PLACE-NAMES OF THE ISLE OF LEWIS

The Isle of Lewis is the northern most island of the Western Isles, a chain of islands on the north west coast of Scotland.

About 20,000 people live in Lewis, which, along with its neighbour Harris, is Scotland's largest off-shore island. In the past virtually everyone living in Lewis could speak Gaelic, and still today over half of all island residents can speak, read or write Gaelic.

You might think from this that most of the place-names would be of Gaelic origin, but in fact most of the main place-names come **from the Viking invaders who began coming to Lewis about 1,200 years ago.** The Vikings came from Scandinavia, and spoke a language now called Old Norse. Many of them settled in Lewis between 800 and 1266, the year when Lewis stopped being ruled from Scandinavia and became a part of Scotland under the Treaty of Perth.

While the names of most of the villages, lochs and mountains tend to be Viking in origin, the names of many of the smaller streams and hills are usually Gaelic.

Over the centuries of Lewis being a wholly Gaelic speaking island, all the place-names took on a Gaelic 'blas' or pronunciation. But more recently there has been a further confusion of place-names. English speaking map makers began coming to Lewis about 200 years ago, and imposed an English spelling on both the Viking and the Gaelic place-names.

For instance, the Viking placename Tangi meaning 'spit of land', became the Gaelic Tunga, and later on the English Tong.

Places are usually named for a landscape feature, like a hill or a loch. Other common names are to do with the type of settlement in the area – a village, a farm or a fort. **Places can also be named after people who lived there.** Some place-names are a combination of all these things – for instance the Gaelic Càrlabhagh

(English Carloway) is originally Viking and means Karl's Bay.   Mullach Chàrlabhaigh (English Upper Carloway) introduces another landscape element showing that it is located on high ground.

Common Old Norse elements to look out for in Lewis place-names include **bost (farm), ay (island), back (the bank of a river, slope), cros (a junction), dal (a valley), val (a hill or mountain), geo (a gully), holm (an islet), kirk (a church), lang (long), lax (salmon), ness (a headland), vat (loch) and vik or uig (bay).**

Common Gaelic elements to look for include **àirigh (a sheiling or summer dwelling), allt, feadan, fèith (all small water features, such as streams), gleann (a glen or valley), loch (loch or lake), beinn (a hill), ceann (head, headland), rubha (a point), and the points of the compass tuath, deas, sear, siar (north, south, east and west).**

Lately, Lewis has also gained some English place-names, such as **Newmarket, Marybank and Maryhill.** This is happening where there is a greater number of monoglot English speakers, such as the district round the main town of Stornoway (Steòrnabhagh meaning 'steering bay' from Old Norse).

TIMELINE

AD 800 – 1200

The Vikings leave their homelands in modern day Norway, Sweden and Denmark to raid coastal communities in Britain and Ireland, eventually settling in the areas they conquered.

AD 1066

William the Conqueror invades England. After defeating the English at the Battle of Hastings William becomes King of England as well as being Duke of Normandy in France. The Norman Conquest fuses French and English culture.

GAMES

Make up your own map of an imaginary island and name all the features on the island.

ACTIVITIES

1. Research the placenames in your own area and try and work out if they are of Gaelic, Viking, English or other origin.
2. Do you think our ancestors made a good job of naming the landscape? Why?
3. Which type of map do you prefer to use and why – paper maps, sat nav systems, Google maps, etc?

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