

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 62

### THE PLUNGE-CHURN

Plunge-churns like this were a common sight on the island's crofts until the 1950s. This one belongs to Brian and Marion Findlater, Scarinish.

Butter has been made on Tiree for two thousand years as a way of storing some of the plentiful summer milk's food value for the winter. But butter was more than just a food: it could be used to pay the rent, and low quality butter was widely used as a lubricant to grease coach wheels and smeared on sheep to help waterproof their wool for the winter.

To make butter, milk is first left to stand overnight, allowing the cream to rise to the surface. This is then skimmed off, traditionally using a scallop shell pierced with small holes. The cream was then left to ferment naturally for a couple of days. Although the plunge-churn had been in use on the mainland as long ago as the Iron Age, islanders stuck with an older method of making butter until the middle of the nineteenth century: "The old way of making butter was to put the milk in an earthenware craggan [pot] covered with a tightly tied sheep or goat's skin ... Then two women seated opposite each other tipped it half up and then dashed it back down, till the milk broke in butter against the sides. It could take nine or ten hours. Straw was used to cushion the shock." This was mainly done at the summer shieling, *àirigh*, on the *sliabh* or hill.

Churning day on the croft was a major event, involving all the women and children in the household. Some looked forward to it; others dreaded it. First the bowls and churn had to be sterilised with boiling water, no easy task before kettles and electric rings. The Tiree plunge-churn, or *lanaid*, was a tall, thin wooden barrel bound by metal hoops and slightly wider at its base. The plunger consisted of a rod tipped by either a disc with small holes or a cross-shaped piece of wood. This was moved up and down using a slow rhythmic action with a slight twist on the upstroke. Over several hours, the tiny fat globules in the milk broke open and the released fat slowly amalgamated. This process, known as *briseadh*, resulted in thin buttermilk, and floating pale yellow butter. This was scooped off, washed with clean water, and then compressed with two wooden butter pats to squeezed out the last fluid. A knife was sometimes passed through it to remove any remaining animal hairs.

Duncan Grant also remembered using the plunge-churn: "I remember making butter [in Ruaig in the 1950s]. In the byre there was a large churn. It seemed, as boys, very

heavy. But we were given the task of churning, up and down with a plunger. And your arms were tired after a short while! Every now and again [my aunt] would lift the wooden bit off the top and look in and you would see a change – slightly bluer the milk and you would see bits of butter floating around. There was a disc at the bottom [of the plunger] with holes. I never did like the buttermilk – it never appealed to me. I know the crofter, *Alasdair Dhòmhnail Bhàin* [from Point, Ruaig], he would quite welcome a glass of buttermilk. Eventually, she would put us boys aside and she would start gathering the lumps of butter. She had two little wooden spades. It would be rather wet, and she would pat it and squeeze it. The fresh butter had the beads of wet on it. It took a lot of patting to get the liquid out of the butter. I really liked the fresh butter. It wasn't like the [butter] you get in the Coop with preservatives. It tasted lovely! ... Kate Lamont, the post mistress in Ruaig, had this thistle butter mould which my aunt didn't have and I remember going down to get this lovely thistle put on the top of the butter."

Left by itself, butter would keep for a week or so, and it could be put down the well in summer to keep it cool. In prehistoric times, butter appears to have been buried on the *sliabh*, where the acidic peat preserved it: the so-called 'bog butter'. But more recently, at least half was mixed with granules of coarse salt and packed away in earthenware *crogain* to last the winter. Duncan Grant remembered homemade butter: "The salt butter they made because in these days there were no fridges or freezers. It would only last, I suppose, fresh butter, for a certain time. There was a crystalline quality [to it]. It was powerful! But people seemed to be inured to salt in Tiree [then]. I'm not too sure what it did for their blood pressure in these days! The salt butter was greatly used with potatoes. The great ashet [bowl] of potatoes would be put out. [We would] be taking great slices of salt butter and sliding it through the hot potato. It was very tasty!" Tiree potatoes with their skins lifting off, *a' gaireachdainn* 'laughing', were particular favourites.

By the time the last of the salted butter was scraped out of the *crogan*, it could be quite strong tasting. The family of the Duke of Argyll, used to finer food, were sometimes less keen on it: "When Lord Archibald Campbell would visit the island, or his sister Lady Victoria, she was mostly calling at every house, paying a visit ... She was staying up in Greenhill for the best part of a year. That's where she learned the Gaelic. And she was a fairly good speaker in Gaelic. And she was very particular about butter. Any home made butter she would smell it first. Aye! ... But she was not a big shot [stuck up] at all. She was very kind and liberal and doing her best to talk to the old people in Gaelic."

Not uncommonly, the milk could be reluctant to 'turn': something to do with the richness of the milk, the fermentation of the cream, the churning being done too

fast, or the temperature. In Shetland hot 'kirning' stones were thrown into the churn to encourage the butter to form; on Tiree, it was commoner to put the churn in a basin of hot water. Some people could be superstitious: "A ball of hair (*gaoisid*) called a *ronag* was put in the milk on Lammas day [1 August] (or on the Thursday after [Thursday was St Columba's holy day]) to keep its substance in the milk during the rest of the year. MacSymon (*MacShìomoin*, a sept of MacArthurs), a native of Balemartine, was much resorted to in former times for these constitution balls. On Lammas day he gave to all who came to him a little bag of plants, sewn up, to be placed in the cream jug (*crogan uachdair*) for the ensuing year that the cattle and the milk might retain their virtue or substance (*toradh*)." Into the twentieth century, at least one butter maker would wrap her black cat in a blanket with one paw showing and place it on the churn. She would then recite three times: "*Cur ìm air a churn, a' chait dhuibh*" [turn the cream turn into butter, black cat].

The archive has a photograph of a Mrs Ludlow demonstrating a presumably 'new' method of butter making using a barrel churn at the 1922 Show held at Scarinish School. By the 1950s, many households were using a Kilner churn: a large glass jar containing wooden paddles turned by a handle. Sometimes in winter, even on Tiree, some used a yellow dye to make their butter look 'richer'.

Dr John Holliday