

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 48

### FITTING FROM THE *OCEANA*

This brass connector was found on *Tràigh Bhàigh* by Charles Berlie. While it may not appear to be that interesting, it packs quite a story.

The *Thais* had been launched in Cowes in 1879, a luxury two-masted sailing schooner, a hundred feet in length. She sailed with a crew of sixteen, and was therefore quite an expensive plaything; she therefore changed hands regularly. One owner was Sir Percy Florence Shelley, the son of the poet. Shelley happened to be a friend and neighbour of Robert Louis Stevenson in Bournemouth, and re-named the boat the *Oceana* in tribute to Stevenson as he set off to travel the Pacific in 1887. Two small engines were added in 1923.

The schooner was bought in the 1940s by Major John Campbell, a charismatic veteran of the war. Campbell, the grandson of the 14th Baron Louth in Ireland, had joined the special forces known as 'Popski's Private Army' in 1944 for the push through Italy. When I talked to him four years ago, he told me: "I had an extraordinarily interesting war." An understatement. On one occasion he emerged unscathed from the wreck of his car after hitting not one but two successive mines. On another, his patrol succeeded in capturing a house occupied by ten Germans without a shot being fired. He won two Military Crosses during the campaign.

De-mobbed after the war, Major Campbell satisfied a long held ambition to go to sea by buying a fishing boat and the *Oceana*. He fished out of Howth, just north of Dublin. At something of a loose end, he found himself in harbour next to a boat of some six Latvians. These had escaped the second Russian occupation of their country in 1944, and were looking for a way of travelling across the Atlantic to seek asylum in the United States. They asked to hire the *Oceana*, but on looking her over, their skipper, an ex-tugboatman, recognised that her engines were too small for the ocean crossing. Major Campbell and the Latvians struck a deal, one that must have appealed to the retired commando: they would sail to Sweden, fit new engines, and then make the Atlantic voyage.

The party left Dublin in December 1948 only to be hit by a winter storm, which tore many of the sails to shreds. They limped into Liverpool, where the Latvians managed to patch things together. Two months later, in March 1949, the *Oceana* sailed again, bound for Sweden. Having made good progress, Major Campbell handed the wheel to the Latvian tugboat skipper, believing him to be more experienced under sail at

sea. It was a decision he later regretted. Hit by more wild weather, the Latvian steered a course to the south of Tìree, rather than keeping north in open water. As night fell, the Latvian crew kept an anxious lookout, finally spotting a red light on their port side. The Latvian skipper tacked towards this, believing it was another vessel. Minutes later they felt the juddering as the boat hitting the sands of *Tràigh Bhàigh* between Baugh and Crossapol.

Although the beach was shallow, the height of the waves made it impossible to abandon ship. Fortunately, the alarm on the island was soon raised, and the island's coastguard unit raced to the scene. At that time they were equipped with a breeches buoy with a rocket to fire the line out to the stricken vessel. The late Archie Brown, Kilkenneth and Donald MacKinnon, Hough, were part of the team. The crew was brought ashore using the line. The Latvian skipper was the last to leave, with "his cap glued to his head" despite the gale, as Archie remembered years later. The crew was adamant no one should touch a large chest on the deck. Rumours that they were a party of smugglers or they were going to Russia to pick up a dissident flew around the island.

The crew was taken to the old Crossapol Hall, and then to the Scarinish Hotel, under the ownership of Johnny Brown. As day dawned, it soon became apparent that the beautiful, seventy-year-old teak ship had been irretrievably damaged. They conducted a sale of her parts on the beach. Some of her teak was made into slightly curved fence posts. Willie Lyons in Mannal used part of her masts to mount his television aerial. Johnny Brown himself bought two aluminium water tanks. However, by the following day, the wreck had almost disappeared under the sand.

By another twist of fate, it turned out that Major Campbell's batman in the army had been Alan MacCallum from Tìree. Major Campbell went on to work for the Foreign Office, ending his career as Consul-General in Naples. He died in 2015, aged ninety-three. To this day, the sands shift from time to time, revealing the ghostly outline of the *Oceana* at low tide. Thank you to Charlie and Jean for finding this and presenting it to An Iodhlann.

Dr John Holliday