

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS: no. 84

### MEAT CLEAVER

This meat cleaver was given to An Iodhlann, by Donald Brown, Vul. Smithy-made on the island, it was designed for home butchery, something that was done on Tiree well into the twentieth century. Meat cleavers have to be strong and heavy, and are used more as a small axe rather than as a knife. They often have a small hole at the tip allow them to be hung after cleaning.

Not that preparing a carcass was an everyday matter. In an often-quoted remark from 1695, Martin Martin wrote that on Tiree 'there are but few that eat any flesh'. Almost two and a half centuries later, Donald Kennedy from Balevullin, *Dòmhnail Eachainn*, echoed this when he ended a description of a 1938 hunt for *sgarbh* – cormorants and shags – on *Consalum*, a rock below the old coastguard's station on *Cnoc Charrastaoin* in Hough: 'There was no money for butcher meat then.' Those lucky enough to have a croft usually sold their animals for the cash that would pay the factor, the schoolmaster, the doctor or the *greusaiche* for a new pair of boots.

But many crofters kept a pig beside the house, fed on any surplus milk, potatoes or scraps. These and cast ewes would be slaughtered in the barn. Meat was a precious thing and only the most skilled men were allowed to butcher. Iain Paterson from Balinoe was the first Tiree man who described himself as 'butcher' in a census, that of 1891. Mairi Campbell, Corrairigh, Iain's great-neice, grew up in Crossapol: 'It was a great and busy day, slaughter day. The pig's throat would be slit and it would be allowed to run around [in the byre, which had been cleaned out] until it collapsed. Boiled water was used to scald and wash the carcass and shave the skin. The carcass was hung from an endless chain for a day and then butchered. My father [George, who had grown up on a ranch in Argentina] did all the butchering. He was very capable.' The children were then sent out with parcels of meat to friends and family around the island.

Likewise, Malcolm MacKinnon from Moss was another who described his trade as 'butcher', this time in the 1911 Census. He and his wife Peggy later opened the island's first butcher's shop in Scarinish, with the slaughterhouse in what had been a cobbler's workshop. During Tiree's second herring boom between 1914 and 1921, fishermen from all over the country flocked to the island, and Calum took advantage of the commercial opportunity to rent the slaughterhouse to a crew from Oban for a month. The late Hector MacPhail from Ruaig told this story about that time. These fishermen had a drink and started a fight in the butcher's shed. An old man

happened to be there, but when he was given a summons by the police and called to Oban sheriff's court as witness, he was afraid to take sides and told the sheriff he couldn't speak English. When an interpreter was brought in, he said he was sorry but he was very deaf. Another story was told how MacKinnon and the neighbouring storekeeper Hugh MacArthur bet Donald MacLean, the captain of the schooner *Mary Stewart*, a leg of lamb and half a pound of tobacco that he couldn't remove the mast, repair it and replace it on his own. The captain won.

There were a number of other men around the island who were also skilled butchers. Archie MacLean, *Èirdsidh Mhuilinn*, was allocated a croft in Kenovay after the First World War and became almost a full-time butcher in his byre, as did his son Donald. During the Second World War, the business was in prime position to supply the RAF camp, helped out by a Sergeant Connel, who had previously worked at Smithfield Market in London. In 1953, Donald and Nan took over Calum's shop in Scarinish, a place many of you will remember with affection! At first there were few regulations: 'When I started in Scarinish nobody paid any attention to you. I only had to sell the meat and pay for the beasts. I didn't have to do anything else! There was no paperwork. Today there is a big, big difference. There are hygiene regulations, disability regulations. The vet has to be there on slaughtering days. A huge change!' The first local lay inspector after new regulations came into force in 1961 was Hugh MacKinnon, a builder from Crossapol, who was known as 'The Contractor'. Donald MacLean remembered that he came round 'with his hands in his pockets. He wasn't strict. No, No!'

Hugh MacLean ran another butcher's shop in the east end with his wife Marion. At first, he rented the Ruaig schoolhouse while the authorities were between teachers. He built a corrugated-iron slaughterhouse at the back, possibly the only such arrangement in the country. Water had to be carried in buckets from a pump at the roadside. When a new teacher arrived he moved to a new croft in Salum. To give an idea of his scale of operations at the time, Hugh would usually slaughter one sheep a week, and if he had a bullock, he would share the carcass with Archie MacLean, Kenovay. Nan McClounnan from Balephuill worked in Rum View, Vaul, in 1945. One day she was sent, as usual, to collect the weekly meat ration from Hugh's shop. This time, however, she noticed that the package of meat was bulkier than normal and, unusually, wrapped in newspaper. When she got back, she unwrapped the bundle and found a sheep's head. Catriona, the landlady, told Nan she would make a delicious soup for her guests that night, which she did. But Nan couldn't keep the secret and told the guests what had gone into their meal! To reach more customers, Hugh used a horse and trap and later a car to deliver his meat. The shop closed soon after his death in 1949.

Jessie MacKinnon in Kilkenneth, who had learned the trade from her father *Èirdsidh Mhuilinn*, also ran a successful butcher's business for many years. Murdoch Cameron from Balevullin was also a well-known butcher. Alasdair MacNeill from Hynish remembered his visits: 'Initially during the [Second World] war, Murdoch Cameron from Balevullin was our butcher, and he came to the village in pony and trap. Because wartime rations applied everywhere, the meat was already cut in appropriate portions. He would halt his pony and trap and blow a whistle to summon his customers to come and collect their meat.' Murdoch came from a line of butchers. One day in 1880 towards the end of his life, Charles MacLean from Cornaigmore, *Tearlach an Tuairneir*, was lying in bed. '*B' fhèarr leam a bhith marbh* [I would rather be dead]', he said to the woman who was attending him. The nurse glanced out of the window, and, trying to cheer the patient up, said: '*Sin agad Murchadh Lachainn a tighinn* [There is Murdoch (Cameron, Balevullin, a butcher), coming]. '*Oh! Feumaidh mi tacainn beag fhathast!* [I'll have to keep going a bit longer (then)]', shot back *Tearlach*, sitting up in bed.

Today, a blizzard of hygiene and welfare regulations means that the nearest slaughterhouse is on Mull. This cleaver, beaten into shape by a Tìree blacksmith and used to prepare countless carcasses, now has no use and has been passed to our museum. Changed times.

Dr John Holliday