**Welcome to Papa Stour**

This rugged island lies off the west coast of Shetland’s mainland. Some of the most impressive coastline in Shetland can be seen here, including caves, arches, stacks and skerries. For walkers, wildlife enthusiasts and those interested in archaeology, Papa Stour has much to offer.

**History**

The name Papa Stour is believed to have been given to the island by the Vikings. Papey Störa in Old Norse means the big island of priests, and refers to a community of Celtic missionary priests that lived on Papa Stour, perhaps as early as the 6th century. Papa Stour became an important area for Norsemen, providing both a strategic base and safe haven for their boats. By the end of the 13th century the island had become a Norwegian royal farm, the personal property of King Hakon. Although Shetland was pledged to Scotland in 1469 the Lairds of Norway continued to operate the island until well into the 17th century. During the 18th century two lairds from the mainland, Thomas Gifford of Bustra and Arthur Nicolson of Lerwick, divided Papa Stour between them and the island remained part of these estates until recently when some crofts have passed into private ownership.

**Archeology**

Papa Stour is full of prehistoric remains, the evidence of settlement back through the ages to Neolithic and Bronze Age times, 5000 years ago. In the historic era, Papa Stour was the source of the oldest surviving written document from Shetland. It is known as the 1299 document and contains allegations of corruption made by one of the islanders.

**Flora**

The island is divided by a hill dyke that separates the fertile in-by land from the moorland of the scattald or common grazing to the west. In the past, turf and peat from the scattald was removed and used by the islanders to provide fertiliser and fuel. This has produced a unique ‘scapped’ heathland of short wind-clipped vegetation growing on gravelly sub-soil.

Today the heathland is covered with a variety of plants including Ling, Thyme, Mountain Everlasting, Spring Squill, Plantain, Heath-specked Orchid and Woolly Hair Moss. In contrast, maritime species such as Sea Pinks and Campions thrive in the salty sea air along the cliff tops.

**Geology**

The west coast of Papa Stour contains some of the most exposed coastline in the British Isles. Exposed to the full force of the Atlantic Ocean the island’s Devonian age rocks have been carved into towering vertical cliffs, stacks and arches. Bands of volcanic ash (ignimbrite) and orange solidified lava (rhyolite) can be seen running through the rock faces.

At Lamarr Bank at the south side of the entrance to Housta Voe, a bed of calcareous mudstone containing broken remains of fossil fish has been discovered. Inland, ridges of glacial moraine – huge boulders carried by glaciers – run across the island, marking the edge of an ancient ice sheet.

**Some Useful Information**

- **Accommodation:** Backpackers Hostel, Hurtleback. Tel: 01595 873 229
- **Ferry Booking Office:** Tel: 01597 722559
- **Air Booking Office:** Tingwall Airport. Tel: 01595 840246
- **Medical Assistance:** Waas Walisd Surgery. Tel: 01595 809352
- **Papa Stour History Group** janepuckeay@hotmail.com
Exploring Papa Stour

On the approach to Papa Stour from West Burrafirth the ferry passes Breis Holm, where you will get your first glimpse of the island’s impressive sea caves. At the foot of Breis Holm a large tunnel cuts right through the holm. In calm weather it is possible to travel through the tunnel by boat.

The tallest of the stacks that cluster around the entrance to Housea Voe, is known as Muckle Fru or Maiden Stack. It was here that the only daughter of a Norwegian Lord was imprisoned by her father for refusing to agree to an arranged marriage. She had given her heart instead to a humble fisherman who, legend has it, rescued her from her solitary confinement on the stack with the help of his friends. The two lovers, reunited once more, fled the island together.

Behind the beach at Housea Voe are the supposed remains of Ting, believed to be a site where Norse assemblies were held. It is reputed that Lord Thorvald Thorsson, the man accused of corruption in the 1299 document, fought and won a duel within this circle.

Excavations in the 1970s and 1980s at Da Biggins, alongside the road just before the Kirk, uncovered the foundations of a medieval Norse house. In 2008 the Papa Stour History Group in partnership with the Norwegian Craft Academy undertook a partial reconstruction of this Stofa. This involved an exchange of students and craftsmen between the two countries. Log timbers were brought over from Norway and assembled on site in Papa Stour. It was officially opened by the Lady Mayor of Hordaland, Norway. Interpretation at the site gives more details of the findings.

Papa Stour is renowned for its famous sword dance, last performed in the isle in August 2008 at the Stofa opening.

The Papa Stour Kirk was built in 2006 and is still in use. In the west wall is a memorial window to the memory of six Papa men who lost their lives in the Great War. This stained glass window is the only surviving work of artist Victor Noble Rainbird.

The small stone buildings around Dutch Loch are good examples of horizontal water mills. Originally these were two story buildings with turf roofs. They were built into banks to give access to the upper floor where the millstone was sited. Many were still in use on Papa Stour in the early years of the 20th century.

To the west of Hamnavoe, the island’s spectacular western cliffs come into view, carved with arches and caves and punctuated with stacks and skerries. Two large holes, set back slightly from the cliff edge, drop through the roof of perhaps the most famous of the Papa Stour caves, known as Kirstan Hol. Look down through the hole and you can see waves breaking on the beach at the back of the cave, but take care, it’s a long way down!

North of Leera Skerry the solitary Snolda (whose name comes from the Old Norse word for a pinnacle) reaches precariously out of the sea, with waves crashing around the base and boulders balanced on top.

Nowhere on the island is the power of the sea more evident than in the three-legged Aisha Stack, Aisha Head, pierced by the Hol o Burrie Geo, and the sea caves that penetrate Fugla and Leera Skerries. Amongst the Snolda and Aisha Stack the waves do not always have their way though and to the north of Leera Skerry the solitary Snolda whose name comes from the Old Norse word for a pinnacle reaches precariously out of the sea, with waves crashing around the base and boulders balanced on top.

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Continued erosion by the sea has led to the collapse of part of the sea cave, known as Kirstan Hol.

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