

## Becoming acquainted with Clare by Fiona Marie Stephenson

For a long time one of the greatest joys in my life has been to pore over an OS map and look over the local area and find new places to go, but the excitement of finding the word 'ruin' and seeing the outline of some old building has always been the most exciting of all. It was in this way that I slowly started to become aware of, and unravel, the story of Clare for myself.

After finding the ruined remains of Achleach on the Foulis side of the river Skiach (I had heard the name of this place from an old school friend, Danny Cragg) I looked on the map to the other side of the river and was intrigued to find another 'ruin' marked there. No other buildings were marked there on the OS map - only this one 'ruin' in what was the Clare Plantation. On the hillside to the west, beyond the Clare plantation, the chambered cairn of Balnacrae was marked, the closest historic, man-made structure on the map.



As soon as I had ample free time, I set off on my bike with a snack and water bottle in my rucksack to go and find this 'ruin' whatever it may be. After pushing on up the wee sloped path behind Fannyfield and turning left, I headed into the Clare Plantation (now called 'South Clare' on Clach Liath Estate) and cycled on straight ahead for a good kilometre. I knew from the map that I would have to keep going onwards and then uphill eventually. I crossed the Clare Burn up there and got off my bike and headed down to the left where I could already see a large structure. Upon arrival, it was clear that this was a sheep enclosure or a 'fank' - a series of large stone pens and a cement 'bath' for the sheep to get dipped in. It was much bigger than I had expected and even then, the first time I saw it, I could get a sense of the busyness of times gone by there - the large number of sheep that must have been tended to there and all the work that was involved.

I remember going to the fank in my childhood summers in the Outer Hebrides and was reminded of scenes I saw there. I could remember the horrible smell of the 'sheep dip' and even though the fank at Clare was clearly a long time out of use, memories of this unforgettable stench were conjured up there at Clare too.



I was also delighted to notice the year 1899 (*photo*) etched into a stone in the wall - in the year just before the start of a new century in the life of whoever wrote it.

Now I was keen to find out more about this fank which seemed to be 'in the middle of nowhere.' After that day it was to become a regular occurrence for me to go out to the Clare Plantation and, eventually, I became quite familiar with the sites of the homes that were

once there. I don't remember the exact order in which I started to unravel the story of Clare. I know I went home that day and looked on the current OS map again and I started to look at various map websites and I noticed other walls and structures out that way.

It also did not take me too long to come across older maps of this area too and soon I was sitting there looking at an old OS map from the mid to late 1800s and I saw something fascinating right before my eyes - the little township of 'Clare' as it was when it was inhabited. I almost felt like I had won the lottery, it felt very special to see this! The names of the crofts were all there to see and I could see that the site I had been on at the sheep fank was actually very close to the site of the croft called Knockantoul, which according to Watson's 'Place Names of Ross and Cromarty' and other Gaelic speakers, means Barnhill. Now that I had found the old map of Clare, I started to compare the old map to the new maps and started to make a plan of which of the former homes I would try to find next.

The next structure I went to find was the remains of the house of Balnacrae (*photo*); it is the furthest west of the crofts of Clare and also not so far away from the chambered cairn, out on the hillside, which was also given that name Balnacrae - meaning Claytown as per Watson's book.



It is obvious when you get to the walls of the house at Balnacrae that, although the walls have fallen or the stones have been taken away for other purposes, what remains here is still the house itself and outlines of outbuildings, this site was not turned into an obvious sheep enclosure. There is even still a window here that you can look through. Unfortunately, no fireplace remains to be seen, the walls are now all very low.

I always feel when I find an old home like this that once I find the fireplace you can really feel the life in the place. Fires have always been central to life in the home,

especially in the days before television. Families sat together by the fire to talk, to cook, to boil water, to keep warm, to make music and sing songs, guests were welcomed in to sit by the fire. So, I always feel that once you find an old fireplace in what we call a 'ruin' you still get a great sense of the reality that this was once the focal point, the heart, of someone's home and I can feel a big connection to those folks of times gone by. But in the case of Balnacrae, the window is the closest connection to the folks who once lived there; at least there is still a window of sorts there at all.

I think by then, after seeing the remains of Balnacrae, I had also found the 'Evanton Oral History Project' [online](#) (I had seen the displays in the Cornerstone Cafe before but do not recall noticing anything about Clare then, but I must have missed it). I pored over it and read Adrian Clark's description of Clare with great interest and was, of course, very keen to get back to see even more.

I was shown other online resources too such as information put together by local historian Rob Gibson where some of the prosperous times at Clare were highlighted with information about the crops that they grew there. Another mention about Clare during more exciting times was in the writings of D Murray Rose. There we learn of the 5th Earl of Seaforth, William Mackenzie of Brahan Estate, spending the night at Clare, as he made his way towards Alness for what would be known as The Skirmish of Alness during the 1715 Jacobite uprising.

Of the 7 crofts at Clare I had had found 2 sites, Knockantoul and Balnacrae, with 5 to go: Balachreik, Knockgurman, Loanick, Gortan and Balmeanach. Next for me to visit was Knockgurman and I think it was after going there that I really fell in love with this place.

I did not find Knockgurman particularly easy to get to. The way there does start on a decent path which is somewhat overgrown with gorse and broom, but not impassable on foot. Once that obvious path ends, you can follow a burn downwards in the direction of the River Skiach and you just have to take care walking amongst tree stumps and tussocks and branches left there, trying not to slip on any wet wood or fall into any unseen holes in the ground under the long grasses growing there. It is a bit of a frustrating walk but with patience and determination, you get there.

From the main path into Clare, it took me almost half an hour or so to reach the site of Knockgurman (*photo below*), which, like Knockantoul, got changed into a sheep enclosure. I would imagine that the stones of the house and outbuildings that were



once here were also used towards the construction of this very large enclosure. There is no sheep dip at this site, just four long walls making an almost square shape and some gaps where gates would have been.

On the old map, you can see a path from Knockgurman down to the river Skiach and I decided to make my way down to the river. I had noticed a

footbridge and a ford on the old map and I wanted to see if there were any signs of the bridge left.



I'm sure that first time at Knockgurman, there had been a few days of heavy rainfall previously and even from the site of the sheep enclosure, I could hear the River Skiach gushing past below, not very far away - a very powerful sound. In hearing this, I felt a connection to the people of the past and imagined this being the site of their home, their whole livelihood centred right there and how on days like this the good lady of the house may have stood outside beating her rugs on the washing line for example, hearing the sound of the Skiach thundering by in the near distance. What I was hearing right now was a sound those folks would have often heard too. The sound of the Skiach was one of the melodies of their daily lives.

All the way down to the river and also on the other side of the river, the slopes there are just covered in the beautiful yellow hues of gorse and broom. I must have been there in summer time because I remember how the beauty of this rich colour struck me.

Getting away from Knockgurman to any kind of path, once again took a bit of manoeuvring through the kind of terrain I had crossed to get there, the stumps, old branches and tussocks did not make it easy, but step by step I gradually made it down to the river. I made my way to the area where the footbridge was but there was no sign of a bridge to be seen, not even any stone support remaining. This must have been a wooden bridge that either rotted or got dismantled. I went back and forth along the river bank looking for signs of it on either side. On a future visit to this site, I waded across the river to look from the other side but still could see nothing that looked like it had had to do with a bridge. I did, however, find an old rusty 'kissing gate' - a treasure! *(photo)*



The old map showed that the path led from Clare here up the hill to the croft of Achleach *(photo)*; this is all now overgrown with forestry, but to me this gate was another link to the past and the thoroughfares of those folks of Clare and Achleach. I think this is when it really struck me - I knew I wanted to write a story set here - a story set in Clare in the time when people still lived there. I definitely have a strong romantic

and sentimental side to me and I felt I had come to life just being in this place and my imagination started to run wild.



The bridge and kissing gate seemed like the ideal place for a young couple to meet, away from the prying eyes on either side of the River Skiach. The ideas came to me one by one and ever since then I have been working on this story, set in Clare before 1875, when it was cleared of people, before it was sold to Major Randle Jackson. The story is also set in Evanton in 1930 but just by finding that first 'ruin' on the OS map, one thing led to another and Clare soon became one of my favourite places. Even if it is absolutely nothing like it once was, it was once home to many people.

I have since then found the last inhabitants of Clare on the census records. The surnames of the tenants living there in 1871 were Macphail, Macdonald, Kemp, Mackenzie, Mackay and another Macdonald family and one more family whose name I am yet to find out. At Kiltearn churchyard I have seen the grave stones of some of the last folks to live at Clare. Donald Kemp of Knockgurman who died in 1875 and his wife Helen who died 20 years later at Shandwick Mains, their stone is very well preserved. There is also a headstone for the Mackay family of Wester Clare (Balnacrae).

I have even located the grave stone of the well-known local businessman, who supposedly made his fortune in illicit whisky sales John Dearg Munro, whose grandson, also John, sold Clare and Swordale to Major Randle Jackson in 1885. I read that John Dearg Munro was predeceased by his wife, Fanny Bisset, after whom he had named Fannyfield, formerly known as Bogreach. I have not yet managed to find her death certificate, nor her gravestone. At first glance, on a dry day, there is nothing of the inscription to be seen on John Dearg's headstone, but one day I was visiting the cemetery when it had been raining and when the sun came out, I could make out the letters on the top of his elegant, recumbent gravestone - another highlight of my quest to find out more about Clare. He died in 1860 and still to be able to see these letters is something special.

Whilst poring over those census records to find out the names of the last tenants at Clare, I came across the odd birth certificate too of babies who had been born there and noticed that in 1855, baby John Macphail was born to John and Anne Macphail, who themselves had been wed in Clare in 1848. Mrs Anne Macphail, whose maiden name was Macdonald, was actually born at Bognahavin, named after the burn that flows by it., the site of which is to be found across the river Skiach almost in line with

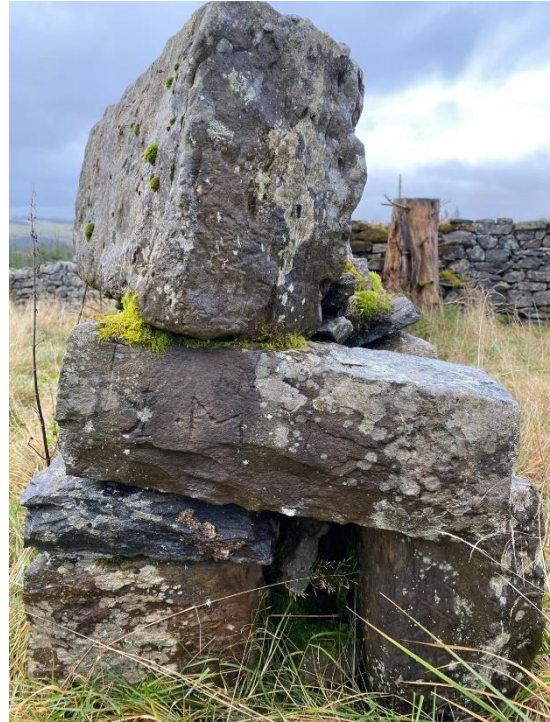


Balnacrae. It had become derelict before Clare. I managed to locate the old stone walls of that very old place which have now almost totally disappeared under moss and thick growing grasses (*photo*). Bognahavin was already marked as being a group of roofless buildings on the 1st edition OS map, so Mrs Macphail may well have been of the last generation to be born there.



After visiting the site of Knockgurman a couple of times, it was time to look for the other places of Clare. The only other two visible on the map and visible on the ground are Gortan and Balacreik. Gortan also became a sheep enclosure, not with a sheep dip like Knockantoul, nor an enclosed square like Knockgurman, but this one has a smallish square enclosure in the middle and it has 4 walled 'arms' around that square reaching out in the 4 directions of the compass, so the whole thing looks a bit like a big cross from above. This would allow sheep to find shelter regardless of wind direction (*photo*).

Another exciting feature of the sheep enclosure at Gortan are some initials etched into the wall there, I could definitely make out JM and possibly IM or KM (*photo*) - more signs of life from many years ago and the young men who would have worked there tending to the sheep in the late 1800s, early 1900s. Next to the sheep enclosure, under turf but still to be seen is the outline/stone of the house that was once there - so not all is 'lost' at Gortan.



I was in for a treat one day after I had been to Knockgurman a couple of times, I had yet again cycled into the Clare plantation and noticed that a lot of trees had been felled since my last visit and then right there before my eyes, I noticed more old walls I had never seen before - the outlines of possibly 2 of the buildings that stood on the croft of Balachreik. The beautiful stonework of these walls was totally visible again, now the trees were gone and one of the walls is reinforced with a buttress. No windows or doorways or fireplace to be seen but all those beautiful stones now visible again in the walls that once sheltered the folks who lived their lives at Balachreik.

On several occasions, and most recently with my friend Claire Campbell of Evanton whom I have been showing around the sites of Clare, I have looked for the remains of 2 other crofts that were at Clare - Loanick and Balmeanach (meaning Middletown) but it seems there is nothing left to be found. At Loanick there are lots of smallish trees growing densely. I would not know how to examine the ground and there are no stones visible. At Balmeanach, everything is very overgrown and piles of earth and bits of trees lie all around so from the ground it is hard to see if there are any stones left without machinery to dig deeper and explore the ground. Loanick was a single house with no outbuildings on the map but Balmeanach seemed to be a slightly larger house with outbuildings.

Claire was also very touched by finding out more about this place, Clare, and, as she has been playing the fiddle for many years now, she felt driven to write a piece of music inspired by this place and she has recorded herself playing it. It is a delightful piece which evokes emotions stirred up by thoughts of those days gone by in Clare and places like it.

The most recent and also very exciting 'discovery' took place at Knockantoul - back to the first place of Clare I ever visited. This was probably the fourth time I had ever been there and on this particular day I was there with my friend Claire again. She was impressed with the size of the sheep enclosures there and she walked around to explore the walls and various enclosures. I noticed something and I said to her 'surely that can't be a big stone we're seeing there?!' What I was looking at, did very much look like a big stone at first glance but the longer I looked, I realised that it was much too rounded to be a natural stone, so I went to have a closer look.



I climbed the wall next to the stone etched with 1899 and went inside the fank. I got closer to this large object to inspect it and realised that I was looking at something that looked like a huge witch's cauldron. It was well camouflaged amongst the other stones and walls, it was partially covered in moss like the other stones there and I am not the quickest to see things that are right in front of me sometimes! It was turned upside down and, when I gave it a gentle kick, I could tell it was hollow, made of cast iron. I cleared away some of the ground at the base of it and could see the rim that went all the way round. Claire and I took some photos and I asked her to take a photo of me standing next to it so we could gauge the size, it was almost as high as the start of my hips.

I was still not sure what I was looking at, even if I knew we were in a fank. I wondered what it may have contained, I thought about water. I knew it would be very hard to move this large vessel and the nearest water source (The Clare Burn) was about 5 minutes away on foot. It would have taken a long time to fill this with water, going back and forth to the burn with smaller vessels, if it had been used for that.

Once we were home later that day, I got in touch with Adrian Clark to show him what I had found and I also wrote to the Highland Folk Museum to see what they thought. After a few days, I heard back from Liz English at the HFM and she told me that seeing as this pot was in a fank it would have been a 'smearing pot' and that they had something similar there at the HFM. This pot was also similar to what was used in Victorian Houses for washing laundry, called a 'copper' and was a large iron pot which had a stand to support it and fire beneath it.

Adrian was interested to see the pot too and we cycled out there together a couple of weeks later so he could view it and photograph it with his metre stick. We both thought how great it would be to see the stand it had stood on where the fire was contained beneath the pot. Adrian started to dig around and pull away some of the turf and rubble that was inside the fank and, lo and behold, he started to uncover large pieces of the very stand - a beautiful, decorative, if somewhat broken item that was gradually showing itself piece by piece.



We found half of the 'bowl' part that would have held the pot, a couple of the pretty legs that it would have stood on, we found some of the fire stones from the 'hearth'. It looks like it would have been a very beautiful item at one time. (Before the days of sheep shearing, sheep were smeared with a mixture of salt butter and tar, normally in November, to kill parasites and supposedly to give protection against wet and cold).



I returned a few weeks later to show my partner, Martin Mackenzie, what we had found. He is patiently supportive of my interest in local history, even if it is not entirely his cup of tea, but being a very practical person, he started to heave away at some of the stones and debris lying inside the fank and he too soon started to pull out more pieces of this beautiful stand for the large smearing pot. It was fascinating to see all these pieces coming together. Exactly when this pot was last used is unknown but it is definitely a Victorian era piece.

The people were cleared from Clare in approximately 1875. Major Randle Jackson bought Clare in 1885. Clare then became used for sheep. The year '1899' is etched into the wall at the fank close to where Knockantoul stood, so that smearing pot may well have been in use back then too. The outline of the walls of the house at Knockantoul can also still be seen just below the turf close to the fank.

I still think there are features of Clare yet to be rediscovered under the turf and in amongst the trees. Even though the story I am writing does not feature the folks from Clare who appeared on the census, I hope it will still function as a tool to keep this place alive in the memories of people who read it and inspire folks to find out about it for themselves. I think that finding these tangible connections to our heritage and past is something very special indeed and the lives of the hardworking people who lived in such places should be remembered and acknowledged. Becoming acquainted with Clare has been a very enjoyable and revealing journey so far- long may it last!

(3981 words)

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In conjunction with Evanton Oral History Project [www.evantonhistory.com](http://www.evantonhistory.com)

Fiona Stephenson's family moved to the mainland from the Isle of Harris when she was 5 years old. She was a keen student of German at Alness Academy and went on to live in Austria for 19 years before returning to the Highlands in 2014. Her interest in local history has grown ever since moving to Evanton in 2015 and this hobby historian can usually be found exploring the chambered cairns and forgotten croft houses of our area - finding inspiration in old maps and documents and books, learning as she goes.