



# Fair Isle

## Your Journey to Fair Isle

Travel to Fair Isle is by ferry or 7-seater Loganair Islander plane. Because of the possibility of weather-related delays, travel insurance is recommended.

The ferry *Good Shepherd IV* carries 12 passengers and leaves from Grutness Pier at the southern tip of Shetland. The trip takes about 2½ hours. In summer, the ferry sails three times a week, including a fortnightly sailing from Lerwick. Fair Isle is also a popular destination for cruise ships and cruising yachts.

The plane leaves from Tingwall Airport, outside Lerwick, and takes about 25 minutes to reach Fair Isle. On certain days in summer there is a connection from Sumburgh Airport. Loganair also run summer excursions from Kirkwall Airport in Orkney.

## Please follow the Countryside Code

Though you're free to walk almost anywhere on the island, some crofters prefer you not to cross their land at lambing time (April-May). Please follow the Countryside Code. Close gates, use the stiles and walk round crops – including the hay and silage fields.

Fair Isle's cliffs offer dramatic scenery and seabird watching but they can be very dangerous. Please take care – and tell someone where you're going, and when you plan to be back.

The North lighthouse



## Fair Isle

## A jewel in the ocean

### Some Useful Information

- Accommodation:** VisitShetland, Lerwick, Tel: 08701 999440
- Ferry Booking Office:** Fair Isle Tel: 01595 760222
- Air Booking Office:** Tingwall Airport Tel: 01595 840246
- Neighbourhood Information Point:** Fair Isle Bird Observatory, Tel: 01595 760258
- Shop and Post Office:** Stackhoull Stores
- Public Toilets:** Airstrip and Stackhoull Stores
- Places to Eat:** Fair Isle Bird Observatory
- Public Telephone:** Shirva
- Museum:** George Waterston Memorial Centre and Museum
- Churches:** Church of Scotland, Methodist Chapel
- Medical Assistance:** District Nurse, North Shirva, Tel: 01595 760242



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Fair Isle from the North East



The Fair Isle Bird Observatory



Ragged-Robin thrives in meadows and marshes

## A Jewel in the Ocean

Fair Isle, a tiny jewel of an island, is known worldwide for the warmth of its welcome to visitors. Lying halfway between Orkney and Shetland, it is one of Britain's most successful remote communities, pioneering projects in wildlife tourism, sustainable management of the environment and use of wind power.

The 70 or so islanders live in traditional crofts on the more fertile southern third of the island, the remaining land being rough grazing and rocky moorland, rising to Ward Hill. Most of Fair Isle's coastline boasts impressive cliffs including the spectacular Sheep Craig.

While the island's oceanic climate brings stormy but fairly mild winters, summer visitors may encounter rapid changes in the weather – a day of sparkling sunshine and incredible visibility followed by one of mist-enshrouded cliffs.

Several of the crofters welcome paying guests into their homes. Self-catering accommodation is also available.

## Island of Birds...

For more than 50 years the internationally renowned Fair Isle Lodge and Bird Observatory has done scientific research on bird migration and the island's magnificent seabird breeding colonies.

All guests are most welcome, many dedicated birdwatchers coming to see the spring and autumn migrations. Lying on the intersection of major flightpaths from Scandinavia, Iceland and Faroe, Fair Isle can produce impressive numbers of common species but is also famous for the rarities that can appear. Visitors are welcome to accompany the wardens on early morning rounds of the bird traps, and to contribute to daily observations.

The island is an internationally important seabird breeding site. From April to August the cliffs are busy with the sound (and smell!) of thousands of Fulmars, Kittiwakes, Razorbills, Guillemots, Black Guillemots, Gannets, Shags and Puffins, while skuas and terns fiercely defend their nests on the moorland. Fair Isle is one of the best places in Europe to view Puffins as they waddle to within feet of a quiet observer.

Grey and Common Seals are frequently seen, with Harbour Porpoises mostly sighted in summer. Whales and dolphins sometimes cruise close inshore, White-beaked, Atlantic White-sided Dolphins, Killer Whales (orcas) and Minke Whales are often spotted from the mailboat Good Shepherd on passage to and from Shetland.



Drawings by school children for a locally produced post card

## Island of Flowers

Thanks to traditional crofting methods, the island has over 250 species of flowering plants. In summer the wetter areas are dotted with the bright yellow of Bog Asphodel, the deep purple of Northern Marsh Orchids and, perhaps rarest of all, the Frog Orchid. From late May the cliff-tops are awash with the delicate blue of Squill, which gives way in June to a bright carpet of Sea Pinks, with the cliffs draped in curtains of yellow Birds-foot Trefoil and white Sea Campion.

Prostrate Juniper – rare in Shetland – is abundant on the heather moorland, with alpine species like Least Willow and Alpine Bistort on the summit of Ward Hill. A wide variety of more familiar plants thrive in the hay fields, cultivated rigs, grazing lands and along the roadsides.

## Real Fair Isle Knitwear

For hundreds of years islanders traded with passing ships, bartering their hand knitted hosiery and fresh produce for goods they couldn't make themselves. Worn in the past to beat the bitter cold of the Antarctic and Everest, today the only source of the genuine article is still the island. A small co-operative – Fair Isle Crafts – produces on hand-frame machines quality knitwear labelled with Fair Isle's own trade mark, either in the traditional bright colours or the natural Shetland wool shades of brown, grey, fawn and white.

North Haven, home to Fair Isle's mailboat Good Shepherd



White-beaked dolphins seen from the mailboat



Taamie Norie (Puffin)



Traditional knitwear featuring the age-old Fair Isle patterns

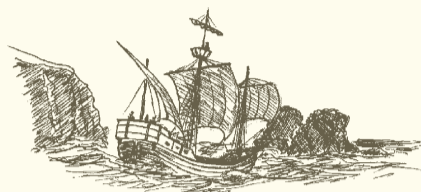


## A Stepping Stone in History

Norse settlers named it Fridarey – the island of peace – but this stepping stone between Orkney and Shetland was also vital in times of strife, when the Earls of Orkney, and Viking warlords before them, used it as a look-out and for sending fire signals to and from Shetland.

For thousands of years Fair Isle has been a useful landmark for shipping but, in storms and fog, its coastline is highly dangerous, with at least 100 known shipwrecks – the most famous of which is probably the Spanish Armada ship *El Gran Grifon* wrecked on Fair Isle in 1588.

Over the centuries, the island changed hands many times, paying rent in butter, cloth, dried fish and fish oil – usually to absentee landlords who rarely visited. Communications with the outside world were difficult and sporadic. Only in the late 20th century did the island acquire a safe summer harbour, at North Haven, and even today the mailboat



El Gran Grifon

has to be hauled out of the water from the reach of winter storms. At Kirki Geo are the ancient *noosts*, where men who rowed and sailed to the line-fishing hauled up their distinctive Fair Isle yoals. The boat-shaped *noosts* remain in use today and traditional boats are still built in the isle.



Fair Isle yoal sits protected in its noost

## 5,000 Years of Human Settlement

Fair Isle has been intensively studied by archaeologists who have found evidence that the isle may have been settled by Neolithic people up to 5,000 years ago. There are traces of oval-shaped stone houses, perhaps 3,000 years old, and lines of turf and stone walls, or dykes, which snake across the landscape. The Feely Dyke, a massive turf rampart which divides the common grazings from the crofts, may also be prehistoric.

The archaeological remains include curious burnt mounds – piles of blackened stones which were heated in a fire and used to heat water. The purpose is unknown but may have been cooking, tanning, preparing cloth or even a primitive sauna.



Excavation at Landberg

There are two known Iron Age sites – a promontory fort at Landberg and settlement underlying an early Christian church at Kirki Geo. Most of the place names date from after the ninth-century Norse settlement of the Northern Isles.

In all, Fair Isle has 14 scheduled monuments, ranging from the earliest signs of human activity to the remains of a World War II radar station. The two lighthouses, now automated, are also listed buildings.

## Work and the Land

Long ago the cultivable land and the better grazing was divided into small crofts. To this day crofting is a system that gives each household a stake in the island and its future.

It's a lifestyle based on low-intensity, subsistence farming. The combination of modern technology and old-style labour produces hay, silage, oats, kale and turnips as winter fodder for sheep and cattle. Although so far north,



Sheep shearing

Mini-baling grass for silage



islanders grow a lot of their own vegetables outside. The increasing use of glass and polytunnels allows an even wider range of produce to be grown. The crofting year has a task for every season with most islanders combining several part-time jobs with their croft work.

As well as the ferry, school and other public service jobs, income also comes from the knitwear co-op, wildlife tourism, a local building firm and the shop and post office. Fair Isle boasts a violin maker, a traditional boatbuilder, and the making of traditional chairs, spinning wheels and model yoals.



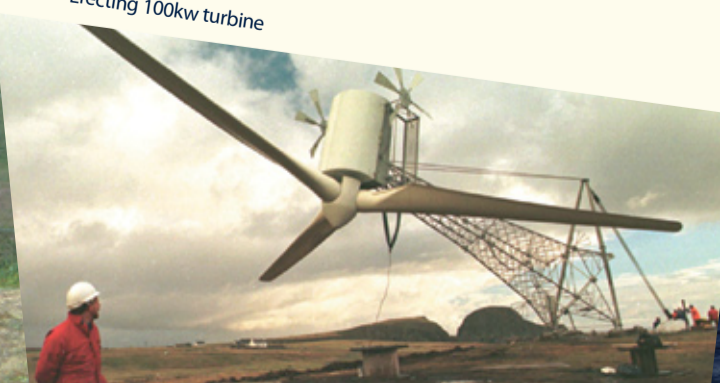
Boat-building is a traditional island craft

## Leading the Way with Windpower

Far from the National Grid, Fair Isle produces its own electricity using a combination of diesel and wind power. The first 60kw wind turbine went up in 1982 as a community effort, supported by council and government development agencies. As the first commercially-operated wind energy scheme in Europe, it proved an extremely successful alternative to expensive diesel-powered generators.

Through the efficiency of the system, the islanders were able to build up a reserve fund which in 1996 helped pay for a second 100kw turbine and upgrade the old one. With this development, aided by the

Erecting 100kw turbine



National Trust for Scotland, Shetland Islands Council, Shetland Enterprise and the European Union, Fair Isle continues to lead the field in this developing technology.

## George Waterston Memorial Centre and Museum

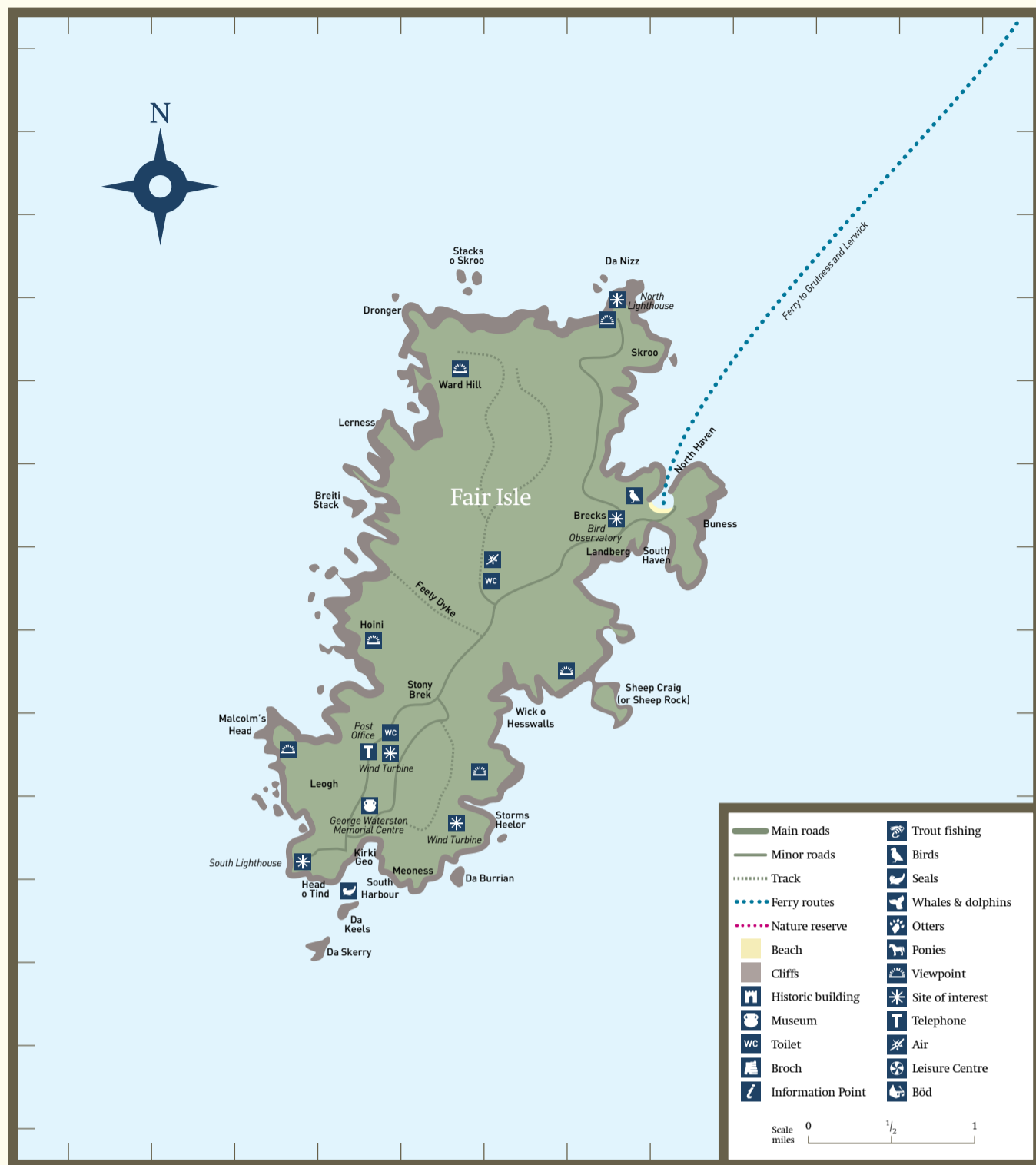
George Waterston OBE (1911-1980), the former Scottish Director of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, was a much-loved figure who had a massive and positive influence on Fair Isle. He bought the island after World War II and co-founded the Bird Observatory in 1948, giving the isle's economy a much-needed boost. In 1955, the National Trust for Scotland succeeded him as landlord and helped islanders to stem emigration and revitalise the community.

Dr Waterston's memorial is a fascinating museum in the former Fair Isle School, packed with displays of the island's history from prehistoric times to the present.

A guided tour is available on request, or you're welcome to browse this collection of photographs, documents and artefacts – for a unique insight into Fair Isle's past and a better understanding of its present.



A period setting in the George Waterston Memorial Centre and Museum



Spectacular coastal scenery of Fair Isle

