

WAULKING A TWEED IN THE ISLE OF SKYE

02.08.2018. Frances writes:



With my singing group, Sgioba Luaidh Inbhirchluidh, I get to visit lots of interesting places, but our trip to Skye must rank as one of the highlights of our career. Our name means *Inverclyde Waulking Team*, and we specialise in Gaelic work songs, particularly those sung by women while waulking the tweed in the old days before mechanisation took over. Waulking (no, not a spelling mistake!) was the technique of finishing the newly-woven tweed by soaking it and thumping to shrink and soften it, with songs to keep the rhythm of the work. We are

kept busy performing our songs and demonstrating the waulking technique, but when we have the chance to do a genuine waulking and actually shrink a new tweed, it's a special occasion for us. So when we were invited to Portnalong in Skye to waulk a tweed we were wildly delighted! We had already waulked seven tweeds from scratch, but to do it in Portnalong was extra special.

Portnalong is in a beautiful corner of the Isle of Skye with an interesting and unique history. In the 1920s the Government bought over the Talisker Estate and carved out crofts to resettle 68 families from the overcrowded east side of Harris and Lewis. Three new crofting townships were formed: Portnalong, Fiscavaig and Fernilea. The people brought their looms and other equipment with them, and continued spinning, weaving, and producing tweed as they had done in their old homes. By law they were not allowed to call it Harris Tweed because it was not woven in the Outer Isles, although it was made by the same people, in the same way, on the same equipment, with the same wool! So they came up with the name *Port na Skye*! They sold their tweed to mainly to "towries" coming off the steamers which called at Portnalong pier in those days.



There are still descendants of the original settler families living in the district, but also nowadays many incomers, some of whom have learned to spin and weave. In July 2018 they organised the week-long *Lamb to Loom ... and Beyond* Festival to celebrate the history and heritage of the area where they have chosen to make their home.

We had a wonderful few days giving waulking demonstrations and children's workshops. One of the tinies remarked in Gaelic: "The waulking was better than MacIntyre's". (The toyshop in Portree!) Then it was heads down for the serious work.

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[Skye Weavers](#) had produced a beautiful length of tweed, made from the wool of local sheep. It was nearly twenty yards, which is the longest piece we have ever tackled. There is a good bit of preparation involved, but the actual waulking took approximately three hours and thirty songs. We were joined at the table by Andrea from Skye Weavers. She was delighted to have the chance to hand-waulk her own tweed.

It gave us the shivers to be waulking and singing beneath a picture on display of the women of the place doing the very same thing 70-80 years ago!



Clicking [here](#), or on any of these pics will take you to one of our songs on Youtube.

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The tweed shrank four inches to the desired width of 28", and eventually dried out beautifully thick and fluffy. Next day we all drove over to visit [Skye Weavers](#) at Glendale, to hand over the tweed. They were pleased with it! What a relief!

Our sojourn in Skye wasn't all hard work: we enjoyed a sheep clipping demonstration, barbecue and ceilidh, and some beautiful sunsets on Loch Harport.

This is one of the first garments made from "our" hand-waulked tweed: a poncho by [On the Croft, Carbost, Isle of Skye](#). We are quite proud that our work is considered good enough for commercial use.



Sgioba Luaidh Inbhurchluaidh are based in Greenock. Our website is www.waulk.org

You can Like us on [Facebook](#).

There is a full description of our waulking in Portnalong [here](#).

