



Sheetlines

The journal of
THE CHARLES CLOSE SOCIETY
for the Study of Ordnance Survey Maps

“OS name books of Scotland and the study
of place-names”

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Sheetlines, 122 (December 2021), pp6-14

Stable URL: <https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/sheetlines-articles/Issue122page6.pdf>

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Published by
THE CHARLES CLOSE SOCIETY
for the Study of Ordnance Survey Maps
www.CharlesCloseSociety.org

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The Society publishes a wide range of books and booklets on historic OS map series and its journal, *Sheetlines*, is recognised internationally for its specialist articles on Ordnance Survey-related topics.

OS name books of Scotland and the study of place-names

Nevis Hulme

The Ordnance Survey name books (OSNBs)¹ referred to here list the place-names collected for the 1st edition OS maps in the 19th Century. This article describes how to access the OSNBs of Scotland, what they can reveal as well as cautions and limitations about the information contained in them. It concentrates largely on Gairloch parish, Wester Ross in the Scottish Highlands, but much of the content should be of value to anyone in the early stages of studying the books.

I have known about the OSNBs since the 1980s when I was able to refer to them on microfiche in our local Museum.² We are fortunate that the vast majority of the Scottish name books are now available for research online.³ The ability now to search a website for the occurrence of particular terms, whether it be a place-name, the name of one of the sappers who collected the names, or their informants, makes research so much easier.

The arrangement of the OSNBs on the internet

The OSNBs can be found by entering 'Scotland's places name books' in a search engine and going to the county of interest, listed alphabetically. Each county is divided into volumes which are listed, not entirely precisely, with the parishes covered in each. The layout of volumes varies by county: some cover parishes in separate volumes while others, eg Ross and Cromarty, do not. *Figure 1* shows the volumes for Wester Ross parishes and exemplifies the muddled arrangement that can make study difficult.

The volumes are divided by the scale of map on which the names are plotted: 1:10,560, 1:2,500 maps and larger for large settlements (eg 1:500 for Aberdeen). The map scale can be found by looking at a volume's title page⁴ or its index. In the case of Gairloch parish, volumes 12-14 contain place-names of settlements at 1:2,500, the largest scale mapped in the parish but omitting some equally deserving crofting townships. The remainder are at 1:10,560. The wide area covered by some volumes can be seen from the example given in *Figure 2*.

Each county has a number following 'OS1/'; Ross and Cromarty Mainland⁵ is 'OS1/28/' followed by a volume number, in this case, from 1 to 51. This is useful

¹ Their official name is Object Name Books but they are commonly known as OSNBs. The objects named included those given descriptive names, eg Well, Cave and those with distinctive names, eg the name of a hill or a settlement.

² Gairloch Museum has a valuable resource of materials related to place-names including those collected by Roy Wentworth, referred to later in the article, and those contained in censuses, rental records and other estate papers. (The Museum was a joint winner of the prestigious Museum of the Year Award for 2020 and an essential stop for anyone visiting Gairloch.)

³ According to National Archives, only those for England and Wales relating to Cumberland, Durham, the Isle of Wight, Northumberland and Westmorland survived enemy action in 1940. Those for Northumberland have recently been put online (<https://namebooks.org.uk>). Many of those for Perthshire, Scotland, were similarly lost.

⁴ For some reason, the title pages appear near the end of the list of pages for each volume.

⁵ As opposed to 'insular' covering Lewis catalogued OS1/27/. It was part of Ross and Cromarty until 1975.

for logging the location of a name within the OSNBs and, with care using a county's URL (each is different because compilation dates are included), it is possible to navigate to particular pages. It is worth also being aware, however, that the URLs do not always correspond to the appropriate OSNB page.

When viewing a page within a volume, the website shows an image of that page from the original OSNB with, where it has been completed, a transcription below of the page's contents. The actual layout of the name book pages does vary a little across the country but the information included is basically the same.

Searching the OSNBs

Finding the place-names from the OS maps in the OSNBs can be tricky even with the search facility on 'Scotland's Places' website. The names need to be input with any accents used but, as far as I can work out, this can only be achieved by importing the term or accented letter from, eg Word. So, if looking for *Cùl-chreag*, you will need to input the 'ù' with its grave. The search will give you occurrences of the name without the accent because this name appears on another page without the grave. This, though, is just chance. Not taking anything from the work of the transcribers who have given us searchable data, there are a few errors in the transcriptions that can cause further confusion or frustration.⁶

The arrangement of the OSNBs for Ross and Cromarty Mainland throws up further difficulties. Finding one name in an area of interest does not mean other adjacent names will be nearby in the name books. Take the place-names of the townships of Aultgrishan and Melvaig, north of Gairloch village, as an example. The settlements extend over the relatively small area of around three square-kilometres but are found in two name books and not always on consecutive pages, ie in volume 12 on pages 66 and 77-79 and in volume 36 on pages 87, 93, 95, 99 and 103.

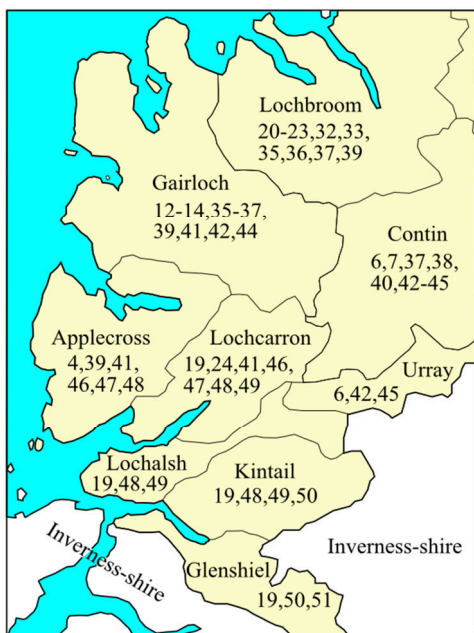
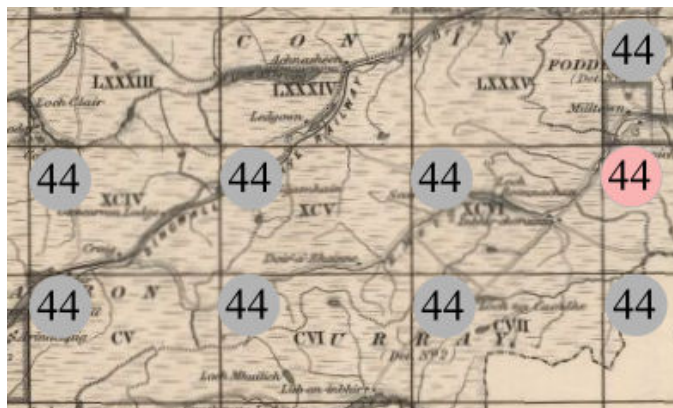


Figure 1 (left) Volumes of Ross and Cromarty Mainland containing Wester Ross parishes.

Figure 2 (below) OS 1:10 560 1st edition maps covered by Ross and Cromarty Mainland volume 44. The one shown in pink was not listed on the title page for the volume, another impediment to analysis.



⁶ An amusing example is found on Lewis (OS1/27/101/7) where the word 'midway' was misread bringing a railway to the island in 1849 years before any of the unsuccessful plans were proposed.

Collection of place-names in the OSNBs

There is no doubt that, without the work of the OS, many of the names that we see on maps would be unknown today; the name books are valuable additions to the historical record of the country. I have not come across a description of the exact method used for the compilation of the OSNBs; what follows is from an ongoing analysis of those for Gairloch parish. The process probably started with the survey and drawing of a draft map⁷ after which 'authorities'⁸ would be identified. The surveyors then noted names of features of interest from residents of the area, probably by walking the ground together to identify remote features.

Gaelic was the main language of the people at the time and it is unlikely that all of the informants (the term used here for the people consulted in the area concerned) spoke English. I do not know how much, if any, Gaelic was possessed by the OS staff, but translators would probably have been required to make sense of what was being said. The names were written in column two of the name book forms by, or under the direction of, the Royal Engineer officer responsible for the OSNB volume. The final spelling was added to the left-hand column once checks had been carried out and it is this that virtually always appears on the map.

It is clear from how some names have been deleted that the details in the other columns were completed later. This was delegated to a sapper who wrote in the names of the informants, the map on to which the name was to appear and, in the right-hand column, a description of the feature. Looking at the locational information in this last column, it cannot always be trusted to unambiguously pinpoint a feature. I suspect that these were simply written by reference to the map and have little real value. The translation of the Gaelic names seems to have been compiled from a dictionary.

The OS had a hierarchy of informants regarded as reliable⁹. Top of the list tended to be those least likely to be familiar with the place-names, namely the landowners, doctors, teachers and suchlike who probably had not lived all their lives in the area and, in many cases, would not have been so knowledgeable in Gaelic, the local dialect in particular. Bottom of the list were the tenants of the land, those who worked the land daily, spoke the local dialect and would have learned place-names from their parents and neighbours through the need to identify, for example, the location of cattle grazing over a large area of moorland.

⁷ The map surveys are usually in the same year as the dates on the name books. The name books were completed with reference to the maps as the map number and trace are indicated within them. The website gives (at the time of writing) the dates of OSNB compilation for Ross and Cromarty as 1848-52 but this refers to Lewis (Ross and Cromarty Insular); the mainland was surveyed around 1875.

⁸ In addition to people with the requisite knowledge, authorities included relevant plans, documents and other written material.

⁹ It is probable that some guidance similar to that of the *Instructions to Field Examiners*, 1905 (<https://www.bhsaccess.org.uk/uploads/instructions-to-field-examiners-os.pdf>) was used although any earlier guidance is not available (other than an insistence dated 1825 (<https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/documents/resources/os-history.pdf>) on using the 'best authorities' in the survey of Ireland.

The informants in Gairloch extended across this range. Many of the names over large areas of sparsely inhabited moorland were given by one crofter or farmer informant; exceptions to this were more general names such as those for settlements. It can be seen from census records that the people selected to assist the OS were long-standing residents who had been brought up in the area and had worked the land through their lives. It is possible that the landowner, Sir Kenneth Mackenzie, 6th Baronet, or someone of appropriate status in the community, would have recommended a tenant as a reliable informant. 'M. Mckenzie ¹⁰ of Peterburn', for example, is recorded as living in Melvaig in 1841, at which time he was 35. He was in Peterburn, a couple of miles away in 1851, aged 42, and still there in 1861, aged 50 (age irregularities are common in census records). Murdo, Murdoch or Murchadh, as he would have been called in Gaelic, was well-placed to speak of the 115 place-names that he gave from the area.

There is a great deal of variety in the contents of the OSNBs depending on the sapper noting the information. There may be details of the construction and use of a building or the vegetation cover of a small island, for example. In some volumes, whole pages are devoted to the description of one feature.

The value of OSNBs for local history research

The following illustrate some of the ways that OSNBs have assisted in place-name study and are described to show their possible application elsewhere.

OSNBs can be a help when names on maps change over time. One example of this was found in NG8185 where there is inconsistency in the last letter of the place-name between the 1st edition (*Figure 3a*) and the 2nd edition (*Figure 3b*). This probably happened because part of the letter 'e' was thought to be another rock outcrop on the named hill. Reference to the relevant OSNB shows what was originally recorded (*Figure 4*), corroborating A' Chreag Chaoidh¹¹ given recently by local informants.

Figure 3 : Representations of A' Chreag Chaoidh on 1:10,560 maps

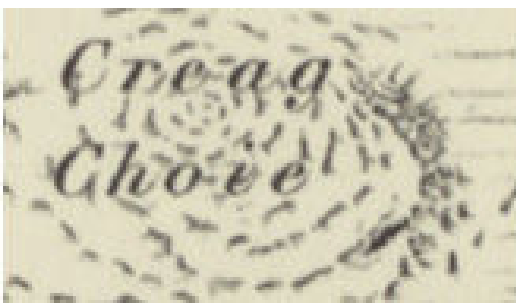


Figure 3a 1st edition



Figure 3b 2nd edition

¹⁰ Sometimes (Mr) Murdoch McKenzie. Mackenzie and MacKenzie are two other spellings for this surname.

¹¹ The probable correct Gaelic spelling of the place-name with a common Wester Ross structure and pronounced similarly to the mangled form recorded. It can be translated as 'the rock of mourning'.

Creag Chòie	Creag Chòie	Mrs. Alse McKeage Maiden of Inverardale	31	8	5	A small hill situated about 1/2 mile N.E. from Pointed Stone. Sg. Jost Mearns.
		Mrs. John Mearns Maiden of Inverardale				

Figure 4 Extract from OSNB Ross and Cromarty Mainland, volume 12, page 90

Figure 5 shows part of another page from an OSNB. The second name on this page, *Allt Gat Mhìag* (NG7486), has not been recorded before or since. Furthermore, its meaning is unknown. This burn (Scots for stream) has a number of names noted from residents recently but this name is a curiosity that appears to this day on OS maps (see Figure 9). This could be an example of a name being noted incorrectly, the informant misunderstanding the name or the informant not being certain of it; these have all been encountered. Although in this case the outcome is inconclusive, sometimes the *Various modes of Spelling the same Names* can be useful in interpreting names.

List of Names as written on the Plan	Various modes of Spelling the same Names	Authority for those modes of Spelling	Situation	Descriptive Remarks, or other General Observations which may be considered of Interest
<i>Melvaig</i>	<i>Melvaig</i>	Mundoch McKeage, Pebshum M. McKeage Littleham S. McKeage Shortholme	Sheet Ross 288 31 5	2 1/2 m. inhabited district lying along the east side of the Allt Mhìag and extending from Allt Mhìag on the south to Croc Breac on the north the property of Sir Kenneth Macleay Bt.
<i>Allt Gat Mhìag</i>	<i>Allt Gat Mhìag</i>	M. McKeage Pebshum		A small stream flowing through Melvaig and falling into Blackish Melvaig. Sg. unknown

Figure 5 Extract from OSNB Ross and Cromarty Mainland, volume 12, page 78

The name books have a column, *Descriptive Remarks, or other General Observations which may be considered of Interest*, in which can be found some useful information, as mentioned above. For Allt Grisionn (the spelling used for the river), the following is written.

A large stream rising in the
and E. of Altgreshan
hill s. east of Melvaig and formed
by the junction of several
smaller streams. ~~It formed the~~
~~boundary between Melvaig and~~
~~Altgreshan and falls into the~~
Minch west of the latter place
at Altgreshan

This, a reasonable representation of
the original, comes from O.S. name
book for Ross and Cromarty Mainland,
volume 12, page 78.

This filled the remainder of the line,
to prevent additions being made, in
theory.

Bold type is used above to indicate additions to the description written by J. Durran, the sapper working in the district, who had some of his entry scored out. This is not in the transcription on the Scotland's People website so shows the value of going to the original OSNB for research.

The boundary between the townships of Aultgrishan and Melvaig (around NG7486) has varied over the years. When researching this, a good deal of information was gleaned from Gairloch Estate rental records¹² but the OSNBs cast some interesting light on this too. The informant made out that the river formed the southern boundary of Melvaig, something that had not been the case for 29 years. The entry has been changed to reflect the situation as from around 1846 when the current crofts were established. What the informant said, though, reflected what had been the case previously and has provided further evidence supporting the boundary changes. *Figure 5*, for Melvaig, shows similar confusion.

Off the north end of Skye, visible from Melvaig but outside Gairloch parish, are a number of small islands (NG3679). One of the OSNBs for Inverness-shire, OS1/16/5/5, includes these and among which are *The Cleats*. The reference states, "This name is given to four or five small rocks on which there is a speck of pasture on each. they [sic] are situated a short distance to the east of Gaeilavore Island..." *Figure 6* shows how, having initially been plotted correctly, over time ambiguity has led to misinterpretation so that, by the Seventh Series of the One Inch map (1957), *The Cleats* have been reallocated. It is interesting that the nautical chart shows what has become *The Cleats* to the OS as being called *Schoun* (*Figure 7*) although it was not until 1957, coincidentally, that the name *The Cleats* appeared on an Admiralty Chart. The OSNB here was invaluable identifying the original location of the name; without it, we may forever have been misled.



Figure 6 various representations of The Cleats
6a (above left): *The Cleats* clearly refers to the islets between Gaeilavore Island and Thon Eilean. One-inch 1st Edition 1884.

6b (above right) This is ambiguous with the possibility of believing that *The Cleats* refers to the islets to the south of the name. One-inch 'Popular' edition 1931.

6c (lower left) There is no doubt as to what *The Cleats* now labels. One-inch Seventh Series 1957.

¹² Thanks again to Gairloch Museum.



Figure 7 *Rubha Hunish to Point of Stoer Admiralty Chart 1957*

The need for caution with names in OSNBs (in addition to those already covered)

Some reasons to be cautious when using OSNBs are outlined below using examples of Gaelic place-names. Other areas may have different problems to be aware of.¹³

Figure 8 is an example of a name that was most probably recorded incorrectly. Given by Mr Mackenzie, mentioned earlier, this hill-name has been recorded as *Sithean Bard na Beinne* (NG7487). In the last column, under 'Sig.'¹⁴, the meaning is given as 'Hill of the Poet of the Mountain'. For this to be correct, *Bard* should be *Bàrd* and an accurate translation would be 'the hill of the poet of the mountain' (with or without capitals according to taste). Figure 9 shows how it has changed on maps to the present day. The name recorded more recently, in the 1980s, is a little different: *Sithean Bhàd na Beinne* means 'the hill of the patch of the hill'¹⁵. It cannot be proved that this hill name has not changed over time but the latest record is much more likely than the earlier ones. I have not viewed the OSNBs for the 2nd edition, if they are available, but these may throw light on fairly numerous differences between the 1st and 2nd editions.

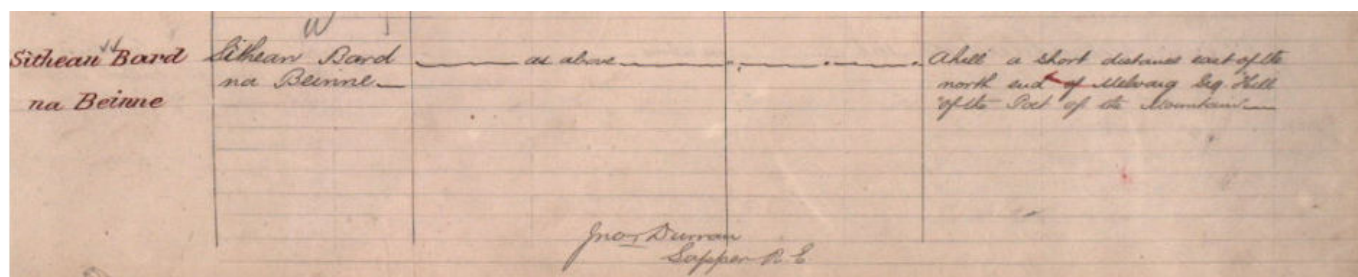


Figure 8 *Extract from OSNB Ross and Cromarty Mainland, volume 12, page 65.*

¹³ For example, where informants were not Gaelic speakers but were relaying Gaelic names, corruptions can be such that the actual names are difficult to interpret.

¹⁴ This was used to indicate the significance of the place-name. Some sappers just wrote 'Meaning'.

¹⁵ The translation of this is open to a good deal of variety but will not be discussed here.



Figure 9 *Sithean Bha na Beinne* as displayed over time. L to R:
1:10,560 1st edition, 1881; 1:10,560 2nd ed., 1905; OS online, 2020

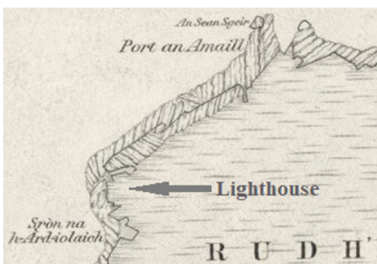


Figure 10 (left) : Location of Port an Amall. 1:10,560 1st edition, 1881 with the location of the lighthouse added.

Sometimes names are added to maps in the wrong place or they shift over time. Figure 10 shows *Port an Amall*¹⁶ as it appears to this day on maps. This is north of Melvaig at *A' Rubha Rèidh* (NG7391). It is not known why it was placed where it is shown but it has been recorded recently as being to the south of the lighthouse built in 1912 (and added to Figure 10) where *Sròn na h-Àrd-iolaich*, itself an 'interesting' name, is positioned. It could be said that the more recent informants are wrong but the argument in their favour is that *amall* means 'swingle-tree' and, at half-tide, either the rock layers on the shore, the way the waves break in two directions or both give the impression of this system for bridling horses.

One further error is the incorrect translation, or recording of a translation, of a place-name in the OSNBs. Figure 11 shows the entry for *Geodh' a' Chriosain* (NG7692), on the coast about three kilometres east of the lighthouse mentioned above. This is translated as 'Cove of the Little Beet'. (*An*) *criosan*, the nominative form of *a' chriosain*, can be found in a Gaelic dictionary to mean 'belt, slender waist, apron' revealing the obvious mistake that has been made here. Whether the true meaning is 'belt' would require further examination of the inlet as it may possibly take its name from being narrow at its seaward end.

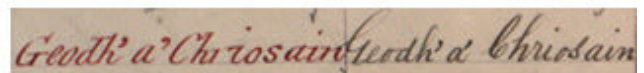
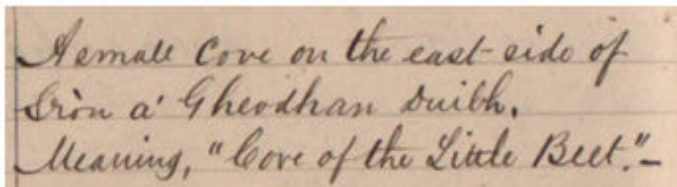


Figure 11 Extracts from OSNB Ross and Cromarty Mainland, volume 36, page 32.

¹⁶ This spelling is a better reflection of how the name was given in the 1980s.

OSNBs are not the final word in place-names

The OS did not set about recording every place-name in an area; it would be interesting to study how names were selected for inclusion. Some names written in the books were omitted from the maps; in some cases they were regarded as superfluous and, in other cases, this may have been because other mapped features would be obscured. There was a bias towards particular types of features. In an analysis of place-names on the south side of Loch Gairloch (available at <https://spns.org.uk/presentations-from-spns-spring-conference-2021>), it was found that water courses made up 27 per cent of those in the OSNBs but only nine per cent of all place-names recorded in the area. Loch and headland names were far more numerous on OS maps while names for crags, rocks, slopes, areas of flat land and those related to agriculture were under-represented.

Whether other unmapped place-names are still available will depend on historical records or the local population knowing them. Few, if any, of the Wester Ross informants who gave information to Dr Roy Wentworth, for whom we are to thank for collecting place-names from 1984 until his untimely death in 2003, are now alive. Without having done this work, many of these names would have been lost. The richness of what has been lost in many places may be seen from a comparison between names recorded by the OS and those collected more recently by Roy and me in Aultgrishan and Melvaig. In the former case, there are twenty names and, in the latter, around 100.

Conclusion

The OSNBs are clear evidence of the value of the work of Ordnance Survey and the sappers who collected the names. While there may be shortcomings in the information, they are a treasure trove of information and offer many opportunities for research in a variety of fields. It is hoped that this article will go some way to encouraging further work drawing on their contents.

Acknowledgements

All maps, except *figures 1*, are reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland. National Records of Scotland gave permission to reproduce extracts from OSNBs.

Thanks to those, especially Richard Oliver, on the ordnancesurvey@group.io forum whose answers to my queries have been incorporated in this article.