



Aldair and Nancy MacInnes sifting potatoes in Ruag in 1905

By the 1700s the population of Tiree was around 1,500. They were able to feed themselves with home-grown oats, barley, potatoes, milk and fish, while exporting 300 gallons of whisky and 260 cattle a year. Justifying the poetic name for Tiree, *Tir an Eòrna*, land of barley, a visitor at the time wrote that the islanders were, *Well clothed and well fed, having an abundance of corn and cattle and great variety and profusion of the finest fish.*

The seas around Tiree are also rich with a long, brown seaweed called kelp, the ashes of which were used to make glass and soap. The Duke of Argyll started kelping on the island in 1746. At that time the same ashes could be made cheaper in Spain, but during the Napoleonic Wars, which began around 1800, this supply was cut off and the price of kelp rocketed. As a result the Duke saw the money he made from the island go up three-fold. He needed kelp gatherers and did all he could to encourage more people to live on Tiree. The population of the island doubled. But the end of the war meant Spanish alkali flooded the market again and the price of kelp tumbled. The last kelp ash was made on Tiree in 1837. You can still see stone mounds at the shore all round the island where the kelp was dried.

The 5th Duke tried to create other jobs for the island's swollen population. He encouraged fishing, buying islanders boats and lines. He started flax growing to make linen and even tried to build a windmill in Scarinish. Trouble makers were not tolerated, however, and 157 islanders were caught making whisky illegally with one in ten being given notice to quit. A major problem facing Tiree was the shortage of fuel. The island's peat banks had been used for two thousand years but by 1792 Tiree's minister wrote: 'One end of Tiree can for a few years [more] make peats, but in the other end near 200 families are reduced to the greatest distress. They, [dig the turf] wherever there is the slightest mixture of [peat] in the soil... Sometimes in the spring they gather dried dung [as fuel - these were still used until recently and are known as *sgaindeagan*]'.

By 1845 the Tiree peat banks were exhausted. Islanders were forced to make the dangerous trip to Coll or the Ross of Mull in small open boats for their supplies. Coal puffers started coming to the island in the 1880s, discharging their cargo on the beaches of the island until the late 1950s.

The potato had been introduced to Tiree around 1743 and became the staple food for the overcrowded island. By 1811 it made up 80% of the diet of the islanders, especially for poorer people who grew them in *feannagan*, or 'lazy beds', on the *slabh* and hillsides. This is anything but a lazy way to grow food and involves turning a row of thin soil over on itself to make a bed of ridges and furrows. You can still see the marks of these in many places on the island.

By 1831 Tiree's population had reached 4,450. In 1846 disaster struck when potato blight hit the island, rotting the potato harvest and condemning thousands to several hungry winters. It is said that only West Hynish escaped. Famine relief flooded in but the able-bodied had first to do a day's work. The stone walls in the centre of the island, such as those surrounding Island House, were built in this way.

Seasonal "offshore" work in the Lowlands became very important. In 1842 it was reported, *The great part of the young unmarried population, especially of females, is in the habit of resorting to the low country [Lowland Scotland] in quest of harvest employment.*

There was dreadful poverty. *Catherine MacP****: A wretched hut made with pieces of wood and the spaces between them filled up with turf. It is full of holes. No window and no chimney. She has two natural children and begs about the country to support them.* POOR LAW ENQUIRY ON TIREE, 1840S

A second attempt to make money from kelp began in 1864. Edward Stanford, a brilliant English chemist, set up a factory in Sandaig to make iodine. His first impression of Tiree was less than favourable, *'The accommodation is execrable, nothing but fish and eggs to eat and no stimulant of any kind sold in the whole island. No place ever disgusted me so much'.*

Life as a kelp gatherer was hard. *[The kelp gatherers] 'are badly treated in many a way. They very often have to get up at midnight [for the spring low tides] and go away and pick up tangle out of the surf when the sea is washing over them.'* DONALD MACLEAN, 65, KILMOLUAG. This factory closed in 1901.



Lachlan MacP****, who originally came from Luing, with a cartload of seaweed outside his house in Crocopol around 1900



Lazy beds south of Garaphall, Connag



A puffer on the beach below Brock unloading coal

This panel has been sponsored by the staff of the Scarinish branch of the RBS