

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 4

### *A' Chailleach*

This beautifully decorated sheaf of oats was a common sight a hundred years ago above the hearths of Tiree. The belief that the corn-spirit lived in the crop itself, giving it the strength to grow vigorously, goes back to the dawn of agriculture. The last sheaf of the harvest was thought to contain the spirit's concentrated essence. It was kept until the next spring when it was fed to the animals to give them the strength to start the farming year all over again after a harsh winter. Donald Sinclair in West Hynish remembered the custom in 1971. 'The last handful [of corn] they cut, they dress it up in pretty paper. They hang it up on the wall and it stays there all year till the next year. It's good luck...and when a cow is going to calve she gets a handful of straws from the *Cailleach* and that's luck on the cow...they would give it to the horses when they were going to start ploughing. Weren't they superstitious?'

But at the same time, the corn-spirit had an unwelcome side too. The *Cailleach* was passed from crofter as they finished harvesting, leaving the last in the township to keep the *Cailleach* over the winter. That crofter had the responsibility of providing for the corn-spirit through the lean months. Donald Sinclair remembered this side of her too. 'Everybody was doing his best so as not to have the *Cailleach*. It was the last man that was finished, that man was to keep the *Cailleach*...in his house, and he was to feed that *Cailleach* the year round till next year...that was meaning bad luck to you.' The *Cailleach* in An Iodhlann's collection was made for us by Hector Campbell, Cornaigbeg.

Dr John Holliday