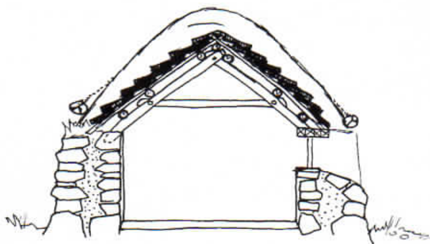
# Sandaig Museum
# Isle of Tiree

# Sandaig Museum – Isle of Tiree

It has been said that the houses of Tiree are among the most prominent and interesting features of the island's landscape. Perhaps they cannot compete with magnificent beaches but they are certainly a fascinating illustration of developments in local traditional architecture. Within a small area a great variety of house-types can be seen – thatched cottages, small whitewashed houses with steep, black-tarred roofs and tall chimneys, houses built of corrugated iron, larger partly-whitewashed 'spotted' houses, renovated outbuildings, converted war time Nissen huts, farm houses and modern bungalows.

The museum at Sandaig originally formed part of a terrace of thatched buildings, including houses, byres and barns. This section of the terrace has been reconstructed in the traditional manner using original building techniques, local materials and skilled island workmanship. It now represents how the buildings would have appeared early this century. The barn at the end of the terrace is a later addition and was built of hand-bored stone quarried nearby; some the bore holes are still visible. These stones were then dressed, giving the barn its neat, squared-off appearance. At the rear is evidence of a stackyard and former cartshed at right-angles to the end of the terrace.



# Construction and Layout

The construction, style and layout of the buildings were influenced by climate and landscape and dictated by the available building materials and sites, but the overwhelming concern was the need for shelter from the severe winds and sand-blow which sweep across the island. At one time it was not unusual for such houses to be built communally; with the help of neighbours and friends it was possible to have the work completed in a few days.

The main structure of the house consists of two parallel, dry-stone walls, inner and outer, with a space of about two feet between which is filled with tightly-packed sand. The walls are about six feet high at the front, lower at the back, and about six feet in thickness altogether; this makes the small windows deep-set and those at the back closer to the ground. Tiree thatched houses did not have gable-ends, but rounded or hip-ends.

The front of the house, chimneys and window ledges were traditionally covered with a white lime wash made from crushed limpet shells; lime was also used on the interior walls of the house. Latterly the dry-stone construction was shallow-pointed at the front with lime mortar giving a smoother exterior. Before cement or wooden floors became standard the floor, which was lower than the ground level outside, was made of hard-beaten clay: this was regularly covered with a layer of clean, dry sand.

The roof rested on the inner wall of the house leaving a wide ledge outside which circled the building and gradually became covered with turf and grass. On a treeless island timber for house and boat construction was hard to find and the islanders depended on timber, particularly oak and hazel, which was specially cut and brought home from other islands such as Mull, or parts of the mainland; driftwood was also in great demand.

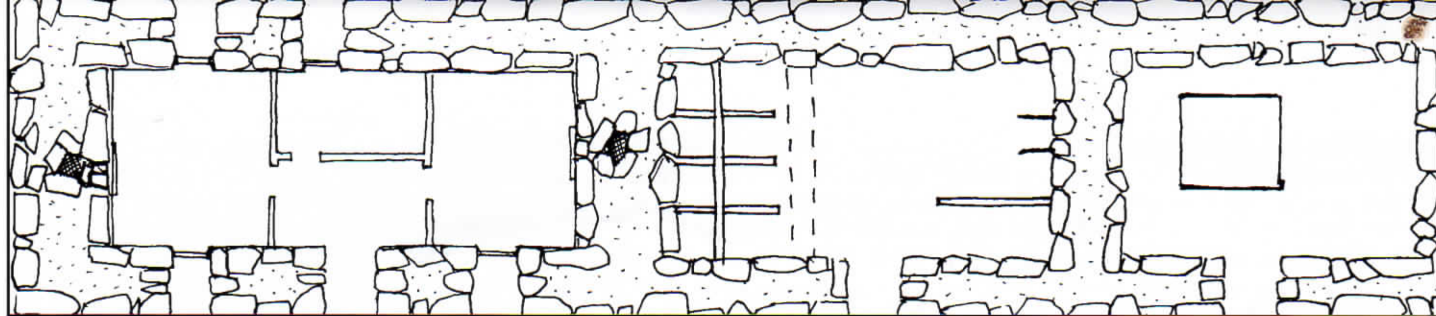
The largest of the roof timbers (about six inches in diameter) stood on top of the inner wall and were secured to each other at the ridge with wooden pins; those at the back or windward side of the house were usually shorter, giving the roof a steeper pitch on that side. A careful arrangement of other timbers crossed the breadth of the house and ran from end to end between the wall-top and the ridge to form a secure structure; to this framework were added rows of trimmed branches which were tied to the other timbers with rope.

The roof was then ready to take the turfs. These measured about two feet in length by one and half in breadth and were laid overlapping slightly from the wall-top to the ridge, secured by wooden pegs.

Bent or marram grass, was cut with a scythe for thatch after the harvest; the house was thatched every other year to keep it in good condition and the shape of the roof became more rounded as layers were added until the old thatch had to be stripped off. Over two hundred sheaves would be needed to thatch the roof of one house.

The first row of sheaves was placed, tips upward, against the turfs nearest to the wall-top, then row after row overlapping, with the tips facing downwards thereafter, until the ridge was reached; at this point the direction of the sheaves alternated along the length of the ridge. Additional thatch and a plank of wood were placed at the chimney to keep this area watertight.

The thatch was itself secured by a complex arrangement of criss-crossing ropes, weighted down at the wall-top by stones. Last century the rope would have been made of straw, but it is likely the rope used here around the turn of the century was made of imported coconut fibre. There is no doubt that a newly thatched and lime-washed house was and is very attractive; it is also warm, wind-proof and quiet.




# Interiors : The House

The rooms inside the dwelling house were divided by smooth shuttered walls which were also lime-washed. Formerly the rafters and turfs would have been exposed to view, but latterly ceilings were added to form a loft. The house consisted of a lobby at the entrance, a kitchen/livingroom to the left where most of the household activities were centred, a small room at the back known literally as the 'closet' but which was normally used as a bedroom, and a main bedroom to the right known as 'the room'.

In the kitchen was a Tiree dresser locally-made, some shelves on the wall above the door, a long bench and a table, some chairs and stools around the fire and perhaps a spinning wheel in the corner. A deep chest or girnel containing flour and oatmeal would occupy a corner of the kitchen or the lobby; a wooden water tub and items of dairying equipment were also frequently stored in the lobby. The focal point of the house was the kitchen fireplace where all the cooking was done; many of the utensils would have been made by local blacksmiths. Fuel was scarce locally and before coal was imported the islanders exercised their peat-cutting rights on the Ross of Mull; on one beach there, near Ardtun, the stones which were brought by boat as ballast from Tiree can still be seen on the shore. If the supply of peat was dwindling, it was supplemented by driftwood and dried cow-dung. Most houses had their own supply of well-water nearby. The kitchen was the centre of social activity where family and friends gathered to keep warm, to eat and to talk.

The beds at one time would have been simple wooden structures with a straw pallet for a mattress; mattresses for iron beds were sometimes made from pieces of sacking sewn together and filled with woollen rags. The larger bedroom contained one or more wooden blanket chests for linen and clothes and a couple of chairs. A good deal of the clothing and bed-clothes was made from home-spun and hand-woven wool, while more delicate items featured linen with hand-crocheted lace.

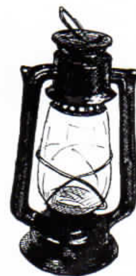
The house was lit largely by paraffin lamps and lanterns which could be hung from various hooks throughout the house or set on a table or mantle-piece. Candles were also used, but at one time iron cruisie lamps containing fish-oil and a wick were the main source of light,

# The Byre

The byre contained a number of stalls – for a horse, a few young stirks and up to four cows; all of them were wooden but varied in size and style according to their purpose. The horse stall was the most substantial, while those for the calves or young stirks were smaller and simple to construct. The four cow stalls used an ingenious mechanism to restrain the cattle by securing a sliding timber post at a diagonal angle across each stall once the cows were in position; this prevented them backing out of the stall or from swinging their heads too much from side to side and injuring each other with their long horns, which in those days were not removed. Most of the floor was cobbled to prevent slipping and a drain ran across the byre and out below the back wall to carry away the effluent. Horse harness and a milking stool were among the pieces of equipment stored in the byre ready for use.

# The Barn

The main feature of the barn was its heavy wooden threshing floor; this was wide enough to take five sheaves of corn laid side by side and had to be positioned so that the flail would not strike the rafters when raised above the thresher's head. The flail consisted of two strong batons of wood, one shorter than the other, tied together by rope or a leather thong; this was swung from a height in a repetitive, rhythmical action so that one end of the flail struck the sheaves loosening the grain from the stalks. Here the animal foodstuffs were stored such as hay and corn, and straw for bedding; potatoes were kept for the house and various implements including forks and spades, sickles and the flail were stacked against the walls or hung from wooden pegs in the rafters.



The terrace of thatched buildings at Sandaig was possibly occupied at one time by cottars and landless tenants who depended on having just enough ground to grow some potatoes and to graze a cow and follower on someone else's land, usually in return for agricultural labour; much was paid for in kind and their diet was supplemented by fishing.

Latterly it seems likely that this house, with its byre and barn, belonged to a more prosperous tenant crofter after a nearby farm called 'Greenhill' was broken up into small crofts following what was known as the 'Crofters War' when islanders demanded land for themselves.

Gaelic was the language spoken in this and neighbouring households and their social life over the years centred on hospitality and neighbourliness, on local traditions, songs, music, poetry, story-telling and the recounting of history and genealogies.

Although the islanders' lifestyle and their belongings may seem basic to some, what remains for us to see today is a lasting and significant testimony to their skill and craftsmanship, their self-sufficiency and understanding of their culture and environment.

We hope that this museum will play some part in reviving and promoting that depth of understanding for this and future generations.

Both the Sandaig and Skerryvore Museums were set up by the Hebridean Trust, a registered Charity (No. 285629). The Trust aims to preserve and develop the human and natural environment of the Hebrides and is interested in particular in the Hebridean way of life, past, present and future. For more information, please write to:

The Hebridean Trust, c/o The Cottage, Lower Square, Hynish, Isle of Tiree, Argyll.

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The Trust is very grateful to all those who have so generously donated or loaned items now included in the Sandaig collection and would like to thank everyone, from Tiree and elsewhere, who have made and continue to make this museum possible.

PHOTOGRAPHS: J.M. BOYD, G.A. HONEYMAN, HEBRIDEAN TRUST

DRAWINGS: BRIAN MACDONALD

Mor Chaol using the plunging butter churn at Sandaig