

A REAL CREEL

Among the artefacts in the Museum there's now a creel – one that is different in several ways from those mass-produced and delivered in batches to the Bunessan and Fionnphort piers. Roger Harvey, fisherman and now both RoMHC Volunteer and Director, explained how he had made it, drawing on his interest in traditional skills, and his own experience of using creels: *'When I started the only thing you could sell was lobsters. There was no market for velvet and brown crab.'*

Traditionally the base would have used scrap wood – sturdy fish-boxes or orange boxes were ideal. Roger nailed the frame together; in the past hazel pegs might have been used instead of nails. The wooden hoops or bows were usually made of hazel, too, though Roger used willow from the garden of the Centre.

This creel has a shape that's traditional on this coast. Making them was a job for early spring, before the fishing season began. The wood would be cut when the sap was rising because then it's more pliable. When the bows have been bent and fixed in place, a flat stone needs to be found and tied down in the centre of the base, to weight it. Above this hangs a bait-swing (the usual bait was salt mackerel).

Then, tensioned over the bows, the net is knotted using a well-worn needle – in the past fishermen would have made those too, from wood. The eyes (entrance holes for the catch) which Roger incorporated were circles of fencing wire – originally they would have been hazel bound into a loop.

Nowadays creels have a lot of metal, plastic and nylon in them. Roger says *'The old boys didn't like the metal creels saying they "sang underwater", – on the other hand they lasted. You'd be replacing the wooden ones all the time.'* Creels used to be tarred after making, to preserve them as long as possible. This was a very messy job.



Photo: Jan S. Pickard

Roger bought twine for the netting. Traditionally it would have been linen twine, which was also used for the salmon nets (like the one hanging in the Centre). Flax was grown on Mull until just after the second world war. The flax fibre is called *gutti-hunk* – which is not necessarily a word originating in Mull. Knitting it is a skill: *'The whole creel takes shape and stability, as every bit is tensioned against everything else.'* says Roger, *'It's a very therapeutic job sitting and knitting a net. From beginning to end it took me four hours, but a skilled worker could make a creel in two. It is a simple thing – and they have been the same for hundreds of years. You know, they found the remnants of a creel at Skara Brae.'*

Jan S. Pickard

WANTED

Postcards or photographs (could be digital) of the Ross of Mull in the past, for our archives and for use in displays. Ownership will be acknowledged and recorded and originals returned with care. Please send to the address opposite.



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Ross of Mull

HISTORICAL CENTRE



SPRING NEWSLETTER

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Photo: Maurice Wilkins

TREASURE TROVE

Lizzie Oldroyd writes

Here is a picture of an arrowhead discovered on Ardtun.

It was found on low-quality crofting land, typical of Mull, usually thick with bracken. The area had been cleared of bracken during the building of a small wooden shed, and the regular walking backwards and forwards over a few months had scuffed the surface of the soil. I saw the flint arrowhead lying on the surface of the soil one day, summer 2014, as I was sitting outside the shed. I don't think that area would have been cleared of bracken, down to soil level, for many years previously. The location is Coille Challtuinn croft, Achnahard, Ardtun, near Bunessan. I lived and worked there until recently. The croft belongs to friends, Celia Compton and Phil Yelder.

Several people were very excited to be shown the arrowhead, as was a curator at the National Museum of Scotland, in Edinburgh. I took it into the Treasure Trove department of the museum, and completed a finder's form, with OS map grid reference, and details of how it was found. A satellite map application pinpointed the location more precisely.

Dr Alison Sheridan, Principal Curator of Early Prehistory at the National Museum of Scotland, thought that it was of intrinsic archaeological interest as an example of a Chalcolithic or Early Bronze Age barbed-and-tanged arrowhead, dating to somewhere between 2500 and 1500 BC. At the moment it remains in the care of the National Museum, but I hope that before long this tiny treasure can be returned to Mull to be displayed at the Historical Centre, near to where it was found.

PROGRESS AT KILVICKEON

The final funding to complete the second phase of the consolidation of Kilvickeon Old Church on the Ross was approved by Historic Scotland in November 2014. Within a remarkably short time frame allowing for the seasonal holidays, tenders were received, contracts signed and the stonemasons arrived on site at the beginning of February for some of the worst weather conditions the west coast has seen this winter. Thanks to careful nurturing and refuelling from Gillian at a certain local B & B, the hardy team from Graeme Brown Stonemasons Ltd succeeded in painstakingly picking out and removing all the vegetation which has been destabilising the fragile walls. They have repointed all the remaining stonework in such a way that accentuates the unusual layers of construction and shows off the variety of stones used. Thanks are also due to James Fisher for providing space outside the Scheduled Monument site for storing all their gear and site caravan - which may yet need to be towed out by tractor!



Photo: Rosie Burgess

Mary Peteranna of AOC Archaeology removed the turf and soil from a portion of the interior ground to allow experts to decide how to level an area to make easier and safer access. The excavation revealed a surprising uneven 'floor' of random stones – some obviously grave slabs and 2 quern stones among others. Stone conservator, Nic Boyes, will be handling the preservation of the sheelanagig, the curious carved figure which can be seen high on the north wall to the left of the entrance archway and Historic Scotland have agreed that the repaired Mariota Stone can be moved back to its original position inside the church.

The Ross of Mull Historical Centre is hugely grateful to Krystyna Pytasz of Addison Conservation & Design for guiding them through the project and John Raven of Historic Scotland for his encouragement and support. One of the final elements of the project will be to place a number of benches within the burial grounds.

If anyone with connections to Kilvickeon would like a family name commemorated on one of the benches, please contact **Rosie Burgess** for the **Historical Centre** on **01681 700509** or email rosie@burgessmull.f9.co.uk or enquiries@romhc.org.uk

Look out for notices of celebrations and events at Kilvickeon this year.

Rosie Burgess



Team GB with Krystyna Pytasz

A tradition of music and courage



Photo: Wikipedia

Sometime last year during the build up to the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War I watched a programme on the BBC entitled 'Pipers of the Trenches'. This got me thinking about the project I had just done researching the names on the Bunessan and Creich War Memorials. One of them was recorded as '**Piper John Sweeney DCM**'.

The television programme explained how the role of the piper was to boost morale among the soldiers and they were sent ahead along the tops to play their pipes and stir up the patriotism and fighting spirit of those poor men suffering the mud and indignities of the trenches. This was often a suicide mission. Not much is known about John Sweeney except that he was one of the 'boarded out boys' born in Glasgow in 1892 and was sent to live with a Bunessan fisherman named Lachlan MacDonald and his wife Flora. He started at Bunessan School in September 1898. There is a postcard in our archives which he sent to Lachlan MacDonald after joining the army. On the front of this is a picture of his pipe band.

A very different story is that of **Charles MacLean** (1874 - 1948) DSO and Knight of the Legion of Honour, 5th Chieftain of Pennycross. He grew up at Carsaig and became Amateur Champion Piper of Scotland. He served at Gallipoli in 1915 and, after Turkish snipers shot pipers from various regiments so as to demoralize the troops, Charles formed a combined pipe band which made a great difference to morale.

Calum MacPherson, who came from the family who ran Bunessan corn mill here at Mill Brae, was also a piper and the pipes he played in WW1 are still kept and played locally.

There has for centuries been a very strong tradition of piping in this area and it is still as strong today. We will probably never know how many brave soldiers were led into historic battles by pipers from SW Mull. For more information on the pipers mentioned here and others – and also perhaps, on a special occasion, a chance of hearing Calum MacPherson's pipes – visit Tigh na Rois this summer. **I would be glad to receive any information from readers on this subject.**

Valerie Fielding

Shiaba to Australia (and back)



Australian-born Gaelic speaker, Ariel Killick, is a descendant of the McKechnies in Shiaba. She works across Scotland delivering Gaelic and bilingual workshops and

projects in Circus Skills, Storytelling & Drama, Graffiti Art, Street Theatre & Spectacle. Ariel has worked with some 85 different schools and communities and took part in the Commonwealth Games Cultural Festival in 2014, and the Fringe Festival of last year's Royal National Mòd in Inverness. Read more about her work here: www.independentstateofhappiness.com

Ariel is seeking to make contact with descendents of Lachlan McEacharn (born about 1781) & Isobel McGilvra of Shiaba. Their children were: Archibald b.1813, Euphemia b. 1815, Catherine b. 1818, Mary (I) b. 1822, William b. 1823, Mary (II) b. 1824, Neil (I) b. 1827, Ann b. 1828, Margaret b. 1829 and Neil (II) b. 1832. Lachlan's second wife, Christie, had a daughter Flora McEacharn.

Ariel's McKechnie relatives in Queensland, Australia, would particularly like to find out if any other Shiaba McKechnies made the journey out to Australia. **You can contact Ariel on +44 75 700 43 745 or by email at arielkillickartist@gmail.com.**

JOIN OUR TEAM

Are you interested in joining the team of volunteers at the Ross of Mull Historical Centre? It's a very good way of learning about the unique history of this area, meeting interesting people who visit the Ross, and helping to make their visit more meaningful. Volunteer for day or half a day at the Centre, as suits your other commitments – most of our volunteers lead very full lives. We need skills as various as welcoming the public, giving local information, note-taking, oral history work, archiving, setting up displays, gardening and painting. Basic training is given in the running of the Centre and the kettle is usually on!



For more information, please contact the Centre during working hours.

Shiaba and team photos: Jan S. Pickard