

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 41

AM BRANGAS

This is a *brangas*, a halter made with two wooden cheek-pieces and rope.¹ This one was found in his stackyard by Donald MacKinnon of Hough in 2006, and we are fortunate that Donald had both the knowledge to recognise it and the expertise to repair it. The *brangas* was used for tethering horses and cattle in the byre or field, or for leading a team of packhorses with a *taod* 'head rope'. The Gaelic word *brangas* is a loan from the Scots *branks*. The wooden cheek pieces gave slightly more control over the horse than a simple rope halter, and the *brangas* was also used for riding by those who could not afford a bridle. The wooden *brangas* was also found in the Northern Isles, and antler cheek-pieces from a halter dating from the Bronze Age have been found in central Europe.

The rope used to make a *brangas* would originally have been made from marram grass or straw, and from the 1850s out of *sìoman ruadh* 'coir rope'. This was made from the husks of coconut. The cheek pieces were made from the staves of an old barrel, which were suitably curved, strong and smooth. Barrels were quite common on the island, used to transport and store many things. By 1764, salted beef was being exported in barrels from Tiree, because cattle from the island often became ill and died as they were driven through the Ross of Mull. The minister also reported in 1792 that two to three hundred barrels of whisky were sold every year from this barley-rich island. And in 1845, the minister recorded that: "[Whales stranded on the shore] are commonly from fifteen to twenty feet long, and their blubber yields about a barrel of oil each." In the Gott Bay herring boom between 1914 and 1921, the pier was piled high with barrels to carry away the salted fish. Charles MacMillan, a teacher's assistant from Mannal, is remembered to have been so athletic that he could jump into, and then out of, an empty herring barrel without using his hands. Oak barrels are still widely used to age, and add flavour to, wine and whisky. Cooperage was a skilled trade, demanding a seven-year apprenticeship. Donald Kennedy, 71, in Balephuill and Lachlan MacLean, 58, Kirkapol, were both recorded as "coopers" in the 1871 Census.

But the word *branks* had another, more sinister, meaning as a 'Scold's Bridle'. This was, as a 1772 description goes: "An instrument of punishment ... a sort of head-piece, that opens and incloses the head of the impatient, while an iron, sharp as a chizzel, enters the mouth." These were used all over Europe from the sixteenth to

¹ An Iodhlann cat. no. 2007.9.2

the eighteenth centuries to punish women who talked out of turn, or who were suspected, in a minor way, of practising witchcraft. A *branks* was often displayed by the authorities in a public space, like a marketplace or a church, to cow women into obedience. Men were rarely punished in this way. A prehistoric standing stone in Strontian had an iron ring stuck into it, and was known as *Clach a' Bhrangais* or the 'Penance Stone'. As in other churches in the Highlands, the *brangas* was also used to humiliate offenders on Tiree into the nineteenth century, as Donald Sinclair from West Hynish recalled when he talked to John MacInnes in 1968:

John MacInnes: 'Were they putting the branks on people and a lead rope [on Tiree]?'

Donald Sinclair: 'Yes!'

'And were they leading the person around by pulling on the rope?'

'No! They were putting it on in front of everyone in the church as a warning. I remember the grandson of the last person who had the branks put on him. And his brother stood up in church and took the branks off him. He said no one should have a branks put on them. And no one did have the branks put on them after that!'

'And was the minister there?'

'Yes. The minister was in front of them all organising it. I think there were branks in every place. Duncan Bàn was talking about it too'.²

The 'Fair Duncan', to which Donald was referring, was the famous poet *Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir* who died in 1812. In *Òran do Charaide Tàillear airson Cuairt Shuiridh*, he writes: "'S am brangas a theannadh ri pheirclibh / The branks that would be tightened around his jaws."

The church also had other ways to bring parishioners into line. In 1814, the Tiree Kirk Session ordered "two pairs of Joggs to be made and fixed in the walls of the church in Terror of Offenders."³ Joggs were an iron collar and chain, which were locked around an offender's neck to humiliate them. The church in question was *Eaglais Sgairinis*, sited next to the old pier and now demolished. Annie Kennedy from Scarinish had played inside the building in the 1920s; she described it to me as having been a "prison" because of the rings fixed to the walls.

This beautifully crafted halter, however, has nothing to do with punishing people. It was an everyday, homemade item, whose use goes back to prehistoric times, and which shows us that recycling is nothing new!

² *Tobar an Dualchais* SA1968.019, translated by JH

³ Tiree Kirk Session Minutes 1807-16, volume II, Archie Henderson 2016, 66

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Footnote: With reference to the piece on Gunter's chain in the last issue, Ian Gillies tells me that he last used the chain as a young factor in 1978, when he was doing an island-wide rent review. Hector JC Campbell, the crofter at Corrairigh in Cornaigbeg, wanted his croft re-measured, went into his byre and presented the 'new boy' with a beautifully maintained chain. Fortunately, Ian had a copy of *Conversion Tables for Research Workers in Forestry and Agriculture* that allowed him to do the necessary calculations. The new measurements tallied exactly with the estate records. We believe this was the last time the chain was used on Tiree.

Dr John Holliday