Gaelic Place-Names: ‘Inbhir’

By Alison Grant

The Gaelic word *inbhir* means ‘a confluence of waters’ or ‘the mouth of a watercourse’. It is therefore most commonly found in conjunction with the name of a river or stream, with examples including Inverary ‘mouth of the river *Aray*‘ in Argyll, *Inverurie* ‘mouth of the river *Urie*‘ near Aberdeen, *Inverkeithing* ‘mouth of the *Keithing* burn’ in Fife, *Inveresk* ‘mouth of the river *Esk*‘ near Edinburgh and *Inverewe* ‘mouth of the river *Ewe*‘ in the North-West Highlands.

In many cases, these river names are of Gaelic origin and are amongst some of the oldest surviving place-names in Scotland, but a few belong to an even earlier naming stratum. For example, *Inverness* in the Highlands is ‘the mouth of the river *Ness*‘, and the historical records of this river name point to an ancient Celtic or pre-Celtic root form *ned- ‘to wet, flood’. Similarly, *Inverugie* near Peterhead contains a river-name which appears to pre-date the Gaelic language, although its precise origins remain obscure.

Conversely, other *inbhir* names are of a much more recent origin. *Inverclyde* was coined in the twentieth century by adding *inver*– to the name of the river Clyde, to refer to a new administrative district in the vicinity of the Clyde estuary to the south and west of Glasgow. Similarly, the name *Invergordon* was created in the eighteenth century by local landowner Sir William Gordon by adding *inver*– to his own surname. The older name for this town in the Black Isle was *Inverbreakie* ‘mouth of the *Breckie* burn’.

It is perhaps worth noting that the qualifying element in *inbhir* names is not always the name of a river or stream. Sometimes a descriptive or locational element is used instead. For example, *Inverbeg* near Loch Lomond means ‘the small river mouth’, *Inverhope* in Sutherland is ‘the river mouth at the bay’, *Inverkip* in Renfrewshire is ‘the river mouth at the stump’ and *Invernauld* in Sutherland means simply ‘the mouth of the streams’. The word *inbhir* is also occasionally found as the qualifying element in place-names, with examples including *Eilan an Inbhire* ‘island of the river mouth’ on the island of Raasay, and *Meall Inbhir* ‘mountain of the river mouth’ and *Tom an Inbhire* ‘knoll of the

burn mouth', both in Argyllshire.

Inbhir was also borrowed into the Scots language in the form *inver*. It is attested from the second half of the fifteenth century onwards, but is rarely used outside of the North-East in modern times. The Scots form is occasionally evidenced in minor place-names in Aberdeenshire, with examples including *The Inver of Bynack* and *The Inver of Geldie*, which both refer to a confluence of two streams.

The Pictish cognate of *inbhir* is *aber*, which is found in Scottish names such as *Aberdeen*, *Aberchirder*, *Aberdour*, *Aberfeldy* and *Aberfoyle*. The same element is present in the related Welsh language, where it can be recognised in names including *Aberystwyth*, *Abergavenny* and *Aberdare*. It has been suggested that some of the Gaelic *inbhir* names may originally have contained Pictish *aber* as their initial element, being altered at the time when Gaelic replaced the Pictish language in the eastern part of the country. However, there is little substantiating evidence for this claim, and Jacob King has recently shown that in the case of the name *Inverbervie* in Aberdeenshire, the much-quoted *Haberberui* form (dating from 1290) may well be an erroneous scribal interpretation of an illegible script, rather than a genuine *aber* form of the name.The Gaelic word *inbhir* means 'a confluence of waters' or 'the mouth of a watercourse'. It is therefore most commonly found in conjunction with the name of a river or stream, with examples including Inverary 'mouth of the river *Aray*' in Argyll, *Inverurie* 'mouth of the river *Urie*' near Aberdeen, *Inverkeithing* 'mouth of the *Keithing* burn' in Fife, *Inveresk* 'mouth of the river *Esk*' near Edinburgh and *Inverewe* 'mouth of the river *Ewe*' in the North-West Highlands.

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