

Island history

Raasay emerged from the Ice Age about 10,000 years ago. The landscape would have been open and bare, shaved clean by the passage of time and 650 – 700 metres of ice.

Evidence of human visitors to Raasay at this time (on seasonal food gathering expeditions) has been discovered in caves at the north end of the island and on the shore close to Raasay House.

Between 5,000 and 6,000 years ago a Neolithic lifestyle became established. Though little evidence exists, archaeologists surmise that domesticated livestock would have been introduced and cereal crops grown in small, enclosed fields.

By 3,500 years ago a settled Bronze Age farming landscape had been established. Fragments of this can be found within the forest plantations at both Inverarish and Brochel, and open burial cairns can be seen close to the shore at Eyre and at Brae, between Balmeanach and Glame. A single standing stone lies on the north side of a clearing in Church Wood at NG 5590 3668.

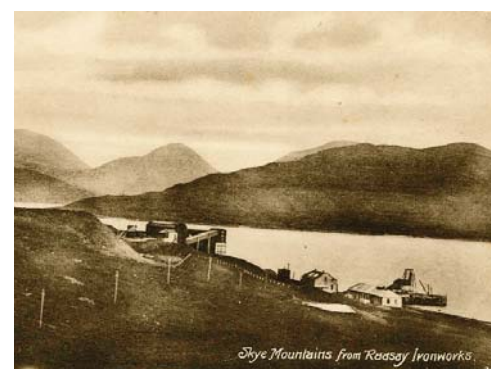
This way of life continued virtually unchanged into the Iron Age (2,300 – 1,300 years ago).

The ethnic affiliation of the population at this time is not known for certain, but it is likely that it was Pictish, judging by the survival of symbol stones at Clachan. Evidence of the Iron Age is plentiful with many circular houses clustered around the now abandoned 20th century iron mines – perhaps an indication of extraction and smelting in Raasay's Iron Age past.

A well preserved dun (Dun Borrodale) survives on the hill behind Inverarish, and underground storage chambers (Souterrains) survive at Suisnish and opposite the Old Post Office by Raasay House.

Towards the end of the Iron Age Christianity replaced the old religions, and chapels were founded at strategic points throughout the island. St. Moluag appears to have been the 'Father' of Christianity on Raasay perhaps founding a chapel or cell here in circa 569AD. (Sharpe, R.). Today the site of this cell is marked by the remains of St. Moluag's Chapel – a 13th century stone building, now roofless.

Around 1,100 years ago the islands along the west coast of Scotland were engulfed by the tide of Scandinavian expansion. Unfortunately not a single monument can be attributed with certainty to the Scandinavian occupation. Little is known of the island's history following these incursions and it is not until the time of the MacLeods of Raasay (400 years ago) that events again become clear.





The Clan Macleod came from the Isle of Lewis and were the island chiefs for some 250 years. The last chief became bankrupt in the 1840's and moved to Australia, finally settling in Tasmania where the current chief still lives.

The island was largely cleared of its people by the landlord in the early 1800's, to make the ground available for sheep. The land still holds the memory of these times. Red deer have joined the sheep to roam amongst the deserted sheilings and villages left by the people in the north and east of the island.

Within the recent past, the ownership of the island has passed through many hands including those of a West Indian sugar planter, an unscrupulous speculator, a London romantic, a sporting industrialist and a firm of ironmasters.

Inverarish, the main village, dates back to World War I, when it was built to house German prisoners of war who were brought to the island to work at the iron ore mine. Two German prisoners were killed in an accident and others died in a flu epidemic. Located on the eastern edge of Raasay Forest, the mine can be reached along the old railway track that took the ore to the pier. It's about 30 minutes walk from the ferry terminal.

The old pier in front of Raasay House is the location for the "Battery" which was designed as a defence against Napoleon's forces. It houses a cannon with a cannonball still stuck inside. There are Pictish symbols on the rock of the Battery, and you can also see statues of two huge mermaids carved out of stone, which now sit silently overlooking the Sound of Raasay.

North of Brochel is a 3km stretch of road known as Calum's Road after Calum MacLeod who, tired of waiting for the council to build a proper route to Arnish, spent 10 years building one himself!

2008 saw the completion of a new Community Hall in the village and the start of work on a new ferry terminal in Churchton Bay. Together with the refurbishment of Raasay House, these developments represent significant investment in the island and signal an exciting and sustainable future for Raasay and its people.

Unfortunately the major fire which destroyed so much of Raasay House on 18 January 2009 is a devastating setback for the island. The building was insured and will be rebuilt in time by the Raasay House Community Company. In the meantime the directors of Raasay House are doing their best to safeguard the future of Raasay House and keep the Raasay House experience alive for as many people as possible by operating out of the nearby hotel.

