

They volunteered their all: Shetland Territorials in the Great War

An exhibition on the Shetland Territorials is currently on display outside the Shetland Archives and has proven very popular with visitors. Jon Sandison, who curated the exhibition, tells us more:

Many questions were asked about a photograph of a kilted soldier at the head of the stairs at St Magnus Street when we were younger. Like many others, William Sandison served in the Great War. He was also a Territorial. This Exhibition is an attempt to re-tell the lost stories via the Territorial formation, departure and war experience. It is complimented by many photographs, loans from the community, and artefacts from the Museum's outstanding collection.

In July 1900, the War Office agreed to the formation of companies of 7th volunteers in Shetland. At the end of November, three companies, attached to the Gordon Highlanders, was raised in the islands. Two in Lerwick, one in Scalloway; an important milestone as there had been no infantry presence in Shetland since 1884. In 1908, as a response to reforms following the Boer War, the Volunteers were replaced by the Territorial Force. They attended the Coronation of King George V in London, 1911. The Shetland unit became the *Shetland Companies*, and was reorganised as two companies.

The Territorial, a part-time soldier, signed up for four years, undertaking training drills, military manoeuvres and camp. Membership was mainly from Lerwick, but others joined from all over Shetland, having a variety of backgrounds including the herring industry, academia, shops and other trades, while seizing the opportunity to participate in 'part-time' soldiering. In a different age, it became an important avenue for socialising, pipe band practice, recreation, and sport.

Upon the outbreak of war more men were needed alongside the depleted British Expeditionary Force, and Kitchener Volunteers. On 13th June, 1915, an estimated 240 left for mainland Scotland, on SS Cambria. Thousands lined the streets and fore shore of Lerwick on an emotional day to say their goodbyes.

Some Territorials were in action during the summer Somme Offensive. However, the first major involvement of these local men took place during the final Somme Offensive on 13th November, along the Ancre River; the largest single loss Shetland had over one day during the Great War.

The experience of trench warfare is reflected in the display by battle dress uniform, helmet, and Lee Enfield rifle with bayonet, knuckle duster, identity tags, shell balls, rum keg, and water bottle. There is a panel memorial to all the Territorials who died during the Battle of the Ancre.

By the end of the war, over 90 Shetland Gordon Highlanders had died. The exhibition includes 12 profile panels of Territorials

who served, with no distinction between those who came home, and those who did not.

This exhibition has been made possible by the work of many, including the loans which relatives have provided, the work of staff at the Shetland Museum and Archives, and The Shetland Family History Society. If you are visiting the exhibition, please leave a message in the reflections book. The exhibition is on until January 2017. I would also be interested in hearing any stories which you may have on family members who served in the Shetland Territorials, or indeed Army generally during World War One.

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Territorials display in upper foyer of the Shetland Museum and Archives.



Lerwick TA men at Fort Charlotte.

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

Visit
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From lifeboat, to ferry, and back

Now the winter season is upon us, the work in the boatshed has started up again, and visitors get a lucky chance to see old-time vessels being carefully restored, and discuss the ongoing work with the craftsmen themselves. The current project is the biggest restoration job we've undertaken on any of our craft; a ship's lifeboat from the liner *Oceanic*, and surely one of the most important and interesting vessels in the boat collection. The parent ship was completed at Belfast in 1899, and big shipyards like Harland & Wolff had their own boatyard, where all the lifeboats were constructed. The ship was the largest in the world at the time she entered service, plying the Transatlantic route, and it's a measure of her size that she carried twenty of these lifeboats. The preserved passenger ship *Nomadic*, built 1911, is open to the public at Belfast, and the publicity for attractions on the ship includes one of her original boats, described as "the last remaining White Star lifeboat". Alas, this is not the case! Not only is the *Oceanic*'s boat another White Star Line one, it is also older, and larger.

Her story gets more interesting in 1914, because the mothership was pressed into the Navy as the merchant cruiser H.M.S. *Oceanic* in the First World War, enforcing the blockade. For all her years of work carrying passengers and cargo, the one-time liner is today only remembered as Shetland's most famous shipwreck, for the cruiser was stranded only a month into the conflict, and had to eventually be abandoned when recovering the ship proved impossible. The salvage of equipment carried on for three weeks, until the weather broke. The final crewmen to leave the ship were part of the starboard watch, who were evacuated in three of the lifeboats, the last of which to unload was No. 6 lifeboat (the vessel now



The *Oceanic*'s lifeboat is 29 feet long, and some nimble crane work was needed to get her into the boatshed.

in the Museum). By coincidence, the last man to get out of that boat was a Shetlander – Willie Mann, from Yell, and he was instructed to leave the empty boat to drift. The lifeboat eventually drifted to Eshaness, where she was declared to H.M. Customs, and was towed to Lerwick.

Old lifeboats were heavy brutes, because they were never intended as rowing craft, so any that came ashore in Shetland were invariably made into a shed roof, but this wasn't the case for No. 6, and here the third phase of her story begins. Around 1920 John Yates, Hoversta, bought the lifeboat and had her converted to a passenger launch, by installing an engine and adding a foredeck, so as to run on the Bressay Sound passage. For fifty years, over a few changes of ownership, the boat, named

Norna, carried people and goods between the town and Bressay. In 1970 the boat was sold, and the next stage of her life began, as a flitboat. Initially she shipped livestock from Bressay to Lerwick, then she was sold in 1975 to work at shifting sheep on Yell Sound. The boat was hauled ashore for good in 1993, and readers may remember her lying at the beach at Ulsta, where she remained until Magnus Anderson donated her to the Museum in 2001.

And so, her story turns full circle. When the vessel came here, most of the ferry-conversion was missing or in very bad condition. Conversely, the almost 120 years-old original timbers were in sound order. This – along with the fact that its ocean liner, wartime, and shipwreck – connections were of the greatest significance to her

pedigree, determined the restoration. The vessel has been reinstated to her original form, as R.M.S. *Oceanic*'s No. 6 lifeboat. Because she is an artefact, and will never be outdoors again, we've been able to keep all the original boat, and not replace unseaworthy, but still perfectly sound, wood. The work was split into two phases. In winter 2015-16 all the non-original timber was removed; the top two planks plus the gunwales were reinstated, the stem and stern were replaced, and the keel was scarfed. Missing parts removed in the 1920s were put back anew; thwarts across the width and along the sides, the keelson, and lockers fore and aft. The biggest challenge was metalwork for tholes and thwart brackets, because neither wrought-iron or blacksmith can be had locally, but because the vessel will always be indoors, we decided steel was a pragmatic compromise. The 2016-17 winter is the finishing touches, such as boarding under the thwarts, fitting grab lines, and making the rudder. One of the most time-consuming aspects is the painting, with woodfilling, sanding, and undercoating to be done before the topcoats can even begin, and there's a lot of fiddly detail on the interior. We're very fortunate that White Star Line enthusiast Graeme Taylor very generously volunteered his time to undertake this work, and his diligent results can easily be seen. Graeme is now masterminding the specifications for the several metal nameplates that will culminate the two-year project.

Dr Ian Tait
Curator

We need round-section oars of at least 14 feet long to complete the job. If you have any please contact Ian Tait at the museum.



Jack Duncan (foreground) and Robbie Tait removing the later timber from No.6 lifeboat. The 1920s changes included a foredeck, different gunwales, rubbing strakes, engine beds, and a hefty stem and stern. The original 1899 timber is in very good order.



Museum volunteer Graeme Taylor has a special interest in White Star Line ships, and his dedication in preparing and painting R.M.S. *Oceanic*'s lifeboat was indispensable to the project. The original colours were reinstated; cream hull, brown gunwales, buff inboard.

PEATLAND PROJECT HIGHLY COMMENDED

The Shetland Peatland Restoration Project has been highly commended in the RSPB Nature of Scotland Awards.

These awards are about celebrating the success of those who work hard to protect Scotland's precious natural heritage and who protect that which is under real threat. There were a total of 39 finalists across eight categories.

The Peatland Restoration Project, which is managed by the Shetland Amenity Trust, was nominated in the Innovation category. The winners were The James Hutton Institute for their Magic Margins project, and

The Scottish Code for Conservation Translocations was also highly commended.

About half of Shetland is covered in peat but Scottish Natural Heritage have estimated that 70% of Shetland's blanket bog is damaged.

The Peatland Project has been innovative in using re-cycled locally abundant waste materials from the aquaculture industry. This has made carbon savings several times over-through restoring degraded blanket bog, avoiding the need to freight materials to Shetland and re-use of bulky waste material from salmon farms.

Shetland Boat Week Appeal



Organisers of Shetland Boat Week are appealing for potential boats to be included in one of several displays planned during the maritime festival in 2017.

There are many different types of Shetland model and the Committee are keen to theme displays to show the variety and quality of these vessels. Anyone who has a Shetland model boat is invited to submit details of their vessel for consideration. All applications will be considered on merit and will take into account the builder, age and provenance of the craft.

Application forms can be requested from the Shetland Amenity Trust office in Garthspool by calling 01595 694688 or emailing info@shetlandamenity.org. Forms can also be completed online at www.shetlandboatweek.com/events.

Applications should be submitted before Monday 9th January 2017.

Jessie Saxby's Adventure Fiction

Jessie Saxby is best known in Shetland as a folklorist. But to me she is equally interesting as a writer of boys' adventure fiction, stories inspired by Shetland's Viking history and set in Shetland. These stories, viewed in the context of children's adventure literature, have been criticised as simplistic Norse romanticism. They are largely forgotten today. But they convey a powerful sense of Shetland's past. Her young heroes care deeply about their Norse heritage and offer thoughtful insights about this and about Shetland's place in 19th century Britain.



Jessie Saxby.

During my research into Saxby's boys' stories for the M.Litt Orkney and Shetland Studies, I became particularly interested in how Saxby uses Shetland dialect. Her contemporaries, such as J.J. Haldane Burgess and Basil Anderson wrote some of their best work in dialect. Saxby, in contrast, makes little sustained use of the Shetland vernacular in her stories. She says this is because it would be unintelligible to English readers and therefore uses only enough of it to colour the conversation. Indeed, she admits that when she does use dialect, this is not always the 'genuine patois' of Shetland but what she calls 'Scotticisms', deemed by her to be akin to Shetlandic and more familiar to readers outside Shetland. In one of her novels – *A Camsterie Nacket* – she writes that she hopes this will satisfy Shetlanders who might needlessly worry that she has forgotten 'the dear old dialect'.

The teenage middle-class boys who populate her stories drop the dialect, whether Shetlandic or Scottish, the more educated they become – although they sometimes revert to it in moments of high emotion. One young lad in *A Camsterie Nacket* is accused of getting linguistic ideas above his station: *wir Shetland tongue is no' gude enough the nacket noo ... but he maun be knapping like ony English lord*. This might seem strangely inconsistent with Saxby's beliefs about Shetland's unique identity but it is consistent with the need to assure a wide readership outside Shetland. As



Lads of Lunda, by Jessie Saxby.

a young widow, with five sons to raise, she needed to make money from her fiction. This does not mean that she knew nothing about the dialect or did not approve of other writers' attempts to use it in their work. She was very supportive of Basil Anderson's work, for example. Her non-fiction writing shows us that she is knowledgeable and interested in the Shetland dialect. But her adventure stories had a very wide readership outside Shetland and often formed chapters in popular magazines such as *The Boy's Own Paper*, read throughout the United Kingdom. Her characters therefore never use sustained Shetland dialect although they regularly use isolated dialect words, helpfully translated by Saxby in footnotes. I have recorded as many of these as I could find.

Lynn Powell

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 27TH JANUARY 2017.