

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 3

CLYDESDALE STUD BOOK

Horses provided the strength that powered the island's agriculture since the *Scotti* people arrived on Tiree from northern Ireland around 300 AD. This page from a Clydesdale Stud-Book is a reminder from a later period of the crucial importance of Clydesdale horses to the Tiree economy from the 1870s to the start of the Second World War.

The Clydesdale breed as a heavy horse had its origins in Lanark in the eighteenth century. In addition to farm work, the Clydesdale found a niche in the developing cities of the Industrial Revolution, pulling everything from brewers' carts to coal wagons. In 1864 the young Ayrshire farmer Tom Barr moved to Tiree to take up the tenancy of the large farm of Balephetrish. He brought with him a Clydesdale stallion and islanders quickly realised its potential. A Tiree Heavy Horse Breeding Society was set up and Barr commissioned to bring two further Clydesdale stallions to Tiree to start a breeding programme. The cross-Clydesdales produced with native mares proved particularly popular in Glasgow as they trotted faster and were cheaper to feed than the pure bred horses. The export of these horses to as far afield as New Zealand became the main source of income for Tiree crofters. Hector MacPhail made this point,

'The horse not only did the heavy work on the island. It was also the crofters' main source of income. Over a hundred foals were born here every year and these were usually sold out as two year olds which would fetch as much as five or six two- to three- year-old bullocks...There was a family of MacLeans in Kenovay. They lived where Fiona Maxwell had a craft shop. And one of these men, Charles (*Tèarlach Ghilleasbuig*), he sold a stallion pony before the First World War for £600. That was a colossal heap of money in those days...You know the story. *Tèarlach Ghilleasbuig* got up this morning. And his brother, *Ailean*, was still upstairs. 'Where are you going?' [*Ailean* shouted down]. 'I'm going for a wee visit to New Zealand!' [*Tèarlach* replied, as he walked out the door]

The Clydesdale Horse Society's annual Stud-Book (first produced in 1877) was carefully read by many crofters on the island. John Maclean, Cornaigbeg, the father of *Ailig Mòr*, was one of the leaders in the field, walking the chosen stallion from croft to croft and looking after the mainland Clydesdale breeders when they came to Tiree. This is a page from John's stud-book, showing the details of a two year

pedigree colt. The days of the working horse were numbered, however. Within the next few years the little grey Fergusson tractor changed the Tiree landscape forever.

Dr. John Holliday