

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 65

TAILOR'S GOOSE

This tailor's smoothing-iron was known as a goose or guse-iron, said to have been because its curved handle looked like the necks of two geese.

We take the modern electric iron so much for granted that it is easy to ignore the fact that women (and it probably has been mainly women) have been flattening cloth on Tiree for over a thousand years. Woollen plaid – made from animal hair – is usually quite forgiving if it is laid out flat after washing. But cloth from plants – on Tiree, linen and cotton – behave differently. The long cellulose molecules in plant fibres get into a tangle if they are crumpled, particularly after being wet, creating a somewhat dishevelled look. Heat and water 'lubricates' the molecular strands. The weight of the iron does the rest.

Linen has been produced on Tiree since at least Viking times. Even then, a groomed look seems to have been fashionable. Glass linen smoothers and elaborately carved whalebone plaques (effectively small ironing boards) have been found in the graves of Viking women settlers in Scotland, for example on Berneray, North Uist. These unheated smoothers were held in the hand and were probably used on cold fabric. Slickstones, looking like miniature curling stones, some with a wooden handle making an inverted mushroom shape, were a standard piece of laundry equipment until the nineteenth century. Larger pieces of linen needed a mangle board. This was two or three feet long, with an elaborately carved handle, often made by a young man for his bride-to-be. The wet linen was tightly wound around a wooden roller and the mangle board, at right angles, rolled back and forth.

Cotton, from the slave plantations of America and the West Indies, had overtaken wool as the national fabric by 1812. Heated irons became the increasingly common tool of the laundrywoman. The triangular flat iron was also known as the sad-iron after an older meaning of 'sad' as solid or dense. To keep the washed cloth clean, the ironing surface had to be regularly sanded (on Tiree, with marram grass roots) and then polished. After heating next to the fire or range, the iron's metal handles became too hot to hold, making the use of rags necessary. Ironing this way with a heavy, heated lump of solid metal was a tiring job; it is not an accident that these guse-irons are often found today as doorstops! Because the iron took so long to heat, you needed two on the go, so that when one cooled, the other would be ready. To see if the iron was hot enough, it was common to spit on its surface. Charles Dickens, in his book *The Old Curiosity Shop*, described another method: "Mrs

Nubbles ironed away in silence for a minute or two, and coming to the fireplace for another iron, glanced stealthily at Kit while she rubbed it on a board and dusted it with a duster, but said nothing until she had returned to her table again: when, holding the iron at an alarmingly short distance from her cheek, to test its temperature." Don't try this at home! In between use, the sad-iron had to be lightly greased to prevent rust. More refined versions had more comfortable wooden handles.

The box iron came later. This was lighter, with a central cavity, into which fitted a small 'slug' of heated iron. Some box irons even contained burning embers of charcoal, and the iron had to be swung backwards and forwards to encourage the fuel to burn faster. Although an electric iron had been invented in America as far back as 1882, it was not until the Second World War that airmen at the RAF base, with its power station, before Tiree had an island-wide mains electrical grid. In An Iodhlann's collection are several other pre-electrical irons, including one powered by paraffin, and another by a smokeless fuel brick. We also have, more unusually, a fine American necktie iron from the 1930s. This tailor's goose probably dates from the first half of the nineteenth century, and may well have been made in an island smithy. It was deliberately cast from a narrow mould to allow the tailor to press the line of the seams.

Dr John Holliday

tailoring

other sorts iron in collection goffering

Iron stand

Decorative, metal stand for resting a hot iron during ironing.

trivet