

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 68

ROYAL HUMANE SOCIETY MEDAL

This Royal Humane Society medal was won by an off-duty Tiree merchant seaman. The accompanying certificate, which has also survived, reads: "It was Resolved Unanimously That the noble courage and humanity displayed by Captain Archibald Brown in having, on the 8th August 1868, gone in a Boat assisted by a crew of seven men to the relief of the Crew of the 'Maria Fanny' wrecked at Balephuil Bay, Island of Tyree, Scotland, whose lives they saved calls forth the admiration of this general Court and justly entitles him to the Honorary Silver medal of this Institution which is hereby awarded." The paper was signed by the eighth Duke of Argyll, the Society's president at the time, who may have been involved in putting the case forward.

In 1773, Dr William Hawes, a doctor in London, became interested in the resuscitation of people who had almost drowned, and paid a reward to anyone bringing him the body of those who were unconscious having fallen into the River Thames. The following year he helped to found the Royal Humane Society, to recognise the bravery of rescuers. Still active today, the society has made over 200,000 awards.

During a summer storm in 1868, the *Times of London* carried this report of a collier that had struck a rock called *Circeabodha* off the tip of Kenavara. The ninety-two ton *Maria and Fanny* (named after the daughters of the owner) had been trading between Glasgow and Ireland for at least forty years:

"On the morning of Saturday last, the 8th of August, some of the inhabitants of the village of Kennavara, Tyree in Argyllshire [the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map, surveyed in 1878, shows two houses in the settlement of *Kenvar*, west of the area we now know as *The Land*], saw the masts of a schooner in the bay, about a mile offshore. By aid of a glass, two or three men were observed clinging to it. A heavy sea was on, a gale having been blowing from the south and southwest for twenty-four hours. Though there were many spectators, no boat was launched for some time. At length, about eleven o'clock, a boat [from West Hynish] was got out manned with six rowers, and at considerable risk got near the vessel. They could not go very near in case they might be swamped against the rigging, so the rescue was achieved the following way. A light cord, to which a piece of lead was attached, was flung to the sailors. This caught, a rope tied onto it was drawn up. To this, fastened to the mast, the crew were then directed to make a running noose some way down. By this, man after man secured himself. Then a jump into the sea and all the

survivors (three in number), were hauled safely on board. A very short time longer would have proved fatal to one of them, as he was much exhausted. They were able to walk to the village half a mile away [probably the *Bail' Ùr*] and were well cared for. The vessel proved to be the *Maria and Fanny* of Milford, Wales, [which had been sailing] from Ayr to Limerick with coal. She had been driven out of her course by the gale when off the north of Ireland. Two men, the captain William James of St David's, and Joseph Evans of Milford, were drowned. The names of the saved are Thomas Davis, mate, of Newport, Pembroke; James Brown, St David's; and William Thomas, Milford Harbour. Especial praise is due to Captain Archibald Brown of the *Laverock Scot*, and the boat's crew, who effected the rescue at great risk."

Thirty-eight-year-old Archibald Brown shared *Taigh Mòr Mhanail* 'the big house of Mannal' with his brother Colin, a shopkeeper. At the time of the 1861 Census, Archibald was recorded as "seaman (coastal trade)". Three other members of his crew that day were Thomas Campbell and James MacDonald also from Mannal, and Neil Sinclair from Balephuill. James MacDonald, *Seumas na Cròige* of West Hynish, had heard stories about the wreck, as he told Eric Cregeen in 1975:

"You can't see it just now, but there's a ridge of rocks coming out from the point of Kenavara, and they are reaching over opposite where we're sitting here [in West Hynish]. You see them at low water. The wind was blowing very strong from the west, the way it is today but much stronger, and she put the ship on the rocks ... The skipper was drowned in her. She was that near the point of Kenavara; he thought he could manage to [swim ashore]. He was a very powerful swimmer, they say, but the tide is very strong out there. His *corp* [body] was never found. The older [folk], they were telling me he was swept into one of the caves. *Niall Òg* ['Young Neil' Sinclair from Balephuill] volunteered to go to her. It was a winter's day, a wild day! He got seven picked men, he picked them himself, and he went out and took the rest of the crew off her. He wasn't slow! And he got no thanks for it, or so I believe. [*Niall*] couldn't talk any English at all, and they [the rescued sailors] were talking Gaelic at the time in the Isle of Man then, anyway ... They were telling me they could understand a lot of them ... Well, there was a man by the name of Brown. He was in Mannal. He could talk a little English. That's the man that got all the praise for saving them. *Niall Òg* got no praise at all ... They [the sailors] were a fortnight here. Transport was very slow in these days! Yes! ... She was a schooner, square-rigged on the foremast."

Sea coal, rounded by decades of wave action, could still occasionally be found on the beaches of Kenavara and Balephuill into the 1930s, but I have never seen any in thirty years of searching.

Dr John Holliday

