

## 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Toast to The Auld Rock & The Shetland Society of Wellington

President Andrew, members of the Shetland Society of Wellington Management Committee, Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening:

First of all, to the Management Committee thank you for according me the privilege of proposing a toast to The Auld Rock and the Shetland Society of Wellington. It's an honour that I accepted with some reluctance, as I knew that Rose and I would only be returning from overseas three nights before tonight's celebration. I trust you'll forgive me if I seem a little jet-lagged.

However, as your Past President, I'll be very mindful of the words of a previous Past President, my older sister Mary, who always gave me the same piece of advice . and it didn't matter what the occasion was - Mary would always say %how, dunna spaek ower lang#! Now that didn't do anything to help my nerves, but nevertheless I'll do as I always did Mary, %an joost do as I qm been telt!+

It's a great cause for celebration when anyone, or any organisation for that matter, reaches their 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. But we are not celebrating our 90<sup>th</sup> birthday tonight, but the 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of our incorporation . and there is a great difference. We know that the society did not suddenly come into being overnight, but grew as early Shetland emigrants wanted to offer new arrivals from %the Auld Rock+their friendship, as well as assistance and support as they settled into their new country. We know that as far back as 1906 visiting Shetlanders could find a welcome in various homes in Wellington.

In fact, shortly after %Ships off the Auld Rock+was published in 1997, I received a rather curt letter from a gentleman in Johnsonville, who felt that our historians had not researched the early years thoroughly enough, and was adamant that meetings had taken place much earlier than 1922.

I could only emphasize that their research had indeed been very thorough but there was very little documentary evidence to tell us about the meetings and functions that had undoubtedly been held prior to 1922. Indeed what had happened between 1922 and 1928 could only be gleaned from personal memories and the odd article as the first minute book covering that period was, and still is, missing.

What we do know is that The Shetland Times recorded that %a largely attended meeting was held in St Hilda's Hall, Island Bay on Friday evening 4th August (1922). It was unanimously decided to form a society to be known as the Shetland Society of Wellingtonō +

Office bearers were elected and the article included a statement %hat the Society would endeavour to assist, as far as possible, arrivals from the Old Rock+. This followed what was regarded as the first meeting of the Society, which was held in the old Brooklyn Hall in July 1922 where, and I quote %over 150 Shetlanders and descendants of early settlers gathered for an enormously successful social evening+.

There is no doubt in my mind that Shetlanders arriving in Wellington were well and truly welcomed, regardless of whether they were new settlers or Shetland seamen on ships visiting Wellington. It must have been overwhelming for the new migrants . arriving in a growing city in a strange country, after the very small settlements that most of them would have left behind in Shetland.

The support that the Society offered would have been very welcome indeed. Functions were well attended in those early years, and the early Committees must have worked very hard given

the amount of entertainment and support they provided then. The photo of a picnic, thought to have been taken in 1923, shows over 300 people, all dressed in their finery . including bonnets and bowler hats - enjoying a day out at Maidstone Park in Upper Hutt.

Other significant celebrations included what was probably the first *Helly Aa* to be held outside of Shetland. Complete with a small galley, this celebration took place in 1928 in the New Century Hall. Later that year, in December 1928 another momentous occasion for the Society was the visit by Sir William Watson Cheyne, Lord Lieutenant of Orkney and Shetland. Again, more than 300 guests gathered for a reception that included the presentation of an illuminated address of welcome inscribed both in English and Maori. The opportunity to share with others their Shetland heritage meant that the links with the Auld Rock remained very strong.

Those early stalwarts, including the Jeromsons, Taits, Reids, Laurensens, Isbisters, and in particular the Society's first President, Daniel Moar, who later stepped in to take over when it looked likely that the Society was about to fold in the late 1930s, all played a huge role in promoting their links with Shetland and Shetland culture. It's very gratifying to know that some of their descendants are here tonight.

The Society has had its ups and downs, and after the near collapse at the end of the thirties, and the trials of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, the Society once again surged forward in the fifties and early 60s. By now, all our family were involved in the Shetland Society, and enjoyed the support of regular dances and socials, where our Shetland dialect and ways were not just understood, but welcomed.

Prominent at this time were the Stewarts, Moncrieffs, Smiths, McLennans, and especially the Arcus. J L Arcus had been the instigator in proposing the idea of a *Hamefarin* to the Auld Rock. The officials in Shetland took up the idea, and the first *Hamefarin* was held in 1960, and indeed there is at least one person here tonight whose parents went on that trip.

The links to Shetland were reinforced immediately and further strengthened by the subsequent *Hamefarins* and *Reverse Hamefarins*. The Society has always been involved in promoting *Hamefarins* and organising groups of those who wished to travel. Even more members were involved in welcoming the *Reverse Hamefarers*, which were instrumental in encouraging the formation of other Shetland societies around New Zealand.

The performance of the *Can Can* by John Christie, John Coutts, Mackie Coutts, Alastair MacKay and John Smith, at the Society's 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 1962 must go down as one of the most original tributes to *Hule* and the Auld Rock. Also performed in 1962 was the play *The Hamefarer's Return*, written by Greta Leask and my sister Freda, which very humorously cleverly highlighted the differences in language and the way of life for those visiting Shetland for the first time. The early sixties was a time of intense activity for the Society, with regular dances, as well as other functions such as the picnics, *Hallowe'en* and Christmas parties and an annual concert.

By the end of the decade, though, general apathy and a lack of support had started to set in and it took an idea proposed by Jimmy Irvine to raise funds for charity to jolt the Society out of this somewhat apathetic attitude. He proposed that members of the Society build a galley, which would then be placed on display around various shopping malls in the Wellington region. This resulted in a hugely increased awareness of Shetland and Shetland culture.

With a very colourful squad of Vikings in attendance, along with knitting demonstrations and displays about Shetland, enthusiasm ran very high. The celebrations culminated in a Viking Ball, which was a huge success, and as we know, continues to this day. Yet again, links with the Auld Rock were immediately reinforced.

By this time, the discovery of North Sea oil, and the resulting boom in the Shetland economy, meant that very few Shetlanders were looking to migrate. Therefore the aim of assisting new arrivals from Shetland no longer became a valid focus for the Society.

With the enthusiasm, and the increased public awareness resulting from the Viking Ball, more emphasis was now being placed on education and the preservation of Shetland culture in New Zealand. With the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary beckoning, plans for its celebration started in the early 1990s with a special history committee researching the Society's activities.

After considering all sorts of ideas, it was decided to go ahead with a publication of the Society's history. The end result, *Chips off the Auld Rock*, was written by professional historians, Susan & Graham Butterworth, who are here with us tonight. *How lovely to see you, Susan and Graham*". The associated Shetland Week activities resulted in a celebration of our Shetland heritage and culture in a way that I doubt we will ever see again. With support from Helen Clark, then Leader of the Opposition, Mark Blumsky, then Mayor of Wellington, and the presence of Lewis Shand Smith, then Convenor of the Shetland Islands Council, we received publicity that touched thousands of Shetland descendants, many of whom never knew that a society such as ours existed.

A parliamentary reception and a fire festival around Frank Kitts lagoon started the festivities, followed by our Anniversary Dinner at the Michael Fowler Centre; museum displays; workshops on genealogy; various musical performances, notably Shetland's Young Heritage Fiddlers, including one with New Zealand's National Youth Choir; displays of our Shetland heritage, including a stunning photographic exhibition by Max Bruce; an education pack for primary and intermediate schools, with a resulting display of their work; to the finale foy at the end, it was an anniversary celebration par excellence! The scale of our activities made a huge impact both here in New Zealand and in Shetland, again strengthening our ties with the Auld Rock.

There are many of you here tonight that were so very much involved in our Shetland Week activities, that I would not dare to try and mention you all individually in case I inadvertently missed someone out. remember I am jetlagged! But I am sure you will agree that the stimulus of Shetland Week propelled us right into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our Viking Ball has been the flagship of our Viking heritage for over 40 years now, and our newsletter continues to keep in touch with our members all around New Zealand.

The Society's Shetland library is providing information for those wishing to find out more about their Shetland heritage and culture, and practical help is there for those wishing to research their family history. With our own website we have an excellent presence on the internet, and between Google and Wikipedia, anyone with a computer can look up anything these days.

But an electronic link can't give you the atmosphere, the simmer dim, listening to the soft Shetland accent, the fiddle music and the dancing. The magic of finding people who know who your forebears were, and are very happy to entertain you with stories, and tea and homebakes. It gives you a feeling of belonging that a computer can't begin to hint at.

No video, DVD, or u-tube can possibly compete with the excitement of standing, actually watching the Up Helly Aa procession in the depths of a Shetland winter, and then being part of the accompanying fun until breakfast the following day. With air travel becoming more and more accessible, more and more people are finding out for themselves the meaning of our ties to the Auld Rock. Almost without exception they are captivated by their experience, and then they truly understand why tonight I am so proud to make this toast:

Please charge your glasses and join me in a toast to the Auld Rock and the Shetland Society of Wellington.