

THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS: no. 88

SAILMAKER'S AWL

This smiddy-made sailmaker's awl, used to create holes in sailcloth in preparation for stitching, belonged to Hector MacKinnon, owner of the schooner *Coll Castle*. It was given to An Iodhlann by Morag MacKinnon.

There are at least two boats on record as the *Coll Castle*. The first was built on Coll by Allan MacLean in 1819, being 23 tons. Possibly the same boat was recorded in 1843 on the Manning River, New South Wales, owned by an A MacLean. Another *Coll Castle* was built in Rothesay in 1860. Since Hector was born around 1847, it is likely that his was the second boat. There is probably a common thread running through these boat names, but I have not found it yet.

Hector MacKinnon and his brother Dugald came from Kilmoluag, and were and known throughout the island as *Eachann agus Dùghall a' Choll*. They jointly owned the *Coll Castle* and sailed out of *An Acarsaid*, Milton harbour, carrying general cargoes from port to port along the west coasts of Britain and Ireland. Time meant money to a boat owner, and ships carried as much sail as they could: the *Mary Stewart*, whose keel still lines the sand of *Port Sgairinis*, had two masts and nine sails in her prime.

Hector MacPhail told one famous story about the brothers' skill at sea: 'On the night of the Tay Bridge Disaster, 28 December 1879, when a ferocious gale swept right across Scotland, the *Coll Castle* was at sea, homeward bound from the Clyde with a load of coal. The gale was of such ferocity that no one on this island believed a sailing vessel such as the *Coll Castle* could survive such violence. By the grace of God and the maritime ability of the MacKinnon brothers, when the wind abated, they brought their vessel into the safe haven of *An Acarsaid*. Something that added to the doom and gloom on the island was the fact that the eldest son of *Eachann a' Choll*, Calum, was born that night, everyone believing that the born child's father was lost at sea.' Today, there are many descendants of *Criùtha* [the crew of] *Eachainn a' Choll* on and off the island.

There is a lot of strain on a sail in a decent wind, and damage was common. All boats would have carried a basic sail repair kit for an emergency: darning a hole or patching a wider tear. In addition to an awl, this basic kit also included spare sailcloth, a sailmaker's palm and thread, a selection of large needles honed sharp, a seam rubber, a marlinspike and some boltrope.

The *Coll Castle* would have had a selection of jibs, staysails, foresails, mizzens and mule sails. All these had different dimensions and shapes, and could be given more or less 'belly' or draft, the *corp an t-sùil*. Even the single sail of a dipping lug, the sort of boat that still competes at the Tiree regatta, was a complicated beast. The older boats usually had a mast that was no longer than the length of the boat, sacrificing speed for safety. But during the twentieth century, competition to be the fastest boat home meant that boats were rigged with taller masts – at least for regatta day. Sails with more curvature produce more force, but less speed. Cutting and stitching a complete new sail was thus an expert job, and usually left to those who were best at it.

Traditional sail making needs a large table and plenty of room, meaning that much of this work must have been done outside on Tiree. Sailcloth came in rolls that had to be overlapped and stitched together. Because sails are not flat, the amount of overlap varied in different parts. Indeed, all modern sails are designed and cut by computer! The hems were folded over and the creases rubbed firmly, ropes sewn along the edges to reinforce them, brass cringles secured to take a rope and the corners were strengthened with triangles of extra sailcloth.

Many sails are likely to have been bought into the island, particularly second hand from the east coast. But there were some sail makers on Tiree too. The ones we know about lived in Balemartine and Mannal. In 1860, the Duke of Argyll commissioned a 40-foot fishing boat for Tiree, the *Duchess*, along with 36 yards of navy canvas sailcloth. By this time, American cotton had taken over from flax, as the basis for plain-woven canvas sailcloth. The following year, the factor John Campbell informed the Duke that 'I had a letter from McQuarry [the ground officer] informing me that the crew of the *Duchess* who were [given] Scarinish Store [a building beside the pier that has since been demolished] to keep their things in, had stolen a quantity of fine sail cloth and other articles belonging to the sloop *Dream*.' And John Fletcher in Balemartine told Maggie Campbell that 'The old man here, that's what my father told me – it was his father – he was out sailing. I told you already that they made their own sails here. And when they were out, they were tightening the sails with the halyard. He had a piece of chalk and he was marking the sail so he could adjust it later. He fell out of the boat one day but swam back to the boat himself. He was lucky.'

Sail making by hand must have been heavy work and needed strong hands. You can see how the sailmaker's palm has been reinforced to make pushing the needle through the tough sailcloth more comfortable. But for a crew that was making a living dodging the Atlantic gales, the ability to repair a sail at sea must sometimes have made the difference between life and death.

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