

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 18

THE SEWING MACHINE

This gorgeously decorated sewing machine comes from the collection of the late Angus Maclean, The Coolins, Scarinish. It had belonged to his mother-in-law, Margaret Robertson from Broadford on Skye, who had come to Tiree around 1910 to work as the telegraph clerk at Scarinish Post Office.

The sewing machine had been invented in the middle of the nineteenth century by a series of engineers working independently, most notably the American Elias Howe in 1844. Isaac Singer started to manufacture a similar machine in the 1850s, and rapidly grew to become the world's leading producer. Singer set up his British headquarters in Buchanan Street, Glasgow in 1856 to get round Howe's English patent. His first manager there was Alonzo Kimball, who immediately hired John Morton in his sales team. In 1867 Kimball and Morton set up in their own right with a new design aimed at the more industrial sack and sail market. Their most famous machine was in the shape of a standing lion with the machinery cunningly hidden inside the body. The 'Medium' machine was introduced in 1878. Some versions of the 'Medium' were elaborately inlaid with mother-of-pearl, the iridescent lining of the inside of pearl mussel, oyster and abalone shells.

The spool of cotton on top of the machine is also significant for us on the island. J & P Coats were a Paisley firm that surfed the wave of the sewing machine craze, becoming the world's largest manufacturers of cotton thread. The unmarried James Coats junior was one of the wealthy owners of this company, while the whole family became known for its philanthropy. A keen sailor, he came to know the northern and western isles of Scotland well. One of his projects was to donate a library to a number of remote Scottish communities. By 1898 the ferry waiting room in Scarinish (now An Iodhlann) became known as the 'Reading Room' after the Coats' gift, and the five Tiree schools were also endowed with a collection of classics.

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