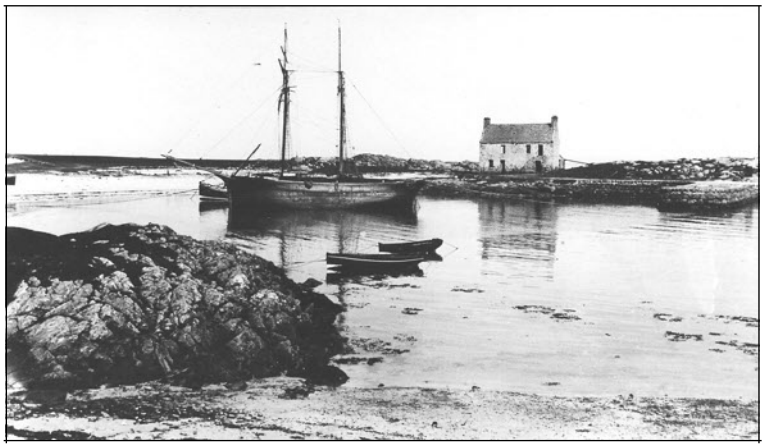
Lines below the Waves

The history of fishing on Tiree.

Tiree and Coll Gaelic Partnership, Summer 2005

Lines below the Waves

Tiree may be known as *Tìr an Eòrna*, the land of barley, but it was the fishing that brought the first men to the island 7,000 years ago. In the 19th century, dried ling and cod were a major export from the island. Today the lobster and crab fishery is Tiree's second biggest earner with an annual catch worth £750,000.



Scarinish Harbour in the 1930s.

Fish but no fishing

John Knox visiting in 1786 found that a few islanders had started to fish with long lines for the first time. However, the Tiree men were no competition for other fishermen.

> *This discovery, strange to relate, was only made in the spring preceeding my arrival on the island when two farmers realised £60 in a single boat after they had finished the daily labours of the field.*
>
> *There have been also adventurers from Ireland and the east of Scotland successful. In one sloop particularly, though they concealed their success, they seemed from their heaps upon the shore to have caught in two months from 12,000 to 16,000 cod and ling… they do not in this district pursue the fishing with spirit.*

This was mainly because islanders from Tiree were crofters first and fishermen second and because there was no safe harbour.

The 5th Duke of Argyll inherited his title in 1770 and from the start was keen to develop fishing on Tiree. He decided to build a new fishing village in Scarinish and in 1804 offered prizes of £10 and £5 for the most successful fishermen.

The demand for fish in Britain was spiralling as the south got richer. But Tiree, despite being in a prime position, was still losing out. The Statistical Account of 1845 stated that there were still too few full time fishermen on Tiree.

> [Fishing on Tiree does not] *appear to have been hitherto prosecuted with the activity and perseverance which it deserves…Though almost all are occasional fishers, yet few follow it steadily as a profession.*

Only small numbers of men declared themselves to be fishermen or boat builders between 1841 and 1901.

Census	1841	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891	1901
Boat builders	4	7	6	3	3	1	0
Fishermen	43	127	90	141	171	110	58
All Tiree	4500	3699	3217	2836	2755	2400	2187

***Port a' Mhuilinn* at Baugh.**

1846 was the year the potato crop was destroyed by blight. The failure of the new main staple food led to terrible hunger on Tiree. The Government decided one way to help the starving people on the west coast of Scotland was by boosting the fishing. In partnership with the Duke they built four new piers at The Green, West Hynish, Balemartine and Milton, and probably the one at Baugh. The remains of these piers can still be seen.

***Port Bhiosda* at the Green.**

Around the same time crofters in Balemartine and Mannal were cleared down to the shore to make way for bigger farms. They had no way to make a living except from fishing. In 1883 Hector MacDonald described life in Balemartine to the Napier Commission:

Q: *How much land has each of the 32 cottars?*
A: *The high road.*
Q: *No land at all?*
A: *Nothing whatever.*
Q: *Not even a bit of ground for potatoes?*
A: *Not the breadth of the soles of our feet.*
Q: *Your living is by fishing. What kind of fishing?*
A: *Cod and ling and all kinds of fish about the shore.*

East coast fishermen on Tiree

During the 19th century Tiree was an attractive summer base for fishermen from the north-east coast of Scotland. The Green, named by the east coasters, was favoured because it was closest to the rich fishing banks to the north. Brock almost certainly was named by fishermen from Fraserburgh, known in Aberdeenshire as 'The Broch'.

***Na Tentaichean*, the ruined huts at Clachan, Cornaig used by east coast fishermen.**

The decline of Tiree line fishing

Tiree continued to be handicapped by its poor harbours which meant that the local boats had to be small enough to haul up the beach. They were outfished by the larger, more efficient boats from the mainland.

Faster communications meant fresh fish could be taken on ice from the large fishing ports like Mallaig and Ullapool to the big cities. The traditional Tiree method of preservation – salting and drying cod and ling on the island then shipping the bundles to the mainland once a year – was out of date.

By 1901 there were only 58 fishermen left on the island. Fish became less and less plentiful on Tiree's banks. Willie Lamont of Mannal remembers four MacDonalds from Balemartine going out to the banks in the 1930s and coming home empty handed, something that was previously unheard of.

Fishing was a difficult way to earn a living.

> *"They were tough, going out in the morning with maybe a bottle of milk and a bottle of water, perhaps a scone in a piece of paper and that was their lot for the day until they came back at night, and I bet there wasn't much when they got home. These people were poor. They had nothing.*
> *"You can't eat fish every day…you got fish for breakfast, fish for dinner, and maybe at night a flounder. You couldn't continue like that. There wasn't any meat or ham…all you had was porridge, potatoes, butter, milk. That was your lot. If you got a small scone on Sunday you were lucky."*
>
> John Fletcher

Long line fishing

Ling live on the sea floor and are caught with large baited hooks on a line left just above the bottom for several hours. These long lines, or *lìon mhòr*, were up to mile long with up to 900 hooks set six feet apart. It was the job of the strongest man in the boat to lift the head rope and stone. Fish caught cleanly on a line were thought to be better than those *tachte,* 'suffocated' in a net.

> *"Salt ling were exported from the island, not in my time but in the past. The rocks down here were covered with fish drying in the sun. When they were dry they would make big bales of them tied with string and a big boat was coming in once a year for them and taking away a boat full of fish, from the whole island, I mean. That was only for ling, only that sort of fish…There was always someone sitting nearby, someone paid to keep the seagulls and suchlike away by shouting or throwing a stone* [or pulling a canvas over them if rain threatened].
>
> "[After fishing] *they would pour pails of fresh water over the lines to stop the salt rotting them. Then they were left on the wall-heads near the chimney…They were extremely careful with them, the lines were expensive, and people didn't have much money then."*
>
> John Fletcher

Port an Tobair **at Balemartine.**

Occasionally skate were also caught on the long lines.

> *While hauling lines near Ardmore Point, Mr. Alex Yule, fisherman, Tobermory, brought up a skate of gigantic proportions. The weight of this monster fish was 265 lbs. and its measurements were 8 ft. 2 ins. from snout to the tip of its tail, and 6 ft. 3 ins. at its broadest part. In its stomach there was found a large hook with piece of line attached, which betokened a former escape.*
>
> *Oban Times*, 15th April 1911

The Small Lines - Flounder Fishing

Nan and David McClounnan maintain that the best place in Tiree for flounders was *Tràigh Bhì* in Balephuil. They always ate them with their fingers. As Nan says, they are "*so good you'll eat your fingers when you've finished!"* Other areas also claimed the best fish. Angus Munn is sure *"the best flounders on Tiree were caught on Tràigh Bhàigh."*

Flat fish or flounders are caught with smaller lines called *na lìon bheag*. At each end of the line there was a stone weight, *an cruaidh*. Flounder lines had up to 500 hooks three feet apart, baited with lugworms. Hooks were tied to the lines with a *snòid* (snood) of horsehair which was light and floated just above the sandy sea bed.

***Port an Tobair*, Balemartine in 1950.**

Boys would also catch small flounders in pools left at low tide near *Carsamul*, Ruaig. They straightened an old cod hook and tied it to a piece of bamboo. Standing in the pool you had to creep up on them very slowly. But they were ticklish if you stood on them!

> *"I never found throwing* [the harpoon] *very effective. When you were walking along quietly, when you got near one the first indication was when it suddenly moved away. But you knew by practice that it wouldn't have moved very far…but if you stood quietly with your bare feet continued and stood still…and waited, the tail would go up and you would see it then."*
>
> Duncan Grant

***Tràigh nam Muir-sgian* at Gott Bay.**

However, like many other species of fish around Tiree, overfishing has made a flounder a rare catch nowadays.

> *"I put 200 hooks* [out recently] *and never got one fish…Where's the fish? I think the marks are alright… the flounders on Tiree have gone."*
>
> Angus Munn

The Second Wave - Tiree's Herring Bonanza

Tiree was also slow to get off the mark with herring fishing, as the 1845 Statistical Account reports:

> *The herring fishing has never been practised here. Though shoals of them unquestionably frequent the coast at certain seasons there are no bays or lochs to afford them shelter and the deep sea fishing is quite unknown…*

Packing herring at Oban pier in the 1920s.

Herring spawn in the Clyde and Loch Fyne in spring and migrate in huge shoals up the west coast in the summer and autumn. Their food is microscopic plankton and so they're 'soft-mouthed', not attracted to a hook. They are caught in fine nets at night.

From 1914 to 1921 there was a herring boom on Tiree. Gott Bay was "*thick with herring. If you fell out of the boat you wouldn't sink with the amount of herring!"*

At its height herring were even being thrown up on the shore. Everybody that could lay their hands on a boat went out and you could see and even smell the herring in Gott Bay from the shore. Most of the fishing was done at night and a small pillar for a lantern was built on the 'Perch', a rock near Gott pier, to guide the boats in.

Gott Bay pier in 1915.

The main Gott Bay pier was so busy that the Ruaig fishermen, fed up with the queues, built a temporary pier on Soay to land the herring. They would then be taken by horse and cart round the bay to be processed.

Gott pier became a hive of activity. Buyers and the gutters, *cutairean*, also came to Tiree following the fish. The packed herring were taken to warehouses in Glasgow.

Alasdair Sinclair tells this story:

> *"Lachie MacKinnon* (his uncle) *was in Glasgow one day, visiting the main fish warehouse in George St. He was interested in some Gott Bay herring that were in barrels there. These were known to be of particularly fine quality. Two Russian buyers were also there and Lachie watched as a cooper was summoned to open one of the barrels. The Russian picked one out of the pickle, squeezed the juice out of it from tail to head between his fingers and bit into the raw fish before handing it to his companion who did likewise. They conferred in Russian and the consignment was taken off by horse and cart the next day on its way to Russia."*

In 1921 the shoals of herring disappeared from Gott Bay as mysteriously as they had come.

John MacDonald of Mannal and Neil MacLean of Hough with a catch of cod in the 1960s.

Hand line fishing from a boat

Although commercial long line fishing for ling and cod was over by about 1910, 'professional' Tiree fishermen still went out to the banks for fish which they sold on the island.

> *"That's how my father made a living. He took* [his brother's] *horse and cart and he would start here in Baugh and reach as far as Cornaig selling fish. You would get two big lithe for a shilling…We had to eat fish. We had to shoot the odd wild goose, the odd hare. We'd have died without it. That's the genuine truth. There was no rich folks on Tiree in these days."*
>
> Angus Munn

Donald Archie Brown of Balevullin spinning horse-hair fishing line in 2004.

Fishing line, *beairt urball eich*, used to be made from horse hair either by spinning with a small weight or plaiting it. This was still being made on Tiree in the 1940s.

Sometimes hand line fishing could be very successful. Alasdair MacArthur, Balemartine, once caught 120 lithe in one night while out with his cousin Murdoch. They had to come in before the boat was swamped. Neil Johnstone from Heanish out with three others once caught 300 of the fish off Hynish. There was no salt in the shop at the time and so they stood outside the Church of Scotland hall in Scarinish after a film show and gave the fish away.

David MacClounnan and Alison MacKay with a catch of lythe in Balephuil in August 1983.

Fishing accidents

The sea has provided an important harvest for the island but its power and unpredictability were constant threats to the Tiree fishermen. The worst fishing tragedy to affect Tiree occurred in Balephuil in July 1856. It seemed a good day for fishing, but at least one old fisherman noticed a weather sign that made him wary of the day.

Balephuil around 1900.

"The day of the Balephuil drowning, Archibald, my grandmother's brother, he was a fisherman....And when he rose in the morning, it was a lovely morning...His father had got up too along with him. His father said to him, 'You are not going fishing today.' 'Why?' said he. 'It's a fine day today.' 'Yes, it's a fine day at the moment, but it won't be like that', said he, 'before evening. Did you see the fadadh ruadh (a fragment of rainbow traditionally thought a sign of bad weather]*' he said, 'in the north-west.'*

"And Archibald was not at all pleased with his father. He was very annoyed at him for keeping him at home. And the others did not go out because Archibald did not go over and call for them. And after noon the wind shifted to the north-west – a storm – and his father said to Archibald, 'What do you think of the weather now?' said he.' 'Aren't you lucky', said he, 'to be on dry land', said he, 'and not out there between here and the Skerryvore? If you were, you wouldn't come back.'

"That was the day of the Balephuil drowning. The boats could not come in to the Port Mòr or to the Cùiltean in Balephuil that day. They were driven away from the island.

Hector Kennedy

Two Tiree women, Isabella Black and Mary Campbell were blamed for the disaster.

[She was] *a little pretty woman, but she had a really evil look about her all the same. They were saying she was a witch, and so she was. And the disaster that befell Balephuil, when the men were drowned and the day turned bad, they were blaming…the two women…*

Neither of them had any great love for their husbands and they wanted to get rid of them…And the people were casting it up against these two women that it was them that caused the wind, because a witch is able to do just about anything. She'll make a wind or calm as she pleases.

Donald Sinclair quoted in *Recollections of an Argyllshire Drover* by Eric Cregeen

Because of accidents like these, Tiree fishermen became extremely cautious. Young fishermen were encouraged to study the shore.

"It's full of boghaichean (submerged rocks) *out there. You have to be knowledgeable to get out. Many's the time my father said to me, 'Go out in a boat at low water. You'll see all the rocks and you can see their markings on land'. When the tide's in, it's all different and quite deceptive."*

Gilleasbuig Kennedy

Preserving Fish

A shed next to MacArthur's shop in Scarinish was used to keep the rough salt for the fish.

D & H MacArthurs' general store in Scarinish in the 1930s.

"There are two schools of thought. Some will tell you not to over-wash it, the cure's better. But this is what my father taught me. I take the fish down to Clach na h-Òigh down there and I gut it and wash it. Before I go I make a mixture of salt and warm water to melt the salt, in an old metal bath, and I put the fish in for 24 hours. The next day I've got a wee firkin barrel and I put a layer of salt in the bottom. Then I pack the fish in, then a layer of salt. Not one will rot. Some miss out the brine, but I would recommend it. The fish were then hung outside [on a rope] *similar to clothes line in pairs, tied together at the tail. The likes of cod, lithe and ling – they were split in two. They lasted all winter with the curing.*

"In these days every house on Tiree had an open fire or stove. The piocaich were hung across [the chimney] *on two metal rods having been treated in the same way, pickling and all that… they were gorgeous. Ròsladh. We invariably had them for our supper. We had these metal rods. They went across the fire and you laid the fish* [across them]. *Looking back I don't think it was very hygienic, but I can tell you this. I don't think anyone died. There's more dying with all these pills today!"*
Angus Munn.

Dried fish were sent to family members on the mainland. Aneen Black, Ruaig, remembers her father, Donald Lamont (*Dòmhnall an Gàidsear*), who worked for the Customs in Glasgow. He was a keen fisherman on his summer holidays in Tiree and sent a *ciste* (trunk) full of dried saithe back to Glasgow on the *Dunara*.

The Lobster and Crab Fishery

Better communications with the south and rising living standards meant that the price of lobsters in London trebled between 1860 and 1880. The earliest record of lobster fishing on Tiree is in 1860 in official papers on the drowning of two men from Ruaig.

Making lobsters creels at Brock in the late 1920s.

The old lobster fishermen were very fussy about where they set their creels. Alasdair Sinclair of Brock remembers going out as a ten year old boy with his uncle Neil MacKinnon. His job was to row the boat while the older man placed the creels. The boat seemed huge and Neill kept shouting at him to keep the boat in just the right place.

The 'Tunnag' was something like eight feet wide and the oars were great long narrow bladed things… [When] *you looked down through four or five fathoms of water there would be a black rock, then a space, and you tried to get the creel about a foot* [from the rock]. *And the creels only had one entrance in these days* [and you wanted to get this]… *positioned exactly towards the rock. To manoeuvre a boat like that with a pernickety old man who was going 'Chan eil sin ceart idir. Feuch a-rithist e!'* (That's not right at all. Do it again!) *You certainly learnt some swear words in Gaelic once you'd been with Neil for a while!*

Once the lobster was caught,

"*They would take them back to a biggish wooden box which was floating just off Skipnish with holes in it, and each giomach* (lobster) *would get its pincers tied with sail twine. They were chucked into the box, but to be fair they threw in a few bits of fish in as well… Donald used to get any old box that came ashore and he poshed it up and trimmed all the edges…they packed it with perhaps two, three dozen lobsters, packed them in with seaweed till it was full. Then the following morning, very early they would have to be off to the pier because the steamer would come down from Barra about six o'clock and the box was duly put aboard and a label nailed on to the fishmonger, Billingsgate, 'Carriage Forward'…and about a week later a postal order would arrive…"*

Alasdair Sinclair

Neil MacKinnon of Brock, holding aloft a lobster, with his brother Donald in the skiff *Tunnag* in the early 1930s.

After the Second World War Tiree's lobster fishery became a more important part of the island's economy. Currently five boats fish out of Tiree for velvet crabs (*deiseagan*) and brown crabs (*crùban* or *partan*) which sell for 50p to 70p a kilo. *Deiseagan* are particularly prized in Spain where they are cut in half and the body contents picked out whole with a spoon. The gross value of the catch is now estimated to be £750,000 per year. The crabs are exported live to Spain by a weekly lorry. By comparison, crofting is estimated to be worth £730,000 to the island, with a further £680,000 coming in subsidy.

Fishing Grounds around Tiree

Fish caught off the north and west of the island are thought to be firmer and tastier than fish from the south side. This is put down to their living in rougher waters. Fish go where the food is, usually an area of raised, rocky seabed. The knowledge of where these 'banks' are around Tiree has been built up over the last two hundred years. Their position was calculated by lining up four marks on the island. The old fishermen, without today's charts and echo-sounders, were astonishingly accurate.

"I remember going out with Tearlach Theònaidh, and he said, "I reckon we should go out to Creag Dhòmhnaill Ruaidh today." "That's all right, you know where the marks are?" "Yes". That was Ceosabh and Ben Hough, and Taigh Mòr Mannal and Ben Mannal. [When we got there he said,] *"I think we're just about there. He stopped the engine and we put the lines out and we were spot on. That's navigation for you. They were very skilled at that sort of thing."*

John Fletcher.

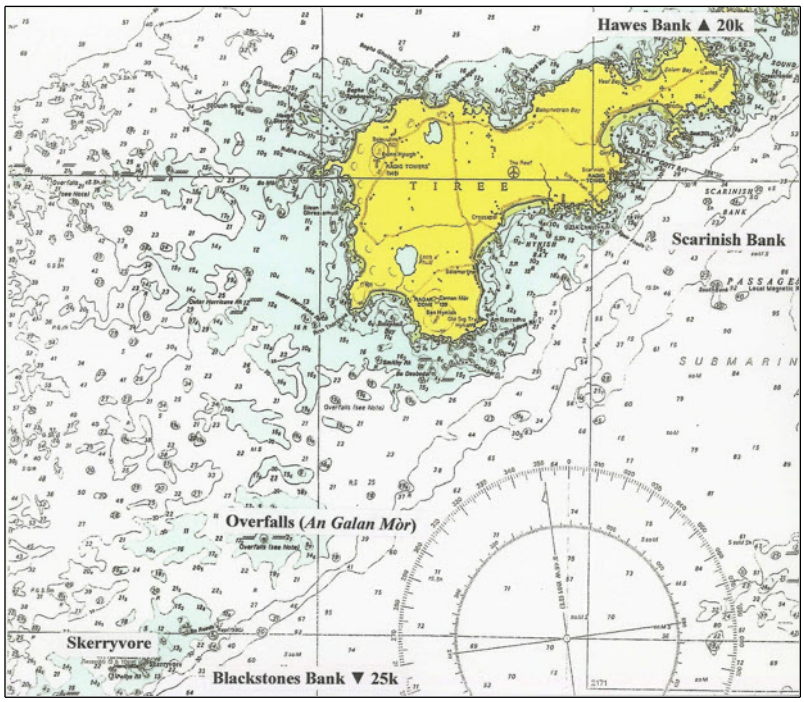
Skerryvore lighthouse in 2004.

Creag Dhòmhnaill Ruaidh (Red Donald's rock) was named after the grandfather of Alexina MacLean, Mannal. He is said to have seen a mermaid there.

The boats then were all sailing boats, using an old-fashioned dipping lug rig.

"The first man to break the tradition was the late Johnny Kennedy [of Crossapol]. *He put an engine in his boat. It was a Ford engine out of a car…There was a radiator…it had to be watered with pure water."*

Angus Munn



Fishing grounds around Tiree.

Whales and Basking Sharks

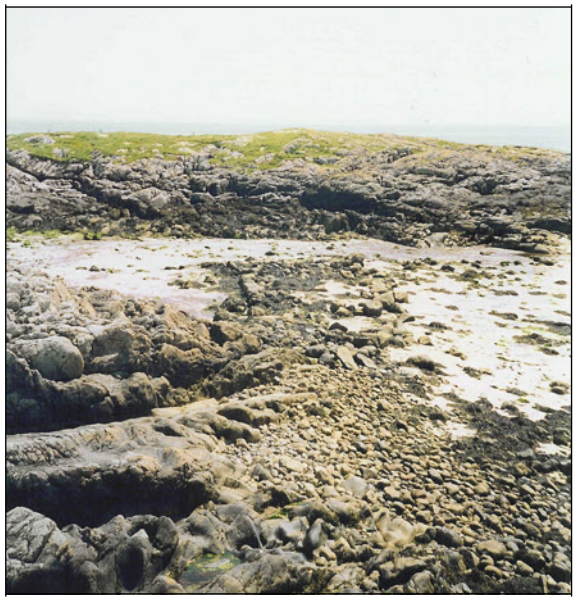
Before the development of paraffin lamps, lighting in Tiree's houses was provided by small oil lamps, *crùisgean*.

Dead whale at Vaul in the 1920s.

Oil from a number of fish were used, but whales stranded on the shore were an important source as were Tiree's most magnificent summer visitors, the basking shark. Whale meat was also eaten.

Fish traps

Stone fish traps were built at several points around the coast of Tiree. They are made so that they fill at high tide. When the tide recedes small fish like *deargan*, small red wrasse, are left behind in small pools under the rocks and can be collected by hand in a bucket.



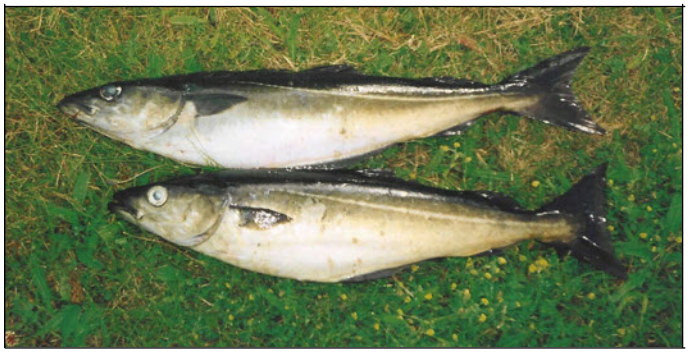
Fish trap at Heanish.

The best preserved trap is at Heanish between the shore and *Eilean nan Gobhar,* island of the goats.

Carraig fishing

Since the Stone Age, islanders have fished from certain rocks around the coast, known in Gaelic as *carraigean*.

> *"Carraig fishing was our hobby and almost our life. We had no television, very little sport was played on the island, and believe it or believe it not, in our formative years in the 1920s very, very few of us drank and we spent our time on the carraig…In my boyhood days it was unknown to go to the carraig without catching something…you could guarantee. My mother would get the pot ready for us coming home. The worst you'd have would be twenty saithe, but we preferred lithe."*
>
> Angus Munn



Saithe, also known as coalfish.

The fishing lines were made from the hair from horses' tails, *urball-eich*, and the rods from bamboo.

"We bought bamboo rods from Dan a' Bhuth [in Scarinish], *14-20 feet long. And there was a great art in flicking it out…I've seen one or two nearly losing their eye with the hook."*
Angus Munn

***Cnotagan* at *Carraig Mhic Èoghainn*, a fishing rock at Baugh, used to grind bait, usually limpets and whelks.**

To attract fish to the *carraig* limpets were ground in small hollows in the rock, known as *crotagan*, and were then thrown into the water. These hollows can be seen at many places around Tiree's shore and are hundreds, if not thousands, of years old.

There was no formal ownership of fishing rocks, but it was considered impolite to fish on a *carraig* in a township other than your own. Most of the fishermen were boys and men, but some women enjoyed the *carraig* as well.

Some of the *carraig* fishing was to feed the cat. However, some cats would take matters into their own hands, as it were, flicking the small fish, *cudainean*, out of the water with their paws. Katina MacDonald, Balephuil, had one such, called 'Bull'. As she says, *"there was no Kitty Kat in these days!"*

An t-Àbh

The *àbh* is a large triangular net on a long handle which was used to fish on certain rocks. The best time to use it was at dusk. The fisherman let the net down and then pulled it up and in, *a-staigh thugaibh* (in towards you), flat against the front of the rock. The *àbh* was heavy and dangerous to use. A full net could drag you into the water and it was used only by stronger, more experienced men. It was used to catch small fish of many different sorts, generally called cuddies.

"They used to love cuddies. Many's the poor family that was brought up on them…they weren't gutting them, just putting them into the pot as they were." John Fletcher

Donald Archie Brown of Balevullin in 2004 with an *àbh* made from an oar and herring net.

Superstitions and Traditions

The unpredictability of the sea quite naturally bred a strong sense of the magical and superstitious amongst the island's fishermen.

Women were thought to be unlucky in or near a boat or even near someone going fishing. Old men would even turn back from going fishing off the rocks if they met a woman on the way.

It was widely thought that it brought misfortune to have a minister on a boat. Even meeting a minister on the way to fishing was a bad sign. It was also believed to bring bad luck to fish on a Sunday.

Everything must be done sun-, or clock-wise. Boats were always pushed into the sea stern first, and then turned *deiseal*, clockwise.

Some hunters and fishermen would go round their house twice before setting off. If anyone called after a fisherman going to sea it was unlucky and they turned back.

Old boat at Scarinish harbour.

The old fishermen would pull boats that were no longer seaworthy up on the shore and leave them to rot. It was even thought to be unlucky to burn a boat's timbers on the fire in the house.

Eels

Conger eels, which can grow up to 9 ft. long, live in holes in rocks and wrecks and feed on bottom-living fish and crabs at night. They were caught on lines and sometimes in lobster creels. They were never eaten on Tiree but cut up and used as bait. Eels were thought to be an unlucky fish. It was believed that if a strand of horsehair was left in water, it would turn into an eel.

Ronnie Campbell with the big conger eel.

Whopper eel

GATESHEAD fisherman Steve Wardhaugh hooked up a fishing trip to remember when he landed three whoppers in one day - and almost landed himself a new Scottish record.

Fishing in the Firth of Lorne from Ronnie Campbell's charter boat *Laura Dawn*, Steve first hauled aboard a huge conger eel weighing a massive 47lb, just one pound off the current Scottish rod-caught record which has stood for 20 years.

A regular on west coast fishing trips, Steve then hooked a 42lb tope, the largest of the shark family to be caught so far from Ronnie's boat, and then found himself reeling in a skate weighing 176lb.

Exciting

Ronnie said: 'The conger might not be the biggest fish we've caught when compared to our speciality of big skate but, for me, it is certainly the most exciting fish we've landed since the hake record eight years ago.'

All were caught on mackerel bait using heavy Penn rods and reels, Steve's monster eel falls well short of the British record which stands at 133lb.

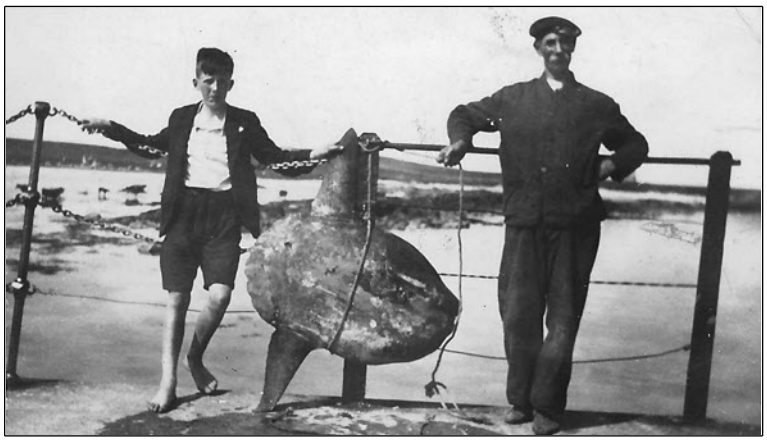
But Ronnie, who has fished these waters for the last 11 years, reckons the firth still holds a few surprises. 'We put our fish back once weighed and there are a lot of big fish out there.'

***Oban Times*, 11th September 2003.**

An Tarraing

This was a small, fine-meshed net with a line of corks along the top, two spars at the side, and a row of weights along the bottom. It was set in small inlets to catch smaller fish. Before setting the net, the fish were fed every day for a week with a bucket of crushed limpets.

The net was left for two tides then pulled in slowly, the men going up to their waists in the water and splashing the top rope to keep the fish from jumping over. *Tarraing* nets were also set in Scarinish harbour. The way Angus Munn remembers it, three or four men worked each side but all the work was done from the land and no-one got wet.



John MacDonald of Heanish with a sunfish on Gott Bay pier in the 1920s.

Food from the Shore

Shellfish have been an important food source since Mesolithic times particularly in the spring, the lean time of the year.

> *The shell-fish most deserving of notice are lobsters, crabs (or partans), cockles, limpets, mussels and razor-fish. These are found and used in considerable quantities, and during seasons of particular scarcity they have sometimes contributed in a considerable degree to the support of life among the poorer classes.*
>
> New Statistical Account for Tiree 1845

James and Effie MacLeish with their grand-daughter Carol Ann picking whelks at Sandaig.

Two Gaelic proverbs illustrate this: *Nuair bhios an t-each caol, bidh an fhaochag reamhar* / when the horse is thin (in the spring), the whelk is fat. *Is cruaidh an t-earrach anns an cunntar na faochagan* / it's a hard spring when you have to be careful with the whelks.This association with poverty continued until recent times. Willie Lamont, Mannal, remembers the hard times of his childhood in the 1930s. Even then, he says, it was a matter of pride not to go down to the shore for whelks, lest your neighbours see how little money you had.

Limpets

Limpets are known on Tiree as *maorach*. The softest ones are found low on the shore, near the low tide mark. They can be eaten raw, and Willie Lamont, Mannal, remembers chewing them when he was hungry fishing at the *carraig*. They are more usually boiled in seawater for 20 minutes, when the meat can be prised away from the shell and the 'horns' and 'string' peeled off. The meat is then covered in oatmeal and fried in butter.

Rats down at the shore will try to eat limpets while the shell is slightly raised as it feeds. One day Willie MacLean was fishing with his brother Hugh and they found a rat drowned with its nose trapped under a limpet shell. There was also a cat in Kenovay that put its paw under a limpet while it was feeding. The shell clamped down, trapping its paw and it too was drowned.

Whelks

On the west coast, *faochagan* are called whelks though strictly speaking they are periwinkles. They, too, can be eaten raw but are usually boiled in seawater for five minutes and picked out with a pin. A soup called *sìabh fhaochag* can be made by boiling the whelks, taking out the meat, cooking oatmeal in the liquor and adding back the meat. This is a good cure for constipation!

Whelks.

Razor fish

Razor fish, or *musgalan*, live in sandy beaches in a few places on the island. They are best caught by moonlight in March three nights after the lowest spring low tide with a north wind blowing. Donald MacIntyre remembers seeing a long line of men down on the beach in Gott standing quietly, waiting.

The men waited until the fish spouted and put their siphons or 'tongues' above sand. You could grab them with your hands, but you had to be careful not to get cut and the trick was not to pull too hard. One could also dig them out quickly with a fork or old sickle. Another way was to file notches in an old sickle so that it was like a saw. You ran this through the sand and lifted them out.

Trout Fishing

Brown trout caught at Loch Bhasapol in 2004.

There were no fish in the fresh water lochs on the island except eels until 1882 when the estate stocked Loch Bhasapol with trout.

Ivy and Francis Gunnis from Sissinghurst in Kent held the fishing rights on Loch Bhasapol before World War II. They restocked the loch with a new strain of trout from Loch Leven. These have a more silvery side than the natural brown trout.

Trout fishing is still popular today. The heaviest trout that Brian Milne, the art teacher, has ever caught was 3 lb. 10 oz. (1.6 Kg) Jessie Gray's father, Mr. Rutter, who managed Brown's shop in Balemartine, once caught a 5 lb. trout. This would have been a 'cannibal' fish that ate smaller trout.

The Tiree Regatta

Tiree regatta in the 1980s.

Tiree fishermen had always raced back from the fishing banks. It was a matter of pride to beat the other boats back into harbour, and the Tiree regatta grew out of this rivalry between boats. The regatta itself was started by Peter MacNeill, a travelling salesman from Colonsay, who visited Tiree before the First World War.

Boatbuilders and Maintenance

The classic Tiree skiff was between 20 and 26 ft long (6m - 8m), and double-ended (a sharp bow and stern). One of the finest skiffs was the *Mayflower* which is now laid up behind the Coop.

The old sailors would always use some ballast in the boat, usually stones from the shore. The trim was important. If the bow was too heavy, the boat would "*steer like a pig*". If the ballast was too far back she steered better but there was more drag.

J. Brown with the *Spindrift* at Scarinish harbour.

Boats built for the later lobster fishery around the east end were much wider, or beamier. As outboard engines came into use in the 1930s and 40s flat transom sterns became popular.

The MacDougalls of Vaul were a famous boatbuilding family in the 19th century. A family on Coll at the time had a particularly fast boat. A race was arranged between them and one of the MacDougall boats with the winner taking the loser's boat as a prize. The Coll family cried off at the last minute. The MacDougalls were famous for making boats quickly, and the Coll fisherman said, *"If Tiree wins we lose our boat and livelihood. If Tiree loses they can build another boat in seven days*."

Skiff on Gott Bay.

The *Times*, belonging to the MacInnes' of Salum, was made by Hugh MacArthur in *Loch an Air* and cost £14. The day it was launched they sailed her to the wreck of the *Nessmore* where they salvaged a load of the tanning agent catechu, used to tan nets and sails to preserve them against the rotting effects of salt water.

They also salvaged a stirk who tried to leap out of the boat almost capsizing them. The beast was eventually brought home, slaughtered and salted into barrels which were hidden beneath the cattle in the byre to keep them away from the prying eyes of the Customs. The boat paid for itself that first day!

The last boat built in Vaul was the Joan, now owned by Lachie MacArthur of Mannal. It was built by Iain MacKinnon for Captain MacArthur, a deep sea sailor, who brought back some Pacific oak for its keel.

Tiree regatta in the 1980s. L-R: *Mayflower*, *Jessie* and *Daisy*.

Properly looked after, boats could last over a hundred years. Painted outside, the inside was coated every year with tar. *An tèarr bhuidhe* (Archangel tar) was traditionally preferred on Tiree because it was lighter and more watertight, whereas darker coal tar was used on house roofs.

"They were kept together with tar. The bodaich went down and made a fire and a peallan*, a lump of rags. There were plenty of black pots with three legs. I know of one instance where the tar went on fire and the boat burned. The famous Taeping, she was probably the best of her day…She was burned accidentally at Mannal."*
Angus Munn.

The old men in Hynish were very particular about keeping sand out of the boat. You had to wash your shoes and the ropes before getting in. They maintained it got between the planks and rotted them.

Shed at Balemartine with a roof made from an old boat.

After their sailing days were over old boats were often made into roofs for an outhouse. One of these can be seen at Lachie MacArthur's house in Mannal.

