

SHOPPING IN TIREE: 1940s and 50s

As I recall Tiree was well served by a number of shops during this period.

If I take a memory tour from my childhood home in Hynish one becomes aware of how they were spread throughout the island.

At Mannal, at the house called Burnside, there was a small grocery shop with a small counter from which you were served. It was owned by Mrs Campbell. As much as the shop itself I remember how during the summer fish would be dried (as in Newfoundland) spread out on the keel of an upturned boat which formed the roof of a shed. We also dried fish by hanging them in the sun.

Next came Balemartine where there were three general stores plus the businesses of Dougie the Tailor and Lachainn Beag, the shoemaker. The latter used to amaze me by the way he could carry-on a conversation with his mouth holding nails as he worked on a shoe.

At the top of the brae stood Hector Campbell's where Nonie was the lady in charge.

In those days everything came in bulk, so the sugar had to be weighed and put into paper bags as requested: butter and cheese were cut from the block, weighed and wrapped in greaseproof paper: rolls of bacon hung from the rafters waiting to be cut into the appropriate slices by the machine which stood on the counter: sweets filled large glass jars presenting a tempting display on shelves, while other goods, perhaps not so much desired by little eyes, also took up shelf space. The shop also provided other items required by a crofting community – not forgetting the very important bamboo rods used by us who were frequenters of the carraig for fishing.

One must not forget the drum of paraffin on which our lamps depended in those pre-electric days.

The light in Campbell's shop in winter- time came from a pressurised lamp called a Tilley, which gave a lovely bright light with a distinctive hissing sound, and created an atmosphere of warmth.

At Christmas time there would be a box of Christmas cards on the counter, some of the goods such as shortbread and biscuits would have seasonal covers, all stirring the imagination and turning young thoughts to the man in the red suit!

Sometimes at the end of the school day I would be feeling hungry and in need of sustenance before walking or cycling to Hynish, so my mother arranged that on these occasions, Nonie would butter two digestive biscuits, placing one on top of the other.

My family and I still like this quick snack, which we have named as "A Balemartine Sandwich".

An additional attraction at this shop was a parrot which sat on a perch inside the house porch. I cannot recall if it could speak, but knowing that breed of bird's ability to learn very quickly words which it shouldn't, I totally deny any responsibility.

Across from the playground wall of the Primary school stood MacArthur's general store which sold similar goods to Campbell's. In addition to the shop they also had a taxi business, were coal merchants, and Duncan, himself, was the postman for the area.

This was long before the shop gained an off-licence counter and when the New Year fortifications had to be posted by a grocery shop in Tobermory- Browns – who at a later stage took over the shop. These parcels became widely known as “Glug, glug parcels”.

Still in Balemartine and just next to the Baptist Church was another MacArthur general store. This one was owned by Neil MacArthur and his wife, who was the teacher of Primary 3-5 in the school nearby.

Neil ran the shop while his wife taught, and he had the reputation of taking fair dealing to the extreme. If you asked for a pound of sausages, then that was exactly what you got – even if it meant cutting off a small piece of link sausage and adding it to your order. At times his head would appear round the door of his wife's classroom when he needed to know how many coupons were required to buy an item.

In Balephuill the MacKinnon family had a general store and their son, Alasdair, travelled round with a mobile shop. Their twin sons, Duncan and Neil, were football fans like myself and had access to newspapers from which pictures of footballers were cut and then pasted into scraps with glue made from flour and water.

In Balinoe the MacNeill family had the Post Office, with a telephone box on the roadside of the building. Later the Post Office moved to another building a short distance across the road with Annie Kennedy as Post Mistress.

Talking to my friend and fellow scholar at Cornaigmore, Billy Whiteside, he reminded me that the MacArthur family sold sweets from their house further along the Balinoe road.

When I would go with my father to his family home in Balevullin we would visit his Uncles Duncan and Donald in the village. “The Merchant”, as my father called him, had a small shop, and invariably during one of these visits he would take down a tin of biscuits from a shelf and give me one.

The word biscuit brings back immediate memories of sacks of what were called broken biscuits and a chocolate wafer biscuit (still going strong) made by Gray Dunn

- Blue Riband. We pronounced the latter word “Ri – band” with the emphasis on the band. The broken biscuits were pieces of all kinds of biscuits. I never see

Other shopping experiences from which we benefitted in Hynish were mobile shops.

Initially during the war Murdoch Cameron from Balevullin was our butcher, and he came to the village in pony and trap. Because wartime rations applied everywhere the meat was already cut in appropriate portions. He would halt his pony and trap and blow a whistle to summon his customers to come and collect their meat.

This led to a story, which like all stories, may have been embellished through the repeated telling.

During one winter when rumours of possible German invasions of the islands were rife and it was difficult to ascertain whether Home Guard exercises were just that or reality, Murdoch arrived in the dark at the Lower Square. Blowing his whistle as usual produced no response, so he decided to take the parcel of meat to one of the houses. As the night was cold he was wearing a heavy coat and a balaclava, and on arriving at the house, knocked on the door. The lady of the house on hearing the knocking, opened the door, and on seeing this figure in the big coat and what looked in the darkness like some form of helmet, ran back into the kitchen shouting to her husband, "The Germans have landed!"

Once the Co-op became established on the island they introduced their mobile shop driven by Rob Mor. Like all shopping experiences in those days it was an opportunity for people to socialise. For me it was important because Rob's son, Bobby, would accompany him and for the hour or so the van was in the village we would play football on front of the Upper Square houses.

Another bonus of the arrival of the Co-op van was the fact that it had for sale a newspaper by the unlikely name of Reynolds News. As with most national papers it had back pages reporting football news. If the edition carried a photograph of a player missing from my scrapbook I would persuade my mother to buy it.

Over the years other vans such as Donald MacLean, with butcher meat, and the baker carried out this useful service.

As with all recollections what is remembered is what impinged on or was important to one at the time, and the passage of time can distort those recollections.

However, the pleasant memories of the social side of the arrival of the mobile shops, causes me to remark that if I hadn't had a career in teaching I would have liked to have been the man with the mobile library !

such goodies available now. Probably Health and Safety regulations would not allow it !

According to my brother, John, and Billy, there was another shop across the road owned by the Browns.

It runs in my mind that there was a Post Office in Cornaig, but even if it was within running distance from the school, the lack of pocket money and Mr MacDougall's ability with the tawse, would have imposed a ban on visits.

One shop which I never visited, but had legendary status in family conversations, was Calum Salum's emporium. He had the reputation of being able to supply literally any goods requested. This reputation resulted in the story, which may or not be true, but hearing of Calum's wit, may well be true,

During the war an official from Air Ministry was visiting Tiree and heard of Calum's store and decided to pay it a visit. Considering himself a bit of a joker, he asked Calum, "Could you lay your hands on a submarine for me?"

Calum thought for a few seconds and then replied, "Can you give me a fortnight!"

Many years afterwards when we were going through my late father's papers we came across a lubrication chart for a Sherman tank. Was this one order which Calum had failed to complete, thus depriving the people of Tiree of the unique sight of a field being ploughed by a war machine!

In Scarinish there were first of all two shops, both general store - MacArthur's and MacDonald's. The former went on fire, if my memory is correct, on an evening when there was a Grand Concert on the island. I attended this concert, the first I had ever attended, with my parents, and still remember most of the artistes: Gaelic singers, Angus MacLeod and Evelyn Campbell, The Edith MacPherson Dancers from Inverness, a violinist who played the Blue Danube Waltz, and an opera singer (or was that one of the Gaelic singers showing their training was outwith the bounds of their own heritage.)

The Co-operative shop replaced MacArthur's.

MacDonald's also sold souvenir tea towels depicting a map and scenes of Tiree, and a booklet about Tiree Bards.

As the MacDonald family were relatives, shopping and ceilidhing were combined. As a child I was fascinated to stand behind the counter and listen to people as they came in for their messages. Items such as bread were dependent on the arrival of the mailboat, so the often asked question was, "Is the bread in yet?"

As my childhood horizon did not extend beyond Scarinish, I don't know if there were any shops in the Ruaig area of the island.