

Tìr an Eòrna

Our History

From the menacing sight of the Viking longboats on the island's beaches to scenes of famine in the nineteenth century, Tìree's history is our story.

Following the Iron Age, Tìree was invaded by the Dál Riata, Scotti who had crossed to Argyll from northern Ireland around 500 AD. They brought Christianity and the Gaelic language. Three hundred years later, however, the island was under attack again, this time from the north.



The Vikings who raided the north and west of Scotland, Ireland and Iceland came from Norway



A 76 foot Viking ship from 900 AD found in a burial mound in Colofud, Norway. Ruffians have crossed the Atlantic.

The Vikings who raided the Shetlands, Orkneys and the west coast of Scotland originally came from Norway. The Norse had developed a new style of boat. These were long and fast, powered with 16 pairs of oars and with a shallow draught that allowed them to land on Tìree's sandy beaches in lightning summer raids. The monastery of Iona was ransacked in 795 and the Norse attacked Tìree for the first time soon after, carrying home both slaves and treasure before the start of the winter gales.

The Viking raiders returned to Norway with stories of Tìree's green farmland. Norse settlers came to live on the island they called Týrvisst (from which comes the name for an islander - a *Tìrreidheach*, pronounced cheer-us-chugh). Over half of the township names on the island are Norse, names like Scarinish (cormorant headland), Barrapoll (farm of the tomb) and Cornaig (corn bay), and it is likely that many of the best farms were taken over by the Norsemen.



Viking township names

Tìree is mentioned in the Orkneyinga Saga from the early twelfth century. The bishop thanked Svein Asleifarson for killing Svein Breast-Rope and called it good riddance. *The bishop let him stay there for the rest of the Christmas season and afterwards sent him to Tìree to a man called Holdbodi Hundason, a great chieftain, who gave him a good welcome.*

Tìree found itself in the centre of a trading route stretching from Dublin to the Isle of Man, Orkney and Norway itself. To a country today centred on Glasgow and Edinburgh, Tìree seems a remote speck on the edge of the Atlantic. In fact, until the 1700s the sea was the easiest way to get around Scotland, and Tìree was at the heart of the west coast economy.

There was more fighting in 1098 when the Norse king, Magnus Barelegs, sent an army down the west coast of Scotland to bring the local chieftains to heel. The sagas tell how,

*Wolves on Tìree's lonely shore
Dyed red their hairy jaws in gore.*

However, the Norse lost control of the island to the Isle of Man. Then in 1156 Somerled, an Argyll chieftain, defeated the Manx king and took over Argyll including Tìree. From him Tìree passed into the hands of the MacDougalls, the MacDonalds and then the MacLeans.

One of these, Lachlan Cattenach MacLean, took over Tìree in 1515. A local story tells of how his wife had begun an affair with an Irish nobleman. Cattenach therefore sent a relative, *Lachainn Fionn*, to Ireland to bring back the nobleman's head, telling him that in payment for his service any future crime would go unpunished. *Lachainn Fionn* did as he was asked and Cattenach duly served the lover's severed head to his wife at breakfast. She died of shock. A few years later one of *Lachainn Fionn*'s horses drowned at the mill in Balinoo. In revenge, a furious *Lachainn Fionn* and his five sons took the miller and hung him on the gallows in front of Island House. Cattenach could only watch.



John Campbell, the 9th Duke of Argyll, who lived from 1723 to 1806. This rich and powerful aristocrat spent most of his life in London but did a lot for the island.

A bankrupt MacLean of Duart sold the island to Archibald Campbell, the eighth Earl of Argyll, in 1674. The island's MacLeans, despite their chief's sale of Tìree, did not go without a fight. Four years later they holed up in a castle surrounded by a moat on the site of the present Island House, forcing the Campbells to lay siege. Tìree has been owned by the Campbells, the Dukes of Argyll, ever since.

When Bonnie Prince Charlie led the 1745 rebellion only four islanders joined the rebel army, but the mood on Tìree was firmly on the Jacobite side. After his defeat at the Battle of Culloden, the Prince fled and hid among the islands on the west coast. It is said the French ship sent to rescue him anchored in Gott Bay and took Donald MacLean from Ruag on board as a pilot. On the way home, with Bonnie Prince Charlie safely on board, the French refused to drop Donald back on Tìree and he had to escape in the ship's dinghy, landing on Coll. He then hid in a cave in Vaul for nine months in case he was linked with the rescue by royalist patrols that scoured the islands looking for the Prince and his men.