

Wartime Island life

My name is Barry Kerr and I lived on Tiree during the war years with my mother Gwen, father George (known as Jock), sisters Wendy, Shirley and Meryl, younger brother Ian and baby Christopher who was born in the RAF Sick Bay. My father was engaged as an RAF Signals and Telegraph Officer who divided his time between Tiree and Benbecula.

We lived in a typical `black house` which still stands at the crossroads at the Balephetrish Bay end of Kenovay opposite the beach. Like most crofts there was no power of any description and oil lamps were used for light, and water had to be collected from the nearby well. The weekly event of a wash in the tin bath in front of the fire will always remain in my memory!



The house where Barry lived during WWII

The ground floor consisted of two rooms, one containing a cooking range and eating area, the other where my Mum and Dad slept. The roof space was accessed via a ladder and on one side my brothers and I slept and on the other, my sisters. (My father thought he was very clever in conveniently produced 3 boys and 3 girls!)

My mother cooked on the range fuelled by coal and wood and the coal came from the local merchant which was brought by steam `puffer' boat from Glasgow. I remember the boat being landed on the beach at low tide and every available horse and cart was used to transport the coal to the merchant. Basic food supplies were collected from the one and only general store at Scarnish and meat was bought from the local farmer/butcher. Most islanders grew their own potatoes and vegetables and at harvest time everyone came together and it was then I learnt the skill of using a scythe.

I attended the local school at Cornaig which was a 3 mile walk away and I remember having raw knees with the winter winds. If I was lucky I got a lift in a horse and cart. There were very few cars on the island, only sheep and cattle on the narrow roads. As children spare time was spent playing on the beach collecting driftwood and fishing with cross sticks. All sizeable successes ended up on the table!

I didn't find it unusual to be playing with and helping the Italian prisoners of war who were building the airfield suitable for RAF bombers. My mother told the tale that I directed a lorry load of prisoners to the croft for a cup of tea and my Mum, having sons of her own and hoping they would be treated kindly in a war situation, obliged.

I had a very happy childhood on this captivating island with many fond memories and have visited a number of times with my wife enjoying re-visiting old haunts, in particular seeing the croft. It is 13 years since I last made the journey and in this my 81st year I wanted to return. I have been saddened over the years to see the deterioration of the croft which is now very much a ruin and sorry that anyone hasn't taken up the challenge to restore it.



Barry and his siblings.

L-R: Ian, Meryl, Shirley, Barry & Wendy

In 1947 my father was posted to Aden, now part of Yemen, which was a completely different lifestyle!

Barry Kerr, Summer 2015