

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 35

UNDERCLOTHES MADE FROM FLOUR SACK

This exquisite pair of *drathais*, or women's underclothing, has been in our collection since 1997. It has become one of the most shown items from our collection, although it has rarely been exhibited in public because of its fragility.

The drawers were made from a cotton flour sack. The maker's name is still visible: Harter. The Isaac Harter Company, set up in Fostoria in 1886, was the largest milling operation in the state of Ohio. The company was taken over by its manager in 1897 following the death of its founder Michael D Harter. It then traded under a different name, and so the material used in these underclothes must date from the period 1886 to 1897.

The drawers have been made with flat felled seams using a sewing machine. Flat felled seams are found today on the inside legs of most modern jeans, where they are stronger and more comfortable than standard seams. In addition, the legs of these drawers have been ornamented with tatting. Shuttle tatting became very popular in the last decades of the nineteenth century. This form of needlework may have originated in the decorative knots made by sailors. Using only a shuttle and white thread, it was designed to imitate point lace.

Tiree has been self-sufficient in cereals since prehistoric times. Indeed barley grain was probably exported in bulk by sea in the medieval period. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, many Tiree households were buying sacks of oatmeal, flour and maize meal to fill the three compartments of the kitchen *gèirneal* 'girnel' from companies such as MacFarlane Shearer and Co. of Greenock. The huge wheat fields of North America, combined with the availability of cheap cotton for sacking, encouraged the wheat export trade from the United States.

The cotton used in these sacks was too good to waste, and it became common in many communities to make clothing from them: dresses, aprons, shirts and underclothes. There was usually an effort to remove the maker's name, as using flour sacking for clothing was a sign of poverty. To do this, the name was scrubbed with soap and left in the sun to bleach. However, the name was often still visible, and in underclothing it was less important. One apocryphal story from America had a woman leaving the words 'Self Rising' on the drawers she made for her husband from a feed sack. In the 1930s, this form of clothing became so popular that flour and animal feed sacks were even being made from brightly patterned cloth to attract customers. As late as the 1950s, cotton bag sewing contests, sponsored by the

American National Cotton Council and the Textile Bag Manufacturers Association, were popular. This tradition has lasted to the present day amongst the Amish communities, who aspire to live a simple Christian life.

These drawers, easy to see as 'primitive', are a finely made example of home needlework from a world where money was tight and clothing shops out of reach.

Dr John Holliday