

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 57

### FLOUNDER LINE WEIGHT

This piece of sandstone, encircled by a rusted iron band, foxed us for quite some time. We now believe it was a smithy-made anchor stone for a flounder line. Sandstone is not a rock that is found on Tiree, and must have been imported. It is known in Gaelic as a *cruaidh*. This usually means 'hard', but fishermen were very superstitious, and it was unlucky to use the word 'stone' at sea.

*Lèabag* 'flounder' is a general name for several species of flatfish. These extraordinary fish are born with an eye on either side of their heads; during growth, one eye migrates, so that, in the adult, both are on the same side. A Tiree tradition has it that this was the work of Saint Columba. When the flounder was trod on by the saint, the fish cried out: "*S tu seo a' Chaluim Chille chamachasaich!* [You are here, bandy-legged Columba]" To which the saint shot back: "*Mas camachasaich mise, is cambheulach thusa!* [If I am bandy-legged, you are crooked-mouthed]." (Black 2008, 120 and 377). When not feeding on small shellfish and bristle worms, the flounder lies quietly, covered by sand or mud, on the bottom of shallows. Larger, breeding, fish are found in deeper waters. Flounders are also quite tolerant of fresh water, and can be found up streams and even in lochs. Several people claimed to me that the tastiest flounders on Tiree came from their local beach.

The simplest method of catching flounders is by wading carefully in bare feet, either simply standing on them or using a fish spear. Alasdair Sinclair in Brock used an old cod hook, straightened and tied onto a bamboo fishing rod. A good spot was *Lòn a' Chaindeag* between Ruaig and Soay. Duncan Grant from Ruaig also remembered flounder tramping: "I never found throwing [the harpoon] very effective. When you were walking along quietly, when you got near one, the first indication was when it suddenly moved away. But you knew by practice that it wouldn't have moved very far ... If you quietly with your bare feet continued and stood still ... and waited, the tail would go up and you would see it then." Indeed, I remember doing the same thing as a boy in Norfolk, using what was called there a 'butt fork' after the local name for a flounder.

Catching larger flounders further offshore needed a light line, known as *an lìon bheag* 'the small line', to distinguish it from *an lìon mhòr* used to catch ling and cod in deeper water. This was usually cast from a boat, although Angus Munn told me he could do this on foot at low tide at *Traigh Bhàigh*. The standard line was five hundred metres long, weighted down by a stone like this one at each end, and with a

smaller stone known as a *faoill* every ten metres. A hook was tied every metre using a length of horsehair called a *snòid* 'snood'. The usual bait was *luga* 'lugworms', as Angus Munn from Heanish recalled: "The lines were more often than not baited with lugworms, and this is where the wives came in. My mother would dig the bait to allow the men to carry on fishing. The bait had to be got at low water and [the men] liked to be out at low water because there was less hauling of the creels." The lines were then baited and carefully coiled in baskets, the layers separated by pages of the *Oban Times*.

Flounders made a popular food, as Angus Munn remembered: "You can imagine what a nice thick flounder swimming about *Loch Ghot* an hour ago, how it would taste. My mouth waters just thinking about it!" The fish were always eaten without a knife and fork, as Nan McClounnan from Balephuill recalled: "They were so good you'd eat your fingers when you'd finished!"

Flounders are rarely caught on Tiree shores today, as Donald Sinclair from West Hynish, told a researcher in 1968: "There are no boats, no people now – there are no people who will catch them anyway." Numbers crashed with more powerful trawlers in 1930s. But stocks may have recovered to some extent, and it would be interesting to see if flounder fishing is still possible on Tiree.

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