

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 44

MANUAL VACUUM CLEANER

I am so used to modern timber floors, fitted carpets and electric vacuum cleaners that I rarely think about how floors used to be cleaned. But this early hand-pumped 'Superex' vacuum cleaner has made me reconsider the subject. The cleaner, worked like a large reverse bicycle pump, dates from the first decades of the twentieth century, a time when flooring on Tiree was changing rapidly but there was no mains electricity supply.

The floor of traditional Tiree thatched houses was *an ùrlar dubh* 'the black floor', made from a mixture of earth, clay and dung. To compact the mixture, Mabel Kennedy remembered a dance with a piper at a new house in Balephuill around 1910, and Hector MacDougall described how a flock of sheep was herded into a new building on Coll for the day. Once smoothed and dried, the mixture created a hard surface, cleaned every morning with brushes made of heather or *mealtarachd* 'roots of marram grass', and then sprinkled with clean, dry sand. This was particularly necessary because, until the end of the nineteenth century, many houses had a peat fire on stones in the centre of the floor. Donald Sinclair from West Hynish, born in 1885, told Eric Cregeen: "I remember myself homes over at Moss; they were the last place they [had a] fire on the floor." Wooden floors were expensive in this timber-poor land. Grand houses such as Island House, built in 1748, or the new Gott manse, completed in 1833, were built to a different specification. They had coal fires in the gable walls, chimneys and wooden floors covered with small carpets that needed cleaning. These were hung on the line in spring and the dust beaten out of them. By 1863, an inspection of the old Balemartine School found: "The floor over the greater part is boarded and below the fixed desks where it is not closely boarded, flooring deals are placed for each form for the children's feet to rest upon."

As housing improved on the mainland and carpets became commonplace, numerous inventors around the world competed to build the machines to clean them. The Ewbank carpet sweeper went on sale in 1889. The first petrol-driven vacuum cleaner was invented in America in 1899, and the large machine, drawn by horses, would visit your house, feeding hosepipes through the windows. One model was powered by the man of the house rocking slowly in his chair while his wife vacuumed around him. 1907 saw the invention of the portable electric vacuum cleaner with a cloth filter bag: this became the first Hoover.

This whirlwind of invention largely passed Tiree by. While there were three thousand Glasgow homes connected to mains electricity by 1901, the first electrical system was installed in the new Cornaigmore School in 1936. A diesel generator, fired twice a week, powered a row of fifty batteries that lit the building with a 110V DC supply. It also ran a small vacuum cleaner in the house of the head teacher, Allan MacDougall. In 1956, electrical grids covering the whole island were completed, and within ten years most houses on Tiree could start to use the electrical vacuum cleaners we now take for granted. While we think

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