

## **Memories of our evacuation to Tiree 1944 – 1945**

In 1944, we three – Archie Johnstone aged 10; Margaret aged 8 and Ian aged 5 –were living with our parents in Rochester Kent: where we were in direct line with the German Air route from the continent to London. When the flying bombs started to arrive, our parents decided it was time to move us out. Luckily our father's sister, Dorothy and her husband Donald Mackinnon in Upper Vault, agreed to take us.

We set off with our parents, in May 1944, which was of course, in the day of steam trains. On the way to London, we had the unwelcome company of a flying bomb almost overhead; the driver spotted it and sensibly stopped to let it go ahead of us to its unknown destination. Having changed trains in London and later on at Stirling, we eventually arrived in Oban ready to catch ferry next morning. Despite mother having rung the hotel and booked a room, Oban was so packed with military personnel, there were no rooms available and we ended up sleeping on the floor of a Guest House.

Next morning we boarded the Ferry and set off, through the Sound of Mull, to Tobermory. There we were greeted with the words 'God is Love' printed, in what seemed to us enormous letters, on the harbour wall. (When I returned in my teens I was amazed at how small the words really were.) There was no pier at our next port of call, which was the island of Coll; so the animals on board were hoisted out of the hold and lowered over the side into the water, so they could swim ashore. Soon after we left Coll, Tiree came into view and it looked beautiful with its large sandy bays.

We were met at the pier head by Charlie Mackinnon, who lived at 'Dunmoor' in Vault and was one of the few people on the island who had a car. At that time the road was only made up around Gott Bay, so when we arrived at Silver Sands, we had to turn up a dirt track to reach Vault and 'Cnoc Oinigar'. When we finally arrived at our destination, we were greeted by the whole family; Donald, Dorothy, Catherine Mary aged 7 and Tommy aged 18 months. (Tommy still lives at 'Cnoc Oinigar' today, with his own family.

On Tiree, water had to be pumped out of the ground and into buckets to be carried into the house. It was beautiful to drink but very carefully used. On wash day, which was Monday, water was put into a big tub in the potato house and heated by lighting a small fire underneath it. The clothes were washed first and then the water was used for the people to bath in. The toilet was 25 yards away from the house and was a dry facility, wet was outside and one learnt very quickly to have ones back to the wind whilst performing. (Margaret tells me the ladies were privileged, they could use the toilet for both.) There were no electric lights, only oil lamps and the cooking and heating of the house was carried out by the huge black kitchen range. When you went to bed at night the only lighting was a candle which had to be blown out as soon as you got into bed and the only toilet, was under the bed. There were no telephones, generally the only communication was by letter or telegram but there was an accumulated battery radio. Having come from a home that had all the modern facilities – hot and cold water on tap; a flush toilet inside the house; central heating and access to electric lighting by the flick of a switch and a telephone box on every street corner – we had a rude awakening when we first arrived but it's amazing how quickly children adapt and we soon got used to it.

We attended Ruaig school which was a walk of some distance, across Vaul Bay and over the sand dunes before finally crossing the Macher(not sure how to spell this as we've never seen it written down). Naturally we walked in all weathers; the only difference being that in the summer we went bare foot (which being children we loved) and in the winter we wore boots and waterproofs to help us cope with the wind and rain. Although it is rare to have much snow in Tiree, that winter, we experienced 10 days of it, which again, being children, we absolutely loved.

Grocery supplies were provided by Morag at Silver Sands or Shamus Mackintyre, who had a van which came to the house once a week. Hardware came from Calam Salam and anything he could not supply you with, you had to make yourself or improvise in some other way. The butcher and slaughter house were at Ruaig on the Salam track and run by the Macleans. His son Hugh Archie was at school with us. The post office was also at Ruaig and the mail was delivered by the 'Postie' just as it is today.

The highlight of every day was watching the Ferry come in. The beaches then, were beautiful white sand, clear of seaweed which was regularly collected, by the crofters in carts, and spread on the land as a fertiliser. Much of the food we ate was provided by the croft. Milk from the cows provided us with butter, plain and salted and the buttermilk left over was used in cooking. We had large scones, cooked on the griddle and cut into triangles. They were brown or white and sliced, with jam spread in them, to make a sandwich, which we called a 'piece'. We also had scotch pancakes all of which were very tasty.

Grown on the croft were potatoes – these were the main source of food, boiled in their skins and eaten with salted butter, delicious. They also grew turnips, swede, leaks, corn and barley. The corn and barley were cut by man and horse power. First a strip had to be cut by a hand scythe down the edge of the field; no easy task. Then the horse drawn reaper came in to cut the rest of the field. The cut barley was then made into sheaves by tying a handful of stalks together, just under the heads, with a length of straw. Then about 8 sheaves were stacked together, with their heads in the air, in stooks, to allow the barley to dry. When they were dry, they were taken to be stored in stacks in the barn. All of which was done by hand and a pitchfork.

Hay was easier, as horses and a reaper could cut the lot and it didn't need to be made into stooks. When dry it was forked into ricks and loaded onto a horse drawn trailer to be transported into the yard and stacked.

As evacuees we were entitled to some benefits, when my rubber boots got too small, I was sent from Vaul to the Manse in Scarnish to get new ones; it was a long walk. With no telephones, the postman was the main communication system and it worked. If you required the doctor, you told the postman, he passed the request on and the doctor arrived.

We were never aware of the existence of the RAF, working on the reef, as all their activity was on the west of the island. We did, however, hear the rumour that some ladies on the island were losing their underwear off their clothes line; word was that it must be one of those on the reef, as no islander would do such a thing.

We returned south, when our father collected us, the week after VE Day.