

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 70

### *SÌOMAN RUADH*

Coir rope, *sioman-ruadh*, was first imported into Tiree in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was a revolutionary material: industrially made, cheap and resistant to rot. It gradually replaced the ropes hand-made from grass, animal hair and hide that were common on Tiree.

Ropes are usually made from fibres that are twisted together to make a yarn. These are twisted again to create strands, which are then often combined to make a rope of two or three strands. Usually these strands are twisted alternately to make the rope stronger.

Both the Gaelic word for rope, *sioman*, and the Scots *simmens* come from the Viking *síma*. The new coir rope became known as *sioman-ruadh* 'red rope'. Coir, from coconut husks, had been used by sailors in India and the Far East for centuries. It took the British Empire to lay out plantations, build the factories and export it in huge quantities. Brown coir comes from the ripe fruit, is and not very flexible but tough. It rapidly became popular with fishermen because it floats and does not rot in seawater. It also became popular around the croft.

In these days of synthetic fibres made from oil, it is easy to forget the importance of rope, and the time spent making it. Before coir, rope for everyday use on Tiree was often made from straw. Oats were stronger than barley. Cordage was also made from *muran*, marram grass or bent, common in the sand dunes of the island. This was best cut while it was still green, and then dried slowly to stop it becoming brittle. Donald Sinclair explained: "It was all thatched houses they had, and whether it was straw or bent, you had to make your own rope out of it ... There was no such thing as coir yarn rope, so the house was to be thatched and roped ... If you were a crofter, you had plenty of straw, [and] you can make straw rope. And if you were a cottar, you would have to go to the *machair* and cut bent there and make rope out of the bent. Just twisting it with their hands, and they were good at it too. They were accustomed to it. If it was straw rope you had on it, you would have to [re-do] it every second year, but if it was bent rope it would last three years."

Making rope was very time-consuming. It was done in the evenings, made into a social occasion as the autumn nights drew in, or when the rain made outside work intolerable. Hector Kennedy from Heylipol remembered the nights well: "There was a ceilidh, the old people. They were gathering in one house ... the young girls was there, and the boys, and they were hearing the old tales, the fairy stories ... They

were gathering the township, every one, in this house. And you were told to fill the pipe with black tobacco, and the pipe was going round. And the ones that were making the rope, they were not filling the pipes at all. And at suppertime they would get mashed potatoes ... and fish. When that man would be finished, they would go to another [house], turn about. But everyone wouldn't miss; it was a great fault if you would miss [not take your turn making rope]."

Hector continued: "They were making it on the floor of the kitchen, two brothers: Neil and Archie and the two sisters: they would do it as well as themselves [the men]. And perhaps someone would come ceilidhing with them, and they would have a go at it. They were near the fire and they were warm ... These bundles [of straw] were coming in, they were taking them in from the barn in the night time or a wet day ... I mind of my father doing it in there ... John Hamilton was making that himself for the stacks and for the top of the houses and one year he made plenty and he left some over in a big ball and hung it up in the barn. 'That will be for the hay when we start at the hay,' [he said]. When they started on the hay, he told one of the boys to take this ball down. He took down the ball, and he let it down at the floor, and the ball burst. There was nothing left but bits of straw! Only the outside. Mice! He never made one after that. Many's the time he was telling me that ... They had a competition who in the crowd would put more rope on the ball." Usually the rope was twisted by hand, but a *corra shùgan* 'rope twister' was used to make thicker ropes.

Rope made from straw or grass was fine for tying down thatch or stacks of corn. For a horse harness, the sheet of a boat, fishing lines or climbing the cliffs of Kenavara looking for eggs, something stronger was needed. Long hairs from the mane of a horse were particularly prized, but hair from the coats of Highland cows or bristles from a pig could also be spun into fibres. The strongest ropes were made of plaited hide, either from a cow or, best of all, a seal.

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