

The Barra Isles

By Vincent MacNeil

We often assume that our MacNeil ancestors lived on Barra when in fact the early Barra church records indicate that many of the MacNeils lived on the small islands which surround Barra. My father's MacNeil's lived on Hellisay. My mother's MacNeils (the line whose surname she bears) lived on Sandray.. Iona, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia was originally called Sandray. Today only Barra and Watersay are inhabited. Here is a brief description of the Barra Isles.

Barra

- Located at the southern end of the Outer Hebrides;
- Barra is only eight miles long by four miles wide;
- Has an area of only about thirty-five square miles
- Supports a population of around 1300
- Barra's name is derived from St Barr
- 12th century church as well as prehistoric brochs and cairns on the island
- Kismul Castle, the seat of the McNeils of Barra.
- Gaelic language is still spoken on the island
- One main road which circles the island
- The main town on the island is Castlebay
- On the mountain of Heaval there is a statue of the Virgin and Child carved from marble
- rry from Castlebay to Oban on the mainland and to Lochboisdale on South Uist.
- Air service to Glasgow, the airport runway is the tidal sands at Traigh Mhor.

Islands South of Barra

Vatersay

- Has a population of only about 70
- Used to be entirely separate from Barra
- When cattle were sent to market they had to swim across the Sound of Vatersay.
- A bus service now runs from Castlebay on Barra.
- The monument standing over Vatersay's west beach is a reminder of the tragic shipwreck of the 'Annie Jane' which ran aground on the rocks on this beach on 28th September 1853 . 350 men, women and children lost their lives there.
- Site of an ancient settlement and the ruins of a Celtic church
- Sloc Mhartuin (Martins' fjord) can be found here
- Has the remains of a Celtic fort and burial cairns dating back to the Bronze Age Period.

Berneray

- 54 miles off the mainland of Scotland and 95 miles from Ireland.
- Had only three families in 1794, rising to 57 in 1881.
- In 1961 only the light housekeepers lived there and the light is now automatic.

Mingulay

- Has Bronze Age remains
- Had a population of 52 in 1764
- In 1881 it was 150
- Last two inhabitants left in 1934

Pabbay

- It had about 20 people in 1794
- Population of 26 in 1881
- Deserted since 1911

Sandray

- Had nine farms in 1794
- Down to nine people by 1861
- 20 in 1930
- Empty of people since 1934.

Islands in the Sound of Barra between Eriskay and Barra itself

Hellisay

- Had a population of 108 in 1841
- Since 1891 it has been deserted.

Gighay

- Had inhabitants as early as 1549 and as late as the 18th century
- Now deserted.

Fuday

- Deserted since 1901
- Highest recorded population is seven.