

HIGHLAND CLEARANCES

In the Seventeen hundreds, the custom in Scotland was for people to have short leases for the land, some as short as a year. Also communal access to grazing land was a tradition rather than a legal right. It had never been questioned before and so no one had bothered to make it legal. When landlords decided to shake things up and sort out what they now saw as lazy, uneconomic, untidy practices, they just had to wait a year or so until all leases ran out. New rules were introduced, new rents set and if the tenants couldn't pay they were evicted from their homes.

There were thousands of ordinary everyday people who were affected and were suddenly surplus to the modern 'improved' farming and were powerless to do anything about it.

These changes are remembered as the 'Highland Clearances' particularly in the north-west but actually the same thing was happening over the whole of Scotland but it had started earlier in the Lowlands, lasted longer and displaced more people but being gradual in comparison to what happened further north the 'Lowland Clearances' are recalled with less emotion. The Lowlanders occupied more fertile land which could support more people and also there were some sizable towns nearby where the displaced farmers could find other employment when they were driven out.

When the people from the inland valleys of the north and west were forced out to make way for flocks of sheep which were deemed more profitable than the subsistence farmers the landowners thought at first they could be relocated on the coastal fringes of their estates. They could take up new work, fishing and collecting seaweed for preparation as fertilizer. This would provide the landowners with more income. Unfortunately when this didn't take off, by 1815 the resettled people felt they had no alternative but to board ship for passage to the New World.

Many enlightened landowners thought they could improve their tenants as well as their land. When they allocated plots of land-'crofts' in the coastal villages, they ensured each was too small to enable a family to grow enough crops or keep enough animals to feed its self. It was known as 'pinching' and the landowners sought to force their people to diversify and to work harder. It was thought that subsistence farmers spent too much time sitting around their peat fires telling stories and drinking whiskey.

This 'pinching' approach was unique to the Highlands and ensured crofting became a hated system. Some landowners e.g. Countess of Southerland and husband Lord Stafford were brutal in the way they went about the Clearances. Many of their tenants – those who waited too long after their eviction notices were served had their homes put to the torch by over zealous estate managers.

About 10,000 people were cleared from Southerland lands in just 15 years at the start of the 19th Century.

Information from A History of Scotland by Neil Oliver