

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS: no. 82

### COBBLER'S LAST

This three-arm cobbler's last, or *bonn-chumadair*, is said to have belonged to the well-known shoemaker and piper *Lachainn Beag Lachainn Chalaim*, or Lachlan MacDonald, who was born in 1884 and lived by the shore in Balemartine. It has 'No. 1' stamped on the side and looks to fit women's and children's shoes

Originally lasts were made out of wood, with some of the fancier ones coming apart in two halves so that they could be removed easily from the finished shoe. Cast iron lasts began to be manufactured in the second half of the nineteenth century, and many homes must have had one, judging by the number we in An Iodhlann have been offered! It is likely that a master shoemaker would have had many other sizes of last available.

Turning hide into leather has always been a lengthy and a smelly business. An inlet in West Hynish is still known as *Port mhic an Alamadair* 'the inlet of the son of the leather worker'. The skin of the animal is first thoroughly 'fleshed', and its hair removed, traditionally with wood ash paste. The clean hide is then tanned to harden the collagen in the skin. Traditionally on Tiree the roots of tormentil were used for this, but by 1789 supplies on Tiree had been all but exhausted and the estate tried to put a stop to its use.

Some of the first industrial tanneries in Scotland opened in the Bridge of Weir in the 1770s, and soon hides from Tiree were being sent to the mainland to be processed. Donald Lamont from Ruaig, *Dòmhnall mac Thèarlaich*, was known as 'The Currier' because he had been apprenticed in the leather trade in Glasgow. Alasdair MacDonald from Kilmoluag had heard this story and gave it to Eric Cregeen in 1973: "They called him 'The Currier' because he was a man that was going round gathering skins. At that time, any beast that would die, or any beast that they were killing, he was buying the skins. He was taking that skin away with him, and sending it away. And it was coming back as leather." While in the city, Donald had also built up a fearsome reputation as a boxer and wrestler. He was so strong he is said to have walked from Kilmoluag to Ruaig with a cow's hide under his arm without once putting it down: "'The Currier' wasn't a big man, they said, but he was very, very stout. He would come over to this end of the island to skin a beast – a cow or a horse. And he would take that skin away to Ruaig from this end of the island on his shoulder. That was a good lift! A skin is heavy after it comes off an animal," continued Alasdair.

A visit to the shoemaker started with his drawing the outline of your foot on a piece of paper and then measuring its circumference at various points with a tape measure. The shoemaker would then either select the right size of last, or make one afresh out of wood. This last would then do for other boots you might purchase in the future. Softer leather was then cut into several pieces and sewn together to make the upper, pulled tight with pliers and tacked temporarily onto the last. Thicker leather was then glued on to make the sole. A marking wheel was then run around the edge of the sole and an awl used to create the holes. Waxed or tarred hemp sewed the layers together. The heel was then built up with thicker leather and tacked into place, and finally the sides of the sole were sealed with a red-hot iron.

Shoes were expensive. Most children on Tiree went *cas-rùisgte* barefoot from April to September. Neil McEachern from Islay remembered it took him five days working at the peat (around £400 in today's money) to be able to afford his first pair of shoes. Tackety or hobnailed boots, *bòtainnean-tacaideach*, where metal studs were hammered into the sole, were popular for farm work and for children, as they lasted longer and gave a better grip, although they could be noisy in the classroom. Skidding along the concrete corridors of the new Cornaigmore School became a popular sport for boys in the 1930s if Mr MacDougall was out of earshot!

The shoemaker or cordwainer was an important member of any community; in 1871, there were twenty-six on Tiree. Each shoemaker could produce one pair of shoes in a good day's work. Around 750 shoes were therefore being made in a year, at a time when the population of Tiree was 2,832. That means most people could only get a new pair of shoes every two or three years. But, like many other trades, local shoemaking became a victim of mass production. In one town alone, Maybole in Ayrshire, by 1883 there were eight large factories producing 12,360 pairs of boots a week. By 1911, there were just six shoemakers left on Tiree, repairing footwear as much as making shoes themselves. (A cobbler repairs shoes rather than making them from scratch.)

*Lachainn Beag* presumably learned his trade from his father, *Lachainn Mòr*, who had been apprenticed to a shoemaker on the mainland. While there, he had been a keen attender at 'Penny Readings'. This movement had started in England in the 1860s as a way to 'improve' the working class and keep them out of the clutches of publicans. A penny would gain you admission to a hall where literature and poetry were read aloud and respectable songs sung. *Lachainn Mòr* also knew the Bible by heart and was a favourite with the Argyll family, particularly Lord Archibald Campbell. When he returned to Tiree he changed trade, however, and worked as a line fisherman for over thirty years during the heyday of that industry. He came from a family known as the 'Fiddlers of Sleat' and had played the pipes in the band of the Stirlingshire militia

under his cousin, Pipe-Major John MacDonald. His son *Lachainn Beag* also played and taught the late Willie MacLean, Balinoe.

The workshop of the *greusaiche*, like that of the *tàillear* and *gobha*, was a magnet for those with time on their hands, and those wanting to share a fireside and hear the local news. Alasdair Sinclair from Balinoe, and Arthur Straker from Mannal squeezed into the crowded workshop one such day in the 1930s to ask if *Lachainn Beag* could put some fresh tackets on their boots. The conversation among the men turned to the problem of thistles growing on their new crofts in East Hynish, created when that farm was broken up in 1914. *Calum Iain an Tuathanaich*, Malcolm MacKinnon, Farmhouse was also there, recently returned from Canada. Calum cleared his throat and told a story about a farm he had been working on there. When he had sat down at midday to take lunch, he hung his hat, damp with sweat, on a thistle to dry. After he had had finished his dinner he had to stretch to his full height and use his rake to pull the hat down. "You've seen nothing," he said. "That's how quickly the thistles grow in Canada!"

The days of the *greusaiche* on Tiree are long gone. Lachlan's house and workshop are now a holiday cottage. But his last survives, as do several of the stories told by his fireside.

Dr John Holliday