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BENBECULA (G *Beinn na Faoghla*, the Hill of the Fords) lies between the two Uists and is largely flat but dominated by the low hill of Rueval (124m) from which there is an excellent view of the island and the Fords.

The island is studded with many lochs. The west side has extensive sandy beaches with a wide machair plain, while the east coast is mostly rugged and backed by moorland. In WWII an airfield was established at Balivanich (G *Baile a Mhanaich*, Monkstown) which continues to be used by the military as part of their Misle

Testing Range, as well as by civilian traffic. A single track concrete bridge to South Uist was started in 1938 and completed in 1942, to facilitate the import of supplies during WWII. It was upgraded to the present causeway in 1983.

Archaeology There is much of archaeological interest on the island. At Gramisdale, near the North Ford, there are several standing stones (NF825562 and NF825553). The northern site has one upright and nine fallen monoliths, while there is one upright and two fallen stones at the southern one. The much ruined

Gramisdale standing stones with Eaval in the background



remains of two chambered cairns lie north of *Loch nan Clachan* (NF813527).

Of several duns, *Dun Buidhe* (NF793547) near Balivanich is the most impressive. Its islet is joined via *Eilean Dubh* to the loch shore by substantial causeways. The site was reoccupied in late medieval times.

A Pictish symbol stone, now in the National Museum, was found near *Strome Shunnamul*. This granite slab is incised with two enigmatic motifs. The only other such stone so far found in the Western Isles was on Pabbay, south of Barra.

The only wheelhouse so far known on Benbecula is now under one of the runways of the airport, and to date no Pictish or Norse domestic site has come to light, making the carved stone even more enigmatic.

Chapels Nothing remains of the monastery at Balivanich. The remains of an ancient chapel,



Beach below Balivanich Airport

Teampall Chalium Cille, dedicated to St Columba (NF783549), and its associated well, *Tobar Chalium Cille*, remain on the south east side of the village.

The old chapel at Nunton (NF768538) may date from the 14th century. There was a nunnery in this area, *Baile nan Cailleach* (G *Nun's Town*) but this

declined after the Reformation. The stones were said to be used for Clanranald's new house and steading in the 1700s. Nunton Steadings has been renovated.



Ancient chapel at Nunton

Teampall Chalium Cille, Balivanich



BENBECULA

- North Ford
- Flodday
- Gramisdale Stones
- Balivanich
- Benbecula Golf Course
- Teampall Chalium Cille
- Tobar Chalium Cille
- Dun Buidhe
- Pictish symbol stone
- Nunton Chapel
- Nunton Steading
- Baile nan Cailleach
- Culla Bay
- Poll na Crann
- Borve machair
- Borve Castle
- Rueval
- Rossinish
- Loch Uisgebhagh
- Liniclate
- Creagorry
- Peter's Port
- South Ford



The west coast of Benbecula has lovely sandy beaches, South Uist is in the background



Borve Castle was built by Amie MacRuari in the 1300s

Borve Castle (NF773506) is said to have been built by Amie MacRuari in the 14th century and it was the Clanranald base for many years until Ormiclate Castle was built on South Uist. Little now remains of this once imposing building or of the nearby *Teampall*

Bhuirgh. The name *Borve* suggests that there may have been a ruined broch here in Norse times.

Nature For birdwatchers the west coast beaches, machair and lochs are good places to view waders, wildfowl, and gulls. Culla Bay and

Peter's Port was built in the 1890s but did not prove to be a good harbour



Poll na Cramm or Stinky Bay, so called because of the smell of rotting seaweed which often pervades the beach, are especially attractive to waders in migration times. The drain from *Oban Liniclate* (NF785498) and the lochs nearby are particularly good for migrants.

The machair behind the dunes on the west side of Benbecula is particularly rich in wild flowers. This is partly due to low intensity grazing by cattle in winter. Several rare species of bumblebees feed on the nectar and collect the pollen.

Rossinish The rugged east side of the island can be very rewarding to the energetic. The track which leads to Rueval from the Market Stance (NF806537) also leads to the remote but beautiful Rossinish peninsula. The sandy beaches backed by machair and dunes on the north side of this headland (NF873538) as well as several other locations around *Loch Uisgebhagh* are unusual for their east coast situation.

Otters frequent these beautiful and unspoilt shorelines, which, although only a few miles from habitations, give the feeling of

remoteness. It was in this area that Bonnie Prince Charlie was hidden for some time in 1746.

Peter's Port The lack of a deep water harbour on Benbecula meant that goods were landed at Loch Skipport in South Uist and then transhipped by small boat, but in the 1890s the Congested District Board built Peter's Port on the south east extremity of the island. This typical example of official folly initially had no road to it and the approach is hazardous for vessels of any size and thus was little used.

In the 20th century the presence of the military has done much to boost the economy of the island. Today Benbecula is the centre of administration for the Uists and Barra, while there is a fine new Community School and Museum at Liniclate.

MacGillivrays in Balivanich is particularly to be noted for its superlative selection of books on Hebridean and Scottish subjects. They also stock Harris Tweed, knitwear and much else.

Benbecula Golf Course "is a naturally flat course, which is popular with visiting golfers seeking a game in slightly different surroundings. The course is maintained by the members and has a short back and sides more regularly than any other course!"

There are a number of testing holes to discover that will require great judgement and club selection and some natural hazards such as rabbit scrapes to add to the fun of the game! Although only a 9 hole course, there are 18 tees in operation, so your



Cattle grazing on machair fields at Borve

round is anything but repetitive.

Situated beside Benbecula Airport, the golf course is minutes away from Balivanich, the social and adminis-

trative centre for the Uists. Visitors can experience incredible views of the Monach Isles and Atlantic Ocean from many vantage points."



Wild flowers on the machair near Nunton



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Imperial War Museum

842 Fleet Air Arm Squadrons were deployed under RAF Coastal Command on short range patrols in August 1944. In September 1944 Wellingtons of 179 and 304 (Polish) Squadrons arrived but despite intensive patrols they failed to find a single submarine. Finally, 36 Squadron, also of Wellingtons, was based here until June 1945.

Today Balivanich remains a military airfield but is shared by civilian airlines. These provide daily flights to Glasgow, Stornoway and Barra. The airfield also serves the military needs of the Missile Testing Range on South Uist. The continued presence of associated personnel and their dependents provides work and is a boost to the local economy.

Until the building of the causeways, Benbecula was isolated at high tide and during storm surges. The

Boeing B17 Flying Fortress off South Uist

WORLD WAR II After all the social changes and upheavals of the previous 200 years, the mid 20th century saw much development, due to wartime necessity. During the 1930s Balivanich was one of the grass strips used by the De Havilland Rapides of Scottish Airways for the first regular air services to the islands. With war looming it was clear that air bases would be needed as far west as possible for anti-submarine and convoy protection work.

were soon replaced with B17 Flying Fortresses. These heavily armed long range aircraft achieved considerable success, sinking at least 12 U-boats. Perhaps more importantly they forced the submarines to remain submerged in the area to avoid detection, thus denying them some freedom of action.

220 Squadron, also with B17s, arrived in March 1943, but both were reassigned to the Azores that October. Swordfish of 838 and

The Benbecula runways were built by laying bitumen directly over sand which had been compacted. The resulting slightly flexible surface was not ideal, but was usable by the aircraft of the era due to their relatively low ground pressure.

Work on the South Ford road link actually began in 1938, while construction of the airfield started in 1940, and it became operational in August 1941. Although there was some local concern about the possible loss of traditional Gaelic culture due to the influx, the RAF personnel were made very welcome.

In late June 1942, 206 Squadron became operational on anti-submarine duties, with Hudsons which



Boeing B17 over Benbecula

WWII German U-boat on the surface, the reason for RAF Benbecula



Imperial War Museum

Imperial War Museum



South Ford causeway looking south from the Benbecula end

crossings could be dangerous on a rising tide, in the fog, or in the dark, and were never suitable for road vehicles. In fact the first outside direct links were by air, due to the lack of a suitable harbour.

The Fords are excellent places to see waterfowl and waders. In particular the south side of the South Ford is a favourite roost for waders at high tide. The small road along the north west shore of South Uist at Lochdar and the eastern shore of Gualan tend to be particularly good. Care should be taken not to obstruct traf-

fic on the causeways themselves.

There are spectacular views over the Fords from many locations, but perhaps the best are from the north end of Benbecula (NF825565) and from the layby south of Creagorry towards South Uist (NF803479). Depending on the location, season, weather and time of day there are almost limitless combinations of land, water, sand and sky for the artist or photographer to interpret. The Fords can be dangerous on foot, so take care!



Otters crossing sign at South Ford