

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS: no. 100

ANEMOMETER

This three-cup anemometer came to An Iodhlann after it was de-commissioned from the Tiree weather station in the 1990s. It is quite a bulky object to store, but wind and weather lie at the heart of what it means to live on this island, and we were never going to refuse it.

The cup anemometer, a device to measure wind speed, was invented by John Robinson of Armagh in 1845. The cup facing the wind 'catches' the force of it more than the cups facing away from the wind, turning the spindle. Robinson's four-cup design was reduced to three in a 1926 upgrade. The mechanism around the spindle below the cups is like a miniature wind turbine: the stronger the wind, the faster the cups rotate and the more current is produced. This anemometer, a Mark 4G, was made by Munro Instruments, a London engineering firm that has its origins in the search for better wind measurement following the 1879 Tay Bridge Disaster. Other designs of anemometers include a hot wire – which cools down more in stronger winds – pressure tubes, such as the standard airport windsock, and a more recent ultrasonic instrument.

The Tiree weather station sent its first report to head office in 1926, after a headmaster at Cornaig School, John Ross, started recording rainfall as a hobby. This caught the attention of the Met Office, which was looking for a steady flow of reliable weather measurements from the Hebrides. At first, the instruments were placed in a fenced-off corner of the school playground and the barometer sat on the headmaster's staircase. The anemometer (which needs to be mounted 10 m. or 33 ft. above the ground) was positioned away from the school buildings above a small hut on the *machair*. When the new Cornaigmore School was built in 1936, with its electricity and flushing toilets, the equipment had to find a new home, and an enclosure was built around the anemometer hut by Hugh MacKinnon, *Eòghann Dhòmhnail* 'The Contractor' of Crossapol. The shuttered concrete perimeter wall and hut are there to this day.

In 1942, the equipment was moved again – this time by the RAF, who had taken over the running of the station – to The Camp in Crossapol, just beside Mr Skinner's shop. To maintain consistency in the readings, the anemometer was left in Cornaig to be read by John MacPhail. In 1946, the RAF weather station was handed back to the Met Office, and re-sited beside an office in the wartime control tower (now demolished, but 100 m east of the present control tower); the anemometer was re-

sited to the airfield in 1956. In 1995, the instruments were moved for the final time to their present position north of the terminal, and Tiree weather station became automatic five years later.

James Turnbull wrote in 1768: '[Tiree] makes a very agreeable appearance, especially in good weather, but in rainy, tempestuous weather everything looks bleak and dismal.' Islanders are well used to the wind; a tempestuous day is described as 'breezy', and many people have told me how they miss the wind if they are living in Glasgow. Our winds have shaped the island, responsible for blasting enormous amounts of shell-sand deep inland to create an island that is the *machair* capital of the world. Our winds are a major selling point with our water-sporting visitors. Our winds provide the financial bedrock for an institution that underpins a lot of our social fabric these days: the Tiree Trust.

We may be accustomed to the wind on Tiree, we may have become used to living around it, but we understand and accept its sometimes-awesome power. *An Eaglais Thin*, Balinoe Free Church, was a 'tin tabernacle' sheeted with corrugated iron. This completely disappeared in 1894 (not during the Tay Bridge Disaster of 1879, as is often said): 'Tiree Church Blown Away: The iron Free Church in Balinoe has been completely destroyed by the gale of the previous night. Not a vestige was left standing on the foundation, some of the material, it is believed, having been blown into the sea. The church, which was a very neat and compact structure, and could accommodate a considerable number of people, was almost new.' Our windiest day since 1926 was 15 January 1968, when a gust of 118 mph was recorded at the Tiree weather station. This storm made 2,000 Glaswegians homeless, but there was fortunately little damage on Tiree; the wooden radio mast on *Beinn Hògh* blew down. In January 2005, the Tiree anemometer broke when the wind speed was 124 mph, a night that brought tragedy to South Uist, where a family of five died trying to escape from flooding around their house.

A sombre note on which to finish this series: four years and one hundred objects chosen from our collection in An Iodhlann. Not always the most valuable, not always the most important, but ones that have made me think most deeply. I will reflect on what the series has taught me in the next issue, but for now, thank you for reading. I will miss them.

Dr John Holliday