

Croitearachd Crofting

Crofting has given Tiree its landscape and its people their way of life.

Nowadays most of the land on Tiree is split up into crofts. It has not always been like this, however. The map on your left shows the way the island was before 1800.

This map was drawn by a surveyor called Turnbull in 1768. At that time the island was divided into townships or *bailean-fearainn*. Some of these were quite large – 163 people lived in Heylipol alone. Tenants paid rent to a tacksman who, in turn, rented the land from the Duke. Around the township the fields were divided into thin strips – the *runrig* system. The marks of these old ridged fields can still be seen under the *machair*, for example under the third hole of the golf course. A good example of the ruins of one of these old townships is at Baugh, between the doctor's surgery and the stream.

Several old townships behind Ben Hough were buried by sand in the 19th century and no longer exist.

The 5th Duke of Argyll, living in London and keen to make more money from his estate, decided to break up the island into smallholdings or crofts, changing the face of Tiree. The tacksmen were removed and, *Such as were formerly tenants to have from 6 to 10 arable acres, and those who were only cottars [islanders with no land] and tradesmen to have 4 arable acres... I am doing all I can to... make every man independent of his neighbours.*

DUKE'S INSTRUCTION TO HIS FACTOR, 1803.

The new crofters were given a year's free rent to compensate them for the work of moving. While other Highland landlords were clearing their land for sheep, here many islanders were being encouraged to stay.

At the same time the Duke also created some large farms, such as Hynish and Hough, where there was money to be made from sheep.

As the nineteenth century wore on, however, conditions on Tiree became less benign. The Duke's most notorious factor, John Campbell, *am baillidh dubh*, could be ruthless. *Hugh MacLean, Manna, who was blind, was disgracefully evicted [around 1864]. Having no house to go to, he was still in his own home. The factor then sent men to strip the roof off... He then removed to the barn... The same men were then sent back to strip the barn too, and the poor blind man with his crippled wife and no sons to help him, as of the three sons he had two were drowned some time before, and his only other son was insane in an asylum, was cruelly turned out and left by the roadside.* NAPIER COMMISSION REPORT, 1886.

And many islanders, the cottars, still had no land at all. They often lived by the shore, as at Balemartine and Manna, but were sometimes allowed to grow a strip of potatoes on the crofters' land in exchange for their labour.

By the 1880s agitation for land rights was building up on the island, as it was in Ireland and the Highlands of Scotland generally. In 1883 Lord Napier held a hearing in Kirkapoll church to allow the crofters to put their case. One witness, Angus Munn from Heanish, went into the witness box to say, *We have been forcibly deprived of our holdings of two crofts... to make room for another party who go into the factor's favour... our demands are - more land, fixity of tenure, fair rent and compensation for improvements.*



Spring 2008. Crofters were encouraged to grow bulbs in the 1950s as a new crop and they have left their mark in a number of fields on the island.



Cutting corn with a reaper at Whitehouse, Kenmore



Lachlan and Flora MacLean, Drumfrahoch, Kenmore building a corn stack in the 1930s with Murdoch MacLean, Kilmelung



Ellie Thomson, watched by her daughter Catherine Ann, drawing water in Raigal in 1944. This was a daily job for all households before mains water was installed in the 1960s



John MacPhail, John Brown and David McClosmann strip sheep in Balephuil in 1947

In July 1885 the *Cairnmuir*, a boat loaded with wine and spirits, ran aground off Tiree. When excisemen came to claim the cargo, however, there was suspiciously little in the hold and large groups of angry islanders shouted at them from the shore.

The flashpoint came when Greenhill farm fell vacant in the spring of 1886 and there was a widespread feeling that the land should be divided into crofts. Islanders were furious when Lachlan MacNeill from Vaul was given the farm, especially as he was the brother of the crofters' leader on the island. Neighbours turned their own cattle onto the ground in defiance of the estate.

A force of 37 policemen was sent to Tiree to serve warrants on 51 men. But the police were met by a hostile crowd and forced to retreat to the Scarinish hotel. The Duke complained that the island had surrendered *to the rule of savagery*. A week later two warships anchored off Scarinish and 250 marines and 40 policemen disembarked. The soldiers set up camp behind the butcher's shop in Scarinish. They mounted a round the clock guard on the well there to prevent it being poisoned. It is called *Tobar nan Saighdear*, well of the soldiers, to this day. However, relations between the invaders and islanders improved. A sports day was held and the Tiree team famously defeated the marines in the tug-of-war.

The reporter for the *Scotsman* tried to steal a march on his rivals by sending his copy to the mainland on the Sabbath using a homing pigeon, but the bird was attacked by seagulls and the report was destroyed.

Eventually arrest warrants were issued to eight men who were tried in Edinburgh and sentenced to four to six months in prison. MacNeill was given the Greenhill farm that had sparked the unrest.

The Tiree crofters had the last laugh, however, when the Liberal Government passed the Crofters Act of 1886. This gave crofters fair rents, security of tenure, and the ability to pass on crofts to whoever they wanted. New crofts were also created by the estate by breaking up the farms of Balephetrish, Hynish, Baugh and Heylipol to give to islanders returning from the First World War.

Today on Tiree's 8,822 hectares there are 292 crofts, with 92 active crofters, and 6 farms. Nearly a third of the crofters are pensioners. Almost all of the island is still owned by the Duke of Argyll. The only exceptions are the Reef which was taken over during the last war and is now owned by Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd., the Church of Scotland glebe, private house sites and a few crofts which have been bought.

Tiree is astonishingly fertile. It is one of the most productive crofting areas in Scotland. The *machair* grassland on Tiree is high in calcium, which makes it ideal for the growth of young lambs and cattle but not for fattening them before slaughter. Most beasts are therefore sent away to be 'finished' on mainland farms.

There are 3,200 head of cattle and 6,200 sheep. 7,300 lambs are sold every August, for an average price of £35 a head.