



Above left: Sea Aster
Above right: Young Otter



Whalsay



Walking With Wildlife

For thousands of years beachcombing has been a favourite Whalsay pastime, as is shown by the astonishing profusion of shoreline place names. As well as flotsam, the coastal walker will encounter most of Shetland’s seabirds, including puffins. Ducks and waders gather at the shallows behind the beach at Symbister and at the houb (lagoon) on Kirk Ness. Inland lochs harbour several pairs of breeding red-throated divers. In spring and autumn there are often good “falls” of migrating birds from Scandinavia and further afield.

The shore pastures are carpeted in summer by the pink flowers of thrift and campion, and the blue of spring squill, while at the Geos of Yoxie on the east side one of Shetland’s rarest plants grows – Sea Aster – but be careful when viewing it from the cliff! Below the tideline, there is a profusion of sea life in the rockpools. Otters are common but shy, except around Symbister where they’ve become used to harbour traffic and are sometimes seen at close quarters.

Follow the Countryside Code: wherever you go in The Bonnie Isle, please use stiles, close gates behind you, avoid damage to crops and fences, and don’t disturb livestock or wildlife. Dogs must be kept under control.

Puffins



Whalsay

A thriving fishing community

Some Useful Information

Accommodation:	VisitShetland, Lerwick Tel: 08701 999440
Ferry Booking Office:	Symbister, Tel: 01806 566259
Shops:	Symbister, Harlsdale, Sodom and Boothpark
Petrol:	Symbister and Boothpark
Public Toilets:	Symbister, Skaw and South Play Park
Places to Eat	Livister
Post Office:	Harlsdale
Public Telephones:	Symbister (ferry terminal) and Brough crossroads
Golf Course:	Skaw, Tel: 01806 566483 or 01806 566481
Leisure Centre & swimming pool:	Symbister, Tel: 01806 566678
Church:	Brough, (church hall Symbister)
Doctor:	North Park, Tel: 01806 566219 Doctor Marshall, Tel: 01806 566501 Relief Doctor, Tel: 01806 566203
Police Station:	Gardentown, Tel: 01806 566432



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Welcome to Whalsay
Whalsay, with its heritage rooted in fishing, is a centre of the industry in Shetland.

Important archaeological sites and a wealth of birds, seals and wild flower make it a fascinating destination for a day trip or a longer stay.

Just 8 kilometres (5 miles) long and just over 3 kilometres (2miles) wide, Whalsay has easy and attractive coastal walks with magnificent cliff scenery.

From the highest point, the Wart of Clett 120metres (393 ft), there’s a panorama of the east coast of Shetland.

Whalsay also boasts Britain’s most northerly golf course, Shetland’s museum about the German merchants who traded with Shetland from 1450 to 1712, and a modern, well-equipped leisure centre with heated swimming pool and snooker house where visitors are welcome.

The tidal sounds and off-lying rocks around Whalsay are among the best places in Shetland to see Porpoises and occasional Dolphins, Minke Whales and Orcas. So keep a lookout during the ferry crossing and you may see why the Vikings called it *Hvals-øy* – the island of whales.

The ferry terminal for Whalsay is at Laxo, a 32 kilometre (20 mile) drive north of Lerwick. The crossing to Symbister takes 25 minutes and the service is frequent, although booking is advised in the peak season.

Britain’s most notherly golf course and club house can be found at Skaw



Looking towards Hamister

Accommodation on Whalsay is limited, so it’s best to book ahead. The Oot Ower Lounge at Livister offers bar meals, and visitors can buy snacks in local shops or at the leisure centre.

Stone Age and Iron Age Relics

People have lived in Whalsay for at least 4,000 years. Traces of former settlement range from hilltop burial cairns and prehistoric field boundaries to nationally important monuments such as the two spectacular Neolithic houses of Yoxie and the Beenie Hoose at Pettigarths Field excavated by Charles Calder and Whalsay-born John Stewart in the 1950s.

These houses evolved over hundreds of years. The flourishing community built its own burial place overlooking the fields.

There are indications that Whalsay had at least two brochs, forts dating from just before the time of Christ. Whalsay was clearly strategically important. The brochs are now in ruins. An even earlier Iron Age fortification is the blockhouse on a holm in the Loch of Huxter.

Arctic Skuas



Planticrubs which can be found next the the remains of an Iron Age Fort at the Loch of Huxter

Granetic gneiss with xenoliths of metamorphic rock at Meoness

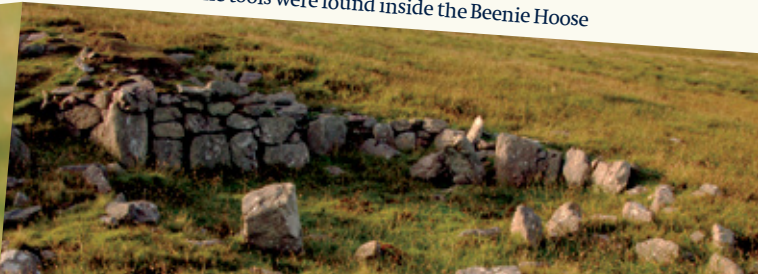
Other archaeological remains include burnt mounds, foundations of prehistoric dykes buried under peat, and traces of Bronze Age houses at the Loch of Sandwick.

Stumps of Ancient Mountains

The rocks of Whalsay are schist and gneiss, formed at high temperature and pressure beneath mountains which were eroded away hundreds of millions of years ago. In places you can see large fragments of the original rocks – known as xenoliths – mixed up with the formerly-fluid mass of granitic gneiss.

On the north-east coast are outcrops of crystalline limestone and contorted calcium silicate bands. The landscape of Whalsay has been carved and smoothed by successive ice ages and the coastline etched by the incessant battering of the sea.

Over 1,800 stone tools were found inside the Beenie Hoose





Symbister Harbour

Symbister's Bustling Harbour

The harbour at Symbister is the hub of this successful fishing community of around 1,000 people – and a constant source of interest to islanders and visitors alike.

Craft owned and crewed by local families throng the sheltered dock, from the smallest creel boats to huge pelagic trawlers – some of Europe's largest fishing vessels. Nearby, a modern factory processes whitefish for export, while next to the Whalsay Boating Club – which welcomes visitors – are the remains of a former herring curing station.



Racing at the Whalsay Regatta

The inner harbour is crowded with colourful dinghies and the distinctive "Shetland Model" boats which compete in local sailing and rowing races. The lines of these double-ended skiffs reveal their Viking origins.

The beach below the road around the head of the bay is partly man-made, and was used to dry salted cod and ling during the heyday of the line fishery from sixerns – open, six-oared boats – in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The German Merchants

For hundreds of years the salt fish trade was in the hands of merchants from North Germany. The fascinating museum in the Symbister Pier House tells how ships from Hamburg, Bremen and Lubeck sailed to Shetland every summer, bringing seeds, cloth, iron tools, salt, spirits, luxury goods and hard currency, to exchange for the Shetlanders' fish. The Germans were forced out by import duties after the 1707 Treaty of Union between England and Scotland.

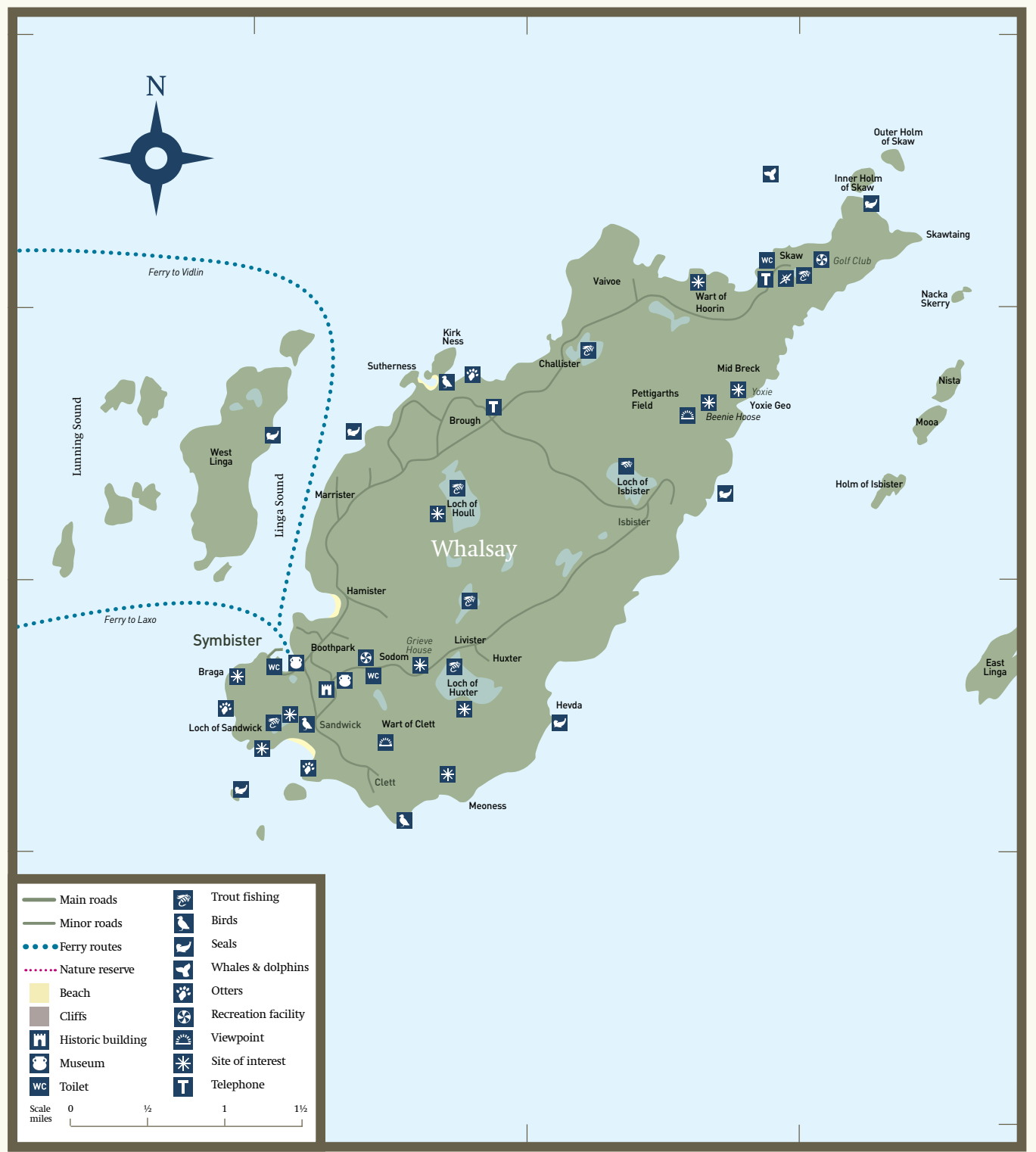


The Symbister Pier House with the Whalsay fishing fleet lit up for Christmas

This picturesque old building, restored with its dock and cargo hoist, was one of two bōds, or warehouses, in Whalsay.

The Auld Haa

Not all trade was legal. Tradition says a smugglers' tunnel ran under Bremen Strasse, the road outside the bōd, to the cellars of the Auld Haa, the former home of the Bruce lairds. According to legend, soil in the garden was shipped from Spain as ballast after the laird's ships had discharged fish cargoes there.



Symbister House

The Bruce family acquired most of Whalsay and oppressed the islanders for over 300 years. But they virtually bankrupted themselves building Symbister House, or the New Haa. Now part of Whalsay Junior High School, this is the finest Georgian mansion in Shetland. It's built of granite blocks, quarried in North Nesting, and taken by rafts across the sound. Despite the use of forced labour, the building cost over £30,000, a fortune in the early 1800s. The estate's finances never recovered and the last resident laird died in 1944.



The Haa, now Symbister House Junior High School

The New Haa had courtyards, stables, byres, a farmhouse, a mill, a dovecote and even a "high-rise", three-seater, outside toilet. The local history group has converted part of the outbuildings into a museum and heritage centre.

Sodom and Hugh MacDiarmid

For most of the 1930s the Scots Communist poet Christopher Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid) lived in Whalsay.



Grieve House camping bōd

In the croft house of Sodom (from the Old Norse *suðr-heimr* – the southerly homestead) this often tormented genius wrote much of his finest poetry (including On a Raised Beach) and, via the Whalsay post office, conducted a long correspondence with the leading writers and thinkers of his generation. Grieve was called up for war work in 1942 and never returned to Whalsay. His former home is now a camping bōd, run by Shetland Amenity Trust.



Christopher Grieve with his wife Valda and son Michael

Working at the farling in the 1950's



Sunset over Sutherness



The coastal village of Symbister

