

Northern Lights

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Discover more at www.northlinkferries.co.uk

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Welcome

An excellent operational report for summer of '26. From the beginning of May through to the end of September we have delivered 1195 sailings, with zero cancellations but some 91 sailings impacted in the main by weather, tides or the very occasional heavy load.

My thanks once again to all my colleagues, both ship and shore, for all their focus in enabling this operational reliability. Key to this are two of my colleagues who recently retired having each served at sea for almost 50 years – Mr David Mitchell, Chief Engineer on MV Hjaltland and Mr John Daly, Purser on MV Hrossey – and together with all my colleagues here at NorthLink Ferries we wish them both a long and happy retirement.

Looking at our carryings over all routes up to the end of August this year, and comparing those volumes to our 2019 figures, which of course reflect our last full pre-Covid year of operation, show strong growth.

2019 v 2026		
Passengers	254,779 v 293,280	+ 15%
Cars	67,293 v 79,541	+ 18%
Freight lane metres	378,109 v 410,847	+ 9%
Cabins	41,838 v 47,478	+ 13%

Strong growth against what we previously had seen in 2019 as breaking new volume records.

This year we've had, and indeed you may be using one on your travels, our very popular new 'Lie Flat' pods. As I have indicated in previous issues, this new concept delivers a very effective testing grounds for this offering as part of the make-up of our 'Freight Flex' new tonnage, which will be eagerly awaited, and on which we hope to have construction commencing later this year.

Take a moment please on page 8 to read through Alan's pen portrait describing not only his early years of cadetship through to his current 2nd Officer/relief Chief Officer position, but also his achievements in climbing a number of the world's highest peaks: Manaslu (8,163m), Ama Dablam (6,812m), Mera Peak (6,476m) and Kilimanjaro (5,895m). Quite an achievement and one on which we have been pleased to support Alan in his fundraising endeavours.

On the subject of fundraising, huge congratulations to Kathryn Fullerton, our MV Hjaltland Retail Supervisor on reaching the £100k fundraising mark with the support of her colleagues and friends. Each year a different charity benefits from Kathryn's endeavours, this year Kathryn and friends are supporting Muscular Dystrophy UK.

Many thanks for travelling with us and enjoy your time onboard.



Stuart Garrett
Stuart Garrett
Managing Director
Serco NorthLink Ferries

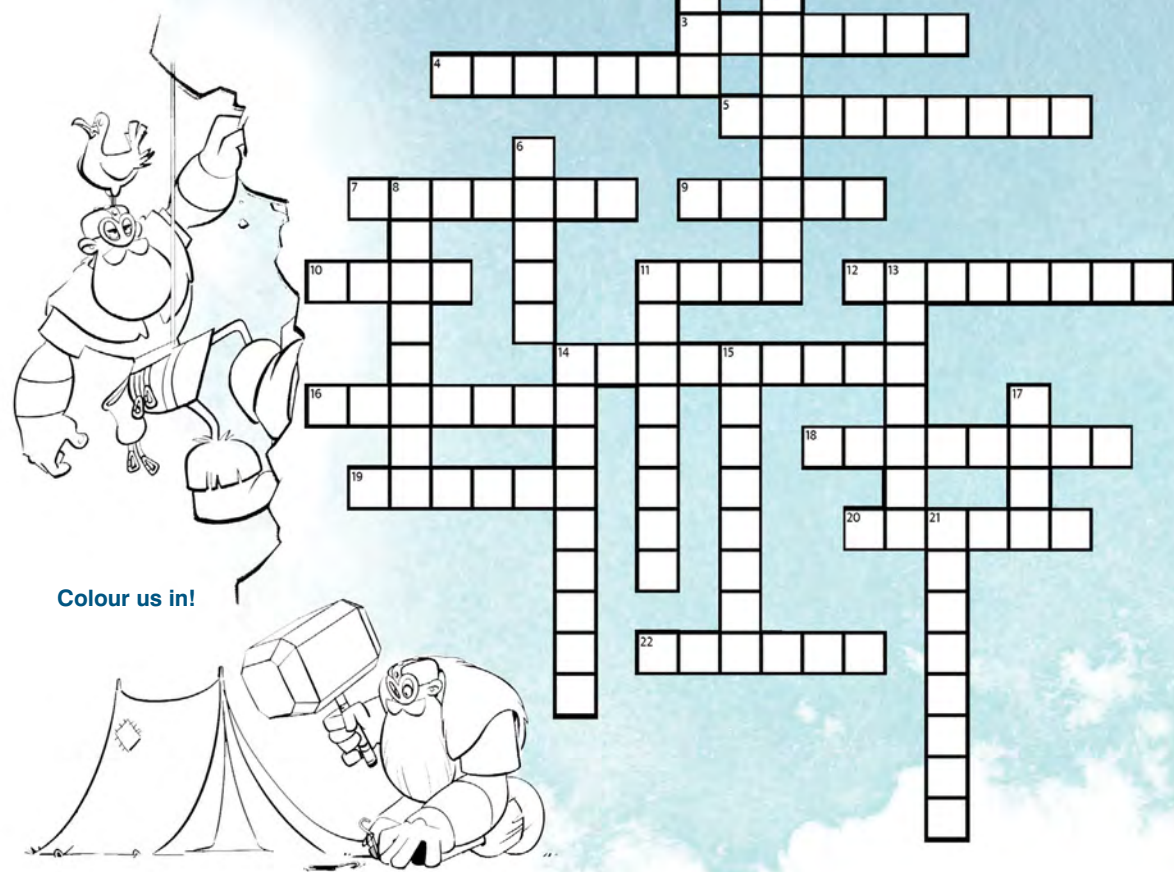
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Front page photograph:
Noss Head Lighthouse

Viklings Crossword



Solve the clues: Read the numbered clues for Across (horizontal) and Down (vertical) words.

Across

- Navigation tool used on ferries.
- Main Shetland destination served by NorthLink.
- Orkney port linked directly with Scrabster.
- The only boss whose office has a bridge.
- Your floating bedroom with a sea view.
- The team keeping everything shipshape!
- Nature's timetable that nobody can reschedule.
- Famous for ponies, knitting, Up Helly Aa... and NorthLink sailings!
- Mainland terminal serving the Stromness route.
- Delivering everything from groceries to giant machinery.
- Journey across the water.
- A brake for a ferry!
- Famous for Neolithic monuments, dramatic coastal landscapes... and NorthLink sailings!
- What is the name of the NorthLink Viking?

Down

- Open area or level of the ferry.
- Another word for the ferry's operating schedule.
- Freight transported alongside passengers.
- Mainland port from which NorthLink operates overnight sailings.
- Building where passengers check in before boarding.
- Protected area where ferries dock.
- Right... but only if you're on a ship!
- The process of getting onto the ferry.
- How many vessels do NorthLink Ferries operate?
- Orkney's largest town and a key NorthLink port.

Answers can be found on page 9.

The first ascent of the Old Man of Hoy

Passengers on MV Hamnavoe are treated to a heart-stirring sight on every crossing to Orkney, as the ship passes magnificent flame-red cliffs on the west coast of Hoy. A lone pillar – the Old Man of Hoy, a 137m tall sea stack – stands 60m away from the rest of these towering cliffs, as great breakers dash against its feet.

July 2026 marked the 60th anniversary of the first climb of the Old Man of Hoy by three intrepid climbers – Chris Bonington, Dr Tom Patey and Rusty Baillie. This daring assault took place from 16th-18th July 1966, requiring 28 hours of climbing!

All three were accomplished climbers. Bonington (aged 31) and Baillie (25) had conquered the north face of the Eiger, and Patey (34) had opened more new routes in Scotland than any other man alive. The adventure began when Patey phoned Bonington suggesting they climb it. This imposing sea stack was one of the few peaks in Britain that had not yet been scaled.

Patey said: "Since I first started climbing in 1948, I've met many climbers interested in the mysterious Old Man. Some considered it impossible to climb, on photographic evidence alone; others like myself concluded that the rock must be rotten. But the word 'impossible' has no permanent place in a climber's vocabulary."

So, the three climbers, along with Baillie's family, boarded the ferry to Orkney and then sailed over to Hoy, where they set up base in a Rackwick cottage.

From Rackwick, visitors must trek up a steep hillside and hike along a rocky track to the Old Man. Climbers must then descend the cliff to the base of the sea stack.

On day one, the climbers decided to take the landward-facing route. The ascent required free climbing with extremely technical, difficult moves, using modern climbing aids – so ropes, pitons, bongs (wider pitons for bigger cracks), karabiners, slings and nuts were gathered below the pinnacle.

For the first 80 feet, the climbers made slow progress contending with a steep pitch, brittle rock, and the fulmars that nest on the Old Man (which have an unpleasant habit of vomiting on the faces of trespassers!)



Further up, the pitch became more perilous as much of it was overhanging. On an inverted chimney, Baillie's sweating hands started to slip just as one foothold crumbled beneath him. Shortly after that, the climbers decided to retire for the day.

Following a restful night in Rackwick they returned, and quickly got back to the inverted chimney, continuing upwards slowly but surely.

The second day's climb proved to be as tricky as the first – one pitch held Baillie up for six hours. Bonington said, "*The Old Man of Hoy was as difficult a pitch as any encountered in the Alps. But it was a pleasure to do it on warm rock and not worry about frostbite.*" Bonington had suffered from frostbite during the two days he conquered all 5,900 feet of the north face of the Eiger. However, by the end of the second day of climbing the Old Man, they had only advanced 200 feet from the base!

On the third and final day, climbing was much easier and faster. Further up the Old Man, the face was nearly vertical, and the climbers gained 200 feet in just over an hour. Bonington tackled the last 80 foot section, finding generous holds in more compact sandstone, and they reached the summit at 4.30pm. The climbers celebrated by making a cairn at the top and lighting a bonfire, which almost got out of hand in the sun-dried heather!

The three days had been sunny, with only the whisper of a westerly wind. Over the course of the climb, there had been a handful of spectators on the

cliffside, but on reaching the summit there was no one there to witness the climber's moment of glory!

However, Bonington, Patey and Baillie would return to the Old Man a year later, in 1967, for a televised climb, watched by 15 million viewers! Then, in 2014, Bonington (aged 80) returned to climb the sea stack once more, raising money for MND research after his wife Wendy died from motor neuron disease.

Though now a commonplace climb undertaken by many parties every summer, the first climb of the Old Man of Hoy was an incredible achievement.

When interviewed for local papers, Bonington said "*The Old Man of Hoy presents a great challenge, one of the few left in Britain today. There is nothing like this rock anywhere else in the country. I feel the same satisfaction as on reaching the summit of a Himalayan peak.*"



The 1966 climbing team (left to right: Chris Bonington, Dr Tom Patey and Rusty Baillie)

Capturing Shetland beneath the sea



We ask Billy Arthur, an underwater photographer living on the Shetland Islands, about his extraordinary images of the marine environment below and above the sea.



Q. Can you introduce yourself and describe how you became an underwater photographer?

A. I became interested in underwater photography while travelling in my mid-twenties, when my love for the marine environment and all the incredible plants and animals within it was reignited.

After returning home, I began freediving around the coastline and gradually built up an underwater camera system to showcase what I was seeing.

Q. How would you characterise the underwater environment in Shetland compared to other locations?

A. It's incredibly peaceful, you almost always have the water to yourself. At times, the visibility can be unbelievable, and the biodiversity is remarkable, from kelp forests to rocky reefs and walls covered in invertebrate life.



Q. What are the biggest environmental challenges you face here?

A. The biggest challenge is probably the cold. It demands a thick wetsuit or good-quality drysuit to stay in the water for any decent length of time. In winter, temperatures can drop to around six degrees, numbing your face and making it hard to talk after a long dive.

Visibility can also be tricky, especially once the spring bloom kicks in. But in a way, that helps sharpen your underwater navigation skills.

Q. How do seasonal changes affect your work?

A. After years of diving around Shetland, you get a feel for what to expect, male lumpsuckers appearing in spring, followed by bursts of nudibranch life in summer.



Winter brings opportunities too. On crisp, sunny days when the water is clear and blue, it's a great time to turn the camera towards the waves.

Q. What species or subjects do you most enjoy photographing?

A. It's a difficult choice! For macro, nudibranchs stand out – they were the spark that got me into underwater photography in the first place. Their colours and forms are unreal.

For wide angle, nothing beats sunlit kelp forests. There's something about those moments that feel peaceful and grounding. I always try to capture that feeling, and give a glimpse of what it's like to slip into that world – like becoming a seal for a while.

Q. What defines a strong or successful image in your work?

A. The ones that make the viewer feel immersed – like they're right there in the moment, connected to the subject. But if an image also leaves them wondering or imagining more, then I know I've done a good job.

Q. What has been your most memorable experience photographing in Shetland?

A. I was freediving through kelp on a hazy summer day when I noticed people gathering on the shore. There was only one reason for that – orca.

Every instinct told me to get out, but this was something I'd imagined for years. So I stayed, hidden in the kelp, heart racing.

When they rounded the point, everything changed. The nerves vanished, replaced by pure awe. From the water, from a seal's perspective, they were enormous.

They passed by, then turned for a second look. I was laughing and shouting through my snorkel, completely overwhelmed. Then, just like that, they realised I wasn't prey – and slipped away.

Q. What do you hope people take away when they see your work?

A. I hope it shows people something unfamiliar, and inspires a deeper appreciation for the extraordinary life in the waters around Shetland. It's a special and fragile world – one we need to protect, so others can experience that same sense of wonder.

www.lonabrakphotography.co.uk

Instagram: @lona_brak



Alan Rae
Second Officer

Tell us about yourself

You may have seen me on NorthLink's social media after I climbed the world's eighth-highest mountain, Manaslu, in 2025 for a cause very close to my heart: the MS Society. My mum was diagnosed with Primary Progressive Multiple Sclerosis in 2011.

I was raised on a croft on the Black Isle, just north of Inverness and went to Fortrose Academy. I played for Ross County FC's youth academy from ages 7-15, and still enjoy playing and watching football to this day, but it has taken a back seat since I began my journey into the mountains.

How did you get into your current role?

I don't come from a seafaring background. My mum found this career online and believed the skill set required for the job (teamwork, communication, adaptability and problem-solving) was well suited to me.

I started my career with NorthLink as a Cadet in 2013, qualifying in 2016. I was offered a position as Third Officer before progressing to Second Officer and, more recently, Relief Chief Officer. My next step is to obtain my Master's Unlimited Certificate of Competency.

What are your main duties?

My main duties include maintaining a safe navigational watch, taking charge of mooring parties, overseeing cargo loading and discharge operations, and carrying out routine planned maintenance. The role comes with a wide variety of tasks, which keeps every day interesting.

What would people find interesting or surprising about your job?

Living and working alongside the same people means you build strong friendships and develop a unique bond that's quite different from a typical 9-to-5 job.

What is the best part of your job?

One of the best parts of the job is seeing the incredible marine wildlife Scotland has to offer. I will never tire of spotting whales, dolphins and porpoises. I also really enjoy the work-life balance the role provides.

What do you do in your spare time?

As mentioned, I'm passionate about mountaineering. When I'm off work, I spend time bagging Munros in Scotland and climbing some of the world's biggest mountains. I've summited: Manaslu (8,163m), Ama Dablam (6,812m), Mera Peak (6,476m) and Kilimanjaro (5,895m). You can follow my next adventure on Instagram: [@Alans_Ascent](https://www.instagram.com/Alans_Ascent).

I've also ran 25 marathons while raising awareness and funds for MS. I'm delighted to have raised £22,000 for MS Society in 2026. I'm incredibly grateful for NorthLink's support in both my career and my fundraising efforts.

When I'm not climbing or running, I enjoy spending time with family and friends – usually over a good meal.

ONWARD, VOYAGER, *and Cook!*

For those of you who have been receiving the NorthLink Ferries monthly newsletter for a while, you will know that each edition features a delicious recipe from Orkney, Shetland, Aberdeenshire or Caithness – from traditional dishes and bakes to family recipes kindly shared by members of our team.

We have gathered 25 of our favourite recipes featured on our website and compiled them into a handy PDF eBook, ready for you to download and enjoy.

Simply scan the QR code to view the recipe book online or visit www.northlinkferries.co.uk/publications

To receive a monthly email newsletter from NorthLink Ferries, please visit www.northlinkferries.co.uk/news-and-media



#MagnusOnTour Competition

To celebrate the landmark 20th issue of our onboard magazine, *Northern Lights*, we are bringing back one of our favourite competitions: **#MagnusOnTour**, giving you the chance to win a trip to Orkney or Shetland for two people with a car and cabin.

For those who are unaware, Magnus is our Viking seafarer and the familiar face of NorthLink Ferries, featured in our branding and in other areas across the service, such as the Magnus Lounge (and his name is the password for our onboard wi-fi!)

To enter, simply share a picture of yourself in an eye-catching location with any NorthLink Ferries product featuring the iconic Magnus logo. Post it on social media with the hashtag **#MagnusOnTour**, or email your entry to marketing@northlinkferries.co.uk

Over the years, Magnus has travelled far and wide thanks to your brilliant submissions, and we can't wait to see where he appears next...

For more details and T&Cs, please scan the QR code to visit our competition page at www.northlinkferries.co.uk/competitions



Answers to the Vikings Crossword on page 3:

Across 3. Compass 4. Lerwick 5. Stromness 7. Captain 9. Cabin 10. Crew 11. Tide 12. Shetland 14. Scrabster 16. Freight 18. Crossing 19. Anchor 20. Orkney 22. Magnus

Down 1. Deck 2. Timetable 6. Cargo 8. Aberdeen 11. Terminal 13. Harbour 14. Starboard 15. Boarding 17. Five 21. Kirkwall

Woodland walks around Aberdeen

Orkney and Shetland's wide-open, largely treeless landscapes mean that many islanders seek out a proper woodland walk when heading south. Aberdeen is an ideal place for this, with several peaceful forests dotted around the city. Here are five of our favourites.

Kirkhill Forest

Kirkhill is a great spot for a moderate hill walk close to the city, with free parking available. The area is full of paths to explore, but the main circular loop – with a short extension to the Tappie Tower – is around 4 miles (6km) long.

The white-waymarked trail follows a wide gravel track, climbing steadily through the woods before looping back down on dirt paths. We recommend walking the loop in an anticlockwise direction, as this way is not as steep as doing the opposite!

Near the top, follow the main trail until you reach a signpost for the tower. At the summit stands the Tappie Tower – a granite folly built in 1846 to commemorate Queen Victoria's arrival in Aberdeen. The tower has a steep spiral staircase leading to a viewing platform which provides lovely, panoramic views across the countryside.



Maryculter Woods

Maryculter Woods

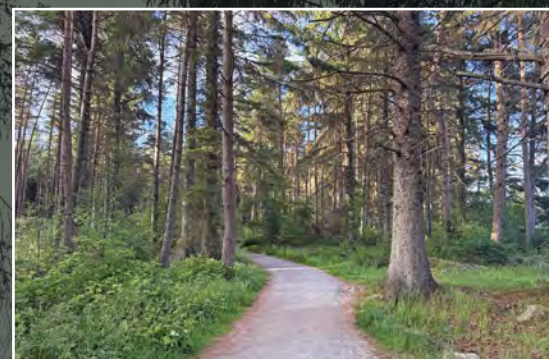
Maryculter Woods is a hidden gem on the outskirts of Aberdeen, just off the A90 beside the Kirkton of Maryculter. A small, free car park holds space for 10-15 cars.

From here, the path follows the picturesque Crynoch Burn, crossing a wooden bridge before joining a circular loop around the woodland. Walking from the car park around the loop and back is just under 3 miles (4.5km) and takes roughly an hour.

This easy, family- and dog-friendly trail has solid gravel paths and mostly flat terrain. It's also great for birdwatching – tawny owls, crossbills and warblers are regular visitors – while trail cameras often capture red squirrels, roe deer and foxes.



The Tappie Tower in Kirkhill Forest



Anderson Woods

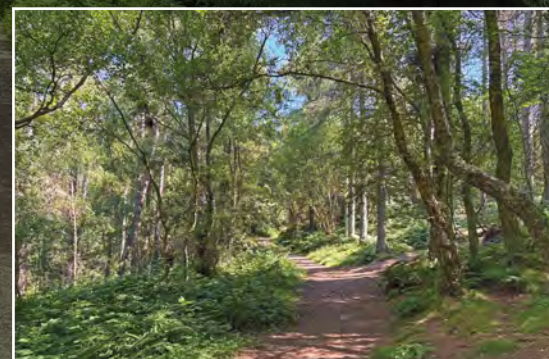
Den and Anderson Woods

Hazlehead Park is one of Aberdeen's oldest and most-loved green spaces. Just beyond it, the surrounding woodland – called Den Woods and Anderson Woods – forms the largest continuous area of forest within Aberdeen.

There is plenty of free parking here, and three mapped routes – 1.5km, 4km and 6km – start directly from the park. We recommend the 6km loop which covers the entire wooded area and curves around Hazlehead Golf Course. It's a gentle, mostly flat stroll along gravel paths, and the route can be easily shortened or extended as required.

Tollohill Woods

Tollohill Wood feels wonderfully tucked away, despite being close to the city centre – sitting just across the River Dee from Robert Gordon University. A narrow road from Leggart Terrace leads to a small, free car park.



Tollohill Woods

Inside the wood, you'll find a maze of paths heading off in all directions. While there are no marked trails, a general loop around the forest takes about 30 minutes at a leisurely pace.

A surprising feature here is the tall granite obelisk monument erected in 1859 to commemorate Prince Albert's visit to the area. It stands near the middle of the woods and is worth seeking out for its great views across to Garthdee and Cults.



Tyrebagger Woods

Tyrebagger Woods

Tyrebagger sits just a few miles northwest of Aberdeen, opposite Kirkhill Forest along the A96, where a quiet country road leads to two free car parks set within a large, open area cleared following Storm Arwen.

Two waymarked trails connect with both car parks: the blue Beech Tree Trail (¾ mile) and the red Robbers' Trail (just under 1½ miles), which leads through a cleared area before entering the woods. The red trail takes its name from Robbers' Cave, said to have been a hideout for 17th century outlaws. The cave isn't signposted along the route, and you'll need to venture a little off the main path if you wish to find it!

Authors inspired by Orkney

Orkney has a rich literary history, with poets and authors drawing from the history, folklore, and picturesque landscape across the islands. Read on to discover how authors have found creative inspiration in the tranquil, yet evocative setting of Orkney.

Alison Miller (Demo)

I was born and grew up in the town of Kirkwall in Orkney. The islands gave me my landscape of the mind. I lived away from Orkney for many years but it was there when I shut my eyes at night, the undulating lines, the patchwork of fields changing with the seasons and the agricultural year, the drama of the sea and sky as the weather shifted from clear and calm to stormy.



Daniel Aubrey (Dark Island)

There's something about the wild nature of the place, and the violent history of the Norse, that just captured my imagination as a crime writer. These islands are beautiful, they pull you in, but they can be dangerous when the weather decides to show its teeth.



Doug Johnstone (Crash Land)

I first visited Orkney before I was a published writer. I was on holiday with my wife in 2004 and found the place absolutely magical. I loved the sense of history being evident in the present everywhere we went, and I knew I wanted to write about it one day.



Lin Anderson (Forensic crime series starring Dr Rhona MacLeod – *Paths of the Dead*, *None but the Dead*, *The Killing Tide* and *The Dead and the Dying*)

My husband John and I lived at Orakirk Farm in Orphir with Vina and Geordie Pirie on the shores of Scapa Flow. Geordie was a great storyteller and when the wind was high he would bring us in from the caravan and we'd sit by the fire drinking his homebrew and hearing his tales of Orkney folk. Geordie's stories became the inspiration for my later writing set in Orkney.



Sally Magnusson (The Shapeshifter's Daughter)

When I was conceiving *The Shapeshifter's Daughter*, a Norse myth about Hel of the Underworld set in modern times, I knew there could be no other place than Orkney to set it. I wanted a place with a Norse feel, still connected to its Viking history but also with a timeless sense of history even further back, to Neolithic times and beyond.



Sara Bailey (Dark Water)

Orkney has a strange kind of hold on creatives, I think. Partly, it's the place's history and the breathtaking landscape, which feels as if it has endless stories just beneath the surface. I love the folklore, then there's the sound of the birds, the sea, the wind, and of course the lilt of a true Orcadian accent.



www.northlinkferries.co.uk/orkney-authors/

Authors inspired by Shetland Islands

The Shetland islands, whilst having some of the most dramatic landscapes in the UK, are also quiet spaces for reflection and creativity. Discover, in their own words, how authors have taken inspiration for their work from the rich storytelling traditions and beauty of Shetland!

Ann Cleeves (Crime book series featuring Detective Jimmy Perez – *Raven Black*, *White Nights*, *Red Bones*, *Blue Lightning*, *Dead Water*, *Thin Air*, *Cold Earth* and *Wild Fire*)



I first went to Shetland more than fifty years ago. I'd dropped out of university and I needed to find work. A chance conversation in a London pub pointed me towards the post of assistant cook in Fair Isle Bird Observatory. As soon as I arrived, I knew this would be a special place. And so it would turn out to be. I met my husband there, and I'm still friends with the islanders who made me welcome on that first trip.

Malachy Tallack (That Beautiful Atlantic Waltz, The Valley at the Centre of the World and Sixty Degrees North)



I spent most of my childhood in Shetland, and much of my adult life too. When I started writing seriously, it was the islands that I wanted to write about. There are a thousand sounds, smells and sights that speak of Shetland to me, and part of what I've tried to do in my novels is to bring those little details of island life to the page.

Marsali Taylor (The Shetland Sailing Mysteries)

I came to Shetland as a very new, very green teacher back in 1981, and loved Shetland's landscape and folk straight away.



It's such a beautiful place, in every season: in spring, with the greens of the new shoots, and the first silver-yellow celandines. In summer, when the sea is blue and the days endless; in autumn, when the hills turn a wonderful burnt orange with the moor-grass growing through the heather stems; in winter, when the snow turns the world to a black and white photo.

Simon King (Shetland Diaries: Otters, Orcas, Puffins and Wonderful People)



Having lived on Shetland in 2008/2009, during which time I made the series *Shetland Diaries* for the BBC, I have so many fond memories of my stay on the islands. Everything from the wild winter storms that explode against the cliffs of Eshaness to the long, light summer nights accompanied by the sounds of wild spirits like red-throated divers and drumming snipe are fuel for my creative spirit, expressed both through my film making and writing.

www.northlinkferries.co.uk/shetland-authors/

A day at the Forsinard Flows Nature Reserve

Whenever I visit Caithness and Sutherland, I'm awestruck by the vast open spaces of the Flow Country. It's a seemingly endless landscape of moorland, lochans and peat bogs, with few trees, and on its fringes, dark, steep summits. It's sparsely inhabited but there's an incredible number of plants and wildlife here that simply couldn't survive anywhere else.

In 1996, at Forsinard, the RSPB created a nature reserve in the heart of the Flow Country. When planning my visit, I wasn't sure what to expect. It all looked quite wild but also quite desolate. I soon learned that, at RSPB Forsinard Flows Nature Reserve, the more you look, the more you see!

Reaching Forsinard

For travellers taking the train from Inverness to Thurso, Forsinard will be a familiar stop. It can also be reached by bike or on foot, but I visited by driving 30 miles from Scrabster on the A897 from Melvich to Helmsdale.

Even the drive there felt special – the single-track road held a new delight around every corner, with rushing peat-brown rivers nearby and thin scatterings

of trees, all surrounded by green pastures and heathery moorland.

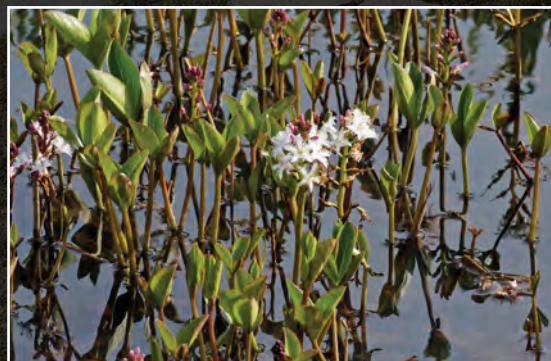
Upon arrival, I parked at the railway station which is now a free RSPB visitor centre.

I wandered onto the Dubh-lochain Trail – a boardwalk path across the blanket bog. It's an easy walk, less than 1 mile long, and the viewpoint at the end looks across the moorland like a lonely castle turret. Its cylindrical steel frame clad in Scottish larch encloses a staircase leading to an incredible elevated view.

Dubh-lochain is Gaelic for 'black pools'. The dark water comes from the peat underneath, but the mosaic of delicate plants and reflective pools added subtle colour to the landscape. The nearest summit, Beinn Griam Beag, rose sharply into the sky.



Forsinard lookout tower



Bogbean plant



Sundew plant



Lizards at Forsinard

Why this landscape is important

The Flow Country contains the largest expanse of blanket peat bog in the UK, covering 1,500 square miles.

Blanket bog is widespread here because it forms in cool areas with poor drainage. Rainfall keeps the ground saturated, encouraging the growth of bog mosses that cover the landscape like a blanket.

When plants die, carbon dioxide they absorbed is released as they rot away. However, in bogs, the cool, wet, acidic conditions prevent bacteria from being very active – so mosses and plant matter don't fully decay when they die. Instead, the plant matter accumulates to form a thick layer of peat, which stores the carbon dioxide. In much of the Flow Country, the peat is 10m deep!

Carbon dioxide is one of the most important elements affecting the world's climate, and as bogs and peatlands are so effective at storing carbon dioxide, it's important to keep them wet and healthy.

There are over 400 million tonnes of carbon stored in the Flow Country – three times more than in all UK's woodland!

The things you'll see!

Interpretation boards helped me spot plants and animals that feed, breed and shelter here undisturbed. Reading these brought my visit to life!

You may see dragonflies, which can dart about at 30mph – making them the fastest insects in the UK!

There are amazing mosses here too – including Woolly Fringe moss and Sphagnum moss which holds 10 times its weight in water, so was used as wound dressing during both World Wars.

I spotted other plants, including cottongrass and bogbean, and insectivores such as Sundew and Butterwort. Bog Asphodel grows here too, with its yellow flowers and red stalks. You may also spot Bog Myrtle or perhaps smell it first! This shrub gives off a distinctive aroma and is a natural midge repellent.

Wading birds are drawn to the pools at Forsinard, including curlew, dunlin, greenshank, and black-throated divers – some of the UK's rarest birds. Moorland birds such as golden plover, meadow pipit, lapwing, and wheatear also flit around the undisturbed lochans. Short-eared owl, buzzard, merlin, and golden eagle patrol the skies.

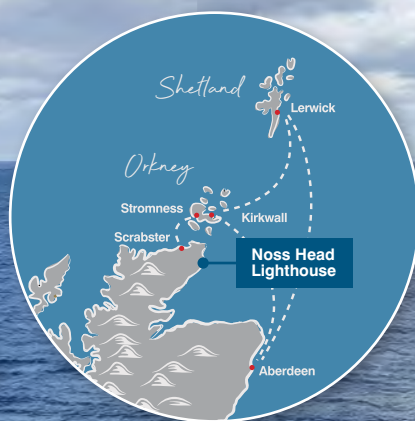
During winter, red deer can be seen, but in the summer they stay up in the hills.

I was charmed to see lizards sunbathing on the plastic sleepers underneath the boardwalk. The sleepers warm up quickly, making them attractive to creatures that I never thought I'd see so far north!

When visiting Forsinard...

It's wise to wear good footwear, with warm, waterproof layers. You can even take your dog but make sure you keep it close to avoid disturbing birds. Sometimes there are guided tours with RSPB Scotland staff, and if you fancy a longer walk, the Forsinard Trail starts four miles further north.

Noss Head Lighthouse



Noss Head Lighthouse is one of the northernmost and most distinctive lighthouses on the Scottish mainland. Situated in Caithness, near the town of Wick, it has guided seafarers since the mid-19th century.

Noss Head is a narrow stretch of land extending into the North Sea and a natural observation point for one of the most exposed coasts of Caithness. The name derives from the Old Norse term *Snos*, meaning nose, referring to the protruding headland known since ancient times and mentioned by the 2nd century geographer Ptolemy.

Although the waters around Noss Head are appealing, they have long been dangerous for ships sailing Scotland's northern coast. This danger led to the lighthouse's construction as part of a wider effort to facilitate safer navigation.



The headland is also important ecologically. Noss Head waters are designated as a Marine Protected Area (MPA), characterised by deep seabed habitats, extensive beds of horse mussels, and diverse marine life. The cliffs and nearby fields provide refuge for seabirds and other wildlife.

The lighthouse opened in 1849 with Alan Stevenson in charge of the project. The tower is not very high, only 18 metres, but it is striking as a white cylinder standing among keeper's cottages and stone buildings within its own compound.

Its most fascinating feature is its architecture. Noss Head Lighthouse was the first in the world to have a lantern room with glass panes angled diagonally. It may not seem impressive now, but at the time it was revolutionary. The concept was simple: fewer window frames meant less light blockage, allowing the beam to be emitted in all directions. The design proved so successful it was adopted by lighthouses around the world.

As building progressed, labourers from the local area, including those struggling during the Highland potato famine, were employed to construct the access road from Wick. This provided income at a time when earning money was difficult, linking the building project with the surrounding community.



For more than a century, lighthouse keepers lived and worked at Noss Head, keeping the light on in tough and isolated conditions. The site included living quarters, engine houses, and other buildings necessary for daily life in a remote coastal location.

Like many UK lighthouses, Noss Head was automated in 1987, ending the era of lighthouse keepers living on-site. Today, the light is managed remotely by the Northern Lighthouse Board, while the original Fresnel lens is preserved and displayed at Wick Heritage Museum. In the years since, the surrounding buildings have taken on new roles, from serving as a research centre to being privately owned and restored, helping keep the site cared for and in active use.

Today, Noss Head Lighthouse remains very much part of the community, its light continuing to shine across the North Sea as it has for generations. Although visitors are not allowed inside the lighthouse itself, they can explore the nearby headland, which offers stunning coastal views and several historic sites in the vicinity, including the spectacular ruins of Castle Sinclair Girnigoe.



Exploring Orkney's wartime history

Orkney has a fascinating wartime history and reminders from this period can still be found across the islands. This guide shares some of the key wartime places to explore around Orkney.

Scapa Flow

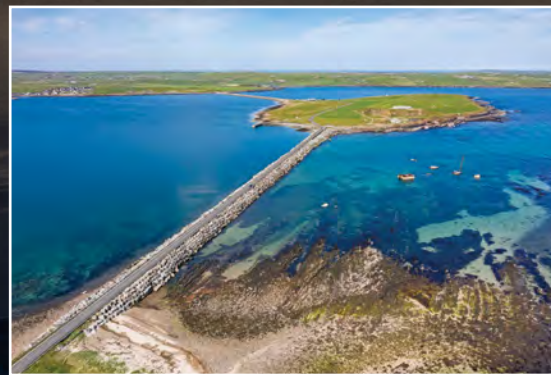
Perhaps the most significant wartime location in Orkney, **Scapa Flow** is a large, deep and sheltered harbour almost completely encircled by islands. It became the base for the Royal Navy fleet during both World Wars, and its ideal location with easy access to the North Sea and North Atlantic meant the fleet could respond quickly to enemy activity and protect vital shipping routes. Because of this, Scapa Flow became heavily defended with coastal batteries, anti aircraft sites, anti submarine nets and, later, the Churchill Barriers.

A dramatic moment came on 21st June 1919, when the German High Seas Fleet was wrecked by its own crews to prevent falling into the Allies' control. In a single day, 52 warships were sunk – the largest loss of naval vessels in one event. Seven major wrecks remain on the seabed and are now world famous dive sites.

The Churchill Barriers and the South Isles

The Churchill Barriers – four concrete causeways – permanently linked Lamb Holm, Glimps Holm, Burray and South Ronaldsay to the Orkney Mainland during WWII. Built after a German submarine slipped past eastern defences in 1939 and torpedoed HMS *Royal Oak*, the causeways were constructed between 1940 and 1944 by more than 2,000 workers, including around 1,300 Italian prisoners of war. Before the barriers, old ships were sunk as temporary defences and can still be seen beside several barriers.

Just beyond the first barrier on Lamb Holm stands the **Italian Chapel**, created by Italian POWs from two Nissen huts and decorated with remarkable craftsmanship under artist Domenico Chiocchetti. Crossing the third barrier to Burray, overlooking Weddell Sound are the remains of **Northfield Battery** which was built in 1940 and abandoned in 1943. Burray is also home to the **Orkney Fossil and Heritage Centre**, which shares many wartime stories and artefacts.



The Churchill Barriers

On South Ronaldsay, a short walk at Hoxa Head leads to the striking **Hoxa Battery** and **Balfour Battery**, which guarded the southern entrance to Scapa Flow. Further south, the **Windwick Bay Memorial** remembers the 188 sailors lost from HMS *Opal* and HMS *Narborough* in 1918.

Orkney Mainland East Mainland

Rerwick Battery in Tankerness is one of Orkney's best preserved WWII coastal defence sites, with gun positions from HMS *Iron Duke*, searchlights, an observation post and air raid shelters. Nearby, **Graemeshall Battery** in Holm once guarded the eastern approach to Scapa Flow before the barriers were built.



Graemeshall Battery

West Mainland

Near Orphir, **Houton Battery** helped protect the western entrance into Scapa Flow, alongside Ness Battery and Links Battery – which sit along the west shore of Stromness overlooking Hoy Sound. Ness Battery is the best preserved site, with gun houses, shelters, magazines and a wartime mess hall that can be explored on guided tours. Further north along the coast, **Yesnaby** has remains of a WWII anti aircraft gunnery school next to the car park, and further on, the **Kitchener Memorial** at Marwick Head marks the loss of HMS *Hampshire* and HM *Drifter Laurel Crown* in June 1916.



Ness Battery



Scapa Flow Museum

Hoy and Flotta

Hoy has the highest concentration of wartime remains in Orkney. The village of **Lyness** became the main naval base for the fleet at Scapa Flow, with more than 12,000 people living and working here by 1940. Here, the excellent **Scapa Flow Museum** is well worth visiting to learn more about both World Wars in Orkney. On the west coast, **Skerry Battery** and **Scad Head Battery** survive as clusters of concrete structures, including gun emplacements, magazines, searchlights and engine houses.

On Flotta, the **Port War Signal Station** controlled ship movements and acted as the Fire Command Post for nearby batteries. **Buchanan Battery** is another well preserved site, as well as the island's ruined wartime cinema, built in 1943 to entertain military personnel.



Buchanan Battery

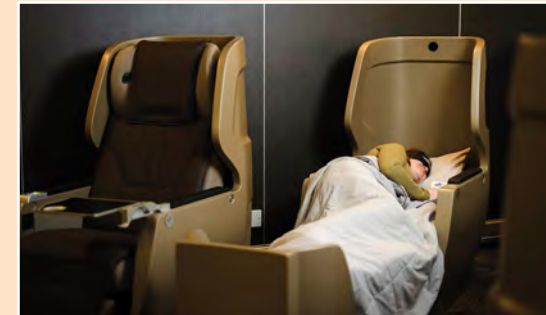
Enhancing the NorthLink Ferries service

Throughout the Serco NorthLink Ferries contract there have been a series of enhancements made across the service, many of which stem directly from feedback collected by our passenger surveys. In the last few years, each of the following developments were implemented to make travelling with NorthLink Ferries more comfortable, more convenient and more enjoyable from the moment you step aboard.

On Board Accommodation

At NorthLink Ferries, we pride ourselves on offering a range of accommodation options designed to suit every traveller. By listening carefully to your feedback, we continue to evolve and expand these options to better meet our passengers' needs.

Throughout 2025, pet-friendly cabins continued to prove popular, with 4,603 pets travelling alongside their owners in these cabins. During our 2026 drydock programme, we increased the number of pet friendly cabins to twelve on both MV Hrossey and MV Hjaltland, which serve the Aberdeen-Kirkwall-Lerwick route. This means that 10% of all cabins on these vessels are now available for guests travelling with pets, giving more passengers the opportunity to sail comfortably with their four-legged companions.



May 2026 saw the introduction of a new accommodation offering: lie-flats. Installed in dedicated lounges (formerly Pod Lounge 2) on board MV Hjaltland and MV Hrossey, these electrically powered seats quietly recline into a fully flat position. This provides a new level of comfort, ensuring a restful night for overnight travellers. With exclusive access to shower and washroom facilities within the lounge, lie-flats provide a comfortable, lower-cost option for travellers without a cabin.

In their first three months of operation, the lie-flats have been used by over 2,800 passengers, representing a 99.8% total occupancy rate. Early feedback has been encouraging, with users rating their experience very positively. We are pleased to see this new accommodation option being so well-received by passengers.

See-LEVEL VR Headsets

For some travellers, seasickness can take the enjoyment out of an otherwise pleasant journey. To help address this, we took on See-LEVEL in August 2025. See-LEVEL is a virtual-reality headset designed to ease motion-sickness symptoms in under twelve minutes.



This technology works by tackling the root cause of seasickness; the mismatch between what your body feels and what your eyes see. By replacing real-world visuals with a calm and stable 360° land-based scene, the headset helps your brain realign these signals, reducing symptoms quickly and effectively.

Two headsets are available, free of charge, on each of our passenger vessels – MV Hjaltland, MV Hrossey and MV Hamnavoe, which operates on the Scrabster-Stromness route. Passengers can request a headset at reception on board, and those who have tried it have reported rapid relief from their symptoms.

For those who feel queasy at sea, See-LEVEL offers a simple, science-led way to make your journey more comfortable.



New Key Cards

Following our 2025 drydock programme, passengers with a cabin, lie-flat or sleeping pod may have noticed an upgrade to our key card system.

Previously, passengers were issued magnetic stripe cards which had to be inserted into a reader to unlock cabin or lounge doors. We've now replaced these with RFID cards, which use a radio frequency to communicate with NorthLink locks, meaning the card only needs to be held over the reader for the door to unlock. This technology is much more secure and less prone to wear and tear.

Where to play golf in Shetland

Shetland offers a golfing experience that feels wonderfully different to anywhere else in the UK. Here, the courses are shaped by rocky headlands and rolling hills – and with few trees, every fairway is exposed to plenty of wind.

With reasonable green fees and the chance to play late into the night during Simmer Dim, it's easy to understand why Shetland is becoming an increasingly popular golf-break destination.



Dale Golf Course

The 18 hole Dale Golf Course sits just a short drive from Lerwick and is home to Shetland Golf Club. Set within a natural valley, it has great views over Dales Voe and the surrounding landscape.

Established in 1976 as a 9-hole course and expanded two years later, it now stretches over 5,500 yards with generous fairways, water hazards and plenty of hills to keep things interesting.

Facilities include a clubhouse with a volunteer-run bar (opening times can vary), along with club and trolley hire. Two indoor simulators allow for year-round practice, whatever the weather.



Asta Golf Course

Opened in 1992 and still lovingly run by the Leask family, Asta Golf Course sits between Tingwall and Asta Lochs. The setting is idyllic, with swans, oystercatchers, Arctic terns, Shetland ponies and bursts of wildflowers often appearing around the course.

Built on flat farmland, the course is ideal for beginners while still offering enough challenge for experienced golfers. Uniquely, Asta offers two different 9-hole layouts that switch halfway through each month. The Classic Course (yellow flags) is more challenging, while the New Course (red flags) is more open and forgiving.

Visitors are always welcome with no need to book ahead unless in a large group. The clubhouse runs on a friendly honesty system for green fees and club hire, with drinks and refreshments available. Time it right and you might catch the long-standing fortnightly music night, where musicians gather for a relaxed session.



Whalsay Golf Course

For a round with real drama, head to Whalsay Golf Club. Set on a small fishing island north of Mainland Shetland, this is the most northerly golf course in the UK.

Bordered by the sea on both sides, the 18-holes stretch more than 6,000 yards across open moorland with clifftop views, seabirds wheeling overhead, and the occasional seal or porpoise gliding past as you line up a shot.

Visitors can make use of the pleasant and well-maintained clubhouse, with convenient club and trolley hire available on site.



Fair Isle Golf Course

Midway between Shetland and Orkney lies Fair Isle – home to perhaps the most remote golf course in Britain. This six-hole course covers a rugged peninsula with crashing waves on almost every side, created in the early 1900s by lighthouse keepers who built their own course around Fair Isle South Lighthouse.

After the lighthouse became automated in 1998, the lighthouse keepers departed and the course faded away; however in 2006, islander Tommy Hyndman restored it with help from the island's sheep (who still keep the fairways neatly trimmed!).

It's free to play with donations welcome, and clubs, balls and tees are available on the island. Binoculars are recommended, as the surrounding coastline is a great spot for bird and whale watching.



The Knab Golf Course

A short stroll from Lerwick's town centre, The Knab is a small 9-hole course with big views overlooking Breiwick Bay. It sits on a windswept headland popular with walkers thanks to its sweeping coastal scenery and peaceful setting.

The course is simple: no clubhouse, no facilities, no fees. From May to September, anyone can wander up with their clubs and enjoy a round. Though only 939 yards, The Knab still packs a challenge, with small greens, sloping fairways and thick rough to contend with.

At NorthLink Ferries, we're very proud of our sponsorship programme, which is designed to support events, community groups, schools, charities, sports teams, and individuals from, or travelling to, the Shetland and Orkney islands.

Assistance is offered through discounted fares or fundraising travel vouchers. For more information and to apply, please visit www.northlinkferries.co.uk/sponsorship



Stromness Athletic Football Club competed in the Highland Amateur Cup.



Shetland U11s played Orkney U11s in their first intercounty football match.



Hools Shetland Pony Stud travelled to the 2026 Caithness Show.



The Orkney Branch of the Pony Club at the Royal Highland Show.



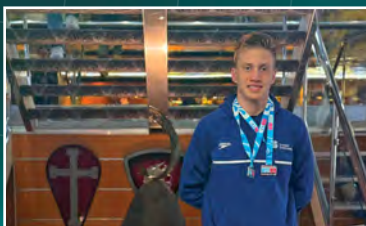
Netball Orkney 1s senior team played against St Andrews University.



Orkney Rugby Football Club U14 and U12 girls, and U14 and U13 boys.



The Delting Jarl Squad were special guests at the Edinburgh Up-Helly-Aa.



Julian Okroj competed at the Aquatics GB Next Gen Championships.



The Lerwick Jarl Squad travelled to the Måløydagene festival in Norway.



Kian and Chloe Leask attended a Badminton Strength residential camp in Largs.



Shetland heart screenings carried out by Cardiac Risk in the Young.



Summer volunteers, Jake and Tom, supported the Orkney Native Wildlife Project.



www.northlinkferries.co.uk
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