

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 15

SEAWEED GATHERING RIGHTS

This petition for a larger share of the seaweed coming ashore in Caolas was made around the time of the First World War.

'We hereby make application for regulating use of seaweed. Under present arrangements Isabella MacArthur is only allowed to take seaweed from the boundary of Ruaig to Ardeas, Caolas until old St Patrick's Day [17th March: the 'old' Julian calendar was changed in Scotland to the 'new' Gregorian calendar in 1752 by taking away eleven days. However, people on Tiree were still celebrating the 'old style' New Year into the twentieth century]. After that date she is allowed to go with the other crofters to any part.

Alexander MacArthur is not allowed an equal share like the others. There is a small bay called *Port Ruadh* where he is not allowed to go at any time and another called *Port an Sruthain*, where he is allowed to go when the respondents are along with him.

Alexander Cameron is only allowed to take seaweed from his boundaries at *Miodar* and not allowed to go to any other part of the shore.

All the respondents except Hugh MacLean and Alexander MacLean are allowed an equal share in any part of the shore, except where Isabella MacArthur gets hers before the St Patrick's Day. Hugh MacLean and Alexander MacLean get a half share in *Port Ruadh* for what they are deprived of on the north-west corner at Miodar.

We hold that we are entitled to get an equal share with the respondents in any place where seaweed comes on the shores of Caolas. That is one croft one share.'

This application (An Iodhlann catalogue number 1998.1.12) was made at the beginning of the twentieth century to the Scottish Land Court, which had been set up in 1912, partly to resolve disputes between crofters. The Caolas Grazings Committee had devised a complicated system to regulate seaweed collection in the township, but some crofters obviously felt that it was not fair.

There is a lot of seaweed around Tiree, as any trip to the beach makes clear. Tiree farmers discovered thousands of years ago that it makes a great fertiliser for any crop. Light sandy soil needs more than heavier ground, and a good crofter can read his or her land "like a book", applying seaweed to some areas more than others. Its

effects are short-lived, however, and it needs to be applied every winter. Some lengths of the Tiree coastline receive more cast seaweed than others, depending on the nature and depth of the seabed, the winds and tides. Caolas is actually one of the best-endowed parts of Tiree; in 1794 tenants in the township collected thirty tons of kelp for sale, the second highest amount on the island, and compared to one ton in Kirkapoll.

Nevertheless, tenants competed vigorously to collect the most, and the most suitable, seaweed. Donald MacIntyre, Gott, remembered seaweed coming in at Vaul after a winter storm when he was a boy. There would be twelve carts down at the shore and the oldest man there went along the pile marking foot the extent of the shares in the sand with his foot. One crofter remembered an old man from Ruaig was made to empty his cart after he had taken it from the 'wrong' part of the beach!

Dr John Holliday