

Return to Foula

When I reached retirement age in 1992, it seemed the right time to plan a trip back to Foula and give my wife Judith a chance to see for herself what the island was like at first hand. After so many changes, like the final realisation of their dream of an airstrip and a regular plane service, I was desperate to see what difference this had made to the islanders' chances of survival. Was the old phrase about Foula, "the St Kilda of the Northern Isles", ever likely to come true? Journalists were always obsessed with Foula's stubborn resistance to evacuation. But the population had dropped relentlessly, in spite of a smart new school which I was desperate to see, down from 70 in 1954 to 40 or fewer in the 1990s. What was the threshold for an island population below which community life was no longer viable?

Every year at St Kilda Club Reunions I would meet old friends who had visited Foula and brought me messages from islanders they had met. By 1993 it was time to return and see for ourselves. We had heard of the West Lothian couple, Bryan and Marion Taylor, who had decided to settle on Foula and had not only built a new house above the croft of Leraback, overlooking Ham Voe, which they were running as a guesthouse for visitors, but had also constructed a line of three chalets for self-catering visitors. Their plan was to increase the tourist turn-over to the island's advantage and as a means of earning a living for themselves. I had kept up to date with Foula's problems through the annual exchange of Christmas cards and irregular phone-calls, especially from Eric Isbister whose knowledge of people and family genealogies always amazed me. It was as though by concentrating his memory on such a small compass, he had the whole detailed history of the island in his head.

A trip to Foula takes careful planning and one essential component from my point of view was our decision to take with us our collie bitch, Holly, who was such a close look-alike to my faithful Norie. He had come south with me in 1955 and lived ten years right through my seven-year period as the RSPB Film Unit. I knew there were islanders who would appreciate my arriving with a 'pirie dog' just as I always had in the 1950s. I also felt that my own journey would be so much more meaningful if I had her as my nostalgic companion. The problem of course was taking a dog on a plane. We had from the start decided to fly into and out of Foula on the Loganair service from Tingwall airfield near Lerwick, if only to experience for ourselves just what was involved in this revolutionary method of access to the island.

The problem was solved earlier that year by a TV programme in a series from BBC Glasgow where Jimmy MacGregor travelled to various outlying parts of Scotland to convey to his audience different aspects of Scottish life. When he was to visit Foula, we watched the programme with more than usual interest. At the end he was standing on the airstrip making his final comments to camera, with the plane in the background, when I noticed an islander boarding the plane with his dog on a lead. No fuss, no problem. I phoned Loganair the next day and was told that dogs could travel at the pilot's discretion. Provided we were prepared to give the dog a sedative and could guarantee she would be on a lead and under strict control, they saw no problem. So Holly was booked in too and jumped into the car with her usual enthusiasm when we left home.

For me this journey was to be the realization of a dream for which I had waited 38 eventful years. After all it was Foula which spurred my first ever attempt at film-making and launched me into a career that had dominated my life ever since. Now there was a new spur – to write a book that would explain why I was "Inspired by Islands". Having researched in depth why St

Kilda was finally evacuated in 1930, my first aim in this new task was to try to assess why Foula, by contrast, had survived till 1993 and looked like surviving for a great deal longer. What better occasion for this could I find than the year in which two of my pupils from 1954-55 celebrated their fiftieth birthdays. One, Jim Gear, having raised a family, now represented a fair section of the future of the island. The other, Eric Isbister, whose family history of fatal liability to infection had led him to live his whole life (with only one brief exception on the Shetland mainland) on the island, indeed on the croft, where he was born in 1943.

We arrived in Shetland with two spare days before our flight in to Foula from Tingwall, and we had booked in at the Community Centre at Cunningsburgh, which was run as a kind of hostel. The weather turned foggy, which had not been part of our plans. So we had the strange experience of the kind of air communications which very small aircraft are involved in, totally divorced from all the fuss and red tape of commercial air travel. We waited a whole day while the fog was too thick around Foula to allow a landing, and then drove to Tingwall when there seemed to be a chance of it lifting.

The airport was small and the plane even smaller. Moreover, the plane was being serviced to take advantage of the delay caused by the weather. However it was apparently possible we could cross that afternoon if the fog cleared so would we please wait. In the interim, the pilot phoned the island for 'instructions'. What amused us – when we found out, after we had arrived – was that the person he was speaking to was our hostess at the guest-house, Marion Taylor, who was asked "Can you see the top of Hamnafield yet?". This system struck us as thoroughly admirable. The pilot knew – and obviously trusted – Marion's judgement, based not on written rules and regulations but on personal knowledge and previous experience. Living as she did at the foot of Hamnafield, she knew exactly what the pilot needed to know and told him. And so it was quite safe for us to fly in! We were in fact slightly more perturbed by the fact that they were apparently half way through the servicing of the plane when the pilot took it over for our flight in to Foula, leaving the rest to be completed after he returned.

The flight was short but fascinating as we could see so much of Shetland and the west coast area round Walls, with its many inlets, voes and islands. And then we had the excitement of seeing Foula approaching rapidly, one minute a distant three-humped whale on the horizon, next a wave-wrapped shoreline, a place of hills and houses, and then the grey shape of the airstrip running across the moor between the road past the Manse and the cliffs. In less than twenty minutes from take-off we were rumbling to a halt close to what looked like a small wooden garage, the hut which constituted the 'airport buildings'. As soon as our door was opened and we could see the reception committee, so to speak, it was clear that for all the informality of the arrangements in advance of our flight, the fire tender was on the spot and the two trained 'firemen' required to attend every landing and take-off were indeed present and looking very efficient in their uniforms and helmets.

Another noticeable feature was that we had landed uphill. The whole airstrip was rationally designed on a gentle rise in the ground so that from either end the pilot landed on a slight uphill gradient to reduce the distance the plane had to taxi after landing. There was in fact little choice for the siting, but being aligned roughly north-south, the normal pattern was to fly in over Ham Voe and land into the prevailing south-west wind.

There were two main disadvantages of the airstrip being restricted to this one possible area in the lee of Hamnafield. First was the problem of side-winds, for any strong wind from the

West was going to cause unacceptable turbulence if it resulted in *flans* under gale conditions. Second was the danger of bird-strike. As soon as we stepped out onto the ‘tarmac’ (i.e. gravel) it was clear from the noise made by a thousand pairs of them that the runway at its south end ran perilously close to a huge colony of Arctic Terns, which were busy flying in with food for their chicks in their hundreds. They are of course quite small birds, but even a single bird getting entangled in an airscrew could cause potentially serious damage. It did not seem to cause any trouble in practice, though, and was obviously limited in duration to the breeding season.

My own reaction was that here was one big change from the 1950s already, in that the size and location of the tern colony was new and far larger than anything I remembered. And of course within minutes I was aware of that familiar wailing cry of the ‘Allens’, the Arctic skuas which had always been such a prominent feature of that extensive area of flat ground below the Kirk. These birds had always defended their territories vigorously against other birds and even sheep, should they stray onto forbidden ground. So I was home, and something at least was familiar and nostalgic. As so often it was the sounds of the birds which created the strongest sense of uplift to the spirit, that here I was back where I belonged.

This sense of welcome was immediately enhanced by Bryan Taylor’s greeting, complete with taxi! Our luggage was dealt with, and in next to no time I was enjoying an amazing experience – being driven in a powered vehicle up past the Kirk and along the road past Mornington and the Manse. And then we were at Leraback – only it wasn’t Leraback at all, as the old croft house below the road was completely lost behind the Taylor’s smart new bungalow and their three chalets, joined together in a stepped terrace running down the hill below the road. All this was so new, and sadly, as so often happens with new buildings in remote areas, so untidy. There seems to be an inevitable clutter of materials, resulting from the work achieved but nevertheless creating an atmosphere of unfinished work and general chaos as though the effort had been just too much to finish the job properly. There was a tractor, a trailer and another car, which seemed to be full of dogs barking. This we soon discovered was part of their careful preparations for our welcome. The Taylors had three bearded collies, lovely dogs but a notoriously lively and boisterous breed, which they were worried might not get on too well with our collie. So they were confined to the car for lack of a better kennel until we got Holly settled into the house.

Our temporary home with the Taylors was a spacious bungalow with a group of bedrooms at one end with double bunks to increase the sleeping capacity, and a large living room/kitchen/dining-room at the other where Marion fed and entertained her guests in a highly efficient but friendly way. The first thing I noticed, apart from the fact that it was a far more modern and well-equipped house than I had ever been in on Foula, was that it was all electric. It took an effort of observation, for which I was already prepared in my expectation of differences from the ‘old days’. Would I notice such things, when they had been for so long part of the everyday life I had become used to within a few days of leaving Foula 38 years before?

What did strike me as unexpected was that the house was sited in a fairly exposed position on top of the ridge above the Ham Burn. And yet it seemed to have quite pronounced overlapping eaves which would present a considerable strain on the whole structure of the house in a winter gale. I suspected it had been built with some form of internal reinforcement to offset this risk. Immediately below the house was Jim and Sheila Gear’s new house, a two-storey building in a slightly more sheltered position where I knew that Jim had specified to the builder that the windows must be able to withstand the forces generated by gusts of up to

200 mph - greater than the Met Office category of 'Hurricane Force'. This sounds excessive, but it was based on recent experience in one or two winters when gusts of well over 100 mph had been recorded. Taking climate change into consideration, this was nothing more than a reasonable safety precaution for the future. It struck me nevertheless that perhaps only on a place like Foula, where islanders born and bred there had a realistic and naturally cautious approach to such problems, would you find such standards applied.

Within a few days we were to see several other brand-new houses: one up at Blowburn at the North end, another at Ham not far from the ruins of Tom Umphray's old hovel at Gravins, another just inside the dyke at the Hame Toun, and all not much different in appearance from any other bungalow on the mainland of Shetland. All were connected by underground electricity cable, with occasional small concrete indicators above ground. The same was also the case with all the telephone connections, so that some of the most dramatic improvements to the inhabitants' life-style had had absolutely no adverse effect on the scenic integrity of the island. Even more impressive was the ecological basis of the new system of the provision of power to the scattered crofts. In fact I couldn't at that time think of another example in Scotland as well thought-out and executed. It was based on the new school which was just beyond the Ham Toun's northern boundary fence, only a longish stone's throw from the old Schoolhouse. This building incorporated not just ample classroom space but a modern kitchen and dining room and a large combined sports hall for both school and community use. It had been built largely with money from a European grant. The cost of the school had run into millions, partly because the energy system for the whole island was included, complete with computer-controlled nerve-centre at the east end of the building.

It was not surprising this was costly as it had three elements, an aero-generator in the form of a huge wind propellor on the South Ness, a hydro-generator in the form of a dam and electric plant below the lochan, half-way up the hills towards the Sneug, and a back-up in the form of a diesel generator in the school building itself in case of a drought and/or calm weather in the summer. The first thing one noticed was that during our visit the diesel was providing all the power all the time, and that this was not unusual even when the wind blew and there had been ample rain. Apparently there were still teething troubles to be sorted out, not least the human element in providing adequate maintenance for the aero-generator which at times presented problems beyond the technical capabilities of the islanders. In other words the theory was proving slightly ahead of the practice, which simply showed that Foula was no ordinary place to provide such a scheme. For one thing, the wind was at times too plentiful and the propellor had to be switched off for its own good. For another, it required attention more frequently than expected. But I gathered that most such schemes, as on Fair Isle for instance, usually had a period of teething troubles to be got through. As I write this sixteen years later, the whole system on Foula is being replanned, after the wind generator had its whole housing blown away in a *flan*. It seems likely that several small wind-generators will replace the single large one. Such are the lessons to be learnt on what is possibly the most exposed wind-generation site in Scotland.

Electricity is such a basic commodity in modern life that it was immediately clear that its introduction into Foula was the biggest factor in altering the lifestyle of the inhabitants. Once I had got over the feeling that TV was incongruous, just because I had never seen it in a Foula croft-house before, it became a major subject of conversation. Several houses also had computers and made good use of them. Sheila Gear, for instance, wrote her highly successful books about Foula on her computer, and described the frustration of a power-cut at a crucial

stage in writing a new chapter, or of losing creative work through the sudden unpredictability of the power source.

We visited Ham Voe on our first day to see the new harbour works which had replaced the old davits, a huge crane which could lift the mailboat right out of the water. Both it and the new winch for pulling the boat on its cradle to the top of the slipway were powered by electricity. A power-cut half way through such operations could be both awkward and dangerous.

When we called in at the school, again the whole design of the place was planned round the availability of an electric supply, for cooking the lunch or conducting a lesson. We found all the children grouped comfortably round one monitor while they took turns at the keyboard in a computer-generated lesson on geography. Changed days from Mary Henry with her saucepans on the peat stove, or my advanced blackboard technology. The number of children was still much the same but two of the pupils were Maggie the teacher's own sons, while her eldest was already out at Secondary School in Lerwick.

On the way up to the new school we had passed the Schoolhouse and the now derelict classrooms, built out into the playground from the Gears' family home. These had for many years bridged the gap between the single room of the original building I had used and this final solution. This newest school had been provided – for reasons which I have never quite understood – at the expense of taxpayers in Germany and France and many other European countries as part of a decision by the European Parliament to finance educational facilities in remoter, more 'deprived' communities. There had at one time been complaints and letters to the Shetland Times by mainland Shetlanders that too much money was being lavished on Foula in comparison with other areas. In the year the new school was completed, the figure of £11 million had been quoted. But that was never Shetland money nor levied solely from local taxpayers who really had no complaint. Of course it seems a hefty subsidy for only forty people, but money spent on making life more tolerable for crofters out on Foula would nearly always be cheaper than the alternative, namely evacuation and rehousing the whole population – something often talked about but never done, and never likely to be done either. For the islanders weren't in the business of leaving. I remembered so well the motif the children used to put at the top of the outside covers of their school exercise books – a silhouette outline of the island hills as seen from the sea, with the words "Hame Sweet Hame" inscribed on a curving line over the top. Evacuation was not part of this school's agreed curriculum.

When the arguments for and against evacuation were yet again aired in the local press, it was usually argued on Foula's behalf that the sort of facilities these grants were providing, like the telephone I had seen installed first in 1954 or the eventual system of piped water, had for many years been an accepted part of everyday life elsewhere in the islands. There was also the whole infrastructure of tarmac roads and public transport and supermarkets, libraries, and recreational facilities which Shetlanders had always taken for granted. Foula had seldom complained. The lack of such things had just been part of the island lifestyle they preferred. But as modernisation progressed and life on Mainland Shetland became more sophisticated, it was not surprising that Foula folk were indignant that in some way they were expected to be deprived just because they were remote. This new expenditure meant that Foula was at last being given the chance to catch up on the other taxpayers in Shetland, long overdue. To my mind, the only anomaly was that Shetland Islands Council, with its huge revenues from North Sea Oil and developments like the massive oil terminal at Sullom Voe, must have been one of

the wealthiest local authorities in Scotland. It was, for instance, renowned for its forward-looking policies on safeguarding the future of Shetland business enterprises of the more traditional kind. These would eventually have to replace oil as the supplies became exhausted.

I suspect that Foula was always low on the Council's list of priorities. But when it came to matters of policy over the mailboat, and attempts to take this service out of the control of the islanders by basing it on the mainland, the Council found that Foula folk could make up in determination and sound argument what they lacked in numbers and resources. They were articulate and dogged in their loyalty to their island home. As I read of their battles over the years for their rights as islanders, I recalled the many earnest conversations I had had on my visits to their crofts with stalwarts like Davie Gear, Scottie Umphray of South Harrier, Bobby Isbister of South Biggins, the Ratter brothers of Broadfoot, Meggie Ratter of Punds, the Henry sisters and most especially Mima Gear at the Schoolhouse, who had passed on much of her wisdom and island logic to her son Jim. Now, as local Councillor, Jim represented the island view to the authorities across the water. On one occasion, when the future of the island-based mailboat was being challenged by Lerwick, the islanders had been prepared to send a delegation to Lerwick rather than accept decisions by unsympathetic councillors who had never made the crossing on a winter's night or been faced with a life-and-death emergency with the Aith lifeboat two hours away across a wild sea. Besides, Foula couldn't afford to lose the jobs involved.

The harbour and the pier had always been a sore point, for Ham Voe was really only an apology for a safe haven. Now, at last, long-awaited improvements had been put in place. In particular, there was a mechanical winch that allowed even a small crew to lift the boat up the slipway and protect it from the weather, especially when exposed to a South East swell. How thrilled I had been when I saw the plaque down at Ham Voe, erected at the official opening of the new conversion of the harbour facilities for the new mailboat. I found that the ceremony had been performed by none other than Niall Campbell, as an Under Secretary at the Scottish Office. Niall had been one of two Edinburgh Academy boys who had made up the party of young bird-watchers that John King and I had taken to the Isle of May in the autumn of 1955. How wonderful that he had overseen changes that reflected the common-sense attitude that it is the people who know the conditions of life on a place like Foula who should be allowed to decide what is best for their survival.

I had taken with me a slide projector and a selection of my photographs taken in the 1950s. With the help of the teacher, I prepared a poster saying that I would give an illustrated talk in the school of a nostalgic nature. We had a good turn-out and so, after the show, I was able to get a sizeable proportion of the island population into an elongated group for a photograph. I had never before attempted this on Foula, let alone achieved such a comprehensive island group. I told the few visitors who were there, entirely by chance and as complete strangers, that they should feel privileged to be part of what I thought of as a unique occasion. There were thirty people in the photograph, but when I checked them out afterwards, only half were true islanders, the rest being incomers like the teacher and her two sons, the Taylors, and the family who had taken over Broadfoot and converted it into a Weaving School as well as a family home. The Gear family dominated the scene, especially the two brothers Ken and Jim, towering literally head and shoulders above everybody else. The oldest inhabitant there was Jock Ratter, then well into his seventies and still active in his workshop at North Biggins making metalwork souvenirs for visitors to a very high standard of craftsmanship.

As we gradually got round to visiting most of the crofting area of the island, I had a mixture of reactions. Some crofts had virtually disappeared, transformed by the neglect that follows death in a community where there are so often no inheritors to take over and preserve. All too soon, sometimes in only one or two winters, windows are blown in, or a roof blown off. Once the weather gets in, the whole house is doomed by damp and decay. The shop was still there, but not in use. Gravins, where Tom and Jeannie were the last two siblings of that branch of the Umphray family, was just a rickety o' stanes. South Harrier, where Scottie had kept such a trim house and well-managed croft, was partly intact but sad and empty. North Harrier was no more; in the Hame Toun, old Robbie Isbister's black house a complete ruin; by contrast, we visited Edith Gray in her neat and much improved house at Dykes, and found her as cheerful and welcoming as ever. Well up in her seventies, she was still looking after herself, cooking and cleaning and doing all the usual chores. She still had a small flock of sheep and scythed the hay for their winter feed. Eric Isbister, then into his fifties, had an off-road four-wheeler vehicle which had transformed his life, living as he did in one of the most distant crofts from the pier, and also enabled him to offer help to the likes of Edith who was less able to fetch her supplies from either the boat or the plane. Interdependence is the key to survival in a community of widely scattered houses.

Two factors had clearly made a huge difference to the logistics of living – the installation of telephones in every house, and the arrival of motorized vehicles on the roads. The telephone had made a real change in the islanders' ability, for instance, to order goods from shops on the mainland which could then be delivered to the mailboat in Walls and had then only to be collected within the island. However, the Taylors felt, and I agreed, that within the island the old methods of communication between crofts had always seemed to be just as swift and efficient as any telephone system. It was quite unusual in the 1950s for me ever to arrive at a croft unexpected. Everybody seemed to know almost by instinct where everybody else was, and who was visiting whom, just as everybody knew exactly who had 'the cold' and so who could be welcomed in for a cup of tea and who should stay outside the house for a chat. I had always felt that the folk up at Blowburn, who had a wonderful view down the valley to Ham over a mile away, must have known the moment I came through the Mornington gate that I was on my way to deliver library books to Betty of North Harrier. She certainly always knew I was coming, and yet I never felt I was being spied on.

I daresay that to save telephone bills, the old grapevine still works pretty well without too much resort to modern technology. But the phone could be a lifesaver on a wild winter's night – except, perhaps, for the nurse for whom the telephone must have been a very mixed blessing. I often wondered whether those on the mainland used to complaining about the molly-coddled Foula folk ever had to face a long night of horizontal snow or a rain-laden gale in old age, without the comfort of a 999 call and absolutely no possibility of an ambulance, a fire-engine, a police car or even a neighbour with transport to a hospital. It's a case of self-help or no help. Recalling our visit to see Edith Gray of Dykes, and her cheerful welcome as though she hadn't a care in the world, our current emphasis on safety and security seemed part of another world, a quite different attitude to the art of living and enjoying life. Have we really gained so much by taking all the risk and challenge out of life?

Communities like Foula have now progressed away from the era of self-reliance, and living close to nature in a subsistence economy, probably beyond the point of no return. To chart the changes, I had brought with me a dozen photographic prints, taken with my old Paxette camera, of scenes or subjects liable to change. My plan was to retake these scenes from exactly the same viewpoints 39 years later, to record any significant difference. So we went

to look at the old water-mill at the southern 'Boat Harbour' and I was amazed that it was still there, basically intact except for its roof. Surprisingly, the old wooden tirl, much decayed, was still in place, but it was half buried in silt, and all signs of the old grinding floor were gone. I felt guilty that I had not made more effort to seek the preservation of such an excellent example of a technical revolution of its time. Now a telephone call and a packet of 'Porage Oats' was the quick-fix alternative, at a cost which represented a tiny fraction of the labour cost of only a hundred years ago. How quickly the struggles and triumphs of the past are forgotten and surpassed by our discovery of first coal and then oil as our means of subjecting nature to our needs. How fatal may yet be our total dependence on these finite sources as the basis of our welfare, and of the Welfare State which makes them accessible to all.

Milk is another staple food Foula folk now simply take for granted. When we crossed the valley to call on Eric and his mother Aggie Jean at South Biggins, always a well-kept house with trim outbuildings in a good state of maintenance, it was noticeable that Eric had the only cow left on the island. To our surprise, he told us that it had had its last calf seven years before but was still giving a good daily supply of milk, and he brought us a cup to drink to prove it. He was also still growing potatoes but wasn't sure if anybody else on the island still bothered. It was, like the milk, so much less work to order from the supermarket – across the water. The cow byre had always been a key part of most of the crofts where there was anybody able to manage the daily chores of milking and taking them out to the hill or fetching them in at night. Life is transformed when one can order a plastic bottle of milk on the phone in the morning and have it in the larder in the afternoon, with none of the hard work involved in caring for and feeding large animals. On the other hand, no cows means no convenient source of manure, so essential for the plantie-crub and its cabbages or the potato rigs with a crop that could last right through to spring either in the ground or under straw in the byre. As we walked round, we saw no potatoes or food crops growing anywhere, most of the plantie crubs were empty and the byres were either in ruins or in use solely as lamb-houses. I also didn't see many hens picking round the doors as they always used to. Eggs now come date-stamped in egg-boxes.

Instead the inevitable feature outside every house was a line of derelict cars, with at best one still running. A Foula winter with salt in the wind for weeks on end is a death-trap for metal standing out in the rain: vehicles soon become rusted wrecks. Of course they are nearly all in their death throes before they reach Foula. The normal pattern seemed to be that any car on the mainland which was no longer fit for its MOT test, or badly in need of a service, could be offered for a knock-down price to a Foula car-owner whose current vehicle clearly wouldn't survive another winter. So they came across on the mailboat and were craned onto the end of the pier, sold for a tenner or even just the cost of the transport. Some proved reliable enough to start with, but few lasted long before repairs became impossible or too expensive, at which point the alternative – getting another old wreck that is still running – was a far cheaper answer. This system produced a steady flow of wrecks, and even if simply to make parking room round the house for the car or cars still in service, the wrecks had to be disposed of. The temptation was obvious. Shipping out cost money and was hard work. So the old cars were usually driven or towed or pushed up to the point where the road went nearest to the cliffs – and pushed over. Abracadabra!

But sadly those interfering authorities on the mainland got to hear of this habit and the resulting pollution at the foot of the cliffs, and though it wasn't apparently strictly illegal, put out an order banning the dumping of cars over the cliffs. And that was how the Foula vehicle

graveyard arose, an area of about an acre of ground completely covered with wrecked vehicles awaiting burial – although that too was either expensive or very laborious, so that before long they were just waiting, and the pile of unwanted metal just grew and grew. Most of the current problems of our society, when they occur on remote islands, are writ large and so demand solutions. In this case, the solution appears to be a recognition that the vehicles in the pile have to be brought one at a time down to the pier and back to the mainland for proper waste disposal via the mailboat. If this costs money, maybe it will make the process by which the cars reach Foula in the first place a little less of a convenience. And perhaps Foula motorists may start to buy better cars that will survive many winters. They may even find it worthwhile to put up garages, except that the normal wooden garage would never survive a *flan*.

One evening at Leraback, the Taylors showed us a video they had taken of the worst storm of the previous winter. They took some shots out of one of their windows of a car sitting on the road near the front door, with its brakes on. It moved with every gust that hit it. In fact, it was being steadily blown away as we watched it. And then, all of a sudden, a *flan* hit it, the windscreen shattered, a sort of implosion as the pressure outside was rapidly increased, and the car simply disappeared off the screen. It was on the same night that Brian's toilets for his chalets took off and landed down by the burn in pieces, where they were still lying as we went down in the morning looking for migrant birds in the bushes at the corner below the old Post Office. I got the impression that they felt quite lucky to have survived that night with a roof still over their heads.

We were on Foula in June. Most visitors choose this cushy time of year to sample the delights of Foula weather, but we took some warm clothes knowing how changeable the wind can be in Shetland. We were rather unlucky this time as the wind had settled into a cold northerly breeze which just never let up, so we wore all the clothes we had brought all of the time. At least it was dry so most days we set out to explore part of the island. My family's natural desire was to see as much of the island's scenery as they could, while I was anxious to spend some quality time with binoculars and camera looking at parts of the island that I had never had time to visit in the busy days when I had two jobs to do. That was why I had borrowed a Hi-8 video camcorder for the purpose of improving the movie footage I had of the island with as little weight of equipment to carry as possible. I found I was almost on a voyage of discovery, especially along the heights above the West cliffs which I suppose I had only visited perhaps twice in all my time on Foula in the 1950s. In one sense I was in my element but with the same old problem, as on St Kilda, of conveying the sheer scale of the place, especially the grandeur of that massive west wall of rock which really defies description.

We spent one whole day on the west of the island, starting over the southern shoulder of Hamnafield, through the Bonxie territories where Holly was swooped at repeatedly by skuas. She began to treat this almost as a game, leaping at them as they passed, which proved her best defence as it made them swoop up over her head, and gave her the chance to anticipate their attack and not be caught unawares. It was wonderful for me to watch Holly enjoying what she loved best, running free all day in an open environment. It was a relief that she coped so well with the skuas. I remember Norie becoming quite scared of them after he had been hit several times by their more vicious attacks, when I had seen him bowled clean over by their webbed feet, complete with claws.

At one point Holly flushed a snipe off its nest and we found the young crouching by the broken eggshells where they had just hatched. We could have trodden on the nest if Holly hadn't put up the sitting bird, as the young's beautifully patterned down made them melt into the background of mosses and grasses. Further on at the cliff-top we came across a party of Eric and Jim's colourful Shetland ponies, grazing about 800ft above sea-level above the great dramatic curve of the cliff above the Scrodhordins. The name itself describes a place of sheer terror to me, like the nonsensical but highly descriptive names Lewis Carroll invented for Jaberwocky. The Scrodhordins weren't mimsy but they were vertiginous and sheer and undercut enough to cause me serious horripilation (and that one is in the Oxford dictionary!). Luckily the ponies were well used to their airy pastures, grazing peaceably within yards of that fateful edge, beloved of the puffins which always line the clifftops where they have their nesting burrows.

The exciting new feature since my last visit was the colony of gannets nesting right at the foot of the Kame, on a large stack just out from the base of the vertical wall, where I counted roughly 600 pairs. It's a superb site for them and perhaps the most surprising thing is that it has taken them so long to find it, considering that their numbers in Scottish waters have been increasing steadily over many years now, and there are huge colonies not very far north at Muckle Flugga and Hermaness in Unst. The impact of this new colony is reduced by the fact that one is looking down on it from a thousand feet up, so that the sitting birds are little white specks and even the majestic wingspan of our largest sea-bird looks insignificant from that viewpoint as they glide on the updraught in effortless flight. The sound of their continuous guttural chatter reached us as a faint murmur wafted upwards on a breeze tainted with the unforgettable smell of guano.

I was scared for Holly who I don't think really understood the danger of high cliffs. Judith did, but seemed impervious to that awful sense of vertigo, the knowledge that one step could be your last. She would even sit right on the edge, with her legs dangling over the abyss, oblivious to the tingling sensation in the pit of *my* stomach. From the trig point on the summit of the Sneug at over 1300 feet, we could see the distant grey shapes of Orkney away to the south, and the hump of Ronas Hill, Shetland's highest point, far to the north. Then we dropped down the steep slope to the North Bank, marvelling at how tiny the stacks at the north end of the island looked from the top, knowing that when we reached them, with their circling lines of white foam, they would look as formidable and indestructible as usual.

The north end of Foula, beyond Soberlie Hill and Skiordar, is all but deserted. One house, Mucklegrind, was restored by the Holbourns. There are the ruins of crofts and the signs of ancient drainage channels across the grass. The derelict skeleton of an old tractor sits on the road, its engine rusted by several winters of salt-laden winds. In the year it arrived it was a marvel of technology, a servant of incredible power, promising to save endless hours of toil in the unforgiving timetable of crofting agriculture with perhaps some new hope of leisure time never before possible. But now it sits useless and forlorn, defeated by the elements which shape island life.

There's a serenity and a sense of timelessness about the stretch of Wurr Wick, a long bay with a beach of large boulders where Black Guillemots nest among the stones or sit out on the water. Close to the shore is Ristie, the restored croft occupied by the Brathay Expedition Group every summer, a long way to trek home after a day's work on somebody's peatbank; and the ruins of Springs, showing the unmistakable stamp of real craftsmanship in building with stone. On the green grass inside the walls, where once a family made their home, a

fulmar sat on its single egg at the base of the wall. Nearby a Ringed Plover made a decorative picture, poised among the pink flowering heads of thrift on the green, close-cropped sward. The piping of oystercatchers and the harsh cries of a small colony of Arctic Terns were the music of a June evening as we turned for the long road home.

Perhaps more than anywhere else on Foula, the sense of isolation, of having all this magic wonderland of natural beauty to yourself, is the most inspiring and precious and memorable. It wasn't paradise, because that cold north wind made me hungry for Marion Taylor's supper; but it was what I had come back to find and to share with my wife and son, because no words or description can convey the peace it brings to one's soul actually to be there. To call it home, with all its pleasures and problems, is a joy of another dimension, provided one has the bodily fitness and mental stamina to face the challenge as the price of the immense satisfaction it brings.