



Newsletter of An Iodhlann's members

Welcome to this autumn's edition of *Sìl Eòlais*. We look at mortality on Tìre in the nineteenth century, hear details of a gripping shipwreck story and find out about the island's unusual houses.

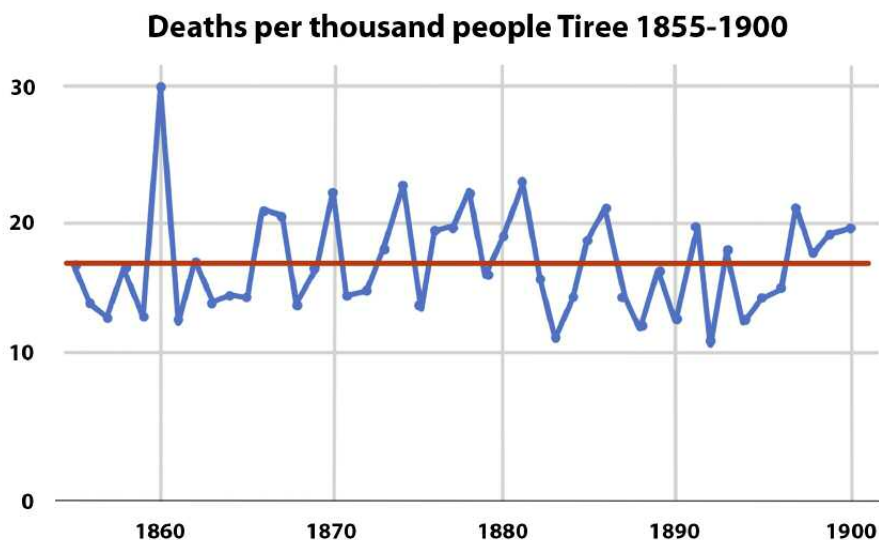
Jack Davey worked in *An Iodhlann* over the summer as an intern. He has produced a wealth of data from 2,103 deaths. This is a report which he and I have written together.

Death on an Island

Statutory registration of births, deaths and marriages began in Scotland in 1855. We set out to examine what the Tìre death records might tell us about islanders' life expectancy, their access to healthcare, and the impact of diseases such as whooping cough, TB and influenza. Jack examined every death certificate recorded by the island's registrar between 1855 and 1900, noting the sex, age at death, cause of death, duration of the final illness, and the presence or absence of a doctor at the death.

Two numbers stood out. There was a noticeable spike in deaths in 1860, when 96 were registered, twice the average. There were also fewer deaths in the final decade in the period than in the first (38 against 43). This was partly due to a falling island population during the second half of the nineteenth century (3,199 in 1861 compared to 2,186 in 1901) as continuing emigration to Canada, New Zealand and Glasgow made its mark.

A striking feature of the annual death rate on Tìre during this period is its volatility, with high values in some years – most notably 1860, but also 1870, 1874 and 1881:

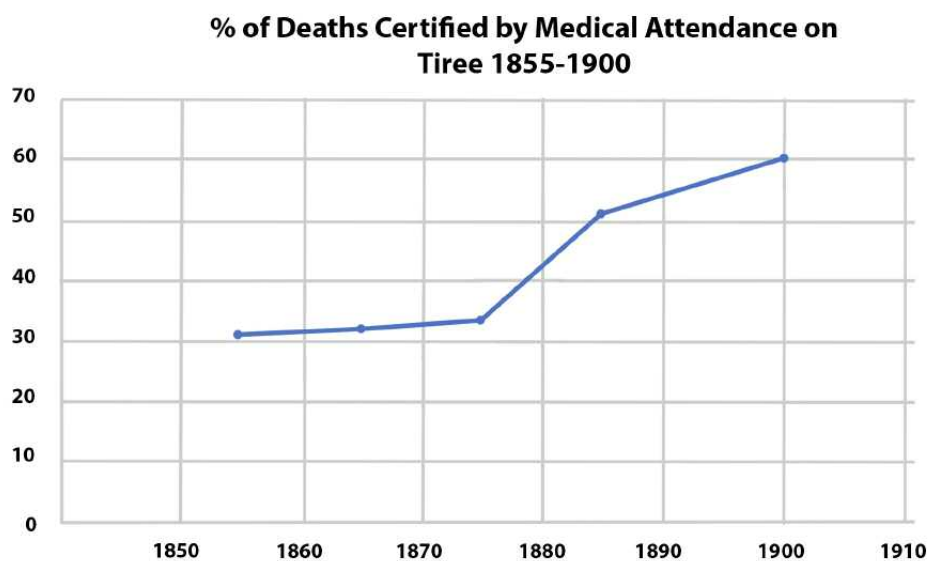


To attempt to find an answer to this, Jack examined the cause of death. It is clear that whooping cough epidemics occurred every four to five years, and instances of death from whooping cough increased markedly in 1860 with seventeen cases.

Children were especially vulnerable, with the average age of whooping cough victims being 2 years and 9 months. One particularly harrowing story occurred in a fisherman's family in Balemartine in March 1870. Two children died from whooping cough on consecutive days.

Although the epidemic of whooping cough explains some of the 1860 spike, clearly other factors were involved. Seven drownings were also registered that year, as long-line fishing from small boats reached its peak on the island. But attendance by the doctor was another factor. Jack calculated the proportion of cases where a doctor was present to certify the cause of death. While an average of 31% of deaths were certified by a doctor over the decade 1855-1865, only 13% of deaths were registered by a doctor in 1860 itself.

By the end of the study period, whooping cough had clearly declined as population nutrition and housing standards improved and the bacteria lost some of its virulence. Other infectious diseases were important. Influenza epidemics had an impact, as in 1855, when 25 people died, and in 1897. Measles caused the deaths of 11 islanders in 1867. Tuberculosis was common, causing an average of 5-6 deaths per year, but rates fell in the final decade. Despite inoculation, practised on Tiree since the late eighteenth century, and then the 1863 Vaccination Act, there were four cases of smallpox during the period. There were also 40 cases of drowning.



During the study period, life expectancy on Tiree increased by almost 50%, from 40.3 years to 58.9. Although better nutrition and rising living standards accounts for much of this, the trend also correlates with the proportion of deaths where a medical attendant was present during the final illness.

Securing the services of a doctor on Tiree was not easy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In 1794, the minister had written: *'It is somewhat singular that this parish should have been almost always destitute of a medical practitioner ... Several young medical men have, from time to time, tried the experiment of practising here, in the expectation of a certain salary; but have found the remuneration so uncertain and ill paid, that in short time they have thrown up the situation in disgust.'*

But even if a doctor could be persuaded to move to Tiree, many islanders could not afford his services. The Poor Law Amendment (Scotland) Act of 1845 directed parochial boards to pay for the medical treatment of those admitted to the Poor Roll. Two years later, parochial boards were given a further grant to go towards the payment of a doctor's salary. Although some wealthy patients – for example, the minister of the Established Church and farmers – could afford the doctor's private fee, many of those excluded from the Poor Roll could not. Another Tiree minister reported 1850: *'Most of the poorer classes, although not Paupers (and they form a very large proportion of the population of this Parish), often suffer much for want of medical aid from inability to call one when required.'*

Poignantly, one Tiree doctor, twenty-six-year-old James Anderson from 'Heynish', himself died from 'scarlatina angiosa' (scarlet fever) in 1860. The presence of a doctor may have had an effect on the illness burden of a community over and above the treatment he was able to offer: for example, in the management of an epidemic of infectious diseases.

The first doctor to settle on the island long-term was Alexander Buchanan, who was in post for fifty-three years from 1860 until his death in 1913. In this, he was supported by the eighth Duke of Argyll with the living of a farm in Baugh.

The correlation between death rates and medical attendance is borne out by the high death rate in 1867 (48) during a long period of absence by Dr Buchanan. Here, the rate of certification by a doctor was just 15%, half the average for the decade. We do not know the reasons behind Buchanan's absence. He had married a local woman in 1866. *An Iodhlann* does have a copy of an 1873 resignation letter, a resignation he later cancelled.

We would like to thank Jack for his hard work collecting all this data, which we will put on our website.

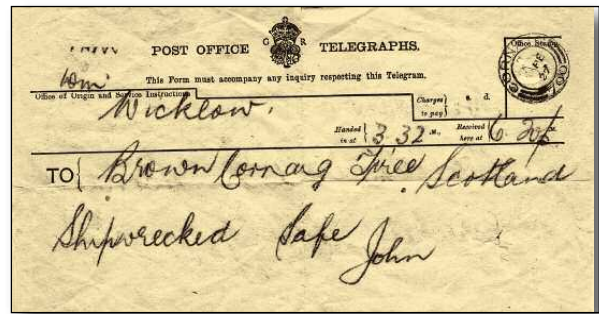
Dr. Buchanan - Tiree's longest serving doctor. He was the doctor on the island from 1860 until his death in 1912.

The newly built doctor's house in Baugh, photographed between 1896 and 1901 by the antiquarian Ernest Beveridge. The older (whitewashed) building used by his household – which included, in 1871, a woolspinner, a governess, four domestic servants and two ploughmen - is seen at the back, with barns behind them. A newer surgery was built onto the west (white) gable in 1969; this is now the dental surgery.

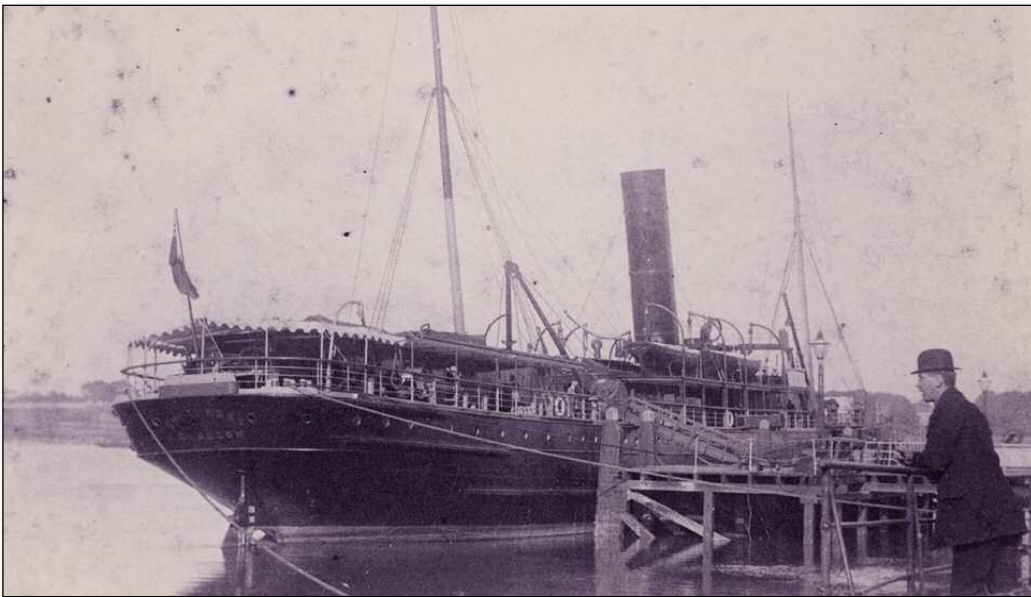


Shipwrecked

'Shipwrecked Safe John'. Three words, sent in a telegram to Cornaigmore Post Office in 1927, that say so much, yet leave most unsaid. The backstory is a fascinating one involving the most dangerous rocks in the Irish Sea, two Tíre men – at different ends of their careers – and their fight for survival in wintry seas.



Lachlan Lamont from Ruaig, the son of a fisherman, was 67 in 1927, and had been a master with the Clyde Shipping Company for many years. John Brown from Cornaigbeg was more than forty years his junior and had signed on with the company on their passenger-cargo boat *Sheerness*, which had been built in 1903.



SS Sheerness, built in Dundee in 1903. I would be interested to hear if anyone knows at which pier the ship is tied up.

The *Sheerness* with a crew of thirty-two left the Clyde on Tuesday 1st February carrying a general cargo. She was bound for Dublin, Waterford and Cork. The first leg was uneventful, but during the second leg, a Thursday night passage south along the Irish coast to Waterford, tragedy struck. We are fortunate to have an eyewitness account from the ship's stewardess, Mrs Miller, herself a veteran with twenty-four years at sea. Interviewed in her sick bed almost a week later while recovering from her ordeal, she told the local paper: *'I was asleep in my bunk when the Sheerness crashed on to the rock at Tuskar, bow on. That would be at about 4.20 am.'* Tuskar Rock, seven miles off the southeast corner of Ireland, is one of the most dangerous rocks in the Irish Sea, with 176 listed wrecks. A lighthouse was built there in 1815, almost thirty years before Skerryvore was completed, and an extensive renovation in 1885 gave the light a range of 24 nautical miles in good weather.

Mrs Miller continued: *'I knew at once from the heavy jolt and the jarring noises that something of a serious nature had happened. I jumped hastily out of bed, found to my horror that the ship was rapidly taking water, and, scantily clad as I was, ran to the deck. There was an instant call to the boats. The captain's first command was to lower the two lifeboats on the starboard side, but before that could be done the ship listed so heavily to port that it became impossible to swing the boats out. The port boats were then lowered, and I, along with fourteen other members of the crew, was accommodated in the first. The surging seas threatened every minute to dash our little craft to pieces against the side of the sinking Sheerness, and it was during our desperate effort to pull clear that our chief officer, Mr McDaid [sic], fell into the water and was drowned.'* James McDade, the fifty-year-old first mate had sailed on the *Sheerness* for many years. His body was recovered later and he was buried at his home church in Lochgoilhead.

'In that awful struggle, three of our oars snapped and our rudder was carried away, but even these handicaps were overcome by the magnificent courage of the men, and at last we got clear. I was sitting in that boat with only a few clothes on and without even a pair of shoes to my feet. A steward, however, had thoughtfully thrown about me his own nap coat, and that, I think, kept me surviving in the bitter coldness. With the loss of Mr [McDade], our lifeboat was left without a single officer, but a young member of that crew, Peter Petersen, assumed command in a way and directed the men at the oars in negotiating the heavy seas.' Hans Peter Petersen had gone to sea when he was just fifteen and had been round Cape Horn on a sailing ship.

'Every wave had to be carefully watched and the boat so handled as to prevent the possibility of its being overturned. The lifeboat was tossed about like a piece of wreckage in the open sea, but every man stuck grimly and bravely to his task. The men behaved splendidly. In the inky blackness of the night it was impossible to see anything at all, but the men rowed on courageously, inspired by the hope that the breaking of day would bring with it the sight of some vessel and ultimate rescue from our perilous plight ... The men cracked jokes and I enjoyed them, while at one period they started to sing an Irish ditty. At this stage however, the lad Petersen counselled his mates to save their wind for the oars, and to remember that they were fighting for their lives. About 6.30 in the morning we were near the Blackwater Lightship [lit from 1857 to 1968], which, answering our own signals of distress, fired a rocket and hoisted a flag. No help however was forthcoming and the best our lads could do was row on



*Captain Lachlan Lamont from Ruaig.
(courtesy of Anneen Black)*

'It was not until midday that the [Welsh] collier Kingston, bound for Newport [in south Wales], hove into view, and you can imagine how we welcomed the sight of it. Our anxieties were not yet over, however, for we had to attract the attention of those on board the vessel. There was a request for something that might be used for signalling, and so I handed my old skirt to one of the crew and told him to stick it on the end of a boathook. This was done, and the skirt was waved vigorously aloft [while] we eagerly watched for some sign that our signal of distress had been observed. At first we thought we were doomed to another disappointment, as the Kingston seemed all the time to be steaming right away from us. Then suddenly we saw to our immeasurable relief that the ship was changing its course and was now actually coming to our assistance. During these eight trying hours our boys had rowed a distance of not less than forty miles, according to the course that had to be taken. Their hands were sore, while one lad had his neck somewhat badly skinned through the movements of his lifebelt. The Kingston came along side and then came the task of getting us aboard. My hands were so benumbed with the cold that I could not grip the rope ladder and I had to be pushed from below and pulled from above. When I got on deck I half collapsed, but I soon recovered. The captain showed me every possible kindness, placed his own cabin at my disposal, and had me provided with hot tea and soup, which I

relished thoroughly. We steamed for two hours in the Kingston, which took us to Wicklow [over fifty miles to the north]. We were landed in the Kingston's lifeboat, and as we approached the shore, I noticed that the inhabitants of the village were lined up for our arrival. How they got to know of our coming I never learned, but when we landed they overwhelmed us with their kindness. With the others, I was taken to the civic barracks and then to the hotel at Wicklow ... I was provided with clothing by the Shipwrecked Mariners' Society, and was also attended by a doctor. The local priest also visited me and was very kind.'

The second lifeboat, with eighteen crew on board, was commanded by Captain Lamont. The Falkirk Herald described this part of the rescue: *Three boats were lowered altogether, but one sank shortly after being put in the water and the captain and three of the crew had a very narrow escape from drowning. The lifeboat into which they had jumped had been badly holed during the lowering operations, and it sank very quickly. Fortunately another boat was nearby and the men were picked up. The tide was running so strongly that after the two boats had got clear they were rapidly swept away from the wreck and none of the crew saw the actual sinking of the Sheerness. It was the intention of those who were in the captain's boat to make for Rosslare [the nearest harbour west of their position], but, despite the greatest exertions at the oars, this was found impossible in the face of the strong tide and heavy seas. They then rowed northward, and after seven hours battling with the elements they got close inshore enough to sight a house. A final effort was then made and they succeeded in beaching the boat. On landing, they found themselves [at Ballinoulart, near Cahore Point, some thirty miles to the north of Tuskar Rock]. They were greatly exhausted [and at least four men must have been soaking wet from the start]. When they had scabbled ashore with difficulty they met a gamekeeper, who took them to his house, where their wants were attended to.'*

Mrs Miller took up the story again: *'On the following day we were joined at Wicklow Station by the others from Wexford, and we had a group photograph taken. Subsequently we entrained together for Dublin, where at the Seamen's Institute a splendid dinner was awaiting us. From Dublin we sailed on Saturday night aboard the Puma and arrived in Glasgow on Sunday morning.'*

Not surprisingly, Mrs Miller, due to retire shortly in any case, never went to sea again. As she herself expressed it: *'It makes a thrilling finish to a long and happy life at sea.'* Captain Lachlan Lamont may also have called it a day after the shipwreck. He died in Glasgow in 1948 at the age of 88. John Brown is likely to have been second mate on the *Sheerness* and therefore to have been on the second lifeboat with Captain Lamont. John Brown gained his Master's certificate when he was 28 in 1930 and went on to be a master with 'Hungry Hogarths' shipping line. During the Second World War he was master of the *Baron Belhaven* on the Atlantic and East African convoy routes. After the war he worked with Southern Steamships, a Greek shipping company, and was preparing to take his family to Durban for a post when they offered him an alternative in the City of London in 1949. After this he became a partner in a number of chandlery companies, including Admiralty Chart Agents Brown and Perring. On his retirement he returned home to Tiree and lived in Balevullin, where he died in 1986. He told his family nothing about his ordeal in the Irish Sea beyond the fact that he had been shipwrecked. His daughter Pearl remembers that he, like so many other Tiree fishermen and sailors of his day, was unable to swim.



*Captain John Brown, Corraigbeg, taken about 1949.
(courtesy of Pearl Brown)*

An Iodhlann would like to thank John Brown's daughters, Pearl and Mary, and Josie Brown for background information, keeping this remarkable document safe and bringing it to our attention.

Tiree Croft Houses

Bob Chambers is a frequent visitor to the island, and a long time member of *An Iodhlann*. He is the author of the 2016 *For Want of Land: Hebridean croft schemes of the 1920s and '30s*, and *Twentieth-Century Crofting Schemes on Tiree and Coll*.

I am currently investigating the development of the design of croft houses in the Hebrides during the period from the establishment of the Board of Agriculture for Scotland (BoAS) in 1912 until the outbreak of World War II in 1939. BoAS developed three croft house designs; these were intended for the whole of rural Scotland, not just the Highlands and Islands. The organisation encouraged crofters and cottars (and others) who wanted to build new houses on the land settlement schemes being implemented at that time to adopt one of the three standard plans. This saved time and money for the successful croft applicants. The lower costs also benefitted BoAS in the end because most applicants needed a loan to pay for the house. They also allowed BoAS to control the construction standards of the new houses.

One of the fascinating things about the Tiree croft schemes during the period just before, and for several years after, the First World War is that on a large number of the new croft holdings (67 out of a total of 103), BoAS dispensed with its normal requirement of insisting that a house had to be built on the new holding.



An example of a typical arrangement of a new croft house built alongside the old thatched croft house, Sandaig - July 1957.

This applied to all twelve of the new holdings at Greenhill (1912); both of the two new holdings at Baugh (1913); all of the 37 new holdings at Hynish (1913); one of the seven new holdings at Heylipol (1914), because one holding already had a shepherd's house on it and that new holding was awarded to the shepherd; and the smallest 14 of the 38 new holdings at Balephetrish (1922).

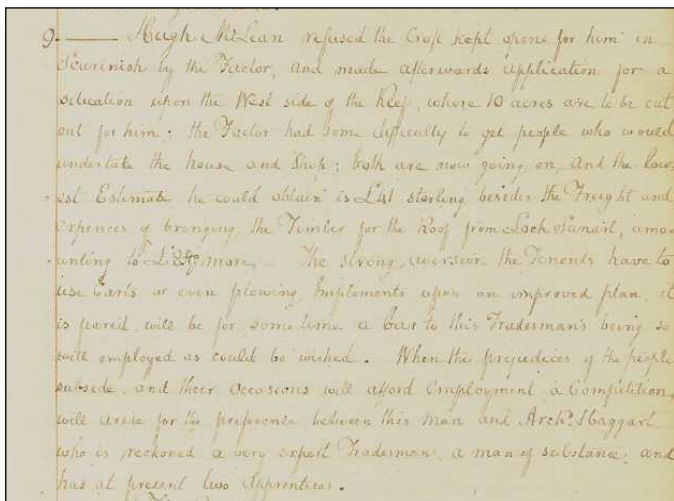
This arrangement was most unusual in the Highlands. It meant that BoAS expected new houses to be built on only 33 of the 103 new croft holdings created. These were at Hough, Heylipol and the larger holdings of Balephetrish. Significantly, many of the holdings where the housing requirement was set aside do not have houses on them today, over a century later – a lasting legacy. In effect, by not insisting on houses being built on land settlement areas in Tiree, BoAS helped to develop the crofting landscape but not new crofting communities.

Most Hebridean croft houses of this period are bungalows. But from what I have seen on Tiree, the 'standard' new house design from 1912 to 1939 appears instead to have been either one-and-a-half or two-storey houses. This may reflect the richer crofting land on Tiree, which allowed higher repayments. Dormers and slate or asbestos slate roofs are also a distinct feature of many of the twentieth-century houses on the island. The other typical twentieth-century house design on Tiree before the Second World War has a large, central, pointed gable in the roof on one elevation and two dormers on the other elevation. The large central gable does not project beyond the main building line of the house. As far as I am aware, this design is not commonplace elsewhere in the Hebrides. Some nineteenth-century Tiree houses also display this central gable feature. This distinctive island croft house tradition adds to the unusual number of tarred roof houses on Tiree, creating an extremely unusual housing landscape.

If anyone has more information about croft house designs on Tiree that came after the single-storey traditional thatched houses and tarred felt roof houses (so ably written about in An Iodhlann's Winds of Change booklet and Alan Boyd's Seann Taighean Tirisdeach – Old Tiree Houses), I would be delighted to hear from you. And if anyone has a BoAS Tiree house plan from the period 1912-1939 period from anywhere on the island it would be very helpful if they could take it in to An Iodhlann so that it could be photocopied and subsequently shown to the author. Please contact me at bobc1951@greenbee.net or 01434 605846.

And Finally

- A coda on the wonderful May visit to Tiree of Alison Diamond, the archivist at Inveraray Castle, and Jackie Davenport, archivist for Live Argyll, with their *Written in the Landscape* exhibition. This allowed us to get up close and personal with some amazing documents. It's not too late to get involved in this project. Here is a message from the Alison: *'I am looking for volunteers who would like to transcribe late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century documents primarily (but not exclusively) relating to Tiree and Mull. Have a look at the examples below and, if you think this is something that you might enjoy, drop me an email to: archives@inveraray-castle.com. I can't promise that the documents will always be this neat!'*



- New recommended book on the history of the island: *Tiree and the Dukes of Argyll 1674-1922* by James Petre. Publisher Shaun Tyas £14.95, or available at *An Iodhlann*.

Thank you for all your continued support for *An Iodhlann*.
Dr John Holliday | doc.holliday@tireebroadband.com