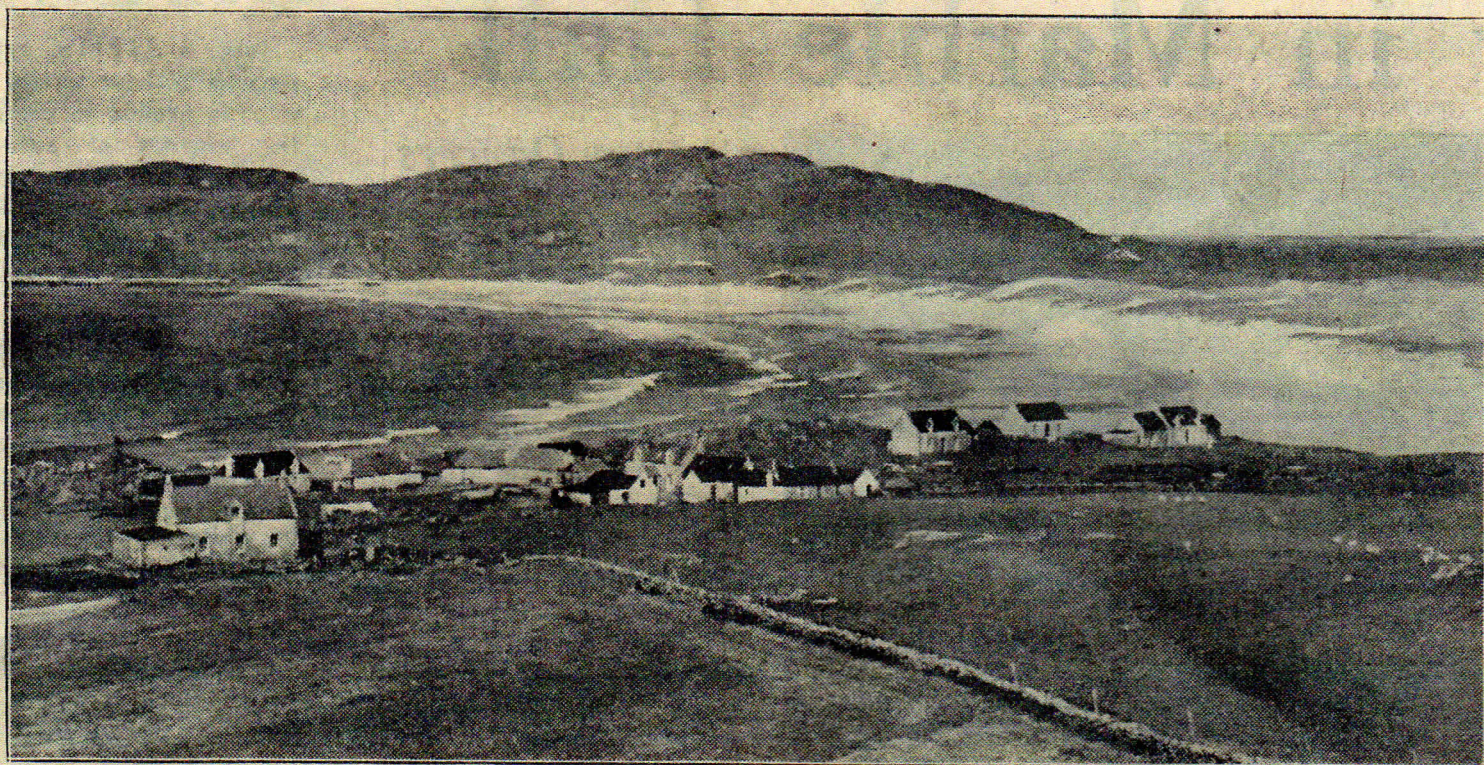


THE MOST HOPEFUL AUGURY FOR THE FUTURE OF THE ISLANDS

The Story Behind the Plans for



A general view of Tiree at Balephuill showing the low-lying sandy character of the island.

Bulbs on Tiree

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In considering Highland economic development it is generally accepted that, no matter how many useful ancillary industries can be attracted to the area, the economy as a whole must be based on agriculture and fisheries. While accepting this general statement it is difficult to see how the Highlands and Islands can compete in the open markets while burdened with crushing transport charges and having not the most productive of soils or most kindly of climates.

The great hope for small engineering units lies in the high value per ton of their products which in turn means that transport charges do not form such a large proportion of the final economic price.

For Early Blooms

It was thoughts along these lines that led the Advisory Service of the West of Scotland Agricultural College to cast about for some product of the soil which from its value for weight could meet transport charges without being doomed to failure from the start. None of the orthodox farm products met that requirement so various market garden products were considered.

In a small way, raspberry canes, blackcurrant bushes, and strawberry plants have been raised in various districts, all with reasonable technical success, but so far it has not been possible to extend the area of these to commercial proportions. The most hopeful line which has been tried and which is being developed is the propagation of bulbs for winter flowering.

Valuable Acres

The public do not as a rule consider very deeply the background of their Christmas hyacinths and the early spring daffodils and tulips which they buy from the florists but these have a long history behind them.

The bulbs take several years in the open field to mature, then they have to be held for a time at specially-controlled temperatures. Thereafter they have to be forced in heat and flowered under glass for the winter and early spring market.

It is to supply these bulbs for



Dr. A. F. R. NISBET

the market gardeners to force for winter blooms that the College field trials have been conducted on the Island of Tiree for the past few years.

The work started in quite a small way on a few square yards in a field on the holding of East Hynish, South Tiree, where a few dozen immature bulbs—daffodils, hyacinths, and tulips—were planted to see how they would react to the soil and climatic conditions there.

Initial Trials

These initial trials were very successful and, each year, the number and variety of the bulbs have been increased both by introducing additional stock and by using the natural increase of those already to hand.

When sufficient bulbs had matured on which to experiment, these were transported to Lanarkshire where they were forced under normal market conditions and put on the Glasgow market without indicating their source. The condition of the blooms and the prices obtained were sufficiently good to encourage the further development of the project.

This has now reached the stage where fully an acre is occupied by various varieties of bulbs—mainly tulips and narcissi, but also some hyacinths. An acre does not sound much in farm economy but it has to be remembered that this represents over 100,000 bulbs with a capital value of £600-£700.

The pilot trials to test whether bulbs could in effect be developed, matured, and satisfactory harvested under Hebridean conditions is now drawing to a close and the stocks

are being taken over by the crofters and smallholders for growing on their own holdings under the technical guidance of the Advisory Service.

There are still many problems to be faced, one of which is the collective marketing of the produce, but consideration is being given to this aspect of the problem which is organisational rather than technical. It can be said, however, that the commercial growers in the industrial areas are much interested in the scheme and it seems as if there would be little difficulty in disposing of supplies for many years to come.

New Methods

Those who have taken part in initiating and fostering this project are fully conscious of the many obstacles yet to be overcome but they are nevertheless hopeful that the scheme does present an opportunity for turning to advantage the naturally-light, not-very-productive machair land and also the equable climate with which the islands are blessed.

The propagation of bulbs is one of the most intensive and most highly capitalised forms of agriculture and is poles apart from the

traditional methods of farming followed in the Islands. The cultural methods are entirely different from anything previously experienced. The treatment of the growing crops against insect and fungus diseases is quite new and the methods of harvesting, ripening, and grading the produce has largely to be learned yet by the prospective growers.

Crofters Hopeful

Nevertheless, the crofters and smallholders see in this an opportunity of turning natural circumstances to good advantage and are taking up the project with enthusiasm. No subsidies or grants have been dangled before them as a bait but, on this one island, over 20 crofters have intimated their wish to take part in the scheme and to purchase sufficient foundation stock to enable them to develop quite a useful acreage within a few years.

The whole attitude of the local population has been most encouraging and belies any indication that the people are not willing to take any action on their own behalf.

It is not claimed or suggested that this project will revolutionise island conditions, but it is quite clear that the attitude of mind has very much changed of late years and is now receptive of any reasonable proposition or opportunity which occurs. In many ways, this is a most hopeful augury for the future.

Shreds and Patches

TALE OF TWO

A postcard which we got at the end of last week from a Norwegian friend showed a placid, peaceful view of the 5000-foot high plateau, Hardangerjökulen, where more than 3000 reindeer were established 40 years ago by the Hardanger Reindeer Co.—more successful in that venture than the importers of reindeer into Scotland have been.

But it isn't my intention to write here about reindeer, still less about the rather sorry story of the Scottish experiment. I want rather to indulge in some meditations arising from the first of the two sentences my friend has written in greeting to Yum-Yum and myself. It was like the beginning of a song, a joyous open-air song. "Marching over the mountains, from

taken at the seat of Government, in Oslo, have the effect of making the feelings of people in Bergen, the ancient capital city (deposed by Oslo at the beginning of the fifteenth century) anything but friendly.

Only last year, Bergen was feeling very sore about the refusal to accept the huge American loan that would have made the shortening of the Bergen-Oslo railway journey possible, thus helping Bergen's inland trade connections—because, of course, merchants in these days can't do business by marching over the mountains like my friend.

Nevertheless, the feelings between those two Norwegian cities are, generally speaking, friendly, and they enjoy pulling one another's legs enormously.