

Insight into life on Noss

When clearing out the loft space in his old croft at Gorie, Bressay, recently, Jonathan Wills made an exceptional discovery at the bottom of a box full of old paperback novels.

Hidden amongst the damp and slightly mouldy books, was the original visitor's book from the island of Noss. This stood out as something very different to the other books in the box and Jonathan realised from a quick glance inside what it was. The leather-bound book would have been in the kitchen of the farmhouse where the Jamieson family took guests who visited Noss to observe the birds.

This is an important piece of social history – and particularly relevant for Jonathan, who was the first appointed Warden on Noss in 1970. Although Noss did not receive Nature Reserve Status until 1955, its proximity to Lerwick made it a popular place for a Sunday outing in the early 1900s. Visitors would take the launch over

to Bressay and a member of the Jamieson family would row them across to Noss on the fourern, known as the 'Noss Boat' for 6d.

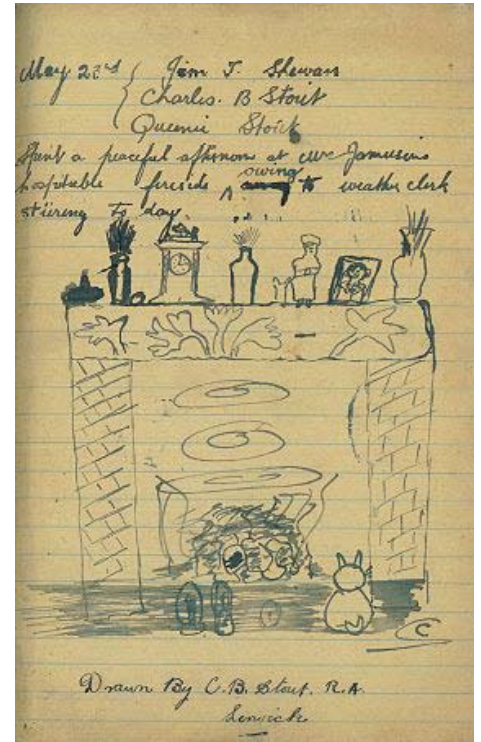
In 1870, all residents of Noss were cleared by the then Estate Factor (land manager), John Walker who established a pony farm on the island. This lasted for 30 years, until the Jamieson family moved from Unst to take on the land as a tenanted farm in 1900 and welcomed visitors to the island and often into their home.

The book was badly damaged when Jonathan found it. Some pages had begun to disintegrate as a result of the damp conditions. He sent it off to the Carrondale Bindery in Falkirk, who have an exceptional record in document restoration. Upon receiving the repaired and restored book, Jonathan contacted Shetland Archives and arranged for the book to be donated to the Archive collection, where it can now be viewed on request.

There are some fascinating entries in the book, which begins on 24th May 1911 and carries on through to 25th August 1921.

Charles B. Stout of Lerwick is the first entry, which is little surprise as Mr Stout was a well known birder and is one of the more regular names to be found in the book. Indeed, on one occasion when he became stuck due to the weather, he drew his surroundings and stated he had "Spent a peaceful afternoon at Mrs Jamieson's hospitable fireside owing to weather clerk stirring today".

There were very few entries during the years of the First World War as might be expected. Those who wrote in the visitors book over the years

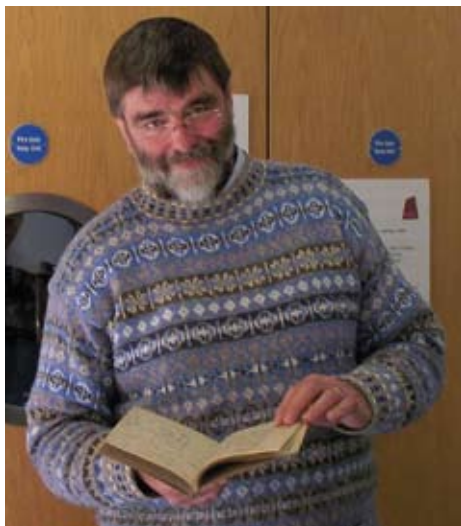


Entry and drawing by Charles Stout, of Lerwick.

came from a wide geographical reach including Aberdeen, Glasgow, Canada and even Rajputana in India. On 7th August 1913, the reader is told that 28 teachers, Mr Ratter and 3 'kiddies' visited "and had a spiffing time".

There are many amusing entries, and some more sombre entries – particularly the poetry to be found at the end of the book. Overall, it is a fascinating insight into a period of time which saw many changes in the world – but life went on as normal on Noss.

Shetland Archives are grateful to Jonathan Wills for the kind donation of this book to the collection, and for his generosity in paying for the restoration.



Jonathan Wills inspects the recently restored visitors book which he has donated to Shetland Archives.

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Da brigs o Waas

Roads had a greater effect on Shetlanders' lives than any other innovation. Virtually absent before 1850, highways came to rule everything; townships grew or were abandoned because there was or wasn't a road. A century ago boat users managed perfectly well without a road, but nowadays boats need roads as much as cars do, and districts grow according to their convenient road links to Lerwick, while islands become depopulated for the opposite reason.

So long as folk went overland on foot, the only obstacle was a wide stream or marsh, and, since the Middle Ages at least, people built bridges at critical places to allow travel onward to settlements, be there road or not. This can be discovered in placenames like Brugarth (literally "bridge farm") in Whiteness, but later developments eradicated medieval structures at such places, through bridges being constantly repaired and remodelled on the same site.

In summer 2014 Shetland Amenity Trust renovated an old bridge near the Brig o' Waas. It comprises seven culverts, some of which had collapsed, and the drainage had failed, causing overgrowth and

flooding. Under expert direction by Robbie Arthur, the Architectural Heritage workforce spent some weeks clearing drainage and rebuilding stonework. How old is the bridge? The route westward passes here, and there was a bridge of some sort for centuries. Unsurprisingly, the nearest settlement is called Brouster, another "bridge farm", but, just as anywhere else in Shetland, no building there is Medieval, so it would be astonishing if the bridge was. Impressive as it is, there's nothing in the construction that places it in antiquity. This kind of large-scale construction is exactly the undertaking that flourished from the 18th century, as the gentry implemented improvements. Other specimens survive from this era, e.g. at Hoove, Whiteness.

There are plenty clues to pinpoint when in the last two centuries it was erected. An obvious candidate is the so-called "meal roads". There had always been crop losses, but as our population grew, failures meant famine, and government shipments of meal began around 1800. The government didn't want Shetlanders to depend on charity, so in 1849 it



The Royal Engineers built the bridge at the head of the Voe of Bruland around 1850. Here it is fifty years later, with Brouster in the distance.

hatched a far better plan, whereby a massive two-year scheme began, where islanders built roads and were paid in meal. In turn, the roads benefited the whole community. The labour force comprised local men and women, with the expertise provided by the Army, who planned routes, oversaw quarrying, blasting, dyking and draining. One of the most important undertakings was the construction of bridges. The westward road here followed the coast, and the bridge the Army made went between the Voe of Bruland and the Loch of Brouster. Our bridge in question wasn't part of the scheme.

In 1878 the Ordnance Survey mapped the area, and besides the government road, we find a track branching from near the Brig o' Waas, leading north-west to Brouster, incorporating our bridge. The government road ended in a branch near the Scord of Brouster, and not to the farm, so was the track built after the 1850s to connect Brouster? The clue is the Abernethy family, who lived at Brouster from the 1870s, and were an enterprising lot. Their thriving business was started by James Abernethy in joinery, and once the next generation set up the firm J. & T. Abernethy it diversified into selling patent medicines, making coffins, carting, and plenty besides. Clearly, the Abernethys had the wherewithal to construct a track and bridge, and it benefited their trade. However – the thoroughfare is unlikely to have been built



Bridge on the track near Brouster, Waas, restored in 2014.

afresh to suit shoppers, because by 1900 this route was redundant, but the shop prospered.

Most likely, the route existed a few centuries earlier, including a bridge, which the Abernethys rebuilt around 1870, inspired by the army's masterpiece at the shore. Later, as the county road improved thirty years on, the track and bridge fell by the wayside.

Dr Ian Tait
Curator, Shetland Museum & Archives

Look familiar?

Shetland Museum and Archives currently have a display of Archive photos in the foyer area. These include a wide range of people and places including football teams, weddings, family days out and work colleagues from yesteryear.

There are a large number of photos in the Archive for which there are no recorded names for the people pictured, and the photographs on display are a selection of these. The display will remain in place until 20th May and members of the public are encouraged to come in and see if they can spot themselves, friends, colleagues or relatives and help to improve the database.

This summer will also see a new photo archive service offered to visitors. A selection of the most popular images from the archive are available to browse on a public access PC in the upper Gallery. From here, visitors can choose an immediate printing service, paid and collected within minutes from the reception desk. The full range of archive images are also available to order online at <http://photos.shetland-museum.org.uk/>



Can you help to identify any of these people?

New publications

Shetland Library is publishing two books about Shetland in World War One.

Blockade 1914-1918 - How Shetland Won the War, is about the Tenth Cruiser Squadron operating out of Shetland in the blockade of Germany, and written by Dr Ian Tait.

Safely Wounded is a collection of letters by Shetland servicemen, and one nurse, written during World War One. It has been compiled by staff and volunteers at the Shetland Archives.

The books will be launched at 7.30 p.m. on 16 April, at the Shetland Museum and Archives. Staff members will talk about creating the books, and about Shetland in World War One. The books are priced at £5 each, and will be available for sale after the event through the Museum and Archives Gift Shop and also online at www.shetlandheritageshop.com (from 17th April).

The Campaign for a Town Hall in Lerwick, 1880-1887



A portrait of Charles Rampini, commissioned by the public as thanks for his Town Hall campaign. He is holding a sketch of the Maid of Norway window.

The campaign to provide a Town Hall in Lerwick was the brainchild of Charles Rampini, who became sheriff here in 1878. He and others regretted the lack of decent premises for meetings and municipal affairs. 'When we wished to have a public meeting,' he said, 'or to have a concert, or even to witness a theatrical performance, we had to betake ourselves to an old and disused church!'

His ideas were popular. It was a time of

prosperity in Shetland, because of the new booming herring fishery. Rampini and others set up a joint stock company. They prepared a glowing prospectus, and sold shares to Shetlanders at home and abroad. They chose a site at the North Hillhead, commissioned an architect, and accepted an offer by the local builder John M. Aitken to construct the whole building for £3,240.

Meanwhile, there was a huge public campaign to raise money for the project. At Christmas 1880 the Good Templars, a temperance organisation, promoted a grand bazaar in the drill hall of the Seaman's Institute. They raised £160.

A year later a committee of Shetland women organised a 'grand bazaar and fancy fair' in Fort Charlotte, this time to raise funds to decorate the new building. This time they made £243 17s., 'the largest amount ever raised in a similar manner in Lerwick before', as the *Shetland Times* reported.

The decoration of the building was in the hands of Arthur Laurenson, a Lerwick draper and scholar. He devised a scheme of stained glass windows and heraldry to portray Shetland's Viking and later history. Benefactors, mainly outside Shetland, donated individual windows and sculpture. Laurenson also persuaded bodies in Germany and Holland to present stained glass to commemorate the relations between their communities and Shetland in times past.

The work went forward quickly: far more so than any modern building project in Lerwick. The foundation stone was laid in January 1882; large iron girders to strengthen the floor of the main hall were being put in position by June; the building opened for business in July 1883. The last stained glass, the great Rose Window, was installed in July 1884, and the clock and chime of bells in June 1887.

Lerwick Town Hall could easily have been a building to celebrate a prosperous class. Instead, it caught the imagination of all classes. And in July 1881, when a fishing disaster resulted in the deaths of 58 poor men, work on the Town Hall ceased instantly. Rampini and his friends threw themselves into raising money for the destitute widows and children instead – they stopped when the fund for the families was big enough. Only then did work on the Town Hall recommence. It was a success story: a work by and for the whole community.

The stained glass windows and other features of Lerwick's beautiful Town Hall are now in danger from the elements.

Shetland Islands Council have undertaken temporary works to secure the stained glass windows and have commissioned Shetland Amenity Trust and Groves-Raines Architects to identify the extent of repairs required, and to attract external funding for these works.

Brian Smith
Archivist



A detail from the Maid of Norway window in Lerwick Town Hall.

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 FRIDAY 22nd MAY 2015.