

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS: no. 98

CABINET SCRAPER

This triangle of metal, given to the museum by Donald Brown, is from the workshop of the Vaul boat builders and is a cabinet (or card) scraper. It has the name 'CR Pugh' engraved on it; we have not found out yet if this was the name of the tool maker or the tool user.

Cabinet scrapers of different sizes and shapes were commonly used to smooth and shape the surface of wood in the days before sandpaper and sanding machines. Little ones are useful for delicate jobs like shaping the curved fingerboard of a violin. This scraper is a big one, and Donald said that it had been used to make coffins. In the hands of an expert, scrapers are better than sandpaper, but you have to hold them at just the right angle so that they do not dig in and leave a mark. There is also a knack to sharpening them. You don't do it in the same way you would sharpen a knife, but by rubbing a steel rod along the flat bottom of the scraper, turning a burr or small hook along the edge.

Until the Second World War there was no professional funeral service on Tiree. Local craftsmen made the coffin, and everyone in the township played their part delivering the invitations, collect the carrying poles from a shed in Soroby cemetery or Kirkapol church, making the funeral meal, digging the grave and carrying the body to the graveyard. All jobs, except essential ones such as feeding the animals, stopped while the township concentrated on the task in hand.

Sometimes the coffin maker felt he had to put on a suit and visit the family to get measurements, but usually this was unnecessary because everyone knew everybody. First, the wooden planks had to be cut. Many townships had their own *Sloc Sabhaidh* 'the gully of sawing', a gap between rocks or sandbanks where logs could be cut with a two-man saw: one above and one (usually a boy, because it was such dirty work) below. Because of this association, many people would never walk past the *sloc* after dark. In the 1950s, Hugh MacDonald, *Eòghann Eachainn* from Kenovay rigged up a mechanical saw powered by old Morris Oxford engine.

A coffin was a significant object, and good quality red pine was often used. This meant that they could last a long time, and gravediggers would sometimes come across old coffins in surprisingly good condition at the bottom of a layer. To bend the wood at the shoulders, many coffin makers poured boiling water on the planks or used a steamer, just like a boat builder. Others cut notches on the inside surface to

the same effect. As work progressed, it was quite common for the coffin maker to be found lying inside the coffin to 'try it out', and visiting children would sometimes be allowed to do the same. In addition to Hugh MacDonald, coffin makers on Tìree between the wars were Donald MacDonald (*Dòmhnall Ghilleasbuig Nèill*, the 'Contractor') in Milton, whose shed had a square window to remove the finished coffin; the boat building MacKinnons of Vaul, (*Iain and Lachainn Eòghainn Ruaidh*); Colin Campbell (*Cailean Sheumais*) a shepherd from Mannal; Sandy Campbell (*Sandaidh Chailein Bhàin*) in Hynish; and Duncan MacDonald (*Donnchadh Bàn*), who lived in Balephuìl.

Coffins were traditionally covered in material: black for adults and white for an infant. The family of the coffin maker often sewed small cushions filled with soft paper or hay to support the head. Alasdair Sinclair, Brock, remembered being sent in the 1930s from Brock to *Bùth Dan*, MacArthur's shop in Scarinish where the Coop is today, to collect the special funeral parcel which contained black cotton for the outside, white cotton for the inside, black patterned lead strips for the handles, tassles, handles, cords and a plate on which Dan stencilled the name. The whole package cost 30 shillings, roughly the equivalent of £100 today.

As so often in this series, a simple object has precipitated a shower of memories. There are two more objects to go in this series. See you in a fortnight!

Dr John Holliday