

# Gaelic in Kintyre



A bust of Dr Norman MacLeod  
Called “Caraid nan Gaidheal” (Friend of the Gael)



## Gaelic In Kintyre

The Education (Scotland) Act of 1872 required that English would become the language of instruction in Scottish schools. This dealt a fatal blow to Gaelic. Soon those to whom it was their first language, found their mother tongue being systematically and quite literally “beaten” out of them.

The Headmaster of Bellochantuy School recorded in June 1882 that “could we at the outset reach the intelligence of these Gaelic-speaking children, their progress would be much more rapid” and “the fact that Gaelic is their vernacular demonstrates that we have serious difficulties to grapple with.”

With the passing of the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act in 2005 and with Argyll and Bute District Council being chosen to help implement the Gaelic Plan, this is a leaflet issued in support of the aspiration that “the Gaelic language should be an official language of Scotland commanding equal respect to the English language”.

Since the passing of the Act great progress has been made in reviving the language through the success of Gaelic medium-schools, bilingual road signs and other efforts to secure the future of the language. This leaflet examines place names in and around Campbeltown, and shows the influence of Gaelic generally in Kintyre.

### Sources

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[www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/CampbeltownTHI](http://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/CampbeltownTHI)

## Grammar, expressions and words

The preposition is a very powerful part of speech in Gaelic, being used to denote possession, attributes and state of being. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the expression “I love you” – “Tha gaol agam ort” literally “Love at me is on you”. Other examples might be “It’s raining” - “Tha an t-uisge ann” literally “The water is in it”, or “She has long hair” - “Tha falt fada oirre”, literally “Long hair is on her”. The verb is always placed at the beginning of the sentence.

In Campbeltown the constructions used in Gaelic grammar have become part of everyday speech, e.g. “The weather is just not in it today” (the weather is not good today), or “I saw her man (i.e. her husband) yesterday” or “I’m just after my dinner” (I’ve just had my dinner) or “He’s doing his joiner just now (He is training to be a joiner just now). The present continuous tense and the present tense are one and the same in Gaelic, so that “I am thinking” might well be heard instead of “I think”

Gaelic words which are still in use include “burach” (a mess), “mougrin” (surly) and “twig” (understand). Another Gaelic expression in common parlance in Kintyre might include the use of the word “wild” e.g. “it’s a wild warm day” meaning “it’s a very warm day”



House names often incorporate Gaelic words e.g. “Tigh na mara” (House by the sea) or “Caladh na sithe” (Haven of peace).



“Ard-sgoil Cheann Loch Chille Chiarain” –

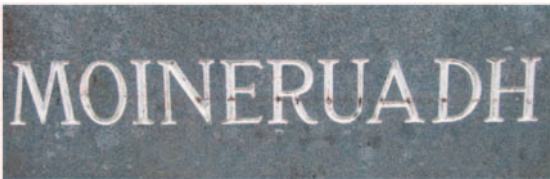
“High School of the Head of the Loch of the Church of Kiaran”

Writing in Edition 3 of the Kintyre Antiquarian Magazine, Hector MacKenzie, former Rector of Campbeltown Grammar School, wrote that, “Gaelic was unquestionably the language of the entire Kintyre peninsula up to the second half of the seventeenth century. At that time the Argyll family encouraged numbers of settlers from Renfrewshire and Ayrshire to come to South Kintyre.”

As a result, Gaelic found itself in competition with the English language which was spoken by the Lowland settlers and a decline set in in its use. In the Statistical Account of 1794 we read that “nearly two-thirds of the people of Campbeltown are Gaelic speaking.” and Gaelic remained the language of the greater part of the population right up to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The log book of Bellochantuy School contains several entries up to 1913 in which the schoolmaster bemoans the fact that none of the children entering his school could speak any English.

MacKenzie also mentions the many Gaelic words which have been passed into standard English. Examples are ben, strath, cairn, cairngorm, ceilidh, galore, bard, loch, creel, cran, whisky among others.

Bellochantuy – Bealach an t-Suidhe – Pass of the seat



Moine ruadh – reddish-brown moss (a place name in Carradale)

## Argyll

The word Argyll derives from two Gaelic words – Earra and Ghàidheal – meaning “coastland of the Gael”. Gaelic was brought to Scotland by colonists from Ireland towards the end of the Roman Empire in Britain. To this day there are very strong similarities in Irish and Scottish Gaelic. By AD 500, these Irish Gaels had established their Kingdom of Dalriada (Dail Riada), under Fergus I, in that year and it embraced what is now known as “Argyll” in south-west Scotland. South Kintyre, therefore, has been part of the cradle of Gaelic culture in Scotland for hundreds of years.



A bust of Dr Norman MacLeod (in the Highland Parish Church, Campbeltown)

Caraid nan Gaidheal (Friend of the Gael) was the title later generations would bestow on Dr Norman MacLeod, minister of the Highland Parish Church from 1808 – 1836.

It had originally been the title of a collection of Gaelic prose which he published with great acclaim. His literary influence was considerable. In addition to his prose collection, he also produced the first weekly Gaelic periodical, a Gaelic dictionary and a Gaelic metrical version of the Psalms of David. He was largely instrumental in establishing an Educational Scheme within the Church of Scotland which embraced 233 Common Schools attended in total by 22,000 pupils and also 110 sewing schools. In 1836 and later in 1846 when the potato crop failed and famine ravaged the Highlands he travelled to England where lectures and preaching helped raise large sums of money to relieve the distress of his fellow countrymen.



### Bengullion

Bengullion is formed from two Gaelic words – “beinn” and “gualainn”. “Beinn” means “a mountain”. “Gualainn” means “shoulders”. So, “Bengullion” means a place where the landscape resembles a mountain in the shape of shoulders. To appreciate this shape, Bengullion has to be viewed from the north, looking south.

The word “ben” exists in place names all over Scotland. The best known are –

Beinn Nibheis – the highest mountain in the UK.

Beinn Mac duibh – the highest mountain in the Cairngorms

Beinn Laomainn – the mountain which dominates the landscape on Loch Lomond

Beinn Dòbhrain – the mountain, famed in song, near Bridge of Orchy.

In Kintyre mention could be made of -

Beinn an tuirc – (hill of the boar) the highest mountain in Kintyre and site of Kintyre’s first wind farm

Beinn na Lice – (mountain of the flagstone) the scene of the Chinook helicopter crash in 1994.



“Bun-sgoil Dhail an Tobair” –

“Primary School of the field of the well”

## Dalintober

The word Dalintober is created from two Gaelic words – “dail” (a meadow or a field) and “tobar” (a well). Joined together, they become “dail an tobar” (field of the well). The word also exists in an Anglicised form, as Springfield, e.g. Springfield House and Springfield Terrace are both to be found in Dalintober.

“Dail”, understandably, is very common throughout the farmlands of South Kintyre, existing in such names as Dalivaddy (dail a’ mhadaidh) (field of the wolf), Dalsmeran (dail smeuran) field of brambles, Dalmore (dail mòr) big field Dalavraddan (dail a’ bhradain) field of the salmon [a tributary of Glenbreckerie Water flows past this farm, and it has been known to overflow its banks and leave salmon stranded on the land!]

“Tobar” is probably best known in Scotland from the name of the principal town on the Island of Mull - Tobermory (Tobar Mhoire) (the well of the Virgin Mary). The name also occurs on the Island of Luing, in the name of a former slate-quarrying settlement - Toberonochy (Tobar Dhonnachaidh) (Duncan’s well).

## Drumore

Drumore is formed from two Gaelic words – druim and mòr. “Druim” means “a ridge”. [It is also used to describe “the back” in the human body.] “Mòr” means “big”. So, “Drumore” means a place where the landscape forms “a big ridge”. The growth of housing has now largely concealed this feature on the outskirts of the town, so some imagination has to be used to identify it now. Similarly, west of Kilchenzie lies a farm having the name “Drum”. “Mòr is a suffix frequently used in Gaelic, as is its opposite “Beag” meaning “small”, e.g. “Drumbeg” – “a small ridge”.

The contours of the landscape around Glen Lussa have given rise to several names incorporating the prefix “Drum”

Drumbaan (Druim ban) - fair ridge  
Drumfin (Druim fionn) - white ridge  
Drumgarve (Druim garbh) - rough ridge

Perhaps best known of all, however, is the village between Campbeltown and Machrihanish – Drumlemble (Druim leamhan) - elm tree ridge



“Bun- sgoil Chnoc a’ Chaisteil” –

“Primary School of the Castle on the Hill”



## Kilkerran

The name “Kilkerran” is an amalgam of two words, “Kil” and “Kerran”. “Kil” is the Anglicised version of the Gaelic word “Cille”, meaning a church or holy place, whilst “Kerran” is a variation of the word “Kiaran”, the Irish saint who is reputed to have brought Christianity to the shores of Kintyre. So “Kilkerran” means “the church or the cell of Kiaran”. The cave where Kiaran is reputed to have stayed can still be reached at low tide, along the rocky shoreline on the learside (east coast), some distance south of Campbeltown, after the road leaves the shoreline. In the cave, the inscribed stone, used now as their logo by McIlchere’s bakery on Main Street, Campbeltown.

The Gaelic name for Campbeltown is “Ceann Loch Chille Chiarain” i.e. “the Head of the Loch of the Church of Kiaran”.

The prefix “Kil” is very common throughout Kintyre and this reminds us of the great number of small chapels which existed on the peninsula in the past. Here are ten examples –

- Kilblaan - the church of St Blaan
- Kilchousland - the church of St Constantine
- Kilchrist - the church of Christ
- Kilcolmkill - the church of St Columba
- Kildavie - the church of St Bi (Bridget)
- Kilkeddan - the church of St Ceadd  
(an Irish monk of the 7<sup>th</sup> century)



“The Scottish Episcopal church welcomes you” - literally “The Episcopal Church of Scotland puts a welcome on you”

## Kinloch

Kinloch means “head of the loch” and, Kinloch Road, as one might expect, is the broad thoroughfare which runs along the former shore line of the head of the loch past the new Aqualibrium building. Until 1877, the sea, at high tide, extended to where the present line of trees stands, opposite Tesco’s Metro Store. At low tide the mussel ebb was revealed and it had a distinctive odour which was not always welcomed, thanks to the effluent from the distilleries at the time! After 1877, the mussel ebb was filled in and grassed over and a new road was constructed to make Dalintober and the town of Campbeltown within easier reach.

The word “Loch” is synonymous with the English word “Lake” and the geological history of the west coast of Scotland has created many fine examples of both sea and land lochs, e.g. Loch Fyne and Loch Lomond respectively.

The prefix “Kin” survives in countless place names throughout Scotland, e.g. –

Kinlochbervie

Kinlocheil

Kinlochlaggan

Kinlochleven

Kinloss

Kintyre – ceann tir – head land



A'Chleit means “the reef” and describes the geographical contour at this point on the peninsula.

## Knockscalbert

Knockscalbert is the hill dominating the northern aspect of Campbeltown Loch and guarding its entrance. The word “Knockscalbert” is formed from three words, one of which is Gaelic while the other two are Norse. There are many Norse place names surviving in the west coast of Scotland and this reminds us of the time when all of Scotland’s western seaboard was under the control of Norway, a period of just over 150 years from the year 1100 onwards.

“Knock” is the Anglicised version of the Gaelic word “cnoc” meaning “a hill”

“Scalli” is the Norse for “a bald head”

“Bol” is the Norse for “a steading”

“Knockscalbert”, originally called “Cnocscalopil” therefore describes a steading on a bare (bald) hill.

The words “Knock” and “Cnoc” survive in the names of many farms in Kintyre –

Knockbay - Yellow hillock

Knocknaha - Hillock of the kiln

Knockrioch - Brindled (patterned) hill

Knockmoy - Hill of the plain

The word “cnoc” is more correctly pronounced “crock” or “crochk”. This can be found existing in a place beside Lephenstrath Bridge called “Crockan” (a little hill or hillock)





Ceann na Creige  
– the head of the  
crag

An Clachan – the  
village

Taigh an Lòin –  
House of the wet  
meadow

Ceann Loch  
Chille Chiarain –  
head of the loch  
of the church of  
Kiaran

### An Tairbeart - Tarbert

The word “Tarbert” is found in the name of the town at the north end of the Kintyre peninsula. It is also found in the Outer Hebrides on the Island of Harris and on the westerly side of Loch Lomond where it is spelt “Tarbet”

In Gaelic, the word “tairbeart” means “an isthmus” while “an tairbeart” means “the isthmus”. The word is composed of *tar* "across" and a form of the verb *beir* "carry". “Isthmus”, in turn, is a Greek word meaning “neck” and which describes a narrow strip of land connecting two larger land areas usually with water on either side.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were several plans to dig a canal between East Loch Tarbert and West Loch Tarbert in Kintyre, thereby assisting sailing vessels to avoid the stormy passage round the Mull of Kintyre 50 miles to the south, but these plans never came to fruition.



“Port Righ” -

“Port of the  
King”