

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 33

THE TIREE THATCHED HOUSE

Made by technical teacher Ron Stirrat with Edward Rose some years ago, this beautiful scale model of the Sandaig thatched house museum is probably our most talked-about exhibit.

Tiree's thatched houses are a signature of the island's landscape. Other islands have similar designs, but the low, curved profile of the Tiree version is instantly recognisable.

There are four reasons for this. The local stone, Lewisian gneiss, is virtually unworkable, so house builders had to make do with the glacial boulders lying on the hillsides and fields. Unshaped stones are unstable, so the walls were built low and thick, with a layer of sand in the middle of a stone 'sandwich'. This produced walls that were up to eight feet thick, thick enough to keep out the wind, warm enough to retain the heat, and strong enough to support the full weight of a rain-sodden roof.

Wood is difficult to source, coming for many years from the Duke's oak woods on the north bank of the Sound of Mull. Tiree also suffered for many years from fuel poverty, as peat banks were emptied. A low, tight roof meant a space that was easier to heat.

Lastly the flat Tiree landscape gave little shelter from the winter gales. If you go to Coll, you'll find real trees growing in the middle of the *sliabh*: that's how much protection you get from just a few undulations. Additionally, with Hebridean houses always built with their backs to the main southwesterly gales, the roof timbers at the back were cut a foot shorter to give a steeper slope. Thatch was put on thicker in the middle of the pitch, and along the ridge there were two ridgepoles instead of one, meaning the Tiree roofs were much more rounded than on other islands.

The roof timbers were first covered with turfs cut from the *sliabh* with a flaughter spade. The moorland soil, with its heathery roots, was stronger. An average roof might need a thousand turfs: five days work. The preferred material for thatching was bent or marram grass. This is flexible, fine and water-repellant. About five hundred sheaves would do. A new roof had to be thatched every year, but more 'mature' roofs could be left for two or three years. Cutting the bent is hard work, mainly because the sickle or scythe becomes blunted by the sand every few minutes. Bent is also much less common than it used to be probably, because the large areas of 'blown sand', where bent thrives, are now grass. Thatched roofs have been held

down with chicken wire since the 1950s, but before that elaborate webs made of hand-twisted straw ropes were created, held down by a line of anchor stones.

The old houses had no windows (glass did not feature in the houses of most crofters and cottars until the 1850s), and the door was made of sheaves of straw bound together. The peat fire was in the middle of the floor, with two small vents cut into the thatch just above the wall head. One of these was closed, depending on the wind direction. The door was kept open most of the day, summer and winter, something you still occasionally see today on Tiree. Often the interior was divided with framed clay and pebble partitions into a bedroom end and the *ceann-an-tinidh* 'the fire end'. Between the two there was often a small room known as *an closaid*, a loan word from the Scots 'closet'.

When coal became more popular, in the late nineteenth century, the hotter fires were moved to the gable walls, small ranges installed and tower chimneys built, usually leaning outwards slightly in case of accidents!

There are fewer thatched houses on Tiree than there used to be, but their graceful shape finds a faint echo in the popular black tar-roofed houses that are still so popular.

Dr John Holliday