Gaelic Place-Names: Occupational Terms

By Alison Grant

Not all place-name elements describe the landscape in which they are found. Some of them describe instead the occupants of the landscape and their various roles within their respective communities. For example, the Gaelic word *gobha* means 'a smith, a blacksmith', and is found in many place-names across Scotland, including *Ballygown* 'smith's farm' on the islands of Arran and Mull, *Balnagown* also meaning 'smith's farm' in Easter Ross, *Port nan Gobha* 'port of the smiths' on the isle of Islay, *Allt Gobhainn* 'the smith's burn' on the island of Arran, *Ledgowan* 'the smith's slope' in the Highlands, *Craig a' Ghobhainn* 'rocky hill of the smith' in Upper Deeside, *Tobar a' Ghobha* 'the smith's well' on the isle of Skye, and *Balgonie* and *Balgove* in Fife, both meaning 'smith's farm'.

Another Gaelic word for a smith is *ceàrd*, although this term also has the wider meanings of 'craftsman' and 'tinker', and when used in place-names it often refers to sites used by travelling people who sold or mended metal goods. Examples include *Bealach nan Ceaird* 'tinker's pass' on the isle of Arran, *Geata Cheàrd* 'gate of the tinkers' on the isle of Islay, *Dùn nan Ceàrd* 'fortress of the tinkers' and *Lag nan Ceàrd* 'hollow of the tinkers', both of which are on the isle of Skye. *Ceàrd* was also borrowed into Scots in the form *caird*, and is found in Scots place-names including *Cardsknolls*, *Cardemuir* and *Cardswells* (all in the county of Fife).[1]

A different type of occupational term which is also commonly attested in Gaelic place-names is *buachaill*, meaning 'herdsman, shepherd'. Examples include *Tom nam Buachaillean* 'hillock of the herdsmen' in Argyll, *Cnoc nam Buachaillean* 'knoll of the herdsmen' on the isle of Skye, *Lag nam Buachaillean* 'hollow of the herdsmen' in Upper Deeside, *Suidhe nam Buachaillean* 'seat of the herdsmen' in Argyll, *Meall a' Bhuachaille* 'mountain of the herdsman' in the Cairngorms, *Craig Buckley* 'rock of the herdsmen' and *Balbeuchly* 'farm of the herdsmen' both in Fife. Perhaps the most famous *buachaill* name is that of a mountain in the Western Highlands, known as

the *Buachaile Etive Mòr*, 'the great herdsman of Etive', in which it is the mountain itself that is described as the 'herdsman' rather than any of its occupants.

Another occupation which refers to the care of livestock is *dròbhair* 'a cattle drover, a cattle dealer', which is found in place-names including *Tobar an Dròbhair* 'the drover's well' on the isle of Skye, *Rathad nan Dròbar* 'road of the drover' on the Isle of Islay, and *Fuaran-an-Drobhair* 'the drover's well' south of Loch Ness in the Highlands.

Numerous other occupations are represented in Gaelic nomenclature, and in some cases these refer to tangible local people and their professions. For example, *Taigh a' Phortair* 'the porter's house' at Arisaig in the Western Highlands commemorates the house built for the local porter, Donald MacKinnon, in 1887. The job of porter was to become obsolete with the arrival of the railway in 1901, although the house (and the name) remained.[2] Similarly, *Làrach Taigh Nèill Ghriasaich* 'the site of Neil the shoemaker's house' on the isle of Skye refers to a house which had been built by the local shoemaker on the glebe land at Kilmore.[3] In Upper Deeside, names such as *Roinn an Fhùcadair* 'land-portion of the fuller' and *Roinn Tàileac* 'land-portion of the tailor' also refer to specific sites occupied by local artisans.[4]

However, in other instances, occupational place-names commemorate less corporeal figures, who are much more loosely connected to the local landscape. Thus, whilst *Coire Dhonnachaidh Taillear* 'core of Duncan the tailor' refers to a specific person in Upper Deeside, another name in the district, *Clach nan Taillear*, 'the tailors' stone', reflects instead a local legend of three eighteenth-century tailors who are reputed to have wagered that they could dance a reel at Rothiemurchus and another in Mar on the same day, but perished at this spot in the snow on their way to Mar.[5] Similarly, the name *Allt a' Cheanneachain* 'the stream of the merchant' on the isle of Skye has a legend attached to it that a man named Big MacGillivray killed two merchants in narrow pass near this stream, their bodies being found at the point where the burn runs into the sea.[6]

In the Lochaber area, *Leum an t-Saighdear* 'soldier's leap' does not refer to a local military figure, but instead to a legend of a Jacobite soldier who was

captured by Redcoats in this district. The soldier managed to get away by leaping across a river, a feat his pursuers were too afraid to emulate, and the Jacobite is then supposed to have made good his escape over a nearby hill named *Tom an t-Saighdear* 'the soldier's hill'.[7]

Additionally, some apparently occupational names may in fact be figurative. For example, the Gaelic word *iasgar* means 'a fisherman', and whilst names such as *Loch an Iasgair* and *Lochan an Iasgair* (both in the Western Highlands) may be genuine references to fishermen, meaning 'fisherman's loch' and 'little loch of the fishermen' respectively, a name like *Bad an Iasgair* 'clump of the fisher' in Upper Deeside is likely to refer instead to a heron or other fishing bird.[8]

References & Further Information

[1] Simon Taylor, *The Place-Names of Fife*, vol 5, (2012) p. 318.

[2] Jacob King and Heather Clyne, *The Rough Bounds of Lochaber* (2013) p. 28.

[3] Information on the place-names of the Sleat peninsula of Skye can be found at Comunn Eachdraidh Shlèite / Sleat Local History Society.

[4] Adam Watson and Elizabeth Allan, *The Place-Names of Upper Deeside* (1984) p. 132.

[5] *Ibid*., p. 44.

[6] Information from Comunn Eachdraidh Shlèite / Sleat Local History Society

[7] King and Clyne, p. 6.

[8] Adam Watson and Elizabeth Allan, *The Place-Names of Upper Deeside* (1984) p. 16.

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