

Unkans

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

FREE

July 2010
Issue 21

museum
Shetland
archives

Tommy Watt, 1959-2010

Shetland Museum and Archives staff were greatly saddened by the death in May of Tommy Watt, Curator, after a long illness.

Tommy worked in the museum for 30 years; that it had grown from small premises upstairs from the library to the splendid facility we have today was due in large measure to his drive. Having started as an assistant, he took over as Curator in 1990. Over several years the displays were revamped, making them more exciting, led by his productive flair. The constraints of the galleries weren't a problem, and it was a matter of pride to Tommy that there were so many artefacts squeezed into the displays; the public loved the busy, local ambience of the place.

Tommy's particular interest was the arts. He redesigned the exhibitions gallery and administered regular changeovers of shows in a venue that was soon booked years in advance. Tommy didn't accept that Shetland's tiny museum couldn't attract major loans, so he negotiated a loan from the National Museums of Scotland of archaeological treasures, which



also involved overhauling the archaeology gallery.

Regular parts of the service, such as supplying historic photographs and selling retail

products were greatly developed and sales were brisk. An important milestone was the three-year digitising of the photographic collection, aided by a Lottery Fund grant. One application of the photographs was publication, and Tommy came up with the idea of a calendar which was an instant hit, and today we have many local competitors.

Tommy realised we needed an education provision that would involve us more in the community, so a service was built from scratch. A collection of objects was toured around community groups, and schools visited the museum. Tommy also publicised the museum and heritage to a wider audience through a radio programme,

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What's On Guide

July

Tuesdays: Film: 'Shetland Lone Star', about musician Thomas Fraser, 12-12.30pm, free, no booking required.

Saturdays: Talk: 'From Old Rock to New Life', 10.30-11am, free, no booking required.

3rd: Workshop: 'Butterfly feeders', 10.30-11am, 12-12.30pm, or 2-2.30pm, ages 3-7, must be accompanied by adult helper, free, booking essential

5th: Workshop: 'Creepy Crawlies', 11am-12 noon or 2-3pm, ages 7-10, £3, booking essential.

5th, 19th, 26th: 'A Night by the Fire', storytelling and music, Crofthouse Museum, Boddam, Dunrossness. Adults £12, Under 12s £6, children must be accompanied by adult, booking essential.

8th: Workshop: 'Friendship Bracelets', 10am-4pm, ages 9-12, £8, booking essential

15th: Workshop: 'Wildlife in Wire', 10am-4pm, ages 9-12, £8, booking essential.

19th: Activities: 'Pirate Fantastic!', 10-12 noon or 2-4pm, ages 5-8, £5, booking essential.

22nd: Workshop: 'Bruck Sculptures', 10am-1pm for ages 5-8, or 2-5pm for ages 9-12, £5, booking essential.

23rd: Talk: 'I Love Every Plank of Her', 7:30pm, Rhian Tritton, Director of the SS Great Britain Trust on Captain Gray, free, no booking required

27th: Workshop: Felted pictures, 10am-1pm or 2-

5pm, ages 5-12, must be accompanied by adult, maximum 1 adult to 2 children, £5 per family, booking essential.

28th: Workshop: Funky knitted bags, 10am-4 pm, ages 12-15, £8, booking essential.

29th: Workshop: Pirate Hand Puppets, 10am-1pm or 2-5pm, ages 9-12, £5, booking essential.

31st July – 30th Aug.: Exhibition: 'Sea Cliffs to Hill Tops', new work by Howard Towll.

August

Mondays: Traditional textiles demonstrations, 2-4pm, free, no booking required.

1st Aug. – 1st Oct.: Exhibition: A cannon from El Gran Grifon, one of the Armada ships wrecked off Fair Isle in 1588.

9th: 'A Night by the Fire', storytelling and music, Crofthouse Museum, Boddam, Dunrossness. Adults £12, Under 12s £6, children must be accompanied by adult, booking essential.

10th: Activities: 'Undersea Creatures', 11-12 noon or 2-3pm, ages 5-8, £3, booking essential.

12th: Workshop: Family crests in clay, 11-12 noon or 2-3pm, ages 8-12, £3, booking essential.

24th Aug. – 3rd Oct.: Exhibition: 'In the Loop 2', photographs.

29th: Talk: 'Sea Cliffs to Hill Tops', with Howard Towll, 3-3.30pm, free, no booking required.

Opening Hours

Museum

Monday-Saturday 10am-5pm;

Sunday 12pm-5pm

Archives

Monday-Friday 10am-4.30pm;

Saturday 10am-1pm; **Sunday** closed

Hay's Dock Café Restaurant

Daytime **Monday-Saturday** 10.30am-

4pm; **Sunday** 12-5pm;

Evenings **Thursday-Saturday** 7-9pm

Please phone 01595 741569

to book a table.

New look for Old Haa



Photo courtesy of Mike McDonnell

Visitors to the Old Haa will welcome improvements carried out recently by a squad of volunteers. Robert Odie has practically lived in the building the past few weeks!

The craft shop has been revamped and the toilet block has been completely refurbished. The upstairs History Room has been restored to its former glory, and the gallery and tearoom have never looked better: the

upmarket homebakes can now be enjoyed in upmarket surroundings.

There is a new display system in the upstairs History Room without a drawing pin in sight, and a geological display is being prepared by the Burray Primary School at a series of workshops arranged by the trustees.

This is the first major facelift since the Old Haa was set up over 25 years ago,

and has been arranged under the Shetland Heritage Tourism Scheme, launched by SIC Economic development with LEADER funding. The grant has paid for materials, and will also enable the trust to invest in an interactive touch screen which will highlight aspects of local heritage. IT installation is being arranged by Dave Sinton from Unst.

All the work so far has been completed by the trustees themselves, and further improvements are planned. The trustees are working with Alan Smiles, stonemason, and Robina Barton, Geoparks Officer, to install a series of geological displays for the garden by July.

There will be a family workshop in rock painting at the Old Haa on Monday 5th July from 2.30pm led by Cass Slater, as part of Shetland Nature Festival (no charge/booking not essential but helpful for catering (also free), tel: 01957 722339/01957 702040).

This season's exhibitions include paintings by David Nisbet, a display on Yell emigrants 'Yell echoes around the world?', and wildlife photographs by Brydon Thomason.

Archives catalogue going online

Researchers all over the world soon will be able to access the catalogue of the Shetland Archives at the click of a mouse when it goes on line in the next few weeks. Thanks to some new software, and lots of hard work by archives staff, the descriptions of 74,500 records will be available through the Shetland Museum and Archives website for the first time.

At the moment the new system is being trialled in the Archives searchroom and feedback from researchers has been

positive. In the past readers had to plough through weighty paper lists or ask archives staff for assistance but now they will be able to search and browse the catalogue at their leisure.

Assistant archivist Joanne Wishart said: 'This will be a fantastic tool for everyone interested in Shetland history. We are hoping the catalogue will be online in August and in the meantime if anyone is interested in trying out the catalogue we would be pleased to see them in the archives'.

Tommy Watt, 1959-2010

Continues from front page "Museum Showcase". In the 1990s several history groups and museums were founded, and Tommy encouraged these, and developed Shetland Museums Forum to share expertise with the heritage community.

As the service grew, so did staff and resources. Tommy drove for purpose-built storage facilities, and records were transferred to computer. The culmination of his career was the development of the Shetland Museum & Archives which opened in 2007. Tommy and his predecessors had campaigned for a new museum, but by the 2000s it was really possible. It was a once-in-a-generation chance, and Tommy wanted the best museum Shetland could achieve. He and his team worked hard to deliver that. He's sadly missed by colleagues in Shetland and around the world.

Get In the Loop!

Shetland Museum and Archives will be the venue for a five-day international conference, *In the Loop 2: Knitting Origins and Evolution*, from 1-5 September. The conference will explore recent and historical trends in knitting design, technique, and social interaction, based on traditional practice. The keynote speakers are Deirdre Nelson, artist, Susan Crawford, knitwear designer, and Annemor Sundbø, historian. A significant number of presentations will be from researchers in Shetland. The conference is being organised by Carol Christiansen of Shetland Museum and Linda Newington of the University of Southampton. For a programme or to register, visit www.soton.ac.uk/intheloop.

Hame fae hame for Shetland descendants

It's been busy for front-of-house staff during Hamefarin – Museum visitor numbers are up nearly 12% over last June. The Archives has been active, too, with over 120 descendants researching their families over the past weeks.

Hamefarin visitors enjoyed Da Gadderie's exhibition of first generation emigrants. One visitor commented, "[It's] understandable that only a few stories could be presented..., so many Shetlanders left, and each have their own piece of history...". Jamieson/Moffatt – New Zealand.

Our boat trips around Lerwick harbour have also been popular. It has been a great two weeks meeting descendants of Shetlanders who left their homeland many years ago.

We hope to see you back in twenty-five year's time, if not before!

Visitor Services Assistants

Highlighting Hascosay

At the beginning of the last century, wildlife was pursued by trophy hunters and marksmen. Reigning monarchs of Europe competed in their attempts to shoot over a thousand birds in one day. Edmund Selous, a keen naturalist, tried to change attitudes, and argued that a more satisfying approach was to study and record bird behaviour.

It was Selous who first adopted the terms 'birdwatching' and 'birdwatcher'. He made two trips to Shetland, in 1901 and 1903. His book, 'Birdwatching in the Shetlands', was published in 1905. A copy is held in the Shetland Museum and Archives.

He spent time in Hascosay on both visits, staying in the house which still survives. His book

relates how he saw breeding cormorants when rowed to the caves by Mr Hoseason, the tenant of Hascosay. (The plot thickens – the Hoseason family left Yell in the 1920s and founded Hoseasons Holidays. Their small boat was acquired by Matthew Nicholson's father, and now forms the roof of a boatie shed in Matthew's garden).

Dr Leo Kinlen, from Oxford, is preparing a biography of Edmund Selous and would be grateful for any information or photographs of the house on Hascosay, the caves, the Hoseason tenants, and the wildlife recorded around the time of Edmund Selous' visits. Any information can be passed to Mike McDonnell, tel: 01957 702431 or email: mandgmcdonnell@btinternet.com.

Staff Profile: Matt Arnold, Lifelong Learning Officer



Matt Arnold

Our Lifelong Learning Officer, Kirsty Kennedy is on maternity leave. Her replacement Matt Arnold, has come to us from the Houses of Parliament education service, having previously working for BBC Education and as a teacher.

Q. What are you looking forward to most about your new job?

I'm trained in Early Years provision and am looking forward to working with this age group again. I enjoy undertaking projects with teachers and their pupils but I am also looking to widening my experience by working with senior citizens and community groups.

Q. Why do you think education in museums is important?

Museums are excellent resources which allow people to access information, be inspired and be challenged. Any educator involved in disseminating information will see that a museum's contents can be used to enhance learning in many ways to suit individual styles, whether it be formal or informal, active hands-on, or through passive observation.

Q. What do you most enjoy about working in museums?

I very much enjoy seeing people interact with displays or those who embark on using one of the carefully positioned learning activities which 'disguise' learning with play. It's also great when you can pass on information or stories which create a sense of amazement or great interest!

Q. What are you looking forward to most about living and working in Shetland?

I fell in love with island life after my previous role took me to Orkney and the Western Isles. I like the fact that I will never be more than three miles from water and that I can open my front door and be on a beach or up a hill within five minutes. I'm also happy to trade my morning commute from sardine-like Underground to a pleasant walk in the fresh air.

Who was Gregory 'keeper'?

In 1221, in the sixth summer of King Hakon Hakonsson's reign, there was a glittering royal assembly in Bergen. One of those who attended, in a group that included the earl and bishop of Orkney, was Gregory kirk from Shetland.

Who was this Shetlander with the unusual name? There is no account of him in the saga where the meeting is described. But the Norwegian historian Knut Helle has made the reasonable deduction that he was the 'sysseleinn' or sheriff of Shetland, an important official, travelling with his compatriots from Orkney. His name, almost certainly a nickname, seems to mean 'keeper', according to the great saga scholar Gudbrand Vigfusson – compare the Scots word 'keek' – although another school of thought is that it could mean 'bloated sheepskin'.

I had known about Gregory, and his visit to Bergen, for a long time. But a recent enquiry from a Norwegian genealogist made me look more closely at him. He is first mentioned in the saga of King Sverre, in the section where Sverre is dealing with the so-called Baglar rebellion, at the very end of the twelfth century, perhaps in 1199.

During those events the rebels headed to Halogaland, in the very north of Norway, and press-ganged the 'best men' of the place into their band. Among their new recruits were a landowner called Halldor of

Hiorleifsvik and his four sons. One of those sons was Gregory kirk.



Gregory's father-in-law, King Sverre Sigurdsson.

Whatever happened next, Gregory changed sides. From being a rebel, he became a trusted royalist. It wasn't long, according to the old history of Norway called *Fagrskinna*, before he married King Sverre's daughter Cecilia. And, as we have seen, in due course he became Sverre's sheriff in Shetland.

As is well-known, Sverre

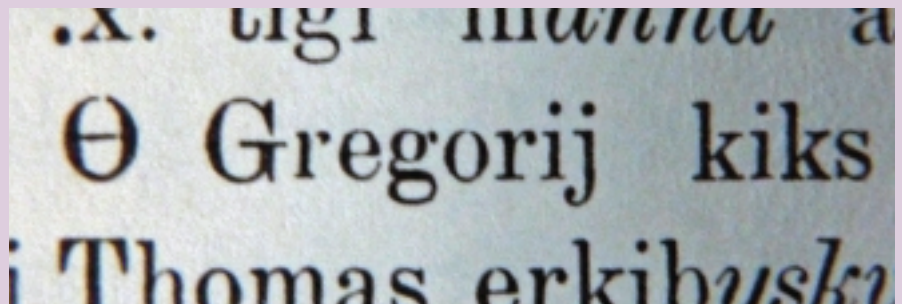
removed Shetland from the domain of the earls of Orkney in 1195, when he defeated another band of rebels. He needed an administrator here, and Gregory, a trusted son-in-law, must have fitted the bill.

He probably wasn't the first sheriff here after the rebellion. There is some evidence that the earls of Orkney might have got Shetland back, briefly, around 1210, and Barbara Crawford has suggested to me that the then king might have sent Gregory here at that point to put his foot down. No doubt he was based in the royal *stofa* in Papa Stour.

That's nearly all we know about Gregory 'keeper'. Since he was an important Norwegian, his death is recorded in Icelandic Annals, shortly after the big meeting took place in Bergen in 1221.

I am grateful to my friend Peder Gammeltoft for help with Gregory's name.

Brian Smith
Archivist



Gregory's death recorded in the Icelandic Annals.

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.

If you would like to stock Unkans, or distribute copies to your group, let us know.

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DEADLINE FOR CONTRIBUTIONS FOR NEXT ISSUE IS FRIDAY, 13 AUGUST 2010