

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 27

THE LEAD-ACID ACCUMULATOR

This glass box was an early form of electrical battery, allowing the first radio broadcasts to be heard on Tiree in the 1920s and helping families on the island follow news about the Second World War. As such, they were a familiar sight in many Tiree houses in the 1930s and 40s, until the mains electricity grid was set up on the island in the 1950s.

The BBC broadcast its first radio programme from a studio at Glasgow's 202 Bath Street on 6 March 1923 with a pipe band playing the tune 'Hey Johnnie Cope'. Nine months later the first Gaelic broadcast featured a religious talk from Aberdeen. Early radio sets used crystal detectors. These are known as passive receivers and work without a power source, using the energy of the radio waves alone. However, because of this they only produce a faint signal and need to be used with earphones. Later in the 1920s amplifying receivers became available: these needed an external power source, but in return had loudspeakers so that a family could gather round and listen together to a broadcast. Neil MacDonald, *Niall Tais*, heard his first radio in 1926 when the travelling salesman Peter MacNeill from Colonsay set up his radio and aerial on *An Cnoc Mòr* in Balemartine. MacNeill was immediately surrounded by a crowd, listening for the first time to speech coming from a box. After the initial wonder had worn off Neil realised that he couldn't understand a word: it was only later that the penny dropped that he was listening to English!

Until the 1950s the power source for radios was an accumulator like this. The glass case enclosed two lead electrodes immersed in a solution of sulphuric acid. The whole thing was protected by a wooden carrying case. Every week or two the accumulator had to be charged by an electrical generator; it then functioned as a two volt DC (direct current) battery.

In 1930s Tiree the weekly *Oban Times* was the nearest thing to the twenty-four hour news cycle. So listening to a daily BBC news bulletin became very common, particularly as world peace became threatened as 1939 unfolded, and re-charging facilities became important. In addition, by the 1920s cars came fitted with an electric starter, rather than needing to be cranked into life. An early one was in Scarinish. Sam Stevenson from Glasgow had lost a leg during the First World War. He came to work on Tiree soon after and bought a corrugated iron shed on the site of today's pier car park as a place to live and work. Being a talented engineer, he rigged up a windmill that ran a twelve-volt system and he was able to charge car batteries and radio accumulators. The new Cornaig School opened in 1936 with a diesel

generator that charged a bank of fifty batteries, which lit the schoolrooms and (fascinatingly) powered a small vacuum cleaner in the headmaster's house. The arrival of the RAF in 1940 meant an explosion in the number of generators, including proper power stations for the airport complex itself and the large and important radar station behind Ben Hough. Duncan Grant remembers walking to the Radio Location Station on the Ruaig *machair*, being careful not to spill the corrosive acid contents of the accumulator onto his bare legs. Duncan MacPhail remembers asking for the same favour from soldiers in the army huts at *Crom na Creige* in Balinoe. John Fletcher remembers leaving his family's accumulator outside the front door "like a milk bottle" for George Haden, who worked at the power house but who lived in Hynish, to pick up on his way to work in the 1950s.

Eventually the electrical grid we take for granted today was rolled out, one end of the island at a time. The entry in the Heylipol School Log Book of 16 March 1956 was:

'Today is a special day in Tiree's history. At 3pm Mrs Hunter, wife of the local doctor, is to turn on the current to light up the east end of the island under the Hydro-electric scheme. We hope we will be in the same position before next winter.'

House by house these accumulators became redundant as mains electricity with its vastly more powerful 230 volt alternating current lit our houses and powered the glowing machines that increasingly dominate our lives.

Dr John Holliday