

The making of “Fair Isle, the Happy Island”

By 1978 I had been divorced and had re-married. My new wife Judith had planned a holiday in Orkney, which she had long wanted to visit, but cancelled as it clashed with the proposed date for our wedding in August. So as compensation I offered her the chance to come with me for my long cherished plan to make a film on Fair Isle. How would she like to come and help me with it as a kind of pre-marital honeymoon? I had to warn her, of course, that it might not be exactly what she would have called a holiday, but she could have the honour of being my official ‘assistant’ and if she liked she could be included on the credits as ‘Sound Recordist’. I think she enjoyed the joke. Anyway, after a bit of hasty training in how to use my trusty Uher field tape-recorder, which gave amazingly professional results for so portable a piece of equipment, she was raring to go in this new technical role. It would be one less thing for me to carry.

As this was to be a freelance effort, it was essential to keep costs down, so we crossed on the mailboat from Grutness near Sumburgh airport, on a pleasantly calm sea. With so little time I had only the sketchiest idea of the film’s content. We decided to play it largely by ear according to the barometer.

We were on the island for only ten days in July, mostly dull and sometimes wet, with only two days you would call good filming weather. We stayed in the Bird Observatory which gave us plenty of opportunity to plan everything on paper on the really bad days, so that the good days were a hectic rush, making full use of the island’s only taxi, to dash to all the selected locations to film events like the arrival of a plane at the airstrip, a visit by the District Nurse to an elderly crofter, and the return of the Good Shepherd – the umpteenth version of a mailboat by that name – from its weekly mail-run.

We organised a knitting session with the fastest knitter on the island, joined by her two grand-daughters, just learning. We attended the Kirk on Sunday morning and then filmed the congregation emerging into a cheerless day and setting off for home on foot. Of course, we took advantage of the annual picnic for all the islanders on the beach below the Observatory, with a rather fruitless attempt to dance an eightsome reel on soft sand in bare feet; and, as a finishing sequence for the whole film, a dance in the old village hall, with the new hall already planned and paid for. When the mums, determined not to miss such a social highlight, came with their babes in their prams and parked them outside the hall, their silhouettes against a lovely mid-summer sunset made a wonderful finale for the whole story. Where else in Scotland could mothers be so confident and such a scene be available for the camera? It was lucky timing of course, for we had arrived on the shortest night of the year, and before turning in for our first night at the Bird Observatory, we walked out onto the moor so as to take pictures of the Northern sky exactly at midnight. Although the sky was dark overhead, the horizon was palest green, edged with clouds still flushed with pink from the sun which went down long after we had had our evening meal, unpacked our bags and settled in. It was all very suitably romantic, and a wonderful introduction to Shetland’s ‘simmer dim’.

One of the first things I was anxious to cover was the airstrip, as this emphasised so clearly the difference at that time between Fair Isle and Foula. To many visitors, the boat journey was an essential part of getting that feeling of arriving at an island, of separation by water from the stresses of modern life to the more relaxed pace of island living. To others, the sea journey was worth avoiding at any cost. For Judith, our visit to the airfield was her christening as my sound recordist in an unforgettable way. We watched and filmed the plane landing and the school dentist and others being welcomed by the nurse. We noticed that a number of Great and Arctic skuas regularly frequented the runway in warm weather to sit on the tarmac. We also noticed that the Observatory warden was out walking round their territories counting nests and checking their contents. Great: another subject on our list, and a convenient opportunity to film him in action. It was exciting stuff, too, as he fixed a long stick in his back-pack to fend off the attacking birds as they swooped. Risking our own necks, we got close enough to film some of these attacks and could hear the swish

of their wings as the birds dived at his head. He was used to it and his stick trick seemed to work to keep the birds from striking him. But then he moved off to the next area of the hill. I had plenty of good action shots in the can – but no sound. I realised this was where special sound effects just have to be separately obtained, because no other effect would do. The swish of Bonxies' wings has a special menace in it, which would be impossible to fake. So, Judith dear, would you please take the Uher and the microphone and just collect a few 'whooshes' when they swoop? I said I would warn her when they were coming if she would concentrate on the ON/OFF switch and the Volume control. Easier said than done, as was clear when we checked the recordings that night and most of them were slightly marred by either cries of terror or expletives of rage, interspersed with the occasional (and highly commended) perfect recording of what it sounds like to be dive-bombed by Bonxies in the course of duty. I don't think I was ever forgiven for also seizing the chance to film her distress as she ducked, shots which were not strictly required for the production but good for a laugh.

Major features we managed to cover on our two good days were the building of a new tarmac road to a new house, by a road gang mostly of Fair Isle bachelors, working a road-roller imported with some difficulty from the mainland; and 'Sheep Hill', a full round-up with almost the whole population of the island's sheep, plus more than half of the inhabitants turning out to help. The traditional drive takes place in the only practicable location, where men and dogs can make use of the sheep dyke, a stone wall right across the island, following the line of the ancient 'feelie dyke', a turf wall dating from Viking times, and still a prominent feature.

That was a wonderful day, the sort of occasion one likes to coincide with as it includes so many opportunities of close-ups of crofters, old and young with most of the children treating it as holiday. I was impressed with the two lads handling the sheep and checking their lug-marks with great skill. It seemed that nearly everybody was an expert at some skill, and even the Bird Observatory warden proved to be quite proficient with the shears. Sound-recording was vital for such a sequence with the rich Fair Isle accent so much more natural from people fully engrossed in what they were doing than when asked to speak into a microphone. We had seen a splendid black-faced Suffolk tup on one croft, and most of the sheep were 'improved' and larger generally than the small Foula sheep I had been used to, with their many different colours of wool. Here shearing, not rooing, was the order of the day. The dogs too appeared to be less wild and more useful to their owners in managing the flock. But the same basic method of marking the animals with the owners' lug-marks (on the tips of their ears) was an essential tool on such occasions with the sheep of many different owners all gathered into the same crue. One difference I noted from Foula (and filmed just in time) was when lunch-time came and, with the sheep all safely penned, the workers suddenly piled into the back of the island lorry to return to their houses at the south end for a meal.

The other occasions when I was able to create the correct impression of the human scale of life on Fair Isle were our visits to the school. This was the main *raison d'être* for our choice of Fair Isle in 1978. It was the school's centenary, and while discussing film topics with Phil Sked in Charlotte Square, he had suggested this as an excellent topic for the second definitive film of the National Trust for Scotland's work and properties which he wanted to commission. There were plenty of attractive and colourful topics among the Trust's many national treasures, but as you may imagine I jumped at the chance of this one. Moreover, it was one of those which most Trust members were unlikely ever to get a chance to see for themselves.

From Fair Isle's point of view it was a milestone in their history and a mark of their progress and success in a competitive world. Fifteen children in a school serving a population of 85 is a sign of a healthy, happy community. My choice of title for my film was becoming less difficult to decide when we arrived at the primary school. Children usually love acting up for the camera. Rod Thome was an enterprising and imaginative teacher with a very busy life but he welcomed us warmly and was co-operative in a very positive way. We took shots indoors of normal class-work and crafts, and an outdoors lesson when they returned the living contents of the school aquarium to the local pond before the summer holidays. Then we followed some of the pupils returning home on foot or

on their bicycles in a landscape most city children couldn't even dream of. There weren't enough boys for a football team, but their playground sports were lively and noisy and pursued with exhilarating enthusiasm. Some of them went home to modern, well-roofed houses clustered near the shop at Stoneybrek, which seemed well stocked and running a flourishing business. All the islanders seemed to be on the phone and most of the houses were scattered between Malcolm's Head and the Sheep Craig towards the south end. The two lighthouses were still manned then, though there were rumours of automation coming soon. However, the children seemed to us to be a symbol of a thriving community and the proposed title of the film as "Fair Isle, the Happy Island" seemed appropriate enough.

The real highlight of the five-minute sequence on Fair Isle for the new Trust film "Scotland: A Heritage" was my coverage of Rod Thome's current school project. It was prominent in the school room and so an essential part of my coverage of the school, but it was so imaginative and so successful, that I decided to make more of it than I would have time for in the National Trust's wide-ranging film. Rod called it 'The Bottle Project'. I forget where it all started or who first suggested the idea but it was so perfect for an island school with limited communication with the outside world and yet one traditional means of contact no city school would ever have access to – the tides and winds of the surrounding ocean.

The rules were clearly posted in the school. Pupils were to bring one clear glass bottle, carefully washed and thoroughly dried (in the oven), and a piece of paper, with a written formula of instructions for whoever found the bottle washed up on a distant shore. When folded the paper should show, on both sides, the words PLEASE READ so that they could be clearly seen from the outside. A tight-fitting screw cap was essential. We filmed the whole class writing their messages, with details about themselves, their family, their school, and the island where they lived, and inviting the finder to return the message with news of their own to match.

When a batch of fifteen bottles had been completed, as was done every week before mail day, the teacher would take the box down to the pier and hand it over to the skipper for the weekly dispatch, halfway across to Grutness, of the Fair Isle School's Centenary Bottle Post.

So that little ceremony was also filmed as part of our busy schedule. The most fascinating part of the project was the long list of 'recoveries', rather similar in excitement to those slips of paper arriving from the British Museum at the Bird Observatory of the very occasional migrant bird, ringed on Fair Isle and recovered far to the south in the wintering grounds of some warbler or flycatcher, or a seabird caught in a net by a trawler on fishing grounds several days sailing away to the north. Like the birds, the bottles too were travellers.

Many bottles had made short journeys to Shetland or Orkney, or further to Scandinavia or the Hebrides or many parts of the Scottish mainland. A few had reached faraway destinations like the Lofoten Islands or the southern shores of the North Sea, and replies had come from schoolchildren in Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands, wherever the finders had seen the sense in giving local schoolchildren the opportunity to communicate with a remote island in Scotland where other children were anxious to exchange correspondence. And exchange they did, with a fascinating variety of pupils of all ages enjoying the treasure-hunt atmosphere of this original and highly educational method of learning about each other's way of life.

Of course, many bottles simply disappeared but with always the chance of a long-term recovery, gradually all the pupils received replies. Half the excitement was that it was a lottery, with every reply a talking point and a learning point, and the whole project the model of a co-operative effort. Rod Thome had also started a Fair Isle newsletter which became the accepted medium for publication of results. So the whole island was automatically involved, and I think most parents were as surprised as the pupils were at the unexpected success of the venture. Instead of just the very occasional reply, there were soon maps and diagrams of all sorts and directions of remarkable journeys. As wind was clearly a major factor in deciding destinations, a whole new study of Fair

Isle's weather position and relationship with ocean currents opened all sorts of geographical studies. Fair Isle pupils were becoming experts in the geography of north-west Europe, from Shetland right up to the Arctic Circle.

Our stay on Fair Isle, marred to some extent by overcast weather, had just enough brightness for the coverage of sufficient subjects to paint a reasonable portrait of the island. With the long summer days, our two or three days of fair weather were exhausting as time was extremely precious from early morning till 'the simmer dim' called a halt to filming about nine o'clock. Not surprisingly, many subjects of wildlife interest were shots near our base at the Observatory.

An eider-duck, in Shetland dialect a 'Dunter', was spotted leading her brood of ducklings down to the water. Watched by a bevy of bird-watchers from the Observatory windows, I followed her progress over smooth ground and rough and when she, at the head of the convoy, had to flutter down a big drop, her intrepid but wingless balls of fluff simply tumbled head over heels after her, so light and agile that they suffered no harm in the process. It made for a lightsome sequence which always raises a laugh, and down on the water of the harbour she fussed round them as, with great proficiency, they found their food as to the manner born.

There were gaudy oystercatchers nesting; a pair of ringed plovers performing their distraction display with uncanny trickery, trailing a clearly 'broken' wing with cries of heart-breaking misery; a wheatear nesting under a stone or hovering a few feet above ground as deft and successful as any flycatcher; and everywhere on the closely grazed turf were rabbits, especially in the early morning. There were adults and real Beatrix Potter youngsters of every hue imaginable: the normal light brown of the majority, a fair sprinkling of melanistic and albino bunnies, some uniformly black or white; the occasional pale tan or almost yellow offspring, plus some piebald and some skewbald, enough to convince us that some previous Warden had let his children's pet rabbits escape to create havoc with the genetic make-up of the island population.

The Arctic Skua variations up on the moor followed more predictable patterns, the subject of a long-term and detailed study by Kenneth Williamson during his time as Warden. This had become a model of its kind as a study of a dimorphic species with pale and dark variations, whose cross-breeding had been systematically recorded for many generations of birds individually marked with rings and re-trapped year after year. Birds were caught on their nests with clap-nets where needed, but with colour-coded rings on both legs in individual combinations which could be read from a distance, by the end of each season virtually every nesting bird in the study area was logged. The Arctic Skua study would have made a whole documentary film on its own.

Like any island, Fair Isle was hard to leave. Even such a short stay as ten days allowed us to meet nearly all the islanders, and at the same time to complete the production. In the same vein, I probably beat all the records for economy of filming. Most wildlife films reckon on a high wastage rate from difficulties in getting close, in unpredictable behaviour, in inadequate depth of focus, in unsteady zooms and pans. A twenty to one ratio of film shot to film actually included at the editing stage is considered quite efficient. On our visit to Fair Isle, I exposed only 2,500 feet for a proposed half-hour production of 1,000 feet. It was a canny Scot's film with a vengeance! Most of the economy was achieved by careful planning and limitation of every shot to perhaps only 50% over its intended length on the screen. With due care, it is possible to keep costs down. By contrast the following year a BBC film crew from Glasgow spent three weeks with seven or eight personnel and exposed 25,000 feet for a production of exactly the same length – goodness knows at what cost. Theirs must have been a nightmare to edit down to length. Mine was a simple task by comparison. My budget was probably less than £3 per foot of finished production.

So we departed reasonably satisfied with the results and a far better understanding of the most successful island community I had yet encountered. In twenty-four years, with National Trust for Scotland backing, they seemed to have solved most of those problems which had loomed so large on my first visit in 1956. The Fair Isle Bird Observatory Trust, FIBOT for short, has proved an

efficient and successful organisation, bringing a constant supply of new blood to the island, new faces to offset the insularity of island life, and just occasionally partners for life for some of those lonely bachelors of the early days.

Our departure was made especially interesting by the fact that it coincided with the end of the school term. Rod Thome had told us that he and three of his boys would be on the boat with us to launch the final batch of bottle messages from the 'Good Shepherd'. I was able to film them doing this, which they did with great gusto, flinging the bottles over the stern when we were half way across. Their journey was to keep a date, which their teacher had organised for them, with 'The Shetland Times' who had reserved for them the window of a temporarily-unused shop in Commercial Street in Lerwick. Here they were to mount a full display of the results of the Bottle Project. It was a triumph. Text, lists, maps of journeys made by wind-blown bottles; North Sea results; Atlantic wanderings; statistics; samples of letters written and replies received with photographs of other schools, pen friends and 'foreign' communities: it was a well-planned and intrinsically interesting display and a deserved success all round, and they had headlines in the paper to prove it and to take home with them. All credit to a brilliant teacher.

Moreover, I was able to help by arranging for them to appear at the local studio of BBC Scotland to tell their story and give examples of the letters they had sent and received. They were full of confidence and enthusiasm and both the broadcast and their window display got wide coverage in the press. I suppose the greatest reward for me of our visit was seeing the inside of the Fair Isle school and making the acquaintance of so many alert, well-balanced and happy youngsters, such a vital part of their community.

I did not attempt to show the workings of the Bird Observatory in the film we made on our ten-day visit. That deserves another film-maker to tell the fascinating story of over fifty years of migration study which has revolutionised our understanding of bird movements in Great Britain and the weather that controls them across the North Sea.

The Bird Observatory has been a training ground for many young scientists, and a Mecca for ornithologists at every level. Most noticeably in recent decades, it has been the ultimate hunting ground for the 'birders' whose hobby, and in many cases obsession, is collecting species in a competitive way, often referred to as 'birdmanship'. It has also provided a comfortable and convenient holiday residence for naturalists and island lovers, which must also have included many members of the charity which owns it, the National Trust for Scotland.

The stamp of Trust ownership sets a seal on the value of remote islands like St Kilda and Fair Isle. Over the last fifty years it has become a vital component in the success of the island's community. It has provided turnover for its economy and all those vital links with the outside world which help the Fair Islanders to offset the tendency to insularity which is otherwise the inevitable result of remoteness and isolation.

Foula is only slowly catching up – the telephone, their home-made airstrip, and now a much-improved harbour and more reliable mailboat have transformed communications but not yet attracted the incomers. Perhaps the coming of computers, powered now by electricity from wind, solar and hydro-power, will do the trick by enabling islanders to source the internet for education, human contact, and even employment. It remains to be seen whether information technology will enable man to defeat the old enemy of insularity and make small island communities the most desirable of all the environments on our fantastic planet for man to find his true soul and live in peace with his neighbours. After all, they start with the undoubted advantage that 'Small really is Beautiful'.