

SHETLAND IN THE SEVENTIES: A SHETLANDER'S VIEW OF OIL

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Dr. Johnson once said that 'A woman preaching is like a dog walking on its hinder legs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all.' Dr. Johnson's aphorism may have some relevance to Shetland in the seventies, and to the attempt of Shetlanders to contain and limit the effects of North Sea Oil. Time has yet to show whether it will be done well. It is surprising that it was tried at all. To have suggested in the depressed, unemployed, depopulated Shetland of fifteen or so years ago that there was any response to potential industry other than an open welcome would have been heresy. And yet it happened. Why?

There are many strands to the story. Possibly first, the economic revival of Shetland. This meant that when the first signs of the advent of off-shore oil became apparent, Shetlanders were not desperate for the work the new industry had to offer. Indeed the reverse was the case. Shetland County Council had had to embark on a crash programme of housing for incoming workers to meet the needs of our native industries.

The regeneration of the Shetland economy arose from several factors, not least of these the creation of the Highlands and Islands Development Board. Now there was available the financial pump primer for island enterprise, geared to island needs. This meant that the small business, the basis often of an outlying island community, could have the cash it needed at the time it was needed.

The nadir of Shetland's post-war history was in the period 1955 to 1960. The population figures concealed, or at least did not reveal, a greater deprivation. Some hundreds of men, all young and in their prime, whilst ostensibly in Shetland, were overseas in the Merchant Service or at the South Atlantic whaling. The social effects of this continued absence were hard to estimate. The man needed to draw water from the well on a harsh winter's day was thousands of miles away. So too was he when there was a call for an additional couple on the dance floor. The sight of two girls dancing together was all too common.

From the depths of what was almost a well of despair arose an awareness that only by the generation of new attitudes could our island situation be reversed. The abilities and energies of many outside local government were harnessed partly by the creation of the Shetland Council of Social Service. This body had as its part-time secretary, Shetland County Council's Development Officer, one of the first of these in Scotland to be appointed. He was Bob Storey, now with the Highland Board.

By identification of problems, by study of solutions, by highlighting these to government and quasi-government agencies, limited progress was made. The main progress was in contingency planning. As the creation of the Highland

Board drew near, it was the avowed intention of those involved to make sure that there were projects on the drawing board, needing only the Board's financial resources for their animation. Between Council of Social Service and County Development Office there was a staff of five, poised and ready. It is well known that Shetland had more than its share of the grants and loans from the Board in its early years.

What were the effects of the livelier economy? One was a general growth of confidence — if one worked hard, success was likely. The Shetlanders released by the end of the Antarctic Whaling were absorbed in the local scene. So too were young Shetlanders, both of academic quality and achievement. There were other fields of Shetland activity that provided the natives with reserves either of resource or experience when the challenge came. The Wheatley Commission gave point to a debate which is of lively importance to Shetland. What is our relationship with the rest of the U.K.? One cardinal feature is our island isolation — to have tied Shetland in with the Highland Region would have spelt disaster in our present situation. And yet the regionalists, the compartmenters, had their successes: much power shifted from Shetland without much evidence of greater efficiency — Police, National Fire Service, the Sheriffdom, the Water Service. I am always proud to think that Shetland County Council washed its hands, committee-fashion if not literally, of this last nonsense — and refused to send a member to the meetings of the Water Board. Eventually, the Wheatley Report came out, with a minority of three recommending all purpose status. The Conservative government accepted this minority report in its legislation and on 15th May 1975, Shetland Islands Council took over.

What did Shetland gain from this long tale of resistance to incorporation in the political structure of Scotland? I would suggest much.

1. By concentration of public, councillors, and officials on the study of our affairs, we discovered practical support for our intuitive feeling as islanders. We became aware earlier than most of the element of the 'nation state' that goes into the region concept.

2. Political power in this country lies at Westminster. For any part of the U.K. to pursue policies which are acceptable, the general support of the people of the U.K. is needed. For reasons of the Wheatley exercise, and others I shall refer to later, we began in Shetland to understand the power of the media — press, radio and T.V. — and to develop some ability at least in this form of communication. To revert to the 'nation state' concept, we realized that a Foreign Office was just as necessary as a Home Office. We also became aware that distance from London is no fetter in contacting the B.B.C.

In two fields we had gained experience of defining our special island problems, and of projecting them. Since 1966 there have been a Seamen's strike and two Dockers' strikes. We here in the north were in no doubt of our island isolation, or of the unitary nature of our life. In addition there was our running fight with the Scottish Office as to whether we should contribute from our own rates to relieve freight costs to Shetland, using the Transport Act of 1968. Once again, we did not take the easy way out.

In 1962 Shetland County Council sent a group of people to Faroe to find out

what lessons there were for us, and the Faroe Report was published. Once again the lesson was many sided, but foremost amongst the Faroese strengths were autonomy, and a sense of identity. To quote from the final item in the factors leading to Faroese success — ‘The vigour, initiative and independent spirit of the Faroese people’.

Whence could come a sense of identity? It is easily found by anyone residing in an island community. The sea is our boundary, our moat, enclosing, — some would say — imprisoning us all. Like it or not, in an island situation, we are all part one of another. Geography and climate make it so.

But what of history? This also is part of the cement of our island society. Whilst our Norse ancestry is not a fetish with us, as Shetlanders we are aware of it. And each day the native Shetlander uses his dialect in greater or lesser degree. It is a second tongue in which he can share nuances and delights difficult for the non-Shetlander to comprehend. The regular quarterly appearance of *The New Shetlander* has done much to give continuity to dialect use. Through its pages Shetland poets have been able to voice our aspirations, our loves, our fears, in a medium grown from Shetland’s history.

These, then, were the elements that conspired together to make Shetland look the gift horse of North Sea Oil in the mouth:-

1. An island situation which enabled opinion to coalesce and be identified.
2. A thriving economy — now, alas, showing signs of strain.
3. An experience of studying many aspects of island life and evolving a positive solution.
4. An awareness of the importance of communication of ideas, both internally and externally, and as important, considerable practical experience.
5. A realization that from our isolation and our history, reinforced to some degree by our dialect, we had a society sufficiently distinctive to try to retain.
6. From all the foregoing, a confidence that if we were determined enough, we would be able to influence the progress of our affairs.

The alchemy of the moment demanded something else — a man. And Shetland was fortunate beyond belief. Coinciding with the advent of exploration activity in North Sea Oil was the appointment of Mr. Ian R. Clark as County Clerk and General Manager. Shetland was, in fact, the first County Council in Scotland to make such an appointment. Mr. Clark was young, barely 30, and had been here some years as County Treasurer. He was a rare bird, he had come to local government comparatively late in his short life, having had commercial experience in his early days. As a result, he was peculiarly well accoutred in two disciplines and had the feel of the minds both of the commercial and the central government worlds. Astute, patient, and incredibly hard-working, he has been a rock over which the waters have broken in vain. He has had the proud experience of advising Shetland County Council in the evolving of its strategy; of distilling from this the terms of the Shetland Bill; conferring interminably with Parliamentary Agents, M.P.s and Civil Servants; and maybe most wearing of all, giving evidence for almost two weeks before a Parliamentary Enquiry. At the end he has seen the appearance of the Bill on the Statute Book. Shetland will be forever in his debt. [Mr. Clark resigned in 1976 to become Executive Director of the new British National Oil Corporation. — Ed.]

From the start, Shetlanders by and large have felt there was little point in adopting a Luddite stance to reject all oil activity. North Sea Oil is so obviously of paramount importance in the national interest. Our aim instead should be to contain and limit the ill effects of industrialisation.

The County Council's general policy was plainly and simply set down under 4 heads:-

1. To keep abreast of developments.
2. To influence developments for the good of Shetland.
3. To provide the Council with safeguards so that the basic interests of the Shetland Community are protected.
4. To provide the facilities and services which are necessary to ensure that the economy and the community adjust to changing circumstances with the minimum distress or inconvenience.

It is interesting to recall that the word 'safeguard' only appeared after a keenly fought debate as to whether the word 'sanction' was the more suitable. 'Sanction', although stronger, was finally rejected because it was felt to be more emotive.

The Council's aims were wide ranging and I do not propose to go into them here — that we should limit the area involved, that we should acquire the ability to control or at least influence effectively day to day operations, that a reserve fund should be built up for the day when all was past. We soon realized and accepted that none of what we needed was possible without ownership of the land.

The document in which our purpose was set out was the Interim Development Plan, required under the terms of the 1947 Town and County Planning Act. Shetland had never had a plan — never felt it needed one. And now, belatedly, under the pressure of events, one had to be produced. The Secretary of State for Scotland intimated his acceptance of the plan, subject only to reservations on areas of great landscape value. Some quotations from the Preamble to this document serve to reinforce much of what I spoke of earlier:-

The County Council feels it appropriate to set forth the characteristics of present island society and that an attempt should be made to identify the qualities of Shetland life of which many Shetlanders are only intuitively aware. The County Council believes that in so doing it will help the assimilation and happy settlement of the relatively large influx of people, who will have to make their homes in Shetland.

Life in Shetland has been affected by various factors:

1. The integration — the homogeneity — imposed by the sea boundary. The high proportion of the population born and bred in Shetland. Only a small changing population.
2. The small size of the population — broken into small communities.
3. Difficulties in communications.

Characteristics emerging from these have been:

- a. Communities where the individual feels he matters, has a sense of belonging.
- b. Strong family ties.

c. A tolerance through not having been exposed to or confronted by strong social pressures.

d. An absence of serious crime — little parental fear for the safety of young ones.

e. Religious tolerance.

f. The realisation that the continuance of a native dialect affords an enriched means of communication.

This Interim Development Plan is by nature a planning instrument, having to do with the physical and material. It is fit and proper that Zetland County Council should highlight the human background against which it proceeds to meet what is probably the greatest challenge and opportunity in its history.

In the history of these past five years or so, Shetland owes much to many — its officials, councillors, voluntary bodies, public-minded individuals, Highland Board, Scottish Universities, government officials. The tale is long and I cannot list them all. We are becoming aware more and more that each year is part of a long and wearying journey. We will not always speak with one voice as the conflict emerges from time to time between the entrepreneur on the one hand and the conservationist on the other. Shetland will need them both.

There is a poem by Robert Rendall, our neighbour Orcadian, which encapsulates what many Shetlanders feel. It is the *Cragman's Widow* who speaks of her dead husband:-

'It's six year past come Lammas
Sin he gude afore da face,
An nane but an auld dune wife
Was left to wirk da place.

Yet da sun shines doon on a'thing,
Da links are bonnie an green.
An da sea keeps ebbin an flowan,
As tho' it hid niver been.'

An approach I have to our present situation in Shetland may be useful. Let us ascribe to the pre-North Sea Oil Shetland society a value of say 100 points. Let us not try to define the nature of these points. Intensive, rapid industrialisation inevitably results in a drop in the values of a society. A drop, a glissando, to say 20 or 30 points, would be disastrous. If by awareness, forward planning, and positive action, we in Shetland can halt the drop in values at 60 or 70 points, Shetland will be immeasurably better off. The challenge is before us, new and old Shetlanders alike. Should we be able to meet the formidable march of events, the last word may yet be with Robert Rendall's *Cragman's Widow*:-

'Yet da sun shines doon on a'thing,
Da links are bonnie an green.
An da sea keeps ebbin an flowan,
As tho' it hid niver been.'