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Gaelic Scotland

3 - Language - Language

Although only approximately 1.8 per cent of the population of Scotland today – over 90,000 people – have any ability in Gaelic, the language is historically and culturally part of the fabric of the country.

Scottish Gaelic is a Celtic language, closely related to Irish and Manx Gaelic, and more distantly connected to the Welsh, Cornish and Breton languages.

History

The country of Scotland did not exist at all when Gaelic first came to Earra-Ghàidheal (Argyll in English), the ‘coastland of the Gael’, in the fifth century. The Gaels came from Northern Ireland, taking their kingdom of Dal Riata with them. Over the centuries they spread eastwards, conquering the Picts, and southwards, taking over from the Britons and Angles.

By the 11th century the Gaels had established the country of Scotland more or less as we know it today.

From this high point 1,000 years ago, Gaelic has been in gradual decline. It was first affected by changing fashions at court, where Norman French was adopted, and then by the increasing use of Inglis in the Lowland burghs of southern and eastern Scotland. Inglis spread rapidly in these areas, and later became known as Scots, with Gaelic retreating to the Highlands and the Hebrides in the late Middle Ages. **From the 15th to the late 19th centuries**, many and various acts of parliament were passed to suppress the use of Gaelic further, including making English the language of all schools in Scotland.

Events such as the Reformation, the defeat of the Jacobites, the Highland Clearances, and the huge loss of life in the Napoleonic and then in two World Wars all contributed to the rapid decline of Gaelic.

Present day situation

Nevertheless, Gaelic managed to survive in the western Highlands and Islands of Scotland, and is today making a tentative comeback. In 1997, a Minister for Gaelic was appointed, and this was followed by the Gaelic Language Scotland Act (2005) which established Bòrd na Gàidhlig as a public body with responsibility for the preservation of Gaelic as an official language which enjoys the same respect as English in Scotland.

Gaelic arts and music are very popular, and are celebrated annually at the major competitive festival of the Royal National Mod.

They are also celebrated at other festivals such as Celtic Connections in Glasgow, and the Hebridean Celtic Festival in Stornoway. The Gaels, and a wider audience with an interest in Gaelic, also have a television channel called BBC Alba, and a radio station called Radio nan Gaidheal. Some of the most important developments in halting the decline of Gaelic have been in the field of education. Since the first Gaelic medium unit (classes which are taught all subjects through Gaelic) opened in Breasclete in Lewis in 1986, great strides have been taken throughout Scotland.

There are now 59 primary schools in Scotland offering Gaelic medium education, and 32 secondary schools offer some subjects through the medium of Gaelic.

Although the 2011 census still showed a very small decline in the overall numbers of Gaelic speakers in Scotland, it also showed **a small increase in the numbers of speakers under 20. The Scottish Government said that the results were encouraging for the future of the language.**

Timeline

Frise

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Games

Practice your Gaelic language skills using the games at Gamag, <http://www.e-storas.com/>

Activities

1. Draw a map showing where the Gaels came from, and how they took over the territories of the Picts, the British and the Angles, to form Scotland.
2. Find out where you can speak, listen and watch, and learn about Gaelic in Scotland today

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