

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 36

SHINTY BALL

This small, black ball came to An Iodhlann from a dusty cupboard at the school. It is likely to date from the time of Allan MacDougall, the head teacher at Cornaig School between 1938 and 1969. Despite being weakened by an attack of polio as a boy, MacDougall was extremely fit, and very keen on sport, especially shinty. Shinty sticks were donated to the school by *Comunn na h-Òigridh*, the young people's branch of *An Comunn Gàidhealach*. As Angus MacKechnie remembered: "The biggest sport was shinty. It wasn't the most popular sport with the pupils, but Mr MacDougall was a great man for 'must play shinty'." Gordon Connell agreed:

When I came to Tiree at first [1962] shinty was the poor relation of football, much to the chagrin of Mr MacDougall, because he was a great shinty man. He used to take the football and lock it in the cupboard and make the kids play shinty, which didn't endear the boys to shinty. However, there were shinty sticks of sorts. They were just bits of tree trunks with a bend in the end of them! There was a time in the 1970s and '80s when shinty wasn't played an awful lot on Tiree, but it was revived by the *Fèis*.

There is a lot of evidence that shinty was played between some Tiree townships, particularly in the west end of the island, until about 1910. The stretch of *machair* between Heylipol and Balinoe was one place used for matches. One game played over two hundred years ago has lived long in the memory:

[The factor Donald Campbell, the Duke's agent on the island from 1770 to 1800] was a very nice man ... He had two sons ... Between the pillar [box] at the factor's house and the church down at Balinoe. The level ground that is there. They used to be playing hockey [shinty] there. And this *Donnchadh Bàn* [Fair Duncan MacDonald] used to tell my father that when the factor's sons would be running, you would fancy it was horses that was running. The ground was shaking under their feet!

Both sons followed their father into the army, but died in Spain during the Peninsular war against Napoleon. Angus Lamont was born at *Lag nan Cruachan* in Cornaigmore around 1844. He went to Glasgow to study medicine, but gave it up to go to sea, where he rose to become a captain. His best-known song includes the lines:

'S gur iomadh fear is aithne dhomh, / 'S a chaman ùr fo achlais. / 'Dol dh'ionnsaigh na Cloich Ghlaise, / Ged tha mise 'tarring ròpa.

And I know many a man, / With his new shinty stick under his arm / Will be making for the Grey Rock, / Although I am hauling a rope. [Shinty was played at *A' Chreag Ghlas* or *An Clach Ghlas* 'the grey rock', part of the Balevullin *machair* near the site of today's phone box.]

John MacLean, the Balemartine Bard, wrote these lines in *Òran Mhanitoba* about two brothers who emigrated to Canada in 1878: "In my youth I was unruly like the others / I loved shinty and ball games / But I dropped my old pastimes / When I said goodbye to *Baile nam Bàrd*" [township of the Poets, as Balephuill was known] (translated by Professor Donald Meek).

The Balephuill painter Duncan MacGregor-Whyte's painting 'The Shinty Boy', a study of his son 'Bunty', is owned by Argyll and Bute Council, and used to (and maybe still does) hang in the Corran Halls in Oban. Finally, Donald Sinclair, West Hynish, remembered:

They used to be playing shinty on New Year's Day. It was a great game, playing shinty! Not in my time [he was born in 1885]. It was in my father's time it was in full swing. Barrapol and the Balephuill people would be at shinty on New Year's Day, out on the *machair* there. Plenty of whisky, plenty of ruffians too! Wild men! Many's the time they [fought]. In my father's time, there was an old Christian man in Balephuill. And they were looking up to him to be the only good man in the village. On New Year's Day, when the shinty would start, this old man would go down among the boys and he would bless them: 'Now boys, see as you don't get drunk and don't be fighting!' They were believing he was a Christian man! They were obeying his orders, for years and years. A good man ... a MacDonald.

Dr John Holliday

