

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 30

THE PRISONER-OF-WAR'S PICTURE

This foil picture was made by an Italian prisoner of war on Tiree. It has been made on the back of a pane of glass which has been painted black, with the image created from shapes cut out from the lining paper of a cigarette packet. A Dutch visitor to An Iodhlann a few years ago identified this image from the boy's style of dress. It shows a fisherman from Volendam, a port twenty kilometres north of Amsterdam. The picture is one of a pair; its companion piece is a lady in a crinoline. Both of these were quite common images and probably came from an old magazine.

Tiree seems an unlikely place for a prisoner of war camp, but one hut just to the east of the present Business Centre in Crossapol was marked 'POW accommodation' on the wartime map of RAF Tiree. They were brought to the island to work.

"They built this pump house on the other side of the loch [*Loch Phuill*] there. And it was an eight inch pipe of cast iron. And they started digging there. And you couldn't see right along the place, they were so near each other, I would say two feet apart. I would say about four or five hundred [of them]. They were digging along. They started at the loch, and there was other ones building big cast tanks, there was two side by side. There was valves on it, and there was a big cage in the middle of the loch ... That's the first water that was supplied [to the camp]. They were never left on their own. This certain plane was coming in all the same with their letters and stuff. They were well looked after." (David McClounnan, Balephuill)

As time went on they could be found wandering around on their own.

"I remember when I was shepherding over there up at Hugh MacLean's [in Barrapol]. I used to take the cattle down from there because they belonged to Hector MacKinnon. It was not fenced at that time. And this bloke came where I was. And I had a watch, one with a chain on, in the top pocket. And [the Italian prisoner of war] was talking to me. I couldn't work out one word! And I started talking to him in Gaelic. And he was as bad as me! And at last he [gestured] to the chain, and his watch wasn't wound. And I knew then that he wanted the time, and I held the watch out to him ... They were like prisoners, more or less, you know [in] prison clothes. And you see those papers that were in the packets of cigarette at that time, it was Capstan mostly that was there. They were making great belts from them to go round your waist. They were great with their hands." (David McClounnan, Balephuill)

They used their time to make things from waste material, which they could sell or exchange for things like eggs.

"The [Italian POWs] were great boys for making leather belts made with laces. They were good with their hands, very artistic. It was free for them to move around. They weren't allowed to go to the pier or anything like that. I haven't met any of them, but I heard tell of them, all the same. They always made to get little things, the top of a cigarette packet, cut it in such a way that it would make a nice picture out of it. They were very good." (Hugh MacLean, Barrapol)

"[The Italian POWs] were walking about, they weren't locked up. Quite a lot of the locals got on well with them ... They made lighters out of bullets. They used to put a screw in the end to put the fuel in and then there was a wheel soldered up the side of it, and the wick was where the end of the bullet used to be. And then the end of the bullet was screwed on [the top]. You gave them two buttons, the like of army buttons. They would make a lighter out of that. They would get a brass nut and put a button on both sides to close it up. [They also] made toys out of tin cans. But I never met any of them at all." (John George MacLean, Scarinish)

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