

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 74

FREE CHURCH COMMUNION TOKEN

This communion token for the Tiree Free Church was donated by Flora MacLean, Druimfraoich. They had belonged to the family of her husband, Lachie. On one side of the token is stamped 'Tiree Free Church' and on the other the Biblical text: 'Do this in remembrance of me'.

Communion tokens were a common sight in Scottish churches in the nineteenth century. The idea for them had come from the influential minister and theologian John Calvin as long ago as 1560, as he wrote a new chapter in the Christian church. Congregations over large swathes of northern Europe left the powerful structure of the Catholic Church and the influence of Rome in a religious revolution known as the Reformation. Calvin's idea was to create a marker so that only those properly prepared and deserving of Holy Communion would be allowed to the altar. Communion tokens were in use in Amsterdam by 1586, and their use spread all over the world. But it was in the Scottish Presbyterian churches in the nineteenth century that they really took root. There were literally thousands of different designs, as each individual church commissioned their own. They were usually made of lead or tin, with the church's name on one side and a short biblical text on the other.

Elders of the church regularly examined members of their church, and tokens were only given to those who could prove they possessed a good understanding of the Bible, and who the elders knew were leading a truly Christian life.

The Duke of Argyll was the main 'heritor' of the parish of Tiree and Coll. Under Scots law, as the landlord he had to pay for the manse and the minister's stipend, as well as the parish schoolmaster's salary, poor rates and road maintenance. But at the cataclysmic Disruption of 1843, almost five hundred ministers left the established Church of Scotland to create the Free Church. A major point at issue was the power of heritors to appoint ministers to 'their' churches. At first, the new Free Church had few adherents on Tiree, partly because the island's Baptist congregation had already become the rallying point for disaffected parishioners. Two years after the Disruption, the long-serving Church of Scotland minister on Tiree could write: "There are some Dissenters of the Independent persuasion, and a few Baptists, each sect having a preacher and a meetinghouse of their own. When the last list was made out, they consisted of thirteen families, of which three or four were Baptists ... The

Independent [Free Church preacher], when inquiry was made, declined to give any information as to the means or amount of his support."

But it was the Free Church that was the first to respond to the famine caused by the 1846 potato blight epidemic, sending food to a hungry island. Helped by this and an increasingly strong national organisation, the Tiree Free Church congregation grew, building a church in Kirkapol in 1880 (now a guest house), followed by a manse in Scarinish (now part of the old peoples' home) and the Balinoe Free Church (known as *An Eaglais Thin* from its tin roof, and now a private house) in the early 1890s. In 1900, however, the majority of the Free Church nationally merged with the United Presbyterian Church to form the United Free Church. This then split in 1929, with some members rejoining the Church of Scotland, leaving a diminished United Free Church (Continuing). This finally closed its doors on Tiree in 1969, as the congregation dwindled to a handful.

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