

A look back on fifty issues

Unkans has reached a milestone 50th issue. The newsletter was first produced in March 2007 to inform and update the community about events, research and services provided by the brand new Shetland Museum and Archives. Assistant Archivist, Joanne Wishart, and Curator, Dr Carol Christiansen, worked together as joint editors. Articles relating to the wider Shetland heritage community were also welcomed.

In July 2012 Unkans was rebranded

to become a publication dedicated to the promotion of activities of the wider heritage and culture community in Shetland. Emma Miller, Marketing Officer at Shetland Amenity Trust took on the role of editor. Since its inception, Unkans has always been available to download from the Shetland Museum and Archives website, and all back issues from the very first are still online. In February 2013, Unkans moved a further step forward in the digital world with the

introduction of an online mailing list. Now readers from all around the world can sign up to receive the latest issue direct to their inbox. The readership now extends from Canada to Australia and New Zealand with many places in between including Norway, Italy and Hong Kong.

Article contributions are always welcome on any subject relating to Shetland's heritage and culture. Here's to the next 50 issues!

The Victoress – a family heirloom



The Victoress Stove was restored to full working order.

In 2013, I took possession of a family heirloom, and as heirlooms go, a 90 year old stove is probably slightly unusual. Before our 'Victoress No 8' stove came to live in its new home

in Hoswick, it had spent all of its life in my great aunt Helen Jamieson's house in Guddon, East Yell. Born in Guddon in 1907, Auntie Helen was 105 when she passed away in 2012, making her Shetland's oldest resident at the time. The stove was installed in 1924 and she kept the receipt of purchase, which is now framed on the mantelpiece above the stove.

I was lucky enough to spend a lot of time in Guddon, listening to Auntie Helen's reminiscence of family, people and years gone by. After Auntie Helen moved into Isleshaven Care Centre near to her 101st birthday, my parents, Alan and Sunniva, kept the stove going for the next 3 years, before it succumbed to old age.

I was told that the Victoress was beyond practical repair, but sentiment kicked in and a twist of fate brought me into contact with Maxi Jamieson, who used to repair stoves at 'Da Smiddy' and said he would do his best to get her going again, although it would be touch and go. It had been over 30 years since someone had last asked him to fix one up. To my utter delight, I received a call from him a few days later to say she was ready for action!

A very excited run up to Vidlin followed, before returning to Hoswick to deal with the big question, 'where are we going to put her'? We

didn't have room in our house, so my forgiving in-laws, Richard and Alison, agreed that we could install the Victoress in a peerie building they had next to their house. Once the stove came, more old bits and bobs followed, with the room even starring in a locally made film by Greg McCarron, which was premiered in a Tall Ship in Glasgow during the Commonwealth Games.

Although she's not used every day now, there have already been many yarns, furs, the odd dram and some 'bannock makkin' session enjoyed in the Victoress' warm company, and with a starring role in a local feature film already under her belt in her new life, who knows what the future holds for our favourite family heirloom!

Jim Leask



Helen Smith who 'co-starred' in Greg McCarron's film with the restored stove.

Meet the Experts this summer at Shetland Museum and Archives

A series of Gallery talks are planned throughout the summer, by the curatorial and archival staff at Shetland Museum and Archives. These talks will cover a wide range of subjects relating to the collections and will take place in the galleries, using displayed artefacts to illustrate the talks. All talks will begin at 3.00pm on the stated dates and take around 20 minutes. These will be free to attend and no booking is required.

Come along and learn about Taatit Rugs with Carol or examine Shetland's Sunken Treasure with Laurie. Discuss Up Helly Aa with Brian, or hear Ian explain how Shetlanders historically 'spent a penny'!

JUNE

Friday 12th – "Taaitit rugs: The pile bedcovers of Shetland" with Dr Carol Christiansen

Friday 19th – Shetland during 3 World Wars with Dr. Ian Tait

Friday 26th – Face to Face: Portraiture within the collection with John Hunter

JULY

Friday 3rd – "Taaitit rugs: The pile bedcovers of Shetland" with Dr Carol Christiansen

Friday 10th – Up Helly Aa with Brian Smith

Friday 24th – Shetland's Sunken Treasure with Laurie Goodlad

AUGUST

Friday 7th – German Merchants and Dutch Fishermen with Brian Smith

Friday 21st – Poop and Pipes: How you spent a penny in the past, with Dr. Ian Tait

Friday 28th – Fantastic Felsite by Jenny Murray



Burra place-names

Over the past five years, the Shetland Place-Names Project has worked with members of Burra History Group to record all the place-names of Burra and the nearby isles.

A series of very lightsome recording sessions have been held on Friday evenings in Easthouse where local folk have come along to discuss the names and share stories about places right round the isles. Each session concentrated on a different area with individuals who had particular local knowledge coming along and helping with the project. Names recorded include coastal features such as geos, craigseats and baas, and house, croft and hill

names. The place-names have been plotted in a range of ways – on copy maps and old aerial photographs and by annotating old photographs. A particularly useful method has been to walk around the coastline and photograph individual features.

Place-names first recorded as part of the 1951 John Stewart project have been checked and located on the ground and on maps. Further names have been extracted from other existing maps and documents and recorded by individuals and at meetings of the RVS group.

All the place-names have now been entered on the Shetland Place-Names Database and linked digital maps. Now with

over 1000 names plotted, the History Group plans to mount a display for the coming summer season. This will give anyone with an interest in the place-names the opportunity to check what has already been mapped, and hopefully add more information. The next stage will be to conduct further research into some of the names, photograph more sites and publish the material.

Easthouse is open from 1st July to 30th September on Sundays afternoons from 14.00 to 17.00, or at other times by arrangement. Contact Laurina Herculeson on 01595 859276 or Adalene Fullerton on 01595 859623.

Eileen Brooke-Freeman

Taatit Rugs: The Pile Bedcovers of Shetland

In 2013, Shetland Museum and Archives received a grant from the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund to research Taatit Rugs. This is a type of bedcover held in the Museum collection, which was used in Shetland long ago but no longer made. During the two years of research, there has been a considerable level of interest from the Shetland public, and beyond, in offering rugs for study.

The results of the study are the focus of a new exhibition which has just opened in Da Gadderie at Shetland Museum and Archives, where twelve of the rugs are on display.

The Shetland rugs are related to pile cloth made from Finland to Greenland to Ireland, where they were used as cloaks and bedcovers in the medieval period. The oldest taatit rug dates to about 1760.

Shetland Museum had 34 rugs in its collection at the start of research. A call was sent out to the Shetland public asking about rugs and now nearly 100 rugs from local museums and private homes have been studied and recorded. Two rugs were located in New Zealand, taken there by Shetland families emigrating in the 1870s. One rug has been returned to Shetland, donated to Shetland Museum by the great-great-granddaughter of the rug-maker. This rug is also included in the exhibition.

The rugs have been analysed for construction details, including the use of natural dyes. The grant provided funding for testing dyes

used in rugs. The results reveal that rug-makers were using a much larger colour palette and had a greater knowledge of dye preparation than previously thought. They obtained dyes imported from the Empire, native plants and lichens and in the late 19th century began to use synthetic dyes. They used several complex methods to extract dyes from these sources.

The rugs are made using a series of bold motifs. These reflect symbols used in Nordic and Shetlandic folk beliefs to ward off evil, especially evil which occurred during hours of darkness.

The family history of each rug has been researched as far as possible. The stories reveal the large number of rugs made for marriages, and how rugs were passed down generations. Floor rugs made in the 20th century using the taatit rug technique are also included in the exhibition, which runs to Sunday 19th July.

A publication will be released later this year about the history of taatit rugs.

Dr Carol Christiansen
Curator
Shetland Museum and Archives



Taatit Rug – an example of a Taatit Rug studied during the research (image by Carsten Fleiger).



The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation is one of the largest independent grant-makers in the UK. We make grants of £30 – £35 million annually towards a wide range of work within the arts, children and young people, the environment and social change. We also operate a £26 million Finance Fund which invests in organisations that aim to deliver both a financial return and a social benefit.

Cunningsburgh Scattald

A hundred years ago, in November 1915, the crofters of South Cunningsburgh were finally able to move their Shetland sheep back into the hills of Catpund, Hoofield, Hamrafield, Bonxa, Royl Field, and Cliffs. This 2000 or more acre scattald or common grazings had been taken from them in 1875, and fenced off to make a private sheep run for about 800 cross-bred sheep, by John Bruce the Younger of Sumburgh, who at that time leased the Sumburgh estate from his father, the ageing John Bruce Sr.



John Bruce Jr of Sumburgh (1837-1907) and his wife, Mary.

Bruce Jr also took a chunk out of the adjacent Sandwick scattald, along with parks at Pickiegarth and Setter. This was a major blow for Bruce's Cunningsburgh and Sandwick tenants, their sheep and wool being a major component of their livelihood, along with the winter, spring, and summer fishing.

For 40 years, between 1875 and 1915, the South Cunningsburgh tenants, on this part of the Sumburgh Estate, agitated to have their scattald returned. The

passing of the Crofters Act in 1886 was an act of emancipation or liberation for crofters everywhere in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, and none more so than on the Sumburgh estate. John Bruce Sr. had died shortly before the Act was passed, and his oldest son, John Jr, along with his brother, Lt. George Hector Bruce, were universally detested by most crofters, for bitterly attacking the Act. They actively opposed every single application to the Crofters Commission for Fair Rents which the 1886 Act legislated for.

However, the Act gave the crofters the courage to agitate, as no longer could they be removed or cleared from their holdings simply because a landlord might take a spite to them. John Bruce Jr was vindictive – oppose him and you risked ejection. None were more willing to take him on though, than the crofter-fishermen of Dunrossness, from Cunningsburgh southwards.

One of their first great victories had nothing to do with crofting. It was their victory in the famous Hoswick Whale Case, when a shoal of about 300 caain' whales were driven ashore at Hoswick, in September 1888. The captors, emboldened by the security offered by the Crofters Act, rejected Bruce of Sumburgh's claim, as the principal proprietor of the lands at Hoswick, to a share of the proceeds. Most people know what happened next. John Bruce Jr took the captors to the Sheriff Court in Lerwick, but Sheriff Mackenzie awarded the case to the defenders. This was an historic victory, and was sealed when the Court of Session rejected Bruce's appeal in June 1890.

The crofter agitation in South Cunningsburgh, and the Hoswick

Whale agitation cannot be separated. Both took strength from each other. One of the leaders of the crofter agitation in Cunningsburgh was Andrew Smith, born at Villians, but living with his wife, Annie, and large family, at neighbouring Vadsgarth. Andrew Smith was the skipper of the herring fishing boat, the "Pioneer", and it was Smith and the other crew-members who first sighted the large shoal of whales near the island of Mousa. Smith became a member of the Whale Committee set up to fight the case in the autumn of 1888. When the crofter agitation broke out, he twice spent time in jail in Lerwick.

I don't want to say any more about this agitation here; who were involved, what actions they took, and what the results of the many court cases were in this period of anti-laird resistance, roughly between 1886 and 1894. I



Agitation 1875-1915

am hoping to write a book about it and indeed I have finally started to put "pen to paper", following years of research in the Archives and tramping the hills in the company of local crofters and friends.

But I have one problem; one gap in my research. I cannot find any photos of the crofters who battled against Bruce's shepherds to get their scattald back. I have photos of the Bruces, photos of the Sheriffs, photos of the crofters' and lairds' law agents, photos of the landscape, but no photos of the central crofter figures. Apart from one – Pheelie Smith from da Villians – the mother of Andrew Smith – who died aged 98 in February 1914, not long before the scattald was returned. For this I am grateful to her great granddaughter, Mrs Johan Walker, now resident in Lerwick.

But if a photo of Pheelie exists,

surely there must exist photos of her son, Andrew, and indeed of some of the other key agitators: The Laurenson brothers from Mail (Laurence and William) and their mother, Widow Ann Laurenson or Malcolmson; the Davidson and Smiths from Vestinore; the Halcrows from Blett and Claphoull; James Nicolson from Haygreen and numerous other South Cunningsburgh tenants. And so on.

What I would dearly love to know is this. Does anyone have any photos of any of these people, or suggestions as to who might do so? It is so easy to forget or ignore the battles these very poor people fought, especially in the post Crofters Act period. I am trying, in a very modest way, to rescue a few of them from oblivion but I just wish I could contemplate some of them in a photograph, a hundred or more years later.

So, if anyone can help me in my search for photos, I would be most grateful. Here are just a few names I'd like to get photos of:

Andrew Smith, Villians/Vadsgarth / Midgate/- 1854 – 1924
 Anne Jarmson (his wife) – 1854 -1924
 Widow Ann Laurenson or Malcolmson, Mail 1813-1900
 Laurence Laurenso , Mail, 1850-1920
 William Laurenson, Mail 1847-1920
 James Nicolson, Haygreen, 1844-1919
 Marion or Merrin Davidson, Vestinore 1842-1919 (in Poorhouse)
 Andrew Tulloch, Brind 1857-1912 (in Montrose Asylum)
 Joseph Moar (one of John Bruce Jr's shepherds, from North Yell) – 1871 -1942

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 Gordon Johnston

Below: 'Modern day' Cunningsburgh, taken from Hoofield (part of the scattald hills).



Rope at end of its line

It's funny how some things, once so common, can slip off without anyone noticing. Every year we undertake thatching at the Crofthouse Museum, at Dunrossness, and that's led me to ruminate on coir, as it were. Most native Shetlanders aged over fifty will remember this hard bristly cordage, which had umpteen uses on the croft and was a shipboard essential for ropes, matting, and fenders. It had a fairly short history, so where did it come from, and where did it go?

Some readers might think "kayar" is a good old Shetland thing, including the name, but that's far from the case, for it was made from coconuts, and the local name isn't even a dialect mispronunciation of coir; it is the Malayan name! Perhaps Shetland seamen picked up the right name when they were going deep sea to the Far East in the 19th century, and took the word back home before the dictionary version stuck. The rope was, and is, made mainly in Ceylon and south-west India, where the husks were steeped then broken to get tough fibres that could be spun into impressively durable rope. You can still see it on sale in shops in the form of doormats, or pots for seedlings.



Heads of coir rope in our collection. Two thicknesses were available, and each head contained four hanks, neatly lashed together in a cylinder.

Today's trade sees coir items shipped by few companies, but on a vast scale, which is a poor situation if you want anything out of the ordinary. It is no longer possible



Coir rope used to hold down thatch; vertical strands hold the weights, while horizontal ones hold the latter in position.

to buy basic coir of the kind used to thatch roofs, although very easy to get plentiful supplies of multi-strand rope, unsuitable for thatching or basketry. The root of this is the not-always-beneficial economy of scale that still leads to British manufacturing industry disappearing, and mechanisation advancing.

Coir rope only entered the scene in the early 19th century and probably only became common in Shetland around the 1880s. Roperies in Britain manufactured it into different thicknesses, and the basic two-strand form was in insatiable demand in Shetland as a general agricultural rope, sold by general merchants anywhere from Unst to Fair Isle, in cylindrical coils called heads. It was ideal for tying-down a des (haystack) or a skru (rick) because these were dismantled within a year, so didn't justify the expense of hemp rope, and people abandoned making simmint (rope) themselves from local plants for these and other tasks such as making nets for carrying peats because coir was affordable enough to be worthwhile.

The biggest job was thatching a roof, where ropes held down the straw, and islanders saw coir was ideal because it lasted just as long as the straw did (it didn't need to last any longer), and old rope layers mouldered away along with the previous thatch.

Shetland shops stopped selling coir

rope in the 1970s, and although the Museum obtained supplies from firms south for a while, alas the globalised economy eliminated both these venerable 200 year-old companies in Lincolnshire and Westmorland.

There, essentially, the story ends, because not even the wonderful Royal Dockyard ropewalk at Chatham can today import the raw material economically. It's just as well that the need for coir vanished too, for the last genuine thatched roofs disappeared in the past twenty years, and it's a challenge for our Crofthouse Museum maintenance, where pragmatic compromises have to be made. The irony is it'd be easier to make the authentic pre-coir product, but such are global economics we'd need to export the rushes from Shetland hills to India, then ship the finished simmint back!

*Dr Ian Tait
Curator*



A kishie (basket) made using coir to hold the bunches of straw together.



The Lunnasting History Group has actively been researching the history of the area since they were established 30 years ago in October 1985. They are now based in the Cabin Museum which is a treasure trove with a wealth of artefacts and memorabilia and is well worth a visit.

Opening Hours during the summer are:

Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday & Sunday from 1pm - 5pm. Other hours can be arranged.

Lunnasting History Group – Tel: 01806 577204 or Email: veneta@trowie.com

The Cabin – Tel: 01806 577232 or 01595 694891 Email: cabinmuseum@hotmail.co.uk

100 Years of Lunnasting Hall



The first Wedding was 23rd January 1913, Peter W Hunter, Billister and Isabella Jamieson, Tarrarit. Sadly she died just after her son Benjie Hunter was born and her funeral was to be the first in the hall.



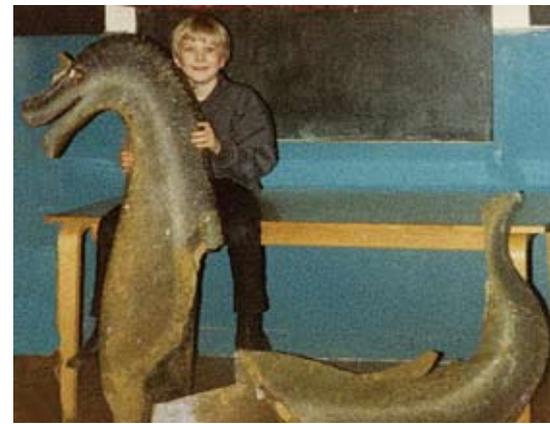
In July 2010, the Centenary of the Hall was celebrated with a Dinner dance which was well attended by the local community.

One of the things that the Lunnasting History Group researched, was the History of the Hall. It was built by the Laird and gifted it to the community, on condition that he could use it to collect the Rent from his tenants for one day in the year. In 1910 the foundation stone was laid for the new Hall. A bottle containing Coins of the Realm, copies of newspapers, and a list of names of the children present, was placed in the foundation.

Lunnasting Up Helly Aa

On 5th February 1913, Lunnasting celebrated their first Up Helly Aa. Peter Herculson was Guizer Jarl. The procession started from the Hall, moved down to Vidlin, and went across the Ayre to the burning site at Orgill.

Below: A young photo of actor Steven Robertson holding the Head and tail which was retrieved from the fire at the last up Helly Aa in 1931 is included in the groups' collection. They also hold full details of all the Up Helly Aa's, School Photos, and lots more. They continue to collect photos, stories etc to add to the extensive collection, and would welcome any contributions.



The Press Gang – Da Hoidin Hol

A 'Hoidin Hol' is situated in the Northern part of Lunning Head, between the Runn Geo and Mussy Geo, both sporting highly dangerous cliffs.

In the days of the Press Gang, this 'Hol' was used by strong working men to escape the raids of these gangsters, who hunted them out in boats, landing in geos along the shore.

To our knowledge, this particular 'Hoidin hol' was never discovered by the Press Gang, as it was situated skilfully amongst rocks and stones naturally leading down the cliffs at the banks. The narrow hole that could just allow a man's body through by easing its way in, could be readily camouflaged to conceal or disguise the opening by adding a few rocks

or stones of similar shape or size to these adjoining the hole. This was done by the wives of the men taking refuge in the 'Hol' who had already trained them in the art, to ensure their own safety.

These men who escaped the gangsters' raids on their shores, stayed in the 'Hoidin Hol' as long as the Press Gang vessels were in the vicinity, being fed by their wives or woman folk when the occasion allowed them to consider it safe to do so.

Men who were caught out with the 'Hol', were taken aboard the gangster's boats, conveyed to foreign countries and sold as slaves for large sums of money, never to be heard of again – Just presumed "Lost at Sea"

Fishing smacks bringing smuggled

goods like Rum or Tobacco from Faroe and Greenland, hid them in this same 'Hoidin Hol. They waited until such time as the Customs Officers had searched every house and holding in the vicinity and had left without knowing that there was such a hiding place. In recent years, a local Farmer ploughed up a buried Faroe Brandy flask. He smelt the strong smell of liquor.

During the first of this century, local young people who were known to visit this 'Hoidin Hol' told us that stone steps lead down to the floor, which stretches beyond the beach. We do not know if anyone then or later, ventured further to see what lay ahead.

By Mrs Ann Hughson [Ms Laurenson] born and brought up at Lunning, Lunnasting.

John Murdoch – friend of crofters

I had known for years that John Murdoch, an Inland Revenue officer based in Lerwick in 1864-6, wrote a weekly column for the *People's Journal* (Aberdeen edition) while he was here. Later on Murdoch was a famous crofters' leader, and in 1985 Jim Hunter edited a volume of his writings, *For the People's Cause*.

Hunter reprinted some of Murdoch's articles about Shetland, and his book whetted my appetite for more. So I was pleased to be able to visit the main library in Dundee, in April, to consult their beautifully preserved newspaper files.

Murdoch was born in Nairnshire in 1818, and his family moved to Islay in 1827. He knew about islands. He joined the excise service in 1838, and soon got interested in temperance and religious ideas. During a posting to Lancashire he got involved in working class politics, and in the 1850s, in Dublin, he became a campaigning journalist.

In Lerwick he lived at Twageos, and as well as his Inland Revenue work he rented the small farm called Roadside, just east of where the Lerwick Hotel now stands. He threw himself into the temperance movement here, and gave a lecture on the 'Mischievous effects of clearances' in the Independent Chapel in November 1865. His son Alexander was born at Twageos the same year.

I wasn't disappointed by Murdoch's journalism. Beginning his commission as the *People's Journal* Shetland correspondent on 1 April 1865, he produced a weekly piece for eighteen months. He wrote copiously and attractively about local affairs.

His columns were about ideas as well as incidents. He was interested in agriculture – he was an official of the Shetland Agricultural Society, and described its activities at length. His accounts of the weather were usually linked to setbacks or progress in the islands' rural world.

'Hands for the spade are in great requisition', he wrote in April 1866, a dry month, 'so much that they cannot be had by many who want them'. 'And grateful to the eye,' he said the following month, 'long tired of the sear and sombre, is the beautiful verdure which is rapidly spreading over the fields; still more grateful must it be to the poor cattle which have been on short commons for a long time, and to many children who have been on a

scant allowance of milk.'

Not surprisingly, given his views about clearances, Murdoch took an interest in the activities of the factor John Walker in the North Isles. He objected to Walker's eviction plans, and predicted accurately what the result of them would be. But he advised the Shetlanders to use peaceful methods in their agitation.

He promoted anything that could improve Shetland's economy. He was particularly interested in the Faroe fishing, and left us an account of a dreadful feerie which afflicted that fleet in 1866. Some of the victims of it couldn't sail to Faroe that year; some had to come home; some died en route. He attributed it to the dreadful sanitary condition in Lerwick at the time – something else that he wanted to reform.

John Murdoch left Shetland in the autumn of 1866. He became secretary of the Scottish Land Restoration League in 1884, and was chairman of the founding meeting of the Scottish Labour Party in Glasgow in May 1888. His short sojourn in Shetland gave rise to a valuable collection of information about the islands in the middle of the nineteenth century. Copies of it will be available in the Archives shortly.



John Murdoch in later life, in his favourite costume.

Brian Smith
Archivist

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.

You can now have each new issue of *Unkans* delivered straight to your inbox.

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heritage
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culture

DEADLINE FOR CONTRIBUTIONS FOR NEXT ISSUE IS FRIDAY 24th JULY 2015.