

The Significance of Sphagnum Moss

In July 1768 the naturalist Gilbert White recorded in *The Natural History of Selborne* that he sent from Hampshire to Fleet Street in London some fish in "a little earthen pot full of wet moss" so that the recipient would find them "fresh and fair tomorrow morning."¹ He was no doubt referring to sphagnum moss, whose preservative properties were known, long before then, to the Vikings. And as Douglas Sinclair recently related in *Shetland Life*, this delicate but resilient plant was harvested in Shetland, as elsewhere in the UK, during World War 1, for use as wound dressings for injured troops.²

Sphagnum moss stores and transports a vast amount of water. There are 26 species known to be growing in Shetland. Most have adapted to particular "micro-habitats"; for example some favour hollows and shallow pools, others drier hummocks. They vary in colour – yellow, dark and light green, crimson, orange, ginger and bronze. Observed closely, they pattern the ground like a bejewelled carpet, bringing alive what from afar may seem a desolate, barren moor.

Most peat is derived from sphagnum, which inhibits the bacteria that cause decay. This is why the remains of bodies such as the Gunnister Man, and his clothes, are partially preserved. A good proportion of Shetland is of course covered with a mantle of deep peat or "blanket bog", which contains a huge carbon store. It also regulates water flow, preventing flooding.

Sphagnum moss is not usually grazed by sheep; bogs have been considered an unproductive hindrance to intensive farming (maximising the numbers of animals per acre). Unfortunately the moss is susceptible to trampling, and when the ground is over-stocked with sheep, can easily be dislodged and blown or washed away, exposing the peat surface, which erodes and releases carbon dioxide back into the atmosphere. This has happened in much of Shetland.

Scottish Government funding is available to restore bogs which have been damaged. Shetland Amenity Trust is organising peatland restoration projects. One near Cunningsburgh, begun in late

2014, has already demonstrated that, by damming erosion gullies, pools are formed, and as the level of the water table rises, sphagnum moss and cotton-grass (a pioneer species on wet peat) are able to establish and spread.³

The humble, often overlooked and unappreciated sphagnum moss deserves our utmost respect. Without it, we may literally be washed away! And unless it survives, moorland will become truly desolate, as there will be little or no vegetation left at all.

James MacKenzie
Woodlands Project Officer

¹ Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, Penguin Nature Classics, 1997

² *Shetland Life, The Past in Pictures – the Gathering of Sphagnum Moss*, p.34, November 2014

³ <http://www.snh.gov.uk/climate-change/taking-action/carbon-management/peatland-action/>

<http://www.shetlandamenity.org/peatland-restoration-project>



A bejeweled carpet



By damming erosion gullies, pools are formed

Local Events Listings

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Visit
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Sign of the Times

Twice last year I picked up old shop signs from donors. This is an uncommon donation, and in future it can only get rarer, because the fate of signs is tied with trading in Britain at large. From the early 19th century, shops were dotted all over Shetland, and there was no need to advertise them because customers were local. During that century shopkeeping prospered, and many firms opened, with owners increasingly proclaiming their businesses on signs. All they needed was a board with the name of the owner, and especially for shops in town, vying for passing trade, they declared the nature

of business, such as baker, flesher, or watchmaker. Most shops outwith the town were general merchants.

Someone in the district, not necessarily a specialist, made the signboard, and the style of lettering depended on the talents of the maker because signwriting was just a sideline. Oil paints 150 years ago didn't offer much colour range; off-white, brick red, and olive green were common, but by 1900 more shades were on the market. Planks could be ten or twelve feet long, and a foot or more wide, so careful planning-out was vital, and

design involved sizing and spacing the lettering to the board's size. The most accomplished craftsmen used shadowing in a contrasting colour along one side of the characters, in a technique also used on boats' nameboards and road vehicles, and some laboriously cut the letters into the board, which made repainting easier. Often, signs were painted onto masonry directly. There was no shortage of people to call on to make your sign. A typical maker was Ertie Abernethy, from Brouster, a professional photographer in the 1900s-'30s, who was talented in woodworking and painting, so was called on to design and paint the odd sign. In the 1910 *Mansons' Shetland Almanac* are advertisements for signwriting, from one-man businesses like Jack Ratter from Fedaland, who was a painter, framer and glazier in Lerwick, to big concerns like Charles Abernethy, from Tresta, whose company in Scalloway was a builders' merchant, wheelwright, and bicycle dealer. Examples in the museum include signs from once familiar firms like David Shearer, Commercial Road, and Nicolson & Co., Scalloway.

As time went on, writing was on the wall for signwriters! There were two factors: as wage rates rose, it was less attractive to pay someone to make a sign, and mass-produced sign products became cheap. Especially from the 1950s, individual sign letters of metal or plastic could be fixed to a board or directly to the wall. Gradually, there was less call for meticulously made signs with moulded frames and painted lettering, and quality declined. In the past thirty years the trend continued, when rural businesses came under pressure by Lerwick commuting, and in the 1990s came the yellow "Lifestyle" sign, supplied by a trade wholesaler, part of whose inducements was the big sign, with just the firm's name to differentiate. As the number of non-local firms in Shetland increases, there is more generic signage that is used across all branches, but luckily local firms can get excellent digitally designed signs made in Shetland, to the customer's exact requirements.

Whilst technically perfect, there's no hand-made individuality to modern signs, and you'll be lucky to see hand-made ones now. There are still some though, so examine the shops from the bus as you go home tonight...



Signs advertised specialist shops in Lerwick to pull in passing trade, like here in the North Road, which was once a bustling place.



This photographer once traded in signwriting, so was able to paint his sign on the masonry of 175 Commercial Street himself.



Goodlad & Goodlass?: The problem with generic letters fixed to the wall was, what goes up sometimes comes down.



After the decline of professional signwriting, many signs were devoid of finesse, although cartoons could cheer things up a bit.



The ubiquitous "Lifestyle" plastic sign imparted a sameness to Shetland's rural shops in the 1990s, but alas the Sandness shop itself has now gone, sign and all.

New Website for Shetland Museum and Archives



Shetland Museum and Archives has recently launched a new website.

The new site has a contemporary design and layout and is fully responsive to display on tablets and mobile devices, making it easier for visitors to get information on the go.

New functions include a public events calendar which will display all events held in the building, and also include details of Gadderie exhibitions planned over the next year. Smaller exhibitions and displays will also be listed on the new website.

Marketing Officer, Emma Miller, said "The way people access information online has changed so much since we launched the original website when the Museum and Archives building opened nearly 9 years ago. We've updated the look and layout of the site, keeping all the information that people will be looking for and adding in a few more things which we hope folk will find useful. The website is well used with over 2500 unique visitors every month and I hope that the improvements we have made will be well received."

The website has been designed by local firm, NB Communication.

Visit the website at www.shetlandmuseumandarchives.org.uk



Thomas Mortimer Yule Manson

From The Waters Beyond, to The Shetland Bus

Everyone knows David Howarth's book *The Shetland Bus* (1951). However, Howarth originally intended to call it *The Waters Beyond*, a not-so-snappy title! This not well

known fact emerges from a letter amongst the large correspondence of Thomas Mortimer Yule Manson, journalist, musician and historian (1904–1996), in the Shetland Archives.

In October 1950 Mortimer Manson, in reply to David Howarth's request for advice and comment on his 'altogether saga like' manuscript, replied:

... Your conciseness and suppression of irrelevant detail is very refreshing compared with too many books on this kind of subject. ... [W]hen I think of the surprise and interest of Shetlanders, especially those abroad, and the great interest to be expected in Norway (not least for the salty comments on their naval officers) ... I hope you send a copy to Churchill ...

Manson suggested that background information be added to the story, for instance that there were:

... 15,000 British troops in Shetland at one time [and the] ... RAF Command and fighter stations, ... Norwegian air units ... 700 Norwegian forces men in Shetland. ...

'Perhaps', he wrote *security considerations still deter you from [disclosing] some of this [detailed information] and your hiding the identity of the slipway in Lerwick and the Duncan men in Burra Isle who built the numerous Shetland boats for use in Norway.*

He also comments on the lack of a general description of Shetland that readers might need:

'[You] infer that [Shetland] apart from Scalloway and Lerwick, is a kind of Svalbard, with a population of two or three thousand, whose war effort lay mostly in engineering and carpentry. I say this quite advisedly, for ludicrous impressions of Shetland still abound and persist. Even Professor Strombäck of Upsala shows in an article in a Swedish paper what a fantastic idea he had of Shetland before he came to the Viking Congress [in July 1950] ...'

Manson continues that the book might include named Norwegians, some of whom continued links with Shetland, and of their lives after the war. He was particularly interested, as he knew or met all the ME7 officers mentioned in the manuscript, as well as Kvalheim and, particularly, Arthur Mitchell.

... I am grateful to see that a date stamp I forged for Mitchell in the 'News' Office (I mean the slugs for it) was apparently connected with the Tirpitz affair ...

His postscript is particularly illuminating:

*P.S. – Your title is euphonious and poetic, but not suggestive of the subject. Have you ever thought of calling it *The Shetland Bus* – I admit it has a very flippant sound, but it would have an immediate effect in Norway, and once understood in this country, would hold attention too.*

And thirty years later, in April 1980, David Howarth wrote to Manson

*... I had quite forgotten the original title I proposed for *The Shetland Bus*: thank goodness you made me change it ...*

Blair Bruce
Archives Assistant

The papers of Mortimer Manson are currently being catalogued in the Archives and are, unfortunately, not able to be viewed as yet.

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 25TH MARCH 2016.