Brochs

Shetland's most spectacular sites are some of the 80 visible Iron Age Brochs which are located around the coast. From the wall head of Mousa Broch there is a good view of both the Sound and of the Broch of Berrurald, opposite [at Sandwick]. It is possible to see from one Broch to the next throughout the South Mainland, and part of their purpose must have been to act as a network of watch towers to guard the shores.

Inside the tower, we think there were watch towers to guard the shores. The several wooden floors and numbers of people could have lived inside. The area around the Broch was often enclosed - an outer defence in times of danger and, later, additional houses were built in this courtyard.

Brochs are very enigmatic and so archaeologists have carried out major work at Old Scatness, unfolding the story of the Broch and the Iron Age Village which surrounds it. Clickhimin Broch, on the edge of Lerwick, stands several metres high and is easily accessible. Mousa is the best preserved Broch in Scotland (Brochs are only found within the Mainland, and part of their purpose from one Broch to the next throughout the South Mainland, and part of their purpose must have been to act as a network of watch towers to guard the shores.

Wherever you look in Shetland you will be sure to find the remains of ancient Shetlanders who have been there before you. Low intensity use of the hill land in more recent times and the scarcity of timber means that these stone built remains are some of the best that you will find in Britain.

Ancient Crofts

Shetlanders having been working the land, keeping sheep and cattle, growing crops, for over 5,000 years. On the west side, visitors can follow ancient boundary dikes for miles across the hill. The Scord of Brouther has three excavated houses amongst the fields. There are five houses at Stanydale, together with an exceptionally large and very impressive building described by its excavator as a 'temple'.

Houses for the Dead

The earliest Shetlanders were buried in cairns, the majority built in the shape of a hea. The remains were laid in a small chamber in the centre. Who was buried in them? We do not know - there aren't enough for the whole population and the chambers are small. Perhaps the bodies were laid out for animals and birds to eat, and just a few bones from each person were put inside the cairn. A ceremony might have taken place in the concave façade at the front of the cairn. Even so, there was not room for many people inside.

The biggest cairns are on hilltops (e.g. Ronas Hill) but there are also very impressive cairns on lower land - usually on knolls which command good views. Ponds Water and Cremation are examples not to be missed.

Standing Stones

Standing stones have been erected throughout Shetland from prehistoric times to the present day. They formed boundary markers, navigation aids and others were memorial stones. Among the dramatically placed stones are Newing, Nesting; one along the road to Muness, Unst and one in the garden of Leagarth House, Fetlar, where the Stone of the Ripples was later moved and set into the landscaped grounds.

Burnt Mounds

If you find a turf covered heap of soil-sized, heat-shattered stones beside a burn, it will be a Bronze Age Burnt mound. Burnt mounds are usually crescent shaped and might have a box of stone slabs visible in the centre. Archaeologists debate their use. Were they cooking sites, meat being boiled in the trough by heating stones in a fire and placing them into the water? Experiments at Tangevik demonstrated that this was difficult. Perhaps water was taken from the trough and poured over hot stones to create steam for a sauna or to make felt, or was it for a more smelly purpose, such as tanning or fulling? Burnt mounds were usually well away from the houses. Cruester, Bressay, demonstrates how complex these sites can be. There are some spectacular burnt mounds on Fair Isle but with over 300 on the mainland alone, they are easy to find.

Souterrains

Shetland's earliest refrigerators, these small underground passages which widen out slightly at the end, would have been good places for storing salted meat over the winter. However, occasionally they are found inside houses, under hearths (e.g. Jarlshof). Perhaps grain or items which needed to be kept dry were stored here. Crawl down a lit souterrain at Jarlshof, or, for the more adventurous smaller person, disappear into the souterrain at Wadstiber, Bressay (take a torch).
Picts

By the 7th century AD, Shetland was firmly part of Pictland, and the most enduring legacy of these people is their art work: carved stones and silverwork. Carved stone slabs have been found at Cullingsbrough, Bressay, where intriguingly the graveyard has been built over the broch, and Papil, Burra, Main, Cunningsburgh was the find spot of several rune and ogham stones and the Mail. Figures. Some of these stones are on display in the Shetland Museum and Archives. Interpretation is provided on site and the spot where the treasure was found (inside the chapel, near the altar) is marked with a stone pillar.

Monks & Hermits

Priests set up chapels in the heart of Shetland (eg: Papil, Burra and St Ninian’s Isle) but the small cells on remote stacks and peninsulas either housed monks and hermits or were places of retreat for the priests themselves. Examples include Da Birrier, Yell (best viewed from the air), themselves. Examples include Da Birrier, Yell (best viewed from the air), facing a similar settlement on the Kame of Isbister across Yell Sound. Today, these are still some of the most inaccessible places in Shetland.

A Haven for Vikings

Shetland was right in the middle of the Viking seaways, and so it is hardly surprising that some of them stopped here, built houses and established farms. They brought with them a new style of building, a new political system, new laws and a new language, all of which have left their mark. Archaeologists have excavated several of their longhouses in Unst, one of their first landfalls. How did these incomers fit in with the existing population? What difference did their flexible boats with keels and sun compasses and their advanced fishing weights make to Shetland’s economy?

The Viking Unst project has excavated longhouse sites at Belmont, Hamar and Underhoull (Upper). These were altered through time and Belmont and Hamar longhouses were longlived. Other interesting sites include the later Norse house on the beach at Sandy Beach. The longhouse at Underhoull (Lower) has an Iron Age souterrain next to it and a broch above it. At Brooke Point, Haroldswick there is a replica Viking longship (the Skibladner) and a reconstructed longhouse, based on the excavation results.

There is a whole Viking village at Jarlshof. The principle Viking parliament (or Alting) was situated in the fertile Tingwall Valley, where an islet projects into the loch. It had good acoustics and good access from both East and West Shetland.

Soapstone

The properties of soapstone (kilber) were known 3,000 years before the Vikings ever came to Shetland. The Vikings did not make much pottery but mainly relied on natural materials. They carved stone bowls straight out of the rock. The shapes of the bowls were left in the hillsides, and can be easily seen at the largest quarry, Catpund, Cunningsburgh. Cliff faces at Fethaland, North Mainland are also covered with these marks.

Evidence of where bowls were carved out of Catpund soapstone.

Replica objects carved in soapstone during the living history project at Old Scatness.

St. Ninian’s

When the chapel on St Ninian’s Isle was excavated, the remains of 7th century stone shrines were found, showing that the island was important in early Christian times. The chapel which is still visible is rather later in date (it lies over an early monastic site). There are replicas of the silver treasure found here in the Shetland Museum and Archives.

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