Tommy Mac Phail | Head | Mar. | 48 | Shepherd | Sgibnis | | | | | 2 | |
| | | | | Tommy | Spouse | Mar. | 48 | Shepherd, wife | Lo. Marvin | G | | | | | |
| | | | | Flora | Da. | Da. | 75 | Scholar | Lo. Kilberry | G | | | | | |
| | | | | Tom | Da. | Da. | 13 | Da. | Lo. Lo. | G | | | | | |
| | | | | Tom | Da. | Da. | 11 | Da. | Lo. Lo. | G | | | | | |
| | | | | Tom | Da. | Da. | 8 | Da. | Lo. Sgibnis | G | | | | | |
| | | | | Tom | Da. | Da. | 5 | ✓ | Lo. Lo. | G | | | | | |
| 18 | Phare | 1 | | Eliza with Blue | Head | W. | 68 | Housekeeper | Phare | G | | | | 2 | |
| | | | | John | Spouse | Wom. | 29 | Shepherd | Sgibnis | G | | | | | |
| | | | | John | Da. | Wom. | 31 | Servant | Lo. Kilpatrick | G | | | | | |
| 19 | Craig | 1 | | Charles Crawford | Head | Mar. | 46 | Shepherd | Royal Kilmaine | G | | | | 1 | |
| | | | | Tom | Spouse | Mar. | 41 | Shepherd, wife | Lo. Sardell | G | | | | | |
| | | | | Tom | Da. | Da. | 27 | Servant | Lo. Kilmaine | G | | | | | |
| | | | | Tom | Da. | Da. | 14 | Scholar | Lo. Kilberry | G | | | | | |
| | | | | Mary | Da. | Da. | 11 | Da. | Lo. Lo. | G | | | | | |
| | | | | Tom | Da. | Da. | 8 | Da. | Lo. Sgibnis | G | | | | | |
| | | | | Tom | Da. | Da. | 5 | ✓ | Lo. Lo. | G | | | | | |
| | | | | Tom | Da. | Da. | 1 | | Lo. Lo. | G | | | | | |
| 20 | Craig | 1 | | Maryann Thomson | Head | W. | 49 | Farmers son & son of 2m. 10 | Sgibnis | G | | | | 3 | |
| | | | | Tom | Spouse | Wom. | 49 | Farmers son | Lo. Sgibnis | G | | | | | |
| | | | | Tom | Da. | Da. | 13 | Da. | Lo. Lo. | G | | | | | |
| Total of Houses... | | 41 | Total of Males and Females... | | 40 | ✓ | | | | Total of Windowed Rooms... | | 9 | | | |

NOTE — Draw the pen through such of the words of the headings as are inappropriate.

D. [Scot.—Sheet A.]

What is revealed from studying the 1881 return above is that people born and brought up in the district or indeed those who originally hailed from other Gaelic-speaking areas were still using Gaelic as a matter of course (see "G" in 2nd column from R). Looking at the domiciles around *Claonaig*¹⁷ just to the south of *Sgibnis* from where the ferry can be used to cross to *Aran*¹⁸, we see that only part of one family from the enumeration district was marked as not being regularly Gaelic-speaking. The family name was *Mac Thómais*¹⁹, and *Maighread*²⁰, the head, was a widow. They seem to have had a farm of some 300 acres as well as a farm servant on

¹⁷ "Little Sloped Spot"

¹⁸ "Kidney Isle" (Arran)

¹⁹ "Tomas-son" (Thomson)

²⁰ "Margaret"

hand, from *Cille Bhearaidh*²¹ who was a Gael herself. Margaret and her two eldest sons were noted as using Gaelic regularly, while younger family members were not.

| Page 6] | | The undermentioned Houses are situate within the Boundaries of the | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------|--|--|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|----------------------|---|--|---|--|--|--|
| Civil Parish of | Quoad Sacra Parish of | School Board-District of | Parliamentary Burgh of | Royal Burgh of | Police Burgh of | town | Village or Hamlet of | | | | | | | |
| No. of Schedules | ROAD, STREET, &c., and No. or NAME of HOUSE. | HOUSES. Units in each House (D 3 or D 4) | NAME and Surname of each Person. | RELATION to Head of Family. | CONDITION as to Marriage. | AGE (Best Birthday) Male Female | Rank, Profession, or OCCUPATION. | WHERE BORN. | 1. Dumb and Dumb. 2. Rhetorical. 3. Imbeciles or Idiot. 4. Infirm. | Rooms with One or More Windows. | | | | |
| | Regan's Inter. | | John F. Johnson | Son | Unm. | 16 | Farmers Servt | By St. Berach's Cell | | | | | | |
| | | | John | Son | Unm. | 14 | to | to | | | | | | |
| | | | James | Son | Unm. | 12 | Scholar | to | | | | | | |
| | | | Donald | Son | Unm. | 10 | to | to | | | | | | |
| | | | James | Son | Unm. | 8 | to | to | | | | | | |
| | | | John | Son | Unm. | 6 | to | to | | | | | | |
| | | | Johny | Son | Unm. | 16 | Farm Servt | to | | | | | | |
| 21 | St. Berach's | 1 | Simeon Cook | Head | Mar. | 34 | Fisherman | By St. Berach's Cell | | 2 | | | | |
| | | | John | Son | Unm. | 33 | Fisherman's wife | to | | | | | | |
| | | | John | Son | Unm. | 4 | to | to | | | | | | |
| | | | John | Son | Unm. | 3 | to | to | | | | | | |
| | | | Elizabeth | Son | Unm. | 1 | to | to | | | | | | |
| 22 | St. Berach's | 1 | Eric McCullum | Head | Unm. | 79 | Retired Farmer | to | | 1 | | | | |
| 23 | St. Berach's | 1 | Mary Thomson | Head | Unm. | 55 | Pauper | to | | 1 | | | | |
| 24 | St. Berach's | 1 | Malcolm M. Miller | Head | Unm. | 46 | Farm Servt & Gardener | By St. Berach's Cell | | 4 | | | | |
| | | | Margaret | Sister | Unm. | 42 | Young Peepes | to | | | | | | |
| | | | John Campbell | Servt | Unm. | 24 | Peepes | to | | | | | | |
| | | | John McPorte | Servt | Unm. | 28 | General Servt | to | | | | | | |
| | | | John McFadden | Servt | Unm. | 16 | Farm Servt | to | | | | | | |
| Total of Houses... | | | Total of Males and Females... | | | 10 | 9 | | | Total of Windowed Rooms... | 8 | | | |

SCOR. - Sheet A J

NOTE.—Draw the pen through such of the words of the headings as are inappropriate.

120

Given the inhabitants of the entire area in 1881 were habitually Gaelic-speaking, including the mother, elder brothers and servant of the farm on which they lived, the chances that these young people (see first lines of above page) did not speak Gaelic are exceedingly low. It is much more likely that they or their parents felt pressure to deny regular Gaelic use, that the harsh handling meted out to young people during the preceding era and long after had visited a negative effect on their confidence in their own culture. Perhaps some parents thought best to deny their children's ability in Gaelic to save them a beating. That said, it is notable that these youngsters were among the few people to be noted thusly, suggesting that Gaelic was the settled language of the people. The only others who are marked as non Gaelic-speaking had come in from outside Greater Gaeldom.

²¹ "St Berach's Cell" (Kilberry)

The true reasons for this kind of resilience are sometimes overlooked due to Gaelic being regarded in this day and age as a language that one has the choice to speak, or not, that for all the cultural weight it carries, the speaking of it is merely a matter of “inclination”. The truth is that Gaels spoke Gaelic because it was normal, it was and is Gael-ic; that which pertains to the Gael and gives voice to the Gael. It is generally true as long as conditions are conducive to native practice - linguistic or otherwise - that they shall be maintained. There is nothing remarkable about that. It’s normal. Natural. Almost unavoidable in fact without great efforts to the contrary and it happens everywhere on Planet Earth one cares to look. On the whole, people everywhere speak what they consider to be their own language and that of their immediate community. It is only when the speaking of an indigenous language becomes undesirable in the face of radically changed circumstances, or when there is no one else with whom one can easily converse, that the dominant, incoming tongue is finally and consistently resorted to.

The question we are therefore left with is when exactly did this become the case around *Sgibnis*, eventually resulting in the dearth of local expression I witnessed in 1992? In looking at the census of 1921, the last to which we currently have public access, we see a drastically different situation for Gaelic. Instead of the heady heights of 1881 and the language spoken by a mighty 91% of the resident population, we have a figure of around 47% which is effectively a 1% drop for every year passed. The oft-expressed idea of English simply being the more “useful” tongue as responsible for this trend however, is frankly erroneous and a close look at the census information around *Claonaig* once again shows us why.



Beached whale pup at *Claonaig* with *Arainn* in left distance

Had the population remained mostly Gaelic, one might reasonably conclude that the efforts of the barbaric teachers backed by broader colonial policy had taken their toll and the people of the area had capitulated to English language use. The truth however shows us that of the people who belonged to the enumeration district, 67% were still Gaelic speakers. Every Gael over the age of 50 is marked as able in his or her own tongue. Where there were *Sgibnis* men who had wives from other Highland or Island areas, these families had also continued to preserve the Fingalian Tongue as their mode of speech. The only family amongst the Gaelic residents of the area who had seemingly not passed along the language had in their midst a wife and mother from Glasgow, who did not have Gaelic and would therefore not have used it at home.

When push comes to shove, the reason that over half the population could not command the native language of the area was down to the fact that they were incomers.

Half of the area's Gaels were gone, presumably away to the cities for better economic opportunity, while those who came in to plug whatever gaps were created by this, ironically often seemed to be from the very places to which the Highlanders had emigrated. Due to the low social prestige of Gaelic, those coming into *Sgibnis* and surround were not best motivated to learn, though that's not to say that some did not make an effort. Economic instability - as with now - was wreaking havoc on the Highlands and population movements bear this out. The ground was shifting under the Gaels and what should have been the supporting environments of work and school as well as the language habits of their neighbours were not conducive to maintaining the native tongue, despite obvious loyalty to it.

A century ago, the Gaels of *Sgibnis* and those other Gaels who had come into the area for work were still speaking Gaelic. As discussed above, this would have undoubtedly been because in their eyes, there was no separation between themselves and their language. It was all the one. Gaels speak Gaelic because it is the simplest thing to continue with the language they received at their mother's knee. The 1891 census for the *Claonaig* area shows that the population had remained relatively stable in the decade since 1881, and the use of Gaelic remained so too. It was only extremity of circumstance that pulled people away from it. The reason we can be so confident about this is the evidence of one particular family in the 1921 census.



If the presence of Christina Cook, the wife from Glasgow, prevented the passing on of the Gaelic language from her husband *Pàruig*²² to their children, we can look at the difference when a Gaelic-speaking partner was present in a household of another *Pàruig*, this time *Pàruig Caimbeal*²³ at *Claonaig* Lodge. Although this other Peter belonged to the *Taobb na Leargaidh*²⁴, he was nevertheless a man of *Ceann-Tir* and in similar linguistic circumstances to his *Sgibnis* cousins. Gaelic would have been teetering on the brink in the same manner it was in the house of his namesake at *Gleann Buidhe*²⁵ had he married someone from the Low Country. What happened however was that the incoming wife was from *Càrlabhagh*²⁶ in *Leódhlas*²⁷ where Gaelic survives relatively intact to this day. She would have acted as something of a cavalry reinforcement for the indigenous tongue - and no less than her own Hebridean variant of it - bolstering the linguistic stability of the household and securing Gaelic's place in *Claonaig*, at the very least in the home over which she had influence and for another generation to come.

²² "Patrick / Peter"

²³ "Crooked-mouth" (Campbell)

²⁴ "Hill-slope Side" (The Largieside)

²⁵ "Yellow Glen"

²⁶ "Karlavágr = Carl's Bay" (Carloway)

²⁷ "Ljóð-hús = Music-house" (Isle of Lewis)

We can see from assessing the above difference in circumstance, that motivation to maintain Gaelic in the home was not in short supply. It simply required the will and when this was understandably not in evidence from people newly arrived in the *Sgibnis* area, that will - even from those naturally disposed to speak their own tongue - was severely compromised. A certain social chaos had set in across Gaeldom, perhaps not detectable to a 12 year-old boy in the everyday rhythms of the 1990s village street in *Sgibnis*, but conspicuous when a retrospective assessment of the change in population dynamics is observed in the fifty years between the 1881 and 1921 censuses.

Part Two coming soon...