

James Robertson (1753 – 1829): The Shetlander who mapped Jamaica

A series of two hundred year old maps are now on display in Shetland for the first time. The maps of Jamaica and Aberdeenshire are the work of Yell man James Robertson (1753-1829) and have been kindly lent by the National Library of Scotland. They form the centre-piece of an exhibition which tells the story of Robertson's life and work.

James Robertson was the youngest son of John Robertson of Gossabrough, a merchant who imported goods from Europe for wealthy Shetland families.

He was bright and was sent to school in Aberdeen, where he also attended Marischal College and trained as a surveyor.

In 1778 he sailed for Jamaica to seek his fortune in the rich sugar



James Robertson portrait, courtesy of Shetland Museum and Archives



Map of Jamaica – Map loans courtesy of National Library of Scotland

economy. He produced plantation and estate plans and also served in the local Militia. As a younger son he had no family inheritance and his work in the Caribbean gave him an opportunity to make his own money and orchestrate his own success.

The pinnacle of his achievements there was his impressive maps of the island. He was commissioned by the Jamaican government to produce one map of the whole island and three county maps. These were highly praised as being very accurate and Robertson was well paid for his work. He returned to the UK in 1802 an independently wealthy man and lived for a time at addresses near Pall Mall in London.

In 1808 he was commissioned to survey and draw a new map of Aberdeenshire. The map was supposed to take three years but instead took 14. The commissioners

were angry at the delays and accused Robertson of making hundreds of mistakes and omissions. A lengthy legal dispute ensued which left Robertson's reputation in tatters and questioned his professional integrity.

Robertson died in Edinburgh in 1829. His legacy remains his important Jamaica maps.

Items for the exhibition have been loaned from the National Library of Scotland, Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Archives, the Royal Scottish Geographical Society and Aberdeen University, Special Collections. The exhibition and associated research has been financially supported by Museums Galleries Scotland

• The exhibition runs until 22nd November.



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In focus at Shetland Museum and Archives

Two of the gallery focus cases at Shetland Museum and Archives have been updated with new themed displays.

The first, situated at the top of the Boat Hall steps, is dedicated to the life of Captain James Jamieson of Sandness. The biographical exhibition explores his life in the Merchant Navy, in a career that spanned two world wars, and a rise through the ranks to Captain. James Jamieson commanded supply and factory ships for Salvesen & Sons, and during his command of convoy ships in the Second World War, Captain Jamieson was awarded the Order of the British Empire after two of his vessels were sunk. In August 1944 he commanded the tanker Empire Heritage, in convoy bound for Liverpool. His ship was torpedoed by the German submarine U-482, and most of the crew were lost, including the Empire Heritage's skipper. The display is a fitting tribute to a brave Shetlander, and includes whaling souvenirs, medals, and moving condolence letters to James's widow from his employers.



Left: This new case is dedicated to the life of Captain James Jamieson.

Below: Whale teeth and a penguin egg on show in the focus display.



The second new display is within the recent acquisitions case at the entrance to the upper Gallery from the main staircase. Museum staff never know what generous donors from all over Shetland will come in with next, and this time the cabinet features three themes especially. There is First World War memorabilia, like an embroidered hospital ship from Dunrossness, a phrasebook belonging to an air mechanic from Yell, and a rifle from Nesting. There are souvenirs from the Antarctic whaling such as penguins' eggs and whales' teeth. Look more closely and you'll find the most poignant objects - mourning items, marking the death of children in Yell and Northmavine.

Shetland Wool Week 2015

The sixth annual Shetland Wool Week was officially opened on Sunday 27th September at a packed out ceremony in the Clickimin Centre. The programme included Q&A sessions with local experts on 'Wool and Crofting' and 'Knitting and Spinning' in addition to musical entertainment from Hjaltibonhoga Fiddlers and an address from this year's patron, Donna Smith.

The event has gone from strength to strength since it's relatively humble beginnings 6 years ago; with only a handful of events between Jamieson and Smith and Shetland Museum and Archives. It now has an impressive

worldwide following and has expanded into offering textile holidays outside the main event, which have been very popular with international textile enthusiasts.

Shetland Wool Week continues to offer an extensive range of classes and activities during the week which are well received by visitors and locals alike who come together to celebrate this wonderful, sustainable and natural resource which is admired the world over – Shetland Wool!

Dates for next year have already been announced as 24th September to 2nd October. For more details see www.shetlandwoolweek.com

Below: Robertson and his crewmates get together for a tune!

Inset: Robertson and some of the crew enjoy a refreshment near their cargo of whisky. Robertson pictured back centre.



J. J. Robertson: An early career at sea

Many families have photo albums passed down through generations. One such album has been subject to much research but is proving difficult for the family to fully identify the locations and people included. Crawford McNeill (Melrose) and his Great-Aunt, Maureen Grant (Salloway) would be delighted to hear from anyone who may be able to shed some light on the contents of Crawford's Grandfather's shipping themed album.

John James Robertson was born in Aith in May 1897. Brought up on the croft at Biggins, he had limited schooling and decided at an early age that he would take a career at sea.

His first experience at sea was on the herring smacks off the North East coast of Scotland, around 1912. Two years later on the outbreak of war he was accepted into the Royal Navy Reserve as an Able Seaman. It is believed that he was the youngest AB in the Navy at the age of 16 - following some adjustments being made on the question of his age!

After the war, Robertson continued his sea career with the Merchant Service and later joined the Northern Lighthouse Steam Tender Service in 1927. These long, deep sea journeys gave him time to study, leading to him being involved with the Labour and Trade Union movement and instigating an active involvement in politics. This in turn led to him establishing a Trade Union for his fellow crewmen, before he was compelled to relinquish his position for 'disciplinary' reasons.

After running his own fruit and confectionary business in Edinburgh for a time, Robertson became a Labour councillor for Edinburgh City. He won his first Parliamentary election in 1945, and in 1947 was asked by the Prime Minister to take the post of Under-Secretary of State for Scotland which he did until he was forced to stand down in 1950 due to ill health.

Robertson never fully recovered from his illness and died in 1955. His full and active life included many other achievements including his role in the

establishment of the Dolphin training ship for young Merchant seamen, and tireless campaigning to improve conditions for seamen, agricultural workers and his constituents.

The images in the album include many of ships at sea, although none with the name of the ship visible. Many appear to show Robertson and fellow crew members with crates of Whisky and Champagne – one where the cargo appears to be being transferred to another ship. Other boats shown include a sailing ship, a small motor tender and steam ships. It is not clear exactly when the photos were taken, although Robertson looks to be around 25 – 35 years old so likely to be during his Merchant service.

The family would be keen to identify the ship, or any of the crew.

If anyone is able to help please contact Emma Miller – emma@shetlandamenity.org. All photographs from the album will be on display in the Shetland Museum and Archives Foyer for two weeks from Monday 19th October.

Mapping Shetland



The sappers prepare for their survey in Shetland. Note the chimney on their cooking tent.

Until the 1830s the sea around Shetland and its land mass had not been properly mapped. In the 1820s, as Chris Fleet of the National Library explained recently, during an excellent lecture in the Shetland Museum and Archives, mariners were still using Preston's map of the 1830s. To do so was dangerous. John Macculloch, a geologist, wrote a ferocious article in 1823, arguing that the lack of a decent chart was putting seamen's lives in peril.

After fifteen years work, George Thomas's chart of Shetland appeared in 1833. But it wasn't until the 1870s that sappers from the Ordnance Survey arrived in the islands, to make accurate maps of the land. Recently Mrs B. Barclay donated an extremely

rare photograph, which shows them in their camp at Brae. It can be dated to around 1 May 1877, from a report in the *Shetland Times*.

They worked arduously and quickly, in difficult conditions. One of them said that Shetland "presented to the surveyors once more the hard work and hard living they had so long undergone, the scant society and vexatious and perilous coast-work.

"The kindly natives, however [he went on], did all they could to make the stay of their strange visitors as pleasant as possible, and many agreeable memories of the expedition remain." In fact two babies were born in Shetland to O.S. personnel.

As well as surveying, the Survey consulted Shetlanders about place

names and parish boundaries. It is sometimes said that they relied exclusively on landowners and clergymen for such information. That is an exaggeration. Many ordinary Shetlanders played their part in recording names that they had known since childhood.

By April 1878 the Shetland survey was complete. The results appeared early in the next decade: the whole of Shetland at six inches to the mile, and most of it at 25 inches.

These beautiful maps are available to view on the National Library website at <http://maps.nls.uk/counties/index.html#shetland>

Brian Smith
Archivist

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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