

CLAN MORRISON, JUDGES OF LEWIS-- AND THE ISLES?

Clan Morrison, like other Scottish clans, is a group of associated families who claim common descent from a particular ancestor. Morrison seems an anglicized name. In Scots Gaelic MacGhilleMhoire may have been the clan's original name. (MacGiollamoire, Irish Gaelic). Some related family surnames are: Gilmore, Gilmour, Judge, Judd, Brieve, Elmore, and Morrison. A detailed list of associated surnames is available from the Clan Morrison Society. See www.clanmorrison.net for more details. Beyond 15 generations back, little is conclusively known of the origins of the Morrisons of Pabbay.

Some believe the MacGhilleMhoire's originated in the Outer Hebrides' isles, possibly on Pabbay (Pabaigh, Old Gaelic), Lewis, and in Harris, the southern-most district of Lewis. It is thought that the Harris branch were hereditary armourers to the MacLeod's. The clan may have a long history as blacksmiths. Dr. Ru Morrison, Chief of Clan Morrison, traces his pedigree back 15 generations through the Harris branch of the Morrisons.

For at least 300 years, and maybe for centuries earlier, the MacGhilleMhoire's were brieves - judges, law experts - on Lewis, and perhaps the whole area ruled over by the MacDonald, Lord of the Isles. The Western Isles were wrested from the Norse (c. early 1200's) the MacDonald then perhaps used the clan as his judiciary. The brieves were experts in the old Brehon (Celtic) laws, which came to Scotland from Ireland when the Scotti crossed to Kintyre in the 5th century. The Lords sought to return their people to an earlier Gaelic glory. Hence, they supported every facet of Gaelic culture, including its ancient Celtic laws. The Hebridean isles and much of the Highland mainland (roughly all of Sutherland, then down the Great Glen to the edge of the Campbell's Argyll & around to Kintyre's tip) were all part of the MacDonald's non-feudal, autonomous Celtic realm. Some think the brieves may have roamed the MacDonald's entire realm as traveling judges. Reportedly, the brieves' helped Highland clans live peacefully for 300+ years.

The clan was probably re-instated as brieves, a position they likely held much earlier in Gaelic society. It took a great deal of training to orally master the unwritten Brehon laws. In ancient Druidic times, it took 7 years to be a bard, then another 7 to be a brieve! Such extensive knowledge surely existed for many generations before the Clan's 13th century appointment since Lewis was Norse controlled for close to 300 years. For the brieves to be accepted as Celtic lawgivers by the MacDonald, and more importantly by the clans he ruled, MacGhilleMhoire's likely had to have a widely known prior reputation as Celtic legal experts, even if they only judged matters on Lewis. Martin Martin recorded in the 17th century that the last brieve's judgements were given orally, in Gaelic verse, which underscores the above requirement to first be a bard, before a brieve.

Dun Eistean was the brieves' fortress at Ness, on Lewis. The clan was presided over by the Brieve, the head judge. MacGhilleMhoire's did not have a chief in the typical sense. The brieveship was hereditary, in keeping with the Celtic nature of Gaelic society. A 15th century son of the Brieve traveled to Caithness for a shipload of meal. The son returned having wed a daughter of the Bishop of Caithness. Her dowery was the whole region of Durness, east of the MacKay's. In that era, marriage was strictly between those of equal social status. This union indicates some prominence for the brieves, even in areas not ruled by the MacDonald; & supports that their reputation was widely known among the clans.

MacGhilleMhoire's and MacLeod's seemed to live side by side for many centuries. However, ties to the MacDonald led to the Brieves' demise. The Crown issued Letters of Fire & Sword

(licenses for murder) against the Brieve and the Ness Morrisons in 1616, with the last Brieve slain prior to 1630. His line then disappears into the mists of time.

The Brieve's fortress, Dun Eistean, is on a sea-stack in Ness, Lewis' northern-most district. Apparently it functioned as a lookout point for boat traffic into the Hebrides.

Sacked in 1613, MacGillemoires fled the Dun & Ness; some did not escape. Dun Eistean remained uninhabited for nearly 400 years. Unmolested ruins of any clan center were unknown in western Scotland, until 2001 radar surveys & trial trenches confirmed local Ness folklore. Thus, Dun Eistean holds a unique place in Scottish archaeology. Excavations have since been completed. Details online at "GUARD Dun Eistean". The clan slogan is "Dun Eistean", Gaelic for 'Hugh's Fortress'. Who Hugh was is a mystery.

Some old Morrison & MacLeod genealogies name Leod & Ghillemoire as having Olaf the Black, prince of Norway in the early 1200's, for their father. Each son had a different mother. Yet, the two clans lived next to each other for several centuries on Lewis & the mainland, and may well be distantly related. The Harris branch's ancient ties as armorers to the MacLeods also speak to close connections between the clans for a very long time.

Pabbay, an isle in the sound of Harris, is considered the earliest Scottish home of Clan MacGhillemoire. The Morrison Chief's motto Teaglach Phabbay (family of Pabbay), affirms this. Pabaigh (Pabbay) is Scots Gaelic, derived from Old Norse, and means "the priests' isle". The clan seems to have a lengthy history as religious leaders possibly back to sometime during the Norse raids & rule, but perhaps much earlier.

Other connections to the MacLeods & Pabbay exist. This Ghillemoire, half-brother to Leod, married the heiress of Clan Gow (Gaelic for a smith). She had inherited the castle on Pabbay. Later, the MacLeod's acquired this castle. MacGhillemoire's of Harris were hereditary keepers of MacLeod's Pabbay castle, & kept watch of Lewis' sea traffic.

One common Scots Gaelic meaning of MacGhillemoire is "son of the servant of St. Mary". Mary is Moire in Irish Gaelic & Maire in Scots Gaelic. Mor in Gaelic means "the great one" and when spoken sounds like Moire. Another meaning of the surname, "son of the servant of the great one"? Both may be equally accurate for all anyone knows.

How do the varied names in the clan connect? A Scandinavian patronymic type name is plausible for Morrison since there were major Norse influences in the area for centuries. Maurice (pronounced Moris in Gaelic) was a very popular medieval first name in Scotland during the 11th & 10th centuries. Plus, there is an ancient church site on Pabbay known as Teampull Maire. This place name could have been adopted. Early Reformation ministers in the family possibly used Morison as a surname; it was less offensive to Protestant sensibilities than 'son of the servant of St. Mary'. So goes one theory of how MacGhilleMoire could have morphed into Morrison. On Lewis, Scotland's last place where Gaelic is one's first language, locals use the terms MacGillemoire nan Morrison when referring to the Morrisons. Through genes, brieves technically became MacDonalds; one changed his name to marry a brieve's heiress, & thus became Brieve.

Some may have picked an occupational name variant (Judd/Judge, Smith). Others may have felt pressures at differing times to anglicize the name and/or produce independent changes. Names were again altered in the Colonies, further complicating things. Based on some preference or necessity, for whatever reasons, certain branches of the family used one form of the name over others. The true 'whys' and "whens" seem very elusive.

Regardless, the associated families recognize each other as kin. For quite some time now, all consider one another Teaglach Phabbay, the family of the priests' isle. As in the Scots Gaelic

words “ghille” and “mhoire”, the “h” of Phabby is a silent letter. On maps, the isle’s name has historically been spelled without ‘h’. Moire is also spelled without an ‘h’. In 1909, the Clan Morrison Society of North America was organized to foster the family’s connections & heritage. Sixty years later a clan chief was installed, John Morrison (great grandfather of Ru, the current Chief), via letters patent from the Lord Lyon, whose pleadings to be chief John finally followed.

The Society registered a tartan with the Lord Lyon in 1909, based on the MacKay’s blue & green sett, with a thin red stripe for differencing, falling back on the family ties to Durness. Nearly 3 decades later, a tartan wrapped about an old Morrison family Bible was found beneath a blackhouse hearthstone. A note dated 1746 was pinned to the orange-based tartan, which stated it was the Morrison/MacGhillemhoire sett. In 1969 Lord Lyon registered the sett at John Morrison’s request as the Chief’s tartan, and thereby the official tartan. This would make it one of the older known clan tartan setts. So, hence there are two clan tartans; one the Society’s & one the Chief’s.

Genetic genealogy has recently introduced a new twist. The Clan Morrison genetic project (Family Tree DNA) has identified over 30 separate and completely unrelated genetic lines bearing the name Morrison. This genetic data supports the wide popularity of the name Maurice (spoken Moris) in Scotland’s very distant past. Letters patent from the Lord Lyon usually place one as a chief over a particular name, based on genealogical research findings. Genetics can lead to some seemingly strange conclusions.