

# Fetlar2013

## Traditional Labour

### Peat Flittin

Until the 1950s, peat was the main form of fuel on the island, and most of the peat cutting took place on Lamb Hoga. Residents of Fetlar have described how families would stay in the peat hoose of Lamb Hoga during the summer months to assist with cutting.

Since the main settlements were a fair distance from Lamb Hoga, the peat all had to be transported home – and this process was known as “flittin”. Traditionally, ponies or boats were used in this task. Using a set of bends – special straw baskets (“kishies”) held by ropes on either side of the pony’s back – the dried peats were transported to the crofts on both the west and east sides of the island.

More details about peat flittin can be found in the booklet Flittin Peats, available from the centre, as well as a display showing some of the equipment that was used during the process.

### Crafts and Knitting

Before industrialisation, Fetlar women would knit whenever and wherever they could – they knitted clothes for their families, and also produced large quantities of lace that could be sold for an additional income. Traditional weaving and basket weaving also featured heavily in Fetlar life.

Fetlar Interpretive Centre has a collection of crafts and knitwear, including some of the instruments that were used in craftwork, and photographs of award-winning knitwear complement said collection.

The Interpretive Centre now houses a craft shop, which sells handmade items made by Fetlar residents with many locally sourced materials.

### Crofting

Crofting in Fetlar remains as a product of the Clearances that took place on the island between the 1820s and 1870s. This was a time in history when tenants were evicted to make way for sheep grazing, and it wasn’t until the Crofters’ Holdings Act of 1886 that the crofters were granted some security. The effects of the Clearances can still be seen today in the large number of ruined crofting houses across Fetlar.

Crofting provided tenants with a source of income and employment, but it was not enough to live on. Nearly all crofters worked at the croft part time and undertook other work to provide for their families.

Today, many islanders continue to croft, and the Interpretive Centre holds many photographs and written reminiscences of people who remember crofting as it was in the first half of the 20th Century.

### Contact

[Fetlar Interpretive Centre](#)

Tel: 01597 733 206

Email: [info@fetlar.com](mailto:info@fetlar.com)

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## Early History

Fetlar has been inhabited for at least 5,000 years, and probably even longer than that – prehistoric sites have been found across the island, but since there are no written records, we cannot be sure of the exact time that Fetlar was first settled.

What we do know is that the island holds many archaeologically interesting sites, from Neolithic cairns to Bronze Age stone circles and the remains of Iron Age brochs. There are a number of other structures and features that can be found in Fetlar, perhaps the most enigmatic being Finnigert Dyke.

### **Finnigert Dyke**

*Also known as Finns' Dyke, Funzie Girt Dyke, or Finnigord.*

Finnigert Dyke is probably Fetlar's oldest surviving man-made structure, having been built prior to the 1st millennium BC, and with large sections still visible today. A precise date of construction is unknown, but various sources have cited Mesolithic, Neolithic, or the Bronze Age as the likely time of construction.

This prehistoric structure was once a formidable dyke that stretched from one side of the island to the other from north to south, separating the island into two halves of roughly equal size. The structure was still complete when the early Viking settlers came to Fetlar, and its influence was such that they treated Fetlar as two entirely separate islands, Est Isle and West Isle.

The dyke is about a metre wide and was built with heavy local stones, and is considered to be one of the best surviving examples of ancient boundary dykes. The human effort required to construct such a structure would have been considerable.

There are many stories about how the dyke came to be constructed. One claims that it was built overnight as the result of a disagreement between two landowners.

Another claims that the Finns – possessors of mystical powers and magic – built the dyke overnight for a farmer who had promised to give up his best cow in return.

### **Hjaltadans**

*Also known as the Fairy Ring, Da Haltadans, or Haltadans Stone Circle.*

The name means “limping dance”, a reference to the local legend that surrounds the stone circle. It is said that the outside ring of stones are trows, Shetland's little people, and that the two centre pillars are a fiddler and his wife. Having danced and fiddled all night long, they were caught by the light of the rising sun, which turned them all to stone.

Built in the Bronze Age, it is now unknown what the original function of the stone circle was, but there is speculation that it was once used as a place of trial and judgement. The site is a ring of 38 stones and has a diameter of 11 metres (37 ft). Within the stone ring is another, earthen ring, and in the centre of these are two rectangular pillars.

### **Fiddler's Crus**

A short way from the Hjaltadans is a small grouping of probable Stone Age stone circles known as Fiddler's Crus, “the fiddler's enclosure”. It has been speculated that the area was in some way involved with the Hjaltadans: the three rings were where criminals were tried and condemned. A white boulder, in the centre of the southeastern circle, is said to have been the judge's seat.

### **Fetlar's Cairns**

Fetlar's chambered cairns at Vord Hill are grave sites, heel-shaped structures which have survived for thousands of years. The best-preserved cairn is the one to the north; a First World War shelter was built into the wall of the south cairn. There are a number of other cairns present on the island which can be found using Ordnance Survey maps.

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## Early History

### **Fetlar's Brochs**

The remains of at least 7 brochs and their defenses are present on Fetlar – Sna Broch, near Snabrough, has been washed away by the sea, but the defensive earthworks can still be seen. The Broch of Houbie, now largely destroyed, can still be traced by the outline of the building and surrounding defensive works. Other brochs can be found using Ordnance Survey maps.

Brochs are Iron Age structures unique to the Northern Isles, the Hebrides, and parts of mainland Scotland.

### **Other Archaeological Remains**

A Bronze Age standing stone, known as the Ripple Stone, is situated in the gardens of Leagarth House. Little is known about when or why the stone was erected, but it is likely it was used as a marker of some sort.

The outline of the structure of Gallow Hill may still just be seen on Lamb Hoga. This was a place of punishment for the island, and many accused witches were hanged here. According to Jeemsie Laurenson, Fetlar's storyteller, the last witch to be hanged was charged with sinking a fishing boat.

There is a huge range of other features on the island, though less prominent archaeological features can be hard to find without a good map or GPS coordinates. Just a few examples of the rich variety of Fetlar's archaeological history include a burial cist, burnt mounds, a range of chapels and ancient burial sites, and even early Celtic monastic settlements.

### **Contact**

[Fetlar Interpretive Centre](#)

Tel: 01957 733 206

Email: [info@fetlar.com](mailto:info@fetlar.com)

[RSPB Warden](#)

Tel: 01957 733

Email: [fetlar@rspb.org.uk](mailto:fetlar@rspb.org.uk)

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## The Vikings

Tradition claims that Gruting, which lies to the north of the island, was the site of the first Viking landing in the West – and while this is impossible to verify, we do know that Vikings definitely settled on the island. Much of this evidence comes not from excavated archaeological sites, but from the names of settlements and landscape features of Fetlar.

The Shetland Isles are right in the middle of what were once the Viking seaways. As Fetlar is one of the most easterly islands, and thus one of the closest to Norway, it is possible that it was the first island that the Vikings reached while crossing the North Sea. Naturally, it made sense for some of the travellers to stay and settle on the island, establishing farms and homesteads.

With them, the Vikings brought new styles of buildings, politics, laws, and most importantly, new language. Many of the place names – and even some of the local dialect words – present in Fetlar have their roots in Norn, the language spoken by the Viking settlers who remained on the island.

Applying highly descriptive names to almost every feature of the landscape, the Vikings left a rich linguistic history behind. For example, we know that ‘wick’, ‘firth’ and ‘voe’ names describe bays of different shapes; ‘ness’ names are headlands, and narrow inlets are described as ‘geos’.

We can also tell that Vikings were once on the island by the evidence they left behind during the production of steatite bowls. Steatite, also known as soapstone, is a soft type of stone that is carved out of quarries in whole pieces. The Vikings would carve bowls and cooking pots directly from the stone face, leaving an impression behind – these can still be seen at Clemmel Geos, an ancient steatite quarry at the coast to the south west of Houbie.

Finally, there have been archaeological excavations on the island. One of these, which took place at Houbie, uncovered the remains of a Viking longhouse. Items from every day life, such as fishing or loom weights, were also revealed – along with a huge steatite bowl.

### More Information

For more information about Viking settlers in Shetland, visit the [Shetland Museums and Archive website](#).

For more information about the Shetland Place Names Project, visit the [Shetland Amenity Trust website](#).

### Contact

[Fetlar Interpretive Centre](#)

Tel: 01957 733 206

Email: [info@fetlar.com](mailto:info@fetlar.com)

[Shetland Place Names Project](#)

Tel: 01595 694 688

Email: [info@shetlandamenity.org](mailto:info@shetlandamenity.org)

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## The Clearances

The Clearances refer to a period of time during the 18th and 19th Centuries when residents were forcefully displaced from their homes and lands to make room for sheep grazing. The act was carried out by landowners in all parts of Scotland, and was the result of an agricultural revolution supported by the government, who gave financial aid for roads and bridges to assist the new sheep-based agriculture and trade.

### Sir Arthur Nicolson

In 1805 the Nicolson family came into possession of parts of the island; the landowner, Sir Arthur Nicolson, designed and commissioned the building of Brough Lodge, which was completed c. 1820 – 1825, and still stands today on the west side of Fetlar.

During the 1820s, the Clearances began to be emulated by Fetlar landowners. Nicolson began enclosing ever larger portions of the island, displacing many families in the process. Many of these families migrated to other parts of Shetland and some even further afield, to places like Australasia and North America. Eventually, Nicolson began to forcefully evict his tenants, so that even more land could be turned over to the grazing of sheep.

Many ruins of old crofting houses may now be seen on the island. It is reputed that walls and other buildings were made using stone from these buildings, as at the Round House on the east side of Fetlar.

### The Effects of the Clearances

Although the Clearances reached Shetland later in comparison to the Scottish highlands, the effects can still be seen today. In Fetlar, the Clearances contributed to a decline in population from which Fetlar has only recently begun to recover.

A major contributory factor to this continued decline was the lack of a pier or natural harbour. Many of the other island communities that existed during the time of the Clearances were able to supplement their income and provide additional foodstuffs for trade through working at sea – in some cases, this became the main source of employment and industry for those communities, and continues to this day.

In the case of Fetlar, there was a tradition of haaf fishing – but this dangerous occupation came to an end in the 19th Century with the arrival of new technology. Because there was no pier or natural harbour at Fetlar, the larger boats could not be kept year round in safety, and the community became almost totally reliant on crofting. With pressure from the lairds to pay rent, and fear of falling into debt, this made life extremely difficult – and so many more families were forced to leave Fetlar in order to find greater opportunities elsewhere.

Today, Fetlar remains mainly a crofting community, with a large amount of land given over to the raising of livestock. However, unlike in the past, the opportunity for part-time work both on and off the island is greater – and it is hoped, given time, that the island community will complete its recovery.

### Contact

[Fetlar Interpretive Centre](#)

Tel: 01957 733 206

Email: [info@fetlar.com](mailto:info@fetlar.com)

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## Birds

Fetlar is renowned among ornithologists and naturalists worldwide for being the home of some of the rarest birds of Britain. The island is Britain's premier site for the beautiful **red-necked phalarope**, and is home for the majority of the UK's breeding population. The island is also home to large populations of some of Shetland's most iconic breeding birds, including the **whimbrel** and **red-throated divers**.

Its unspoilt heathland supports large numbers of upland breeding birds like **golden plover** and **dunlin**, and through the summer months the moorland, hills, and fertile soils of the island are brought to life with the beautiful sights and sounds of the highest densities of breeding wading birds in Shetland. Good numbers of **redshank**, **lapwing**, **curlew**, **snipe**, **oystercatcher** and **ringed plover** are supported by Fetlar's diverse range of habitats.

The hills and heath of the island hold populations of **great skua** and **arctic skua**, although the latter is much less numerous. Around the coast and cliffs of the island, a number of breeding seabirds can be seen, including **storm petrels** and **manx shearwaters** – although the latter is a very scarce breeder. Unusually, **gannets** do not breed on the island, although they can be seen feeding at the shore.

The island has a great many common songbirds, including **skylarks**, **meadow pipits**, **wheatears** and the Shetland subspecies of **wren** and **starling**. Other birds that can be seen on Fetlar include the **hooded crow**, **shag**, and **fulmar**.

Fetlar's dramatic coastline and inland network of spectacular drystone dykes are welcome resting places for birds during their spring and autumn migration, and the island often attracts off-course migratory birds and rare vagrants. Britain's first ever record of **chestnut-sided warbler** was made in Fetlar, as was the second ever recording of **common yellow throat**.

Other rare sightings include the **little swift**, **red-flanked bluetail**, **Isabelline shrike**, **Swainson's thrush**, **hermit thrush**, **lesser scaup**, **pacific golden plover** and **white-throated sparrow**.

Fetlar was once the home to Britain's first and only breeding pair of **snowy owls** during the late 1960s to 1970s. Although the male owl disappeared, the offspring of the pair could be seen on the island until the mid 1990s.

### RSPB Nature Reserve

RSPB Mires of Funzie nature reserve, located at the eastern side of the island, is a breeding site for **red-necked phalaropes**. A birdwatching hide overlooks it. As you walk to the reserve from the car park, west of the Loch of Funzie, you will pass the roadside shore of the Loch. Phalaropes sometimes feed here along the water's edge, offering lucky visitors very close views – without disturbing them at their breeding sites. They are Schedule 1 breeding birds protected by law.

Other birds you might see on a visit to the Mires of Funzie include common waders like **snipe**, **redshank** and **curlew**, or ducks such as **teal**, **tufted ducks** and **mallards**.

RSPB Scotland has been studying Fetlar's wildlife since the 1960s. The conservation charity works together with local farmers and crofters to manage land for some of Fetlar's rare or endangered species.

### Contact

[RSPB](#) Warden

Tel: 01957 733 246

Email: [fetlar@rspb.org.uk](mailto:fetlar@rspb.org.uk)

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## Geology

In terms of geology, Shetland can be regarded as a 'jigsaw' that was assembled around 400 million years ago. The assembly of this jigsaw was the result of a massive collision as plate tectonic forces drove three ancient continents and the ocean between them together to form a supercontinent. As a result the vast Caledonian Mountain Chain was thrust up in a process known as the Caledonian Orogeny. Later, forces pulled the supercontinent apart once again so that by 60 million years ago the Atlantic Ocean was forming. Shetland, as part of a new European tectonic plate, split from North America and drifted to its current location at 60 north.

The island of Fetlar, broadly speaking, is made up of 3 different groups of rocks. The chemical makeup of each group influences the types of vegetation and wildlife that can be found living in each area. Weathering and erosion caused by the sea continue to shape the landscape; at Funzie the cliff edges are blocky and square in appearance, whilst at Houbie the land slopes down gently to meet the water.

### Dalradian rocks

About 730 million years ago a large ocean known as Iapetus began to form and spread between ancient 'North America' and 'Europe'. Layers of sand and mud were deposited at the edges of the Iapetus Ocean as the continents eroded to build up thick sandstones and mudstones. As the Iapetus closed these sedimentary rocks were compressed and heated to form metamorphic rocks including silica-rich quartz gneisses, mica-rich phyllite, and, where the mud had contained calcium-carbonate, crystalline limestone.

A group of these rocks, from ancient 'North America', is known as the Dalradian Supergroup and makes up the west of Fetlar and Unst. The rocks are acidic and weather to produce soils with low natural fertility that become leached and waterlogged resulting in the formation of blanket bog.

### An Ancient Ocean Floor

As the Iapetus Ocean closed a slice through the Earth's crust beneath the ocean was trapped between the colliding continents and thrust up onto 'North America'. This stranded ocean crust is known as an ophiolite and is seen today as the

serpentine rocks that are found in the central sector of Fetlar.

The rocks of the ocean crust began as deep mantle material that was mafic (high in magnesium and iron). As the ocean floor spread, the mantle material rose and solidified to form new crust made largely of the minerals olivine and pyroxene. When the ocean crust was forced up onto the continent hot fluids circulated through the rocks, altering the olivine and pyroxene to serpentine.

Serpentine rocks are low in some plant nutrients and high in toxic metals. Many areas of serpentine rock support an unusual form of heathland, rich in wild flowers such as thyme, dog violet, mountain everlasting, alpine meadow-rue and early purple orchid.

### The Funzie Conglomerate

The Caledonian Mountains eroded quickly. Over thousands of years great thicknesses of water-rounded cobbles and finer sediment built up at the base of the mountains and were cemented together to form conglomerate. The Funzie conglomerate in the east of Fetlar is of particular interest. After it had built up a slice of the ancient ocean crust was thrust over it. The immense heat and strain stretched the round cobbles into cigar shapes. The finer sediments were metamorphosed into phyllite. The ocean crust has since eroded away exposing the deformed conglomerate beneath.

### Geowall

The Geowall at Funzie was created and installed in 2008 by Geopark Shetland. A visual representation of the geology of Fetlar, the Geowall shows the complex nature of the rock formation of the island, including the unique Funzie conglomerate.

### Geopark Shetland

For more information see the Shetland Ophiolite self-guide trail pack and the Geopark Shetland app for Android and Iphone.

### Contact

[Geopark Shetland](#)

Tel: 01595 694688

Email: [info@shetlandamenity.org](mailto:info@shetlandamenity.org)