

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 38

GREENER BELL GUN

(Warning: this article is about the art of skilled butchery. Please don't read any further if this would upset you.)

This humane killer was given to Robert Beck, the island vet, in the 1960s. It is a form of gun, a form designed to be fired at very close range, killing large farm animals instantly. 'Greener's Humane Horse (or Cattle) Killer' (it could also be used with sheep) was invented in Birmingham in 1865, principally for use in the new industrial abattoirs of the time. It uses round-tipped, lead bullets, usually of .310 calibre. It was important to use the correct ammunition, as the manufacturer's bullet was engineered to end up in precisely the right part of the animal's brain. The bell gun was best applied directly to the centre of the animal's head, just above the eyes. By the beginning of the twentieth century, almost every country vet would carry one, and they were standard issue to farriers and vets in the British Army during the First World War. During this conflict, eight million horses died, many being put down for their wounds. Many later vets, less practised in handling guns, disliked using them. The bell gun needed two hands, one to hold the gun tightly to the head, and one for the wooden mallet used to strike the firing pin. This made it difficult to stop the animal from moving at the last moment. If the bullet passed through the animal, there was a danger it could ricochet from nearby walls, and it was much safer to use outside.

Although animals were usually considered too precious to eat on Tiree before the nineteenth century, many islanders became adept at slaughter (usually by cutting the animal's throat) and butchering. The first commercial butcher on the island was Malcolm MacKinnon of Moss, who set up shop in Scarinish around 1910. Annie Kennedy from Scarinish she remembered him when I recorded her in 1998:

Calum MacKinnon, *Calum Dhòmhnaiill* or *Calum Buidsear*, was the first butcher [on Tiree]. He was from Moss; the house is opposite Alec MacPhail's. He started butchering and he did very well. There wasn't a butcher on the island before that. You maybe killed a sheep or a pig or whatever. And of course, no deep freezes; it was salted. I can still remember the tubs, whatever creature was in it: a cow or whatever. That was the only means they had of keeping it fresh ... The butcher's shop was in the same place as it is today [where Nan's shop was]. The slaughterhouse was where the *greusaiche* 'cobbler' did his shoe repairs. I don't remember the *greusaiche* himself, but I remember his donkey! He was from West

Hynish, and went home every weekend. But he had his shoe repair business in Scarinish.

Hugh MacLean in Salum was another who had a butcher's shop. His slaughterhouse seems to have been a lean-to at the back of Ruaig School. It was later that it became compulsory to have a vet present in the slaughterhouse. The Highlands and Islands Veterinary Services Scheme was set up in 1915 to support vets in the Crofting Counties. But it was not until 1932 that Duncan MacLean, *Donnchadh Dhòmhnail 'ic Nèill*, from Balevullin qualified as a vet with the encouragement of DO MacLean, the respected headmaster of Cornaigmore School. He returned to work on Tiree.

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