

The Isle of Tiree: *One of a Kind*

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** Family descended from John McKinnon (1816-1896) and Grace Campbell (b.1811) of Cornaigbeag, Tiree, who received assisted passage to Upper Canada on the 1849 voyage of the "Charlotte".*

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One of a Kind

Although it is one of the most unique places in Scotland, the tiny Isle of Tiree is relatively unknown outside of the United Kingdom. Overshadowed for centuries by its sister islands of Iona and Islay, famous for their monastic heritage and Scotch whisky distilleries respectively, Tiree developed a rich heritage all its own. Today, Tiree is being noticed, and with that attention comes both benefits and challenges that may forever change the island.

Scotland is blessed with close to 800 islands, so what makes Tiree so special? Tiree stands alone in several categories: its indigenous architecture, its cultural and agricultural heritage, and its natural

resources. Its geography and geology are responsible for a way of life that dates back to the 6th century when the earliest evidence of settlement can be traced.

An Island Apart

Tiree is the most westerly island of the Inner Hebrides, 20 km long and 10 km across at its widest point, with a population hovering around 750. Geologically, the island is Lewisian gneiss, the oldest rock in Britain, formed 3,000 million years ago.

The island is a microcosm of the settlement history of mainland Scotland, with evidence of prehistoric settlement, three Neolithic cairns, 20 Iron Age fortress,



Image 1: Background, rich floral grasslands of Tiree

two brochs and numerous mentions in the legend and lore of Dalriada (Ireland) and Viking settlers. In an old Irish poem written before 800 AD, it is noted that King Labraid Longsech landed and “*ort ocht turu tire Iath, ort ocht scoru Sciathach*” (he razed eight towers in Tiree, and destroyed eight strongholds on the Island of Skye).¹

The distinctiveness of Tiree’s geography, culture and history is also evident in the many names the island has been given over many centuries. Before 800 AD, Irish Church writings referred to the island as Heeth or *Tir-iath*, and later as *Tirieth* (1343) or Tyree (1385). Other writings refer to the island as *Tiriodh* (land of corn), *Tir-Idhe* (granary of I (Iona), *tir bàrr fo thuinn* (the island below the waves), *tir iséal an eòrna* (the land of low barley), the “island of two harvests”, and the “Sunshine Isle”.²

This land of many names is distinct in other ways, all worthy of note to a potential visitor. First, Tiree’s fertile soil and island geography created a crofting legacy that stands apart from other Hebridean islands. Second, the island is the only known site in Scotland to produce a unique marble – known as “Tiree marble” – a highly prized pink and green stone. Third, Tiree is blessed with an abundant supply of long-stemmed seaweed that surrounds the island, which led to a booming kelp economy in the early 19th century. And finally, Tiree boasts an indigenous architectural form – “pudding houses” and Tiree croft houses – seen nowhere else in Scotland.

Crofting in Tiree

The island is treeless, surrounded by white sandy beaches from nutrient rich sea shells. The sands blow inland due to the low lying elevation and combine with the soil to form a rich fertile earth known as *machair*. The fertility of the soil,

▽ Image 2: Location of the Isle of Tiree, Inner Hebrides



combined with the warm climatic conditions provided by the Gulf Stream, give Tiree the ideal conditions to produce two harvests annually in cereal crops. In 1764 a surveyor and visitor to Tiree, Dr. John Walker, noted:

a field [of barley] having been reaped very early in July, it was immediately ploughed and sown again with the same grain. And from this there was a pretty good crop reaped about the middle of October. The only instance perhaps in Britain of two crops having been reaped off the same land in one season..³

The fertility and productivity of this small island cannot be overstated. Perhaps the best illustration of its importance is Tiree’s link with the Isle of Iona. Tiree exported crops and livestock to support the monastery at Iona after St. Columba and his 12 companions settled there in 563 AD. St. Columba ordered the building of a sister monastery on Tiree, known as *Mag Luinge*. This monastery on Tiree hosted men paying penance for crimes through hard agricultural labour, which speaks to the island’s primary role of exporting food to Iona. St.



Image 3: Traditional Tiree “white houses”

Columba visited the island and a feature *cioch Choluim Chille* (St. Columba’s Hill) is named for him. The symbiotic relationship between Iona and Tiree was not limited solely to grain and livestock, as one third of Iona marriages came from imported “marriage partners” from Ross and Tiree.⁴

The machair soil of Tiree is only one element of a productive croft (farm). The physical layout of a typical Tiree croft is highly unusual. Historically, a tenant croft was granted through lease by the Duke of Argyll, the landlord of Tiree since 1674. Since the Duke relied on rents from productive crofts as a source of income, it was in his best interest to ensure maximum productivity from each holding. He was actively involved in administering the land holdings of Tiree, as evidenced by the detail and frequency of his orders through the factor responsible for Tiree and other islands. The Duke of Argyll ordered in 1803 that crofts were to “*have from 6 to 10 arable acres, and those who were only cottars [islanders with no land] and tradesmen to have 4 arable acres...I am doing all I can to...make every man independent of his neighbours.*”⁵

For this reason, crofters were granted a slice (like a pie) of each type of land. From the beach inward, the machair would produce a grain crop (or two). The outer ring of machair is dark, rich earth, and then the inner area is a centre of wet, peaty ground called *sliabh*. The pie-slice approach to crofting meant that every tenant enjoyed the benefits of each type of land -- crop land, grazing land and access to both beach and peat. Records from the estate of the Duke of Argyll in 1791 show that it was clearly understood there was economic benefit to



Image 4: Inland shell beach, between sand and machair

each crofter having access to the beach, for harvesting “*the kelp, which can be manufactured yearly from each farm on Tiry.*”⁶

Today, the whole of Tiree is comprised of 286 crofts. Although the island has less than 100 active farmers, Tiree still exports 7500 lambs and 1000 cattle every year.

Tiree Marble

Tiree marble (coccolite or diopside) is not actually marble at all, but part of the Lewisian Complex, and a substance of much geological interest. The Tiree version is pink/red and green and highly prized. A description of the unique colour is discussed in the 1903 *Scottish Journal of Geology*, suggesting it “*may originally have been a wind-blown coral-sand rock, with abundant rounded crystals of detrital augite.*”⁷ The aesthetic allure of this stone was reported in 1764 by Dr. John Walker, who started a small quarry. In 1789, the Duke of Argyll sent a Swiss geologist, Rudolf Raspe, to set up his own quarry in Balephetrish.

It appears from the estate records of the 5th Duke of Argyll that he had a fascination with Tiree marble. Many of his inquiries and orders through his factor on Tiree between 1771 and 1805 have to do with quarrying and delivering the stone for his own use. He even notes that the blocks being delivered were too big and that he wants the factor to inventory each piece “*describe the cut and dimension and colour*” of each block.⁸

Tiree marble was used in the interior of the Duke of Argyll’s Inverary Castle (built between 1744 and 1785) and his residence at Roseneath.



Image 5: (left) Ruins at Ruagh, Tiree



Image 6: (right) Sandy shell beach of Tiree

“Brown Gold”

The Isle of Tiree was, at its height, one of the most prosperous kelp economies in the region, producing over 400 tonnes of “brown gold” every year. Kelp (ash from seaweed) was essential to soap and glass making, as well as linen bleaching. Its value to the Duke of Argyll was significant. Between 1770 and 1806, the rental income from Tiree grew from £852 to £2,613, primarily due to kelp production. Kelp became even more valuable during the Napoleonic Wars when the supply in mainland Europe dried up and prices boomed.

Kelp is not an easy harvest. Fresh kelp is called “tangle” and must be gathered and dried in the sun.

“Life as a kelp gatherer was hard. [The kelp gatherers] are badly treated in many a way.

They very often have to get up at midnight [for the spring low tides] and go away and pick up tangle out of the surf when the sea is washing over them.” (Donald MacLean, 65, Kilmoluaig.⁹

Tiree’s booming kelp economy also resulted in a population boom, and the island population reached 4,450 by 1831. This was problematic because the price of kelp dropped and the industry collapsed in 1837, leaving the island over-populated and in poverty. Even the Duke felt responsible for profiting from islanders, and he paid for hundreds to be relocated on the island into newly built fishing villages. He allowed rents to be forfeited, writing:

...all the oats, all the potatoes, all the lint, all the sheep, all the milk, butter, cheese, eggs, poultry, fish etc...I allow all these to go for the support of the tenants because I wish them to live happily



△ **Image 7:** John Campbell, 5th Duke of Argyll (1723-1806)



△ **Image 8:** Tiree “marble” (coccolite)



△ **Image 9:** Scottish Kelp



◁ Image 10: Tiree islander Calum Lamont burning tangles in 1932.

and plentifully.¹⁰

Despite the effort, a small island such as Tiree has limited ability to support an inflated population and by the time of the Potato Famine and the Highland Clearances in the mid 1800s, Tiree was ripe for evictions by the 8th Duke of Argyll (1823–1900). In his report of the kelp industry on Tiree in 1863, Edward Curtis-Stanford of North British

Chemical Company wrote “I found every supply very bad and dear, the people poor and family...no place ever disgusted me so much”¹¹

Today, the kelping tradition continues, albeit at a much smaller scale. Tiree still exports 1-25 tonnes per year, which is processed into alginate and used as a thickener for foods such as ice cream.

Indigenous Architecture

Of all of the distinctive legacies of the isle of Tiree, the most endearing is its unique form of architecture – “the pudding house” – which is indigenous to Tiree. Pudding houses, also known as spotted houses, are characterized by the use of a dark building stone, often blackened by soot, which is then over-pointed with white mortar, resulting in a spotted appearance. Such houses are not seen elsewhere in Scotland.

Another type of traditional croft is the “white house” -- whitened with lime made with limpet shells.

Crofts are long and narrow, and sited to take full advantage of each individual site. They are built “*an iar’s an ear an dachaidh as fhearr, cul ri gaoith agus aghaidh ri grein* (to east and west the house that’s best, back to the wind, face to the sun).”¹²

The ingeniously engineered design speaks to the cultural adaptivity of the *Tirisdeach* (the people of Tiree). A traditional Tiree croft house is built with rough-dressed stones laid in courses without mortar in a double wall. Sand is then used to fill the space between the two walls, resulting in a wall over six feet thick! Two deep inset windows and one doorway are typical. The roof trusses are set directly onto the inside wall and then the water runs off the roof and down between the two stone walls filled with sand. The roof is covered with *sgrothan* (turves) that are cut from the moor. It takes about 1000



Image 13: Detailed photo of a Tiree croft double-walled construction



turnes to cover the average roof and it is reported that a turf roof will last “several lifetimes if well maintained.” The roof is finished with thatch made from the muran grass that grows on the sand dunes. Approximately 300 *squaban* (sheaves) are laid loosely and tied down with an elaborate network of ropes held down with stones. Inside, there is typically a lobby area, kitchen on one side, bedroom on the opposite side and a small bedroom straight ahead. Children would sleep upstairs under the eaves. A croft home could accommodate up to 12 people.

Even the outside of the structure was useful. The six foot wide wall head was used to plant grass, flowers and rhubarb. In the summer, sheep or even cattle would

climb up to graze.

Thankfully, Tiree has made an effort to restore and conserve these wonderful testaments to ingenuity. Twelve traditional thatched crofts have been restored on Tiree, the “highest concentration in Scotland.”¹³

Tiree Today

The island is best known today as the sunniest place in Scotland, a mecca for windsurfers and a proposed site for a massive array for offshore wind power generation. To some, this is problematic because Tiree’s charm is in its unique and fascinating past -- specifically, its unique native architecture, its cultural heritage rooted in its fertile soil, Tiree marble and kelp. Tiree’s future is at a

Image 14: (left) Historical image of Tiree croft house

Image 15: (right) Tiree croft “white house” today



crossroads. Will encroaching modern interests have a detrimental effect on Tiree's rich heritage? I think not. In fact, its cultural and architectural heritage are key to tourism and investment in future stewardship and protection of historic sites. Its seasonal cottagers and windsurfing tourism are a valued source of economic stability for islanders who depend on the hospitality industry. The prosperity of the island may have taken a modern turn, but adaptation and survival has been the hallmark of the *Tirisdeach* for centuries, and there is no reason to believe that the same spirit does not course through the blood of its descendants.

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