

# Shetlanders don't care about nationality

By DAVID WILLINGS

Lerwick the capital of the Shetland Isles is nearer to Norway than it is to England. The Northernmost of the British Isles it can be reached by air from Glasgow or by boat from Aberdeen but once you arrive on the Island you have in fact if not in political theory stepped out of Europe. The Romans called the Islands "Ultima Thule" which means the far lands. The dialect they speak ought to be English yet somehow it isn't. Of course it is liberally sprinkled with Norse, a type of medieval Norwegian, but even the English usage is enough to confuse. I was introduced to someone in Lerwick and after a few conversational pleasantries he asked me "How do you work?" A simple enough question but what did it mean? It meant in fact what do you do for a living? The normal greeting is a mixture of Norse and English in which Norse comes off best. "Was it wit du" is asked for "how are you?" The Shetlander has none of these English inhibitions about laughing at his own jokes and so although I could barely understand a word of some of their humorous tales I was never likely to laugh in the wrong place or not to laugh in the right place. Whenever a raconteur stopped talking and bellowed with laughter I would not go wrong if I roared with laughter at the same time.

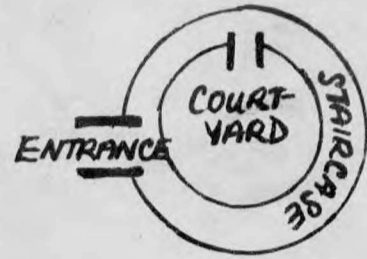
Scottish or English? The Shetlander couldn't care less. Shetland is Shetland. The Islands used to belong to Denmark but when a Danish Princess was given in marriage to King Kenneth of Scotland the Islands also came as part of her dowry. But they feel no affinity with Scotland. When they talk about the South they refer to Aberdeen but this is only because Aberdeen is the most accessible city.

Quite a number of books are published in the Shetland Dialect and some compelling poetry in the dialect is put out by a publisher who knows he will lose money on it yet doesn't want the

cultural heritage to die out. As one begins to understand their humour it is delightfully human. In 1940 when it was highly probable that Britain would be invaded by Germany (indeed the German High Command did consider crossing from Norway and taking Shetland) the Local Defence Volunteers were set up. The name was naturally abbreviated to L.D.V. In Shetland this was extended and that organization is still referred to as Look, Duck and Vanish! The initial letters of the Scottish Women's Recreational Institute - SWRI - have given in Shetland the title "Silly Women Running Idle". Their humour often relates to the discomfort of some educated person - although the extent to which they venerate such people is almost disturbing. A mythological character by the name of Tirval dominates many tales which begin "Tirval, say I, was is wit du?" and then Tirval recounts what has happened to him that day. For example one day some eccentric stranger who had been crawling over the rocks asked him to row three sacks across the bay and leave them at his hotel. For this Tirval was offered five pounds. As he was rowing he had a look in the sacks and found they were full of stones. Tirval had long ceased trying to fathom the ways of educated people but they had never rowed a boat. Tirval emptied the sacks into the water. When he landed he stopped at a roadworks and filled the sacks with lumps of concrete which were much easier stones to get at, duly delivered them and the educated man nearly had a fit on the spot.

(Geologists, you have been warned!)

To the amusement of people like Tirval Shetland is a Geologists' paradise. It is also an anthropologists' paradise but the Islanders have an aversion to being studied. One of the better educated islanders living in a village in the North of the Island made some boomerangs. The villagers were fascinated with these and



asked what they could do to thank him. He pointed that an anthropologist would shortly be arriving in the village and suggested that they tell him they had used boomerangs since the times of the Roman Empire. A student of politics, female, arrived on the island. Within an hour of her arrival everyone on the island knew she was there. She was given abundant information on the feeling on the island and the impending campaign to have the islands returned to Denmark. She went back to her English University gave a paper on this, made out a strong case for it and the paper was well received while she remained blissfully unaware that her shapely leg had been elaborately pulled.

Archaeological sites abound on the Island. At Mousa, a small island off the main island, there is one of the best preserved Brochs. A broch is an iron age edifice about twenty feet high originally. It has an outer wall and an inner wall and there is a staircase between the two walls.

What they were used for remains a mystery. How they were built on Shetland is an equal

mystery. Because of the hostile climate trees could not have grown and thus there was no timber. You have to make your own arrangements with a boat owner to get across to Mousa. Nearer Lerwick is the broch of Clickhimmin. This is not as well preserved as Mousa but is worth a visit. South of Lerwick is the interesting site known as Jarlshoff (Earl's House). Jarlshoff was described by Sir Walter Scott and excavations have shown there was a Broch there at one time. This was destroyed and there was a settlement built. Indeed there have been several settlements there from the Iron Age onwards.

There is no problem about public transport in Shetland - it just doesn't exist. You will have to hire a car. The climate is certainly hostile but there are other rewards for making the journey. The scenery, the Churches (which are like no others in the British Isles since they are a mixture of British and Norwegian) the Castles are all worth a visit. There is a castle north of Lerwick, now in ruins, where the walls were covered with a mixture of egg white, egg shell and sundry other substances.

The Feudal Lord found this to be an ideal type of insulation and so confiscated all the eggs of his tenant farmers over two hundred years ago. This resulted in very grave hardship and some of them forcibly took him out in a boat one night and pushed him into the sea. He probably froze to death before he drowned but since that time there has never been a murder

in Shetland. Drugs, violence and other social problems seem remote from the Islands. In a largely farming and fishing community where everyone knows everyone else sex in entertainment is just beyond their comprehension or interest. To decide whether to allow a series of films on sex education to be shown on the island the Director of Education went to Scotland to have a look at them and the local newspaper announced in a headline "Director of Education gone to see dirty films."

Its remoteness from the rest of Britain is what makes Shetland interesting. One morning at about half past seven I listened to the weather forecast broadcast from London "A cold belt and heavy snow showers should reach Shetland late this afternoon". Very interesting since I was just getting ready to step out into a howling blizzard and help my colleague dig his car out of the snow.

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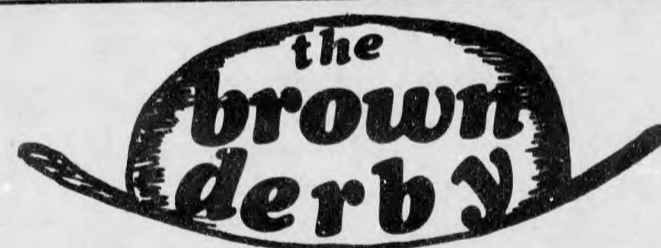
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