

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 12

### WHALEBONE SERVING MALLET

George Holleyman, an RAF policeman who was also a keen archaeologist, found this whalebone serving mallet in a ruined cottage in Caolas in 1942. The whaling industry in Scotland peaked in the middle of the nineteenth century. Whale oil was an important ingredient of jute processing, and was used as a lamp oil and for making soap and latterly margarine. Some Tiree seamen must have signed on, with Greenock the only port on the west coast with a whaling fleet. The last Scottish whaler tied up after its final voyage in 1963. This serving mallet is likely to have been made and used by an unknown whaler from Tiree one hundred and fifty years ago as he sailed around Greenland, although whale bones are often cast up on the shore here and it is possible that it was made locally. The first Royal Naval warship built without sails was the *HMS Devastation* launched in 1871, but sails on large trading ships were found into the twentieth century and the last voyage of the *Mary Stewart* out of Scarinish was in the 1940s.

Ropes on old sailing ships were made of natural fibres like hemp or sisal. While strong, they were liable to chafe and break if they rubbed against a sharp edge. This happened, for example, around the bottom of the shrouds or near the anchor. Sailors therefore spent a lot of their time protecting the ropes' surface from abrasion and water damage. First they 'wormed' the roped, winding string along the grooves. Next they 'parcelled' the rope, by twisting canvas strips along it. Then they 'served' the rope by winding twine tightly over the top using a 'mallet' to twist it tighter. Finally the whole construction was painted with 'slush', a mixture of Stockholm tar, linseed oil and 'Japan drier' (actually a mixture of salts that oxidise the oils to create a hard skin). The rule is, "worm and parcel with the lay (twist of the rope); turn and serve the other way".

Whalers often carved elaborate pictures onto walrus tusks, a practice known as 'scrimshawing'. This simpler bone carving was practical rather than decorative, and has obviously been used, judging by the wear around the head.

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