

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 29

THE HORN SPOON

This small horn spoon was found on a rubbish dump in Balevullin by George Holleyman during the Second World War. Decorative horn spoons are still made and found in gift shops, but this simple, robust spoon would have been common in Tiree houses since medieval times. In more recent times they were made on the island by Travelling People.

Spoons have been around since ancient times, but the older Tiree diet may not have had a great need for them. Martin Martin wrote in 1695 that 'The natives [on Tiree] for the most part live on barley bread, butter, milk, cheese, fish, and some eat the roots of silverweed. There are but few that eat any flesh [meat], and the servants use water-gruel [a thin 'drinking' porridge made with oats or barley, either cooked or uncooked] often with their bread. In plentiful years the natives drink ale generally.' Much of this food could have been drunk from a bowl or mopped up with some unleavened bread, in the way that we might eat an Indian curry with a chapati. But stews were made for special occasions, and when sugar and tea arrived on the island in the second half of the nineteenth century, spoons would have come into their own.

The well-known traveller Alec John Williamson was born into a Gaelic-speaking family in Edderton, Ross-shire. He said 'It was horn that was the big thing with us, before the tin came in. Tinsmithing came in the nineteenth century with electroplating; before that it was all horn – spoons, powder horns, drinking horns. And before that it would have been the old metalwork, copper, bronze, pewter, blacksmithing.'

The first mention of Travelling People on Tiree is in the 1841 Census when a John Stewart, aged twenty and described as a 'pedlar', is listed as staying in a fisherman's house in Caolas. The island's minister Rev John Gregorson Campbell wrote 'Some fifteen or twenty years ago [in the 1850s] a party of tinkers quarreled and fought, first among themselves, and then with some Tiree villagers'. After that small parties of travelling people became a common sight during the Tiree summer, selling their tin mugs and basins. Families used to camp on waste ground, and one such spot was the fang on the Balevullin *sliabh*. On the corner of the Moss-Hough road is a faint ruin called *Bothag Norris* after one such visitor. In fact the 1891 Census lists James Norris,

70, a traveling 'tinker' from Mull, with his wife Ann Norris, aged 68, from Thurso, Caithness, living in Scarinish. Both spoke Gaelic and English.

Horn spoons were made from cow horns, which would have been available when animals were slaughtered, probably not that common an event in the old days. Cleaning the gooey middle out was not a pleasant task, and sometimes horns were simply buried or left in water for several weeks to let nature take its course. The rough spoon shape was cut out with a small saw. After putting the rough spoon in boiling water for five minutes, it softened enough to be filed and pressed into shape. It was then trimmed with a small, curved knife called a *leigis*, and then polished with a finer file called a *lìomhan*, before being shined with lard or tallow.

This spoon was collected by George Holleyman, who was posted to Kilkenneth in 1941 as an RAF policeman. Holleyman was from Sussex and had worked as an archaeologist with Dr Cecil Curwen, himself very interested in the Hebrides and a man who had taught himself Gaelic. Holleyman's posting was, therefore, not unwelcome, and he spent his off duty time poking around the huge areas of open sand dunes in Balevullin and Balephuill. He gifted his valuable collection to An Iodhlann, and we are indebted to him and to Linda Gowans for bringing so many of his finds to national attention.

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