



Newsletter of An Iodhlann's members

Welcome to the first issue of 2014.

Not long after you get this newsletter Tìree will see the launch of a major new history book when the Islands Book Trust publishes *The Secret Island* on Friday 23 May. John Randall, the outgoing chair of the IBT, and Professor Donald Meek will be in An Talla. The volume collects all the talks given at last year's conference of the same name. Copies will be available on the night, in An Iodhlann, from our website and from all good book sellers.

This August sees the centenary of the start of the First World War. We have set up our own small exhibit showing how the conflict affected the island. I recently heard the story of a German 'invasion' of the island in 1918. The man who told me this was having his tea in Baugh at the house of Jake Munn in the 1930s. He was listening to Jake's brother Danny, home from the Middle East where he was a harbour master. Danny said one of his duties was to have dinner with visiting sea captains and one night a German captain had told the story of his posting as a U-boat skipper during the First World War. They had been ordered to lie at periscope depth off Soay, Tìree, and report traffic. For several days they did this, but their rations were running low and the mate reported how he had seen sheep grazing on this island. They decided to go ashore at night to take one: it was the best mutton soup he had ever eaten! This story was confirmed in an article by A MacLean in the 1986 *Coll Magazine* (these are all available online) - except the Soay in question was the islet off Coll, not Tìree!

Minesweepers off the coast of Tìree during WW1.



*"The peace of Coll itself was not greatly disturbed during the war. Its young men went off to battle; seven did not return, as the village memorial testifies. A few unknown bodies were washed ashore and buried here. **There were rumours of German sailors landing at night to slaughter and carry off sheep for their own ships' kitchens**, and of spies armed with maps and binoculars - one spotted near Friesland, another at the East end. The sounds of war were seldom heard, but on the 29th July, 1918 a young Collach gathering razor shells on Eleraig beach was startled by the distant noise of gunfire. A German submarine was firing at *The Plover*, the mail-boat that was bound for the Outer Isles. Local lore has it that a soldier from Barra who was on board manned the *Plover's* single stern gun and fired back, but the submarine submerged, probably undamaged."*

In contrast to World War 2 when there was a major base and 2000 servicemen on Tiree, the trenches of Europe were a long way away in 1914. But the Great War had a devastating effect on the Tiree community. In the 1911 Census the island's population was 1,812, with 251 males in the recruiting age band of between 19 and 41 years old. The Tiree Roll of Honour lists 207 who served in the conflict and the Scarinish War Memorial honours 66 men who died. A huge loss, emotionally and economically, for the island to bear. Professor Donald Meek has just finished making a programme for BBC Alba about his grand uncle, who died in this war. It will go to air later this year.

A moving occasion takes place on 16 August when a new memorial is unveiled at Tiree airport. It will be 70 years ago to the minute that the island witnessed its most devastating wartime tragedy, when two Halifaxes collided over Island House with the loss of 16 lives. The ceremony is being coordinated Ken Organ, whose father was the pilot of one of the planes. Relatives of many of the crew, and representatives of the services will be on the island. An Iodhlann is helping with the arrangements, and there will be an event that evening and a church service the following day.



The crew of one of 518 Squadron's Halifax aircraft, which collided in mid-air over Tiree on 16 August 1944. Back row L-R: Sgt "Bill" Graham, Arthur Marshall, "Norm" Power, "Warny" Creswell. Front row L-R: F/O "Harry" Oates, F/Lt "Bill" Kemp, F/O K W Organ, F/O "Johnny" Peterson. The photo was probably taken at RAF Brawdy in Pembrokeshire before their posting to Tiree. Kemp and Power did not follow the rest of the crew to Tiree, but were instead replaced by P/O BW Smith and Sgt PG Smith (not photographed). The accident happened only six days after they arrived on the island.

Much of the news of the Great War came back to the island in the form of telegrams. Here is a brief history of this service on Tiree.

SPEAKING WITH WIRES: the history of the telegraph on Tiree

In these days of instant worldwide communication, these days of iPhones, YouTube and Twitter, it is easy to forget the world of one hundred years ago when the sending of a sentence from a Tiree croft to a Glasgow tenement required an hour's walk and a week's wages.

It was in 1834 that Samuel Morse, a New York artist of Scottish descent, invented a way of transmitting words using a sequence of dots and dashes – a code that still bears his name. In 1871 Mull was connected by a telegraph line stretching from Oban to Grass Point, and islanders on Tiree lobbied to be added to the network. In 1883, Edward Stanford, the chemist responsible for the Glassary seaweed factory in Middleton, made this plea to the Napier Commission hearing in Kirkapol Church.

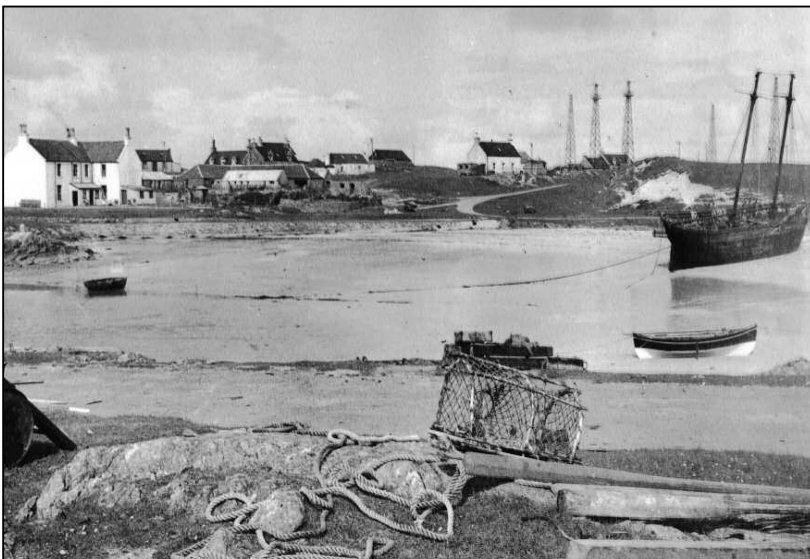
"All should be thoroughly connected by telegraph; this is not an expensive thing to keep up, not much more than the first outlay, and would be very useful to the country generally, in reporting wrecks, or in time of war, besides the commercial advantages."

Other islanders too started to agitate for telegraphic services. A visitor noted,

"I found that three subjects were the engrossing topics of the people when I was there [on Tiree] – namely daily postal services, the urgent want of the telegraph and the new pier."

The island did not have much longer to wait. In August 1888 the cable was laid to Coll and across the Gunna Sound to the shore below Roisgal in Caolas. From Caolas the line ran to the Scarinish Post Office, which was in the eastern half of the shop on the site of the present day Coop.

The first postmaster on Tiree with responsibility for the new machine was Hugh MacDonald from Milton, *Eòghann a' Mhuileir* (Hugh from the miller's family). In 1881 he is recorded as living in Scarinish as a 35 year old shop salesman, but by 1891 he had been promoted to become the sub-postmaster. Living with him that year was Anna MacKechnie, 20, a telegraphist.



Scarinish in 1947 with the Emergency Wireless Telegraphy Service masts in the background.

By 1901 Hugh had become the full Scarinish postmaster, and was married and living in 'Links Cottage', a corrugated iron-clad house in Scarinish. In 1911 his 'telegraph clerk' was 20 year old Margaret Robertson from Broadford in Skye, who went on to own the shop at the corner of the pier road and whose daughter Mona married Angus MacLean. It is said that Hugh did not love the 'dot-dot-dash-dash' machine. One story has him exploding with, *"I don't understand this bloody thing!"* Another has it that he would become so enraged he would throw the Morse transmitter across the room, shouting, *"Mac na Galla!"* after it.

However, the new submarine cable was as vulnerable to damage by tides, waves and trawlers as it is today. In 1891, three years after the cable had been laid, Lady Victoria Campbell was frustrated in her intention to send a telegram from the island, as she recorded in her diary.

"All day indoors. Wanted to send a telegram in afternoon, answering a business question from Edinburgh, a week old today. Archie tells me the telegraph wire is broken, and even if it had not been I could not have sent it, as it blew and rained too hard to admit of him or the horse going [from Balemartine to Scarinish]."

In 1911 the cable was disrupted for five months before it could be repaired. By 1923 these frequent interruptions had become too much and a temporary wireless service was established on Tiree for the first time. David Murdoch was one of the men manning the temporary wireless station in Scarinish. In 1974 he wrote a memoir of time spent on Tiree in 1923 providing a back-up service for the telegraph cable.

"In the 1920s it was the responsibility of the WTS (Wireless Telegraphy Section of the British Post Office) to provide a communication service when the Islands in the Western Hebrides were cut off from the mainland arising from the failure of the normal telegraph system. These failures usually occurred during the early part of winter, and were attributed to the cutting of the submarine telegraph cable by trawlers fishing in this area. The duration of these breaks often extended until the following months of May or June when one of the GPO (General Post Office) cable ships, "Alert" or "Monarch", would call in the area to repair the cable and restore the normal telegraph service."

"I was fortunate to be sent on long periods of detached duty to three of the islands; namely Scarinish (Isle of Tiree), Castlebay (Isle of Barra) and Lochboisdale (South Uist), and these experiences are amongst the most vivid and happiest memories of my days in the WTS."

At Scarinish the equipment was housed in a disused crofter's cottage with walls about six feet thick, earthen floor, two small windows, and close to the only hotel on the island. Two temporary aerial masts, about sixty feet in height, were erected and a suitable lead-in brought into the side of the house...All communications were effected through Malinhead Radio (GMH) and the procedure adopted was a calling system every hour, commencing at 9am each day and finally closing the station at 6pm. The telegraph traffic amounted to an average weekly number of 20 messages and were delivered to the local post office by a messenger boy.



The postmistress and postmen at Scarinish Post Office in 1919. L-R: (back) Margaret Robertson, Scarinish (postmistress); Lachland MacNeill; Donald MacKechnie; Hugh Lamont, Ruaig; (front) Archie MacLean, Scarinish; Donald MacDougall, Kilmoluaig; John Munn, Baugh.

Sub-post offices were set up in Ruaig, Corraig, Balemartine and, later, Middleton. At first, these smaller post offices did not have a telegraph connection. Balemartine was the first post office outside Scarinish to be connected to the telegraph network.

A 1911 Directory records,

"Post, Telegraph and Money Order Office, Balemartine: Miss Juliean MacNeill, sub-postmistress. Letters arrive through Argyll. No Sunday delivery."

"Post and Money Order Office, Corraig: Hugh MacPhail, sub-postmaster. Letters arrive through Argyll. No Sunday delivery. The nearest telegraph office is at Balemartine, 3 miles distant."

"Post and Money Order Office, Ruaig: John Lamont, postmaster. Letters arrive through Argyll. No Sunday delivery. The nearest telegraph office is at Scarinish, 4 miles distant."

The next sub-post office to be connected was Corraig. The idea of a weather station in Corraig was put forward by the Meteorological Office in May 1924. The attraction was the presence of the secondary school head teacher as its observer. The stumbling block was the lack of a telegraph

line to the Corraig Post Office to allow the weather readings to get to London. The GPO refused to put in the line without a 14 year guarantee that it would get a minimum annual income of £60 from the new office. The Air Ministry refused to pay this in full but did offer to pay £35. The newly-installed head master at Corraig, DO MacLean, wrote to the Met Office in September 1925 with the names of five local residents who had offered to stand surety for up to £5 a year each: William MacPhail, Croish, Murdoch Cameron, Balevullin, Hector Campbell, Kenovay, John MacPhail, Corraigmore and John Campbell, Corraigbeg.

The Telegraph Office opened at Corraig Post Office on 27 July 1926 with the first observation sent to London on 16 September that year. Weather measurements were sent to London seven days a week at 7 am, 1 pm and 6 pm. It was reported that it was sometimes difficult to rouse the postmistress for the early morning call. The Parish Council finally agreed to take over the guarantee in 1929.

To send a telegram islanders would go to their local post office and dictate their message to the post-master or mistress. Payment was by the number and length of words and so text was kept to a minimum. In the 1930s the other post offices in Ruaig and Middleton were also connected to the telegraph and telephone lines.

The temporary Repeater Station and Radio Hut at Scarinish in 1941 (left of picture). The Reading Room (now An Iodhlann) is on the right.



Until the spread of the telephone to most Tìre homes in the 1970s the telegram was the way most people transmitted or received urgent news. The commonest subject on the island was the movement of animals on the boat, but the orange envelopes could contain sad news of death and illness too, and the arrival of a telegram at the door was met with some apprehension. During the 1914 - 1918 War the teacher at Balemartine School would walk to the post office for news of the war every day during the lunch break. Boys were given the (welcome) task of delivering the orange envelopes. Angus Munn, Heanish, recalled,

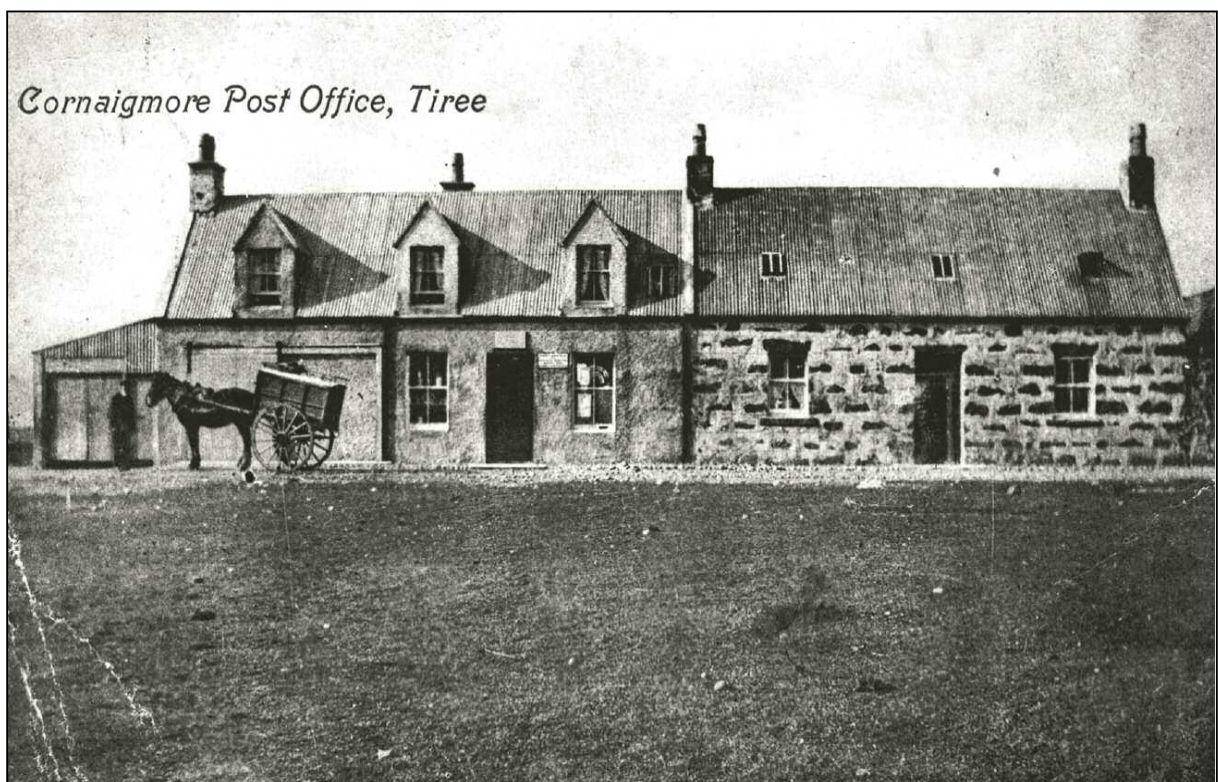
“When I was at Scarinish School, I had the official task, I was nominated by Katie Nisbet [the teacher]; I was the official deliverer of telegrams from Scarinish Post Office as a schoolboy. There was a red bicycle with a big carrier at the front of it. A lot of telegrams came, even for the doctor. I got the princely sum of a shilling to deliver a telegram to the doctor’s. That was a lot of money! I went to Corraig [school] I think in 1940, so I don’t think I delivered any bad [war] news. They were in bright yellow envelopes. There was no question of you even attempting to look [inside]. Sometimes you knew by people’s faces that the news was bad. Of course, quite often folk would tell you, “That’s my cousin, Donald, he’s coming home.” It was a means of communication. Very few people had phones. Men coming home from the sea would send a telegram, “Arriving next Tuesday, Willie or Hugh.”

Sometimes delivering telegrams was a good way to get out of school. Duncan Grant, Ruaig, recalled,

“One of the little perks we used to get. The post office was not that far from Brock, Hugh Lamont’s [the postman] croft, and of course, wartime, there were telegrams with various news and other things as well, and someone in the post office would come across and ask for one of the boys to take it away up to Caolas or Milton or Vaul. You were out of school, on a lovely summer’s day and the Caolas road in front of you and the rest were all in class. These telegrams would come in their yellow envelopes and away we would wander up to Roisgal, or wherever. I suppose we were delivering at times sad news. We were told to stand and ask if there was a reply. I think we were given 2 old pence for doing this. My aunt told me later that I was given the privilege seemingly because I was the only one that came back in a reasonable time!”

Sometimes the backs of the telegrams were sealed with sealing wax. But, although telegrams were sealed in an envelope, confidentiality in a small community could be an issue. One old man, with an eye for local news, had seen a boy going up the road with a telegram, and watched out for him returning. *“Anything interesting in the telegram?”* he asked. The boy refused to say and Julie Anna, the postmistress at Balinoe, was later furious with the old man for asking.

Often the contents of the telegram were routine, for example information about the arrival of a calf on the boat. In the 1930s and 40s many Tìree crofters would get new born calves from the big dairy farmers on Mull, Coll or the mainland and they would get a telegram in advance giving details of the animal’s arrival. A typical telegram would read, *‘Ram on boat tomorrow’*.



Cornaigmore Post Office in the 1920s or 1930s.

Other telegrams contained news that everyone dreaded. Kenneth Organ was the pilot of one of the Halifaxes that collided over Island House in 1944 in the island's worst wartime tragedy.

To: Dora Organ, 29 Southey Drive, Sheffield, 12th August 1944

"DESIRE TO EXPRESS DEEPEST SYMPATHY IN THE LOSS OF YOUR HUSBAND STOP YOUR HUSBAND CAN BE BURIED WITH SERVICE HONOURS IN SOROBA CHURCHYARD AT TIREE IN WHICH CASE ROYAL AIRFORCE REPRESENTATIVE WOULD ATTEND STOP THE COST OF THE BURIAL UNDER THESE ARRANGEMENTS WOULD BE BORNE BY THE GOVERNMENT AND IF YOU WISHED TO ATTEND THE FUNERAL A FREE RETURN THIRD CLASS RAILWAY WARRANT FOR TWO PERSONS ONE OF WHOM MUST BE A RELATIVE WOULD BE ISSUED ON THE PRODUCTION OF THE TELEGRAM AT THE NEAREST POLICE STATION STOP IF YOU DESIRE A PRIVATE FUNERAL THE BODY WILL BE SENT HOME AT GOVERNMENT EXPENSE AND THE COST OF THE COFFIN WILL BE MET BY GOVERNMENT FUNDS STOP IN ADDITION YOU WILL BE ALLOWED A GRANT OF £5 TOWARDS FUNERAL EXPENSES BUT NO OTHER EXPENSES WILL BE ALLOWED STOP VERY STRONGLY RECOMMEND THAT INTERNMENT TAKES PLACE HERE OWING TO DISTANCE INVOLVES STOP PLEASE TELEGRAPH YOUR DECISION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE 518 SQUADRON TIREE"

The impersonal nature of the text is still shocking today.



Hugh Cameron (right) with pipers Hugh MacArthur of Tullymet and Hugh Campbell of Port Glasgow, at the 1921 Remembrance Day service at the War Memorial in Scarinish.

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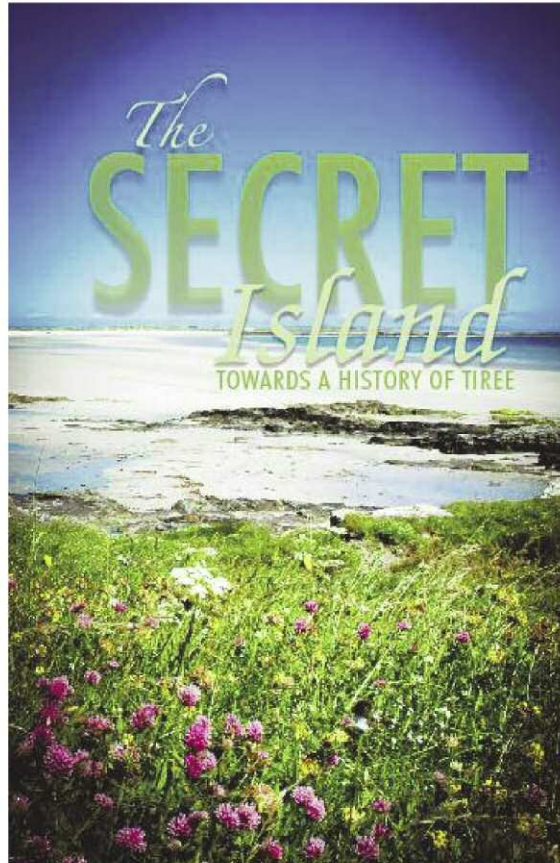
- The long-awaited refurbishment programme for the Reading Room starts in May, with new windows, a front door, external fascia, landscaping and store room shelving. Bernard Smith and Sons is our contractor, and work is expected to take three weeks. We are grateful for a large grant from the Tìree Trust Windfall Fund to allow this to happen.
- We are grateful, too, for the generosity of Ronnie MacLean, Silversands, who has left An Iodhlann a large bequest. We have used this to buy paper copies of all Birth, Marriage and Death certificates for Tìree from 1855 to 1913.
- We were very pleased to show a group from Coll around our archive. They are hoping to set up a similar project on their island and we wish them well.
- Many of you will have been following the new Facebook sensation 'Tìree Memories', set up by the indefatigable Iain Smith, West Hynish. Well worth a visit if you're in that area.
- Another of our winter projects has been the cleaning and painting of our collection of old rusty tools and artefacts. This allows them to be handled – a great pleasure, if you like that sort of thing!
- Other summer arrivals are a pair of Duncan MacGregor-Whyte paintings on long-term loan from the school. These have been cleaned, repaired and re-framed in Glasgow. Our other mini-exhibition is a collection of wonderful artefacts from the late Angus MacLean, Scarinish.
- Recent research includes the history of the post on the island, the summer visits of the Travelling People and the Viking place-names – trickier than you think!

Thanks to all of you who follow and support this archive. It's wonderful what this little red hut produces – and it's all down to you! And when we speak again we will know if Scotland is going to be an independent country or not!

Dr John Holliday

With thanks to the following for the use of their photographs:

*Minesweepers - Jean Lindsay, Halifax Crew - Ken Organ, Scarinish in 1947 - Michael Watson,
Post Office staff - Angus MacLean, Radio Hut and Reading Room - Eileen Shearer,
Cornaig Post Office - Doris MacLean, Pipers at the War Memorial - Jean Lindsay.*



The Secret Island

Towards a History of Tiree

Book Launch
Friday 23rd May 2014
7.30pm
An Talla Hall, Tiree