

THE SLATE QUARRIES ON KERRERA

by Charles Hunter

Few people know that the "Easdale" slate beds surface near Gylen Castle at the southern tip of Kerrera Island. Some information about the workings has come to light in the records of the Oban Company, which are held at Ardchattan Priory. The company was started on 30th December 1734 and the draft contract includes the intention to "cause work the Schlate Craigs and quarries in the Island of Kerula or any other part of the Laird of McDougalls Estate". This entailed "Purchasing Tools for the Slate quarries".

On 1st October 1737 the partners agreed to dissolve the Oban company but to continue the tobacco mill at Oban "for a twelvemonth". When a new Oban company was started on an unknown date the "stock ingrafted by the first oban into the new copartnery" included the following items:

by sclaits sold	£25
by 40,000 sclaits on the rack	£33- 6s- 8d
by tools for the sclait quarry & workmens houses	£25
by proportion of grassum paid McDouall	£12
for tack of sclait Craig	
by half of sclait Craig 1734	£5
by cash due by McDougall after payt of his rent 1734	£16

On 21st October 1738 Archibald Campbell, who had managed the Oban company, was instructed to "converse with McDougall what is the least he will take to discharge the tack of the slait quarry and that it be a condition of the continuing that McDougall give security ... against all mortals". Archibald enlisted the help of Coline Campbell of Inveresragan to negotiate with John MacDougall (Ian Ciar) and Coline duly claimed expenses "for incidentals going to oban and Dunolly to report the companies Resolution to MacDugd anent".

These isolated slate workings may have been uneconomic from the start. The state of labour relations in 1736 can be judged from a letter written by John Nicolson, clerk at Oban, to Coline Campbell of Inveresragan, dated 5th April 1736, which reads in full:

"Since the quarriers entered into Contract I had some difficulties to keep them free of the Companys Debt yet notwithstanding one of them Viz. The Smith has made a moon light fliting last week being something in the Companys Debt and also in the Countries Debt and I am afraid the three that remains and is yet at work will not be in Condition to make any hand or gaine there Bread which they must have otherways they will give over work. I understand when Whit sunday comes they will not work no more in your quarrie unless they be offered by works wages and nothing can be made of it. I wish the Company would consider what to do about the said quarrie for I can assure you it will go west after whitsunday for none can be got to it without great wages which will not allow of it. If you see proper to acquaint the Company in time of this. I cannot readily find the opportunity otherways I would also acquaint them". (ref. GD 1/2/17 9/10)

(With thanks to Mrs Sarah Troughton for permission to consult the Ardchattan Archives)