

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS: no. 80

### MINERAL WATER BOTTLE

This glass bottle with its crimped neck must have been an unusual sight on Tiree at the end of the nineteenth century; that is presumably why it has survived. It was made by Dan Rylands of Barnsley, Yorkshire for a well-known Oban company: McCall's.

Mineral water, both for bathing and drinking, had been a popular tonic since Roman times. Indeed, a Tiree well containing 'red' water on the *sliabh* in *Èirneal* was known as *Tobar an Leighis* 'the well of healing'. It was Joseph Priestley who first discovered how to carbonate water, publishing his 'Directions for Impregnating Water with Fixed Air' in 1772. A decade later, Johann Jacob Schweppes in Geneva became the first person to sell carbonated water. His drink was adopted as a tonic and cure for kidney stones by King William among others. Schweppes moved to London to develop his business and started bottling Malvern spring water. Sales received a major boost when the company commissioned the centrepiece of the 1851 Great Exhibition in Hyde Park. This was a twenty-seven-foot glass fountain running with Malvern spring water. It was billed as the 'fountain of youth'. Alcohol being banned inside the original Crystal Palace, Schweppes sold over a million bottles of 'soda water' and ginger beer. Using carbonated drinks as mixers became fashionable soon after, with 'Quinine Tonic Water' coming onto the market in 1858.

The railway came to Oban in 1880, bringing with it a flood of tourists looking to take the sea air. Work on the Oban Hills Hydropathic Sanatorium above Rockfield Road began the next year, although it ran out of funds before it could be completed. The Royal Hotel was built in 1895. Six years after the arrival of the first steam train, a trade gazetteer contained the entry: 'Oban Mineral Water Works, D McCall and Co., Aerated water manufacturers, Drimvargie Spring'. The company was still trading in 1953; the Mod programme from that year contains an advertisement for 'McCall's 'The Call of the West' Aerated Water Manufacturers and Beer, Stout and Cider Bottlers' of Soroba Park, Oban and Fort William. Today, Drimvargie Road is a tiny side street off Albany Street, just inland from the station. But Drimvargie briefly made the national headlines when a rock shelter was exposed during building work in 1898; on examination, it contained an 8,000-year-old pile of shells and 'Obanian' Mesolithic bone tools.

From the start, maintaining the pressure inside glass bottles filled with carbonated drink was a problem, and manufacturers were forced to use tight-fitting corks, often held in place with a wire basket, like champagne today. Some glass bottles were

made with pointed ends, forcing them to be laid on their sides to keep the corks moist. The splendidly named Hiram Codd started his working life as an engineer with a company making corks for wine bottles. Having seen potential in the mineral water business, he patented 'Codd's globe stoppered mineral water bottle' in 1874. Filled upside down with carbonated drinks, the pressure that built up inside the bottle kept a glass marble in the neck tight against a rubber seal. His invention was an instant success; within three years he had issued four hundred licences to various bottling companies. The handmade glass bottles proved expensive to manufacture, and so he set up the world's first bottle exchange in 1880; shopkeepers in London were paid a penny when they had collected 144 empty bottles. Unfortunately for Codd, the glass marbles themselves became popular with children and many bottles never made it back to the factory. His design fell out of favour in the 1930s, although it is still used by soft drink manufacturers in India and Japan. There is a popular theory that the word 'codswallop' came from 'wallop', a slang word for beer, and Hiram Codd's bottles, which often contained something less satisfying than beer; sadly, that ingenious idea is probably not true.

This particular bottle was made at the Hope Glass Works in Barnsley, Yorkshire, between 1884 and 1926. Dan Rylands had inherited the glass factory, and a business relationship with Codd, on his father's death in 1881. A talented inventor in his own right, he eventually had ninety patents to his own name, and he soon fell out with Codd over changes he made to the bottle without permission. Rylands also patented the world's first metal screw top wine bottle, but it never made it into production because acid in the wines had a tendency to corrode the stopper. Codd and Rylands eventually parted ways, but the glass works thrived, employing at its peak a thousand people; bottles such as this were sent all over the British Empire. A new gas furnace prompted Rylands to impose a night shift and shorter day shifts on the glass workers, but they went on strike and won. Another strike, a fire in the factory and failed investments in a coalmine tipped Rylands into personal bankruptcy in 1893. Remarkably, despite the strained industrial relations, his workforce collected £300 to enable him to keep a few of his personal possessions. The business cut its name to simply 'Rylands' in 1897, before ceasing trading finally in 1926.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, there would have been few people on Tiree wealthy enough to drink bottled aerated water: possibly the factor Hugh Macdiarmid in Island House, the visiting family of the Duke of Argyll or the scatter of intrepid tourists. This bottle is a beautiful object in itself, but it also features a brilliant invention and some brilliant social history. Aren't museums wonderful?

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