



Newsletter of An Iodhlann's members

Welcome to this edition of *Sìl Eòlais* 'seeds of knowledge', the newsletter of An Iodhlann.

Hiatus (haɪ'eɪ təs) n. 'a break or interruption in continuity'. It's been a hiatusy sort of year. An Iodhlann is a community archive that is rooted in its place and its people. The island, fortunately, is still here. But the vigorous flow of visitors – members of *clann an eòrna* 'the clan of the barley' looking to dig down to their family's roots, summer travellers seeking to understand what makes Tìree tick and islanders wanting to donate precious things to the museum – that sustains us has dried up. There have been upsides. Janet has been able to do many housekeeping tasks around the collection that she cannot manage in a normal, busy year. She has organised a wonderful virtual tour of the archive display room which can be seen on our website at <http://www.aniodhlann.org.uk/virtual-tour-of-an-iodhlann>. A Business Support Grant from Argyll and Bute Council has compensated for some of our lost income. But this year has reminded us of something we should not have taken for granted: a community archive without its community is a shadow of itself. We look forward to continuity being resumed.

Search and Rescue: the history of Tìree's coastguards

It is a forbidding stretch of ocean. A web of skerries, extending over an area of eight square kilometres from *Dubh-sgeir* in the west to *Bodha Sgiobagair* in the east, lie in wait off Hough. These boiling waters have claimed many sailors' lives over the centuries. Indeed, the Norse name *Sgiobagair* itself (*Skipagjár* 'gullies of the boats') implies the captains of Viking longships were equally wary of them.

This grim reputation persuaded the newly reorganised HM Coastguard to build a wooden hut on *Cnoc Charrastoin* on the northern slopes of *Beinn Hògh* to allow a local team to keep watch over the southern waters of the Minch. In fact, the lookout's low elevation – some 25 m above sea level – allowed observers to see just 18 km, a third of the way to Barra.



The Coastguard Hut in Balevullin in the 1930s or 40s. L-R: Sisters Mary and Maggie MacLean of Balevullin with Toby the dog.

I have not been able to discover yet exactly when this hut was erected. Some evidence is provided by an undated photograph of Mary and Margaret MacLean from Balevullin outside the hut. Using their dates of birth as guide (Mary was born in 1896 and Margaret, whose later married name was Richardson, was born in 1898), we can estimate that this image was taken around 1925-30.

HM Coastguard had been founded in 1822 with a remit both to counter smuggling and to rescue shipwrecked sailors. But in 1923, the service became part of the Board of Trade and was able to concentrate on its role of coastal safety and rescue.

Two disasters off the northwestern shores of Tìree soon after this reorganisation may have provided the stimulus needed to bring greater resources to bear on this section of Scotland's coastline.

On a wild March night in 1925, the Fleetwood steam trawler *Gaul* hit a submerged rock off Balevullin. The crew of nine, all from Grimsby and led by Captain Karl Johnson, took to the lifeboat. Overwhelmed by tumultuous seas, this overturned and only two men made it alive to Balevullin beach. Edward Thomson, a deck trimmer, stumbled his way to the house of John MacLean (*Iain Ghilleasbuig Mhòir*) while deckhand George Pratt crawled up the hill to Sine Henderson's house. The body of the ship's cook, Amos Beard, was washed ashore later.

Five years later, the trawler *Saxon* struck a submerged rock in the Hough skerries. As the boat took on water, the crew abandoned ship and made their way to *Tràigh Grianail*. As the *Oban Times* reported:

'On arrival at Tiree, the crew were taken in charge by Mr Kenneth McKenzie, the local agent of the Shipwrecked Mariners Society [and piermaster], and provided with comforts and were forwarded later by the MacBrayne inner island steamer Lochearn to Oban. When the vessel struck, the weather was dark and hazy with a strong northwesterly gale blowing. Owing to the exposed position of the wreck, there is little hope of salving her. Only the top of the funnel and part of the bridge was above water. The crew, 12 in number, lost all their effects, some of them very personal, but fortunately no lives were lost. The Saxon was one of the best-known Fleetwood trawlers operating in the West Coast.'

During the Second World War, the small wooden coastguard hut was replaced by a more substantial concrete building. The lookout, warmed latterly by a paraffin heater, was manned round the clock in four-hour shifts. At first, the only way to get a message to the mainland was to run and knock up the postmaster at Cornaig Post Office. His telegraph line had been connected in July 1926 to service the new weather station beside the school. The weather station went on to have a phone line installed in 1935, and the Hough coastguard station is likely to have been connected some time after that.

Observers, who were paid, kept a log. An insight into their duties comes from a report from the RNLI archives: *'About 8.50 in the morning of the 12th August, 1940, a ship's boat was sighted off Hough Skerries. A southwesterly breeze was blowing, with a heavy swell. Six men put out in a motorboat, picked up the ship's boat three miles off shore, with no one on board, and brought her in. Rewards, £2 10s.'* Observers also sent a twice-daily weather report to the coastguard station at Duntulm in Skye and latterly to Islay. The team was made up of local crofters, and included Murdoch MacLean (who was one of several islanders to receive a Coastguard long service medal); Murdoch Cameron; John Lamont, Balevullin; Alasdair MacLean, Hough; Hector Brown; Donald Eachainn Kennedy, Balevullin; Alasdair Brown; John Brown, Balevullin (*Iain Mòr a' Briuthannaich*); and Donald Archie Brown, Hillside. The Hough coastguard lookout was closed some time in the 1960s.



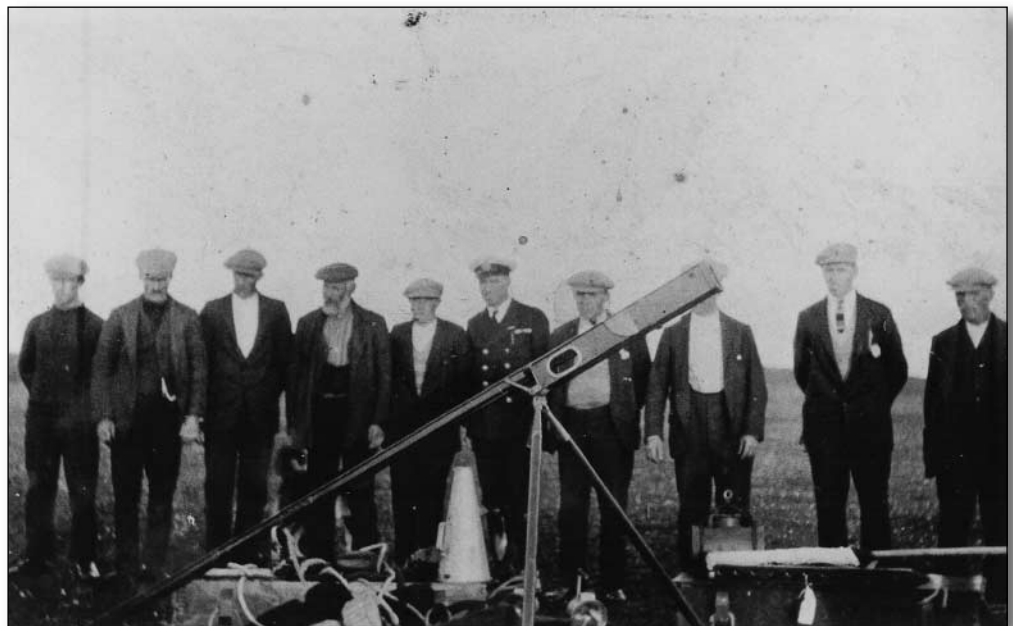
ABOVE - Concrete Coastguard Hut in Hough built during the Second World War.
BELOW - View from the Hough coastguard hut, with the Hough Skerries to the left and Barra Head on the horizon.



The national Coastguard Auxiliary Service had been founded in 1931 with the aim of training local teams of volunteers in coastal rescue. A Tiree branch was established, with over forty members (Lachie Brown, pers. comm.). A mortar able to carry a line out to a stranded vessel had been invented as early as 1808, but a more reliable rocket was developed in the 1860s by Edward Boxer, the Superintendent of the Royal Laboratory at Woolwich Arsenal.

Unusually, the Boxer rocket had two charges: the first, with a five-second fuse lit with a match, launched the rocket and the second ignited during flight to add extra power. The rocket had a range of around 370 yards. A brass scale and pendulum on the rocket's side allowed the firing team to alter the trajectory and therefore the distance. The wind had to also be factored in. The accuracy was poor, however, with errors of up to 40°. The line was carefully wound around a double row of pegs in the rocket line box. The box's false bottom with its pegs was then pulled away, allowing the rope to run freely. The first six fathoms of cable had to be soaked in water before firing to prevent the line being ignited by the rocket exhaust. The first shot, when the line was dry, was likely to be the most successful. If the rocket missed its target, the line had to be hauled in and another rocket attached.

Nine members of the Tiree coastguard team with an officer of the Coastguard Auxiliary Service in the 1930s. The Boxer Rocket tripod and megaphone can be seen. This looks like a staged photograph when the equipment was handed over.



Instruction boards in English, French, German and Norwegian were attached to progressively thicker ropes as they were hauled out by the shipwrecked sailors. A breeches buoy system could then be deployed. This was a cork lifebuoy to which a pair of tanned leather 'breeches' had been secured.

After the Second World War, there was an increasing number of reports of the Boxer Rocket flying off course. It seems as though the technician making the explosive mixture had died without passing on his 'recipe'. In 1948, the more reliable and electrically fired Rescue Rocket superseded it.

The Tiree coastguard team attended rocket practice at the back of Hough three times a year, supervised by an officer from Tobermory. Archie Brown from Kilkenneth followed his uncle into the service. He told me this story. In the 1960s he had been promoted to the position of rocket firer, with John MacLean, Lochside, as his deputy. The day of his first exercise dawned with a strong southerly wind. He was told to aim for a gatepost, pretending it was a mast. He aimed the rocket launcher well to the side, allowing for the wind, and the officer asked him where on earth he was aiming. Archie took no notice and the line went over the dead centre of the post. *"You've inherited your uncle's position alright!"* was all the officer could say as he walked off.

At midnight on 14 January 1942, the Leith fishing trawler *Ocean Tide* ran aground close to the shore at Manna. The island's coastguard team was alerted. In the darkness, wind and rain, the outline of the vessel

could barely be seen, its crew sheltering on deck. The coastguard deployed its Boxer rockets in an attempt to fire a line over the stricken vessel. Onshore winds, however, meant they fell short. Assistance was requested from the RAF station at Hough and a sergeant, RAF Policeman and an MT driver together with three local crofters made their way to the scene. They were closely followed by another group from the main RAF base, led by no less than the station commander, Group Captain Tuttle. He had brought with him a portable searchlight, which lit up the listing trawler. It became apparent that the vessel was taking in water. The crew aboard began to release buoys with lines attached, hoping that they would float ashore, but the wind blew them onto rocks fifty yards offshore. Realising that the situation was now desperate, Group Captain Tuttle stripped off his outer clothing and swam out to the reef. Despite the bitter cold he succeeded in freeing one of the buoys and brought it to shore. When the rescuers pulled on the attached line, however, they found it had been cut by a sharp rock.



The trawler Ocean Tide on the rocks off Mannal.

By 3am the crew of the trawler decided that they had no option but to launch the lifeboat. The searchlight picked out the six crewmen rowing desperately in a vain attempt to keep into the wind and clear of the maze of rocks. Dashed against a reef, the fishermen were flung onto the rocks. Fortunately, they were able to find two lines from the rescue rockets and the men were able to cling to these and the coastguard pulled them to safety.

Amazingly, five stormy days later there was another call. The tanker *Laristan*, in ballast and bound for South America, was driven onto rocks at *Port na Muice* 'the inlet of the whale' on the north shore of Craignish, right under the nose of the Balevullin coastguard lookout. Lights foretelling the disaster had been seen by the Hough farm manager and seer *Iain mac Eachainn Bhàin*, John MacLean, who had died in 1903.

When a calmer dawn broke, the 6000-ton vessel could be seen, in the words of Donald MacKinnon, Hough, "*straight, as though she was sitting against a pier*". At first, the determined captain of the *Laristan* ordered his crew to stay on board as he tried to refloat the vessel over two tides. But as another gale closed in, the island's coastguard team was recalled to fire a line aboard. First attempts failed due to the strength of the wind, but finally a rope was secured.

A barrel of rum was used to test the breeches buoy line. Alice Atkins, whose husband was part of RAF reinforcements, described the scene: "*The mountainous seas creaming and crashing violently and incessantly over the vessel lying helplessly at the end of the promontory of jagged rocks ... Even with ten men hauling with all their strength, each rescue took at least fifteen to twenty minutes to achieve ... The [coastguard] team remained throughout that day and well into the next, fighting against the odds in the most awful conditions*

imaginable, absolutely exhausted, until the task was complete. All forty mariners, and a wee terrier dog with the last man, were saved – all in reasonable shape." Alasdair Brown from Cornaigbeg, an ex-policeman, manned the lookout hut for twenty-four hours without a break.

A third wreck where the Tìree coastguard deployed its rescue rocket was the yacht *Oceana*, which ran aground on Crossapol Beach in 1949. We discussed this in *Sil Eòlais* in 2010.

However, the days of the breeches buoy were numbered. With the rescue helicopter fleet increasingly powerful and well equipped, the rescue line and rocket was deployed just twice in Britain between 1983 and 1988 and it was withdrawn from service. It had certainly proved its worth on Tìree, and the island's coastguard team was sad to see it go.

Archivist's Choice

Heylipol School photograph, 1956/66 (An Iodhalnn catalogue no. 2020.49.1)

Of the seventy items entrusted to An Iodhlann over the past six months, this is one of my favourites. Kindly donated by Gordon Bucher, the children in this charming image are all smiling and enjoying themselves, and it is the only school photograph in colour from Heylipol (it closed in 1975). Janet Bowler



L-R top: Gordon Bucher, William Weston, Duncan McLean. L-R middle: Betty Weston, Dollaidh Cameron (teacher), Anne Sinclair, Anne MacArthur, Lorelei MacLennan (the factor's daughter), June Weston, Janet MacArthur, Effie MacKinnon. L-R front: Christine MacKinnon, Ian MacKinnon, Anne Bucher, Charles Bucher, Richard Maxwell, Christine Maxwell.

Finding Jane

We were delighted to receive this report from a long time member of the An Iodhlann family, Glenda Franklin in Canada:

In September 2020, an email was sent to me by Chrissie Anne MacArthur and Margaret MacKay, two sisters that I had met in 2013 at an Islands Book Trust Conference on the Isle of Tìree, Scotland. The email started with "Cast your mind back to the summer of 2013", followed by a nice photo of the sisters plus an old family photo pointing out their Aunt Jane Morrison who had left the Island of Lewis over one hundred years ago and all contact with her had been lost.

Their aunt Jane Morrison was born 13th April 1894, the daughter of Chirsty Morrison, North Shawbost, Isle of Lewis. Jane's mother had later married Angus MacLeod of North Shawbost and they had seven children, so Jane had several half siblings. Many times, others tried to find out just where Jane Morrison went to: did she have a family; were there any living relatives; did she emigrate to Canada? The sisters asked me if I would try and find their Aunt Jane. A few days later, I found Jane, thanks to a family tree on Ancestry. I found emigration records stating Jane Morrison sailed from Glasgow on the vessel Parisian and arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia on 20th March 1911. She stated she was twenty-one, but really she was just sixteen. She was to be

a domestic in Manitoba. At some point, Jane went on to British Columbia, to the area near Vancouver where her aunt and uncle Murdina and John Morrison had settled.

In 1914, Jane 'Jennie' Morrison married Howard Boley, and they had six children: Kathleen, Jean Anne, John, Donald, Ruth and Margaret. Jennie Boley died in Victoria, British Columbia in 1974 and is buried in Royal Oak Burial Park there.

The sisters now have contact with two grandchildren of their aunt Jane Morrison and the emails are flying back and forth. All families are delighted. The rest is history!

Glenda McPhadden Franklin

Isle of Lewis MORRISON and MACLEOD families and how they are related to JANE MORRISON - identified by Chrissie Anne Macarthur and Margaret MacKay of the Isle of Lewis.



The people in this old photograph outside 40 North Shawbost - where Donald and Anne (Macleod) Morrison raised their children and granddaughter Jane are:

FRONT ROW L-R: Effie Morrison (sister of Donald Morrison and grand aunt of Jane), Christina Morrison (Jane's mother), Two of Christina's children from her marriage to Angus Macleod - Normina and Murdina, Donald and Anne Morrison (Jane's grandparent, Anne Morrison (Jane's aunt)

BACK ROW L-R: Murdo and Christina Macleod (Family of Effie Morrison), Peggy and Annabella Morrison (Jane's aunts), JANE, Last two ladies - Jane Macleod and Catherine Maclean neighbours.

Put Out the Flags

The Tìree tradition of flying flags to celebrate a township wedding is alive and well. On the morning of the wedding – or the evening before – you can see makeshift lengths of wood pressed into service, lashed to gates or fence posts, with a motley selection of flags. The Scottish Saltire, the Red Ensign, the Union Jack: I have even seen an Australian Aboriginal Land Rights flag fluttering in the Tìree breeze.

This custom also flourished at one time on other Hebridean islands, in fishing communities along Scotland's east coast and as far south as the German Bight. It may have its roots in fishing.

The first description of the tradition on Tiree comes in a mid-nineteenth-century story about one *Calum Crom* 'Twisted Malcolm' told in 1969 by the great storyteller Donald Sinclair from West Hynish: *There was this man, a neighbour of his in Balemartine. And him and Calum Crom was not agreeing very well. And this man, he called two boys. And he says to the two boys, "Did you hear that Calum Crom was going to get married?" "Yes we know that he's going to get married." "Well, if you hoist a flag at his house and hoist another flag in such and such a place the day before he'll get married, I'll give you some money." "Yes! We'll do it," says the boys. And they got [bamboo] fishing rods and they put the flags up the day before Calum married. And Calum Crom was wild: that was his second marriage.*

Donald Sinclair talking to Eric Cregeen on School of Scottish Studies recording SA1969.168.B1.

Calum Crom was also the subject of a satirical poem by John MacLean, *Bàrd Bhaile Mhàrtainn* 'the Balemartine bard', who lived from 1827 to 1895.

Finlay J. MacDonald, born in 1925, was raised in the township of Scarista on the west coast of Harris. In the first of a trilogy of memoirs, *Crowdie and Cream*, he describes a wedding day:

My father was behind the byre wrestling with a long bamboo fishing rod to the end of which he was tying a large white pillow case. He was in expansive form, and if we would just be patient, we could help him fix it to the chimney stack when he was finished ... We watched spellbound as he climbed carefully to the top of the iron chimney stack and, using yard upon yard of coir rope left over from the corn-stacking, strapped the fishing rod to the chimney. When he was satisfied that it was secure he reversed down and removed the ladder. He stood with his head tilted back and a smile on his face. 'Look at that boys,' he said with pride, 'there won't be another flag like that in the village!' He was right. Just as he spoke a puff of wind blew into the mouth of the cotton pillow case which he had forgotten to stitch closed, and it swelled out into a big white sausage which might have been perhaps more aptly described as a 'wind sock' had there been aeroplanes around at the time ... When I looked out in the morning not only was our flag flying bravely, if slightly obesely, but there were flags flying above or beside every house in the village. Most of them were white pillow-slips like ours, but one or two were pink and, wonder of wonders, above the school there flew a Union Jack.

Crowdie And Cream: Memoirs of a Hebridean Childhood by Findlay J. Macdonald 1983

A hint as to the origins of this tradition comes from a description of a wedding day in Easter Ross fishing villages in the nineteenth century: *'The first boat coming into harbour on the day of a wedding sailed as near inshore as was safe, hoisted a flag, and then the crew came ashore to get a dram from the wedding party, a custom that only went out when the white fishing ceased.'*

Down to the Sea: An Account of Life in the Fishing Villages of Hilton, Balintore and Shandwick
by Jessie Macdonald and Anne Gordon 1971

The Scottish Fisheries Museum in Anstruther, Fife, has an exhibit titled 'Fisherman's Wedding Flag'. This was last flown at a wedding in 1991, but as the flags were often kept as souvenirs, it may be older. Flags were often hoisted on the groom's fishing boat. This one is the signal flag for the letter 'T', meaning generally 'Keep clear of me', and if flown by a fishing boat meaning 'Keep clear. Engaged in pair trawling'. I think we can get the point!

In Port Seton on the Firth of Forth, one person in the village puts up a flag and the groom must give that person a bottle of whisky (Rosemary Omand, pers. comm.). In Newhaven, nearby, *'a wedding ... used to be a very notable event: 'And a' the boats wi' flags were decked / Frae Annfield to the pier.'*

The Story of Leith by John Russell 1922

And a book from the German islands of Heligoland, fifty miles north of the mouth of the Elbe in the North Sea, describes a similar tradition there: *Engagements and weddings are celebrated the same as everywhere, just that we also raise flags the day before. The flag raisers are the friends of the lad who is getting married. In the evening they go and fetch the flags from the pier and also from the lighthouse. Then the neighbours are asked whether they can fasten the line on the roof and against the guttering. Then there are flags over the whole*

road, and everyone knows, that there is a wedding. So is it also done at silver weddings and golden weddings. In the evening the flags are fetched back. Then they go to the house of the bridegroom and ask for a knife. Therewith is the last flag, the flag of Heligoland, cut off. The groom must then invite one person, and the whole gang goes to drink grog.

Wi Lear Halunder by Mina Borchert 1991, Verlag Nordfriisk Instituut, translated Colin Batchelor

The strategically important Heligoland islands were acquired by Britain from Denmark in 1807 in an effort to contain Napoleon. From 1890, they have belonged to Germany, although the islands were evacuated and were used as a bombing range by Allied forces after the Second World War. The community has therefore experienced a range of cultural influences.

It would be interesting to learn if these traditions of flying flags at weddings still exist. It has certainly survived strongly on Tiree. This is possibly to do with the fact that flags show so well on the island. With its flatness, its lack of trees, its strong winds and sunshine, flag flying throughout the year is very popular. Indeed, Tiree adopted its own flag – designed by islander Donald Cameron – in 2018.



Wedding flags flying in Ruaig.

Thank you all for supporting this small community archive with big ideas. As one online dictionary puts it: *'The key thing about a hiatus is that it's an interruption of something that was happening, but it's not a permanent break.'* Keep in touch (email is a wonderful, if slightly old-fashioned, thing). See you at the end of the tunnel!

Dr John Holliday