

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 49

### STONE STRIKE-A-LIGHT

This oval, purple-brown, flat pebble fits comfortably in my hand, polished by years of use. It was given to us as the needle sharpener of a sail maker, and it looks as though it has indeed been used for this purpose. In fact, this is a strike-a-light, a tool to produce sparks and create fire.

Fire has been used in a controlled way by humans for about a million years, essential for keeping warm at night and making the catch of the day more digestible. It was essential 'bushcraft' to know how to make fire. One way was to rotate a wooden stick between the hands on a notched piece of dry wood. But a commoner method was to create a spark by striking two stones, or, more recently, a stone and a piece of iron, together. Stone-on-stone strike-a-lights have been used since prehistoric times, and are sometimes found placed beside skeletons (interestingly, almost always male skeletons) in ancient graves, presumably to give the dead an ability to make fire in the afterlife. The best striking stones were flint. These can easily be found on Tiree's pebbly beaches, washed here from deposits near the Giant's Causeway in northern Ireland. The second stone needed to have a high iron content. Rusty red iron-rich stones are occasionally found on Tiree, particularly around Barrapol. Fool's gold, or iron pyrites, is the best, but is not found naturally on the island. Fascinatingly, however, we found several lumps of fool's gold and a flint beside the bones in the grave we excavated this summer in Kirkapol. A handful of fluffy, bone-dry tinder was also vital. The shredded fibres of the horseshoe fungus, which grows on birch trees (found on Tiree until the Iron Age, two thousand years ago), was especially good for this, but dried moss or grass would do.

Once iron tools became commonplace, quartz pebbles like this came to be used. After many years, the stones developed a groove on both sides and around part of the edge. A stone very similar to our strike-a-light was found during the excavation of the Iron Age *Dùn Mòr Bhalla* in 1964, and was dated to around AD 200. They continued to be used on Tiree into the twentieth century. The late Archie MacKinnon, Cornaigmore, kindly gave An Iodhlann a steel strike-a-light, and described its use: "During the last war matches were very scarce, so men smokers had a steel hand-held striker made in one of the local blacksmiths' smiddies. They then looked for a small flat flint stone among the gravel on the beach. They also obtained a sheet of brown parcel paper, which they dampened with water and then sprinkled saltpetre on to it. They then dried the paper. Step one was then to tear about a square inch of the paper and lay it on the edge of the flint stone and with a downward strike of the steel striker the sparks from the flint would ignite the paper.

They then put the smoldering paper into the bowl of their pipes. As a young lad in Cornaig I used to watch this performance with great interest!”

Friction matches had been invented in the 1820s and 30s by a number of chemists, but early versions contained white phosphorus. This was extremely poisonous and workers in the match factories often suffered from “phossy jaw”, a disfiguring and often fatal disease involving abscesses around the teeth. The London matchgirls’ strike of 1888 at the Bryant and May factory in London was a turning point, and the use of red phosphorus ‘safety matches’ was strongly championed, among others, by the Salvation Army. These are essentially the matches we use today. The next time you use one of these, think about this beautiful pebble and the skill needed to create fire in years gone by.

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