

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 20

### THE EGG BOX

This week I want to talk about eggs. We often take them for granted today, but during the Second World War they were like gold dust on the mainland. Tiree had plenty of hens and the means to feed them; islanders often sent boxes like this full of eggs to relatives and friends in Glasgow or further afield to help them through the hard times.

As the curtains opened in 1939 on the tragedy that became the Second World War, Britain, with its huge empire, had traded its way into a position where the country imported almost three quarters of its food. German naval strength put intolerable pressure on this fragile lifeline. Within four months bacon, butter and sugar were rationed, and eggs were included in ration books the following year. Adults were rationed to one fresh egg a week, with an additional packet of dried eggs (equivalent to twelve fresh eggs) every month. Vegetarians, children and expectant mothers, and those who laboured in the cold and wet such as farm workers, were allowed eight, rather than three, ounces of cheese a week. Dried eggs came from America and were nutritious - but not universally loved. They tasted fine in baking, but their taste when reconstituted into omelettes or scrambled eggs was, let us say, acquired! Many older people today, who grew up during the war, were put off eggs for life. Eggs were de-rationed in 1953 and ration books were finally abolished in 1954 after fourteen years of austerity.

Islanders have kept domestic hens, duck and geese since at least Viking times; there is a little promontory in Hynish called *Gasamul*, Norse for 'the headland of the geese'. By 1883 the Duke of Argyll was reporting that, 'the island is admirably suited to poultry and there is annually a very large export of eggs, amounting, I have reason to believe, to not less than 50,000 dozen [600,000!].' By the twentieth century eggs were often used on Tiree to 'buy' food from the shops when money was tight. The large areas for the birds to free range, and the delights of the farmyard and dung heap, must have meant that supplemental feeding with coarsely milled oats or barley, or food scraps, was less necessary. Wild bird eggs from seagulls or peewits were also widely collected in early summer on Tiree into the 1950s. Eggs could be preserved for the winter by making them airtight with a coating of lard or isinglass, a thick soup of collagen made from the swim bladders of white fish like cod or ling.

Servicemen stationed to wartime RAF Tiree found islanders happy to trade eggs for cigarettes or other goods from the NAAFI, or just as a gift for 'our boys' a long way

from home. Percy Williams was one. "I experienced a lovely relationship with the crofters. There was never a closed door to me, maybe because I was the only Welshman in the unit and known as "Taffy". I remember speaking one day with a remarkable older person (80 year old). Born, lived and never had left the Isle of Tiree. He wanted to know all about Wales. He was very interested in me speaking Welsh. We were not known as Air Force but as the 'Royal Egg Force'! One of the reasons for that title was that when anyone went on leave they would take us many eggs home as they could carry, and butter also."

The egg postal box pictured could take up to twenty four eggs, but was never actually sent. Inside are cardboard dividers. It is flimsier than modern egg-posting containers and one has the impression that postmen at that time were used to handling this sensitive cargo with the greatest care. We must remember that it was also common at that time to post dead hens, before they were cleaned and dressed, from Tiree to the city with only a label around their necks and another around their feet. Today the only eggs that are routinely posted are hatching eggs for those wanting to restock their flock.

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