

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS: no. 93

### CLAY PIPE

This clay pipe was found by David McClounnan at the Iron Age fort *Dùn nan Nighean* 'the fort of the young women' in Balephuill. But despite its discovery on a prehistoric site, it probably dates from the nineteenth or even early twentieth century.

Native tobacco plants are found in South and North America as well as Australia. Their leaves are rich in the alkaloid nicotine, which probably protects the plants from grazing and insect attack. For humans, however, it acts as a stimulant to the nervous system, and tobacco leaves have been used for thousands of years, both in America and Australia. The Italian Christopher Columbus, commissioned by the Spanish Crown, 'sailed the ocean blue' for the first time in 1492, making landfall in the Bahamas. In Cuba he met local people with 'some dry herbs put in a certain leaf, also dry [essentially a loose cigar] ... and having lighted one part of it, by the other they suck, absorb, or receive that smoke inside with the breath, by which they become benumbed and almost drunk, and so it is said they do not feel fatigue. These, muskets as we will call them, they call *tabacos*'. Columbus brought some plants back to Spain, part of the 'Columbian exchange' that also included the potato, maize and tomato. The habit of smoking tobacco leaves was taken to France seventy years later by the ambassador Jean Nicot, whose name is remembered in the Latin name for the plant and the alkaloid nicotine.

The English explorer and entrepreneur Sir Walter Raleigh established a colony on an island off North Carolina in 1585, and introduced the habit of smoking to the English court, going so far as to offer Queen Elizabeth I his pipe. Smoking became very fashionable, and it is ironic that the potato was regarded at first with great suspicion, while smoking tobacco was believed to cure everything from toothache to cancer. In 1662, for example, smoking at breakfast was made compulsory for pupils at Eton school during an epidemic of plague, one boy later writing that he had never been whipped so much in his life as he was one morning for not smoking.

The next monarch, King James I of England, was less impressed. He penned 'A Counterblaste to Tobacco' in 1604, describing the habit as 'A custome lothsome to the eye, hatefull to the Nose, harmefull to the braine, dangerous to the Lungs, and in the blacke stinking fume thereof, nearest resembling the horrible [Stigian](#) smoke of the pit that is bottomelesse'. He went further and imposed a tax on tobacco. This official disapproval, however, could not stop the spread of smoking and chewing tobacco. The first Scottish clay pipes were made in Edinburgh in 1622. At first, the bowls were tiny – tobacco was an expensive item – but they got bigger over time. By

the 1680s, clay pipes were being manufactured in their millions, and there were more than a thousand clay pipe manufacturers in London alone. In the nineteenth century their use revived and they became fancier, with their bowls made to resemble people and animals. Sometimes they carried advertising slogans, and publicans would give them away. Duncan MacPhee found a 'fancy' clay pipe when he was digging beside the old butcher's shop in Scarinish. He was told by the old men that it had belonged to Daniel Hannay, who had had the croft around the old people's home at one time. I have not yet been able to find any other records about him.

It was not just a male habit. Records show that women cleaning Inverness Town Hall in 1822 were given clay pipes as part of their wages. And Hector Kennedy of Heylipol remembered one woman's house in Barrapol: 'There was a wee hole in the wall beside the fire – *dàrnag* – and that's where she was keeping the clay pipe. And the boys would be going around with the clay pipe and smoking!'

Tobacco was probably introduced to Tìree in the nineteenth century by soldiers, sailors or fishermen, many of whom used nicotine to help them endure fatigue and their often cold, wet, miserable conditions. Bogie roll, a thin, black twist that could be chewed or smoked and was named after the River Bogie in Aberdeenshire, became very popular. Donald MacDonald, who ran the Balevullin shop *Bùth Dhòmhnail Alasdair 'ic Dhonnchaidh*, was well known for being able to judge by eye the exact length of roll that would make one ounce.

Tobacco smuggling was one way to make a shilling in the nineteenth century, and Donald MacLean from Balephuill wrote a poem *Òran a' Chutter* about one successful smuggling trip: 'We had tobacco on board / a sort of smuggler's cargo.' It is actually legal to grow tobacco in Britain, although nowadays you need to declare your harvest and a duty can be levied. James MacDonald, *Seumas Mòr na Cròige*, once grew tobacco inside a ruined house in West Hynish, drying the leaves and curing them with honey before smoking the fruits of his labours.

The church was often disapproving of tobacco. As far back as the time of King James I, the Catholic Church declared its use a sin. And on Tìree, the Free Church minister John MacLeod, who was from Lewis, exhorted his congregation in 1879 to give up alcohol, tea and tobacco and donate the money saved to the church. His opposite number in the Church of Scotland, John Gregorson Campbell, wrote a satirical song with the chorus 'Have you seen the great, great professor / Who has come from Lewis to save us / From drunkenness, tea and tobacco? / And O King he's the hero, MacLeod!' (translated by Ronnie Black). A pocketful of tobacco was one way of keeping the fairies away.

Lighting your pipe at sea could be a frustrating business, and chewing tobacco was more popular with older sailors. It was uncomfortable to keep swallowing the tarry

saliva, and men became expert at spitting. Hector MacPhail told this story, passed on to him by James MacCallum, one of the Cornaigmore blacksmiths. A popular ceilidh house on the shore beyond Whitehouse belonged to *Fionnghala*. She was said to have been born in 1815 on the battlefield of Waterloo. Her house was spick and span, and she made a point of keeping her hearth whitewashed with lime made from burnt limpet shells. The old men gathered around her fire at night would spit into the embers. But their aim was not always true, and the next morning she would have the job of cleaning the sticky brown mess from the white walls. Increasingly fed up with this, she ordered a spittoon and placed it in front of the fire. This became the talk of the township, and some lads got together and hatched a plan: they would make a point of missing it. As the ceilidh wore on, James said to *Fionnghala*: '*Fhionnaghal, tha 'n t-eagal orm mura tog sibh a 'vase' breagha tha sin as an rathad, tha fear de na cèardan seo a' dol a thilgeil smugaid ann!* / Flora, I am totally convinced that if you don't move that beautiful vase, one of these rascals is sure to spit in it!'

Clay pipes use fell out of favour at the start of the twentieth century as modern cigarettes rolled off production lines in industrial quantities. Those Tìree men who returned from the First World War were probably the first to introduce this new fashionable way to consume tobacco to the island. This pipe therefore probably dates from that time, although it could be more than a hundred years older than that.

Dr John Holliday

Caption for second photo:

Pipe wind cap from Calum MacLean's shop in Salum, given to An Iodhlann by Peggy MacKinnon, Vaul. This was placed over the pipe bowl to keep the burning tobacco in place. They were popular with sailors, crofters working with dry hay, or any smoker not wanting holes burned into their clothes.