

A HUNDRED YEARS OF LERWICK

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In 1468 the Orkney Isles were pledged to Scotland by Christian I of Denmark; Shetland followed in 1469. During the next century links with Norway were eroded only gradually, but just four hundred years ago the harsh reality of Scottish feudalism triggered off open confrontation with the overlord Robert Stewart. His 'oppression and misrule' resulted in an official inquiry and his temporary withdrawal (Tudor 1883. 111 et seq.).

At that time no such community as Lerwick (ON *leir-vík*: mud bay) existed in Shetland. Earl Patrick Stewart's castle, built sufficiently by 1602 to serve as a prison, and for long a symbol of Scottish exploitation, still stands in Scalloway, the ancient capital (ON *skála-vágr*: bay of the huts/sheds) (Jacobsen 1936).

By the late 16th century, however, Dutchmen were fishing regularly each summer in Shetland waters. They gathered in their 'busses' in Bressay Sound — merely a fine natural harbour — in the fortnight previous to June 24th, when their law permitted herring fishing to begin. Booths sprang up along the shore at Lerwick where 'stockings, gloves, garters and feathers' were bartered by the native Shetlanders for 'Tobacco, Brandie, Boots, Shoes and Money' (Monteith [1633] 1711. 41). Such, however, was the wickedness committed yearly by the Hollanders and the country people 'repairing to thame', that in 1625 the Court in Scalloway ordered that these houses be 'utterlie demolished'.

There is uncertainty as to when permanent buildings appeared, and conflicting estimates as to the probable number of inhabitants of Lerwick some 300 years ago (Crawford 1901. 14 et seq.). But by then a church was certainly in use, and when this was superseded at the turn of the century with the disjunction from Tingwall parish, Lerwick's population was given as 700.

As a community, therefore, Lerwick is less than 3½ centuries old, and owes its development to the Dutch rather than to the Scandinavians. Wm. Aberdeen's 'Perspective View' of 1766 (not illustrated) shows rows of houses — the 'lanes' — end on to the sea south of Fort Charlotte, and others along the rocky shore eastwards. Most of these are on the landward side of what was to become known as 'The Street' — Commercial Street [Fig. 4.1].

Both later photographs of the Lerwick sea front were taken from Fort Charlotte, said to have been built originally by Cromwell, but certainly 'repaired' in 1665 to protect the Sound of Bressay from the Dutch, destroyed by them in 1673, and rebuilt in 1781 (Cowie 1879. 46–47). The earlier illustration [Fig. 4.2.] still shows the smaller jetty, to be replaced in 1886 by the Victoria Pier. It also shows the North Lodberry (foreground).

Details of 20 'lodberries' are given by Reid Tait (1955), of which perhaps one-third could have been there by about 1766 and perhaps one pre-dates 1740. An early owner at the 'sooth end', beyond the jetty, was a Patrick Torry — though the actual date is uncertain. Lodberries embodied a courtyard built into the water, where goods were loaded and unloaded through a sea door. Originally, however, the word referred merely to a flat rock (ON *hláðberg*) by the shore,



Fig. 4.1. — Old Lerwick — 'The Street', otherwise known as Commercial Street. When Lerwick was first built, vehicles were unknown. 1975. (Photograph: J.R. Baldwin)



Fig. 4.2. — Lerwick seafront a century ago. The *lodberries* at the 'sooth end' provided direct sea access and moorings for boats loading and unloading. From Fort Charlotte.
(*Photograph: George Washington Wilson*)

Fig. 4.3. — By the 1970s, several phases of reclamation and building had extended harbour facilities for fish-processing and maritime services, so that Fort Charlotte is now a considerable way from the shore.
(*Photograph: J.R.S. Clark*)



alongside which vessels could be moored for unloading (Jacobsen 1936).

Except for those at the South End, all the lodberries (including the North Lodberry) were to lose their original function with the reclamation of the foreshore in 1886. And only those to the south of the Pier have survived — largely intact, at least externally.

When the second round of Harbour Works came, twenty years or so later, in the early 20th century, the herring fishery was already past its peak. Nonetheless, the Town Council developed not just the small boat harbour but ensured the continuing provision of wharves and jetties, warehouses, ships' chandlers, fish processors, cooperages and other ancilliary facilities [Fig. 4.3.].

Expansion continued with an important wharf extension completed in 1959, whilst the last few years have seen considerable reclamation to the north, the erection of a new fish market, and a spectacular development of the frontage away to the west and north again to Holmsgarth, Grimista and round to the Point of Scattland. The new roll on-roll off ferry terminal is sited out of the town centre a mile or so north of the Victoria Pier, whilst oil-related development now rings the northern shore-line of the Sound [Fig. 4.4]. The Böd of Grimista, birthplace of Arthur Anderson (co-founder and first chairman of the Peninsular and Oriental Steamship Company, and participant in the founding of the Union Castle Line) is happily being restored, though

Fig. 4.4. —New pier and oil-related developments in 1975 just to the north of Lerwick's old harbour area, past Grimista towards the Point of Scattland. Development has been rapid in recent years.

(Photograph: J.R. Baldwin)

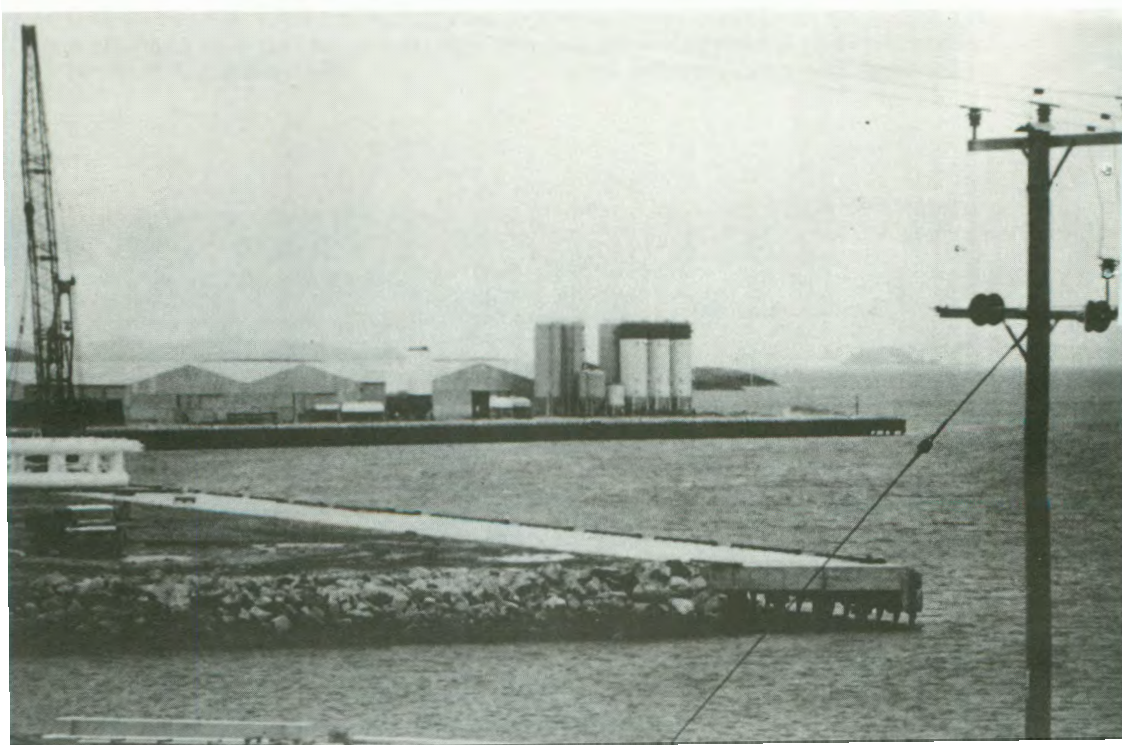




Fig. 4.5.— The Böd of Grimista was occupied in the 18th century by Robert Anderson of P. & O. fame and fish factor for the Nicholson estate. It may, however, date to the 17th century. Since 1975 all external stone-work has been renovated and re-roofing with stone slates completed. Shetland is increasingly aware of the need for conservation. *(Photograph: J.R. Baldwin)*

now more or less hemmed in by the new industrial development [Fig. 4.5].

Until a hundred years ago, the town of Lerwick was largely confined to the coastal strip — a few houses only had appeared on the landward slopes overlooking the Loch of Clickimin. Elsewhere in Shetland, life and settlement was generally that of the crofter-fisherman rather than of the merchant, fish-curer, ship-owner or administrator.

Today, Upper Sound (ON *sund*: narrow sea channel) is little more than an outlying suburb of a rapidly expanding Lerwick [Fig. 4.6]. Housing has sprung up on the west side of the Loch of Clickimin around Helendale and along the south road, as well as on to the Ness of Sound. At Upper Sound, a few of the older houses survive, re-roofed and altered; so do some of the yards and gardens. But while it is still possible to identify something of the shape of the older township, there has been considerable change.

The late 19th century photograph of Upper Sound [Fig. 4.7] shows a grouped township — the norm prior to the re-division or ‘planking’ of the land earlier in the century. It is reminiscent of artists’ re-constructions of Viking levels at Jarlshof and Underhoull. In such a settlement, dwelling houses, barns, byres and other buildings were huddled together on a patch of less productive land.

The farm land was held in 'rigga-rendal' or 'run-rig', with each individual farmer holding a greater or lesser number of small strips interspersed amongst those of his neighbours. When the land was re-divided and consolidated crofts allocated, crofters tended to build new houses on their own individual crofts.

This change did not, however, destroy the earlier way of life. For a long time many activities remained much the same — cultivation of bere, oats and potatoes, pasturing and herding of livestock on the common hill, domestic fishing in small boats from the shore. In spite of the increasing commercialism of the fisheries, there continued to be a considerable reliance on home-produced equipment and the survival of long-established crafts and techniques. In many such activities, direct parallels can be identified in Iceland, Faroe, Norway and other areas of Northern and North-Western Scotland. And not surprisingly, terminology reflected strongly the earlier cultural and linguistic tradition.

Indeed a century ago, the inhabitants of 'the ancient ... town of Sound' are said to have been 'very primitive in their habits, and at the same time scrupulously honest and moral. They are generally averse to all changes and improvements, and in matters of rural and domestic economy, are very much in the condition of their remote forefathers. They subsist chiefly by supplying Lerwick [a mile and a half distant] with milk and peats. Lately, however, a fish-curing station has been opened in the neighbourhood, which affords some of them profitable employment.' (Cowie 1879. 29).

Over the past 100 years, however, change has been more rapid than ever before. The crops of rushes and ungrazed grass behind the remnants of Upper Sound [Fig. 4.6] are silent witnesses of the change in emphasis of Shetland life. The new, advancing crop of houses is equally eloquent, so that the old saying — 'Sound was Sound when Lerwick was none

And Sound will be Sound when Lerwick is done' — takes on a hollow ring. Upper Sound is being swallowed up as surely as was 'the East Ness of Sound' — that peninsula pushing south into Bressay Sound and in recent centuries known more commonly as 'Lerwick'.

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Fig. 4.6. — By 1975 much of the old Upper Sound township had disappeared. Local authority housing reached Breiwick (top right) in the 1920s, and post-war schemes have spread from Lochside to Sandveien (upper right). (*Photograph: J.R.S. Clark*)

Fig. 4.7. — Upper Sound around 1890. Though new Lerwick housing was creeping over the slope above the Loch of Clickimin, the township was still very much an old style cluster of crofters' buildings. (*Photograph: George Washington Wilson*)

