

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS: no. 95

### SHIP IN A BOTTLE

This exquisite ship in a bottle was given to An Iodhlann recently by Ann MacIntyre through the good offices of Babs MacIntyre. A tall ship sails in front of a shore scene, complete with (cotton wool) smoke rising from the chimneys, while to the left there is a Tiree dipping lugsail boat. Although the bottle itself looks old, it now has a plastic stopper. These only became common in the 1970s, and it may have been a later addition when the previous cork deteriorated.

The donor is sure that it was made by Sam Stevenson. Sam came to Tiree from Glasgow after the First World War, living near the pier, where his mechanical ingenuity and curiosity marked him out. He was born in 1890 in Maryhill, Glasgow, where his father worked as a slater. In 1914 he married Jane (later known as Jean) Campbell. His trade at that time was recorded as 'house painter', but he signed up to go to the front, possibly in the Highland Light Infantry. During the fighting he was badly injured; one of his legs was amputated and thereafter he walked with a wooden leg or crutches. He went on to work as a brass turner for Mavor and Coulson, a company making mining equipment near George Square in Glasgow. Some time in the 1920s the couple came to Tiree, at first living at The Neuk in Vault. At that time there was Spiers corrugated iron building in the corner of what is now the car park at the pier. This had been built as a shop by John MacArthur, *Teònaidh Chìobair*, whose brothers Hugh and Dan ran the successful shop in Scarinish that went on to become the Coop. The building was used for a while by a plumber from Tobermory, but was bought by Sam in the late 1920s. Jean and Sam ran it as a tearoom for a while.

Sam was a brilliant engineer, largely, I suspect, self-taught. He was one of the first people on the island to set up Lucas 'Freelite' windmill, which he used to run a twelve-volt system and charge accumulators and batteries. He once made a petrol engine small enough to fit inside a teacup, with all the parts made in his workshop at the south end of the building. He also once made his own five-foot outboard engine, with every piece apart from the propeller hand crafted. He was an early adopter of the camera, and two albums of over a hundred photographs survive, including some fascinating shots of a diver below the pier.

He also manned the hand-operated petrol pump at the pier head. Alasdair Sinclair remembered him: 'If a visitor, who was not familiar with such a pump, bought petrol, Sam sometimes forgot about the petrol remaining in the delivery hose. He might

remember and recover it after the customer had gone!' He worked for the RAF during the Second World War. Sam was an excellent swimmer, and Angus MacLean remembered hearing the tap-thump, tap-thump as he walked down the pier before he dived off the end. It was Sam who asked to retrieve a handbag from the seabed when a passenger dropped it over the side of the *Lochearn*.

When Reef Terrace was built, Sam and Jean moved there, and the Scarinish house bought by Angus MacLean. But by then, however, it was deteriorating, and it was demolished in 1962 by Hector Brown. Sam himself died in 1983 at the age of 93 in Renfrew.

The custom of making miniature ships in bottles is not as old as you might think. The earliest one was made for the Venetian Navy in 1784, but it was only in the 1880s, with the mass production of colourless glass bottles, that they became a popular hobby. Life as a merchant seaman did not give the time (or a steady platform) for this sort of detailed modelling, but it became a common pastime among lighthouse keepers.

If you have any more information about Sam or Jean, I would love to hear from you.

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