

# An intriguing monument

Every time I do my dishes I must have taken a great deal of strength and hours to carry it up there. During the South Huxter and visible for past thirty years I have miles around, there is a large stone standing in the middle of a square box in the middle of the hill. It's a burial place from the Bronze Age, 26 feet in diameter, with a square box in the middle. Sticking out of the box, at sixty degrees, is the lid – the coverstone - of the grave. I suddenly realised that Da Stane a Comba isn't a standing-stone, as I had always thought, but the coverstone of a tomb. The hole, and fragmentary remains of the cist, are still there to be seen. At Nesbister, and at Hellister, vandals from ancient times have ripped off the tomb-lids, and yanked them into a vertical position. And there are other signs of human activity at both sites.



Da Stane a Comba, looking north-east.

stone: Da Stane a Comba. The name is derived from Old Norse *kambr*, a comb, and refers to the long sharp edge of the hilltop. Da Lang Kames is another example of a *kambr*-name.

I'm not an archaeologist, but I enjoy looking at Shetland's prehistoric monuments, and wondering about the societies that created them. A year ago I

The stone is hefty, and it



Stones running south along the 'comb' of the Hill of Hellister

## Get in touch

We are keen to include contributions from anyone who has something interesting to share about Shetland's heritage. Deadline for the May issue is 13th April. If you would like to stock our newsletter or distribute copies to your group, let us know.

Email: [info@shetlandmuseumandarchives.org.uk](mailto:info@shetlandmuseumandarchives.org.uk)

Telephone: 01595 695057

Fax: 01595 696729

Post: Newsletter, Shetland Museum and Archives, Hay's Dock, Lerwick, Shetland ZE1 0WP

was walking from the Westings Hotel to Scalloway (a splendid trek) and I took a look, not for the first time, at the Nesbister cist. It's a burial place from the Bronze Age, 26 feet in diameter, with a square box in the middle. Sticking out of the box, at sixty degrees, is the lid – the coverstone - of the grave. I suddenly realised that Da Stane a Comba isn't a standing-stone, as I had always thought, but the coverstone of a tomb. The hole, and fragmentary remains of the cist, are still there to be seen. At Nesbister, and at Hellister, vandals from ancient times have ripped off the tomb-lids, and yanked them into a vertical position. And there are other signs of human activity at both sites.

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**The cist at Nesbister.**

Marching along the 'comb' of the hill at Hellister, south from my stone, is a long line of other stones, some very large indeed. And we find the same feature at Nesbister, running north and south from the cist.

Some businesslike friends have told me that these rows of stones are boundaries, separating territories on the west and east of the

respective hills. I like a prosaic explanation as much as anyone else, but in this case I suspect that the rows are in some way ceremonial, directly connected with the tombs. Andrew Fleming's book *The Dartmoor Reaves* (1988) deals with a similar association between stone rows and tombs, 600 miles south of us.

In the thirty years I have been visiting Da Stane a Comba I have never seen another soul in the vicinity, unless I have dragged her or him there. I strongly



recommend a trip to the top of the Hill of Hellister, to see the grave of a Shetland potentate from 4000 years ago.

Brian Smith

Archivist

*This page is dedicated to research on all aspects of Shetland's history and heritage.*

*Contributions are welcome.*

# Unkans

The newsletter of the Shetland Museum and Archives and the Shetland heritage community

FREE

March 2007

Issue 1



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**Welcome to Unkans,** the newsletter of the Shetland Museum and Archives.

We hope this newsletter will keep you informed about what's going on at the Shetland Museum and Archives and provide a means to exchange news in our heritage community.

The word *unkans* means news. It was recorded by linguists Thomas Edmondston, Jakob Jakobsen, John Stewart Angus and John Graham, and is still used today. It was suggested to us by Shetland ForWirlds,

our local dialect group.

This newsletter will tell you our *unkans* and we hope you will tell us what is *unkan* with you.

As with this, our first issue, we hope to provide regular features about our lifelong learning activities, information about our collections and exhibitions, and news about local community museums and heritage groups. We will include a What's On calendar for activities and events at the Shetland Museum and Archives and the Hay's Dock Café Restaurant.

We also felt it was

important to provide a format by which heritage research could be published on a more informal basis, in a similar way that the very popular *Hentins* did a few years ago. Brian Smith has agreed to kick off our research back page.

If you or your heritage group have news or research items you'd like to share with Shetland's heritage community, we'd love to hear from you.

*Unkans* will be published every second month. The next issue is due out in early May.

## What's on guide

### March

**9th : Documentation for Accreditation** (Skills Building, free training)

**16th: Practical Oral History** (Skills Building, free training)

**20th: Introduction to Textile Conservation** (Skills Building, free training)

To book Skills Building courses see below left.

### April

**20th—22nd: Conference; A Woman's Island?, Shetland Women—Past, Present and Future** (See inside for more details)

### May

**Official opening of new Shetland Museum and Archives.**

### June

**2nd and 3rd: Open weekend at Shetland Museum and Archives—come and see the new building. Everyone welcome.**

## Free training courses to learn new skills

Are you involved in a heritage group in Shetland? This includes local history groups, community museums and heritage related projects. If so, you might be interested in the upcoming training days.

Skills Building for the Future is a Scotland-wide project organised by Rowan Tree Consulting, which aims to train those working in the heritage sector in a variety of skills. The project is in its second year with another one to go and is part funded by the Shetland

Museum. A host of free training courses will be held in Shetland in the coming months. It is also possible to attend courses outwith Shetland and travel expenses will be reimbursed.

To see the list of courses for all of Scotland in 2007 or to book a place, go to [www.heritage-skills.co.uk](http://www.heritage-skills.co.uk) or email [info@heritage-skills.co.uk](mailto:info@heritage-skills.co.uk) or phone 01463 715 225

The remaining Spring 2007 courses in Shetland are listed in the what's on guide.

# A long time coming

*Museum curator Tommy Watt, and archivist Brian Smith, have been involved in planning the New Museum and Archives since the inception. Here they reflect on the long campaign to get a new building, and what has been achieved to date.*

We have sat on so many committees during the past twenty years, and attended so many meetings – some boisterous! – that much of it is a blur. During those decades there have been tons of paper, and umpteen plans, many of them scrapped, some of them valuable and now it all has come to fruition.

For years Shetland Islands Council discussed how we could get a new Museum and Archives building fit for the purpose. Eventually, about eight years ago, the Council handed the project to Shetland Amenity Trust.

The project team approached the SIC Charitable Trust and Heritage Lottery Fund, and other bodies, for the £11 million pounds we needed. But all the hard work and momentary disappointments have been worthwhile. We now have a building at

Hay's Dock to be proud of.

## Our aims

What we wanted was a building rich in the objects that have made day-to-day life in Shetland so interesting, from the earliest times to the present day.

Our aim was to tell an accurate story about Shetland's history, in language that was clear enough for everyone to understand, young and old. We wanted every Shetlander and visitor to have access to Shetland's past.

With that principle in mind we also wanted to bring together the museum and the archives in one building, institutions that had been separate in the past - so that people who looked at the museum displays could go on to read about Shetland's history, in a comfortable archives searchroom, or vice versa.

Museum and archive collections are displayed together for the first time along with lively first-hand accounts to bring the displays to life.

We needed the building to be good to look at, with plenty of public art, an

auditorium for 120 people for lectures and films, and a café-restaurant so that visitors can relax. We also planned to restore Hay's dock, outside.

And finally, it was part of our conception that the new Museum and Archives would be a stepping-off point for people who wanted to visit other parts of Shetland's heritage, from Lerwick Harbour to each local museum and scenic view.

## Results

Hundreds of people helped in the process – architects, designers, members of staff and volunteers. We all think that the result is very fine. At the end of May, when the building finally opens to the public, others will tell us if they agree.

But if you want to see displays about Shetland from hundreds of thousands of years ago until the oil era, see the latest art exhibition, read the *Shetland News* for 1893 and hear a tape of Jeemsie Laurenson speaking about trows - or just enjoy the view of Hay's Dock and Lerwick Harbour from the restaurant-café – there is only one place to come!

# The stories behind the objects

As Curator of Collections I see the vast array of objects that come in to our collections. Some of the items acquired in the last few months are typical of the items we accept. Each is unique, yet each one has a different story to tell.

The stories behind the objects in the museum collection are just as important as the artefacts themselves. The details about where an object was found, who made it, or what it did, can add a lot to our understanding of it because we can only tell so much by examining the object directly. Much of the information we have on our collections comes from the donors themselves.

Late last year we were donated an interesting multi-coloured allover jumper,

with bright patterns on a black background. Because it was given to us by the knitter herself, we have been able to get a full pedigree for the piece. It was made by Winnie Robertson, of Wethersta, Delting, in 1954.

The design is typical of the 1950s, with diagonal patterns running the full length of the garment. There was a massive amount of work in the making of the item because all the patterns have been sewn in, rather than the garment knitted in one.

Winnie had the time to do it because she was expecting twins at the time so she was not able to do other work on the croft. Rather than just taking things easy she decided to make something useful and she made this jumper. The jumper itself was a

plain machine-made one, and the multicoloured patterns were all stitched by hand – hundreds of hours' work. The garment was made for the donor's husband, who wore it often. The wear on it makes it of all the more interesting because it shows the item was meant as a piece of "wearing clothes", not a showpiece, although it has belatedly become one!

Other acquisitions of many kinds have come in the past few months, including army insignia from the Second World War, a lace shawl made by a famed Unst knitter, and a bodice made by a Walls dressmaker around 1890.

**Dr Ian Tait**

# Come on in to the new Archives

We are pleased to tell you that the archives search shelf library of literature about Shetland and room at the new building is now open. historical subjects for browsing, and some very

We closed our doors at our King Harald Street premises in October 2005 and we know that many of you are keen to get back on with your research. For the past two months we have been receiving researchers on an appointments only basis in our brand-new searchroom. attractive public art by Dr Mike Macdonnell, which brightens the room up. In addition, the furniture is very comfortable! If you would like to come in please just give us a ring on 01595 695057 to arrange a convenient time.

Due to the installation of artefacts in the main galleries we cannot yet open fully.

To give you an idea of the new facilities we have: there are twelve reader spaces – previously we had six.

In addition there are five public computers, compared to just one, and two microfilm reader printers - one more than we had before. We also have plenty of storage space and extra office space for staff as well.

There is a very large open-



Readers enjoy the spacious new searchroom.

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# From witchcraft to arts and craft

As Lifelong Learning Officer, I have the job of organising lectures, school workshops, arts and craft sessions and all kinds of other fun events for people of all ages.

Although I am based at the new building at Hay's Dock, my job takes me out to schools and community groups.

Over the next few months I will be working on the events and education programme for the new service.

The aim is to hold a wide range of events which will appeal to both Shetlanders and visitors and to anyone with a interest in Shetland's history.

The first event due to be held in the new building is a two day conference entitled "A Woman's Island? Shetland Women; Past, Present and Future."

The conference has been organised in partnership with Women's History Scotland and will investigate the role of women in Shetland's history.

Speakers from Shetland, Britain and abroad will gather to present their ideas in a variety of ways – from workshops and lectures to poetry, exhibitions, films and performances. Topics range from witchcraft and medieval heiresses to how women

are represented in photography and their role in health, fishing, oil and textiles.

This conference marks the launch of a series of pilot events leading up to the official opening of the Shetland Museum & Archives at the end of May 2007.

**Kirsty Kennedy**

If you would like to attend the **Shetland Women; Past, Present and Future** conference please phone 01595 695057 for a programme and booking form.