

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS: no. 81

### TOILET SET

This handsome five-piece toilet or commode set was provided for visitors of the late Angus MacLean, Scarinish. Consisting of a shaving cup, soap dish, washing bowl, water jug and chamberpot, sets similar to this would have been found in many households on the island before the advent of hot running water. From the wear on the handles, it appears to have seen good service. Some of the pieces have 'Newton' stamped on the base, and I think the set may have been made in Devon by Honington Pottery in the 1920s.

Many islanders will remember articles like this because Tiree houses only got the chance to connect to mains water and electricity comparatively late. The new Cornaigmore School must have caused quite a stir when it opened in 1936. A William Dickie windmill beside the loch pumped water to a thousand-gallon tank in the school loft. The school log for 2nd June 1936 read: 'The new sanitary offices for the pupils were brought into use yesterday, thus providing them with water-borne sanitation for the first time in the school history of Tiree.' It was not just 'school history'; most households at that time had an outside dry or 'Elsan' chemical toilet. Some crofters, particularly those in the new 'Department' two-storey croft houses built in the 1920s and 30s, had installed hand-pumped flushing toilets. Scarinish School was connected to mains water in 1967. Going outside in the middle of a winter's night never held much attraction, and many preferred to have the *soitheach-mùin* under the bed. We were made of sterner stuff in those days!

Before mains electricity, most domestic water was heated in a kettle on the coal-fired stove. It was 16 March 1956 when Mrs Hunter, the doctor's wife at the time, flicked a switch and sent power surging along cables to the east end of the island. The west end followed the next year. At first, most houses had just the basic wiring for a few light bulbs and a socket or two; immersion heating and hot water on tap often had to wait until the 1970s, when the island was designated a 'Housing Action Area' and funds were put into modernising many of the island's houses.

I am painting a picture of life that many of us today would find challenging. But, keeping clean and well groomed was often given high priority in the past. A very common finding by archaeologists digging up Viking houses are beautifully made bone combs. And looking at photographs in *An Iodhlann* from the 1920s and 30s, it is surprising how many men are clean-shaven, considering the difficulties involved.

Most islanders made do with more robust chinaware. Fine commode sets like this one, with its floral design and gold leaf trimming, became increasingly necessary on Tìree in the 1920s for new actors on the island stage: tourists. An article from 1912 made this prediction: 'It seems to me that the beautiful and romantic Isle of Tìree – "the gem of the western main" – is on the threshold of new times in its history and that the prophetic utterance of the late Duke of Argyll will in the course of a few years have literal fulfillment ... The importance of the new pier, which is in course of construction in Gott Bay at a cost of over £20,000, would be difficult to over-estimate. It brings the islanders into touch with the mainland in a manner, which is certain to widen and expand the industrial possibilities of Tìree, and eventually raise it to the proud position, which its natural and geographic position entitles it, as the great health sanatorium of the Hebrid Isles.'

The opening of the Gott Bay pier in 1915 meant that passengers could now walk safely down a gangplank onto the island, without having to jump from the mail boat into a flit boat rowed out from Scarinish harbour and corkscrewing on the Atlantic swell. Numbers of visitors to 'the great health sanatorium of the Hebrid Isles' grew steadily, with the new eighteen-hole Vault golf course, opened in 1916, playing a big part. Many islanders began to let rooms for the new guests, sometimes going as far as to give up their whole houses. One such boarding house was 'Rhum View' in Vault run by the indefatigable *Catriona Iain*, Catriona MacKinnon. A regular August visitor from 1928 to 1939 was Meena Knapman: '[Catriona] used to pack fourteen people into that wee house! There was no electricity; we took candles up to the bedrooms. There were lovely feather beds. Potties of course, because the loo was outside.' A tin jug, made by travelling people and filled with hot water, together with a big ewer of cold water, were delivered to the doors of the guests at 7.30 each morning. One jug had to do the two, three or four guests in the room. As Meena told me many years later: 'In the morning they took hot water up to the bedrooms. You had a pitcher and ewer on a stand and you washed. And then they made the beds and cleaned out the ewer.' Nan McClounnan from Balephuill worked for Catriona from 1947: 'We slept in an extension at the side. In the morning [we were up at 6 am], the fire had to be lit, quite a big stove she had, water boiled, put into cans and left at each visitors' door.'

Keeping clean used to be harder work than it is today, much of the hard work done behind the scenes by women. Another historical fact to keep in mind when you press the button or turn the tap for a cascade of hot water.

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