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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 Missile

Testing Range, as well as by civilian traffic. Construction of 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

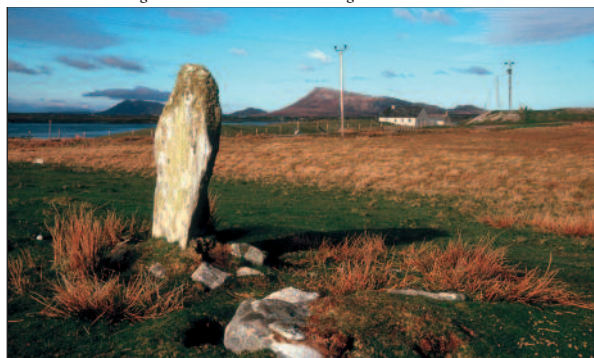
southern one. The remains of two chambered cairns lie north of *Loch nan Clachan* (NF813527).

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 on the shore at low tide near some ruins at *Strome Shunamual*. This granite slab is incised with two symbols, a comb box, decorated with spirals and a disc with three smaller discs within, perhaps representing the Holy Trinity. 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.

Gramisdale standing stones with Eaval in the background



Beach below Balivanich Airport

Chapels Little remains of the monastery at Balivanich. The lichen-covered remains of an ancient chapel, *Teampall Chaluim Cille*, dedicated to St Columba

(NF783549), and its associated well, *Tobar Chaluim Cille*, lie on the south east side of the village.

The old chapel at Nunton



Ancient chapel at Nunton



Teampall Chaluim Cille, Balivanich

(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.

BENBECULA

North Ford
Flodday
Gramisdale Stones
Balivanich
Benbecula Golf Course
Teampall Chaluim Cille
Tobar Chaluim 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

The stones were said to be used for Clanranald's new house and farm buildings in the 1700s. Nunton Steadings has been renovated.

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 *Poll na Crann* 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 has an abundance of wild flowers in summer. This is partly due to low intensity grazing by cattle in winter. Several rare species of bumblebees thrive here.

Rossinish The east side of the island is rugged and remote. 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) are unusual for their east coast situation.



Borve Castle was built by Amie MacRuari in the 1300s

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



Otters frequent these beautiful and unspoilt shorelines, which, although only a few miles from habitations, give a feeling of isolation. 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. In the 1890s the Congested District Board built a pier at Peter's Port on the south east extremity of the island. This typical example of official folly initially had no road to it. The approach is hazardous for vessels of any size and thus was little used. Today small creelboats and recreational craft still utilise it.

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. There is a large Community School at Liniclate. This incorporates a theatre, swimming pool, library, running track, fitness suite and a cafeteria.

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!"



Cattle grazing on machair fields at Borve



Benbecula farm on the west side

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 round is anything but repetitive.

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





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.

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 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 842 Fleet Air Arm Squadrons were



Boeing B17 over Benbecula

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



Imperial War Museum

Imperial War Museum

Imperial War Museum



South Ford causeway looking south from the Benbecula end

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 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 Iochdar and the eastern shore of Gualan tend to be particularly good. Care should be taken not to obstruct traffic 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



Otters crossing sign at South Ford and sky for the artist or photographer to interpret. The Fords can be dangerous on foot, so take care!

South Ford and causeway with the hills of South Uist in the background

