

Facebook Focus: Shetlanders on the Western Front



Shetlanders on the Western Front Facebook page is a local military history link. It has three aims. The first is to tell the story of Shetlander's experiences on the Western Front. The second is to give some historical perspective of our own local military heritage at this time. The third is to share Shetland soldier stories from the Great War whilst helping people to find out information about relatives or connections during the conflict. As we approach the 100th anniversary this will be very important.

Many Shetland men were Territorial Gordons in the 51st Highland Division, whilst others served in other Scottish Divisions, such as the

Seaforths and Black Watch. Others served in British and Imperial Regiments. Some of these Shetlanders were Regulars at the start of the war, whilst others joined up later through regular recruitment, then eventually conscription from 1916 onwards.

Although not exclusive, a continuing focus of the Facebook page is the Shetland Territorials. They were a group of young men who joined up locally prior to 'Great War'. As much as they were part time soldiers, they also were a social grouping. With the outbreak of war in 1914, they were sent to guard cable communications throughout Shetland. On Sunday 13th

June, 1915, over 200 left on the ship *Cambria* for mainland Scotland. Around 80, who had enlisted for Imperial Service, went to Scone for further training. By the end of 1915 these men left for France, to be joined by others throughout the war. The 'Shetland Battalions' served as an individual entity until the Battle of Ancre in November 1916. After this battle, 17 were killed and they were amalgamated into other Gordon battalions. They, and other Shetlanders, were to see more service and loss in battles such as Arras, Ypres and Cambrai in 1917, and also the German Spring Offensive and final Allied Offensive of 1918.

Therefore, we hope that *Shetlanders on The Western Front* can encourage and inspire people to find out more about their relatives, and how the local and personal story linked to wider one on the Western Front. Hopefully in this process, we can help keep their memory alive during the 100th Anniversary and beyond. These Shetland men should never be forgotten.

John Sandison

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

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2 Unkans

North Atlantic Native Sheep and Wool Conference 2013

The North Atlantic Native Sheep and Wool Conference was held in Shetland this year, to co-incide with the Wool Week festival in October. The event opened on Friday 11th, with a welcome from Lord Lieutenant Robert Hunter and conference founder, Karin Flatøy Svarstad. Lyall Halcrow and Ronnie Eunson gave an informative lecture on the concept of Carbon Kind lamb – examining the environmental sustainability of the industry.



Conference founder, Karin Flatøy Svarstad during the sheep visit in Unst



The conference was an opportunity for delegates to discuss issues of sustainability in relation to North Atlantic Native Sheep breeds. Iceland, Sweden, Norway, Shetland, Uist and St Kilda were all represented, with participants also attending from America, Canada and Australia. Over 60 people attended during the four days which included a visit to the Shetland Marts for a tour of the abattoir, an explanation of the Flock Book points and a chance to see the fleece judging and ram sale.

A trip to Unst and Yell included visits to the Hermaness Nature Reserve to hear about common grazing and see the sheep, as well as a craft fair at the Haroldswick Hall and a stop along the ASF Shetland Workshop, Shetland Gallery and Bayenne House to see the work being done with textiles. A full day of lectures in the Shetland Museum and Archives from a range of international experts was concluded with a meal on the Monday evening with traditional music and dancing demonstrations.

The main themes identified during the conference were the need for increased awareness of North Atlantic breeds, and in particular that different breeds produce fleece which is better used for different purposes. The importance of knowing the quality of each type of wool plays a part in educating the wider consumer base and getting the best price possible for the product. Deborah Robson, Fleece and Fibre expert from the United States, explained how some products need to be carefully considered when it comes

to wool. She gave the example that merino wool is less suitable for socks, than a hardier wool such as Shetland.

The differences between practices in each area were explored, with many alternative methods of sheep management employed in the various locations. Ólafur Dýrmundsson, Iceland's National Advisor on Land Use, explained how sheep in Iceland are taken indoors during the winter months and sheared in November and February to produce the best quality fleece.

It was firmly agreed that the conference provided much food for thought, and that delegates would be returning home with new ideas and inspiration for their sheep farming and fleece use, but also with an enthusiastic positivity about Shetland sheep, landscapes and people.

Next year's conference will be held in Iceland in September. Anyone interested in attending should contact organiser Jóhanna Pálmadóttir – textilsectur@simnet.is



Conference Delegates

Spotlight on Adam Christie



Photo: Left to Right – Senior museum assistant Linda Fraser, Steven Christie and Curator Rachel Benvie.

The true genius of Adam Christie's sculpture, painting and writing only came to light some 30 years after his death in Sunnyside Royal Hospital, Montrose. Adam was born at Aith, Cunningsburgh in 1868. He was the eldest son of Laurence Christie and Isabella Bain. Sadly Isabella was plagued with ill health and tragically died when Adam was only 7 years old. This had a devastating effect on Laurence, a fisherman by occupation, and the surviving children. Within 3 months of his wife's death Laurence was admitted to Montrose hospital leaving the children to be looked after by family at home.

This separation from his mother at such a young age and the disappearance of his father to hospital affected Adam profoundly. Although Laurence returned to Shetland in good health, remarried and had further children, Adam remained saddened by his mother's death. Adam began his artistic skills in stone in his twenties when he quarried and inscribed a

stone to mark his mother's grave.

As a young boy Adam worked with his family on the croft at Aith, an interest that lasted his whole life and can be seen reflected in his paintings from Montrose. Despite having left school at 13 years of age Adam had excellent writing skills and was articulate and well able to express his feelings on paper. Like many crofters in Shetland Adam also developed many practical skills. He built stone dykes, played the fiddle and was an avid inventor putting forward inventions to the Patent Office from time to time. Adam also submitted various letters and poetry to the Shetland Times. One poem 'To the Violin' went thus:

*And when a youth with scarce a single tool
I fashioned a rude model wherewith I
Learned the finger and the bow to ply;
Yet I failed – I only 'played the fool'*

This poem, although written almost 10 years prior to his severe depression and penned with humour, may reflect the melancholy that Adam was

already feeling. In 1901 Adam became severely depressed and was admitted to Sunnyside Asylum, Montrose, never to return to his beloved home in Cunningsburgh. Adam spent 50 years in the hospital and it was there that he turned his hand to sculpture in stone using nothing more than a six inch nail, a file and shards of glass. He was a prolific carver of stone heads, which were distributed throughout the Asylum grounds and were even gifted to people in the town. He also painted using flour sacks, old paint and chewed matches for brushes and constructed violins.

A book about Adam, *The Gentle Shetlander*, was published in 1984 by Dr Ken Keddie and earlier this year an exhibition of his work went on display at Montrose Museum. Curator Rachel Benvie has kindly gifted parts of the display to the Cunningsburgh History Group and this will be exhibited in their building.

*By Steven Christie,
great-nephew of Adam Christie.*

Burns Lane: the good, the bad, and the ugly

The streets and lanes of Lerwick were formally given names in March 1845. Burns Lane, at the north end of the town, was named after Magnus Burns, a successful and respected merchant. Burns lived, and also had his business, in an old house which stood on the corner opposite the Clydesdale Bank, where Mackay & Co. is now located. Born and brought up in Unst, he was captured in August 1793 and was pressed to serve in the Royal Navy. Burns became Quarter Master under Lord Howe and fought on the "glorious 1st of June," 1794, against the French Navy. Losing an arm he returned, battle scarred, to Shetland and started a prosperous business in Lerwick. During the 1820s he began to build and let houses up the lane directly across from his business. He soon owned most of all the properties in that lane, which naturally became known as Burns' Close.

In those pre-esplanade days, a sandy beach stretched the length of Lerwick's shorefront, interspersed by piers and lodberries. Burns' Lodberry was at the back of his house and Burns' Pier lay to the south of this. Merran Moad's beach lay a little to the north. Merran was a somewhat eccentric old woman who once lived there, probably somewhere near the steps which are still named after her. A wall topped with an iron railing ran between Burns' property and that of Laurenson & Co., which is now the Clydesdale Bank. This prevented passers-by from stumbling in the darkness onto Burns' Beach below. The space between these properties is still called Burns' Walk and it was here that Magnus Burns would take his daily stroll. Dressed in his best, Burns would strut around with his gentlemen friends and discuss the affairs of the day. One of these was John Burgess, who lived and worked as a tailor from No. 1 Burns Lane. He was father of the poet and author, Haldane Burgess.

No. 1 was down at the foot of the

lane on the north side. The door to the adjoining house was in Pilot Lane to the south, and the narrow entrance to Burns Lane formed a 'trance,' or passage, below these two properties. The lane was quite cramped here at the bottom but it widened out to give more elbow room, not to mention breathing space, towards the top end at the Hillhead. The dark enclosed space created by the trance was a great place for children to play and also afforded pranksters an opportunity for mischief. In his memoirs Thomas Manson described how boys would sometimes fasten a piece of string across the unlit entrance to the lane. A jab in the ribs was often enough to entice an innocent passer up the murky lane only to be caught or tripped by the string, to the hilarity of the impish jokers hiding nearby.

Life in the lanes was not always so joyful, and Burns Lane was no exception.

Houses were grossly overcrowded; in fact, the 1841 census records that there were almost two hundred men, women and children living within the confined spaces of this narrow lane. When we consider that there was a lack of adequate sanitation in the town, the situation would seem to us unbearable. Magnus Burns' son, David, was appointed Inspector of the Poor in 1845. In his report of January 1848 he described the town's paupers as dirty wretches, who were seemingly inclined to live in miserable hovels. It's noteworthy that many of the most offending slums were in Burns Lane, and had recently belonged to his late father. The Inspector noted his concern that such squalid conditions were adversely affecting the health of the said paupers. Indeed, he died later that same year, victim to an epidemic of typhus fever!

Brydon Leslie



Two men are having a conversation at the entrance to Burns Lane.
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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.

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DEADLINE FOR CONTRIBUTIONS FOR NEXT ISSUE IS 22 NOVEMBER 2013.