

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 38

HARVEST KNOTS and HORSE ROSETTES

These three harvest knots were made in 2003 by Lachie MacLean, Druimfraoich, having been taught the skill by his father. The length of straw between the top nodes is cut, and then the outer skin, or epidermis, is peeled away. Two or three pieces are bound together at one end with cotton, plaited, then made into a simple knot and secured with another piece of thread. More elaborate ones, sometimes including the ears of the corn, were also created for girls to wear. These knots, known in Scots as *hairst roses*, were often made at the end of the harvest, worn as love tokens or made into horse decorations. One tradition had it that if a farm labourer placed one on the shoe of his master, he would be given a bottle of whisky. These customs were found from Ireland to Orkney. However, I can find no Gaelic word for it, and it is likely to have been an English and Lowland Scottish custom that settlers to Ulster and the Northern Isles took with them. In the nineteenth century, it was very common for young men and women from Tiree to work on the Lowland harvest, and they probably returned home with this tradition.

These beautiful horse decorations were also made on the island. Horses were fundamental to crofting work, but there was also great demand in the cities for Tiree Clydesdale crosses between the 1880s and the 1940s. With so much at stake, crofters became extremely competitive in displaying their horses to best advantage at the Cattle Show. This had started at Scarinish School by 1877, the chamberlain describing it in 1883 as being for "cattle, horses and butter". Horses were brushed, groomed and decorated with rosettes such as these. Horses were also prepared lovingly for the Salen Fair in Mull. Donald Sinclair, West Hynish, remembered:

There were only two times of the year that the tailor was kept busy [the other was at the New Year]. That was the time the horse sale was at Mull, and you had to leave Tiree with your horse and go to Mull. Well, he would be busy then making trousers and drawers and all this lot ... Salen, Mull ... (A nice place. And there's a hotel there. And in my time [he was born in 1885] it was a Tiree man that was running it. A MacDonald from Mannal) ... July, as far as I remember ... Every crofter was going with a horse. He would get a chance to buy another horse to replace it. But better than that, maybe a young horse was coming on and he would be fit for the ploughing in the spring. They were selling the older horses. It would be a very good horse that you would get £20 for ... Clydesdales.

Dr John Holliday

Three images: harvest knots, rosettes, and photograph of Archie MacDonald of Melness, Cornaigbeg at the 1921 Horse Show