

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 16

HEANISH FEVER HOSPITAL REPORT

In 1905 Dr Roger McNeill, Argyll County's Medical Officer, wrote in his Annual Report: 'On May 14th four cases of [Diphtheria] were notified to me in two families [on Tiree]. As I was anxious to have them removed, if possible, to the hospital, I visited the island on the first available boat. On my arrival I found that three of the children affected had already succumbed and two more had sickened. On visiting the hospital I found it was not yet ready for the reception of patients, but on bringing this under the notice of the [Mull] District Committee [of the County Council] steps were taken to have it furnished, a nurse was provided and the convalescents were removed to it, along with the mother, who sickened on August 2nd. There was no further spread of infection.

The 'Fever Hospital', which still stands on the Heanish *machair*, was finished in a hurry in 1905, but Dr McNeill, aided by Lady Victoria Campbell, the Duke's sister, had been lobbying for it since 1893. Infectious disease often spread quickly in Tiree's cramped housing conditions, and it had been understood from the middle of the nineteenth century that isolating patients as soon as they displayed symptoms was the best way to curb epidemics.

Like the Reading Room in Scarinish (now An Iodhlann), the Heanish hospital was built by Speirs & Company, a Glasgow firm specialising in prefabricated timber structures often clad in corrugated iron and lined with wooden panelling. A two-bedded ward lay at each end of the building with a kitchen, nurse's room and bathroom in the centre. Two thousand cubic feet of space was allowed per patient. Nurses were brought over from the mainland on demand. However, in 1927 Dr Hunter reported that it was only occasionally used; some families refused to use it after a number of patients died. It was, in fact, let out to the MacKinnon family, *Iain* and *Magaidh Iain 'ic Nèill* on condition that they had to leave at once if the hospital was needed for patients. It was last used medically in the 1940s and then let to the Council roadmen, in 1947 Tommy Stewart and subsequently Donald MacNeill (*Dòmhnall an Tàilleir*). It was sold by the Council in the 1960s as a private house.

Dr Roger McNeill, the instigator of the idea, had a very distinguished career. Born in 1853 to crofting parents on Colonsay, he graduated from Edinburgh University where he studied with Joseph Lister, the famous surgeon who had pioneered sterile procedures. After working in London during a smallpox epidemic he became the first Medical Officer of Health for Argyll (from 1890 to 1924), and in 1894 wrote a report titled, 'The Prevention of Epidemics and the Construction and Management of

Isolation Hospitals'. He is likely to have been a Gaelic speaker, which would have helped him talking to the frightened Tìre families struck by diphtheria in 1905. His reports played a leading part in the creation of the Highlands and Islands Medical Service in 1913.

Dr John Holliday