

PART II

SHETLAND BOATS AND THEIR ORIGINS

T. Henderson

Some fifteen or twenty years ago it was quite usual for an occasional controversy to strike up in the local press as to the origins of our Shetland race. Somebody would rashly suggest that Shetlanders were Scottish. Immediately another correspondent would arise in wrath to prove that this was nothing short of libellous, that we were a purely Nordic race, and that all we ever got from Scotland was 'dear oatmeal and greedy ministers'.

So off it went and to the non-participant the argument could be quite amusing. There was never any compromise between the two sides. One would have us sprung straight from the line of Torf Einar and Ganger Rolf; the other would have it that all Norse influence and blood vanished centuries ago and we were as Scottish as William Wallace. After a week or two of fuss and fury the editor of the paper concerned would interpose a firm line that 'This correspondence is now closed', and that would be the end of it for the time being.

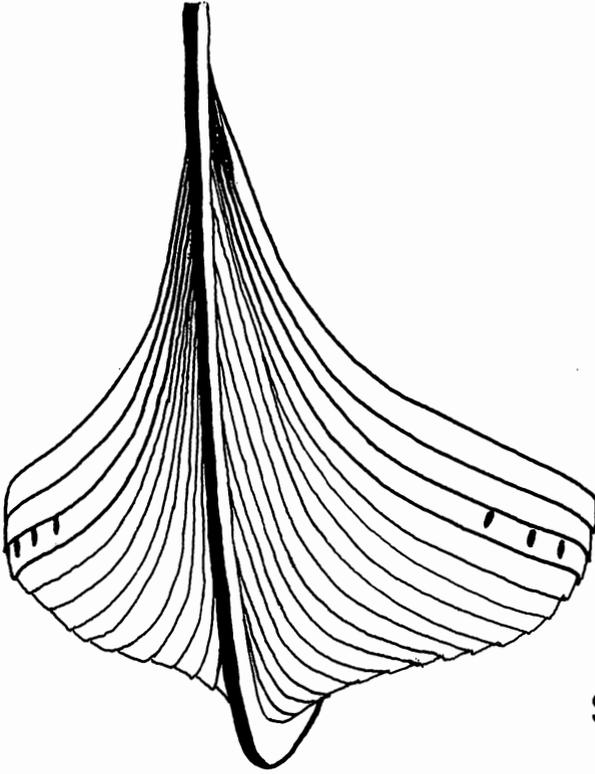
Very harmless all this, but also quite foolish. There is no truly native Shetlander today who can say that he is of purely Norse stock, nor is there any native Shetlander who can claim to be wholly Scottish. The basic strain is certainly predominantly Norse but there is a strong Scots leavening. It does not really matter. We are what we are: Shetlanders — and, I might add, fiercely proud of it!

What was unbalanced and completely wrong in those absurd little paper duels was the argument that nothing Norse has survived in the Shetland way of life. Any person who has studied the background must realise that up to two generations ago, life in rural Shetland was far more closely akin to peasant life in Norway than to that of any area in Britain, even and including our neighbouring islands of Orkney. The seasonal cycle from *voar* to *hairst*, the activities of the dark days of winter, the implements we used, even the *springs* our fiddlers played — you could find all these around the fjords and in the upland *seters* of Western Norway.

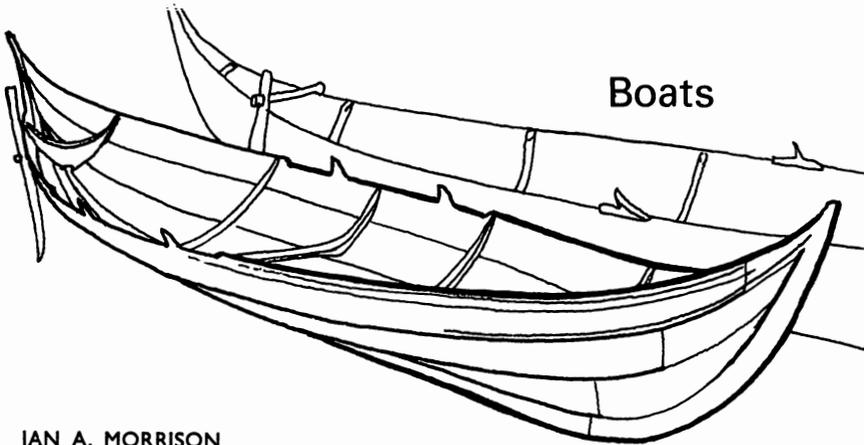
I encountered a striking example of this in 1969 at the time of the Congress to mark the quincentenary of Scottish rule in Shetland. We planned an exhibition in the museum of Shetland crofting, household, and seafaring artifacts along with similar objects borrowed from Norwegian museums. In one respect the show was a success; in another it was more than a little confusing, for unless one carefully read the attached labels it was hard to distinguish the native Shetland object from its Norwegian counterpart.

And if this is true of the implements and artifacts of house and croft, it is equally and even more true of Shetland boats and their gear.

GOKSTAD



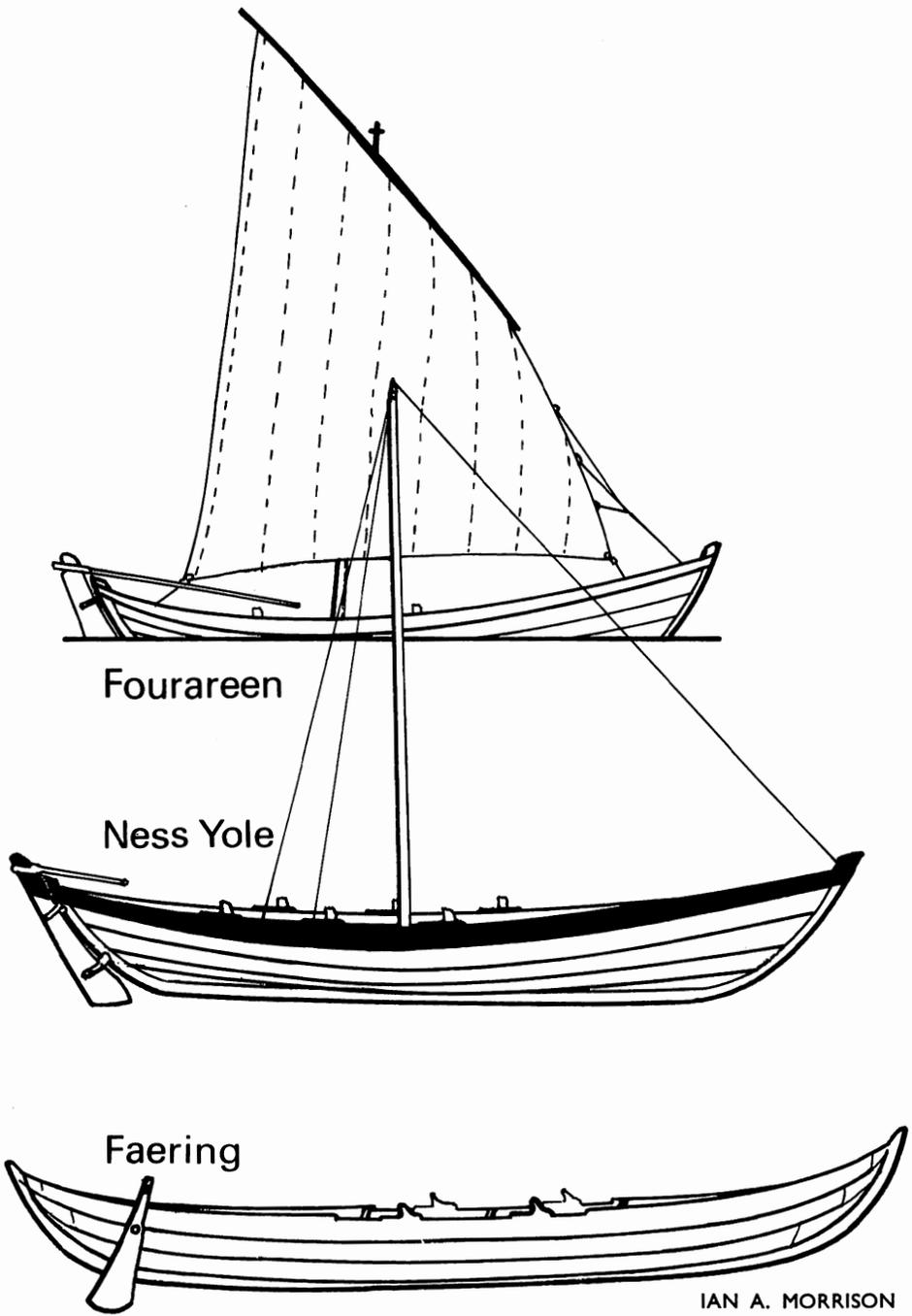
Ship



Boats

IAN A. MORRISON

Fig. 6.1. — The 9th century Gokstad ship, excavated in southern Norway in 1890, is thought to have been an all-purpose ocean-going ship. Two smaller boats found with her, for two or three men, probably resemble small fishing boats of the period.



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Fig. 6.2. - 'Scandinavian' small boats - Shetland *fourareen/fourern* and *Ness Yole*; Gokstad *faering*.

It must be between twelve and thirteen hundred years since the first Norse long-ship came stealing into a Shetland voe. Long, narrow and rakish, clinker-built of thin planks overlapping each other, her high horns embellished with dragon carvings, that craft was strangely different to anything which had previously sailed the Shetland seas. Whatever inhabitants were here — whether the population was numerous or, as seems probable, thinly scattered — their boats would have been of the coracle type, skin-clad over a light wooden frame, as different from the stranger as is the Irish *curragh* of the present day from my native *Ness yole*.

That was the beginning. Soon, as Viking raids intensified on Lindisfarne and Jarrow and Iona, and up and down the mainland coasts of Britain, Shetland became a convenient staging-post on the Viking Path, a rovers' hold set in the far West Sea. But the Norseman, as we are too prone to forget, was more than a mere seeker after loot. He was also a colonist of no mean order. With a burgeoning population in his native land he was land hungry. It was not long before Norse emigrants were settling here in these isles which, even topographically, have so much in common with the isles and shores of Western Norway.

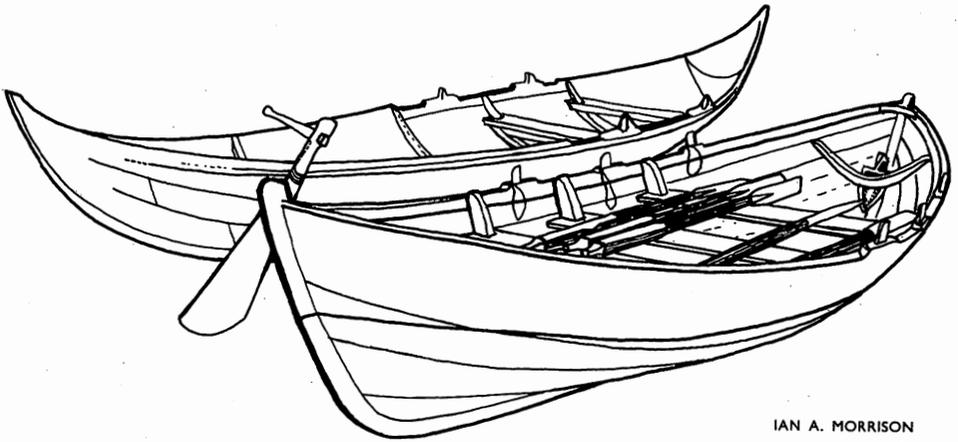
Our knowledge of the ships of the Vikings owes everything to the custom of those pagan people of burying a chieftain in his ship. A very suitable coffin, one would think, for some fierce old sea warrior when his roving days were done. The upper drawing [Fig. 6.1.] shows one vessel preserved this way. This is the Gokstad ship, and whether she ever came to Shetland is an intriguing thought. She may well have done, for though smaller than some others we know of, she is an ocean-going vessel, and it was in just such ships that many a Viking cruise was made.

That this ship was an able and seaworthy vessel, fit to sail to Vinland itself, was amply proved when, in 1893, Captain Magnus Andersen sailed an exact replica of the Gokstad ship across the Atlantic to the Chicago World Fair. Captain Andersen has since written that he started his voyage with certain qualms, but completed it full of admiration for his ship's behaviour in Western Ocean conditions.

The lower drawing [Fig.6.1] shows two of the small boats found with the Gokstad ship. These are more relevant to my theme than the full-scale parent ships. Here are direct ancestors of our Shetland boats of to-day. There is only one very marked difference: these boats have very high *horns* and the planking is carried up along the horn to a high peak at each end. Notice some of the detail here: the places where the for'ard oars and fore thwart were set are uncommonly far aft from the stem, a shrewd touch which gives the boat a large empty fore-room and adds greatly to the buoyancy when driving into a head sea (see Morrison 1978. below). Notice also the light timbers used in her construction and the curious crooked frame. This is still the way a Shetland boat is framed.

The little Gokstad *faering* is shown again [Fig. 6.2; 6.3] and above/adjacent appears a *Ness yole* from Shetland, an example of one of the oldest boat types still in use round the coasts of Britain. I think you must agree that her ancestry is apparent in every line.

Fig. 6.3. — Gokstad faering and Shetland Ness Yole.



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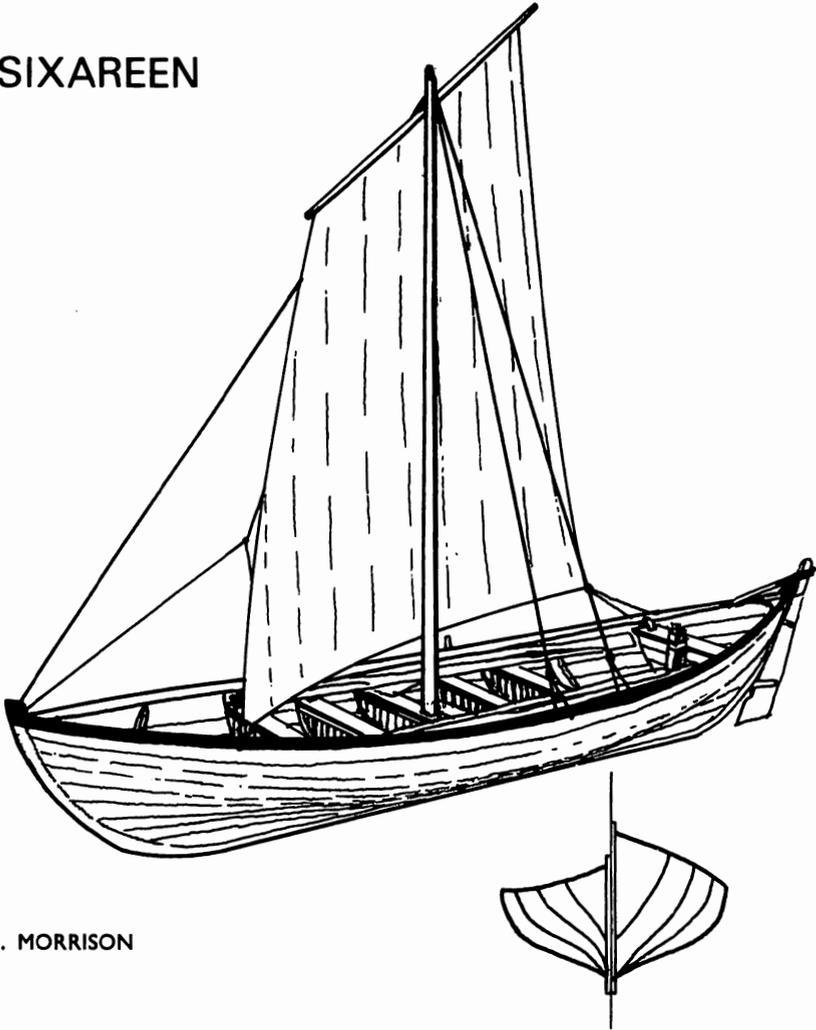
Ness is an abbreviation for Dunrossness. Only in that district and in the Fair Isle have *yoles* continued to be built and used. This was where the main fishing areas long continued to be inshore, mainly for saithe in the turbulent *rausts* or tideways. For all her slender appearance, no boat of her size can compete with the *yole* in tidal or broken water.

Not only is the *Ness yole* of ancient lineage, she must also be one of the most conservative craft in the world in her hull lines and measurements. These measurements are inflexible: 15ft. of keel, 22.5ft. overall, 5.5ft. beam and 21in. inside depth amidships. It is puzzling why this formula should be so strictly adhered to. Almost, one would think, in some ancient day, the boat's proportions having reached a point of perfection in the opinion of those who used her, any deviation from those proportions would spoil her. My father owned a very fine boat when I was a boy, the JEANNIE, built by one of the most noted *yole*-builders in Dunrossness. She was a *yole* in every respect but one. The old men of my youth acknowledged her beauty and sea-kindliness, they even admitted that she was perhaps the finest boat that builder had ever turned out. But, alas, she was not a *yole*. The reason? She was 15.5ft. of keel, 6in. too long.

For centuries these boats were mainly built in Norway, constructed with a temporary fastening of wooden pegs. When completed the wooden fastening was cut and the boat shipped as a mere bundle of planks and frames, what was called the *skow* of a boat. She was re-assembled in Shetland, clinched up with iron nails and roaves in place of the wooden pegs.

When buying the *skow* of a boat, the knots in her planking were meticulously examined, for the size and type of the knots could foretell what the boat's future would be. There were *fishy knots*, which prognosticated that she would be lucky in catching fish; *windy knots*, which foretold a stormy career. Worst of all and to be avoided like the plague was a *misform knot* which told that here was a boat foredoomed to tragedy, sooner or later to be cast away.

SIXAREEN



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Fig. 6.4. — The *sixareen/sixern* was developed in Shetland from around the mid-18th century for the *far haaf* — a deep sea cod and ling fishery.

The saithe fishing from open boats has gone long ago and the *yoles* are going. In a generation or so there will be none — unless, as we hope to do, we preserve a good specimen in the County Museum.

The *Fair Isle yole* [see Fig. 7.9] is not so conservative as the Ness boat. Nor does she have the graceful sweeping lines. In fact, to look at her, she is a more primitive effort all over. But there is no question of her equal seaworthiness and ability to stand rough water. It is true that her performance owed much to the men who manned her, small-boat seamen without peer. Some of their exploits in their native craft are nowadays nearly incredible. Their record of

saving life from shipwreck must forever stand as a proud memorial to a hardy race.

Once upon a time, centuries ago, the *yole* was the universal fishing boat of Shetland. At that time — up to the end of the 17th century to be precise — cod, ling, and tusk were all commonly killed within ten miles of the shore, and for such inshore work a boat of this type was eminently suited. But nearing the end of the century a dramatic change occurred: the commercial fish suddenly forsook the inshore grounds. Contemporary chroniclers — Brand, Sibbald and Low — all mention this fact and attribute it to various causes, the favourite theory being that Dutch herring busses gutting herring on board and dumping the offal had attracted the fish out into deep water. It seems much more likely that some climatic change was responsible.

Whatever the reason, the big fish left the land, never to return; and since where the fish are the fisherman must follow, *yoles* had to go to the *far haaf*, a trade for which they were never built. Accidents and fatalities became common.

Fishermen are, or were, notoriously slow to adopt new ways. It was close to the middle of the 18th century before a new boat came into the limelight, a craft larger, heavier, deeper, deliberately designed for the *far haaf*, the deep-sea fishing grounds of the open ocean. This was the famous Shetland *sixareen* or *sixern* [Fig. 6.4.], a boat which is Shetland's own, and one of the ablest open craft of her size ever designed by man.

There is yet another boat to which I must refer, the Shetland four-oared boat or *fourern* [Fig. 6.2]. Like the *sixern*, the modern Shetland *fourern* is a boat of native design, but every line in her still bears witness to her Norse forebears. There are no hard and fast rules to inhibit the draughtsman here. The *fourern* can be 8ft. of keel or she may be as much as 12ft. She can be beamy or narrow, shallow with flat floors, or sharp in the bottom and deep of keel to give her a grip for sailing. The end result is what is now known far outside of Shetland as 'Shetland Model'. She is the maid-of-all-work around the Shetland coast and has been for generations. And, thank God, *fourerns* are still being built every year though they now cost seven or eight times what they did before World War II. Mostly nowadays they sport a bracket on the stern for an outboard. Sail and oar are in abeyance for everyday work, but that is inevitable in a technological age.

But there is one sphere where sail and sail only still reigns supreme in Shetland, that of sport. The racing Shetland model has come to be established as a type of her own. In fact there are two types of 'Shetland racer' — the big, heavy, ballasted boat, gunther rigged; and the light, clever 'Maid' class which is sailed without any ballast at all, to the supreme discomfort of her three-man crew seated along the weather gunwale.

Boat sailing is extremely popular and well organised here. There are five boating clubs — Lerwick, Whalsay, Walls, Aith, and Delting — and competition is keen, particularly at the Inter-Club regatta at Lerwick when the clubs compete together at the end of the season. When strong windy weather coincides with this event the spectator realises that, even in this mechanical age, Shetland boatmen have not lost all their ancient skills.