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 Burraland, opposite at Sandwick. It is possible to see from one broch to the next in 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 several wooden floors and numbers of people must 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. Clickimin Broch, on the edge of Lerwick, stands several metres high and is easily accessible. Mousa is the best preserved broch in Scotland (brochs are not found outside Scotland) standing 13 metres high with a staircase between the double wall to the top. Off the beaten track, the striking red granite broch at Culsivwick, West Mainland, the well-preserved broch at Burraness, Yell, and the broch on the edge of the Loch of Houlland, Eshaness, are just some of the treats in store for the walker.

Houses for the Dead
The earliest Shetlanders were buried in cairns, the majority built in the shape of a heel. 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 knoxes which command good views. Punds Water and Vementry are examples not to be missed.

Some Useful Contacts

Shetland Museum and Archives: Hay’s Dock, Lerwick, Tel: 01959 692097

Unst Heritage Centre: Haroldswick, Unst, Tel: 01957 711528

Fetlar Interpretive Centre: Humie, Fetlar, Tel: 01957 732304

The Old Haa: Burravoe, Yell, Tel: 01957 722239

Tangwick Haa Museum: Eshaness, Tel: 01806 503389

Scalloway Museum: Main Street, Scalloway

Bressay Heritage Centre: Leraness, Bressay, Tel: 01959 820790

Hoswick Visitor Centre: Hoswick, Sandwick, Tel: 01958 431406

Quendale Mill: Quendale, Dunrossness, Tel: 01958 460969

George Waterton Memorial Centre: Fair Isle, Tel: 01950 440405

Mousa Ferry: Sandwick, Tel: 01955 431367

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 remains are some of the best that you will find in Britain.

In addition there are the spectacular and internationally important sites of Mousa broch (Scotland’s best preserved broch), Jarlshof and Clickimin, (multi-period sites several metres high). Shetland is indeed a treasure trove from the past.

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 Leagath House, Fetlar, where the Stone of the Ripples was later moved and set into landscaped grounds.

Burnt Mounds
If you find a turf covered heap of flat-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 Tangwick 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. Cruesler, 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 Weisdister, Bressay (lake a torch).
**Archaeology in Shetland**

**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 Culplingsbrough, Bressay (where intriguingly the graveyard has been left over the broch), and Papil, Burra. Mail, Cunningsburgh was the find spot of several rune and ogham stones and the Mail Figurine. Some of these stones are on display in the Shetland Museum and Archives.

**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 earlier one). There are replicas of the silver treasure found here 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. An example can be found at Da Birrier, Yell (best viewed from the air), facing a similar settlement on the Keel 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 begun systematically investigating some 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 current Viking Unst project started by excavating longhouse sites at Belmont and Hamar. Bath were altered through time, and the Belmont longhouse was longived. Other interesting sites include the house on the beach at Sandwick, and Framgord, a mile further along the coast, where the chapel associated with an unexcavated massive Viking farm building (to the north) is still in use today. There are small attractive early Christian crosses in the graveyard. The longhouse at Underhoull has an Iron Age souterrain next to it and a broch above it.

**Soapstone**

The properties of soapstone, or talc, were known 3,000 years before the Vikings ever came to Shetland. The Vikings, however, did not make much pottery, but instead used natural materials. They carved stone bowls straight out of the rock. The shapes of the bowls were left in the hillside, and can be best seen at Catpund, Cunningsburgh. The cliff faces at Fethaland, North Mainland is also covered with these marks.

**Chapels**

By the 12th century there were numerous chapels throughout Shetland. Most of these are now very ruinous but take time to visit Lund, where there is a fish carved on one of the window lintels. Framgord has fascinating crosses in the surrounding graveyard, as well as a Viking or Norse farm just outside. Both these sites are in Unst, as is Kirkaby, where the early circular graveyard is still visible.