



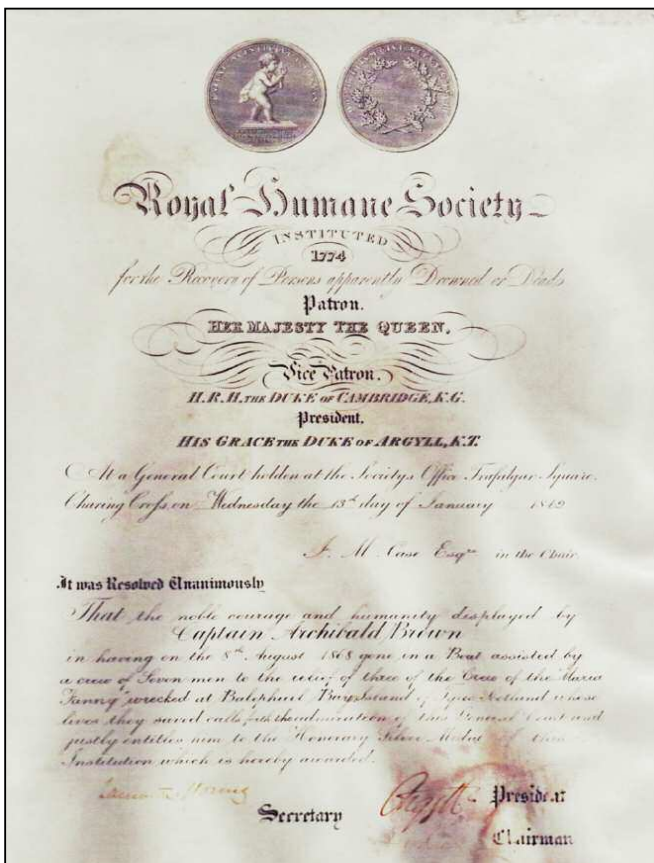
## Newsletter of An Iodhlann's members

Welcome back to Tìree's yesterday. In this edition we have the story of a very brave Tìree crew, information about an illness found only on Tìree and the Mexican desert, and news of a very special hillside.

### A HEROIC RESCUE

Tìree, sadly, has witnessed many shipwrecks and our coastline is peppered with the unmarked graves of sailors whose bodies were cast ashore here: one thinks of *Port nan Spàinneach* 'the inlet of the Spaniards' in Milton where there are four graves; *Dùn Haingis* in Hough where seven sailors from the *Artois* lie, including the captain Ewen Edwards, after their 1830 wreck; and *An Cladh aig Sloc a' Ghuail* 'the graveyard at the gully of the coal' on the Hough/Balevullin boundary, where the bodies of twelve sailors from *Nancy* of Dublin were laid to rest around 1870. It is said that unidentified bodies washed ashore could not be buried in a church graveyard in case they were not Christian.

The island, with no protected harbour and lacking a lifeboat station, has seen few rescue attempts from its shores. But one such came to our attention when Alasdair and Mary Flora MacDonald, with the help of Mairi Campbell, Corrairigh, kindly gave *An Iodhlann* an old framed certificate when Manna House was being cleared out. We had the certificate re-framed in Glasgow using special acid-free archive card.



Bravery certificate awarded to Captain Archibald Brown

A London Times report from August 1868 is our main historical source for this story.

### "WRECK AND LOSS OF LIFE"

'On the morning of Saturday last, the 8th of August, some of the inhabitants of the village of Kennavara, Tyree in Argyllshire [the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map, surveyed in 1878, shows two houses in the settlement of *Kenvar*, west of *The Land*], saw the masts of a schooner in the bay, about a mile offshore [likely to have been on the reef called *Circeabodha*]. By aid of a glass, two or three men were observed clinging to it. A heavy sea was on, a gale having been blowing from the south and south-west for 24 hours. Though there were many spectators no boat was launched for some time. At length, about 11 o'clock, a boat [from West Hynish] was got out manned with six rowers, and at considerable risk got near the vessel. They

could not go very near in case they might be swamped against the rigging, so the rescue was achieved the following way. A light cord, to which a piece of lead was attached, was flung to the sailors. This caught, a rope tied onto it was drawn up. To this, fastened to the mast, the crew were then directed to make a running noose some way down. By this, man after man secured himself. Then a jump into the sea and all the survivors (three in number), were hauled safely on board. A very short time longer would have proved fatal to one of them, as he was much exhausted. They were able to walk to the village half a mile away and were well cared for. The vessel proved to be the *Maria and Fanny* of Milford, Wales, [which had been sailing] from Ayr to Limerick with coal. She had been driven out of her course by the gale when off the north of Ireland. Two men, the captain William James of St David's, and Joseph Evans of Milford, were drowned. The names of the saved are Thomas Davis, mate, of Newport, Pembroke; James Brown, St David's; and William Thomas, Milford Harbour. Especial praise is due to Captain Archibald Brown of the *Laverock* Scot [another coastal schooner - *laverock* is the Scots word for a skylark], and the boat's crew, who effected the rescue at great risk.'

The *Maria and Fanny* had been trading between Glasgow and Ireland for at least forty years, and was no stranger to incident, having been involved in a collision in 1850 in the Carlingford Loch in Northern Ireland with another schooner called the *Erin*, losing her rigging.

Postcard of Mannal taken  
around 1930



The 38 year old Archibald Brown came from Mannal House, the son of Colin (a general merchant) and Catherine. In the 1861 Census he was recorded as a 'seaman (coastal trade)'. It's an amazing story, and we can only admire the Tíree sailors' bravery and boatsmanship. We are delighted to be able to put the pieces together to honour the memory of Captain Brown of Mannal and his crew, and to have the certificate restored so future generations can remember them.

## A TÍREE DISEASE

Tíree is home to a very unusual illness, though it is rarely seen today. It mainly affects children, and can, in extreme cases, prove fatal. The disease known in Gaelic as *barr a' chinn*, literally 'the top of the head' was being treated on Tíree into the 1990s, and, for all I know, may still be around.

"It was children. They were taking it through fright. Some people were believing in it, some were not. I saw a boy, Hugh M, he's out in Oban [now]...and he was almost dead. Donald Sinclair [West

Hynish] cured him...Alec M, he had the same thing when he was a boy...and his mother didn't believe in the thing, but his father was believing it. When she saw there was no hope for the boy, that's when she agreed. He was too far through, he was nearly a goner!" (Hector Kennedy, Heylipol, talking to Eric Cregeen in 1974: SA1977.098)

*Barr a' chinn* was usually caused by a fright, for example being bitten on the face by a dog, or surprised by a hen flying out of a barn unexpectedly. After this the child would become pale, listless and lose his or her appetite. Patients were commonly taken to several doctors and hospitals but none were able to understand their illness. It was said the condition could be diagnosed by asking the child to look up. If you were unable to see a line of white under their pupils they had *barr a' chinn*. The illness was thought to be caused by the descent of two bones in the roof of the mouth.



Thrift

There were two cures: physical and herbal. In the physical cure, the healer's index and middle fingers or thumb (or sometimes a horn spoon) were pressed against the roof of the mouth, pushing the 'bones' back. This is remembered as being quite painful, and patients could rarely be persuaded to go back for a second treatment if they relapsed. Sometimes the healer's finger could be bitten hard by a surprised patient! Alec MacNeill, Balevullin, was

unlucky enough to suffer *barr a' chinn* three times: once when a flock of starlings on the roof of the house surprised him as he lay in bed, and another time when a horse reared as he walked past Greenbanks. He went to the healer *Bean a' Stiolaich* (so-called because her husband had been nicknamed 'Steel' due to his indifference to the cold) three times, on a Thursday, Sunday and Thursday. She lifted the roof of his mouth with her middle finger. The son of the Free Church minister at the manse in Scarinish was also cured by *Bean a' Stiolaich*, after which the minister sent her a Christmas present every year.

The herbal treatment uses the plant sea pink or thrift (*Armeria maritima*) known on Tiree as *barr a' chinn*. This is common on the rocky parts of the shore. In 1974 Eilidh MacLean told Dr Margaret MacKay from the School of Scottish Studies how to prepare this cure (SA1974.143 on the *Tobar an Dualchais* website). The plant was gathered at any time of the year, as it was the roots and stem that were used. You needed to bring home some thirty six roots to work with. "You wipe the soil off the roots, not scraping the bark off the root. I've seen me rinsing it in the water down there and drying it off." The largest roots were discarded as it would be too difficult to grind them, and the dry roots were then picked up one by one until the healer had eight. The ninth one was discarded. This sequence was repeated three times until the healer had twenty four roots. These were ground on a stone to make "a paste" and put into a loosely stitched cotton bag. The whole ritual was repeated three times: on a Sunday, Thursday and Sunday, or a Thursday, Sunday and Thursday. Thursday was dedicated to St Columba, and was widely regarded as an auspicious day

in the islands. The bag containing the ground herb was hung around the child's neck or sewn onto the inside of their vest, and left there for several weeks.

Both treatments were accompanied by a rhyme. It was also said of some Tiree healers they could treat someone in Glasgow suffering from the disease. It is believed that a healer's powers are lost when he or she teaches the cure to another person.

Fascinatingly, a similar illness has been recorded on the Mexican-American border. *Towita* or *Caída de la mollera* 'the fallen fontanelle (the soft spot on the top of a baby's head)' is caused by a fall or carrying an infant vertically rather than horizontally. If the fontanelle falls, the palate also falls and the baby become unable feed and becomes weak. The treatment there is to suck on the top of the head, pushing the palate back to its correct position with a finger, or holding the baby upside down. This can be done by the family, but more difficult cases have to be taken to the *curandero* or traditional healer. These may massage oil to the head while saying the words of a cure, or apply a sticky dough to the top of the head, which shrinks as it dries, pulling everything upwards (*American Folk Medicine*, ed. Hand, W., 1976, University of California, page 338). There is no known European equivalent and I am not aware of any connection between Tiree and the Mexican desert. One for future research!

### *Tir* - TIREE ARCHAEOLOGY WEEK

The first Tiree Archaeology Week organised by *An Iodhlann* with help from the Windfall Fund came to a close at the start of the month. A score or so members of the Association of Certificated Field Archaeologists (ACFA) came to the island for a week. Members of this group are trained in field archaeology: surveying and drawing, but no digging. They were accompanied by Dr Heather James from Northlight Heritage, an archaeological charity in Glasgow. The party were interrupted by a day's unseasonal snow, but were able to spend four days in the field drawing houses and monuments on the slopes of Ben Hynish, Kenavara, Hough, Kilkenneth and Balephetrish, accompanied by a number of local volunteers. They discovered some fascinating sites. Just east of the coastguard's hut behind Ben Hough there is a long ruined building, now only showing as faint ridges in the grass. Behind this is something that seems to be common in older buildings on the island: a very unusual triangular enclosure.



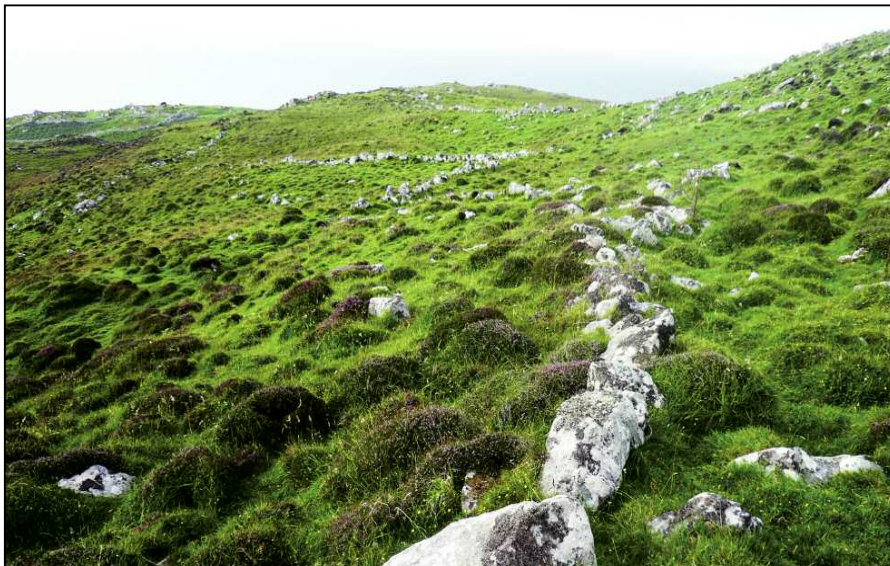
*Our chair concentrating hard drawing his first stone*



*The archaeologists enjoying some unexpected April snow*

Just east of the coastguard's hut behind Ben Hough there is a long ruined building, now only showing as faint ridges in the grass. Behind this is something that seems to be common in older buildings on the island: a very unusual triangular enclosure. This triangular pattern was repeated in some nineteenth century houses in Kilkenneth. On the summit of Kenavara were two house sites that appear to be medieval. At the Ringing Stone there are the remains of a large building oriented, unusually, east-west.

There was a lot of debate as to whether this could be Viking or not as it is not on the early maps, but the jury is still out. At Earnal a well-preserved corn-drying kiln was found. But it was the south-east slopes of Ben Hynish that attracted the most interest. A huge number of irregular stone walls seem to enclose tiny areas of unproductive hillside. Amongst these are several lambing enclosures, a Bronze Age kerb cairn, an unrecorded possible Neolithic stone circle, a probable Neolithic stone cairn, and a small building complex above the cliffs of *Diubadal* that appears to be prehistoric. It was an astonishing haul of finds, all of which were previously unrecorded. The southeastern shoulder of



Stone walls: Stone walling, on the south side of Ben Hynish, looking towards Skerryvore

Ben Hynish, also likely to be home to the 'lost' township of *Heren*, is fast becoming a very important landscape. Three eminent scholars accompanied the party and gave a talk to packed house in *An Talla*. Dr Colleen Batey is a Senior Lecturer in Archaeology at Glasgow University specialising in the Vikings. She was particularly interested in a site below the smaller broch at *Vaul*, a place known today as *Boidhegeir* (from Old Norse *borg geiri*

'the farm of the fort'). Here there appears to have been a row of turf houses that could go back to the Viking Age. David Caldwell was, until recently, the Keeper of Medieval Archaeology at the National Museum of Scotland. He has done a major excavation at Finlaggan on Islay, the seat of the Lords of the Isles. He was attracted to the idea that Island House was built on the site of the 'lost' medieval castle of *Isleborgh* that has been puzzling historians for many years. Much of the refuse from such buildings was often dumped in the loch, and he suggested excavating the loch floor around Island House might find some interesting material! Both experts examined the Holleyman collection of finds left to An Iodhlann, pointing out some brass lace endings, a medieval brass brooch, some medieval horse buckles, and some high-quality medieval pottery that came from wine vessels that must have belonged to the church or a wealthy man. Dr Stuart Jeffrey is an archaeologist based at the Glasgow School of Art. He specialises in creating three-dimensional images of archaeological sites using a system known as photogrammetry. He took a series of photographs of the Ringing Stone and created a three-dimensional picture that could be seen from any angle. He also recorded the sound from the stone using special microphones and showed how remarkable the noise was. This was a very special week, and there is a lot of enthusiasm to keep the project going. The 'secret' island is giving up some of its mysteries and revealing others.

## CÀTH | CHAFF

- **New Website** | After a huge amount of work by Mark Vale and Janet Bowler our new website has come to a search engine near you, at [www.aniodhlann.org.uk](http://www.aniodhlann.org.uk). You can now search our entire catalogue. The next stage is to photograph and scan every item, but, at 12,000 items, this is going to take some time! But if there is a piece of our collection you would like to know more about, don't hesitate to get in touch. And if you have a precious object of your own, or know something extra about an item we already have, let us know. This is your archive!
- **Graveyards** | Catriona Smyth has completed her monumental survey of the Soroby and Kirkapol graveyards, with a transcription and photograph of all the stones (where legible), translations of any Gaelic inscriptions and cemetery map. This all now available online on our website. I'm sure you would all like to join me in thanking Catriona for the considerable work she has done in completing this valuable project over several years.
- **'Written in the Landscape'** | This project to catalogue and copy some of the thousands of Tìree papers in the archive at Inveraray Castle was due to start at the beginning of the year, thanks to the generosity of many donors and the Windfall Fund. Sadly, Ishbel MacKinnon, the Castle's long-serving archivist and driving force behind the entire project, has moved to Perth to take up another post. Appointing her replacement will slow the project, but we hope to re-start in the summer. Some damaged documents, however, have already left the castle for conservation.
- **Longships on the Sand** | This book on the Viking settlement of Tìree is finished and will be published in the late summer by An Iodhlann Press.
- **A' Bhuain** | At the end of the month we host the island's second 'Homecoming' and we look forward to seeing some old friends, and making new ones. No doubt it will generate another slew of fascinating stories. We'll keep you posted!

Thank you for helping to tunnel into Mount Tìree. 'There's gold in them thar hills' (with acknowledgement to Colonel Sellers, a character created by Mark Twain).

Dr John Holliday