



EXPEDITION LOG



Scottish Highlands and Islands
16th to 28th May 2010

Log written by Danny Edmunds with help from the Expedition Team

Polar Star
Scottish Highlands and Islands
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Sunday 16th May Oban, Argyllshire

Noonday Log Position: 56 24.9 N, 005 28.7 W

Weather: wind SW 10knots, Bar 1017 temp 12

Oban is a pleasant little town that nestles beneath the Scottish highlands. For centuries it has been an important fishing port and the departure point for boats to the local islands. In the Victorian era a railway link was established right next to the ferry wharf enabling tourists to step straight from one form of transport to the next. Above the town is a large double-tiered structure vaguely reminiscent of the coliseum of Rome. On first sighting it might appear to be a defensive structure, the remains of the seat of countless Lairds and Ladies of the lands, but it actually dates much later than that. In the early 20th century a local businessman, motivated by a combination of familial pride and a desire to support the town, hired the local stonemasons to erect a massive folly overlooking the town. His intention was for it to rise three stories and for each alcove to contain the bust of a member of his family.

Common sense or financial constraints caused the project to be abandoned with only two tiers and without any of the busts, but the monument still stands above the town providing a talking point for modern day tourists visiting Oban, and provides a panoramic view of Oban bay and the vessels lying there, ranging from day boats to local islands, visiting tall ships and the distinctive dark blue and white hulls of the CalMac ferry service. And there in the harbour we could see the distinctive red and white lines of the *MV Polar Star*, our home for the next fortnight.

Down the concrete slip to the waiting Zodiacs, where we were separated from our luggage. We were zipped across to the waiting gangway while our luggage was rather less ceremoniously lifted onboard by cargo net, magically reappearing in our cabins while we explored the ship. By 17:30 all were onboard and we assembled in the Observation Lounge for the inaugural briefing of the trip. Expedition Leader Hannah introduced Captain Leszek who welcomed us and toasted the voyage. Hotel Manager Natasha explained the workings of the ship, drawing particular attention to the vagaries of the toilet system, a curiously temperamental beast. The expedition staff then introduced themselves, each giving a brief resume – some more cryptic than others!

Then a more serious matter – the regulation IMO Safety Briefing given by First Officer Jack, followed by an opportunity to put theory into practice with a lifeboat drill. We duly assembled on deck 4, resplendent in bright orange lifejackets, and were checked off the muster roll before heading back to our cabins and preparing for the most important part of the evening – dinner, and our first opportunity to sample the cuisine onboard and meet our team of stewardesses.

Monday 17th May Duart Castle & Tobermory, Mull

Noonday Log Position: 56 24.4 N, 005 39.9 W

Weather: wind S 10 knots, Bar 1022 temp 12 C

We woke with the silhouette of Duart Castle imposing itself against a light grey sky to port. First order of the day – breakfast followed by the mandatory Zodiac briefing given by Hannah in the Observation lounge. Again following theory with practical, we headed to the gangway for our first trip ashore, a quick two minute run from the side of the ship to the slipway below the castle.

Duart Castle commands the Sound of Mull between Mull and Morvern and would have been of huge strategic importance during the period of Viking and Norse incursions, and

indeed during the clan wars of the second millennium. The first walls were laid down by the MacDougalls in the 13th century as part of a loose defensive alliance of the west coast clan chiefs. It formed part of a string of eight castles ranged along the Sound, and signals could be sent by means of beacons mounted on top of each – should an enemy fleet be spotted the beacons were lit, alerting the neighbouring castles who would then light their beacons and so on.

Duart was passed to the Maclean family in the 14th century by King Robert (the MacDougalls had made the mistake of supporting Balliol rather than Bruce for the throne) and they developed the castle, adding walls and towers over the decades. These were times of turmoil for Scotland. In 1608 James I of England (who had been James VI of Scotland) summoned all Hebridean chiefs to a conference at Aros castle on Mull (also at that time part of the Maclean estates). At this conference they were imprisoned and sent to Edinburgh, the start of James's attempt to suppress the Gaelic culture of the highlands and islands of Scotland. James was no lover of the Gaels. He promoted a company called the Fife Adventurers to plunder many of the Gaelic lands, recommending 'slaughter, mutilation, fyre-raising, or utheris inconvenieties' – tantamount to genocide.

Charles I sent the Army of the Covenant north under the command of the Protestant Earl of Argyll with the aim of finishing the work James had started. Despite also being Protestant, the Macleans of Duart refused to join Argyll only to discover that Argyll had cunningly bought up all their debts which were duly called in. Settlement of these debts cost the Macleans Duart and Aros castles and much of their estate on Mull. Duart was garrisoned with government troops until the middle of the 18th century after which it was gutted and fell into disrepair.

In the early 20th century the 27th clan chief, Colonel Sir Fitzroy Maclean, purchased the castle back, initiating a process of restoration that has seen it back to magnificent condition. The current clan chief is Sir Lachlan Maclean and he welcomed us to his home, taking the first of our two groups around his familial seat closely overseen by his little white Highland terrier.

After our exploration of the castle, we had an important choice to make: did we join our bird experts, Andrew and Stefan, on a walk through a delightful wood, or did we head for the tea rooms to sample some of the local produce?

We headed back to ship and lunch, our Zodiacs taking a slight detour so that we could see the castle from seaward. During lunch we sailed along the Sound of Mull towards the delightful little town of Tobermory, planned and built in 1788 by the British Fisheries Society under the guidance of the fifth Duke of Argyll, more business-minded and less bloodthirsty than his predecessors.

Fishing has declined in economic importance but Tobermory is still a pleasant, colourful, bustling little place, much visited by tourists. Many of these are en route to Iona, but some come to see Tobermory in its own right, partly as a result of the highly popular BBC children's programme "Balamory", set in a fictionalised Tobermory and featuring some of

Mull weather (by a summer visitor)

It rained and rained and rained and rained
The average was well maintained
And when our fields were simply bogs
It started raining cats and dogs
After a drought of half an hour
There came a most refreshing shower
And then the queerest thing of all
A gentle rain began to fall

Next day 'twas pretty fairly dry
Save for a deluge from the sky
This wetted people to the skin
But after that the rain set in
We wondered what's the next we'd get
As sure as fate we got more wet
But soon we'll have a change again
And we shall have a drop of rain

(from the Oban Times)

the local school-children in its supporting cast. Tobermory has other attractions – the artisanal Handmade Chocolate shop did a roaring trade from our visit and several of us carried the distinctive black bags from the Tobermory Distillery, the first of several purchases on a theme that was to continue throughout our trip. A hike through the surrounding woodland left us ready for dinner, after which the Zodiacs were loaded up and we headed back to Tobermory for a traditional British night out – a visit to the pub, in this case the legendary “Mishnish”, owned and run by the same family for more than 100 years.

Tuesday 18th May Iona & Staffa, Inner Hebrides

Noonday Log Position: 56 26.4 N, 006 20.1 W

Weather: wind SE 21 knots Bar 1023 temp 13 C

The Captain dropped anchor north-west of the island, giving us some protection from the southerly sea that was rocking the ship. Clearly our skills on the gangway were to be tested! Other than the swells kicking up white horses to the south, the day was set fair – beautifully clear and sunny, with one of the most renowned caves in the world to visit.

Staffa itself is a tiny island that has been uninhabited since the beginning of the 19th century, and is named for one of its two distinguishing features – the array of basalt columns that form its 40m cliffs. These bear a striking resemblance to the log staves used by the Norse for house construction, and which give the island its name: *staff-oy* or stave island.



At the southern end of the island, time and the waves have cut a cave into the columns, and this gives Staffa its second distinguishing feature – the world-famous Fingal's cave. Fingal himself was a 3rd century Irish hero (Fionn MacCool) who defended the Hebrides against several Viking attacks. He died in battle in Ulster in 283 and the cave is named in his honour. It was visited in 1772 by Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society who was making his way to Iceland. His ship was sheltering from bad weather in the Sound of Mull and he met a fellow Englishman, a Mr Leach, who told him of the cave. Banks set out to see it for himself, spending the night in the house of the island's sole inhabitants and becoming infested with lice in the process. Despite this his report was so enthusiastic that tourists flocked to Staffa, among them Sir Walter Scott, John Keats, J W M Turner the painter,

William Wordsworth, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, Jules Verne, Dr Livingstone, Robert Louis Stevenson and Felix Mendelssohn. The latter visited in 1829 and was inspired to write the Hebridean Overture (known as “Fingal's cave”) providing a further boost to the island's profile. We were following in distinguished feet indeed!

An intrepid group headed out first, to be landed on the narrow concrete stairs leading up to the island. Along the rocks passing basalt columns covered with pink thrift and into the cave itself. We sat and watched the Zodiacs entering the cave and then backing out again

before they got caught by the waves. Then up the steep steps to the top of the island and a gentle stroll around, warmed by the sun and serenaded by the birds.

Others chose a Zodiac cruise, some of us still a little unsure of the sea-worthiness of these strange rubber craft. Fortunately our drivers have been doing this a long time and were able to keep the worst of the spray off us. Both parties returned to the ship, which set sail for Iona, a few miles down the coast.

Iona is one of the most visited islands in the UK, famed as one of the early centres of Christian learning and culture, but it has probably been inhabited for over 5000 years and there is a Celtic hill fort on the west coast that dates back about 2000 years. In 563 the Irish missionary Columba landed with 12 monks after a hazardous voyage from northern Ireland. He founded a monastery and began to convert the local Picts, and before long missionaries were being sent from Iona all over the UK and on to northern Europe. The monks settled to work producing some of the world's first illustrated manuscripts, including the renowned *Book of Kells*. But at the end of the 8th century, the Vikings arrived, raiding the islands three times in 11 years. They destroyed the monastery and killed many of the monks on one of the islands sandy beaches, and as a result the Abbot and his remaining monks retreated to Ireland, taking the few treasures left with them.

It was the mid-12th century when the local chieftain Reginald gave permission to Benedictine monks to build a second monastery and a nunnery of which his sister became the first Abbess. The new monastery was upgraded to a cathedral in the 15th century, but both cathedral and nunnery fell into disuse during the late 16th century and it was not until the early 20th century that the cathedral was rebuilt.

The landing at Iona is on a jetty built for ferries that faces the sound between Iona and Skye. Unfortunately it is too shallow for the Polar Star to approach closely and the captain had to anchor to the northern end, leaving us with a Zodiac ride of about twenty minutes. The wind was coursing up the sound, pushing up white-capped waves before it. The bing-bong was pretty clear "It's windy and may be wet so wrap up well!". We headed down the gangway to take our seats and the drivers headed out, trying to find as much shelter as possible from the winds, tucking the boats inside a small set of barrier islands. But the last part of the run took us straight across the sound, the waves hitting the sides of the boats.

The jetty itself was sunlit and protected from the winds, and we were glad of the chance to stretch our legs. Up through the village to the nunnery, its walls covered in moss. Some of us sat in the suntraps, while others pushed on to the cathedral, hoping to be there before the service started at 14:00. On the way we passed the organic garden of one of the hotels and heard the distinctive "crick-crick" of a corncrake. The birders would have great excitement later on, as not one but three of these increasingly rare birds were spotted.

After a couple of pleasant hours ashore it was time to head back. This time we were heading with the wind, a much more pleasant way to travel. Dinner onboard the ship and then Jane told us of the Celts and the Christians, and discussed the ways that the iconography had developed over the centuries of Iona's mission.

Wednesday 19th May Loch Scavaig, Skye & Kinloch Castle, Rum

Noonday Log Position: 57 10.9 N, 006 08.8 W

Weather: wind SW 6 knots Bar 1023 temp 11 C

Loch Scavaig lies at the foot of the Cullins to the southern end of Skye. The sky was brooding and grey and looked heavy with rain as we boarded the Zodiacs and headed to shore. We landed on a stark metal ladder onto a path winding beneath the mountains above. Their peaks were hidden in cloud and a light drizzle was falling. This was true Scottish weather!

We set off along the valley, the path leading beside a small set of rapids flowing from Loch Coruisk into the sea loch. The path underfoot was mostly dry, and we hopped over the odd



puddle. We tramped up towards the Loch over granite smoothed by glaciers millennia ago. Jane pointed out that we were treading much as our distant ancestors would have been – taking the drier, steadier runs of rock when we could to and squelching through murky bogs when we had to. The rain pattered down in fits and starts, while a lone seagull flew above us to settle on one

of the islands in the middle of the loch. The sun peaked out from behind the clouds from time to time and a sandpiper darted along the shore in a display flight. Over on the other side of the loch we spotted a red deer – a brief but encouraging sighting.

One of our number was bent over the rocks. Bob McDonald, unable to resist his secret love of lichens, gave us a fascinating insight into these symbiotes. He was later to repeat it in less damp surroundings during recap.

After an hour or so of gentle hiking we turned around and headed back to the landing. Jumping in the boats we took a longer route back – around the islands in the sea loch to watch the common seals lying on the rocks and then off to Soay.

Soay is a small island off the coast of Skye and is best known through its association with the author Gavin Maxwell. Maxwell wrote the book “Ring of bright water” about his relationship with a pet otter and its wilder cousins. Something of an adventurer, he set up a basking shark fishery on Soay in 1946, a venture that was ultimately unsuccessful despite doing quite a lot of damage to the basking shark population in the area. His deserted tumble-down house, complete with the boilers he used to extract the oil from the sharks, still stands up an inlet in the centre of the island. We were somewhat surprised to find a rather rough looking trawler moored up in front of the house – the *Golden Isles*. According to the nameplate it is registered in Soay, despite the island being all but deserted. Possibly it refers to a different Soay – the name “Soay” merely means “sheep” in old Norse and there are a number of islands dotted around the Scottish coast with that name. Back to the ship for lunch, while she headed toward our next port of call, the island of Rum.

Rum has archaeological remains dating back over 7000 years making it one of the longest inhabited Scottish islands, early settlers possibly being drawn here by the deposits of rare bloodstone – an attractive substitute for flint. Despite this it is still wild and untamed with a population in the 17th century of only about 200 people, mostly occupied with fishing. In 1845 the MacLeans of Coll sold the island to the Marquis of Salisbury who turned the island into a sporting estate for wealthy Victorians, stocking the burns with trout and importing red deer. In 1870 the shooting rights were leased to the Lancashire MP and millionaire John Bullough, who loved the island so much that he bought it outright in 1888 and built a hunting lodge there. He died in 1891, leaving the island and his fortune to his son George who between 1900 and 1902 redeveloped the lodge into Kinloch Castle.

Sir George, something of an eccentric, spared no expense in his construction. The architects came from London, the stone is red sandstone from Arran, the stonemasons came from Lancashire, and the soil for the garden was brought in from Ayrshire. The workmen were paid extra to wear kilts. Once the building was complete, George stocked it with items from his travels, live turtles and alligators in heated tanks, birds of paradise and

humming birds in the conservatory, central heating and an early form of air conditioning in the smoking room, a ball room and a Victorian Jacuzzi. Guests were brought to the Castle by a combination of private train, steam yacht and Albion motor cars, one of which is said to still be visible at low tide after a slight miscalculation around a sharp bend. Tropical fruits – grapes, figs, peaches and nectarines – were grown in glasshouses, while laundry was taken from the castle up into the hills to be done. George also changed the name of the island to Rhum to avoid associations with alcohol, but this was changed back to the original Celtic Rum in 1991.

The sort of lavish Edwardian house parties George was building for went out of style after the slaughter of the first World War, while changing fashions led to his fortune, founded on his father's inventions in mill machinery, starting to founder. George died in 1939 and is buried along with his father in a mausoleum on Rum, but his wife Lady Monica continued to live there until 1957, when she sold the island, the castle and all its contents to the Countryside Commission for Scotland for a nominal sum.

The Zodiacs deposited us at an impressive concrete ferry terminal, somewhat out of keeping with the wild vistas of Rum. It has been built with European community money and is an indication of the importance placed on Rum as a possible tourist destination, but also as a site of scientific research – considerable work is done here and it has a list of conservation statuses to its name: National Nature Reserve, Biosphere Reserve, National Scenic Area, Special Protection Area for Birds and a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Furthermore it has seven separate Geological Conservation Review Sites on it.

We walked along the shaded coastal path to the castle itself. Some of us took brief respite in the tearoom whilst the others headed inside. If Sir George's intention had been to impress then he certainly managed it. The entrance hall was crammed with exotica, even by today's standards. For Edwardians less well travelled it must have been close to overwhelming. Fortunately we had a guide to lead us around the rooms. Of particular interest was the orchestrion. This extremely rare electric organ works through punched roll cards and was meant to sound like an orchestra – to modern ears it's not Memorex. There are only three left in the entire world, and this is the only one that is still working, so it was a privilege to hear it, regardless of fidelity!

Back out to wander the paths leading to the ferry. Those of us fancying a longer walk headed off to a deserted crafting village guided by Callum and Jane, while the rest of us wended our way back to the slipway and thence to the ship.

No lecture after dinner – we headed around the coastline of Rum to see the Manx shearwaters rafted up beneath the cliffs before they headed back to their nests for the night. And as the ship headed off to our next destination, we did likewise.

Thursday 20th May Dunvegan Castle, Isle of Skye & Isle of Isay

Noonday Log Position: 57 25.5 N, 006 37.7 W

Weather: wind S 16 knots Bar 1025 temp 13 C

We awoke with the ship moored off the north-west corner of Skye in Loch Dunvegan. Our morning destination lay before us – Dunvegan Castle, the family seat of the Clan MacLeod since the beginning of the 13th century, the longest continuous occupation of any Scottish castle. Amongst the exhibits on display is the clan's Fairy Flag, a flag said to have been given to the clan by the Queen of the fairies in payment of a favour. It could be waved three times and the fairies would come and help the clan. Legend has it that it has already been waved twice. The flag is made of silk from the Middle east and dates to somewhere between the 4th and 7th centuries. It may have originally belonged to Harald Haardrada of Norway who was defeated at the Battle of Stamford Bridge in Yorkshire in 1066, only months before the victor, King Harold of England, had to face Duke William of Normandy at Hastings.

The castle contained numerous exhibits relating to the MacLeods over the centuries, including a particularly interesting series of photographs of life on St Kilda, one of the MacLeod territories. The disparity between life on the mainland and life on the islands was marked – the St Kildans seem to be stocky weathered folk, barefooted except for the men who wore socks. A length of horsehair rope was on display, the making of which marked the transition from boyhood to manhood on the islands. It was only once he could weave his own length of rope that a man was held able to support a family and marry.

After exploring the castle and its delightful and extensive gardens we headed back to the ship, passing to starboard the colonies of common seals hauled out on the islands we cruised past earlier in the day. Once back onboard, the ship head to Isay.

Isay is a small peaceful island that lies with its neighbours of Mingay and Clett in the waters of Loch Dunvegan. It was visited by Dr Johnson in 1773, who was offered it by the MacLeods on condition that he lived there for one month every year – Johnson declined. Earlier changes of ownership had not been so peaceful: in the early 16th century Roderick MacLeod of Lewis wished his grandson to inherit the island. The one tiny flaw in his plan was the two families of his twice-married daughter, which stood before his grandson in succession. Clan chiefs of that era tended to take a fairly direct hand in such matters and Roderick was no different. He invited all the members of both families to a banquet on Isay, during which he had each member taken in turn into a side-room where they were stabbed to death. The empty shell of main house (where Roderick's murderers would have lain in wait) still lies at one end of the street lined with over 18 other dwellings, but the island itself has been uninhabited since the 1880s. For a while the British folk singer Donovan owned the three islands but, despite being so taken with Clett that he wrote a song "And Clett makes three", he sold them in the early 1980s. More recently one-square-foot 'unspecific' plots of land on Clett were on sale over the internet for the princely sum of £22.50, an act that caused consternation in the Scottish parliament. The website now seems to have been taken down.

We landed at a small tumbledown jetty, little more than a line of rocks, which lay below the ruins of the old Laird's house. This was almost certainly where Roderick carried out his bloody deed. An overgrown street ran to the north past the broken skeletons of houses. It was almost impossible to imagine this place as it would have been. Oystercatchers flew along the shoreline, skuas hovered overhead, and sheep grazed peacefully on the distant hillocks. Almost the only sound was the wind whistling through the dry stone walls of the decaying buildings.

Our Zodiacs back to the ship took a dogs-leg route to see a bigger building on Mingay. This was a lime kiln – limestone being brought here from the mainland, processed and then sent down to Dunvegan to bind the rocks of the castle together as a mortar. An industrial process seemed somewhat out of keeping with the tranquillity of the place. Then the Scottish heavens opened and a downpour sent us scurrying back to the security of the ship. A lecture by Callum – Crofting on the Western Edge – discussed the lives of the farmers who lived on the remote isles of Scotland, dinner and then the film of Gavin Maxwell's book "Ring of Bright Water" rounded off the day nicely, while the ship left the safe harbours of the Western Isles and headed out into the Atlantic.

Friday 21st May St Kilda archipelago

Noonday Log Position: 57 48.3 N, 008 33.8 W

Weather: wind SW 10 knots Bar 1026 temp 13 C

The seas had been kind to us overnight, and we woke to a light swell as we moored inside Village Bay. The spectacular archipelago of St Kilda lies in the Atlantic Ocean, the four islands and their associated stacks being the remnants of an extinct volcano. It is one of the most important seabird breeding sites in northwest Europe, protected by the sea and the sheer cliffs. Incredibly it was inhabited for over 2000 years before the remaining population

was finally evacuated. The oldest archaeology seems to date from the Bronze Age, which suggests that the first settlers arrived over 3500 years ago. For centuries the islanders would have survived through fishing, growing oats and barley and raising sheep, but their primary source of food was the plentiful seabird population. Men would climb down the sea cliffs to trap fulmars in particular, some of which would be eaten and others of which would be boiled down to oil which was sent to their landlords at Dunvegan. The trade in fulmar oil was vital to the islanders' survival. An early guest to the islands arrived in the middle of the 18th century. Lady Grange was exiled there to prevent her revealing her husband's Jacobite sympathies, and she died here in 1745.

More willing tourists started visiting in 1834, and so began a decline in the fortunes of the islanders. Unused to the conventions of trade, they were cheated out of many of their essential possessions by these visitors. Cholera and smallpox swept through the population in the mid-1800s, a portion of the population emigrated to Australia in the 1850s and then in 1865 arrived the Rev John Mackay who did his best to usher the remaining islanders to the next life by enforcing so much church attendance that there was little time left during the week for gathering food. He stayed on the island until 1889. Furthermore baby mortality for the last half of the 19th century was around 80% and it was not until the 1890s that it was traced to tetanus caused by the tradition of anointing the umbilical cords of new-born babies with fulmar oil. Emigration continued, with the young men leaving the island to seek work elsewhere and by the late 1920s the remaining population, living near starvation levels, appealed for evacuation. On 29th August 1930 the thirty-six remaining St Kildans packed their possessions and left the island for the last time. They were given housing and jobs in forestry near Loch Aline. Many of them had never seen a tree.

It is not uncommon for those arriving at St Kilda to brave the waters between the archipelago and the mainland to arrive only to discover that the conditions inside the bay are too poor to allow a landing. We were fortunate – the seas, while not flat calm – were good enough for the Zodiacs to head to the wharf, returning to the ship bearing the warden, an Irishman who was awaiting the helicopter to take him back home, his stint on the island was done. He gave us a brief introduction to the island's history and culture and we headed for our waterproofs and the Zodiacs.



We climbed up the concrete jetty, up the cobbled slipway and into the ex-army base that now houses the support staff for the radar station based high on the hill. A low blanket of cloud lay over the island, and while we could see the tumble-down

houses where the St Kildans used to live, the road continued up into the mist. It was a truly atmospheric introduction to the island. Met by our guides we walked up the hill through the base to the short street lined by dry stone houses. St Kilda is maintained by teams of volunteers who are put up in the first few of these, reconstructed to make it a little more palatable to modern tastes. The others are kept more or less as they were left when the last St Kildans were evacuated.

Amongst the dwellings and their associated storehouses (known as "cleits") wandered soay sheep. These are the descendants of those brought by the first settlers to the islands with little or no interbreeding over the intervening centuries. They are very primitive compared

to the sheep we know from home, and range all over the island almost unconfined. Fulmars nested on the tops of the buildings; St Kildan wrens, an endemic species that Andy wanted to see in particular, flitted from stone to stone; Polar skuas wheeled and danced in the skies between our heads and the clouds. A whooper swan was spotted waddling around a stone wall, probably recuperating from an injury or illness.

All too soon our time there was over, although the Zodiacs took a brief diversion to the nearby island of Dun and the rafts of puffins sitting on the water around it. Back to the ship for lunch and then back to the Zodiacs.

We headed north around the cliffs of Hirta, St Kilda's largest island. Fulmars, guillemots, skuas, puffins wheeled and dived around us. A trio of purple sandpipers hopped across the rocks and chirruped at each other. The clouds had lifted by now and we could see the full extent of the cliffs towering above us. Shags dived into the waters around the Zodiacs and the occasional gannet swooped over the boats. A peregrine falcon was spotted, causing consternation to the other birds and excitement to our birders. The cliffs have numerous caves at their base, some of which are big enough to enter with the boats. We ventured forth. Rounding the northern end of the island we went through the gap between Mina stack and Hirta to another bay surrounded by high cliffs littered with birds. Sadly we could not continue – time was passing and the ship needed to set sail. We turned and headed back to Village Bay and safety.

We had one more treat in store before finally leaving St Kilda. To the north of Hirta is Boreray and to the west of Boreray is a stack with one of the biggest colonies of gannets in the world. We approached from the south and circled it. The walls were steep and sheer. It was hard to believe that the St Kildans would head here in small boats, smaller and less seaworthy than our Zodiacs, climb these cliffs using little but a rope and their bare hands and feet, catch the birds with loops of string and climb down again. They must have been hardy folk. The gannets lined every crack and crevice in the rock face and on the sea in front of the ship vast rafts floated, taking off in a hurry as the ship approached. Many were carrying seaweed for use as nesting material. One was even trying to lift a length of bright blue polypropylene rope, an endeavour bound to failure. He eventually abandoned his prize.

Twice around the stack and then the ship headed north-east, away from St Kilda and towards the Flannan Isles. These are comprised of a series of small islands gathered into three distinct groups. For a while they were known as the 'Seven Holy Isles', and pilgrims from Lewis would visit the 6th century Chapel of St Flannan on the largest of the islands, but these days they are little visited. There is a Stevenson lighthouse that was the site of a mystery that quite captured the late Victorian public imagination, with sea-monsters, the ghost of St Flannan and murder by Secret Service agents all being given their share of the blame.

On the evening of 15 December 1900 a passing steamer noted that the light was not working. The lighthouse relief tender arrived at the islands on Boxing Day and found the lighthouse deserted. A search of the island turned up no trace of the three keepers, but a half-eaten meal and an upturned chair were found inside the building. Two sets of oilskins were missing. The most likely explanation for the disappearance is that one man was swept into the sea and the other two similarly caught while trying to rescue him.

It was always unlikely that we would be able to solve the mystery, but our chances were dashed completely when a thick sea fog descended around the ship. Visibility was not much more than a few hundred metres but thanks to modern technology we were in far less danger than sailors would have been in the past. We could make out through the fog the base of the island as it slid by, and one or two of us caught one very brief glimpse of the lighthouse when the fog swirled and lifted momentarily. Then the islands were gone, lost in the blanket that enveloped our ship.

Saturday 22nd May Isle of Lewis & Shiant Isles

Noonday Log Position: 58 12.3 N, 006 23.2 W

Weather: wind W 10 knots Bar 1025 temp 17 C

A change of pace – we were alongside the port of Stornoway and could set foot on land without entrusting to the Zodiacs and their drivers. Stornoway is the main town on the confusingly names Islands of Lewis and Harris, technically one single landmass, but historically and geographically they have been split by a range of mountains, with Lewis being the northern half and Harris being the southern. Both have been inhabited for over 5000 years, with Lewis being particularly rich in prehistoric sites, more being uncovered every year as the peat that covers the island is removed. For much of the 1st millennium the islands were under Norse control, and were only ceded to the Scottish King Alexander III at the Treaty of Perth in 1266. The legacy of the Norse exists in many of the place names, but also in some of the archaeology on the island, the most well-known of which is probably the Lewis chessmen – four near complete sets of chess pieces discovered in the region of Uig.

In 1355 both islands were incorporated into the Hebridean kingdom ruled by the MacDonalDs or Lords of the Isles, but a series of murderous family feuds caused such unrest that in 1493 James I took the title for the British crown and the islands have been held by the heir to the throne ever since.

In 1844 Lewis was sold to Sir James Matheson who had made his fortune in the far east opium trade. He used his money to build roads and other infrastructure and by the mid 19th century Stornoway was a hugely important fishing port. In 1918 the Mathesons sold Lewis to the soap magnate Lord Leverhulme who also bought Harris a year later. He had grand plans for the island but died in 1925 and his plans never came to pass.

The island was split into estates and sold off piecemeal. Large scale unemployment led to increasing levels of emigration, particularly to Canada. These days things are more stable, although under-population is still a threat, and the economy survives through traditional industries such as weaving, fishing and crofting with a healthy contribution from tourism. Playing our part in the latter we clambered our buses and headed off on our tour.

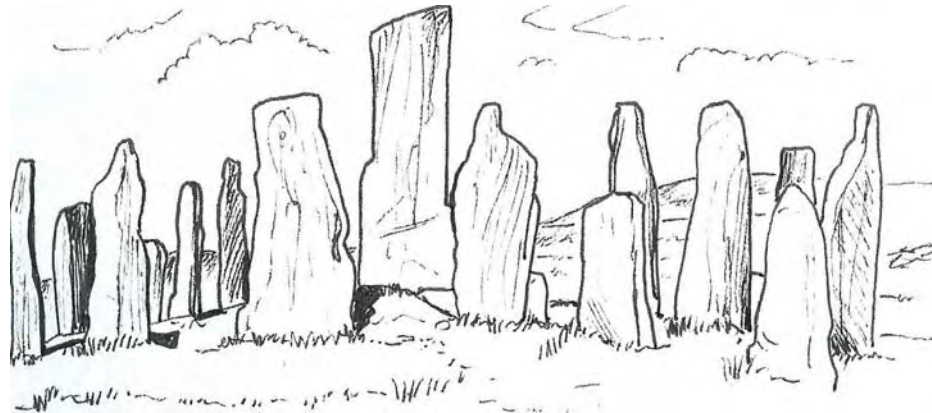
The Blackhouse is a development on from the traditional longhouse, a relic of the times when the Norse controlled the islands, and the finest examples are at Garrenin, a small settlement on the western side of the island. On our way we passed through the magnificent peat moorland scarred by centuries of peat cutting, a tradition that is on-going and has increased in recent years as the price of oil has risen. We passed isolated houses, modern-day versions of crofts, occupied at the weekends by families from the towns.

Arriving at Garrenin we left the coaches and entered the blackhouse through its attached barn. Sitting down on the low furniture beneath a pall of smoke from the peat fire we listened as our guide related stories of the lives of the people who had lived there until so recently – the last inhabitants had only been moved in the 1970s when they fell too ill to maintain their homes. The guide led us through to the store and demonstrated the loom that is still used to make the world famous Harris Tweed. Tweed manufacture is still carried out on the island and is subject to strict controls – each piece must be produced on the island by a hand operated loom. Many of the locals weave as a second job, and our guide had herself been a weaver for about 20 years.

Back into the bus and we headed for Dun Carloway Broch, a 2000 year old partially-collapsed but nonetheless awe-inspiring double-walled dry stone tower commanding an outstanding view of the bays and inlets on the west side of the island, north of Callanish. The rationale behind the brochs is not clear – they may have had a defensive role, but it seems more likely that they existed as a symbol of the local landowner's power and wealth. They may also have been permanent residences, with two living floors set over a basement level in which animals could be housed, perhaps evolving in place from the earlier round houses or wheel houses. The double wall and inset gaps allowed for the passage of warm

air in winter and cooling drafts in summer and lightened the weight of the massive construction. We had time to scramble up the staircase between the walls and then take a few photos of the ruined croft buildings nestled around the foot of the hill.

Once again back to the bus and to our final destination, the Standing Stones of Callanish. These magnificent standing stones are arrayed on a high point of land overlooking a sea loch (in prehistoric times it may have been a freshwater loch with an outlet to the sea) and the surrounding countryside. There are almost 50 stones, among the largest and also the tallest of any of Britain's megalithic sites. The stones are set in a Celtic cross-like arrangement, with a north-south long avenue of two parallel rows leading to a central circle around a chambered cairn grave, and continuing in another, shorter double row; two single rows of five stones each run off from the centre to the east and west. The stones are all of



Lewisian gneiss and probably came from a nearby source. The central ring and the grave probably date to about 5000 years ago, while the north-south avenues may have been added at a later date. The alignment suggests that they were set to coincide with the position of the moon at the winter and summer solstices.

Back to Stornoway for lunch, either on the ship or ashore. Hannah had decided that we were working too hard and had given us an afternoon off to wander this bustling little town. In celebration of this the sun came out and resolutely shone down on us as we walked the streets in search of tea-shops and newspapers, chess-sets and postcards. Hannah herself disappeared with a mysterious plastic bag that she resolutely refused to discuss.

Ship departed at 17.30 and headed north through the waters known as the Minch. Legend tells of the Blue Men who live in the Minch around the Shiant Islands. It's unsure where they come from – some say they are storm kelpies who must be treated with respect by sailors, while others believe that they are bad-tempered angels who landed in the sea when they were expelled from heaven. The Rev John Campbell of Tiree reported a sighting when he was sailing in the area in the late 19th century – “a blue-covered man, with a long grey face, and floating from the waist out of the water”. All sources agree that if you are accosted by a Blue Man it is crucial to speak Gaelic – one skipper had to reply to questions in rhyming couplets to avoid being dragged to a watery grave.

The Shiant Islands are one of the few places in the British Isles where the Black rat (*Rattus rattus* – the dreaded plague rat) exists, having been outcompeted elsewhere by the Brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*). When this was realised, a planned rat extermination programme was cancelled, with Black rats and puffins being allowed to live side by side. So far they seem to be reasonably peacefully co-existing. The islands were bought by the author Sir Compton Mackenzie, best known for his satirical novel *Whisky galore!* and the accompanying Ealing comedy (in which he played a small role), in 1925 for £500 and renovated the abandoned cottage to use for writing. They are now owned by the Nicholson dynasty, and the cottage still sits proud on an isthmus on the largest island. The islands have similarities with Staffa – both are formed predominantly of basalt columns, although those of the Shiant Islands do not

have the geometric regularity of those of Staffa. The Shiants are much taller though and have caves every bit as impressive as Fingal's cave. We headed for the Zodiacs. Rafts of puffins, guillemots and razorbills awaited us on the water, fulmars called over our heads and grey seals lay watchfully on the rocks, bigger and uglier than the common seals we had seen so far. Black-backed gulls perched on top of the cliffs, watchfully eyeing the birds on the water beneath them. Sheep grazed unconcerned only inches away from the sheer drop, despite the presence of the odd lamb carcass on the rocks by the water. Oystercatchers piped and flitted over the shoreline. Time passed too fast and it was 22:00 when we returned to the ship and tumbled to our beds, exhausted but exhilarated.

Sunday 23rd May Inverewe Gardens & Handa Island

Noonday Log Position: 57 47.4 N, 005 37.9 W

Weather: wind SW 16 knots Bar 1022 temp 16 C

A lazy morning – Hannah woke us at 07:30, a lie in by recent standards – and we watched the Zodiacs of the *Prince Albert II* as they carried passengers from her mooring ahead of us to the shore. Slightly bigger and more luxurious she may have been than our ship, but she doesn't have the history or the heart of the *Polar Star*. Our destination was Inverewe gardens.

In 1862 Osgood MacKenzie inherited 12,000 acres from his stepfather, the Laird of Gairloch. On his estate he created a walled garden and stocked it with plants from all over the world, nursed by warm waters carried up from the Gulf of Mexico and protected from the worst of the Scottish weather by Scots pine, rowan, oak, beach and birch trees. Soil from Ireland was brought over to provide a decent overlay to the local beach gravel and sea grass. MacKenzie died in 1922 leaving a garden that covered the whole peninsula, and this garden is now maintained by the National Trust for Scotland.

We had the pleasure of walking the labyrinth of walkways and paths through a dozen or more individual gardens featuring plants imported from China, Chile, Japan, Tasmania, South Africa and the Himalayas, interspersed with ponds. The rhododendrons and azaleas were in riotous bloom, casting their scent over us. The walled garden today is a kitchen gardener's dream, with neat rows of chives and other herbs, cabbage, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, beans, peas and many other vegetables, and rows of berry canes. Some of us found bargains, presents and long-sought reference books in the excellent gift shop.

Through lunch and a lecture by Stefan on the whales and dolphins in the waters around Scotland we sailed north-east to the Island of Handa, used in early times as a burial ground by mainlanders – wolves were unable to cross the narrow Sound of Handa to scavenge the corpses – but not settled until much later when seven families started cultivating the grassland. Much like St Kilda, they survived on oats, potatoes, fish and sea birds. The men held a parliament every day to decide the allocation of work, and the oldest widow was held to be the Queen of the island. And just as at St Kilda, the potato famine in the mid-1800s led to famine and the eventually emigration to America of the islanders. Since that time Handa has been deserted and is now a wildlife preserve and renowned for its birdlife.

It being a Sunday – the birds wishing to peacefully observe the Sabbath – we were unable to land, but a cruise around the island was proposed. Tucked in our Zodiacs we set out heading clockwise. At first the island gently sloped down to the water, and we could see the ruins from a distance. However once we rounded the south-western corner, the island became more rugged and cliffs stretched over our heads. The north-western face was most impressive – unprotected from the full force of Atlantic gales the cliffs were cracked and torn. Huge boulders lay in the shallows at their feet, dumped there by some ancient wave, and flat rocky outcrops denoted the former site of a sea stack. And all of the surfaces were packed with birds – guillemots, razorbills, shags, fulmars, kittiwakes. Puffins nested in the grasslands at the top of the cliffs and skuas and black-backed gulls patrolled above them. We saw guillemots jostling for space on the ledges where they chose to nest. Some were pushed off by their comrades, landing ungracefully next to the Zodiacs. The seas were swelling, breaking over the rocks leaving boiling opaque azure trails. There would be no going into caves today – the risks were far too high of being caught in a swell and dashed high onto the rocks. We circulated at a safe distance. Cut into the cliffs were some gashes, torn through to form skyscrapers of birds, their calls almost drowning out the noise of the engines.

Back on board for dinner and the resolution of the mystery of Hannah’s bag. It contained fresh haggis, bought from the butcher in Stornoway and prepared by Brian for those of us brave enough to try it. But before we could eat there was a ritual to be performed – the haggis had to be blest. Adam stepped up to the mark with aplomb.

As we ate the ship set sail, heading north again to round Cape Wrath, British mainland’s most north-westerly point and topped with yet another Stevenson lighthouse. Busy chaps those Stevensons. Despite appearances, Cape Wrath is not named for the ferocity of the Atlantic storms – it is a sailing direction in early Norse, meaning “turning point”. When sailors heading from Norway to the Hebrides saw the cliffs of Cape Wrath, they knew that they had to turn to port, heading south towards the islands. Unlike our dim view of the Flannan Isles, we had good weather for the rounding of the Cape. Low cloud lent

Address to the Haggis by Robert Burns
(translated by Adam & Eleanor Wilkie and Audrey Shirra)

You have a happy honest face
Great chieftan of the “Pudding” race
Above them all you take your place
Painch tripe or therm
You are as worthy of a grace as my arm
The heavy-laden platter you fill
Your outline like a distant hill
Your skewer would help to mend a mill
In time of need
Through your pores the juice distill
Like amber bead
His knife see rustic labour clean
Then cut you up with great skill
Pouring out your innards gloriously
Like any ditch
Then Oh! What a glorious sight!
Warm! Reeking! Rich!
Then horn-for-horn the stretch and strive
Devil take the hindmost, on they strive
Till their swollen stomachs look like drums
And all good men ready to burst
Say “Thank you”
Is there that over his French ragout
Or oleo that would fill a pig
Or fricassee that would make her ill with perfect disgust
Looks down with sneering scornful sight
On such a dinner
Poor devil, see him over his food
As useless as a withered branch
His calf a good whip-handle
His fist a nut
Through bloody field or flood to dash
Oh, how unfit!
But see the rustic haggis fed
The trembling earth resounds his tread
Put in his hand a blade, he’ll make it whistle
And legs and arms will be chopped off
Like tops of thistles
Ye powers that take care of man
And serve them their bill-of-fare
All Scotland wants no fancy food
That slops in pots
But if you wish her grateful prayer
Give her a haggis!

atmosphere to the scene as we watched from on deck. We were leaving the Western Isles and heading north-east.

Monday 24th May Mainland, Orkney Isles

Noonday Log Position: 59 00.0 N, 002 58.4 W

Weather: wind NNW 21 knots Bar 1018 temp 10 C

Mainland Orkney contains a wealth of notable archaeology, and it seems certain that by the stone age an extensive, well developed and affluent social network had developed. They were followed by the broch-builders, experts in dry-stone work, and during the 9th century the Norse Earldom of Orkney was established, rising to the peak of its influence by the middle of the 11th century. A series of spats between rival descendants of Earl Thorfinn the Mighty led to a gradual decay of the Norse hold on the islands and in 1468 King Christian of Norway and Denmark gave the Orkneys and the Shetlands away to the Scottish King as part of a dowry. Today the Orkneys are a thriving community, notably different from many other parts of Scotland with a pride in their own cosmopolitan heritage.

Another morning at leisure in the picturesque town of Kirkwall, and we wandered along the streets towards St Magnus cathedral, built of red sandstone not unlike that of the cliffs we had so recently cruised at Handa. Founded in 1137 but not completed until the 15th century, the cathedral was threatened with destruction during the Reformation but saved by the population and Cromwell's men deciding to use it as a stable and a prison instead. While it never stopped being used as a church, it became gradually neglected until restoration in the 1920s and again in the 1980s restored it to its true status. It is said that the remains of the titular saint are still incorporated into its pillars. Across the road is the Earl's Palace, now a ruin but once known as the finest structure of 16th century Scotland. It was built using forced labour by Earl Patrick (known as "Black Pate") and so ignorant that his death sentence was commuted for a week so that he could "better inform himself".

Lunch either onshore or onboard and then we boarded the buses for our afternoon tour.

The Ring of Brodgar is a stone circle that overlooks some of the inland lochs of Mainland. Originally it would have had 60 standing stones in a circle 103 metres in diameter, dating from about 5200 years ago and is surrounded by a henge or ditch an impressive 10 m across and up to 3.5 m deep, bridged by two opposing causeways. The whole ceremonial site may have taken as much as 10,000 person-days to construct. Vikings also visited this site and some of the stones still bear their runes, more attractive than modern day graffiti.

Two storms were instrumental in the saving of the prehistoric settlement Skara Brae. Established around 5000 years ago, this was swallowed up in a sandstorm about 4400 years ago, and only uncovered following another storm in 1850. It was formally excavated in 1928 and gives a fascinating and valuable insight into the everyday lives of our ancestors: a collection of houses built close together, sharing party walls and laneways, built with a beautiful view, close to the resources necessary for life. The village and surrounding fields must have rung with the shouts of children playing, the calls of mothers at meal time, the smells of meat and seafood cooking, the sounds of men gathered in a workshop area hammering away at chunks of stone to fashion beautiful but functional tools in the fashion of the day, and discussing the changing weather patterns. Nearby is Skaill House, built in 1620 and one of the most intact manor houses of its time remaining in Scotland. We headed back to the buses and ran along the coastline of Scapa Flow, site of some much more recent history.

At the end of the first World War, the largely intact German fleet was escorted to Scapa Flow and interned there while the victorious allies squabbled amongst themselves about how to share out the spoils. The German sailors were confined to their ships, largely forbidden shore leave and left to wait out until they were repatriated. The officer in charge, Rear-Admiral Ludwig von Reuter, had a distinguished service record and was by all

accounts a man with a high sense of honour and managed to keep the 5000 men under his command in reasonable order over the winter of 1918/19. He was almost dismissed by the British commander, Vice-Admiral Sir Sydney Fremantle, who seemed to regard the handover of the ships as cut and dried. Reuter had other plans.

On 17 June 1919 he issued orders to his captains: "It is my intention to scuttle the ships only if the enemy should attempt to place himself in possession of them without the consent of the (German) government. Should our government concur with the surrender of our ships in the peace conditions, then the ships will be given up, to the lasting shame of those who put us in this position." This news leaked out across the German sailors, but remarkably never reached allied ears.

Reuter was reliant on four-day old copies of *The Times* for reports of peace negotiations, and was unaware that the deadline issued for acceptance of peace terms by the German government had been extended from noon on 21 June to 19:00 on 23 June. He feared that the British might pre-emptively seize the German ships and at 10:30 on 21 June ordered that the seacocks on his flagship, the *Emden*, should be opened. His order, "Paragraph eleven: confirm", was passed down the line by morse and semaphore, and the entire German fleet began to sink. As it happened a group of Orcadian schoolchildren were touring Scapa Flow by steamer that day and had a ringside seat as the ships settled in the water. One of the British ships guarding the fleet misinterpreted the signals from some of the German sailors and opened fire. Nine were killed and sixteen wounded in the confusion. It took less than three hours for the entire fleet to go down – five battle-cruisers, ten battleships, five cruisers and thirty-two destroyers lay at the bottom of the Flow. Reuter and his men were repatriated.

The ships were sold for salvage with many lifted and converted into scrap iron. Indeed iron from Scapa Flow is highly valued for use in scientific equipment. Being at the bottom of the sea has protected it from radiation from nuclear testing, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, making it ideal for use in detectors measuring solar radiation. Scapa is also a thriving tourist site, with divers from all over the world visiting to dive some of the biggest warships of their era.

Scapa Flow played an important role in the second World War as well, being the headquarters for the British home fleet. Despite numerous blockades, in 1939 the German U-boat *U-47* snuck in through the obstacles and sank the *HMS Royal Oak* with the loss of 833 men. This raid, described by Churchill as a remarkable demonstration of "professional skill and daring", was a major blow to British morale so early in the war and to prevent any repetition, Churchill ordered the construction of more extensive barriers across the eastern approaches to the Flow. These barriers were constructed by Italian prisoners of war who spent some of their time off converting two Nissan huts into a chapel that still stands at Lamb Holme, doing such a good job that they were invited back by the Orcadians in 1960 to restore the interior paintings to their original wartime condition. The chapel is still in fine condition.

It is interesting that we had visited three sites that demonstrated the need of man to believe in something greater than themselves. The Ring of Brodgar is the most distant from our times and culture but we can see in the devotion and effort put in by our forebears the same desire for order and a sense of place in the universe as that of the stonemasons who built St Magnus cathedral and the Italian prisoners who painted the frescos of the Italian chapel.

We returned to the observation lounge but instead of the usual recap, were entertained by two young Orcadians, one on fiddle and one on piano. They played skilfully a series of jigs and reels, many of which are traditional from the islands of the Orkneys. After an hour or so it was time for dinner and they received a well deserved standing ovation. The continuing tradition of music on Orkney is in good hands.

A lecture by Callum on the Archaeology of the Northern Isles gave us an introduction to some of the sites we were to visit over the next few days, whetting our appetite for the last few days of the trip.

Tuesday 25th May Foula & Papa Stour

Noonday Log Position: 60 21.8 N, 001 18.4 W

Weather: wind NNW 21 knots Bar 1017 temp 8 C

Foula is the most isolated inhabited island in the British isles, lying 14 miles to the west of the other Shetland isles. Norse Udal law was still recognised in the late 17th century by the islanders, who simply lived too remote from the rest of Scotland to be aware that the islands had become Scottish 200 years earlier. Even these days the island uses the old Julian calendar so that Christmas falls on the 6th January and New Years day on the 13th. At times the island is so beset by storms that it may be cut off for up to six weeks at a time. We could see why as during the night the ship had been rolling and bucking, several of us feeling less than hungry when we arrived at the breakfast table the following morning.

The swell hadn't died down as we watched the Zodiac drivers climb in at deck three and set out onto the water. Hannah and the scout team headed off over the rolling sea towards the tiny harbour, while two other boats bobbed next to the ship. The swells were washing over the bottom steps of the gangways one second then dipping out beneath them the next and it wasn't a huge surprise when the message came round that the landing was being cancelled. Secretly some of us were quite glad, although disappointed not to be amongst the select few who make it to Foula. Zodiacs recovered we weighed anchor and headed north to Papa Stour, hoping for better seas there.

Volcanic islands often make for fertile soils, and Papa Stour was settled by farmers about 5000 years ago. The Norse arrived and also settled down, Papa Stour becoming so important that it is virtually certain that the 13th century King Haakon of Norway had a farm on the island. Three hundred years later German merchants set up a summer trading post to buy fish and oil from the islanders, but the importance of the island started to diminish and by the 1870s emigration rose, people being driven away by lack of fuel and food. In 1970 the island's school closed due to lack of children, with the island's population falling to 16 fairly old people. It looked as though the island would be abandoned, as so many other islands had been.

But an advertisement in a British paper mentioning that crofts with five sheep would be granted for free to incomers, brought young people from all over the UK, drawn by the possibility of refuge from the rat-race. Shetlanders began to call it the "hippie isle". Many left, daunted by the realities of island life, but the few that remained invigorated the island. A further recruitment drive in 1992 saw the population rise further and in 2003 the primary school re-opened.

Papa Stour is known for its remarkably fine series of sea caves, carved out of the volcanic rock by the Atlantic storms. Our hope was that we would be able to cruise in and around some of these, but sadly the same swell that had foiled us at Foula made this impossible. We steamed around the island hoping to find some shelter, but had to concede once again. The captain headed for the calmer waters of the sea lochs east of Muckle Row lighthouse, and we dropped anchor. We decided to take advantage of an opportunity for a completely unplanned expedition landing. At the end of the loch was a small fishing harbour with a pretty little marina – the village of Voe. The Zodiacs skimmed across the water between the lines of mussel farms, we landed at the marina and set off for a walk up to a loch and then to an abandoned church. A few of us took a longer hike up onto the moorlands behind the village, rewarding themselves with a refreshing drink at the pub before getting back on the Zodiacs and returning to the ship.

That evening Jane told us more about the Celts, the race of peoples who spread across these islands in the centuries before the Romans and Vikings arrived.

Wednesday 26th May Mousa & Mainland, Shetland Isles

Noonday Log Position: 60 09.3 N, 001 08.4 W

Weather: wind W 10 knots Bar 1012 temp 7 C

We had visited a broch on Lewis, but the most complete broch in the world is on the small island of Mousa, and it was to here we were heading. Mousa has the distinction of being mentioned twice in Norse sagas, and there was a thriving farmstead here – next to the broch are the shells of a large farmhouse with storage buildings and a mill spanning a burn. The 04:30 wake up hadn't seemed a particularly attractive proposition the night before, but once up and on the Zodiacs for the brief ride from the ship to Mousa the attraction of the place became apparent. Mousa is about 16 metres high, and has lost very little of its structure since it was first built. Inside can still be seen the holes for the floor supports and we could follow the trail of tea-lights up the stairs to the top, overlooking the waters between Mousa and Mainland Shetland.

Once we had explored the broch, Callum Jane and Hannah led us on a short walk over the island to the eastern side where terns and skuas were on their nests. The sun rose and bathed the area in gold for all too brief a period before it hid itself behind the clouds again. We could understand why this would be a good place for a honeymoon or a love-nest.

The last of us were preparing to return to the ship, had our lifejackets on and were waiting at the shoreline but there were no boats to be seen. Just as we were wondering if we had been deserted, both Zodiacs appeared from behind the rocks bearing five grinning staff and one bemused looking sheep. The sheep had been spotted sitting forlornly in a cove surrounded by cliffs the height of the average house. Sheep not being renowned for their mountaineering or swimming abilities, it was clearly incapable of rescuing itself, and the staff had decided to help it out. The sheep had other ideas and needed to be manhandled into the Zodiac, and then very firmly sat on for the short run around to the landing to stop it from jumping out into the water. Callum and Steve lifted it out at the landing point and after a moment's pause it scurried off to rejoin its fellow sheep on the grass, while we headed back to the ship.

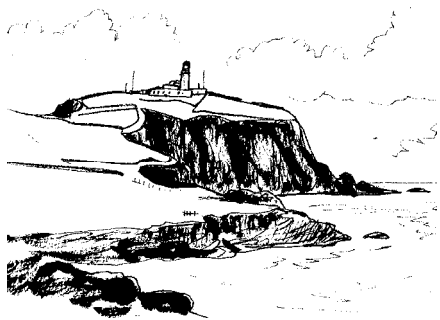
The history of Shetland is unsurprisingly similar to that of Orkney. Both were under Norse rule for much of the period between about 800 and 1468 AD, and both were part of the dowry from King Christian of Norway to the Scottish King. The next 100 years saw the entirely Norse population subjected to a flood of land-hungry Scots, and land-grabbing and confiscation became the norm for the next couple of centuries. By the 1600s the landowning families had gained enormous power and spent much of the time fighting amongst themselves to divide the spoils. Intriguingly despite this there are still some aspects of Norse Udal law that have survived which protect the rights of the crofters. Understandably they have been keen that these few rights are not eroded any further.

For our visit to Shetland we were again tied up to a wharf and it was an easy step off the ship and onto the buses that were to take us around Mainland. The tenor of today was to be archaeological, and the main site we were visiting were the excavations at Jarlshof.

Jarlshof is a complex and fascinating set of archaeological ruins that covers at least five distinct periods of occupation. Subterranean dwellings similar to those at Skara Brae sit next to Iron age wheel house which sit next to a couple of Norse longhouses dating between the 9th and the 14th centuries, then a mediaeval farmhouse (14th – 16th century) upon the foundations of which is built the 16th century house belonging to Earls Robert and Patrick Stewart, one of the families most involved in the land-grabbing that followed the handover of the islands. The site was named by Sir Walter Scott in his Viking novel *The Pirate*.

Only a mile from Jarlshof is another archaeological site: Old Scatness. Just nine years ago during construction of a new road to the airport, a team of archaeologists from Bradford University with local assistance excavated the site and simultaneously built replicas of some

of the structures found so that visitors, who are strongly encouraged to tour the site, can gain an appreciation of how people lived there over several thousand years. At the centre of the house is the remains of a broch, which is surrounded by several wheelhouses and roundhouses. The guide told us that radiocarbon dating of peat trapped beneath the bottom layer of the broch and a fortuitous find of a sheep bone in the wall has allowed a revision of the date of construction, pushing it back to 2400 years ago. Our guides were quite wonderful and you could see their obvious enthusiasm for the work they were doing. One guide in a replica wheelhouse described how every resource available to these people was utilized. A small peat fire glowed in the hearth, the smoke finding its way to a hole in the roof, while two fish oil lamps burned in the corner. Another guide demonstrated the use of soapstone spindle whorls and loom weights in the manufacture of tweed clothing. With the guides' help, for a few moments time fell away and we slipped back to another age.



A change of pace at Sumburgh Head, a wedge-shaped cliff topped by a Stevenson lighthouse. The view over the seas is beautiful, but some of us only had eyes for the puffins and fulmars that live on the cliffs below.

St Ninian's Isle has similarities to Mont St Michel in northern France. Both are islands accessible at low tide but cut off from the mainland at high water. Both were sites of early Christian monastic settlements, but unlike Mont St Michel, that at St

Ninian's Isle failed to survive. The remains of a 12th century chapel can be seen on the downs and in 1958 an earlier church was excavated and a hoard of 8th century Celtic silver discovered hidden under a stone slab.

We returned to the ship for dinner after which an adventurous few headed ashore to The Lounge, where we had heard live music was to be played that evening, although the only sign of this was a man carrying a violin case who appeared as we were leaving. The waters were calm and the air still when the *Polar Star* finally left the quayside and headed out to the south and Fair Isle.

Thursday 28th May Fair Isle, Shetland Isles

Noonday Log Position: 59 28.2 N, 001 34.0 W

Weather: wind SE 6 knots Bar 1011 temp 11 C

In 1588 the remnants of the Spanish Armada was struggling around the British Isles trying to get home. One of the ships, the 38 gun *El Gran Grifon*, was swept onto Fair Isle by a storm and foundered. 200 men escaped the wreck and were fed and watered by the islanders, but this put strain on the island's food supplies and the Spanish set about raiding the winter stocks, killing poultry and slaughtering sheep and cattle. In desperation the islanders rounded them up and shipped them off to Shetland where they were fed and well treated until they were repatriated. In 1984 a Spanish delegation dressed as conquistadors dedicated a cross in Fair Isle's kirkyard to those that died in the wreck.

Wrecks were a feature of life in Fair Isle. It's been suggested that until the advent of marine radar, at least one major shipwreck occurred there every four or five years. By the middle of the last millennia there would have been a substantial amount of trade – the German merchants who had set up shop on Papa Stour also had a trading post here, and Dutch herring fishermen were exploiting the waters around the island, the fish being sent to the Europe, the Mediterranean and even South America. In 1702 the French raided the herring fleets off Fair Isle, with some success.

Fair Isle went through the same problem of decreasing population as many other Scottish islands but an extremely successful recruitment drive in the first years of the 21st century

has left the island better off than many. While much of its modern reputation lies on its bird life – a nature reserve was established after the second World War – Fair Isle is also known for the Fair Isle sweaters the designs of which probably hark back to Nordic designs.

A long lazy swell rocked the ship at her anchorage north of the landing site. Every now and again a larger wave would come and swamp the platform at the bottom of the gangway. Our Zodiac entry skills were to be tested today.

Our last landing by Zodiac was onto a long low jetty, slightly slippery due to the seaweed. At the top of the slipway we were greeted by some of the Fair Isle inhabitants, complete with a couple of cars. Those of us who felt up to a gentle hike headed up to one of the island's many scenic cliffs where we could overlook the fulmar nests and watch birds scudding in the breeze at our feet. A few large heavy skuas kept a careful watch, on the lookout for wayward puffins leaving their nests. High above us tiny wheatears sang their songs. Fair Isle has long been a mecca for birdwatchers and we could see why.

A stroll downhill led us to the community centre where the locals waited with cups of tea, scones and cakes. The tradition of British High Tea is one that has died out on the mainland, but is still carried on in some of the island communities and the people of Fair Isle weren't about to let the fact that it was the morning rather than the afternoon get in the way of good home cooking.

Those of us who felt up to the walk back to the jetty sauntered, cooled by the sea breezes and calmed by the birdsong. Those of us who preferred could take a taxi ride in one of the island's cars. Soon we were back in our lifejackets and on our last Zodiac ride of the expedition, cutting between rafts of puffins, razorbills and fulmars as we returned to the ship.

The *Polar Star* lifted anchor and swung south towards our final port, Dundee. The small matter of settling our ship-board bills, packing our bags, the showing of the film "Local hero" about the culture clash between a Texan oil executive and a small Scottish village, and a final lecture from Andy on Bird Monitoring filled the afternoon up to the Captain's farewell and the showing of the Voyage Slideshow put together by Stefan with help from the rest of the staff.

Friday 29th May Dundee

Dundee, 59°N 002°49'W

Hannah's briefing for the day was brief and to the point: "You get up, you have breakfast and you leave". And that is more or less exactly what we did.



We have travelled 1136 nautical miles on our voyage from Oban to Dundee.

You have been sailing with:

Captain	Leszek Slawski	EL	Hannah Lawson
Staff Captain	Jacek Marek Lisiecki	AEL	Danny Edmunds
2 nd Officer	Roberto Sainz	Staff	Jane Sproull Thomson
3 rd Officer	Jerry Malapad		Callum Thomson
Chief Eng.	Waclaw Kedziora		Stefan Braeger
1 st Eng.	Piotr Kurzynka		Steve Wilkins
2 nd Eng.	Zygmunt Jadanowski		Andrew Colenutt
3 rd Eng.	Marian Krucien		Jimmy Thomson
Electrician	Jerzy Niewinski	Doctor	Robert Sweeney
Bosun	Bernardo Gonzales		
ABs	Joselito Gangoso		
	Gregorio Dalawampu		
	Mackross Sario		
	Richer Riosa		
	Lito Zamora		
Repairman	Alex Pinque		
Motormen	Herman Geonigo		
	Sofronio Pahang		
	Gaspar Rozol		
Hotel Mgr.	Natasha Hanson		
Receptionist	Irene Lao		
Head Chef	Bryan Hanson		
Cooks	Ricardo de Dios		
	Generoso Abelado		
	Edwin Flores		
Messmen	Ronie Malicdem		
	Marcelo Caneja jr		
Stewardesses	Girlie Lagos		
	Cherry Lyn Tesalona		
	Catalina Armedilla		
	Ana Belinda Lazaro		
Laundryman	Michael Catajan		
Bartenders	Ruel Merquita		
	Bartolome Orcullo		

MV POLAR STAR
Scottish Highlands & Islands
16th to 28th May 2010

