

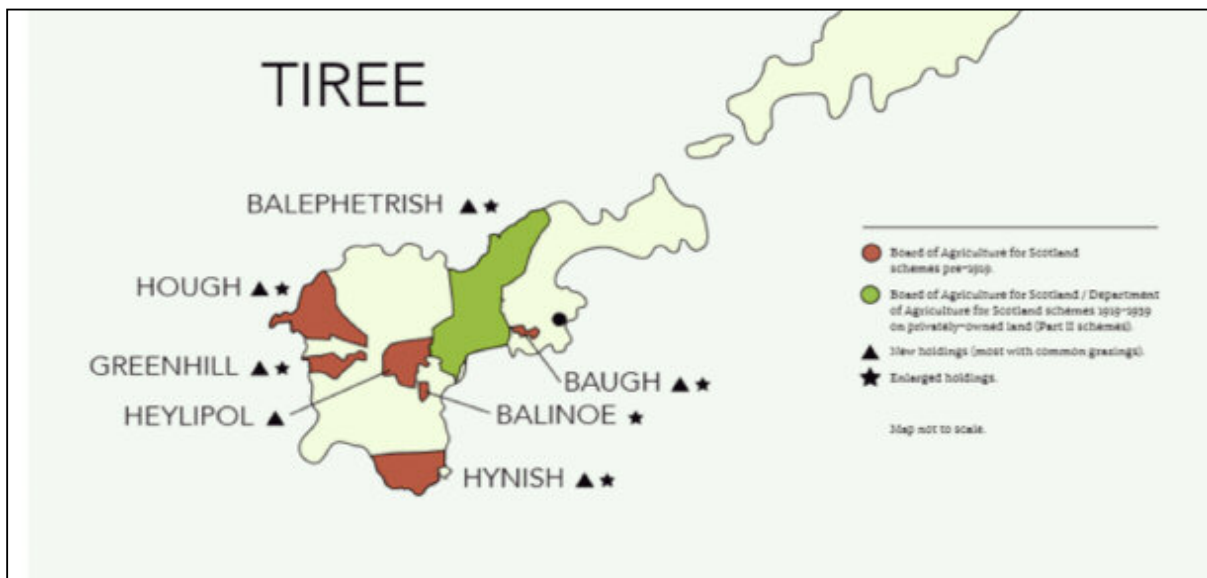


Newsletter of An Iodhlann's members

Welcome again to *Sil Eòlais*, the newsletter of *An Iodhlann*. We have news about two recent books about the island - one on the new crofts of the twentieth century and another on the Vikings of Tìree - the discovery of a possible lost township, and the island's traditions about *cruidh-mara* 'sea cows', as well as a splendid new painting of the *Mary Stewart* in her pomp.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TÌREE'S CROFTING LEGACY by Bob Chambers

Tìree is firmly part of what Robert Grieve, the Highlands and Islands Development Board's first chair, described as Scotland's 'true crofting areas'. By that he meant the Hebrides and the west coast of the Scottish mainland from Argyll northwards. Interestingly, the same cannot be said of its close neighbour, Coll, which, in strong contrast, has had far fewer crofts created on it and could not be described as a crofting island.



Although the two islands are of a remarkably similar geographical size (approximately twelve miles long by three miles wide) they are very different from one another in many ways. The differences between the two islands far outweigh the similarities. It would be extremely interesting if someone rose to the challenge and produced a comprehensive comparative study of the two islands.

Today, there are around 290 crofts on Tìree – an impressive number, especially given the island's comparatively small size and population. 35% (amounting to 103 numerically) of those 290 or so crofts are very recent in origin – most (some sixty-five new holdings) having been created between 1912 and 1914. In addition, thirty-five existing holdings were enlarged during the same short period.

The other thirty-eight new holdings were begun in 1922 at Balephetrish, making those new crofts less than one hundred years old. As well as the new crofts at Balephetrish, eight existing holdings there were enlarged at the same time.

By contrast, on Coll only ten new crofts were created in the first quarter of the twentieth century. In fact, there were no new crofts created on the island in the twentieth century prior to seven new

holdings in 1920. No existing crofts whatsoever were enlarged in the first quarter of the twentieth century on Coll, and none afterwards in the period under consideration (that is up to the outbreak of World War II).

Not only is the total number of new crofts created on Tiree impressive during the ten-year period between 1912 and 1922, but so is the proportion they represent of the total stock of croft holdings on the island. This amounts to 35% of Tiree's 290 crofts.

This proportion is strikingly higher than in any other Hebridean island between 1912 and 1939 (the year when the creation of new crofts came to a virtual end in the Highlands and Islands). For example, the comparable figures for some of the other Hebridean islands (the Hebrides being the most prolific area for the creation of new croft holdings of anywhere in Scotland) are as follows: Harris 20%; North Uist 17.6%; Skye (including Raasay) 15.5%; Barra (including Vatersay) 15%; Lewis 8.5%; and South Uist (including Benbecula) 6.6%.

On Tiree there were six land settlement schemes (the term commonly used to denote the creation of new crofts and/or the enlargement of existing ones) in a highly concentrated period of two years between 1912 and 1914. The first of these was at Greenhill in 1912 (thirteen new holdings and four enlargements). The last was at Hough (six new holdings and eight enlargements) and Hynish in 1913 (thirty-seven new holdings and five enlargements). The smallest of the schemes was at Balinoe consisting of six small enlargements (and no new holdings) on just over twenty-six acres of land.

With the exception of the small scheme at Baugh (comprising two new holdings and four enlargements) in the centre of the island, the other five schemes were in the western part of Tiree.

The seventh – and the only post-World War I – scheme was at Balephetrish. This straddled the centre of the island from the north to the south coast and was, by far, the largest scheme, in geographical terms, in Tiree. There were no schemes at all in the east of the island.

The impact of crofting on Tiree today is everywhere to be seen. However, there could be a tendency, in some quarters, to take this for granted or not to fully appreciate (or understand) its importance and legacy.

All of the Tiree land settlement schemes were on land owned by one proprietor – the Duke of Argyll – and which still remains in his ownership today.

The author is not aware of any new crofts having been created on Tiree since the inter-war (1919 to 1939) period. If this is incorrect he would like to know the details – see the contact details at the end of the text.

This is unsurprising as it mirrors the picture elsewhere in the Highlands and Islands.

However, the national situation in Scotland is slowly changing. Since 2010, 157 new crofts have been created in Scotland – 109 by the division of existing crofts and forty-eight new ones on land not previously under crofting tenure. This begs the question: what is the potential for new crofts on Tiree?



Balephetrish House and Hillcrest in 1931. The wreck of the Malve can be seen on the reef Gràthadar in the background.

A number of bare land crofts (that is, crofts with no accompanying croft house on them) already exist on the island. These were deliberately created as bare land crofts in the first quarter of the twentieth century. If a number of these were voluntarily made available to young entrants to crofting to work and to build a home on them, that would be one way of getting more crofters and a generation of new crofters into the system but would not, in itself, create new crofts. This would, of course, depend on existing crofters allowing this to happen and would also depend on the economics stacking up which would probably not be the case – though the post-Brexit world could alter that, as could the Scottish government if it had the will to do so.

And, of course, there are still several farms on Tìree that, in the right sort of social, economic and political climate, could be broken up into new crofts. Not that either of these paths is being promoted by the author – his role being simply to point out the potential and possibilities under the right sort of circumstances, which may not arise for some time or maybe never.

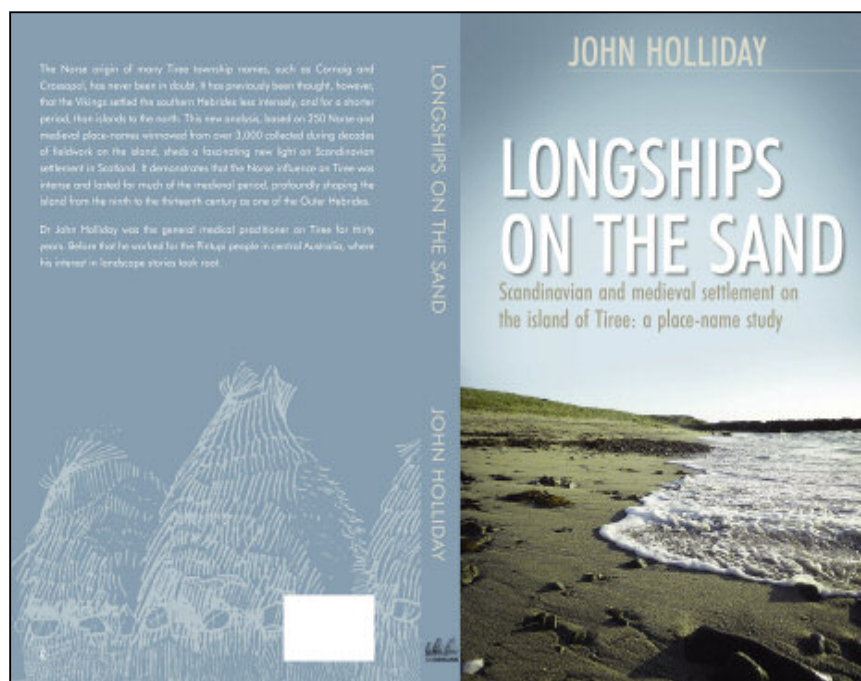
If anyone would like more information about the history of crofting on Tìree and Coll (and its legacy) they might be interested in reading a copy of the author's book *Twentieth Century Crofting Schemes on Tìree and Coll*, first published in May 2016. A reference copy is available to read at An Iodhlann, or a copy of the book can be purchased there.

*Bob Chambers is a member of An Iodhlann and frequent visitor to Tìree.
He can be contacted by email on bobc1951@greenbee.net*

LONGSHIPS ON THE SAND by Dr John Holliday

The Vikings have been good box office since Wagner started on his *Ring* cycle of operas in 1854, and horned helmets soon became an integral part of their staging. The BP exhibition *Vikings: life and legend* (note the subtle sponsorship) at the British Museum in 2014 attracted 288,000 visitors.

And the Victorian *Up Helly Aa* midwinter festival in Shetland sees serious Viking costumes, beards and fiery galleys pull visitors from all over the world. But it sometimes seems that the Norse have been airbrushed from the pages of Tìree history. However, those sleeping Scandinavian warriors may have less cause to complain now, as a long-promised book about the island's Norse settlement is finally published this month.



Longships on the Sand published this month by An Iodhlann.

I have been collecting place-names on Tìree for thirty years. This harmless hobby was quite interesting in itself, but I never did much with the collection until about three years ago, when I decided to try to look at the Scandinavian names in a bit more detail. At that stage I knew very little about the language of Old Norse, or medieval history. (Many will say I still don't!). Nevertheless, after numberless early morning sessions and a lot of help from some brilliant scholars I have learned something about the subject.

It is obvious that the Norse gave us most of our township names: *Gott*, *Cornaig*, or *Kirkapol*. But it has been the received wisdom for years that the Vikings raided and pillaged the southern Hebrides for a century or two but didn't hang around; Tiree's position as part of the Gaelic heartland wasn't disturbed for too long. I'm not sure of that any longer.

The process of 'reconstructing' a name is interesting in itself. Take the name *Èirneal*, that part of the *Gott sliabh* towards the Balephetrish and Baugh boundaries. The first edition of the Ordnance Survey collected the name as *Earnal* and *Cnoc Earnal* in 1878. One informant gave me *Èarnal*, but most pronounced it *Èirneal* (pronounced 'ey-ny-al'), a subtle but important difference. Hearing local people say the name it is incredibly helpful to the collector. The second part of the name probably comes from the Norse word *hóll* meaning 'a rounded hill', which might relate to *Cnoc Mòr Èirneil* or even Balephetrish Hill. But there are at least four possible meanings for the first part of the name:

- *Ein* 'single'. This element is quite common in Iceland, for example *Einholt* 'the wood on its own'
- *Einir* 'juniper'. There is an *Einifell* possibly 'the juniper-covered hillside' in Iceland. Juniper grows on Coll but not Tiree today, but it may have done so in the warmth of the Medieval Climatic Optimum
- The Norse personal name *Einarr*: there is an *Einarhola* in Norway
- *Qrn* 'eagle': there are eight examples of *Arnahóll* 'eagle hill' in Iceland. Funnily enough, the eastern section of *Beinn Bhaile Phèadrais* is still sometimes called *Beinn Iolaireach* 'the hill abounding with eagles'

We therefore can't be sure exactly what *Èirneal* originally meant, but we can be pretty certain it was a Norse hill name that stood the test of time and therefore may well have become a farm name. Some Tiree 'Gaelic' names that are hard to understand often turn out to be Norse. *Poll a' Dhiùr*, a coastal pool off Cornaigmore, probably comes from the Old Norse word *gjögr* 'a cleft'. Even ones that look Gaelic, such as *An Stòl* 'the stool', a rock at the tip of Craignish, is more likely to come from the Norse *stqðull* 'a milking place'; you can still see the remains of a dyke running across the headland that would have contained the cattle running across the headland.

There are about 250 probable Norse place-names here, ranging from the obvious *Càrsamul*, *Greasamul* and *Sgibinis*, to the less obvious *Rif*, *Co' Dhèis* and *Miodar*. These are spread over the whole of Tiree, showing Viking settlements in all parts of the island. Even in a Gaelic named township like *An Caolas* there are Norse farm names like *Raonabol*, possibly 'the rocky farm', and *Àigeir*, possibly 'the farm of the stream'.

And Norse was the main language on Tiree for four or even five hundred years. The Hebrides may have been formally handed over to the Scottish Crown in 1266, but Norse was probably spoken on Tiree long after that date. For comparison, Norse was spoken by the farming population in Orkney for three hundred years after these islands were given to Scotland, only dying out at the end of the eighteenth century. Many of today's Tiree Gaelic words come from Norwegian: *baca* 'dune' from the Norse *bakki*; *bodha* 'sea rock' from *boði*; *fadhail* 'ford' from *vaðill*; *cleit* 'rounded sea rock' from *klettr*; and *sloc* 'gully' from *slqkk*. 289 Tiree place-names contain, embedded inside them, an older Norse name: for example *Rubha Sgibinis* and *Beinn Mhanail*. Sometimes a Norse name has been pushed aside but not forgotten. An example is an islet off Caolas called *Creachasdal Mòr*, which is actually a Norse field name containing *dalr* 'a valley or patch of ground'. The name for an islander *Tiristeach* comes from the Norse name for the island *Týrvist* plus the Gaelic suffix *-ach*, meaning that Gaelic-speakers were comfortable using the old Norse name for Tiree for many years. While the Vikings seem to have settled Tiree quickly and overwhelmingly, Gaelic 're-settlement' appears to have been a slow process with Norse and Gaelic speakers living side by side for centuries.

Gaelic speakers also seem to have been 'planted', often by the Church, in some townships more than others. This is one explanation for the fact that some Tiree townships today have a lot of Norse place-names - for example Hough with 27% - while others have very few - for example Middleton and Kenovay have none.

One of Tiree's most iconic traditional stories is that of *Cath nan Sguab* 'the Battle of the Sheaves'. The sneaky Viking raiders were slaughtered by the heroic Hebridean underdog armed with no more than sheaves of barley. This 'Biblical' expulsion appears to be the polar opposite of what happened, and possibly reflects the anger of the Gaels after years of Scandinavian dominance.

As a historical aside, for the last ten years Tiree, like much of Scotland, has become noticeably more nationalist. But thirty years ago I remember being told by quite a few folk that they did not relate to Edinburgh as their capital: if anything they identified as Hebridean. We can understand this by looking at the medieval history of the island. In crude terms Tiree was 'Norwegian' for four hundred years (although more often under the control of Dublin, Orkney, the Isle of Man and *Dùn Ollaigh*), part of the Lordship of the Isles ruled from Islay for two hundred years, 'Scottish' for only two hundred years after the 'king assumed possession of Islay and Tiree' in 1495, and British for the last four hundred years.

At just under 500 pages, the book *Longships on the Sand* is not for the faint-hearted, with quite a lot of technical place-namey stuff! But I hope it will do a little to shine a light into the 'black hole' of Tiree's medieval past. Only 100 have been printed, and they will be available from *An Iodhlann* for £35.

TIREE'S LOST TOWNSHIP

The township name *Heren* (or its probable variants *Hyring*, *Torren* or *Herene*) appears fourteen times in the island's rentals between 1496 and 1695. It's not a name that we know today and we



A view of 'Heren', with Fang a' Bhàird on the left, some probable prehistoric platforms in the centre, a medieval turf wall to the right, and Dùn na Cleite in the distance.

cannot be sure exactly where it was. But in 1509 it was listed as part of the parish of Soroby, placing it in the west and south of the island; in 1654 *Hyring* was mapped by Blaeu between East and West Hynish; and many rentals group it in one tack with Crossapol and Mannal. It was not a valuable property; in 1674 it was valued at one merkland, at a time when Balephuill and Hynish were both worth six merklands.

Recent work with a group of archaeologists has

discovered on the southeastern slopes of Ben Hynish a busy landscape of fields, monuments and houses that date from the prehistoric to the nineteenth century. There are probable Bronze Age cairns, a network of fields enclosed by stone walls and set next to tiny hut circles, numerous tiny 'farms', some impressive sinuous turf walls, many medieval shielings, and a large sheep fank built

by John Maclean, the Balemartine Bard, in the nineteenth century. There is therefore a case that *Heren* was on the slopes of Ben Hynish and abandoned at the end of the seventeenth century as the climate deteriorated.

We have made a start recording what the experts call a 'relict cultural landscape'. This has been preserved because it stopped being cultivated and was run from East Hynish as hill grazings. Dr Colleen Batey, Senior lecturer in Archaeology at Glasgow University, has identified at least one of the stone settings on the slopes above *Dùn Shiadair* as probably Viking; indeed the name *Siadar* comes from the Norse word for *sætr* 'shieling'. But we are waiting the arrival of more experts next year to identify some of the other remains we have found. Dr Batey, who has worked extensively on St Kilda, told me it reminded her of *An Gleann Mòr*, a fascinating shieling area on the north side of that island and the focus of a lot of research. Hopefully, there will be more to report from this area next year.



ACFA member Janie Munro and John Holliday taking a well-earned rest from surveying inside a possible medieval farmhouse on the slopes on Ben Hynish on a very windy day in October.

SEA COWS

A few weeks ago I went to a fascinating talk in Tobermory by Roddy MacLean about the Gaelic culture of sea creatures. He brought up the subject of *cruidh-mara* 'sea cows' and asked me if these mythical beasts were known on Tìre. A bit flustered, my mind went blank, but I



An Iodhlann Mhòr, Greenhill, with Ben Hough in the background

I remembered later that Alasdair Sinclair, Greenhill, had once told me a story about them in his township. Stories about *cruidh-mara* were popular throughout the Uists and Barra, and Alexander Carmichael collected a number of stories about them in his great collection *Carmina Gadelica*. In one of these a man from Howgarry on North Uist was devastated by the early deaths of both his children and his cattle.

He went to a local wise man, who advised him to catch one of the red and white sea cattle that were often seen close to the shore. To do this he had to sprinkle *ùir dhubh* 'black earth' on the beast's back. He did this and caught a beautiful heifer, which he fed on a nourishing seaweed called *feamainn-chìrean* (or *chìreag*) 'channelled wrack'. (A short brown seaweed, *Pelvetia canaliculata* is commonly found near the high-water mark and used on Tìree to heal cattle with 'scour'). The Uist heifer produced a calf called *Gruaigean* and plenty of milk. She was allowed back to the sea once a year to mate but she always came back to land. Fourteen years and many calves later the crofter decided to slaughter the animal, but when he got up in the morning to do the deed the animal had disappeared back into the sea. It was said that for many years after this the Uists were full of healthy cattle called *Gruaigean* (Carmichael Watson project Coll-97/CW1/86).

Tìree also has this tradition, although the *crodh-mara* here was responsible for 'infecting' the healthy Tìree cattle, rather than strengthening the bloodline. In front of *Taigh Mòr Ghrianail* 'the big house of Greenhill' is a tumbled-down fank known as *An Iodhlann Mhòr* 'the big stackyard'. Alasdair told me in 1995 of a tradition about an *tarbh sligeach* 'the shell-covered bull', whose home was some offshore rocks known as *Na Bodhaichean Sligearnach* 'the barnacle-covered sea rocks'. The animal had a warty eruption on its skin, and all his offspring had the same complaint. These were put down by crofters frightened there was *sgoil dhubh* 'witchcraft' afoot. Their carcasses were buried at *An Iodhlann Mhòr*, but passers-by could still hear the lowing of the calves for their mothers from below ground.



A rare colour image of the *Mary Stewart*, the remains of which can be seen in Scarinish Harbour. The original painting is owned by Dr Huw Roberts, the great grandson of Captain David Roberts of Anglesey, who was the master, and possibly part owner, of the ship in 1886-1897.

CÀTH

- We have had news from Alison Diamond, the new archivist at Inveraray, about the project *Written in the Landscape*. An Iodhlann has been heavily involved in this - pledging its own funds and secured a grant from the Windfall Fund. The project was put on hold earlier this year but it has now sprung back to life in two phases. Phase 1 will go ahead now and see fragile manuscripts conserved and some papers digitised. The more extensive Phase 2 should start in nine months time once a £42,000 funding gap has been filled.

Thank you once again for your support. I recently visited Mull and saw the museum in Tobermory. I was told they have 25,000 visitors a year, and you could see the economic and social importance of a local museum to a community. Well worth a visit!

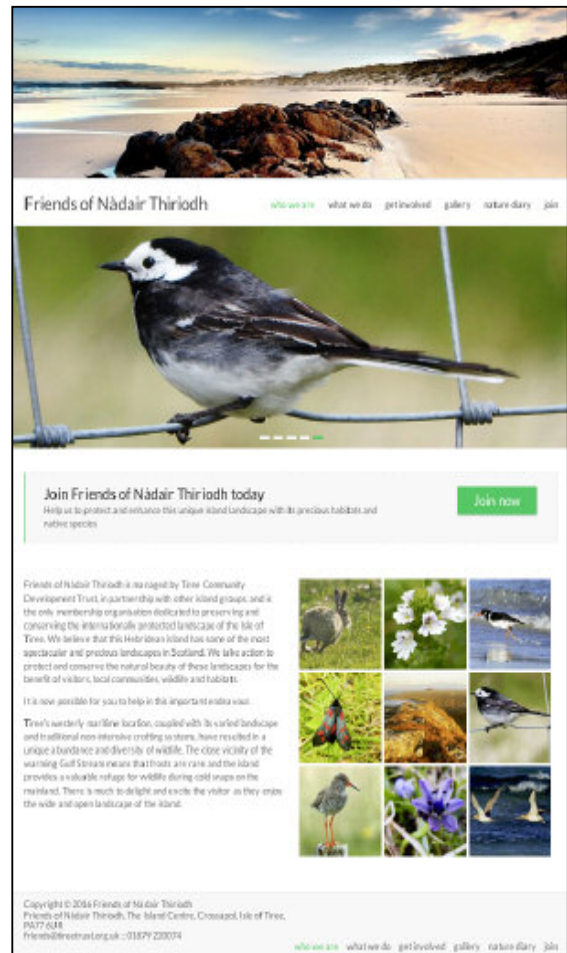
Dr John Holliday

Friends of Nàdair Thiriodh

The Friends of Nàdair Thiriodh group was launched in summer 2016 with the aim of helping the Tìree Ranger Service become more self-sustaining in its work to protect and enhance the unique and precious environment of Tìree. Members of Nàdair Thiriodh receive a regular newsletter with details of the latest work of the Tìree Ranger Service and updates on recent wildlife sightings from the island, as well as a car sticker and discounts on Nàdair Thiriodh productions. If you're interested in helping with the ongoing work of Nàdair Thiriodh – you can get involved by joining as a member through the website at:

<https://friendsoftiree.org.uk/get-involved/>

and keeping up to date with our programme of activities for 2017. Or why not give a membership to a friend for Christmas?



Tìree Walks - 12 Walks Through an Island Landscape

A new guide to 12 walks on Tìree is now available. All the walks are mapped with detailed notes on the routes, their distance and duration, terrain description, footwear required and wildlife likely to be seen. The 63 page guide is illustrated throughout with colour photographs and black and white illustrations by John Busby that really bring the walks to life. The guide costs £10 and is available from outlets across the island or by mail order at £12.50 including p+p by contacting:

janetmhunter@clara.co.uk

All profits raised from the sales of this guide will help fund Nàdair Thiriodh - the Tìree Ranger Service.

