

*evelix valley, sutherland*

**An introduction to the Environment and Heritage impact of the  
population.**

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### **EVELIX VALLEY, SUTHERLAND.**

The three farms of Achormlarie, Achviach and Achosnich represent nearly 5000 years of continuous habitation and agriculture on the hills that enclose the first few kilometres of the Evelix River. Indeed the word ‘Ach’ in their Gaelic names means field.

From the rivers beginnings at the southeastern shores of Loch an Lagain to its decent in to the Dornoch Firth, people have farmed its flanks, working the fertile soils of this glacial erosion.

The Evelix Valley from Achormlarie in the east to Achosnich in the west represents around five kilometres of the totality of the river but it has a fascinating insight into the last five millennia. This is where my essay will concentrate.



The Evelix Valley: Achosnich, Achviach and unseen Achormlarie

### The Earliest Farmers

#### The Bronze age

In this small stretch of the Evelix Valley the hills are littered with the evidence of prehistory. Hut circles, fields systems and Cairns of different shapes and sizes adorn the higher levels of hills. There are so many huts that this is quite substantial evidence to the fertility of the land at this time. The huts are grouped in such a way that they suggest that there were at least four communities all of around the same era living and working here.



A cluster of hut circles. Achosnich in the distance

The remnants of the field systems can be seen as sub peat dykes that run up into the heather even higher than the dwellings. Some of the huts are quite extensive and complex in their planning, but all that there is for us to view today is first course of stone, barely visible for the bog and heather.



The Bronze Age farmers had the best of what the hills had to offer, as changing weather patterns brought cold, wet weather, making it ever more difficult to cultivate the higher fields. Together with this, was the exhausting of the soil through traditional farming practices. These factors brought about the depletion of the high ground. As the fields became exhausted so they were deserted. The people gradually descended further into the valley bottom building new dwellings, recycling the old ones for the stone and timber.

The hills that surrounded the early Evelix farmers would have been extensively forested, supplying them with everything from tools and utensils to shelter and fuel. Today there is nothing of this ancient forest except for the odd stump that shows from beneath the peat.



One of the many tree stumps that peek from within the bog.

I would argue that it wasn't the Bronze Age farmers that depleted these forest, they would have managed them for their benefits. I feel that the centuries preceding the first farmers would have been more taxing on the arboriculture, as farmers and communities struggled for more productive land, sacrificing the woods for fields. This action unbeknown to the perpetrators would have further reduced the viability of the soils, so the only area left to crops would have been around the river itself.

### **From prehistory to the Enlightenment**

We know from ecclesiastical records that the land of the Evelix Valley belonged to the Skibo Estate at this time, in particular Bishop Gilbert. What is intriguing about this association with Bishop Gilbert, is that in the Highland Council Sites and Monuments Records there is a reference to an archaeological survey that was done in 1926, this states: *“Some traces of the foundations of an old building still remain in the neighbourhood of Achormlarie. This may have been a church served from Dornoch ministry as the names ‘Achenecolais’ (Church field) and Allt-an-t-Sagairt” (Priest’s Burn) suggest”* (C.D Bentinick 1926)

Two other surveys were carried out, one in 1963 and the other in 1980; both these surveys report no evidence to substantiate Bentinicks theory. In my investigation I found no confirmation of the ruin in the locality given in the surveys, although the burn that runs through the forestry plantation is still known as the ‘Priest’s burn’, and what adds more fuel to this religious fire is that there are four ponds to the west of Achormlarie that are known as the ‘monks ponds’. May be the monks and priest’s who served the Bishop cultivated the land, and the ponds were for their Friday fayre of fish.

This is where the trail runs cold; a ‘neo dark age’ descends on the Evelix and its inhabitants. We can take an educated guess that the land remained in use, but without any form of records or archaeological evidence to corroborate this we can only assume. We have to take a giant leap forward in time to the 18<sup>th</sup> century to pick up were we left the monks.

### **The Improvements**

Much to my surprise the exact opposite to what I had expected happened in the Evelix at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. There is evidence of clearance communities living here, but it seems that instead of the romantic theory of families being shipped out for the sheep to move in, it was the families that were forcibly evicted into the Evelix Valley.

The landlords, who placed the families in the Evelix, namely the Sutherland Estate, the Skibo Estate and the Palrossie Estate (the latter two being tenants to the first) evicted crofters and small farmers from the traditional lands around the Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet into the Evelix valley, in order to develop the land that was vacated into 'High Farms' of the period.

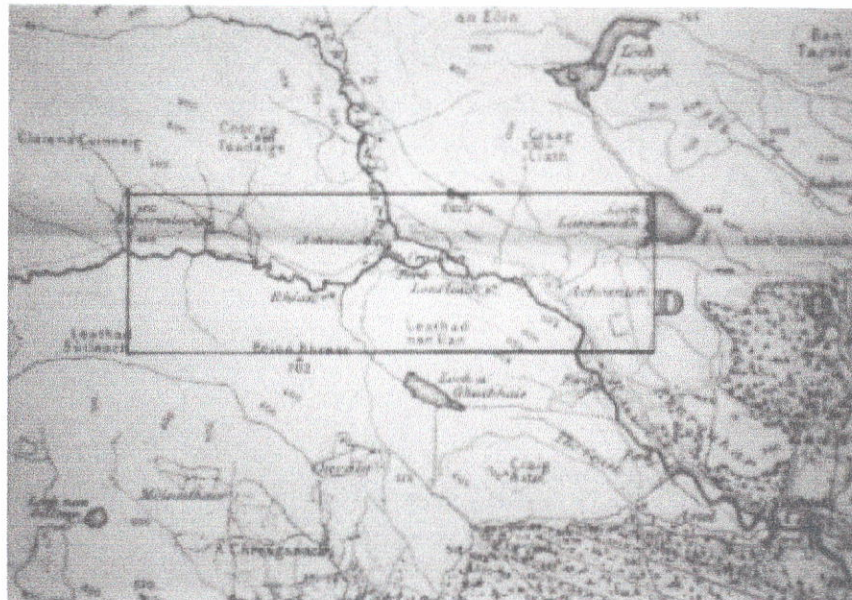
There is reference to a ruin of an old mill house at Achosnich in 1800, it was estimated then that the building had been gone for at least seventy years? Today every stone of the old mill has been removed only the sluices and the stream give its presence away.

There seems to have been a concentration of mills as there are two small and two large ones, all of the improvement period mapped by the RCAHMS. On the north side of the river there is also remains of three corn kilns. These two factors, kilns and mills suggest the people of this time really tried hard to make the best of their situation. Most of the ruined crofts of this period we see today have substantial garden plots, some measuring in excess of 50 feet square. By the lay out of these crofts they are typically in the style of barn – house – byre. (see over page)



A typical ruined croft of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

In the map of 1843 we have 29 dwellings from Achosnich to Achormlarie, but in the O.S map of 1873 there are only 18.



O.S one-inch map, 1873.

What had happened in this 33-year period to make so many families desert their homes? Although there is no documentation to back up my theory, I believe it was question of economics, too many people trying to eek out a living from too few good acres.

In a letter to his brother in 1877, Donald Murray of Glasgow writes to his brother of his findings when visiting the house at Achviach where they were both born:

*“Although a ruin yet it was still there.”*

He tells of his distress at finding the family home and that of his childhood neighbours in a state of ruin and abandonment. Not surprisingly the letter is addressed to Toko, Otago, New Zealand. His brother had had the same idea perhaps.

### **The late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20th Centuries**

It is well documented that Andrew Carnegie fished the River Evelix, and it is said that it was while fishing on Loch An Lagain with a small boy as gillie that he dreamt up the ‘Carnegie Scholarship’ for disadvantaged children. If Carnegie himself fished the area then surely guests at Skibo Castle fished and shot here during the Highland season. The whole region around the Evelix makes for a perfect playground for such activities, for Grouse and deer still frequent the hills and moors today.

Again in the early part of this century we have more people leaving to seek their fortunes elsewhere. In the O.S map of 1912 there are only 9 dwellings left in the Valley, by 1976 there are 6. By the last O.S map, 1998, there are just the three remaining, Achormlarie, Achviach and Achosnich.

On speaking to the crofters who live and work in the Valley today it is obvious that without a second income none of these people would be able to survive here on just the living they make from crofting the land.



### **Back to the Future**

In the late 1980's vast swathes of land in the upper and lower parts of the Evelix valley were turned over to forestry. There are further plans in the near future to join the plantations in the west and south to the plantations in the east. If this does infact happen then in a matter of 5000 years the Evelix valley will have come full circle, albeit at the expense of the quality of the soil. Once swathed in native forest supplying the Bronze Age folk with almost everything, it has been degraded so much at the hands of man that the only crop it can grow with any real hope of profitability is a forest that would be certainly alien to the these first guardians of Evelix

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