



Mrs. Chips of the Highlands smiles goodbye. For forty-five years, Margaret Johnstone taught Bunchrubin children. Now, with no pupils, her school closes

GOODBYE, MRS. CHIPS

The people are leaving the Highlands. Why? Jack Esten begins a three-part inquiry in words and pictures that gets to the heart of an intensely human problem

TURNING off the road to the Isles, I headed towards Bunchrubin. And I saw that the sad things they had told me back in Inverness were true. On either side of the road stretched the glorious landscape of the Western Highlands. Lovely—a land of infinite beauty; but also lonely—there wasn't a human being in sight for mile upon mile. "The problem of the Highlands," they had told me, "is that the people are disappearing. Go to Bunchrubin and you will see what we mean." I did.

The Highlands through which I travelled—land north of the Inverness-Greenock line—make up one-sixth of Great Britain. And yet the area's population has dwindled to something below that of the London borough of Wandsworth (area: fourteen square miles).

At Bunchrubin, on the peak of the mountains overlooking the home of the notorious Loch Ness monster, I came upon a scene that crystallized what is happening. The Bunchrubin school was closing down that day. For Mrs. Margaret Johnstone, its only teacher for forty-five years, it was goodbye.

Mrs. Johnstone, now aged sixty-seven, had come to Bunchrubin as a girl of

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Last lesson in Bunchrubin school. Mrs. Margaret Johnstone, forty-five years the teacher, writes a farewell message on the blackboard in the sloping handwriting the village is proud of



Last sports day. There's always been fun for the eight pupils. But there have never been amenities



Last morning cocoa break. They will get cooked dinners at their new school five miles away

Bunchrubin has no running water. No electricity. No free milk . . .

twenty-two. She had come from Stornoway to take over, as headmistress, a thriving school of twenty-seven pupils. The records show that in its opening year—1885—the school had no fewer than seventy. Now there are eight. These eight are so dispersed that five of them have to be collected by taxi. Two who live close by get a ride because their father is the taxi-man. And one who lives just under the regulation three miles has just over an hour and a half of walking to and from school.

"This used to be a thriving community," said Mrs. Johnstone, near to tears. "Look at it now. My nearest neighbours are more than half a mile away. I am surrounded by empty crofts." Bracken and bog-myrtle have invaded the once-rich pastures that produced cattle and sheep, which Britain now imports.

Mrs. Johnstone is realistic about the problem. "We couldn't have carried on much longer," she said. "Our toilets are in the shed—at the bottom of the garden. No running water. No electric light—although I would sooner have the water than the electric. And as for school milk, it doesn't exist—except for the powder the authorities supply. Most of our children come from farms and look at it with disgust."

They've had no luxuries

I watched Mrs. Johnstone making the cocoa for the morning break and again at lunchtime when the children ate their sandwiches. These children have never known the luxury of hot school meals. Sometimes in the winter they used to bring a pie in a dish to be heated on the kitchen range, which also served to dry the wet clothes of children who had tramped for miles through snow or rain.

Mrs. Johnstone is proud of her record. One hundred and eighty-nine pupils have passed through her school in the past forty-five years. Some have gone on to university. Several have become teachers. But few have remained to till the soil of their forefathers.

"They won't stay," said Mrs. Johnstone. "What is there for them here? One bus a week into Inverness—and if you miss the bus home, it costs nearly thirty shillings for a taxi."

Within an area of five miles, there is only one prospective pupil—a

child of six months. And there would have been even fewer pupils in recent years, had it not been for the family of Murdo Campbell, the postmaster of the village of Torness.

Mr. and Mrs. Campbell arrived in 1941 with a ready-made family of ten children, eight of school age, and during Mrs. Johnstone's time they sent a further four to school. Now Ronald, ten, and Colin, eleven, still go. But there are no more young Campbells to send.

The authorities will allow Mrs. Johnstone to stay in the house that adjoins the school. She will live a life of retirement with her husband, who last year finished a forty-six-year stint as the village postman.

Mrs. Johnstone's nearest neighbours will be the postmaster and his family at Torness. There are no shops or public houses within seven miles. The new postman brings the milk. Bread is delivered twice a week.

And so another highland community disappears. How does it happen that, within living memory, a community of more than one hundred families dissolves away until there are fewer than four?

Every Scotsman has his own particular answer to this question. Most

The Campbell family has helped Bunchrubin school survive. Twelve of the fourteen children learned their three Rs from Mrs. Johnstone





The Campbells are coming no longer. Colin—in bare feet after being soaked on the way to school—and Ronald are the family's last pupils



It's a rough road. Eight-year-old Margaret Johnstone, the teacher's niece, walked one and a half miles to school. Now it will be a five-mile taxi trip

The taxi waits at the end of the lane. The children will come here no more. Only the postman, carrying her milk, will greet Mrs. Johnstone each morning

And soon there'll be no children

of the seventy-six Scottish M.P.s have urged their own solutions upon Parliament. Millions have been expended in various schemes of road development and hydro-electric projects and in subsidies for hill-bred cattle and land reclamation. But nothing has stopped the bolt from the Highlands.

I left Mrs. Johnstone waving a last goodbye to her pupils. Only the children's first ventures into the magic of crayons and paints, which still decorate the walls, remain to tell the story of decay that will settle and envelop this one-time prosperous spot.

There are many people with ideas for restoring the Highlands—people who have not waited for official help, but have begun practical schemes of their own, moved by a love of the Highlands and a belief that they can be made to live again.

I drove up the road from deserted Bunchrabin school, past the abandoned crofts and the pastures that have been taken over by the creeping bracken and bog-myrtle. And I went to look for those people. *NEXT WEEK, I shall report on the people I found—and on their plans.*

