

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 51

HAND SHEARS

We're halfway there already! Our fiftieth object, a set of hand shears, is something most crofters will still have in their shed, even if machines have largely taken over today. They are often still used for dagging, or removing the dirtiest part of the fleece.

It was the first Neolithic farmers that brought the first sheep to Tiree around 6,000 years ago, while the two-thousand-year-old Iron Age broch at Vaul was found to contain over five hundred sheep bones. Wool was important, obviously, but milking ewes to make cheese was very common in the early days. These early sheep looked similar to the present-day Soay breed. The Norse brought their own sheep stock, more like the modern Hebridean and Shetland breeds. One thing these early sheep had in common was the fact that they moulted in the early summer, when the wool could be hand pulled, or roo'd. Hand pulled wool has the advantage of no cut ends, making it easier to spin a softer yarn.

Tiree was slow to adopt the improved breeds of the eighteenth century, the Cheviot and the Blackface. Sheep on the island at the time were blamed for grazing the *machair* too short, leading to sand blow, and their wool becoming soiled with sand. A report for the Duke in 1768 advised: "It is the factor's opinion that there are too great a number of sheep on the island, and for various reasons it seems evident to be in the Proprietor's interest that there should be none at all." Sheep numbers were cut right back. However, the Duke's lands on Mull, let as sheepwalks, were soon generating huge profits, and the estate was persuaded to let the bigger tenants on Tiree follow suit, with large sheep farms at Hynish (home to a thousand sheep), Hough, Heylipol, and Balephetrish. Even by 1970 there were over 13,000 sheep on the island.

Improved breeds of sheep have wool that grows all year round, and therefore need to be sheared. Iron shears like this have a long history: one was found in the Iron Age broch at Leckie near Stirling (interestingly, by Euan MacKie, the same archaeologist who excavated Vaul - the shears can be seen on the Hunterian Museum website). I have used blade shears myself. In the 1990s, I kept a couple of sheep in the garden of the doctor's house, and was lent a set of hand shears by a kindly crofter. It took me an hour to shear one animal. At the other extreme, in 1892 the legendary Jackie Howe sheared 321 sheep in less than eight hours on a station in Queensland, a record for blade shears.

Attempts to mechanise this back breaking and labour-intensive job started in the 1860s; early models were powered by a horse walking round a wheel. Despite an Australian shearers' strike, most big sheep stations were using some form of machinery by 1900: it was far quicker (and cheaper), and cut the fleece closer to the skin. The current world record for shearing a single sheep is held by Ivan Scott of Ireland at 37.9 seconds; Matt Smith from New Zealand has shorn 731 ewes in nine hours.

The photograph below shows blade shearing on Heylipol Farm in the 1940s: (from left to right) farm manager John Hume from Skye, factor Iain MacLaren, Lachie MacFarlane of Hynish and Neil MacLean of Heylipol. Does anyone know the first Tiree crofter to use mechanised shears? How many people are still using blade shears?

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