

## Back to Foula with the Brathay Exploration Group, 1956

[By early 1956, Chris Mylne had returned from 18 months as a teacher and lay missionary on Foula, and taken up a post as Classics master at the boys' preparatory school run by his father, which was by then based in Fife. But he was keen to use the school holidays for bird-watching trips to Scottish islands, including a return to Foula with his dog Norie.]

My return to Foula so soon after the trauma of my departure in autumn of 1955 was a rather strange experience. Apart from the fact that someone else's furniture and books and kitchen utensils were in the Manse, nothing else seemed to have changed. It really was like coming home. Both Norie and I got a wonderful welcome, and progress was slow as we went round the crofts with so much news to catch up on and questions to be answered. Of course, the children had all grown, as children do, after an absence of over ten months since I had last seen them. Using the old tables I had always used for my daily bird counts on the island, I recorded 38 species of birds during my stay from 8<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> August. One of the first things I noticed on walking up from the pier on arrival was how well the galvanized wire-netting of the Heligoland trap in the Ham kale-yard had survived the salt spray of the previous winter. Yet there were just enough signs of incipient rust to make it clear that without regular maintenance its days, or rather years, were already numbered.

On the very first day of my return visit, Jim Gear spotted a Lesser Grey Shrike in the bushes at Ham, recognised it as something unusual and took the initiative to trap it and carry it up to the schoolhouse, where with the help of their Field Guide he identified it correctly as the much less common of the two species of Grey Shrikes which migrate more or less regularly to Scotland. Sadly, it was found dead only four days later, which was not surprising as it was last seen being pursued by a territorial Arctic Skua. Few other migrants were recorded, with only single Willow and Garden Warblers to represent typical autumn passage birds. A dozen birds, mostly resident blackbirds, were trapped and ringed, proving that the trap was still viable; and one re-trapped Starling and one ringed bird found dead also proved that these two species remain firmly as island residents. Four adult Fulmars were also caught and ringed; but not by me. And this was because of the one major new factor in the life of the island which I had introduced in 1956 – the advent of the Brathay Exploration Group into the story of the island, in whose company I had crossed from Walls on a rather crowded mailboat.

Based in Cumbria, Brathay Hall ran residential courses and recruited young people from many backgrounds to gain experience of outdoor pursuits and recreation as well as social skills in living and working together. The Exploration Group was formed to undertake more adventurous expeditions on survival skills could be learned in more difficult and testing environments than the Lake District. When Ioan Thomas, one of the Group's leaders, heard I was working on Foula, he suggested that the island might offer them the same sort of challenges and opportunities as foreign expeditions, but at a far lower cost. With our Atlantic weather, this was undoubtedly true, but the idea also presented a risk factor for an organisation which had always canvas tents for accommodation. They had not experienced the type of violent winds, and especially *flans*, which can make camping on Foula truly hazardous, if not at times impossible. However, if this hurdle could somehow be overcome, the idea clearly offered at least a partial answer to the Foula community's need for help with the heavy croft work: tasks such as peat cutting and carrying, which so many of the older folk were now finding too difficult and in some cases quite out of the question. If Brathay would agree to making part of the purpose of each expedition a lesson in volunteer assistance to a community in genuine need of help, as well as their normal scientific and recreational

training aims, then I felt sure we could offer them some safeguards against our extremes of weather. The idea had been hatched while I was still in residence. It took off in 1956.

To cut a fairly long story short, I had put the proposal to the Holbourn family, and especially the late Professor's widow, Marion Holbourn in Wales, with the request that some form of more permanent shelter than tents should be offered in return for physical help on selected crofts. I had every confidence in the Leaders I had met, especially as several of them had a special interest in ornithological research. There would be plenty of opportunities for meaningful tasks that non-experts could perform – census work, ringing under supervision, etc. – thereby increasing our knowledge and hopefully sowing some seeds of interest in the scientific method of assessing the complexities of bird populations and behaviour. Foula, as a low-cost substitute for foreign travel to wild places, was in line with Brathay's plans, and Brathay looked like being a fruitful answer to some of Foula's needs.

The idea appealed to Mrs Holbourn at once. She was always keen to seize any chance of improving the lot of her beloved island and its people. In the first year, she offered Brathay a campsite at Ham beside the ruined croft of Brae, overlooking the Voe, and another in the shelter of the Biggins dyke at the south end, at the east end of the Daal. These proved satisfactory but testing, due to the exposure to some very fresh winds. So subsequently she offered them the croft of Ristie at the north end of the island as their base. The house was in good enough repair to be useful from the start, but clearly Brathay could offer the skills and the manpower to make it sound and weatherproof again, sufficient to become an asset instead of a liability both to the owners and the incomers. And so a deal was struck.

There was, I fear, a little apprehension among some of the older folk at the idea of Foula being 'used' in some sort of social experiment involving young men from a variety of backgrounds, few of which would have given them any chance to understand a crofting way of life or the social needs of a remote island. I had done my best to re-assure them and to present the idea more in terms of providing help to Foula's ageing generation as part of a training exercise which would also include an opportunity to study the island and its bird-life. All they had to do was tell us about tasks they needed help with before next winter and which complete strangers to Foula's way of life could learn quickly and carry out under good leadership without specialized skills or experience. Several areas of work were suggested like hay-making or dry-stane dyking, but it was clear that the main worry was getting the peats raised and dried, and then barrowed home to the croft for stacking and covering. With a good peat-stack at the back door, they would be able to face the winter with more confidence.

The first Foula expedition of the Brathay Exploration Group was organised to start on 8<sup>th</sup> August, and I met up with them at Walls where a mountain of gear, tents, camping equipment, haversacks and boxes of food were loaded into the spacious hold of 'The Island Lass' at the little pier just down from AK Reid's store in the village. Having successfully completed my first ever movie film the year before on Theo Kay's borrowed camera, and then spent what I regarded as a small fortune editing it and having a colour projection print made, I was sufficiently encouraged by the favourable reception it got from family and friends that I felt able to offer to make a 16mm film of this, the Brathay Exploration Group's first venture into Shetland landscapes. But as they were as short of cash as I was, we decided to make it in black-and-white to save costs at all stages. After all, the main purpose was as a record of human activity and a useful tool for their recruitment of future members of the Group, so colour seemed a luxury rather than an essential need. There was also the factor of

limited time and the obvious advantage of much faster black-and-white film in poor or overcast weather, when the very slow colour films of that era were so restricting for the cameraman. Kodachrome needed full sunlight for correct colour rendering and adequate exposure, and dull conditions often made the use of telephoto lenses, with their much smaller apertures, impossible. For me, this film had become the main purpose of my return to Foula in the summer of 1956, apart from a real yearning to preserve friendships and acquaintances and to keep in touch with the islanders' needs and problems. Besides, Brathay saw a real value in a film record which could convey the excitement of the activities which formed such a vital part of the whole venture, and I seemed to be the only person likely to be able to offer them that service. In addition, they would share costs by paying for the film-stock and processing. The camera equipment came courtesy of Theo Kay and so was free, and I was delighted to offer my services and very limited skills in this field, when doing so gave me the chance to tackle a different kind of production in a place I already knew well.

There was also a new and significant factor which decided my course of action that summer, and was to change the whole course of my life for the next forty years. I had spent many hours during the winter of 1955-56 editing and producing the short colour film I had taken in 1954-55. This was my first ever film: a single-handed project which aimed to put on record my Foula experience. The word soon got around. There was virtually no other film record of Foula except Michael Powell's famous feature film, so a new documentary, however amateur and inadequate, was in demand by such audiences as the Scottish Ornithologists' Club. The arrival of my film in a form that immediately fulfilled a demand happened to coincide in a most fortuitous way with a sudden hiatus in the fortunes of a comparatively small and impecunious organisation called the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the now-famous and influential RSPB. The Society was short of funds and badly needed new members. However, its Council was known to have a built-in resistance to photographers, who were regarded by several Council members as a dangerous intrusion into their efforts to provide new bird reserves for rare species. They were especially opposed to the use of hides at nests, which at that time was one of the best methods of obtaining those revealing close-ups of birds that were a totally new experience for many bird-watchers and the public in general. The Council's opposition was now being challenged by the undoubted success of movie film, which introduced a commercial element the RSPB could hardly resist. Birds had suddenly become a viable subject for the lucrative big screen. Here was a source of excellent publicity, to recruit new members and so raise funds.

Starting with the Kearton brothers and pioneers of the cine camera like Oliver Pike, nature had proved popular and birds were the most spectacular section of the natural world to catch the public fancy. Edgar Chance's fabulous film study of the secret life of the Cuckoo was shown in the Albert Hall in London to capacity audiences, answering on the big screen many hitherto unanswered questions about the mysterious bird which made no nest but acted as a parasite on other species. It was drama as well as revelation, and professionally produced.

So the RSPB at last got the message and the Council approved the idea of forming a Film Unit to spread the message of the need for the protection of many vulnerable species, largely by presenting the riches of British avifauna to the city-bound masses. At first they had employed a talented cameraman and naturalist, George Edwards. He secured some wonderful film, mostly in RSPB reserves, using the now tried-and-tested method of filming from hides, to ensure natural sequences of bird behavior free of the fear of man. At first, this meant largely nest photography, but as everything was new, this still offered plenty of scope for fresh subjects. New telephoto lenses and improved film stocks also made many topics

possible that had been considered too challenging before. Several amateurs had taken short sequences of garden and woodland species, but few had tackled any sort of major production. So the first RSPB film was a compilation of all the best snippets from the most competent photographers of the easiest subjects, under the uninspiring title of "Birds in Britain". George edited this into a catalogue of beauty and fascination, which showed the real potential films could have in getting across to a wider public the message that birds were valuable but vulnerable. For the first time, using the magic of movement in nature's most active creatures, film was seen as the ideal aid to recruitment of support for the cause of bird protection. The real aim was membership. Membership could achieve two vital things – a public voice in support of birds and a paying membership to finance it; in other words, income and influence.

At this crucial stage, George Waterston, who with other Edinburgh enthusiasts had founded the SOC, as well as setting up the Fair Isle Bird Observatory, had just been appointed the RSPB's Representative for Scotland. It had been decided that George Edwards' first blockbuster bird spectacular should be 'Highland Birds', covering all the most romantic and colourful birds the mountains and lochs of Scotland could offer in a world famous setting. George set to work in 1956, aiming to complete the film in a year, but by the winter it was clear he was only half-way there. George (cameraman) liked to take his time, and was not good at getting up in the morning. George (Scottish Representative) was a man of vision and tireless energy. He needed this new film badly, and hadn't got even half of it by winter 1956. I had just appeared on the scene, complete with a short but promising film produced entirely as a one-man effort. It had been shown to the SOC and hailed as a revelation, both of the value of Foula as one of the great bird islands of Britain, and of the value of colour film, professionally edited into a coherent story, as the best means of getting this across to the public. By sheer chance, I was the right person in the right place at the right time; and so the scene was set for George Waterston to take the initiative on a project of great mutual benefit to us both. The RSPB had urgent need of a wildlife cameraman, and I was at a loose end and free. We discussed the possibility and George soon gathered I was enthusiastically interested but also loath to leave Scotland or to be based of all places in London. I asked for a few days before reaching a decision and rushed home to discuss possibilities with the only person I knew who was already involved in film-making, and who happened to be a close neighbour of my parents in Edinburgh.

That was Eric Lucey, a visionary scientist working for the Department of Genetics in Edinburgh University at the King's Buildings, where he ran a specialist film unit under Professor Waddington, one of the world's leading geneticists. There Eric filmed, mostly through powerful microscopes, the hitherto hidden world of human cell division and the development of chromosomes, especially the unusually 'large' ones of the salivary glands of drosophilus fruitflies using both time-lapse and high-speed techniques to show things never seen before by the human eye. Eric was the kind neighbour who had helped me to pack up my books when I first went to Foula in 1954 and lent me his van to transport them to Leith docks. Naturally, when I returned to Edinburgh with my unedited film, it was to Eric that I went cap in hand looking for film-editing facilities. He had set up a small editing room, with simple but adequate equipment. There was no mechanical editing machine of the kind then being introduced to BBC cutting rooms, but for hand editing by old and tested methods, there was as much as I could have hoped for; and the fee suggested was modest in proportion. So I was able at very low cost to edit and complete my own amateur film.

Meanwhile, George Waterston had boldly approached Philip Brown, the Secretary of the RSPB in London, suggesting he view my film and consider me as a replacement for George

Edwards. The net result of all these fortuitous circumstances was that I was offered, starting on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1957, a trial period as Director-Cameraman of the RSPB Film Unit, to be based in Edinburgh to take advantage of Eric Lucey's offer to co-operate over the use of his premises. This would give the RSPB facilities, at least on a semi-professional basis, for projection and editing of the picture, and to a lesser degree the sound-tracks. During the winter I could edit and finish my productions while Eric was engrossed in academic work. Then in summer, while I was away filming in the great outdoors and staff and students were on vacation, the facilities were available to Eric. It seemed all too good to be true and ideally suited to both our needs.

My first target was to finish 'Highland Birds' and have it ready for showing in the Festival Hall in London by the winter of 1957. And this was why I needed all the practice I could get in summer 1956 to practice my camera techniques and to learn my new trade. Brathay's summer expedition to Foula was my second-ever film, and I have just looked at a DVD version of it sent to me as a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Brathay Exploration Group in 1956, which is still going strong and still going to Foula.

Making a film to tell a story is a great incentive for firming up policy and future planning. Brathay found just the mix they needed of scientific work and social endeavour on behalf of the community, which they followed up in 1961 with a second film in colour showing Ristie in full use as their permanent base. Like my shot of the washing line at the Schoolhouse to emphasise the wind factor, it was noticeable that both Brathay films depicted the setting up each year of a temporary weather station, where the anemometer featured spinning so fast that the revolving cups virtually disappear in a blur. Flapping guy-ropes and tent canopies, and the use of heavy stones to weigh them down, also tell the same story. But the films achieved their purpose of recruiting generations of young men to the exciting realities of life on a windswept island, as well as the rewarding experience of a warm welcome from friendly people. How was it that the islanders appeared to be so content with no jobs and negligible income and so little of the paraphernalia of daily life that the visitors were used to at home?

The sequence in the 1961 film of the party the islanders threw for the 'Brathay boys' in the schoolroom, with Harry sawing away at his fiddle for an energetic thrash at the Foula Reel by dancers from eight to eighty, followed by tea and home-baking galore, with no alcohol in sight, is a lesson in genuine hospitality and full-blooded merriment. Likewise, the scenes of the bird-ringers at work at the bottom of the Sneck of the Smallie, suffering the spitting technique of young fulmars who object violently to being pulled from their rock ledges to have rings fitted to their legs, are an object lesson in the dedication required for objective scientific research. That musky smell of fulmar oil on their jeans was clearly as indelible as the memory of the challenging 200-foot descent down that precipitous fissure of rock to reach the young shags and fulmars in the nests below.

This adventure, at one of Foula's most spectacular features in the Wick of Mucklaberg, clearly made an indelible impression on one 'Brathay boy', who had also been one of my pupils at Dalhousie and a member of our joint schools expedition to the Isle of May in 1956. Nothing could have pleased me more than the vivid account he sent me of his visit with a group in 1960, in which he described meeting the islanders, including some of my former pupils on Foula about whom he had heard so much from me in 1956. He described his visit as "the greatest experience of my life so far" which I found deeply satisfying, making all the hard work of establishing the Brathay scheme so worthwhile.