

# THE SUTHERLAND LONGHOUSE PROJECT



## WOOL WORKSHOP Part 2



Following on from last week's workshop on carding and spinning, Sally and Anne used indigo dye to demonstrate dip dyeing, a technique used during pre-clearance times to colour spun yarn.

Sally began by explaining how the whole household in an eighteenth-century longhouse would have taken part in some aspect of turning fleece into, in this case, the blue yarn that made the bonnets worn by drovers



in that period. Anne explained that blue had always been important in dyeing terms as, historically, the colour was seen as a sign of wealth. Locally-grown woad was sometimes used to create a blue dye, or indigo - which produced a richer blue - would have been imported. Indigo dye was obtained from plants such as *Indigofera tinctoria* and merchants or dye sellers would have brought it from the Far East and Africa to the Highlands.

The production of indigo dye was complicated. The leaves were cooked down and formed into balls for sale. People in the eighteenth century would have

bought the dye at local fayres, such as the one held in Dornoch. Crofting communities, like the one at Dalnamain, would probably have processed and dyed their yarn communally.

Sally demonstrated the dyeing process by heating a solution of yellow-green indigo dye and spectralite (synthetic urine!), to 50 degrees centigrade. She



carefully lowered the wetted skein of yarn into the vat to soak in the dye, then gently worked it around like spaghetti. She explained how the dye adheres to the skin so protective clothing was needed.



After leaving the yarn for 5 minutes, Sally and Anne

lifted out the skein. Once in contact with air the dye was oxidised. It solidified and became fixed to the wool fibres, gradually changing colour from green to a beautiful indigo blue.



Later the group was given a demonstration of the art of plying yarn. Sally skilfully spun 2 yarns into one, creating a 2-ply yarn that would be recognised today as the thickness of 4-ply. There was also the opportunity to try the hand at peg-loom weaving.

Once again Sally and Anne created an informative, relaxed and highly enjoyable workshop.

