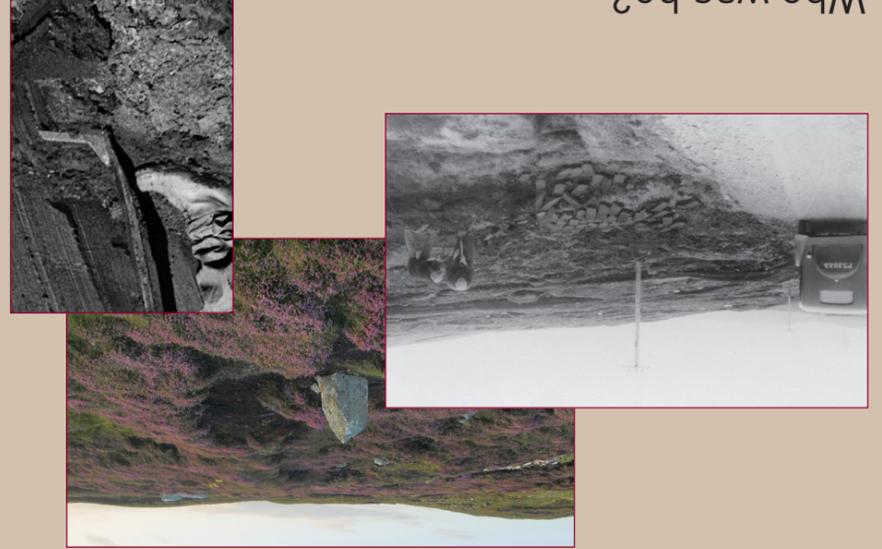


Some people think he was local while others think he came from further afield, possibly even a foreign country. Items of his clothing mirror foreign influences; could he be a traveller who picked up items on his trips. Or, due to extensive trading links in the islands at the time, were these styles available locally? Did he have a profession? Speculation about this has ranged from a clerk to a farmer or a thief.

Who was he?



On 12th May 1951, two men were cutting peats near Gunnister, in the north mainland of Shetland, when they came across the remains of a man. The style of the man's clothing, and coins found in his purse, dates his death to around 1700. While the acidic conditions in the peat rotted much of the body, it kept his clothes and other items incredibly well-preserved. The remains provide various clues about the life of the unidentified man. However, over 50 years after his discovery, mystery still surrounds him: Who was he? How did he die? Why was he buried in a peat bog?

Discovery!

How did he die?

Due to the lack of roads in Shetland at the time many travelled by foot. Perhaps he lost his way or had an accident which hampered mobility, both of which could result in death by exposure or starvation. The fact he was wearing a lot of clothes when buried could indicate it was cold when he died, during winter snow storms people often lost their way. Although his clothing has no evidence of wound marks and coins were found on his body, murder cannot be ruled out. An attack may not have damaged his garments and he may have been carrying other items which lead to theft as a motive.

Why was he buried in a peat bog?

The most intriguing fact about this mystery is his burial – why was he not buried in a graveyard? Was he murdered and hidden in the peat moor? Was he unknown locally, so buried where found? Or was his body too decayed to identify or move by the time he was discovered?



Reconstructing the evidence

The Gunnister find is nationally important. His clothing is one of the few complete outfits found in Britain belonging to an 'ordinary' person from this period. His purse features the earliest physical example of 'Fair Isle' knitting in Shetland and the two tablets of wood found with him are of a unique design. Considering these items were buried for around 250 years, their preservation is incredible. During detailed study of the knitted items individual stitches were recorded, down to minor flaws made by the original knitter.



A partnership agreement between Shetland Amenity Trust and National Museums Scotland has facilitated a closer working relationship, including the loan and study of major artefacts. Detailed study of the Gunnister finds has enabled the Shetland Museum and Archives to commission a full set of replicas, and uncovered more about the original items. These replicas, which allow us to see what the artefacts looked like when the man died, are displayed for the first time in the exhibition. Also on display are all of the original finds which have not been displayed in Shetland since they were discovered.



Gunnister Man

A life reconstructed

Who was the man found at Gunnister, Shetland? Over 50 years after his discovery the mystery continues....

museum
Shetland
archives



Coat

This coat and matching breeches are typical c.1700 style. He wore a tattered jacket over this garment; was it cold when he died?

Hat and gloves

Little of the man survived, however his hat and gloves contained his hair and fingernails.



Purse, coins and ribbon

His purse is the earliest evidence of patterned knitting in Shetland. It contained Dutch and Swedish coins plus some silk ribbon.



Tub

This small tub was secured by wooden hoops, did it contain his food for the journey?



Spoon and knife

He carried a horn spoon and a wooden handled knife, with an iron blade which had rusted away.



Horn & Quill

Is this equipment for writing, taking snuff, or something else?



Rivlins

He wore hide shoes like these over his heavily-patched socks.



Tablet

These tablets of wood have a unique design and so the purpose is unknown, could it be the tub lid or an early writing board?

