

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 31 THE TIREE SPINNING WHEEL

This beautiful spinning wheel was made over a hundred years ago by Archie MacLean, Cornaigmore. It has been kindly lent to An Iodhlann by Mary MacLean, Scarinish.

Hugh MacLeod, *Eòghann Charrachain*, remembered Archie well. "*Èirdsidh Tuairneir* was the brother of *Dòmhnall an Tuairneir* in Whitehouse. His father [Charles] was a turner and it was he who taught Archie. He was making spinning wheels, lots of things, bannisters ... He was making a few coffins as well, I remember that! He had a small felt house [*Taigh Èirdsidh an Tuairneir*] with a workshop beside it. He worked the machine with two feet on pedals, his feet going up and down and turning the wheel. It was amazing to see; there was no electricity then! He later built a small tin hut beside the big house."

Archie was born in 1849. His father Charles was a 'wheelwright and turner' as well as a crofter. His mother Christina had come to Tiree to be the housekeeper for her brother-in-law, the Reverend Archibald Farquharson, the Congregational minister who lived in the manse beyond Whitehouse.

Hugh continued: "Every house had a spinning wheel in these days. [Archie] was making them for the whole island. It took a while to make them; they were quite complicated. He was good at any kind of woodwork - I'm not saying he could have built a house - but [he could make] furniture, or anything fancy. He could make table legs, round ones. There wasn't anyone else on the island doing that sort of thing."

Yarn has been spun in Scotland from sheep's wool for five thousand years. This was done with a drop spindle, which consisted of a wooden rod or dowel with a stone or clay whorl disc at its base. The spindle was twisted round as it pulled down the yarn. The great advantage of this method was that it could be done while walking. The spinning wheel was invented in India at about the time Viking longships were landing on Tiree's beaches, but didn't reach the Highlands until the 1850s. 'In the Hebrides in 1850 most of the women were still using the spindle. Yet by 1884 very few women were said to be using it.' The 1861 Tiree Census counted 26 woolspinnners (using a spinning wheel) and three 'spindlers of wool'. Despite their late arrival on the island, there were a number of superstitions about their use, one of which was that the band should be taken off the wheel at night to prevent fairies from using it.

Spinning wheels produce yarn much more quickly than a spindle. But they had to be used sitting at home, which encouraged some women to make it their trade. Almost everyone on Tiree wore clothes made with tweed made on the island, and it was said that one weaver needed the yarn from three spinners. In 1851 there were forty-eight weavers (all women apart from one man). As world markets brought factory-made fabrics to the island (the spinning jenny was widespread in English wollen mills by the 1820s), demand for hand-spun wool or hand loomed tweed fell. By 1911 there were just two active weavers on Tiree, along with five spinners and three stocking knitters, although An Iodhlann does have a number of photographs from the 1920s of island women at their spinning wheels. As demand for hand-spun wool fell, so too did the demand for Archie's hand-made wheels.

This is a 'cocked up' Saxony type spinning wheel, where the wheel and spindle are on the same level. The double band around the wheel drives both a spindle to twist the wool and a hake to wind the yarn. It is stamped 'A MACLEAN' at the front of the base. Archie posted his wheels all over the country. We know of one in Sussex that is now in Germany.

Archie himself remained unmarried. He died in 1942 at the age of 93, and is buried in *An Cladh Beag* 'the small graveyard' in Kirkapol.

Dr John Holliday