

Northern Lights

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Welcome

As I write this introduction we are now definitely into Autumn. Storm Ashley, fortunately and almost conveniently, dropped into the middle weekend of the October holidays. Several heavy frosts and the absence of the endless gales we experienced in September and October last year have given us the opportunity to enjoy the changing of the seasons.

Already we are well ahead with our dry dock planning for early 2025 with some major works lined up – particularly with a revamp of both Magnus Lounges on board the Hjaltland and Hrossey. Billy Robb, our Customer Service Director, is leading on this exciting project and who knows, you may even be sitting reading this issue of Northern Lights in our new look lounge already.

Our Marketing team, Amy Leith, Victoria Dixon and Magnus Dixon have pulled together a lovely 17th edition for you, with a host of articles and of course featuring another of our route network Northern Lighthouse Board lights. Copinsay Light – seen off our port side when sailing North to Kirkwall – is perhaps one of the lesser-known lights on our network, with the island itself, whilst uninhabited, still ready to receive visitors. Our article on pages 10/11 may tempt you to explore just a bit off the beaten track. If you do decide to visit Copinsay, please let us know.

Although still some time away, the Tall Ships Races Aberdeen 2025, which will take place during the weekend of 19-22 July, has the makings of a great event. We will of course provide our customers with advance warning as to any likely impact on arriving into Aberdeen and the likely special arrangements which will be in place around the Port and adjoining areas during this period. For the latest up to date information on both the event and any changes to check-in times, please go to www.northlinkferries.co.uk/tall-ships-aberdeen

For now, enjoy your time travelling with us and please do not hesitate to ask any of my colleagues for advice or assistance if required.



Stuart Garrett

Stuart Garrett
Managing Director
Serco NorthLink Ferries

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*Ruairidh Bolas,
Electro-Technical Officer (ETO),
MV Hamnavoe*

Tell us a bit about yourself.

Born and raised on the Isle of Skye, I am part of a large family with four brothers and a sister! Our father was a fisherman so we always had a connection to the sea.

What inspired you to pursue your career?

I wanted to be an electrician from a young age, dismantling DVD players to use the small motors inside for homemade fans and making torches from 9V batteries, paper clips and small bulbs! When I was 17, my brother and I hitched from the Isle of Skye to Unst, at the top of Shetland. After travelling as a passenger on the MV Hamnavoe, I thought it would be a fantastic ship to work on. I studied at Clyde Marine as a cadet and after nine years of training and working elsewhere, I finally got the job I'd always wanted!

What are your duties?

Maintaining, repairing, and upgrading all ship electrics from lighting and engine monitoring systems to control gears for bow thrusters! I am also responsible for unplugging our new ship to shore power system every morning which helps reduce carbon emissions.

What is the best part of your job?

Maintaining the ship to a high standard and ensuring all systems are running smoothly is very satisfying. We have a great team on board and the quality of the ship reflects that.

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

Living and working on a ship. The variety of equipment we work with makes it fascinating, everything from motors to washing machines!

What do you do in your spare time?

Surfing, wakeboarding, snowboarding, snorkelling and fishing. I'm also a huge fan of country music and visited Nashville this year which was fantastic!

Hidden gems in Orkney



1. The Standard, Birsay

One of Orkney's most impressive sea stacks is tucked away in Birsay, behind a dark hill and the Swannay Loch. However, it is quite easy to see the Standard if you know how. At the corner above the Swannay Brewery, where the road turns sharply, follow the farm track on foot for a third of a mile to the coast. From these precarious edges, you will get the most spectacular view of the Standard, a 50m tall sea stack which resembles a dorsal fin rushing through the water's surface.



2. Doun Helzie, Sanday

Nearly every coast on the island of Sanday has long white sand beaches, and all are dazzlingly beautiful. We love Doun Helzie, located at Stove, only 3 miles from the Loth ferry terminal. To reach it, visitors need to follow a track uphill from the electric substation and then walk the well-trodden footpath down to the coast. From here, head north following the cliff-top path until it descends to the beach.

At Doun Helzie, the beach is backed by rocky cliffs. Winter waves have carved deep caves into the rock. Children will love exploring these, imagining pirates living by candlelight in the darkness of the caves!



3. Cuween Cairn, Finstown

Cuween Cairn is just outside Finstown on the Old Finstown Road. There's a car park here and a short walk up an eastern facing hillside. The tomb itself is grass covered and small. It's also dark inside so we'd recommend taking a torch! You will need to crawl to enter, but can stand once inside – and you'll see four smaller chambers on each wall.

Cuween is thought to date from 3,000BC and the skulls of eight people (and uniquely – the skulls of 24 dogs) were found inside. We'd highly recommend this hidden gem for the view of the surrounding landscape!



4. The Dooocot, Rendall

The Rendall Dooocot is signposted just outside Norseman's village, and this Beehive shaped building can be found just downhill from the road. It's an amazing place which was used to house pigeons in the past. Pigeons still live in the Dooocot, so if you go inside, make sure you're not wearing your best shoes!



5. The Broch of Borwick, Yesnaby

When visiting Yesnaby, follow the cliff line northwards. Not only will you cross a hillside known for the rare flower *Primula Scotica*, you'll find an Iron Age broch in a dramatic and precarious position, perched high on an eroding headland!

The Broch of Borwick was probably used for over 1,000 years, and was abandoned between 500AD and 600AD.

The only safe way into the broch is by crawling in through the main entrance and you'll find the interior is a mass of tumbled debris. However, we challenge you not to fall in love with this broch in such a dramatic setting!



6. Beacon at Rose Ness, Holm

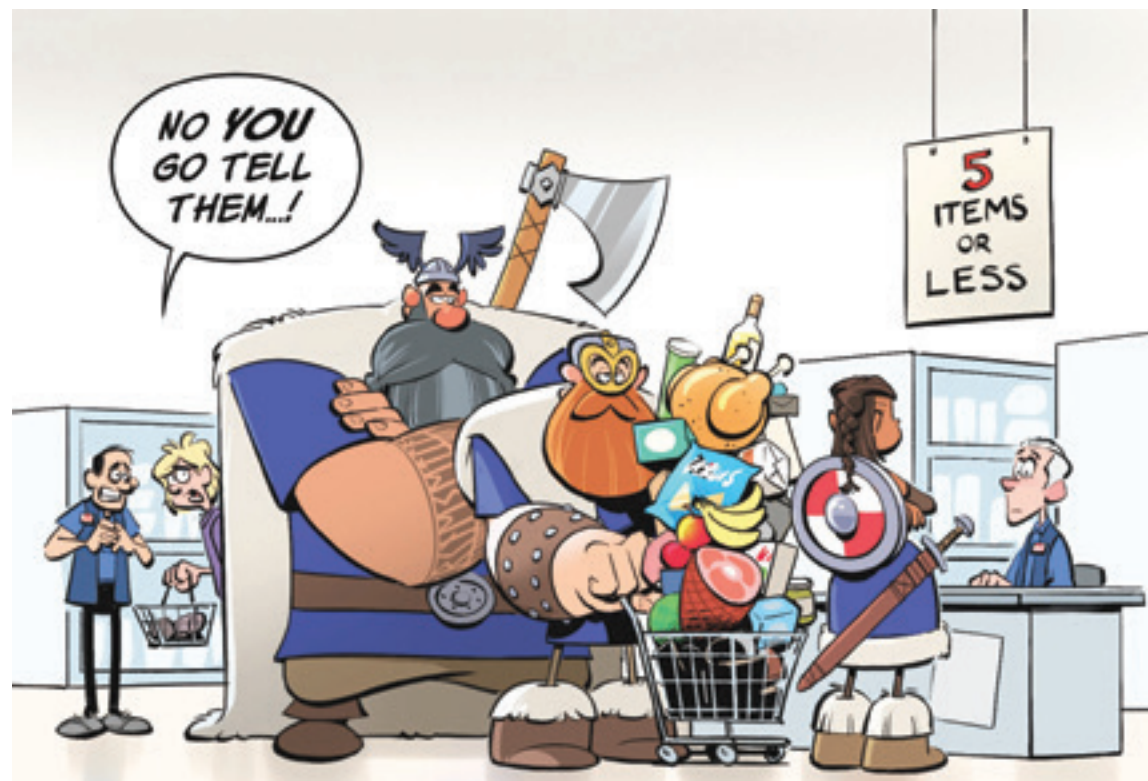
Rose Ness marks the most southerly point of the Orkney Mainland and the cliffside beacon there can be seen from miles around, especially from the Churchill Barriers. Take the Cornquoy road and you'll soon find a parking spot next to a sign for a coastal path. This gentle walk is 30-40 minutes long each way, and takes in cliffs, at least three sea stacks, a Neolithic chambered cairn, a gloup (a collapsed sea cave) and great views of Copinsay.

The beacon itself is a large geometric shape, around 12m tall and it was built on top of a Neolithic Horned Cairn. The tall square stone tower was built in 1867 and topped with a timber cross. It was used as a navigation aid for shipping in the past.

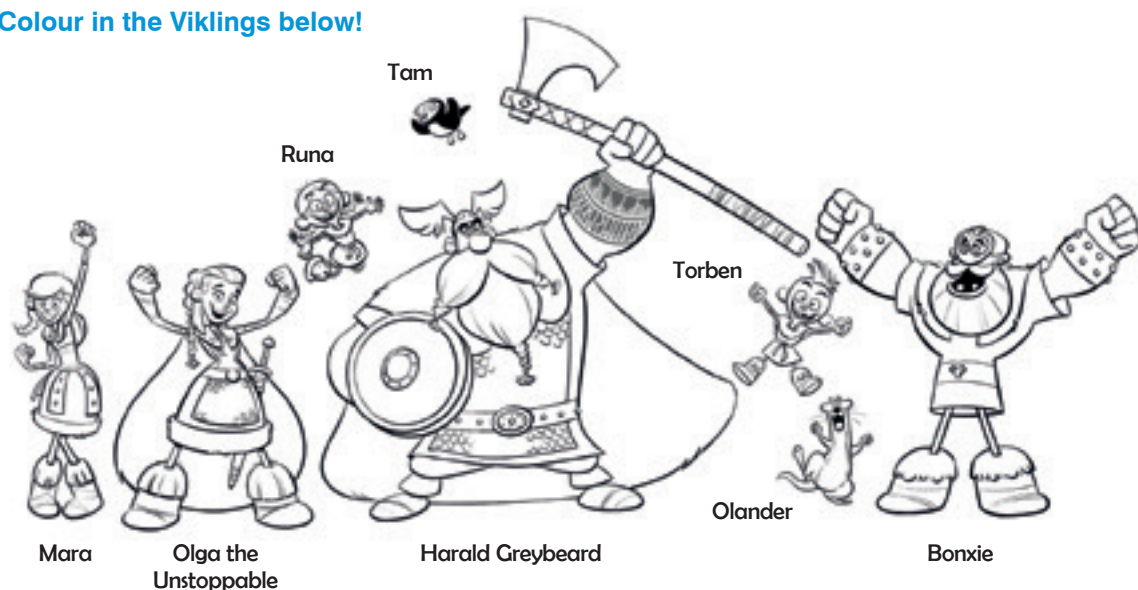
Discover more, including the Knowes of Trotty, featured in the background image, at www.northlinkferries.co.uk/hiddengems

The Viklings

Alex Leonard – No.4



Colour in the Viklings below!



Recipe

Deep-fried Grimkister cheese and cranberry sauce



Grimkister farm cheese is a delicious firm but crumbly cheese made in Orkney.

The cows in Orkney enjoy fresh air and graze on clean grass, and as a result, the fresh milk produced locally tastes amazing. This in turn leads Grimkister farm cheese to have a beautifully simple and delicate taste.

Grimkister cheese is enjoyed, deep fried with a sauce to complement it, and served with green salad leaves.

This recipe comes from Grimkister farm, and first appeared in the recipe book, Peenk Fish and Peedie Tatties. We like this wintry sauce, but many other chutneys, pickles and sauces will go well with Grimkister cheese! It makes 3-4 servings.

Ingredients:

Deep fried Grimkister cheese

- 350g Grimkister cheese
- 100g plain flour
- 200g breadcrumbs
- 3 eggs lightly beaten

Cranberry sauce

- 250g cranberries
- 30ml lemon juice
- 70g caster sugar
- 75ml water

Method:

1. Start by making the sauce. Drop the cranberries, lemon juice, caster sugar and water into a saucepan and slowly bring to boiling point.
2. Simmer for a few minutes and gently mash the cranberries.
3. Once the mixture is quite thick, take off the heat.
4. Rub the sauce through a nylon or metal sieve into a bowl. This can be quite messy!
5. To make the deep-fried cheese, cut it into small wedges.
6. Divide the block of cheese into three semi-circles, then cut each semi-circle into four triangles.
7. Coat with flour, dip in the beaten egg and then coat with breadcrumbs, ensuring cheese is fully coated.
8. Set the deep fat fryer to 180 degrees.
9. Deep fry in hot oil until golden brown – this will take a minute. Be delicate when taking the cheese in and out of the fryer basket.
10. Serve with cranberry sauce and salad.

Tip:

The cheese will be quite molten – wait for 5 minutes before eating!

An interview with Chris Dyer

Exploring Shetland's ancient livestock and landscapes



Garths Croft Bressay is a sustainable agricultural holding owned by professional archaeologist Chris Dyer that focuses on native and traditional breeds. Chris offers a unique opportunity by welcoming visitors to his island home for a tour of his farm, Bressay and the other islands in Shetland.

We spoke with Chris who offered us a fascinating insight into farming life, the significance of native Shetland sheep and his background in archaeology!

What inspired you to begin welcoming visitors to your croft and establish the business that you run today?

As a historian and archaeologist, I've always been interested in Shetland's native breeds, past landscapes and how people lived and farmed here. My background in the public presentation of history and archaeology, as well as the desire to share my island home and landscape, encouraged me to start the unique and bespoke experience that I now provide. However, there was never a 'plan' to do this – it has been a completely genuine thing that has evolved organically.

What can visitors experience on a visit to Garths Croft Bressay?

After providing refreshments, I give visitors a tour of the croft and show them the animals, drystone walling, woodland and fruit and vegetable growing. I demonstrate working sheep dogs with the sheep and visitors can feed the flock, take photographs, make memories and see their incredible fleeces. I then take them out into the landscape of Bressay and I show people the Viking longhouses, Iron Age brochs, prehistoric homesteads and the stunning National Nature Reserve of Noss.

Can you tell us about the animals at your farm and the significance of native Shetland sheep?

I keep poultry year-round and pigs during summertime. I concentrate on the native breed of Shetland sheep to retain and enhance their qualities and traditional fleece colours and patterns – there are over fifty different varieties. The native sheep breeds link to the Viking heritage in Shetland. Each of the traditional markings has a name; for example, the fleece marking 'flecket' is named after the Norwegian word 'flek' which means dappled or spotted.

What does a typical day look like for you?

It is very mixed! Some days I'll be working on the croft, while others I'll be giving visitors a tour of my farm and historic sites around Shetland. Some days I'm busy building drystone walls, and I am also a retained firefighter, so sometimes I'm occupied with that! I would say I spend most of my time working with visitors to promote the heritage and culture of Shetland. I personalise my tours depending on the interests of the groups, and I can take them all around Shetland, not only Bressay where I am based.



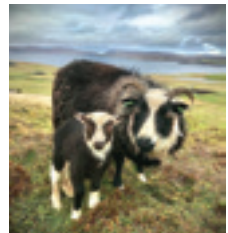
Could you tell us more about some of the sustainable initiatives you have implemented at the croft?

The drystone walls I've built at the croft provide shelter allowing me to plant trees, bushes and shrubs and create a woodland, which in turn provides a habitat for nesting birds. The drystone walls also protect the vegetables and fruit trees that I grow on the croft. Another sustainable initiative involves my pigs which I use to cultivate, dig over and fertilise the land without the use of artificial fertilisers.

What are some of the most rewarding aspects of your work?

The most rewarding aspect is engaging with visitors and truly enhancing their experience of Shetland by taking them off the beaten track to unlock over 6,000 years of human history.

To find out more about Garths Croft Bressay, please visit: Instagram @garthscroftbressay and www.garthscroftbressay.com



Copinsay Lighthouse

Out in the grey sparkling sea off Orkney's east mainland there's a small sloping island that belongs to the birds.

Copinsay is uninhabited and looks almost like a rising green wave. At the waves' crest there is a sharp rocky drop – the cliffs here extend for a mile. A lighthouse stands midway.

When Copinsay was inhabited

On the lower side of the island there is a beach, a pier, and an old Orkney farmhouse. In the 1930s, a family lived here and farmed the island. The farmer, a Mr Groat, had 13 children, and they, along with the Lighthouse Keepers' children, were given lessons by a resident teacher in a school room within the farmhouse.

Copinsay's land, though exposed and salted, is fertile and supported horses, cattle and sheep. The Groats embarked every fortnight on shopping trips to Deerness, but eventually moved to the mainland in 1958.

Copinsay Light

A single road leads uphill from the farmhouse to Copinsay's lighthouse. Despite only being 16m tall, the lighthouse stands on the island's highest point, a cliff edge 76m high. Visitors will enjoy a panoramic view of Orkney from here.

Copinsay's lighthouse flashes 5 times every 30 seconds and has a range of 14 nautical miles. The white tower has a black lantern with an ochre trim and balcony. Like many other lighthouses in Scotland, it was built by a member of the Stevenson family.

David Allan Stevenson completed Copinsay Lighthouse on 8th November 1915, however it was only lit in 1919, after the First World War had ended.

Copinsay Lighthouse became automated in 1991. It is maintained under the care of the Northern Lighthouse Board.

In summertime, the south-easterly facing cliffs below Copinsay's lighthouse are a blizzard of sea birds. On these crags, more than 35,000 pairs of guillemots, fulmars, razorbills, puffins and kittiwakes arrive annually to breed. For bird-enthusiasts the island is a must-visit.

Visiting Copinsay

Copinsay is about 1.5 miles from the Orkney Mainland, and a boat from Skail in Deerness can be chartered to take visitors out to the island.

Near to Copinsay there are four islets. Three of these, Corn Holm, Ward Holm and Black Holm, are accessible at low tide.

The fourth islet, the dramatic Horse of Copinsay, rises sharply from the sea. Surrounded by cliff edges and

strong tides, the 28m high island is difficult to land on. The Groat family once kept pigs on the Horse of Copinsay, and the animals fed on bird eggs!

Copinsay has been occupied since early times. Below the farmhouse, ancient walls face the sea. Elsewhere, there is an old burial site.

The name Copinsay comes from the Old Norse Kolbeinsey, which means 'Kolbein's Island', but little is known about who he was.

In 1972 the RSPB bought Copinsay and it is now a bird sanctuary. Part of Copinsay's grassy slope is still cultivated to provide a haven for birds, such as corncrakes.

Exploring Copinsay is a treat that few get to experience but visitors will find themselves quite unwanted!

Whilst exploring the island, you'll encounter fields of birds rising in alarm and hear the whoosh of divebombing bonxies and arctic terns. The birds have grown used to having the island to themselves. A once small colony of seals has grown now to a vast number. You'll hear their haunting moans on your visit to the island and, if you get too close, see them frantically splashing into the water.

Copinsay and its lighthouse, so cut off from the rest of the world, are an explorer's dream to visit, a snapshot of the past, guarded by wild creatures.



Island in Focus: Whalsay

Whalsay is the sixth largest of Shetland's islands with a population of around 1,000 people. With its rolling fields, enthralling coastal walks and magnificent scenery, it is sure to leave a lasting impression on those who visit.

The Vikings named the island from the Old Norse term 'Hvalsey' meaning 'whale island'. In the 19th century, fishermen nicknamed Whalsay the 'bonny isle' due to the wildflowers that blanket the island in spring and summer – including one of Shetland's rarest plants, Sea Aster.

Symbister Village

Symbister is the island's largest village and arrival port for visitors sailing over from the mainland. The busy harbour accommodates small fishing boats as well as some of the largest deep-sea trawlers in Europe. Whalsay has a deep-rooted fishing legacy and it's still a proud fishing community today.

Symbister offers a range of amenities, including a post office, various shops, a community hall, a police station, a medical centre, and the Whalsay Leisure Centre. Overlooking the village is the grand Symbister House which was built in 1823 by Whalsay's former laird, Robert Bruce. After falling into disuse in 1944, the building was repurposed in 1964 to serve as a school.



The Ward of Clett

The Ward of Clett is the highest point on Whalsay and offers sweeping views of the North Sea and the rugged Shetland landscape, making it a favourite spot for walking.

At the summit, you'll find the ruins of a chain home radar station, which played an important role in Britain's defence network during the Second World War.

Whalsay Golf Course

Whalsay is home to the UK's most northerly golf course which is located at the northern end of the island. It's a challenging 18-hole course that is enclosed by the sea on all sides. With an unusual airstrip hazard (meaning play must stop if there is an incoming flight), this course makes for a truly memorable round of golf.



Benie Hoose and the Standing Stones of Yoxie

Whalsay is home to numerous ancient sites, most notably Benie Hoose – the ruins of a Neolithic house in which around 1,800 artefacts were discovered. Less than 100 yards away lies the ruins of Yoxie. Although this site was originally thought to be a group of standing stones, it is now believed to be the remains of a Neolithic farmstead similar to Benie Hoose.



Museums in Whalsay

There are some lovely museums in Whalsay where you can learn about the island's rich history. Between the 15th and 17th centuries, Whalsay was a significant trading port for the Hanseatic League. Every year, ships from Germany arrived here and traded their goods for Shetland's prized fish. Housed in a restored 17th-century trading booth, the Pier House Museum tells the story of this trade and visitors can let themselves in by picking up a key from the nearby JWW shop.

The Whalsay Heritage and Community Centre is another great museum to visit. Aside from its permanent displays, the centre has rotating exhibitions on various aspects of Shetland and Whalsay history, such as Fair Isle knitting and the First World War.

Wildlife in Whalsay

The waters around Whalsay are ideal for spotting porpoises, dolphins, minke whales and orcas – make sure to keep a lookout whilst travelling across on the ferry!

Whalsay offers encounters with most of Shetland's seabirds – including puffins! Other seabirds include storm petrels, little auks, great northern divers, arctic terns as well as ducks and waders.

Prime birdwatching spots around Whalsay include Symbister Harbour, the Houb – a small tidal lagoon – at Kirk Ness, and at any of the islands' lochs. Otters can also be regularly seen around the coastline and at Symbister Harbour.



Exploring the Spirit of the North:

A journey through distilleries in Caithness

Caithness, located in the far north of the Scottish Highlands, known for its rich history and scenic beauty, boasts some remarkable distilleries producing high-quality spirits.



Photo credit: Wolfburn Distillery

Wolfburn Distillery

Established: 2013
Location: Thurso
Type: Whisky
www.wolfburn.com

The original Wolfburn Distillery, founded in 1821, fell into disuse in the 19th century, but in 2013 was revived. They produce traditional, handcrafted single malt Scotch whisky combined with a contemporary approach. Their whiskies are made using time-honoured methods, so the natural flavours are preserved.

Tours: An up-close and personal experience of the process.
Book a tour here: <https://wolfburn.com/pages/tours>



Photo credit: Dunnet Bay Distillery

Dunnet Bay Distillers

Established: 2014
Location: Dunnet
Type: Gin, Vodka and Rum
www.dunnetbaydistillers.co.uk

Dunnet Bay Distillers are renowned for crafting the award-winning Rock Rose Gin, Holy Grass Vodka, and Mapmaker's Rum. Locally foraged botanicals such as juniper, rowan berries, and sea buckthorn are used to create spirits that capture the essence of the Caithness landscape. Committed to sustainability, the distillery's unique bottle designs are sought-after souvenirs.

Tours: Learn about the small-batch gin-making process, enjoy tastings and attend cocktail workshops! Book online or call 01847 851 287 to reserve your place!



Photo credit: www.instagram.com/oldpulteneymalt

Old Pulteney Distillery

Established: 1826
Location: Wick
Type: Whisky
www.oldpulteney.com

Known as the "Maritime Malt," this is a distillery with a long and rich heritage. The proximity to the sea gives their whiskies a distinctive salty tang. The traditional methods, including using copper pot stills and dunnage warehouses, contribute to its characterful single malts.

Tours: An insight into the workings of the distillery and an opportunity to taste their range of whiskies. Please book in advance.
www.oldpulteney.com/visit-pulteney-distillery/book-a-tour/



Photo credit: 8doorsdistillery.com

8 Doors Distillery

Established: 2022
Location: John o'Groats
Type: Whisky
www.8doorsdistillery.com

This small, distillery and visitor centre is the most northerly on the Scottish mainland. Offering two ranges of whisky: Seven Sons and 8 Doors Single Malt Scotch Whisky (still maturing), they also hand craft Five Ways, an award-winning liqueur which blends Scotch whisky with orange, ginger, honey, and spice.

Tours: See the warehouse and enjoy some drams in the tasting room.
Book here: www.8doorsdistillery.com/tours



Photo credit: Highland Photography services

Ice and Fire Distillery

Established: 2018
Location: Smerral, Latheronwheel
Type: Gin, Rum and Vodka
www.iceandfiresdistillery.com

This family-run craft distillery located on a small croft uses local ingredients and water from the area to produce artisan gin, rum and vodka. They ensure authenticity throughout the brand by using natural home-grown ingredients in their spirits.

Tours: No tours available.



Photo credit: Angus Mackay Photography

North Point Distillery

Established: 2020
Location: Forss
Type: Gin, Rum and Whisky
www.northpointdistillery.com

A multi-award-winning craft distillery producing a variety of small-batch, authentically Scottish, sustainable spirits. These include Crosskirk Bay Gin, North Point Pilot Rum, North Point Spiced Rum and their 'still maturing' Dalclagie Highland Single Malt Scotch Whisky, which they hope will be ready by 2028.

Tours: Five-star rated tours (advance booking recommended)
Book here: www.northpointdistillery.com/distillery-tours



Photo credit: Dunnet Bay Distillers

Stannergill Whisky

Established: Opening Autumn 2025
Location: Thurso
Type: Whisky
www.stannergillwhisky.com

Dunnet Bay Distillers Ltd are revitalising Castletown Mill with a project aimed at conserving and breathing new life into this significant building. Scheduled to open in Autumn 2025, it will feature a state-of-the-art craft whisky distillery and provide a world-class visitor experience through guided tours, tutored tastings, masterclasses, leisure learning workshops, living history demonstrations, and an annual programme of special exhibitions and events.

These distilleries offer a glimpse into the craftsmanship and tradition behind Caithness spirits, making them great destinations for anyone interested in gin, whisky and the unique flavours of the Highlands.

Ten must-visit museums in and around Aberdeen

Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire have a rich culture and heritage, and what better way to learn about it than visiting some of its many museums. From local history and maritime, to transport and the people of the North-East, this guide explores some of the region's best museums to visit.



1. Aberdeen Maritime Museum

Just a short walk from the NorthLink Ferries terminal on Shiprow is the Aberdeen Maritime Museum. This free museum tells the story of the city's long and often dramatic relationship with the North Sea, from the earliest days of fishing and shipbuilding through to Aberdeen's place today as a leader in global energy transition.



2. Gordon Highlanders Museum

Comprised of ordinary men from the North-East of Scotland, the Gordon Highlanders were one of the finest regiments of the British Army. Their extraordinary 200-year-old story, from the Napoleonic Wars to modern day, is told at the eponymous five-star museum, with excellent displays including a full-sized replica WW1 trench and a D-Day exhibition.

3. Aberdeen Science Centre

The Aberdeen Science Centre is the perfect place to take the kids for a fun day out. They have exciting displays covering six topics including energy, space and life sciences. With over 60 interactive activities and a humanoid talking robot, there is plenty for everyone to get involved with.

4. Provost Skene's House

Provost Skene's House is the oldest surviving townhouse in Aberdeen, dating back to 1545. The house has been restored into a museum that celebrates the pioneering people of Aberdeen and the North-East of Scotland. Inside, there are interactive displays showcasing over 100 remarkable individuals from the region, including innovators, scientists, musicians and sporting champions.



5. Museum of Scottish Lighthouses

Immerse yourself in Scotland's coastal heritage at the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses in Fraserburgh. Discover the history and evolution of lighthouses, marvel at historic artefacts, and hear stories of the courageous lighthouse keepers. With a tour of the historic Kinnaird Head Lighthouse, this museum is a must-visit for maritime enthusiasts.



6. Grampian Transport Museum

Located just 25 miles from Aberdeen, the Grampian Transport Museum in Alford showcases an impressive range of exhibits, from 1800s travelling chariots to cutting-edge electric vehicles. With interactive displays, climb-aboard vehicles and seasonal exhibitions, this museum shares the evolution of transport and provides an engaging experience for all ages.



7. Stonehaven Tolbooth Museum

Overlooking the scenic harbour of Stonehaven in the town's oldest building, the Tolbooth Museum is a treasure trove of local history. The building used to serve as a prison and artefacts from this period can be seen, alongside displays on the region's maritime heritage and unique past.



8. Peterhead Prison Museum

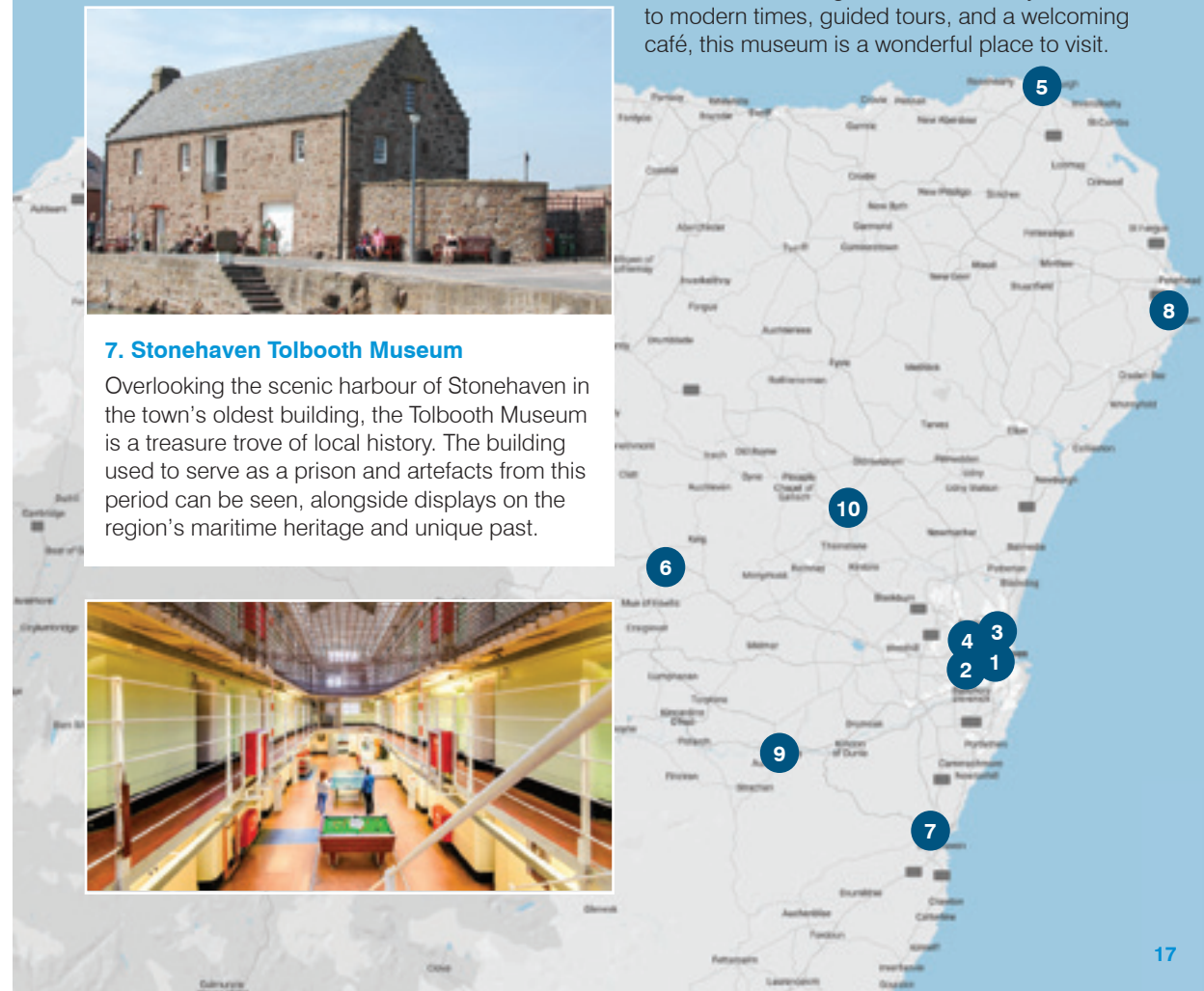
Explore over a century of crime and punishment at Peterhead Prison Museum. Once home to Scotland's most dangerous criminals, this former prison showcases the stories of infamous inmates, dramatic sieges and daily prison life. An audio tour and an immersive experience brings to life the challenging conditions faced by both inmates and officers.

9. Banchory Museum

Situated through the Banchory Library and Cultural Centre, the Banchory Museum offers an insightful glimpse into Deeside's local history, from its prehistoric roots to its modern-day community. Inside, you can find a range of artefacts, local artwork and stories of the people that shaped the area.

10. Garioch Heritage Centre

The Garioch Heritage Centre is housed in the former locomotive works, which closed in 1969, and tells the story of Inverurie and the surrounding areas. With exhibits showcasing local life from early settlements to modern times, guided tours, and a welcoming café, this museum is a wonderful place to visit.



Bobby Tulloch and the Snowy Owls of Fetlar

There was a moment, from 1967 to 1975, when the Shetland island of Fetlar was thrust into the national spotlight. The reason was the discovery, by naturalist Bobby Tulloch, of Britain's first breeding Snowy Owls.

These large birds are white with dark speckles, have yellow piercing eyes, and comically fluffy feet. These days, Snowy Owls are recognisable to most as Harry Potter's pet 'Hedwig'.

Snowy Owls normally live on grasslands in Canada, Siberia and northern Scandinavia. They roost on the ground, on windswept rises in the landscape, and hunt small creatures. Occasionally, when food is in short supply, Snowy Owls venture out of their usual territory.



Bobby Tulloch: The first Shetland representative of the RSPB

Bobby Tulloch was a self-taught naturalist from the island of Yell. Born in 1929, he spent much of his young life outdoors, developing a keen interest in natural history.

After leaving school, Bobby worked as a baker, before being offered the post of the Shetland representative of the RSPB in 1963.

An excellent wildlife photographer and tour guide, Bobby was a warm and welcoming ambassador for Shetland and often ferried visitors through wild seas in his small boat, *Consort*.

Snowy Owls were beginning to be seen occasionally in Shetland. In 1963, Bobby and photographer Dennis Coutts got close to one by wearing a moth-eaten pantomime horse costume!

An amazing discovery

In 1967, whilst Bobby was guiding birdwatchers around Fetlar, the party noticed Snowy Owls on a desolate slope at Stackaberg.

Snowy Owls normally look bored, however this male was acting aggressively.

Bobby took a moment away to "look for owl pellets" and found a nest with 3 eggs. Aware that announcing his discovery could endanger the owls' nest, he kept this secret and at the first available opportunity, called the RSPB.

Shortly afterwards, an around-the-clock watch was kept on the Snowy Owls. An observation hide (Bobby's neighbour's garden shed) was placed 100m from the nest.

There was great interest in the Snowy Owls, and Bobby took the influx of journalists and ornithologists on his boat to Fetlar to see them.

The Snowy Owls bred on Fetlar for eight years, successfully raising 23 young owls.

About the Snowy Owls of Fetlar

In the Arctic, Snowy Owls usually eat lemmings, but on Fetlar, the large population of rabbits was the main food source. It may have been the vast quantity of food that attracted the Snowy Owls to the island. Unfortunately, during the Snowy Owl's time on Fetlar, the rabbit population was exposed to the lethal virus myxomatosis.

By 1971, rabbits had almost vanished from the island, so the Snowy Owls began to eat smaller birds instead. Slowly, the rabbit population recovered, and by 1975 had returned to pre-epidemic numbers. However, in the winter of 1975/76 the male disappeared, and breeding stopped. One or two Snowy Owl females continued to return every year until 1993 but no new males arrived.

Though Snowy Owls can still be seen occasionally, none have bred in Shetland since.

After the Snowy Owls of Fetlar

Bobby Tulloch was the RSPB representative in Shetland until 1985, and continued to give tours and talks about birds long after that.

He passed away in 1996, two years after receiving an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours List.

Fetlar is still a must-visit for ornithologists, who visit to see rare Red-Necked Phalarope that gather at the Loch of Funzie.

On the lonely hill at Stackaberg there is now a plaque dedicated to Bobby Tulloch, the amazing self-taught naturalist, who discovered the first Snowy Owls to nest in Britain.



A beginner's guide to the Ba' game in Orkney

Visitors to Orkney at Christmas may be surprised to see shops barricaded with planks on Kirkwall's main street. This is in preparation for the Ba', a traditional game played on Christmas and New Year's Day under the steeple of St Magnus Cathedral.



In the game, two teams must fight through the streets of Kirkwall, carrying, kicking, or smuggling a leather ball towards their respective goals.

There are no time limits, no limits to the number of players, and few rules!

How the game is played

The Boys' Ba' starts at 10:30 and the Men's Ba' begins at 13:00, when a Ba' stalwart throws the Ba' up from the Kirk green. A surge of bodies will leap upwards to receive it.

What follows is surprisingly rough. A scrum will gather around the players in possession of the Ba', and many hands will try to wrestle it away. This struggle to gain ground means a game can last for hours. Once the Ba' reaches its goal, a winner is decided, and the trophy is the Ba' itself – a coveted prize.

The Uppies and the Doonies

For the Ba', the Orkney men are divided into two teams – the Uppies and the Doonies.

In the old days Uppies and Doonies were determined by where they were born (the lane opposite the Cathedral acting as the dividing line) or by how they first entered Kirkwall. These days players tend to play on the same side as their father and grandfather.

To win the game, the Uppies must touch the Ba' against a wall opposite the Catholic Church. The Doonies must immerse the Ba' in salt water, dropping it into Kirkwall Harbour.

Making the Ba'

Resembling a 19th century soccer ball, the Ba' is made of tough hand-stitched leather panels (to withstand the amount of grappling it must endure) and cork dust (so that it floats if it reaches the harbour). The Men's Ba' weighs 1.3kg and is 19cm in diameter, with a smaller version for the boys.

The experience

The game draws large crowds of spectators, and though it is a marvellous social occasion, spectators may need to move away quickly from a rolling tidal wave of men!

Playing in the Ba' can be a quite brutal experience. Though most Ba' players know who is an Uppie and who is a Doonie, there are no uniforms to tell them apart. Players don old clothes and protective boots before entering the fray.



Within the scrum there is tremendous pressure. There is pushing from all sides. When the mass of men meets buildings and walls, those on the outside of the scrum can be crushed.

Respect for the spirit of the game is expected though. If a player becomes injured or passes out, play will stop to allow them to be taken out of the scrum to safety.

Plans beforehand

For a game that appears to have no rules, there is some organising to do, handled by the Ba' Committee, made up of 5 Uppies and 5 Doonies. The Ba' Committee raises funds, organises the crafting of the Ba' and chooses who will throw the Ba' up.

The individual teams meet the evening before. By the fireside and over a dram, they greet old and new players, and discuss tactics for the day.

The winner

One of the most surprising elements of the Ba' is how the winner is decided. Once the Ba' has reached its goal, the player who brought it there may not necessarily be crowned the winner.

Instead, a scrum may form on the winning side, and those men will engage in a long fight over who

should be the winner. The winner could be someone who played well, or a player who has participated over many years.

Afterwards the winner will host a party in their house – sometimes lasting several days. The Ba' will be repaired, varnished, and proudly put on display in the winner's home.

Tradition

The Ba' comes from an old football game played in 1650 at Yule time, on grass beside the Cathedral. It moved onto the streets in 1800 and by 1850, the restricted space of the streets meant that the Ba' was picked up instead of kicked.

For many Kirkwall households, the Ba' holds such importance that Christmas dinner is delayed until the following day.

Although tempers can fray during the game, once it is over, Uppies and Doonies will return to being good-natured neighbours and friends.

Tradition states that an Uppie win will bring about a good harvest, and a Doonie win will bring good fishing.

Whoever wins the Ba', all the people of Orkney benefit from supporting such a unique tradition, as wild and unpredictable as the raging north wind.

The Ultimate Outdoor Sauna Experience –

The Haar Sauna at St Ninian's Isle



A growing number of outdoor saunas are popping up around Scotland's coastline allowing users to enjoy the heat of the sauna followed by a wild swim in the cold sea. These are very common in Nordic countries and are now becoming more popular in Scotland.

We spoke to Callum Scott and Hannah Mary Goodlad who own Haar Sauna, Scotland's first mobile sauna!

What inspired you to bring this idea to Shetland?

One cold, crisp, morning in January 2020, we were sat in Oslo's Badstuforening – a social enterprise sauna in the mouth of the Norwegian fjord. It was two months before the world was turned upside down with covid. We had no idea what was coming our way.

Lockdowns went from weeks, to months, to years and we kept thinking back to the peace of the Oslo sauna. Inspired by our Norwegian neighbours, the thought of bringing authentic sauna culture to Scotland wouldn't leave our minds.

We wanted to connect the great Scottish wilderness to the possibility of sauna – so we knew that our sauna had to be mobile. We bought an old Ifor Williams horse box and, month by month, we built, sawed and hammered our way into DIY sauna heaven. It was a way to reconnect and give us purpose during lockdown whilst learning a new skill.

After a few months, Haar Sauna was ready. We had designed and created a beautiful Scandi sauna ready to tour across Scotland!

Why do customers seek out an outdoor sauna?

Across Scandinavia, the sauna is a significant part of culture and life. Our North Sea neighbours have long enjoyed the benefits of the power of deep heat combined with cold water therapy. For Norwegians, a sauna offers relaxation with friends and family, to unwind, socialise and even do business!

Are there any wellbeing trends that have influenced the design of your saunas?

People want to sauna outside in nature. We have tried to put people, nature, safety and community at the heart of our business.

We currently have two saunas on St Ninian's Beach, Shetland and one on the way in Orkney. We have a growing emphasis on not just physical detoxification but also mental wellbeing. We try to be accessible for all users offering private, community, MENDful health, Women's Hour, LGBTQ, Yoga + Sauna, HIIT + Sauna, and silent sessions.

Haar Sauna won a national award, can you tell us more?

In May 2024, Haar Sauna attended the British Sauna Society's first ever Sauna Summit and won the UK's Best Nature Sauna award. The award recognises the sauna that best captures an experience of being close to or surrounded by the natural world. A sauna at 60 degrees north doesn't get much better than that!

Do you have any recommendations for first-time sauna users?

Rinse - Hot - Cold - Rest
Have a shower
Sit on a towel
Get warm (5-15 mins)
Get cold
Rest
Repeat

Top tip:

Follow your heart. Notice your resting heart rate before the sauna, how it speeds up during the process, comes back down during cold plunge then settles during rest. When it is normal it's time to return to the sauna.

How do I book?

Online at www.haarsauna.com

What should I bring?

Booking Confirmation
Swimwear
Beach Shoes/Flip Flops
Water Bottle
2 Towels
Bath/Dry Robe: Optional
Comfortable Clothing

Where are the saunas located?

St Ninian's Beach, Bigton, Shetland, ZE2 9JA
///teaching.seagulls.nicely

Coming Soon

Scapa Beach, Scapa, Orkney, KW15 1SD
///number.erupted.hamsters

Photos: Ritchie Williams

www.instagram.com/ritchieeroams





Travel information

Here is some helpful information to know when you are sailing with NorthLink Ferries.

We are here for you

The NorthLink Ferries passenger service team are dedicated to making your sailing safe and comfortable. Throughout your journey, they are readily available to help you with anything you may require. Please don't hesitate to reach out to our friendly crew; they will be more than happy to assist you.

Indulge in some holiday reading on us

Passengers can enjoy some complimentary reading courtesy of NorthLink Ferries by downloading the PressReader app on their device. PressReader has a varied collection of news and lifestyle magazines, and once downloaded, the content will remain on your device allowing you to read it even after sailing with us.

Enjoy a delicious meal

Enjoy your first taste of Orkney and Shetland in our onboard restaurant, The Feast. We have a delicious and varied menu which showcases some of the finest locally sourced food and beverages. You can browse the menu at www.northlinkferries.co.uk/menu

Relax and watch a movie

When sailing from Aberdeen to Orkney or Shetland, passengers can enjoy watching the latest movie releases in our onboard cinema! Cinema listings are available onboard and on our website. There are two films shown every evening and tickets can be purchased in our onboard shop.

Supporting passengers with accessibility requirements

Before travelling with NorthLink Ferries, we recommend downloading the free 'Welcome' app if you require assistance or support. This allows you to communicate your specific requirements to our crew in advance, so that our staff can give you the best experience when you arrive. For more information, please visit www.wel-co.me

Bring along your four-legged friend

We happily accommodate pets here at NorthLink Ferries, allowing them to travel in your vehicle, stay with you in a pet-friendly cabin, or relax in one of our pre-booked kennels. Additionally, the MV Hamnavoe has a dog lounge where owners can sit with their furry friends.



www.northlinkferries.co.uk
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