The Shetland Boat: History; Folklore and Construction.

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Introduction

This is to be a definitive study of the Shetland boat. It will examine the boats Norwegian origins, its history, uses, building traditions and folklore which are an important part of Shetland’s Nordic heritage.

Having access to a boat has been an essential part of everyday life for Shetland’s inhabitants since the islands were first settled some 4,000 years ago. A boat was essential for fishing, transporting people, animals and goods.

There were no roads and it was easier and quicker to go by sea. Thus the boat was central to the social, economic and cultural development of the Shetland Isles (Fenton 1978, 80).

Norwegian Viking boat ancestry

The first Norwegian Viking settlers arrived in Shetland towards the end of the ninth century. Christensen (2009, 92) thinks it reasonable to assume that settlers brought with them their boats Norwegian origins, its history, uses, building traditions and folklore which are an important part of Shetland’s Nordic heritage.

Oslevær identifies similarities between the Sandefjord boats and the Shetland model. He suggests that the Viking settlers who migrated to Shetland brought their Viking culture with them. The Viking culture included boat-building and fishing.

In 1880 a faring and a seskering were discovered along with six oared boats. The linking between the Gokstad and the Shetland model is important as it suggests links between the Viking period and the early Shetland boat.

It is thought that the initial expansion of the Shetland fishing fleet took place in the eleventh century when there was a demand for boats to fish further afield. By the time of the Gokstad boat (1038) the fishing fleet was more established.

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Off shore, large scale fishing for ling, cod and haddock developed from the fifteenth century. This fishing was within sight of land and was known as the haaf fishing (haaf is old Norse for ocean). By the beginning of the nineteenth century fish stocks had moved up to 40-50 miles off shore and this fishing was known as the far haaf (Goodlad, 1971, 94).

Haaf fishing was carried out in fairs and seskaerings and these boats were imported from Norway by the Shetland lairds who leased the boats and the fishing gear to their tenants. It is not known when this trade in boats began but the earliest records begin in the sixteenth century (Thowsen,1899, Smith, 1978). These boats were soon being built to order and were known as Hjelleba (Shetland boat). By 1836 there are records of larger boats being built for the far haaf called Jæltebaade and these boats are probably the beginning of the building of the bigger sixern used during this period (Thowsen, 1969; Smith, 1978).

What is the Shetland boat?

There are at least eight different types of boat that are considered to be, or termed ‘Shetland boats’. These types of boats are as follows:

- the fourern or fouraren or fourareen;
- sixern or sixaren;
- Fair Isle yole;
- Ness yole;
- haddock boat;
- eela boat;
- maids quarter sail racing boat and;
- the motor fishing boat.

Collectively, all the boats listed, are known in Shetland as the ‘Shetland model’.

Context of the Research

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Bibliography


