

Shetland Place Names Project

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Eileen's interest in place-names stems from her childhood in Shetland learning local names from family members and an introduction to Scottish ethnology, through the Department of Celtic and Scottish Studies, whilst studying geography at the University of Edinburgh. She trained as an archivist and worked in Lincoln and Chester for 13 years before returning to Shetland in 2001 to establish and run the Shetland Place Names Project.

Introduction

I am delighted the conference celebrating the 60th anniversary of the School of Scottish Studies is being held in Shetland and to have the opportunity to talk about the Shetland Place Names Project. My first introduction to the School came 25 years ago when I took a course in Scottish Ethnology at Edinburgh University. Little did I know that it would eventually lead me to return to my native Shetland 10 years ago to establish the Shetland Place Names Project.

Shetland Amenity Trust is a charitable organisation dedicated to preserving, enhancing and promoting Shetland's cultural and natural heritage, with responsibility for Shetland's archaeology, biological records, architectural and environmental improvement, woodlands, Shetland Museum and Archives and the tourism organisation, Promote Shetland. In 1998 it was recognised that place-names are an important component of our cultural heritage, fitting logically within the Trust's remit. Doreen Waugh was pivotal in the establishment of the project, having originally brought forward the idea. A project plan was developed and funding secured to set up a pilot project to systematically record all available information on Shetland's place-names and establish a comprehensive database of Shetland place-names linking it to digital maps to enable users to relate the names precisely to their locations.

The project planned to build on the achievements of place-name scholars such as Jakob Jakobsen and John Stewart who dedicated years to recording and interpreting Shetland place-names. Jakob Jakobsen in the 1890s and John Stewart in the 1950s amassed vast collections of Shetland place-names which they scrutinised and interpreted in detail, culminating in Jakobsen's *The Place-Names of Shetland* and Stewart's *Shetland Place-names*. Their approach was to arrange the names by linguistic elements rather than geographically, resulting in some difficulties when relating the names precisely to their locations. Subsequently one of our key aims was to locate all recorded names on maps, augmenting their work by not only adding more place-names, but putting the names they collected and explored linguistically into their geographic context.¹

The project has stimulated a tremendous amount of interest throughout Shetland and beyond, resulting in considerable amounts of unrecorded information being brought to our attention. From a three-year Heritage Lottery Fund pilot, the Shetland Place Names Project has become one of Shetland Amenity Trust's core activities. We are pulling together all known records of place-names and adding the many oral names which are at great risk of being lost entirely. The old place-names are a particularly fragile resource in this era of digital maps and satellite navigation; our modern lifestyle means that increasingly fewer people use coastal landmarks or waypoints through the hills. Priority is given to collecting names from oral sources before those names which do not appear on maps or survive in documents die out altogether.

A vast number of names relate to fishing and crofting, with individual rigs, geos and rocks all carrying names, which were passed down between generations of people living in the same area. Additionally, names have frequently been written down, but not plotted on maps, highlighting an urgency to talk to older residents who remember them and help locate them before the information vanishes forever. The project concentrates on recording these oral names first, prior to checking documentary sources

1 Methods explored by Jakobsen, Stewart and the Shetland Place Names Project are explored in more detail in Sigurðardóttir and Smith, 2010.

and undertaking linguistic analysis. The urgent need to preserve the oral record – recognised by both Jakobsen and Stewart – is still very apparent but, sadly, some of our key informants have now died, while other, potential informants have either died or become incapacitated before being interviewed.

Recording

An excellent starting point has been working with the network of local history groups. Currently 20 groups meet mainly through the winter months, but some continue their activities throughout the year. They have been instrumental in identifying potential informants for each local community and to date we have worked directly with 14 history groups



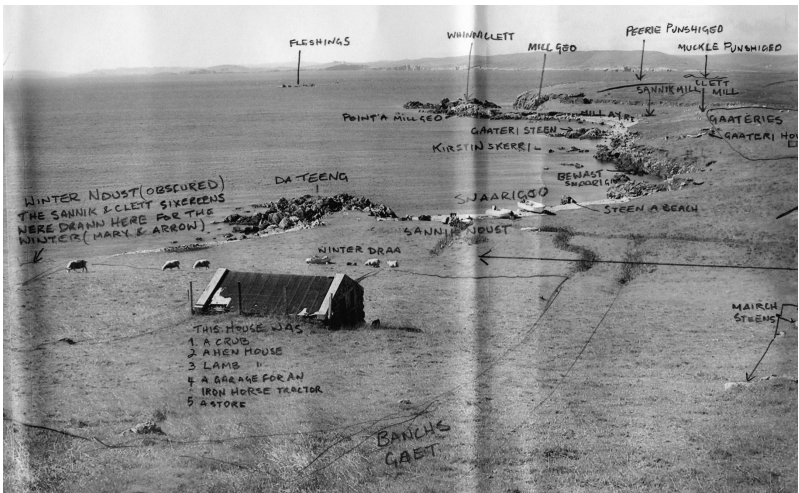
*Discussing Unst place-names with pupils from Uyeasound Primary School
(photograph Barbara Priest)*

staging recording sessions in their communities. Other key groups include the Women's Royal Voluntary Service and Care Centres where staff acted as recorders helping to note names on maps and recording sheets from day care residents. Work with primary schools has included supplying local information, maps and documents for local studies and Viking topics to supplement national curriculum resources.² Recording place-names has also formed part of EcoSchools and other school assignments.

A range of recording techniques are employed including using copy maps and recording sheets, taping and digitally recording conversations, studying old maps and aerial photographs, walking the ground and photographing sites, and extracting information from documentary sources. The photo opposite shows names from Sandwick, Whalsay annotated on a photograph. We record each place-name on a copy map or aerial photograph with a running number adding details, including a phonetic spelling, the precise geographic location and a record of any alternative names, to the recording sheet. A description of the type of feature and information about origins of the name or suggested interpretations are also noted. All known names are recorded including those for features such as rigs, tracks, outbuildings, wells, mills, noosts (places where boats are drawn up) and rocks, whether named on the map or not. Names that are mis-named or mis-positioned on the maps are also corrected. Recording conversations helps determine pronunciation and therefore spelling and yields further background information about the locality. Some locations in the field are recorded with Global Positioning Systems (GPS) whereby satellites provide a grid reference which can later link to digital maps.

Various tools act as memory triggers including Ordnance Survey (OS) maps, especially the c.1880, 1901 and 1973 editions, photographs and aerial photographs. Particularly valuable has been copies of the RCAHMS Royal Air Force post-war survey of 1944–1951. We have teamed these up with transcripts of the names collected by John Stewart in 1951 to help pinpoint individual rig, hill and coastal names.

2 Prior to my input, school children were introduced to Viking place names through a workbook page of Lincolnshire examples.



Whalsay History Group members' annotated place-names on photographs and maps

We are also extracting information from documentary and printed sources, deposited in the local museums, library and archives. It is also very important to cross-check written evidence with current local knowledge to avoid mistakes in suggested origins of names.

John Stewart Archive

The papers of John Stewart of Whalsay deposited in the Shetland Archives are one of our most useful sources.³ In 1951 Stewart, a Shetlander living and working in Aberdeen, followed the model of similar projects in western Norway and issued almost 5,000 numbered questionnaires to schoolchildren to take home to their parents and grandparents, and also to other houses in the district. The questionnaires asked respondents to record every place-name

³ SA D.27/1/1-100.

they knew, spelling the names as they said them and grouping by names on their croft, names in the hill, names at the shore and names in the sea.

The response was overwhelming. Almost 1,200 original sheets are now deposited in the Shetland Archives, some listing up to 250 names. From the record sheets, Stewart extracted lists of names for his own field notes, which he added to and amended on his annual field trips. He traced every 6 inch: 1 mile OS map for the whole of Shetland, copying all the names as they appeared on the map. These were stuck into books and gradually annotated and amended during his annual field trips. He then proceeded to compile alphabetical lists of names covering each parish; these lists are estimated to contain over 30,000 different place-names. John Stewart's detailed study of Shetland island and farm names, was published posthumously as *Shetland Place-Names* in 1987, ten years after his death. It comprises almost 4,000 names, but to his disappointment the immense volume of information amassed meant that he was unable to subject the entire collection to the detailed scrutiny he desired.⁴

In order to help make the entire collection more accessible, we are striving to pinpoint these names on maps, adding information about these and other known place-names. Transcripts of the original sheets are taken out to folk in each community to try and verify names and, more importantly, locate them on the map. It is a slow process as many of the sheets are difficult to read due to Stewart's work method. As he copied names onto his subsequent lists, he crossed them off the record sheets, often almost completely obliterating the name. The lists work in the same way as OS maps, jolting memories and resulting in sheet names being corrected and added to. They are particularly effective when used in conjunction with enlarged copies of the RCAHMS aerial photographs and we are pinpointing the exact location of many of these almost obsolete place names and succeeding in mapping more of Stewart's names.

4 In 1963 Stewart wrote: 'My place-name stuff is an immense accumulation now. The problem is to get anything published ... I would certainly be willing to publish it as a book or books. The difficulty is finding time to polish it off as I would like it.' (Stewart 1987, p. viii).

SHETLAND

COLLECTION OF PLACE-NAMES

- My house is called.....
- in the group of houses called.....
- in the village (or town) of.....
- in the parish (or island) of.....
- It had the older name of.....
- The postal address is.....

Write every name you know near your home. Spell the names as you say them; for example, Soombra, Bressa, Whalsa, Suanis, Waas, Skalawa, Rånis Hill. Put two dots where this peculiar Shetland *ð* sound occurs. Add in brackets () what each name represents, for example, Yuxie (high geo), da Valgårds (underwater skerries), Loomshun (shallow pool), Bilyinabreak (round hill). If you know any story about a name, or its meaning, or when it was given, say so. Group the names as follows:—

1. Names on your Croft.

Write down all houses, foundations (mills, skeps), yards, dykes, paths between walls (stiggles, traces), wall-gaps (slaps), gates (grinneds), brigs, wirfies, mounds (rúnies, kumbóls), stone-heaps (cairnies, roags), march-stones, quarries, punds, gerdies, quoyis, lubba, sheep-cris, rests (búls) for animals, paths (getis), ditches (staniks), burns, wells, ponds (holis, pulis, pows), springs (spys), bogs, dams (clooses), rigs, fields, parks, meadows, grass patches (blettis, toonals), strips between rigs, flat parts, steep parts, earth ridges, hollows, knowes, hools, rocks, stones, shore names, and everything that has a name.

2. Names in the Hill. (Include your scaitald, peat ground, and the parts you travel in.)

Hills (warts, vords, "fields", kames, ridges, brakes, hools, knowes), tufts (loogs), rocky parts (bergs, hamars), steep parts (byurgs, braes, broos), valleys (slaeeties, snecks, gils, skords, daals, vaas), slopes (lees), ledges, slippery parts, stony parts, flat parts, trodden parts, sheep tracks, hollows, rocks, stones, heather, green spots (blettis), mosses, pastures (hogas, scaitalds), peat ground, walls, grinneds, old ruins, mills, cruis, sheep-búls, otterhadds, hiding-holes, burns, mires, waterfalls, wading-places, pools (shuns), lochs, names at loch shores.

3. Names at the Shore. (Take these in order round the coast.)

Nesses (points, mools, taings, tongues, noops, bards, heads), shallows (spurs, fyooggs, swarfs), rocks (clietts, ledges, heelyicks, banchs, ords), holms (calfs, huggs), stacks (steens, skerries, baas, flethens, gaats), caves (halyers, gloops), cliffs, geos, voes, lagoons (hoobs), firths, bights, wicks, sounds, guts, harbours, beaches, etds, airs, nousits, piers, loading places (lodborries), wading places (vaddals), fishing places (craigstones), sand, sandbanks, links, rock bridges, saltwater holes, tide strings (roosts), stormy places, whirlpools, seaweed.

4. Names in the Sea.

Names, as given under heading 3, and names in the interior of uninhabited isles where you keep sheep or fish, cross-bearings when fishing (meeads), fishing grounds (saets, naeds, klakks, skors), shallows, sea-rocks, sea-names for landmarks which have other names on land, tide strings and roosts, sounds and channels.

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS. If born elsewhere, add the croft, hill and shore names of your birthplace, stating the exact district. These, with the names on holms and uninhabited isles, are extremely valuable. So are names heard from old people and not used now. You probably know names which no one else does. Please return this paper. Thank you for your help.

Names from your district will be published locally.

John Stewart record sheet (D.27/1/1) courtesy Shetland Museum and Archives)

Shetland Place Names Database

We established the Shetland Place Names Database which is linked to digital maps. Based on the Scottish Place-Name Database,⁵ it includes fields for linguistic, historical and geographical analysis of place-names in their environment. Possible searches include all the names for a particular area, all occurrences of a particular feature, e.g. all noosts or skerries, all names that include a specific linguistic element, e.g. all *borg-* or *kvi-* names, and all the names which include a particular word, e.g. *baa* (a sunken rock). Unlike the Scottish database, the Shetland Place Names Database precisely locates each place name with a 10-figure grid reference showing the location on maps. This is achieved through our Geographic Information System (GIS).⁶

GIS Digital Map System

The key to recording and presenting data is the use of digital mapping. The interface between the database and GIS allows place-names to be plotted on digital maps and then transferred into the database for the addition of further information such as the source, classification, informant details and pronunciation. This enables quick and accurate data entry. Digital mapping also provides a powerful means of presenting data. We can show layers of information gathered from different sources, and maps can be created based on the specific searches previously mentioned: for example, all the names for one village, all names containing the element *quoy* or *hwaes* (from ON *kvi*: a cattle enclosure), and all rigs, noosts or baas. Results appear on the Shetland map and in a table, which can be enlarged to study a specific area or individual place-name. This Otterswick example shows the quantity of names added to the 1973 edition OS map. The new names in red increase the total for this small hamlet from 30 to almost 100.

5 The Scottish Place-Name Database is based at the University of Edinburgh's Department of Celtic and Scottish Studies.

6 ESRI ArcGIS 9.

FID	NameAsDisp	Article	NGR	NGR east	NGR north
36	Baas	da	HU	5304	8519
723	Baa o Andl Geo		HU	52681	85350
726	Baa o da Groin		HU	53364	85143
895	Baas o Hog		HU	44229	31194
905	Baa o Ollingarth		HU	44674	30823
1165	Baas o Mòoin		HU	22552	47202
1170	Baa o da Voe		HU	23959	47273
2584	Baa o da Lofther	da	HU	36167	77369
2614	Baa o Glass Aye		HU	37362	77173
2650	Bonar		HU	36190	73279
3026	Flossa Baa		HP	59057	00981
3027	Fraser's Baa		HU	58309	99605
3028	Gurda Baa		HU	57804	99328
3097	Plook	da	HU	54059	89642
3194	Sandy Baa		HU	51281	91548
3215	Lackie Baa		HU	51693	90970
3269	Fuggs	da	HP	54249	05159
3293	Fringa	da	HP	54029	05398
3343	Baa o Markamut		HU	53577	92415
3541	Transa Baa		HU	67357	70964
3563	Bjarga Baas		HU	67462	72292
3654	Baa o Gunnister		HU	29834	74036
3942	Clavie Baas	da	HU	24910	78411
3952	Vallins Baa	da	HU	23881	77418
3955	Bruckleens Baa	da	HU	23148	77275
3991	Cod Baa	da	HU	21398	76613
4008	Dale Baa	da	HU	20953	77370
4032	Dale Baas		HU	22729	80440
4062	Villans Baa		HU	23623	81777

GIS search for baas (© and database right Crown copyright and Landmark Information Group Ltd (All rights reserved) Licence no NG00228)

There is immense scope for presenting and using the data. The base map can be linked to the detailed database and there is potential to link in old maps, aerial and site photographs, archive and printed source material and sound recordings. When new names are incorporated, a map is generated and taken back to the informants for checking the names and locations; any necessary amendments and additions are subsequently made to the database.

Fishing Meids

A parallel project has recorded Shetland's fishing meids in conjunction with the Trust's Shetland Biological Records Centre. Before the advent of navigation with radar and GPS, fishing grounds around Shetland were

located by taking the transect of two meids – each meid involves lining up two landmarks. Meids are significant both biologically and historically. In biological terms they are used to locate fishing grounds that yielded particular species of fish. Historically, many of the meid names are at risk of being lost; many features which cannot be seen from land are recorded from the sea and many place names having an alternative name in fishing terms, either a descriptive name (how it appears from the sea) or a taboo name (due to the superstition of not using certain words when in a boat).

We interviewed 16 retired fishermen to collect information on meids and the fishing grounds that they were used to locate. Information was gathered on place-names relating to meids and the wider coastline, and we amassed an oral history relating to the contemporary environment, fishing and culture. This yielded a detailed history of the halibut line, haddock line and seine net fishery with descriptions of the grounds, details of place-names and notable words and phrases.

Some place-names are forgotten on land, but preserved in meids. *Houlastongas* was the fishermen's name for the sound between the Holm o Skaw and Whalsay (from ON *holm* m. 'a holm' and ON *stong* f. 'a pole').⁷ *Burgidale* was an old name for the valley between Sumburgh Head and Mid Head, named after the fort once situated at Sumburgh Head (from ON *borg* f. 'fort' and *dalr* m. 'a dale, valley'). Today any structures seem to have been obliterated when the building of Sumburgh lighthouse commenced in 1819 and the name is now only preserved in the meid *Water in Burgidale* – seen from 13 miles east, the valley dips below the horizon giving the appearance of water in the dale.

From the recordings, transcripts were made and reports compiled covering each type of fishery and ground. Additionally, a database and GIS system allows us to plot the landmarks and grounds and linking it to the Place Names Database. The transcripts of the men's stories have been used to produce a book; *Water in Burgidale* by Charlie Simpson was

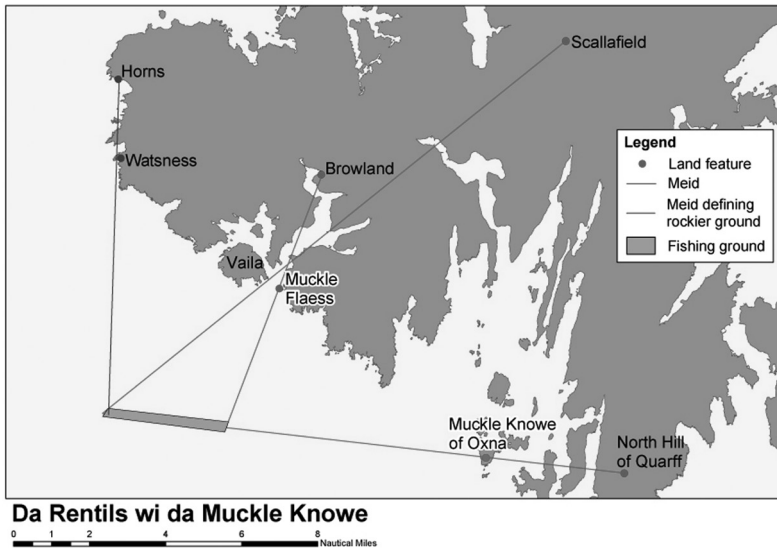
7 Jakobsen (1993, p. 104) notes that 'In Norway "Stang" (Eng. pole) occurs as a name of isles and peninsulas, and commonly as the name of a headland, in the compound "Stanges". – Shetla. *Stonger-holm* [*stångørom*], the name of a holm off Nesting.'

published in August 2010 and gives a detailed insight into the days of fishing before the use of navigational aids.

Conclusion

The future of the project looks really healthy. Our next major challenge is to make the maps and database more universally accessible through the internet. This will of course take time and money, but it will be pleasing to feel that we are using the latest technology to tell the whole story of what is going on in the landscape.

In over a hundred years of recording Shetland place-names, the importance of collecting place-names from oral sources has not diminished. Both Jakobsen in the 1890s and Stewart in the 1950s amassed vast collections of place-names by travelling throughout Shetland and talking to local residents. Jakobsen was gathering Shetland place-names



Meids map of Da Rentils wi da Muckle Knowe fishing ground

over a century ago at a time when there was little comparative work, but he employed the same basic techniques we use today – travelling around the isles talking to local folk about their way of life and local community. Fifty years later, in an era when the photocopier had just been invented but was not universally available, John Stewart chose to employ the method used in western Norway, sending questionnaires home with school children. Like Jakobsen he also travelled through Shetland talking to folk and verifying names. His achievements were immense, particularly in light of the fact that he was conducting all this work in his spare time and laboriously traced the OS maps rather than avail himself to the original maps, which might have been available through links established at the First Viking Congress held in Lerwick in 1950.

Today for the Shetland Place Names Project, the starting point remains the oral interview, but modern technology helps us collect and present Shetland place-names. Photocopied maps and aerial photographs and recording sheets are used, together with high quality digital recording equipment to capture local pronunciation and stories about the origin of names. Cameras and video cameras allow sites to be visually recorded, and GPS machines help pinpoint exact grid references in the field. Computer technology has enabled the development of a high quality detailed database to store the information and digital mapping ensures the accurate pinpointing of individual names, allowing the data to be presented in different ways to a range of potential users. Information can be shared worldwide through use of the internet. Taking forward Jakobsen and Stewart's legacy, the Shetland Place Names Project is putting the names they collected and explored linguistically into their geographic context. The base map is linked to a detailed database with potential to link in old maps, aerial photos, site photos and sound recordings.

Not only are we charged with the important task of locating Shetland's place-names, but modern technology dictates our goal of making the information available to all interested parties worldwide and broadening the scope for future researchers, be it the local resident, the school child, the local historian, the official charged with producing maps or road signs, the historical geographer, the geologist, the archaeologist or the linguist.