

# An Cuan The Sea

*Surrounded by the restless Atlantic Ocean, the sea has given Tiree its fertility, its people their food and livelihood, and shaped the island's weather.*

The earliest Mesolithic visitors to the island lived at the shore and their diet was largely sea food.

However, commercial fishing by islanders began, somewhat unenthusiastically, only in 1787. *There were several companies of natives employed, and though of little experience, they caught at one letting of 200 hooks, from 30-80 cod and ling... there are yearly companies from Barra... having more experience are more successful than our own men... They do not in this district pursue fishing with spirit.* OLD STATISTICAL ACCOUNT 1792.

The 5th Duke of Argyll tried to encourage his tenants to take up fishing. He instructed his factor in 1801 that, *Each boat's crew to be assisted with an advance of £10 or hooks and lines to that value... Malcolm MacDonald appears to have made spirited exertion already as a fisher, and has been unfortunate in losing a boat and lines. He should be encouraged to renew his exertions and I allow you to give him £10 to set him a-going.*

A major problem was the lack of good harbours on Tiree, which forced islanders to use fishing boats small enough to drag up onto the beach. So in 1847 small piers were built at The Green, West Hynish, Balemartine, Baugh and Milton.

The prize was the shoals of white fish - cod and ling - which was salted and sent to the growing cities of Britain. By the 1881 Census 171 islanders said they were fishermen with 3 others boat builders. The island also attracted a number of seasonal fishermen from the east coast of Scotland. Brock and The Green both got their names from these men.

*Salt ling were exported from the island... The rocks down here were covered with fish drying in the sun. When they were dry they would make big bales of them tied with string and a big boat was coming in once a year for them... There was always someone sitting nearby, someone paid to keep the seagulls away by shouting or throwing stones.* JOHN FLETCHER, BALEMARTINE.



Donald MacKinnon, Sandag, in the Heatherbell, and Donald MacIntyre, Cott, in the Jubelle, racing in the Tiree regatta in the 1980s.



The Mary Stewart in Scarinish harbour in 1927. Her keel can still be seen there. She was sailed by Donald MacLean, Dornhall Op, Scarinish and carried cargo up and down the west coast.



The pier at Port of Mhullin, Baugh.

Life as a fisherman was hard. *They were tough, going out in the morning with maybe a bottle of milk and perhaps a scone in a piece of paper and that was their lot for the day until they came back at night, and I bet there wasn't much when they got home. These people were poor. They had nothing.* JOHN FLETCHER, BALEMARTINE.

However, by 1900 the 'white gold' around Tiree was disappearing due to over fishing and competition from large steam trawlers. By the start of the Second World War the industry had moved elsewhere.

The classic Tiree skiff was around twenty feet long and rigged by a dipping lug sail, an old fashioned rig but comparatively safe in the open sea. These boats still race off Scarinish in the July regatta, one of the last places in Britain where they can still be seen.