

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS: no. 86

### COPPER TURNER

This small coin, about the size of a modern penny, was found a few years ago 'near Kenavara'. Known as a 'turner', it was worth two Scots pence. Although the inscription is quite corroded, with patience and a magnifying glass you can make out the lettering CAR.D.G.SCOT.ANG.FRA.ET.HIBR 'Charles by the Grace of God, King of Scotland, England, France and Ireland' on the obverse (the 'head'), with a thistle and NEMO ME IMPVNE LACESSET 'No one shall hurt me with impunity' on the reverse (the 'tail'). This dates it to the reign of Charles I, a period from 1625 to 1649.

Coin finds are quite rare on Tiree, particularly today as less ground is cultivated. A silver hoard was dug up below *Dùn Mòr a' Chaolais* in 1780, its coins over a thousand years old. Another was found in 1787 near *Dùn Shiadair* in West Hynish and came from the period 1180-1242. Both of these collections, between 200 and 500 coins in total, were given to the British Museum in London by the estate. In the 1830s, an eleventh-century silver coin from the reign of King Malcolm III was found 'in a sandbank'. James MacArthur found three seventeenth-century coins in Balemartine. And a few years ago, John Fletcher dug up an 1805 Irish penny beside his shed in Balemartine. And that, as far as I know, is it.

The word 'turner' comes from the name for a medieval French coin called the *dernier turnois* because it had originally been minted at the abbey of Saint Martin in Touraine. Made of copper alloy rather than silver, the turner was not hugely valuable. Worth two Scots pence (and for those born after currency decimalisation in 1971, there were 20 shillings in a pound and 12 pence in each shilling: a total of 240 pence to the pound), we can make sense of its worth by comparing it to the rent of Barrapol farm in 1509 of £4 a year, or the wage of an ordinary seaman in the Royal Navy at that time of around £10 a year. Scots currency at the time was worth a twelfth of the English, so that this coin was worth one-sixth of an English penny. An independent Scots currency was abolished at the Act of Union in 1707, with the exchange rate set at one pound sterling to twelve pounds Scots. That is why the Gaelic *sgillinn* now translates as 'penny'.

This coin was minted in Edinburgh in a run of several million. As a fascinating diversion, the profitable contract to mint them was given to court favourite William Alexander, who was to become the Earl of Stirling. Alexander had set up a precarious Scottish colony in Nova Scotia. This had infuriated the French, who threatened King Charles I that they would withhold part of the dowry for his French wife, Henrietta

Maria. Charles backed down. The king then awarded the minting contract to Alexander by way of compensation.

Charles I, grandson of Mary Queen of Scots, had a difficult reign. He believed strongly in the divine right of kings, but was confronted by a Westminster parliament that obstructed him at almost every turn. His French wife, who he had married by proxy (Charles himself had remained in England) at the door of the cathedral of Notre Dame, was a Catholic, and Charles was mistrusted by the Puritans. When he imposed the English prayer book on the Scottish church in 1637, there was uproar. The General Assembly abolished the role of bishops and adopted a system of presbyterian church government, setting the scene for the Bishops' Wars. Four years later, Charles was also at war with his own parliament, led by Oliver Cromwell. It did not end well for him. Defeated on the battlefield, he fled to Newcastle to put himself at the mercy of Scots forces. There was little mercy. He was sent down to London, tried and executed in 1649.

This turbulent history seems a long way from the slopes of Kenavara. Why was a coin from this period found here? We often assume that islanders at that time had no need for money. This was a time before the kelp and commercial whaling industries or the trade in salt beef to England. People produced most of what they needed themselves; when they needed anything else, they used a barter system. But money was still necessary sometimes. Although rent was paid mainly in barley, oats and cattle, by this period the landlord (at that time the MacLeans of Duart) also wanted silver. The most reliable way for a young Hebridean to earn money was to sign up for military service in the army or navy.

This small disc of copper opens a number of historical doors. I am sure there are plenty more to be found. Hint, hint!

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