

Northern Lights

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and Shetland
Wild Skies Shetland

PLUS

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Ten hidden gems in Caithness



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Welcome

Well, the final quarter of 2023 and the opening quarter of 2024 have provided us with significant challenges and indeed who remembers Storm Babet which played havoc with the October holidays, or Storms Elin, Fergus and Gerrit coming right on the back of each other in December.

No sooner were we into January when Storm Henk decided to come calling, playing some havoc with dry docking of the Hamnavoe, followed closely by Storms Isha and Jocelyn. Winter weather then decided to test us during the Hjalmland dry docking, restricting our use of cranes into the dock as we regularly saw wind speeds in excess of safe operating parameters.

As I write this short introduction, Storm Nelson, named by the Spanish State Meteorological Agency, is causing havoc further south. One of my colleagues said to me 'Well, we'll just have to keep an eye out for that one then won't we'. I took it he was teasing ever so slightly.

As you travel, I do sincerely hope that you are enjoying your journey with us and that all your plans and connections work out well.

Remember please, Aberdeen now has a comprehensive set of bus gates in operation, not physical gates as some may imagine, but notional gates monitored by camera and clearly indicated both by roadside signs and road markings. To further challenge you the Aberdeen LEZ (Low Emission Zone) goes live on 1st June 2024. We will continue to push out social media and website advice as to how to check whether your vehicle is legal for the LEZ or not.

If you are driving, please take time to consider your route to and from the Port, particularly if you are approaching from either the north or west of the city.

If you have any questions why not ask Angus, featured just opposite, he and his colleagues in Aberdeen will be pleased to answer any specific road network queries.

Also in this issue, Amy in our Marketing team has provided you with a suggested trip to Dunnottar Castle, just South of Stonehaven. I think I can safely say the last inhabitants of the Castle probably had other things to concern themselves with without worrying about the bus gates. We look forward to hearing about your adventures.

Enjoy your time with us and travel safely.



Stuart Garrett
Stuart Garrett
 Managing Director
 Serco NorthLink Ferries

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NorthLink Ferries

Stromness Ferry Terminal,
 Ferry Road, Stromness,
 Orkney, Scotland, KW16 3BH
 Email: info@northlinkferries.co.uk
 Web: www.northlinkferries.co.uk

Front page photograph: Wojciech Kruczynski



*Angus Heyman,
 Customer Service
 Supervisor, Aberdeen*

Tell us a bit about yourself.

I was born in Wollongong, Australia, and raised with a mix of Australian and Scottish traditions. My family moved to Aberdeenshire when I was twelve. This helped me understand my Scottish (mainly Aberdeenshire and Shetland) roots better. I've taken the ferry to Shetland from a young age, always looking forward to the legendary fish and chips.

How did you get into your career / current job?

I graduated in Petroleum Geology from Aberdeen University, however I fell back on my customer service skills due to the sparse energy job market. Through working at the Donald Russell butcher during school and university, I learned the value of service that turns a good product into a great product. I secured a Customer Service Assistant (CSA) role at the NorthLink Ferries terminal in Aberdeen and started my journey. I worked as a CSA in the Aberdeen team for four years before becoming a supervisor two years ago.

What are your duties?

My main duty is ensuring the passengers board the ships safely, smoothly, and of course, happily! The customer service team works with a range of departments both shore side and on the vessels

meaning no day is the same. The front of house team is here to provide both passengers and the public insight into our services and to assist them on their voyage to and from the islands. Additionally, I assist in the general health and safety of the Aberdeen terminal.

What is the best part of your job?

The best part is interacting with the passengers. I love recommending hidden gems such as a nice café, museum or walk. There is nothing better than seeing a passenger return from a nice day out in Aberdeen with a smile on their face.

What do you think people might find interesting about your job?

As a lifeline service we see many regular travellers. Getting to meet these people, hearing how they're doing, and building a great bond of mutual respect is very rewarding.

What do you do in your spare time?

Beyond work, my passion is good food and drink – I very much enjoy cooking. This enthusiasm was inherited from my parents and developed through the butcher I worked at. I also have a regular meet up with friends to enjoy a good board game.

A Shetland timeline

This timeline covers the human history of the Shetland Islands, as well as noting key places of interest to visit throughout the islands!

5,000 BC
The first settlers arrive in Shetland. Though no traces are left of these nomadic hunter gatherers, pollen studies show a change in vegetation possibly caused by man.

3,250 BC
The Scord of Brouster near the Bridge of Walls are the ruins of the earliest stone-built houses in Shetland. These dwellings are built on top of earlier, wooden ones.

3,000 BC
Chambered cairns can be found at Islesburgh near Mavis Grind, at Mangaster in Northmavine, and at March Cairn at Eshaness. These ancient tombs tend to be ruined and the contents lost.

2,500 BC
Stanydale temple is the most impressive of the many Neolithic houses found in Da Westside. Neolithic houses are oval, with a hearth in the middle.



Jarlshof



Mousa Broch



Scalloway Castle

1,500 BC
Volcanic eruptions in Iceland affect the climate, and peat begins to encroach onto agricultural land.

1,200 BC
Shetland has over 300 Bronze Age burnt mounds. One can be found at the Bressay Heritage Centre. Burnt mounds contain a hearth, water trough, and piles of scorched stones.

800 BC
At Jarlshof, there are Bronze Age houses and a smithy which makes axe heads, swords, and pins.

400 BC
Mousa Broch is built. This massive structure is stunningly well-preserved. The Iron Age broch and village at Old Scatness in the South Mainland is also built around this time.

200 AD
Clickimin Broch on the outskirts of Lerwick is constructed, on the site of an Iron Age fort. It was abandoned in 800 AD.

The Neolithic – 6,000 years ago
Houses are built and farming begins. Fish are caught from the sea, cattle and sheep are kept, and fields are ploughed. The dead are buried in communal tombs.

The Bronze Age – 4,000 years ago
The Bronze Age is marked by the creation of metal, but it began later in Shetland, perhaps due to the difficulty of obtaining copper and tin. Bronze Age people buried their dead in individual graves rather than communal tombs.

The Iron Age – 2,500 years ago
In the Iron Age, distinctive dry-stone buildings appear, such as wheelhouses, blockhouses, and brochs. Brochs are large, circular buildings – impressive status symbols in spectacular locations.

1838 AD
Lerwick overtakes Scalloway as the main economic centre and becomes the capital of Shetland.

1665 AD
Fort Charlotte is built to defend Lerwick, as the Dutch, who had been fishing in Shetland waters since the 12th century, become a threat during the Dutch Wars.

1599 AD
Scalloway Castle is built for Patrick Stewart, who drives up taxes and uses the islanders as slave labour. He is later executed for treason.

1565 AD
The notorious Robert Stewart begins to rule over Shetland and Orkney, followed by his son Patrick Stewart.

1469 AD
The daughter of the King of Denmark marries the son of James II and Scotland demands Shetland and Orkney as part of the dowry.

1000 AD
Ting sites, such as the one at Tingwall loch are meeting places to discuss law and order.

900 AD
Soapstone is quarried at Catpund mine near Cunningsburgh to create bowls and fishing weights.

875 AD
Shetland and Orkney become part of Scandinavia and Norse Earls begin to rule. History is recorded in the Sagas.

780 AD
The St Ninian's hoard is a stash of 28 Pictish silver items, which were found on St Ninian's Isle, buried in a chapel. Replicas can be found in the Shetland Museum and Archives.

700 AD
The Papiil Stone is carved. This beautiful Pictish symbol stone can be found in a kirkyard in West Burra.

The Modern Era – 200 years ago

The Scottish Earls – 500 years ago
There is tension between the new Scottish Earls and the Shetland landowners, however, the Norse influence continues.

The Norse Earls – 1,000 years ago
The Norse arrive by sea around 800 AD, bringing their language, law, culture, and architecture to Shetland. Long rectangular Norse houses are built at Jarlshof and Underholl in Unst.

The Picts – 2,000 years ago
Unlike the Iron Age people, the Picts did not leave any impressive buildings behind. Instead, exquisitely decorated Pictish stones and cross slabs have been found.

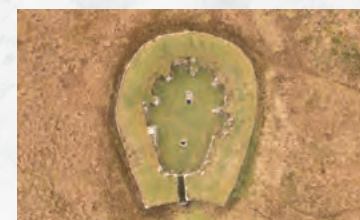
1881 AD
Up Helly Aa begins.

1939 AD
Wartime, and the first German bomb to land on British soil hits Sullom Voe in Shetland.

1941 AD
The Shetland Bus begins clandestine wartime operations between Shetland and Nazi-occupied Norway.

1981 AD
North Sea oil comes to Shetland and the Sullom Voe Terminal is constructed. In the 1990s, Sullom Voe handled over a quarter of the UK's petroleum production.

2021 AD
Plans are put into place for the construction of a spaceport at SaxaVord on the island of Unst.



Stanydale temple



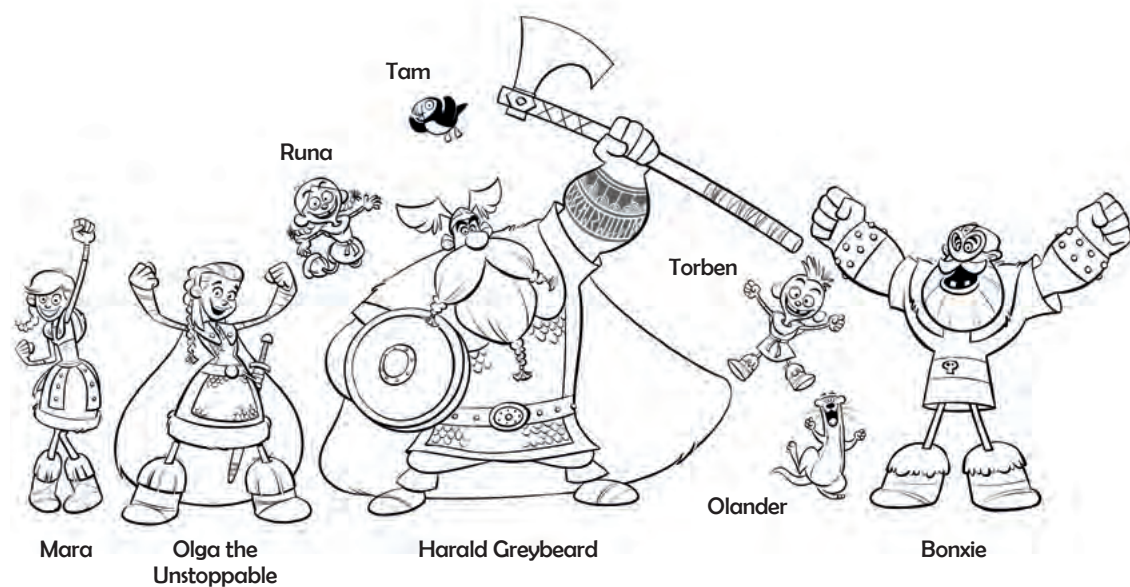
St Ninian's Isle treasure



Up Helly Aa

The Viklings

Alex Leonard – No.3

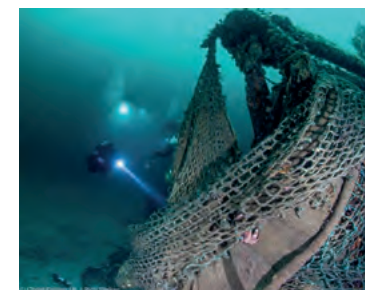


Sponsorship photos

Working closely with island communities, the NorthLink Ferries Sponsorship programme is designed to support events, community groups, schools, and individuals with discounted fares and travel vouchers as they travel to and from Orkney and Shetland.



1. Lerwick Amateur Swimming Club



2. Ghost Fishing UK



3. Alba Explorer



4. 11th Croy Scout Group



5. Demonburgh Junior Roller Derby



6. Orkney Branch of the Pony Club

Here are some of the groups and individuals who have benefitted from the programme this year.

1. **Lerwick Amateur Swimming Club** won Scottish Swimming's Club of the Year – well done to the athletes, volunteers, and coaches! NorthLink Ferries is proud to sponsor the club with discounted travel.

2. NorthLink supported the charity **Ghost Fishing UK** by sponsoring travel to Shetland for 12 divers. After 6 days, they recovered 1,500kg of lost fishing gear which could have harmed marine life.

3. Lerwick was a host port for the Tall Ships Races 2023 and NorthLink was the official transport sponsor. During the event, sail trainees from **Alba Explorer**, which belongs to Ocean Youth Trust Scotland, were welcomed on board MV Hjaltland for lunch.

4. The **11th Croy Scout Group** travelled to Orkney for a week-long summer camp in Orphir. The sponsorship program assisted with costs towards their travel.

5. **Demonburgh Junior Roller Derby** travelled to Orkney sponsored by NorthLink Ferries, to compete against the Orkney Junior team. They won their game and made some great friends.

6. **Orkney Branch of the Pony Club Junior games team** competed at the Scottish Horse of the Year Show and gained 2nd place overall. Their travel was discounted by the NorthLink Ferries sponsorship program.

For more information about the NorthLink Ferries sponsorship programme, and to apply, please visit www.northlinkferries.co.uk/sponsorship

Buchan Ness Lighthouse

The village of Boddam is a lovely seaside community, tucked away amidst the breathtakingly beautiful Buchan coastline. With a population of over 1,500 people, Boddam is a short commute to the nearby town of Peterhead and the city of Aberdeen.

Boddam is also home to the striking Buchan Ness Lighthouse which has stood imposingly on a small rocky headland and tidal island for 200 years.

Before its construction, the absence of a lighthouse in combination with the area's occasionally unforgiving seas sent countless ships crashing into cliffs and running aground. Therefore in 1819, following requests from the Magistrates, Town Councils and Harbour Trustees of Peterhead, it was agreed that a lighthouse should be constructed on Buchan Ness or another appropriate section of the coast to guide and warn sailors of the dangers ahead.

Robert Stevenson, the grandfather of renowned lighthouse engineer Robert Louis Stevenson, was tasked with surveying the area and after careful consideration, he decided that the lighthouse would be most effective near the village of Boddam.

Eight years later, in 1827, the lighthouse's construction was completed by John Gibb, an Aberdeen contractor, using sizable blocks of granite mined from a local quarry. Buchan Ness Lighthouse reaches an impressive height of 115-feet and boasts 166 steps leading to the top of the tower.

Interestingly, Buchan Ness was the first lighthouse in Scotland to feature a flashing light, which had a faster rotation than any other at the time. Its present

light flashes every five seconds, emitting a bright white light that can be observed from up to 28 nautical miles away.

Since its construction, Buchan Ness Lighthouse has undergone several modifications. To help seafarers recognise the lighthouse during the day, a distinctive red band was painted on the tower in 1907. The lighthouse updated to a dioptric light system three years later in 1910, significantly increasing the lantern's output from 6,500 to 786,000 candlepower. In 1978, the lighthouse switched to electric operation. Finally in 1988, over 160 years after its construction, Buchan Ness became fully automated and is now remotely monitored by the Northern Lighthouse Board.

Like many other unfortunate Scottish lighthouses, Buchan Ness sustained damage during the Second World War. In this case, a drifting mine exploded 50 yards south of the lighthouse after washing ashore. Thankfully, no one was injured in the explosion – however the lighthouse itself wasn't so lucky, and sustained some minor damage.

Nestled at the base of Buchan Ness Lighthouse are two Lighthouse Keepers' cottages – the residence of the Lighthouse Keepers that once worked here.



It was a demanding role, Lighthouse Keepers worked through the night to ensure the light flashed appropriately and took care of other responsibilities during the day.

After the lighthouse became automated in 1988, Lighthouse Keepers were no longer necessary, and the lighthouse's cottages soon fell into poor condition. However, a small family-run business has since taken over the property, offering visitors the chance to stay in one of two beautifully renovated guest houses. Although there is no public access inside the lighthouse tower, you are still free to wander around the perimeter and take in the wonderful seascapes.

The area surrounding Buchan Ness Lighthouse is simply a stunning backdrop of natural beauty. The Boddam cliffs exhibit a rugged and rocky terrain and although not particularly tall, with an average height of around 200 feet, these cliffs are exceedingly steep. They serve as a sanctuary for many seabirds, while seals can frequently be observed gracefully swimming in the surrounding waters.

For those who embark on the coastal path and follow along for 5 miles heading south, a magnificent sight awaits for you at the Bullars of Buchan. This remarkable area showcases awe-inspiring collapsed sea caves, impressive sea stacks and stunning arches that are sure to leave a lasting impression.

Sir Peter Maxwell Davies: Sculpting Sounds in Orkney



Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, or Max as he was known, was one of the most significant British composers of the 20th century. Born in Lancashire, he spent his early career in England, Italy, and Australia, before finally settling in Orkney in 1971. He lived in Rackwick on the island of Hoy, in a hill croft above the valley.

"I thought that that place was one of the most marvellous places I'd ever been to physically, the most extraordinarily beautiful valley there on Hoy, with the sea pounding in just below the house."

The silence and solitude of the islands allowed him to escape the demands of urban life, providing the perfect setting for contemplation and creative exploration.

"To live in those circumstances where on that beach I don't think for a whole month I saw one person, nobody came, you come face to face with yourself in a way."



The beauty of Orkney's environment resonated with Max's creative senses and his work began to embody the very essence of Orkney's landscapes. Max's compositions are known for their experimental nature, challenging traditional musical conventions, and pushing the boundaries of contemporary classical music.

In 1977, and with the help of a few others, Max and Orcadian poet George Mackay Brown co-founded the St. Magnus Festival. Max's opera, The Martyrdom of St. Magnus was the principal event of this first, now annual, celebration of the arts.

Knighted in 1987, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies was also a respected conductor, associated with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, of which he was a composer laureate. He was made Master of the Queen's Music in 2004.

Perhaps one of Max's most recognised pieces of music is Farewell to Stromness. It was written as a protest against a proposed uranium mine near Stromness in Orkney, composed at a time when the future of the town was uncertain. The beautifully poignant piece is often played at local funerals.

Max moved from Rackwick to the island of Sanday in 1998 and lived there until his death in 2016 at the age of 81. He was laid to rest in Bunness Kirkyard Church burial ground on the island.

Max's dedication to pushing the boundaries of musical expression continues to inspire musicians and audiences alike.

With grateful thanks to the Orkney Library & Archive Sound archive for photos and quotations from Sir Peter Maxwell Davies.

Orkney Beremeal Shortbread recipe

Recipe



Beremeal comes from bere (pronounced "bear") which is an ancient grain grown in Orkney – a form of barley which is ideally suited to the shorter growing season in these islands in the north. Bere is low in gluten and saturated fats. It has been grown for over 5,000 years in Orkney. Grains of bere were even found in the food waste of the Neolithic village, Skara Brae, on the west coast of the island!

I wonder what those ancient islanders would have made of using bere to create Orkney Beremeal Shortbread though? This delicious, sweet treat is **easy to make and is very addictive**. Orkney Beremeal Shortbread also makes the perfect accompaniment to a cuppa.

Ingredients:

- 250g Beremeal flour
- 125g Semolina
- 250g Butter
- 125g Caster sugar
- Pinch of salt

Method:

1. Preheat a fan oven to 130 degrees celsius
2. Soften the butter (we put it in the microwave for 6 seconds) then cut the butter into cubes.
3. **Add the butter and caster sugar into a bowl and cream the mixture** until it is light and fluffy. We used an electric whisk for this task.
4. Gradually add the beremeal flour, semolina and salt to the bowl and **mix until it is all bound together in a slightly sticky dough**.
5. To make the next task easier, divide the dough into 4 portions.
6. Lightly flour a surface and use a rolling pin to **roll each quarter to a thickness of approx. 1 cm**.
7. **Use a biscuit cutter to cut into rounds**, placing them on baking trays lined with baking paper. Continue until all the dough is used.
8. **Bake in the oven for between 25 and 30 minutes**, or until golden.
9. Switch the oven off and remove the trays from the oven. **Sprinkle the shortbread with caster sugar**.
10. Return the shortbread to the oven (still switched off) until it is cool. This helps the sugar stick to the shortbread.

Tips:

- If you cannot find beremeal flour to buy, plain flour will work just as well.
- Beremeal is quite expensive, so we used plain flour for flouring the surface before rolling.
- Be aware that the rolled mixture can become stickier the more you work with it.
- Keep a close eye on the oven during cooking, as the shortbread can easily burn.

Ten hidden gems in Caithness

Discover ten hidden gems in Caithness, less well known places worth finding!

1. Needle Eye Rock (Wick Sea Arch)

The Caithness coast boasts stunning natural wonders and, just 5 miles south of Wick, the remarkable Needle Eye Rock (Wick Sea Arch) rises 150 feet above the North Sea.

To reach Needle Eye Rock, there are coastal pathways from Wick. No matter which direction you approach from, you will be rewarded with a stunning view of this magnificent sea arch!



2. Berriedale Footbridge

At the bottom of one of Caithness' steepest roads, Berriedale is a quaint fishing village packed with history despite its size. One quirky feature within Berriedale is the suspension footbridge. This bouncy footbridge is the only way to cross over the Berridale Water and leads to a terrace of buildings (fisherman's cottages, an icehouse, and storerooms) which date back to around 1840.

3. Badbea Clearance Village

Situated north of Helmsdale, Badbea Clearance Village is an eerie, abandoned clifftop settlement. Inhabited from the late 1700s, it grew during the Highland Clearances in the early 1800s. The last resident left in 1911 and the settlement fell into decay.



4. Reiss Sands

Just north of Wick, at Sinclair's Bay southern edge lies a beautiful white stretch of sand with 16th century castles at either end. Reiss Sands is a popular beach amongst local people but is often overlooked by visitors.

It has high cliffs and sand dunes, so Reiss Sands is sheltered from the wind. It is a peaceful spot for wandering and wildlife spotting – a variety of seabirds, seals and occasionally orcas can be seen!

Visitors can wander freely amongst the ruins of stone houses and visit the striking monument built by Donald Sutherland (the grandson of one of Badbea's residents.) Despite breathtaking views, harsh weather conditions must have made living here a daunting challenge.



5. Halkirk Heritage and Vintage Motor Centre

The Halkirk Heritage and Vintage Motor Centre offers a unique display of vintage vehicles, including motorcycles, bicycles, and classic cars. Visitors can also sit behind the wheel of some of the impressive motor exhibits!

In the Heritage Room, the museum delves into Caithness's rich social and local history, and explores the experiences of those who lived here through World War 1 and 2.

6. Windpump Tower

The Flagstone Heritage Trail is a short walk starting near the Castletown Heritage Centre, designed to commemorate the flagstone industry in Caithness. The most obvious surviving structure on the trail is a distinctive old windpump tower.

This tower once served to extract quarry water to a nearby dam but was made redundant by a steam engine in the 1860s.

7. Loch Watten

Near Watten village, between Wick and Thurso, sits Loch Watten, Caithness's largest water body. Its name is believed to have originated from Old Norse 'Vatn', meaning water or lake. The scenic loch is a renowned trout fishing spot, drawing anglers from nearby regions. Rich in flora and fauna, and hosting mallards, geese, and swans, it's a designated Special Area of Conservation.

8. Harold's Tower

Harold's Tower, is an unusual hexagonal structure which dates to the late 1700s. Sporting turrets at each corner, it crowns the Hill of Clairdon near Thurso and is visible for miles around.

Once the site of a chapel, it's also believed to be where Earl Harold of Caithness met his end in battle in 1196. With the chapel falling into disrepair,

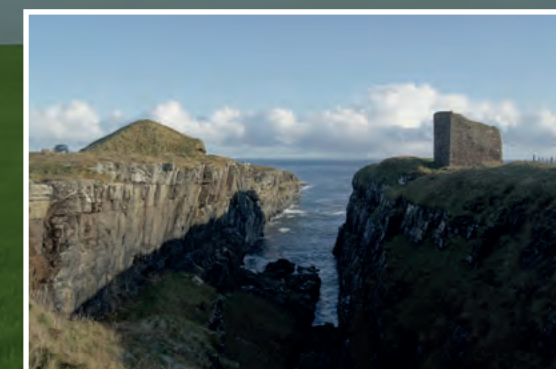
Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster replaced it with Harold's Tower, a mausoleum, and the resting place of the Sinclairs of Ulbster.



9. Dounreay Viewpoint

Dounreay, a small settlement near Thurso, was the site of two large nuclear establishments and housed the world's first fast reactor supplying electricity to the national grid. It ran from the 1950s until 1988, when the UK government opted to halt operations.

Nowadays, as the plant is being dismantled, visitors can see Dounreay from this safe viewpoint, where informative panels narrate its history and the ongoing dismantling process.



10. The Old Man of Wick

The Old Man of Wick is also known as the Castle of Old Wick and is one of Scotland's oldest castles, first built in the 1160s by Earl Harold of Caithness. The ruins seen today were constructed in the 14th-century, and rest on a sheer-sided peninsula, accessible via coastal paths from Wick.

Surrounded by stunning rugged scenery, the castle has an informative board detailing its history, and is a must-visit!

A trip to Dunnottar Castle in Aberdeenshire



Located nearly 20 miles south of Aberdeen lies a once mighty and impregnable castle, steeped in over 1,000 years of history. Dunnottar Castle is perched atop a 160-foot rock and was once home to one of the most powerful families in Scotland, the Earl Marischal.

It is not surprising that **Dunnottar Castle has appeared as the backdrop in many films** like Hamlet and Viktor Frankenstein because of its breathtaking and evocative setting. It also inspired the Pixar animated movie Brave.

To enter the Castle, you must first walk **200 steps** down the cliffside before climbing a steep staircase. Unfortunately, there are **no ramps and the terrain can be uneven in places**, making the site unsuitable for those with mobility issues.

Forged by history

Dunnottar Castle began as a Pictish settlement between 5,000BC and 700AD. This corresponds **with the name 'Dunnottar' deriving from the Pictish word 'Dun' meaning hill fort or place of strength.**

Over the following turbulent centuries, **many of the original buildings were destroyed, rebuilt and then destroyed again.** Due to its strategic location,

Dunnottar Castle has been attacked by the Vikings, English armies and even by famed Scottish warrior William Wallace!

When **Sir William Keith – the Great Marischal of Scotland – acquired the Castle towards the end of the 14th century**, it was then that the Castle complex we see today was built. Throughout history, many Scottish Kings and Queens (including Mary Queen of Scots) have stayed at Dunnottar and enjoyed lavish feasts and gatherings there.

Exploring the ruins

When exploring the remnants of Dunnottar Castle, **the size of the complex is impressive.**

However, except for the recently restored drawing room, almost **every structure is roofless and in a ruinous state.** The Castle deteriorated after it was vacated in 1715, until restoration works began in 1925.

The Keep (also known as the Tower House) is **the oldest building that is still standing on the property.** The Keep housed the great hall, the Castle's original kitchen and a private residence for the Earl Marischal and his family.

Adjacent to the Keep is the storehouse, smithy and **the stables which were home to the Earl Marischal's 12 finest horses.** The Palace is another impressive ruin to explore. This building was mostly used as accommodation for castle staff, but also contained a ballroom, kitchen, brewery, and the fully restored drawing room.



The chapel has a turbulent history. **The original chapel was constructed in 1276**, but William Wallace burned it down with English soldiers trapped inside barely 23 years later. The chapel was rebuilt soon after, and further renovated in the 16th century. **Two small Gothic windows survive to this day.**

The Whigs Vault

The Whig's Vault reminds us of one of Dunnottar's darkest moments. In 1685, 200 'Whigs' (those who refused to pledge allegiance to the King of England as head of the church) and Covenanters were marched from Edinburgh to Dunnottar Castle. Only 167 survived the journey, before they were imprisoned in a cellar now known as the infamous 'Whig's Vault'.

They suffered appalling, unsanitary conditions for six weeks while receiving little food or water. The survivors were later sailed to America to be sold as slaves, with a further 70 losing their lives at sea.

The Honours of Scotland

The Honours of Scotland are the oldest regalia in Britain and consists of a crown, sword and sceptre.

In 1649, Oliver Cromwell destroyed the Crown Jewels. To prevent the Honours of Scotland from suffering the same fate, they were hidden within Dunnottar Castle. However, in 1651, English soldiers arrived at Dunnottar to steal the Honours. **After an 8-month siege, Dunnottar surrendered but when the castle was raided, the Honours were nowhere to be found.**

The Honours had been smuggled out of the Castle during the siege by Mrs Grainger, the wife of the church's minister. There are several tales as to how she achieved this, but **the true story has never been revealed.**

A paradise for bird watchers

When you explore the ruins, **it is hard to ignore the calling of hundreds of seabirds which nest on the surrounding sea cliffs.** They are in their highest numbers during May and June. **If you are fortunate enough, you can even catch a glimpse of dolphins, seals, and even whales, out at sea.**

Dunnottar Castle is open every day for visitors, with seasonal opening times. The Castle can occasionally close due to poor weather conditions. **Please keep up to date by checking their website www.dunnottarcastle.co.uk before you visit.**

Next to the car park, a small refreshment stand can be found. **Dogs are also welcome at Dunnottar Castle** as long as they are kept on a leash.



Wildflowers of Orkney and Shetland

In the far reaches of the British Isles, where the North Atlantic meets the North Sea, lie the enchanting islands of Orkney and Shetland.

Amidst the rugged cliffs, ancient ruins and sweeping moors, a tapestry of wildflowers emerges, painting the landscape with vibrant hues and delicate forms. These blooms, resilient in the face of harsh coastal winds and ever-changing weather, contribute to the unique charm of these northern archipelagos. Here we uncover the diverse and captivating world of some of Orkney and Shetland's wildflowers.



Thrift (*Armeria maritima*): The Coastal Jewel

'Arby' Sea Pink, Cushions, Lady's Pincushion, 'Banksflooer'

As one of the islands most iconic wildflowers, Thrift, more commonly known as Sea Pinks blanket the cliffs and coastal areas with its striking pink blooms. Its ability to thrive in the salty sea spray makes it a symbol of resilience.

Best time to see: May – September



Red Campion (*Silene dioica*): Crimson Inspiration

'Sweet William'

This perennial plant is known for its vibrant, pink to red flowers and is often seen in meadows, woodland

edges, and along roadsides. The plant typically blooms from late spring to early summer, adding a burst of colour to the natural surroundings. The plant can grow up to 80 centimeters in height.

Best time to see: May – November



Wild Thyme (*Thymus polytrichus*): A Fragrant Tapestry

'Tae Girse'

In the rocky crevices and coastal grasslands, the aromatic Wild Thyme spreads its tiny lilac-coloured flowers, releasing a delightful scent that mingles with the salty sea air. The flowering period for Wild Thyme is typically from late spring through early summer. During this time, the small flowers create a carpet of colour across the landscape.

Best time to see: May – August



Eyebright (*Euphrasia* spp.): Opalescent Meadow Muse

'Brighteye' 'Lamma Flooer'

In the tapestry of landscapes, the Eyebright emerges as a delicate artist's stroke – a small, dainty wildflower graced with ethereal white or blush-pink

petals. Its presence is a study in subtlety, a whisper amid the meadows and grassy realms that frame the islands.

Best time to see: June – September



Northern Marsh Orchid (*Dactylorhiza purpurella*): The Orchid's Elegance

'Long Purples' 'Curl-dodie'

Dainty and elegant, the Northern Marsh Orchid graces the wetlands and meadows of Orkney and Shetland with its intricate purple blossoms. Orchids are often sensitive to habitat changes, and some species may be considered threatened or protected. Local conservation efforts may be in place.

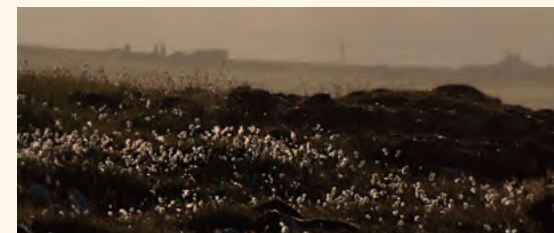
Best time to see: May – July



Sea Mayweed (*Tripleurospermum maritimum*): Coastal Resilience

Along shores, Sea Mayweed, distinguished by its white-rayed flower heads, yellow discs, and slender, thread-like leaves stands tall, its white daisy-like flowers a beacon of resilience against the harsh coastal elements. Its presence is a testament to nature's adaptability showcasing its botanical allure along coastal landscapes.

Best time to see: June – September



Bog Cotton (*Eriophorum angustifolium*): Ethereal Elegance

'Luckaminnie's Oo'

In islands wetlands and moorlands, the fluffy white tufts of Bog Cotton sway gently in the breeze, creating an otherworldly and poetic atmosphere. Also known as Common Cottongrass, the cottony plumes catch the caress of the winds, they create an otherworldly spectacle, transforming the moorland into a sea of feathery enchantment.

Best time to see: May – July



Ragged-Robin (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*): Whispering Petals

'Raggy-Willie'

A captivating wildflower known for its distinctive ragged or deeply lobed petals. Belonging to the carnation family (Caryophyllaceae) the petals have a ragged or tattered appearance, which gives the plant its common name. This wildflower is commonly found in damp meadows, marshes, and other wetland habitats. It thrives in areas with consistently moist soils.

Best time to see: June – August



Bird's-foot Trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*): Nature's Miniature Bouquets

'Kattikloo' or 'da cock-an-da-hen'

Along the roadsides and in grassy patches, the Bird's-foot Trefoil offers clusters of vibrant yellow blossoms, resembling tiny bouquets scattered by nature's hand.

Best time to see: May – August

Celebrating the amazing sky above Shetland

With clear skylines and less light pollution than other places in the UK, Shetland is a great place to observe the skies. Wild Skies Shetland is a charity based in Unst, the most northerly island in the UK, which celebrates the magnificence of the skies all the year round.

Jane Macaulay, the secretary of Wild Skies Shetland, told us more.

Q. What is Wild Skies Shetland?

Wild Skies Shetland showcases the marvels and enormity of the skies above the island of Unst, and down through Shetland. We set up trails, and organise events, including a photo exhibition.

Q. What is the aim of Wild Skies Shetland – why is the sky important?

We celebrate the wonders of our amazing skies – recognising how the sky has influenced our history, dialect and understanding of science.

From an economic point of view, we encourage visitors to visit Unst outwith the summer season. During the shoulder season (before 1st May, and after 30th September) visitors can experience the winter skies with us, and this benefits the island too.

Wild Skies Shetland also recognises the importance of being outside, in nature, for your mental wellbeing. Being outside in a beautiful environment and filled with awe by the beauty of the skies is a most excellent antidote to gloom.

Q. Tell us a bit more about the Sky Trail.

The Sky Trail is an island wide trail. Unst is about 12 miles long and 3 miles wide and we have 13 sky stops. Each one has a different theme connected to the sky.

One of the themes is the Mirrie Dancers (the northern lights). That stop is at the top of Saxa Vord, the highest hill in Unst, and boasts a solar rechargeable audio bench with music by harpist Sunita Stanislaw and a story told by journalist Tom Morton.



Amongst the other 12 sites there are 5 more audio posts which explore other aspects of the sky, for example the simmer dim (midnight sun) and weather sayings read in Shetland dialect.

You can also undertake the whole sky trail from the comfort of your own home by visiting www.wildskiesshetland.com/the-sky-trail. All the poems, stories and music are there on the website for your enjoyment.



Q. When I first heard about Wild Skies Shetland, I imagined it might only be about the night sky. Is that not the case?

No – each stop on the Sky Trail will feature a different aspect of the sky and has relevance to visitors all year round, day and night.

From the summer of 2021, we have had an exhibition of Shetland sky photos in the Unst Heritage Centre. We made a point of showing incredibly beautiful daytime skies and sky phenomena, as well as the Milky Way and the aurora.

Q. Unst is relatively easy to get to – the Sky Trail sounds like it will be a great draw.

We would love to bring more visitors here, all year round. Unst has an enormous visitor offering already from beautiful beaches to amazing wildlife. We also have UnstFest, a 9-day summer festival, and two Up Helly Aas – Viking fire festivals – in February.



Q. How do visitors find out about the Sky Trail?

Please visit our website (www.wildskiesshetland.com), our Facebook page or our YouTube channel. Once you arrive in Shetland there are leaflets available from the Shetland tourist information office at the Market Cross in Lerwick, or you can download one before you come. We also have information panels inside the NorthLink Ferries terminal in Lerwick.

Q. What else will Wild Skies Shetland cover?

We have a seasonal Planetary Trail in the north of Unst. This is a walk across the solar system. Each planet was made by friends of Wild Skies and they have been set at relative distances from each other. Walking the span between planets can be quite eye opening, and you can walk the whole solar system in less than half an hour!

Another space fact is that there is an asteroid which orbits in the asteroid belt between Jupiter and Mars called Unst. Not many other islands have an asteroid named after them!



Q. Have you received much support in developing Wild Skies Shetland?

We are all volunteers in Wild Skies Shetland, and we have received many different forms of help from folk in Unst and beyond. The Shetland Coastal Communities Fund, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, The Institute of Physics Scotland and the National Lottery Community Fund have provided funds. We have also been sponsored by local businesses to help Wild Skies Shetland grow and flourish.

With grateful thanks to Wild Skies Shetland and Robbie Brookes for the photos used in this article.



Travel information

Some useful information to know when travelling on board MV Hamnavoe, MV Hjaltland, and MV Hrossey:

We are here for you

The NorthLink Ferries passenger service team is committed to ensuring your sailing is safe and comfortable. Throughout your journey, please don't hesitate to reach out to friendly crew members, who will be happy to help you with anything you may need.

Indulge in some holiday reading on us

With a diverse library of news and lifestyle publications available, enjoy some complimentary reading courtesy of NorthLink Ferries. Simply download the PressReader app onto your device, and, whilst in NorthLink ports and ships, select newspapers and magazines to download and keep.

Enjoy a delicious meal

As you sail to Orkney and Shetland, you can enjoy your first taste of the isles in the on board restaurant, The Feast. Browse the delicious, varied menu which showcases locally sourced food and beverages at www.northlinkferries.co.uk/menu

Relax and watch a movie

Passengers travelling on MV Hjaltland and MV Hrossey can enjoy the latest movie releases in the onboard cinema. Cinema listings can be found on the NorthLink Ferries website and on board. Tickets can be purchased from the gift shop.

Supporting passengers with accessibility requirements

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Bring along your four-legged friend

Pets are welcome on board NorthLink Ferries ships. They can travel in your vehicle, stay with you in a pet-friendly cabin, or relax in a kennel. Additionally, MV Hamnavoe has a dog lounge, where owners can sit with their furry friends.



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