

Na taighean tughaidh Below the Thatch

Nestled into the land, the island's unique thatched houses have been designed by history.

Tiree's beautiful thatched houses are unique. Using what came to hand and three thousand years of local knowledge islanders have developed a design that stands up to winds of over 100 miles an hour and driving rain.

This model shows what a traditional Tiree house looks like. Most houses face east - *cùl ri gaoith, aghaidh ri grèin*, back to the wind, face to the sun. The six foot double walls are made of rough stones and, to keep the wind from whistling through the cracks, the space between the two walls is filled with a sand mixture called *an glutadh*.

The roof sits on the inside wall and the rain runs down between the two walls. This leaves a wide *tobhta*, or wall head, where grass and flowers grow, sheep graze and dogs lie in the sun. Timbers for the roof are the most valuable part of the house. Since there are no trees on Tiree, the Duke of Argyll allowed islanders to sail to another of his estates on Loch Sunart to cut wood. Eventually he became fed up with the amount they were taking.

'My Chamberlain continues to complain of abuses committed on my woods by the people of Tiry and says that in a few years they will utterly destroy them'. THE DUKE OF ARGYLL, writing to his factor on Tiree in 1786.



Effie MacDonald at her house in Kilmoluaig in the 1920s

On top of the timbers lie 1,000 *sgrothan*, or turves, laid upside down. These are cut from the *sliabh*, or moor, where the heather roots give them more strength. A man working alone can cut this amount in five days. Over this base the thatch is laid. On Tiree, islanders use *muran*, or marram grass, which grows on the sand dunes at the shore. A man can take a week to collect enough for a house. Houses needed re-thatching every two years. There is now a shortage of *muran* on Tiree. The roof is not fastened onto the walls. Instead it is shaped like an aircraft's wing with a steeper curve at the back causing the wind to push the roof downwards. The front and inside of the house is whitened with lime made by baking limpet shells overnight. Inside the floor is made of mud and clay. To tread it down, sheep are sometimes herded into the new building for a night or a piper will play for the neighbours to dance. Every morning the woman of the house sprinkles the floor with *siaban*, clean white sand from the shore.

Inside there are three rooms. To the left is the kitchen/living room, to the right a *seòmar*, or bedroom, and between the two a little room called the *clòsaid*. Children sometimes sleep in the rafters and houses like this one can be home to as many as twelve people.

By the middle of the nineteenth century islanders started to use tarred felt instead of thatch for the roof and this style is still widely used on Tiree. The term 'black house' is slightly insulting and refers to an older style of house with no chimney where the smoke from a central fire escaped through the thatch. The last house like this was in Moss in the 1850s.

Do visit the thatched house museum in Sandaig owned by the Hebridean Trust.

This panel has been sponsored by John MacKinnon Builders, Kilmoluaig, Tiree