

Unkans

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

FREE
March 2011
Issue 25

museum
Shetland
archives

Unique collection of letters comes to Archives

A recent donation to the Archives gives a new insight into the lives of a gifted Shetland family. Readers of *Shetland: a love story*, edited by Kay Wheatcroft and published by the Shetland Times Ltd last year, know about the talented family of Barbara Laing and Robert Jamieson. Married in 1861, they set up house in Sandness, where Robert was headmaster, and their eight sons and daughters were born there from 1862 to 1880.

Now Kay Wheatcroft has donated Barbara's and Robert's love letters, and a mass of letters home by some of their children, to the Archives. The love letters are full of interest, not just for the picture they portray of their developing relationship, but because of the lively picture they paint of life in Gulberwick, where Barbara lived during their courtship, and Sandness.

On 3 March 1859 Robert writes to say that 'there is scarcely a man left in the parish and what is even more singular, it is a rare sight to see a man child'. The men had gone to the whaling at Greenland. A year later

Barbara gives an attractive account of a soiree in the Gulberwick school, where the temporary French master joins in the singing. The collection contains 190 letters by John Kay Jamieson, the couple's fourth son, written when he was at university in Edinburgh, and later when he worked in the anatomy department at Leeds University.

(continued on page 2)

The Jamieson family of Cruisdale. Barbara and Robert with seven of their eight children. Daughter Christina stands back right, and son John Kay stands in front of his father, at the front.



What's on Guide

March

daily, to 27 March: Exhibition: The Lewis Chessmen, Unmasked, Da Gadderie, free.

daily, to 27 March: Voices of the Lewis Chessmen: radio drama by Charleston Primary School, Aberdeen, Da Gadderie listening post, free.

Lewis Chessmen Guided Tours: please ask at Museum reception desk for times, free.

daily, new Focus Displays: An 18th century waistcoat, conserved; Shetland Fur Trade; Edwardian scrap screen; Haps, Contemporary Fine Lace, Patterned Stockings and Gloves; ask at Reception for case locations, free.

12th: Junior Chess Competition, players aged P6 and S4 compete in 5 rounds for £60 top prize and trophy, 1-5pm, free, booking essential.

17th: Lecture: 'The Role of the Merchant Navy Across the Centuries', by Prof. Gordon Milne, Merchant Navy Memorial Trust (Scotland), 7.30pm, free, booking recommended.

19th: Senior Chess Competition: players aged 15+ compete in 5 rounds for top prize of £150 and replica Lewis Chessmen set, £10, booking essential.

24th & 25th: Easter Animals: Mootie Moose workshops, 10.30-11.30am & 2-3pm, ages 2-5, £6 for three (March, April & May) sessions, booking essential.

26th: Film: 'Southern Softies', by John Shuttleworth, 7.30pm, £8, £6 conc.

daily, 26 March - 10 April: Easter Scavenger Hunt ground & first floor galleries, pick up

clue sheet and prize at Reception, free, self-guided.

27th: Happy Hens: sewing, felting and decorated egg workshop, 12noon-2pm, P6-P7, £3, booking essential.

27th: Easter Present Pouches: felting and beading workshop, 2.30-4.30pm, S1+, £3, booking essential.

31st: Easter Foam Mosaics: art workshop, 10.30-11.30am, P1-3, £3, booking essential.

31st: Pop-Up Easter Cards: make sparkly 3D cards, 2.30-3.30pm, P4-5, £3, booking essential.

April

3rd - 2nd May, Exhibition: Høminland - Traces at Twilight, by Amy Lightfoot; woodcut prints based on life in Shetland mid-1800s to early 1900s, free, Da Gadderie.

4th: Scarecrows!: learn about seasonal crops and make a scarecrow to take home, 10.30-11.30am, P4-7, £3, booking essential.

4th: Talk: Høminland - Traces at Twilight, by Amy Lightfoot, artist, 7pm, Da Gadderie, free, but booking recommended.

9th: Willow Baskets and Felted Eggs: family workshop; any age, maximum four per booking consisting of children and at least one adult, 10.30am-3.30pm (lunch: 12.30-1.30), £6 per booking.

21st & 22nd: Musical Mayhem: Mootie Moose workshops, 10.30-11.30am & 2-3pm, ages 2-5, £6 for three (March, April & May) sessions, booking essential.

Opening Hours

Museum

Monday -Friday 10am-4pm
Saturday 10am-5pm
Sunday 12pm-5pm

Archives

Monday-Friday 10am-4pm
Saturday 10am-1pm

Hay's Dock Café Restaurant

Daytime:
Monday-Friday 10.30am-3.30pm
Saturday 10.30am-4.30pm
Sunday 12pm-4.30pm

Evenings:

Friday and Saturdays,
6:30-9pm (last orders)
To book: 01595 741569

Staff Profile: Steven Christie

What does your job involve?

There are various tasks for Visitor Services Assistants day-to-day and every day is different. There are reception and shop duties, tours for adults and school groups and of course workshop preparation with our new celebrity "Mootie Moose". Currently I man Da Gadderie while the Lewis Chessmen are here and also I add photos and information to the Photographic Archive.



What aspect of it do you enjoy most?

I would have to say it's the Photo Archive service. We have a great heritage and the photos bring it to life. I love looking through old photos. Recently I scanned a collection of glass slides and I was the first person to see the photographs in 80 years! I also love to identify unknown locations or people,

which helps make the archive more useful.

What is the most surprising aspect of working with the public?

I worked many years at the library before coming to the museum four years ago. Like here, I mainly worked with the public. It intrigues me every time I see how far people have come to reach us on our

remote island, we see all nationalities here in Shetland.

What is your favourite object?

My favourite object by far is the Goliath sculpture. He was carved by a great grand uncle of mine, Adam Christie. He was a talented man who should never have been sent away from Shetland. My family and I plan to research his life further.

Give us a Clue



The Reawick Seal (photos courtesy of NMS)

If you haven't already visited the museum to see the Lewis Chessmen exhibition now is the time to go. The exhibition is filled with mystery and intrigue and brings together artefacts from both the British Museum and National Museums Scotland.

One of the pieces on show is a medieval seal. Little is known about this piece other than it came into the National Museums collection between 1849 and 1892 and that it originated from Reawick. The seal depicts a knight on horseback brandishing a sword with an inscription around the edges.

Do you know more about the seal - who found it, where it was found, and how it came to be in Reawick? Any small clue passed down through the generations will help us gather more information about this interesting object.

The Lewis Chessmen are on display until the 27th of March.

Unique collection of letters comes to Archives

(continued from page 1)

John's letters are humorous, sometimes sardonic, and they deal with affairs at home as well as his day-to-day life in the cities.

Another correspondent is John's sister Christina, whose career has been dealt with recently by Marsali Taylor in her book about women and the vote in Shetland. The letters deal with the last part of her life, when she emigrated

to New Zealand to get relief from her bronchitis. Christina was a thoughtful and strong-minded correspondent.

The Jamieson letters are an important addition to the Archives' ever-growing collections. The writers didn't imagine that researchers would be reading their letters in the 21st century; unwittingly they put on record material that exists nowhere else.

Lace industry project

A joint project between the University of Glasgow and Shetland Museum and Archives is now underway to research the history of the fine lace knitting industry in Shetland. This was a skill and an economic activity conducted by women for whom hand-knitting provided important income and occupied a central place in the complex web of trading and social relationships. As well as being essential to the economics of many Shetland households, this beautiful knitted lace was also a fashion item, sought after and worn by the

wealthy, noble, and royal women of Scotland, England and further afield. The project aims to chart the history of the Shetland knitted lace industry by following the 'life' of knitted lace from its birth in the mind and fingers of a Shetland knitter to the agents, merchants and commercial units who promoted and sold it, and the women who purchased it to wear.

The project has been funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the form of a PhD degree in the Dept. of History, University of Glasgow. Roslyn Chapman was selected

from a group of candidates to conduct the research. She has been in Shetland recently, looking at documents and lace collections in Lerwick and Unst. Already her research indicates that Shetland lace was more important to 19th century business and fashion than previously thought. If you have information related to knitted lace, from family photos or stories about lace knitters or merchants, Roslyn can be contacted at 9 University Gardens, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, or r.chapman.1@research.gla.ac.uk



Your Museum needs you!

This July sees the arrival of the Tall Ships. For four days Lerwick town centre will be transformed by sail. To mark the occasion the Museum is running an exhibition called 'High Seas to High Teas' and we are looking for old tea chests. Do you have an old tea chest that we

could borrow until the beginning of August? They don't have to be in super condition – all we ask is that they don't have woodworm!

If you think you can help please contact Jenny or Laurie on 01595 69 5057 or email jenny@shetland-museum.org.uk or laurie@shetland-museum.org.uk.

What's in a bøst? A Pandora's box from Norway

I recently volunteered to be interviewed at Shetland Museum about my favourite object. I chose a 'Norrova bøst', an 18th century container or storage box. Imported from Norway, this particular bøst belonged to Robert Gifford, son of the landowner Thomas Gifford, of Busta. It has been decorated with pokerwork on the sides and the initials 'RG' have been carved into the lid.

I knew very few facts about this item, but since the interview I have found out that this type of wooden box has quite a long and interesting history. Wooden boxes like these were common household objects up to the 20th century, dating back to traditional wooden objects and tools of the middle ages.

The box is made with a technique called 'bentwood': a piece of wood is bent by steaming or boiling it, in order to achieve a rounded shape. It then can be fastened on one side by stitching the two sides together. The shape and design of this box initially reminded me of a small bentwood box given to me some years ago by the father of a Norwegian friend, who started making them after he retired. You'll see quite a few of them around Norway, where they are known as a 'tine' and are highly treasured family heirlooms. Most are decorated with traditional flower motifs and used to store cakes or other foods.

One of the first recorded examples of this type of container can be found in the collection of wooden objects from the Oseberg ship burial dating from around 835, now displayed at the Viking Ship



Above: Tines from the Oseberg ship burial (photo courtesy of Kulturhistorisk Museum, University of Oslo)
Right: The Gifford bøst

Museum in Oslo. With 'staves' of vertical pieces of wood bent into a round shape, it includes the locking mechanism of the two longest staves that keep the lid in place (with a metal lock added for security). Clearly, this was such a useful design for a container that it formed the basis for subsequent wooden vessels, adding useful techniques from elsewhere in Northern Europe, such as making lighter boxes out of tree bark (a technique dating to back to the Iron Age). In this way 'bøsts' or 'tines' were made, adapted and traded by various people in Northern Europe throughout the next 1000 years. Remnants of both bark- and stave-built wooden vessels were found during excavations of a late-norse farm at Biggins, Papa Stour.

The use of the Scots word 'buist'



(modern Scots) or 'boist' (Older Scottish Tongue, 12th-17th centuries, from French 'boite', box) documents some of the changing aspects of culture and language of Shetland before and during the 18th century. In the case of my favourite object, it provides a tangible link to what are complex changes both in Shetland and the whole of Northern Europe, including Norway and Shetland - a cultural and historical 'Pandora's Box'.

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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.

Email: info@shetlandmuseumandarchives.org.uk Telephone: 01595 695057 Fax: 01595 696729

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

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DEADLINE FOR CONTRIBUTIONS FOR NEXT ISSUE IS FRIDAY, 15 APRIL, 2011.