

Unkans

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WRITING THE North

Shetland Museum and Archives staff have been busy over the past year working on a project which has explored the historical literature of Orkney and Shetland, and explored continuity with contemporary works.

The Writing the North project will culminate in a major exhibition, currently on show in Da Gadderie at Shetland Museum and Archives. The exhibition uses books, sound recordings, manuscripts and illustrations to tell the story of literature in the Northern Isles through four themes: myths and legends, visitors to the islands, working lives, and the sounds of Orkney and Shetland.

Exciting interactive displays and activities bring to life what it was like to live, to work and to write in the islands from the early nineteenth century to the present day. The exhibition also includes items on loan such as a portrait of Walter Scott by William Nicholson from the National Portrait Gallery, and a Robert Louis Stevenson manuscript from the Edinburgh writers museum.

A key aim of Writing the North is to share the literature of the islands with as wide an audience as possible. To this end, local school pupils have been involved in the project by studying the work of an author and interpreting it in their own way through film or drama. Pupils from Sandwick Junior



High have been studying extracts from Sir Walter Scott's 'The Pirate' and will produce a short film depicting a modern take on the piece. Aith, Whalsay and Brae pupils are also working on films which will be lasting legacy of this project. Pupils have received drama lessons and help with set design and costume planning to provide a cross curricular learning experience.

The project website – www.writingthenorth.com gives a wealth of information about the literature of Orkney and Shetland and encourages visitors to contribute

their own creative writing to an interactive map. There are also education packs to download and dialogues between academic specialists in Scottish literature and contemporary writers connected with the Northern Isles.

The exhibition will run until 11th May, with a final day of events planned for Saturday 10th May including a series of talks and an evening of poetry reading. See www.shetlandmuseumandarchives.org.uk for more details. Free tickets for this event are available from Shetland Museum and Archives, call 01595 741562 to reserve yours.



Shetland ForWirds is getting ready for its annual fund-raising concert in the Garrison Theatre on Tuesday 13th May. It's usually a sell-out so keep a look out for when tickets are available. Performers will be coming fae aa da airts. Among them will be the winners of the dialect prize at the Shetland Schools Music Festival, Burravoe Primary School, and the Brenna Players from Bigton who won the dialect section at the Shetland County Drama Festival.

Local Events Listings

For information on local events please visit www.shetland.org to view listings. To add your own event to this site please call 01595 989898 or complete the online form at www.visit.shetland.org/submit-an-event

Visit
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Felsite Research and Display



Felsite Dyke, Northmavine



Felsite 'axe factory', North Roe

Neolithic knives and axes are some of Shetland's most beautiful and distinctive archaeological finds. Made of North Roe felsite, they still amaze us with their striking patterns and highly polished surface. Some of them bear little or no signs of wear meaning that they might have been used for religious or ceremonial purposes.

New research by Shetland Museum and Archives and University College Dublin will attempt to better understand the significance of felsite in Shetland's Neolithic communities. How and when was it quarried? How was it shaped and polished? How was it distributed between different communities? Those are the kind of questions researchers will try to answer.

An archaeological and geochemical characterisation will centre on Ronas Hill, the highest point of Shetland

where there is a chambered cairn and felsite dykes. The focus of the survey will be the Beorgs of Uyea and small-scale, targeted excavation will take place at Grut Wells.

Experimental work to understand the processes of working felsite will also be undertaken. Crucially, a 'felsite roadshow' is planned for June, which will give researchers the chance to record any axes in private



Felsite Display at Shetland Museum and Archives

collections. Professor Gabriel Cooney from University College Dublin will be visiting the Shetland Museum and Archives, and rural community halls to meet with local people.

A small collection of exquisite felsite knives and axes is now on display in the Museum in the archaeology section. Jenny Murray, Collections Curator, who has produced this display said "If you have a felsite artefact at home we would love to see it so it could be recorded and photographed for the project's reference. It is important that we can trace as many items as possible to gain a more complete picture of distribution of Neolithic axes."

If anyone can help with the project, please contact Jenny, or a member of staff at Shetland Museum and Archives on 01595 695057.

Corrections

We do get things wrong from time to time. Apologies for the following errors, and thanks to the eagle eyed readers who spotted them!

- The image on page 3 of February 2014's issue stated that it showed Jarl Laurence Sandison, when it was in fact, Macgibbon Scott, the Jarl for 1913.
- The story of James Campbell Jamieson in the December 2013 issue said Mr Jamieson was from Garth, in Sandness. This should have said Greenfield, in Sandness and his granddaughter, Miss Deyell now lives in Eastbourne, and not Edinburgh as printed.

Shetland Bus Reference Room

The latest addition to the Scalloway Museum is a dedicated reference room, principally created to house a donated collection of books, which has the potential to become one of the most comprehensive UK-based archives of Shetland Bus historical books and documents.

This unique facility came into being through a chance piece of serendipity that brought together museum volunteers with two significant benefactors to the museum. A conversation between a museum volunteer and a trustee of a charity called the Gerry Holdsworth Special Forces Trust yielded the chance to apply for funding that paid for equipping the archive room. Mr Duncan Stuart, the trustee, was chatting to volunteer Cathy Hallett in the Scalloway Museum while holidaying in Shetland and indicated that the charity he represented was formed in memorial to Commander Gerry Holdsworth "to help preserve and promote the heritage of SOE and related Special Forces." The SOE (Special Operations Executive) were in command of the British side of the Shetland Bus operation which features as a key exhibit in the Scalloway Museum. Having established that the charity would like to fund a project in support of the Scalloway Museum, the next piece of good fortune came when Mr Douglas Smith offered to donate his entire collection of Shetland Bus related books to the museum. Mr Smith had collected an extensive archive of written material on the subject from both UK and Norwegian authors.

Having identified the funding to equip the reference room, and content with which to stock it, a space used as a workshop in the Scalloway Museum was identified as a

suitable location. The room was equipped with handsome cabinets, redecorated, and computer equipment installed in January this year. Since then a number of further donations have been made from members of the Shetland Bus Friendship Society, including additional books and financial support.

February brought the reference room into first formal use with the arrival of Norwegian historian and author Asgeir Ueland, accompanied by Norwegian Special Forces historian Tomas Adam. Mr Ueland brought with him digitally imaged copies of around 20,000 SOE documents from the National Archive in London as part of his research toward a new comprehensive book on the subject. Mr Ueland has left copies of the documents in the Scalloway Museum reference room to form yet another key component of the archive. The many wartime, and subsequent, photographs that the museum possesses will also be duly archived in digital form and made available.

An interesting footnote to the good fortune which brought this archive into existence is the fact that Commander Gerry Holdsworth, whose memorial trust fund primed the project, was placed as an agent in Norway in 1939, exploring possible landing sites for supplies. This was part of an early operation that was unrelated to, but evidently contributed to, the conception of the full Shetland Bus Operation which remains of such importance to the joint wartime history of Norway and Shetland. The initial funding toward creation of an archive and reference room to detail this history is a fitting legacy for one of those who primed the operation in its infancy.

Lerwick Brass Band celebrates over 150 years of Brass Banding in Shetland.

As part of the European Festival of Brass 2014 (26th April – 11th May), visitors to the Shetland Museum and Archives will be able to view a focus display celebrating over 150 years of Brass Banding in Shetland. The exhibition, on display throughout May, will feature items and images from throughout the Lerwick Brass Band's history.

The first reference to a brass band in Shetland dates to March 23rd 1863, when an advertisement was placed in the Shetland Advertiser seeking '...Young Men in Lerwick who would like to practise with a view to forming a BRASS BAND? and who would be willing to subscribe a trifle, weekly, for his own instrument? Apply Mr Ellaby at the Institute.' Nicknamed 'Da Bressa Band', as the sound of their practising appeared to come from across the water, they were officially titled 'The Institute Band' and were based at the Anderson Educational Institute. In 1885 the Lerwick Brass Band made its first appearance in public on New Year's Day at the head of the annual Royal Navy Reserve procession and in 1888 the band was asked to perform as part of the Up Helly Aa procession. In those days the band charged



Lerwick Brass Band in its early days, by J D Ratter.

(Image courtesy of Shetland Museum Photo Archive)

the princely sum of £1 for their services, which may explain why they had not been a feature of earlier processions!

Since then the Lerwick Brass Band has been a regular fixture at community events and celebrations throughout Shetland. The Band are always interested in hearing from new players, of all levels and abilities. Practices take place 7.30pm Tuesdays and 11am Sundays in the band room at the Gilbertson Park. Why not come along and contribute to the next 150 years of brass music in Shetland?

'Butter' names in Shetland



The Butter Stane, between Weisdale and Aithsting.

Photo: Brian Smith

There are a good few 'butter' place names in Shetland. There's a Butter Geo at Skaw in Whalsay, and another at St Ninian's Isle, and a Butter Knowe at Gluss. What the association was between these places and butter we do not know. Maybe a boat with butter onboard capsized in the geos so named: Shetlanders paid rent, tax and tithe in butter until the eighteenth century, and consignments of it were often on the move.

The butter that Shetlanders and Orcadians gave to their landlords and superiors wasn't noted for its good quality. There is evidence from the sixteenth century that it was sometimes used for greasing the royal artillery. 'It was probably rancid grease unfit for food', one historian has remarked.

There is a large stone called Da Butter Stane in the hills between Weisdale and Aithsting, latterly a boundary mark. Visible from miles around, the huge stone is probably so-named because it looks like a chunk of bog butter. Shetlanders and others sometimes buried their rent-butter in peat, probably to preserve it better. There

is an example on display in the Shetland Museum and Archives.

Most interesting of all are two places in Shetland called Da Butter Lispund. The local pronunciation is something like 'Butterleeshpint', where 'pint' rhymes with 'hint'. One is a hill south of Kellister in Sandness, and the other is one of the Neean Skerries, at Da Banks o da Neean in Aithsting. At first sight these names are difficult to fathom. But there is no doubt that the features there are so called because they look like the tub in which a 'lispund' of butter was contained.

A lispund was a weight unit, common in north-west Europe; in Shetland it was about 9.9 kilograms, one-twelfth of a standard barrel. There are no lispund-tubs still to the fore in Shetland, but many survive in Norway. The image above shows such a tub from the personal collection of Audun Dybdahl of the University of Trondheim. It is from the Trøndelag area of Western Norway, and dates from the nineteenth century. We can see why Shetlanders called two squat hills after a squat container. The skerry at Da Banks o da Neean even has a lid!



A Norwegian butter tub.

Photo: Audun Dybdahl

The Butter Lispund, Aithsting.

Photo: Mona Walterson



The Butter Lispund, Sandness.

Photo: Brian Smith



There is a very good parallel in the name Da Soldian, given to an offshore rock with steep shelving sides north of Bressay. That name derives from Old Norse *sáld*, a corn-measurement which also gave its name to a tub. There were similar names at Gert in Dunrossness, Hoswick, Levenwick, Gilsbreck in Lunnasting, and Papa Stour, this time applied to fields, which provided *sáld* of grain.

All Shetland's butter names are relatively recent: they contain the Scots word 'butter' rather than the equivalent Old Norse term *smjör*. But there are *smjör* names here too: the place name scholar Jakob Jakobsen recorded names like Da Smerrin-rigs in Midbrake in Yell and Da Smerr-meadow in Quarff. (He also heard the phrase 'krump an smortek' in Fladdabister, meaning buttered cheesecake!) Smerr names seem to refer to the fertility of the land in question, rather than the shape of the feature named.

Eileen Brooke-Freeman and Brian Smith

We gratefully acknowledge help from Mona Walterson and Audun Dybdahl.

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

Get in touch

We are keen to include contributions from anyone who has something interesting to share about Shetland's heritage.

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DEADLINE FOR CONTRIBUTIONS FOR NEXT ISSUE IS 19 MAY 2014.