

BOATBUILDING BY THE DUNCANS OF HAMNAVOE, BURRA ISLE

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INTRODUCTION

Hamnavoe lies at the north-western corner of Burra Isle and is sheltered from the Atlantic by a natural granite promontory. The haven is well suited to boats that can be beached or moored close inshore, but is not adequate in all conditions for larger craft. Burra, as a whole, has a long established place in Shetland fishery history and generally has remained among the more successful districts. In the haaf fishery era its people exploited the nearness of the Burra Haaf; they changed early (1870's) to the adoption of decked long lining craft and also took a prominent part in the west coast herring fishery of the late 19th-early 20th centuries. Today its seiners and dual purpose boats play a prominent part in the inshore fishery, although their activities are largely centred on Scalloway or Lerwick. The Burra area is also noted for its lobster fishing, which together with a long tradition of small boat usage and the island's former isolation accounts for its retention of many small craft. It is perhaps a feature of the area's fishing history that progress and conservatism have often run strongly side by side.

The turn of the century marked a general stagnation and then decline in fisheries-related boatbuilding throughout Shetland. It was characterised by an increasing preference and dependence upon new or second-hand Scots decked sailing boats. Even large building concerns such as Hay & Co. of Lerwick abandoned building craft of over 60 feet after 1900, and by 1910 launched their last 40 foot fishing boats. Elsewhere building by the more famous native designer-builders dwindled, although the need for the smaller boat types ensured the survival of men able to work in the traditional manner if even only on a part-time basis, and numbers of shipwrights remained in the larger maintenance yards. Boatbuilding by the Duncans of Hamnavoe is of particular interest in this context; their activities have spanned the entire post-1890 period, and continue to the present day, having involved two generations of the family [Fig. 8.1]. The type and number of craft built by the Duncans has been very closely related to the prevailing conditions in the Shetland fishery, particularly those of the Burra/Scalloway district, and it is only within the last two decades that substantial demands have arisen from outside Shetland.

PRACTICE

The present boatbuilding business was founded by the late Walter Duncan (senior) in the years 1887/9 after serving an apprenticeship with the Laurenson brothers of Scalloway. The first boats that he built in Hamnavoe were

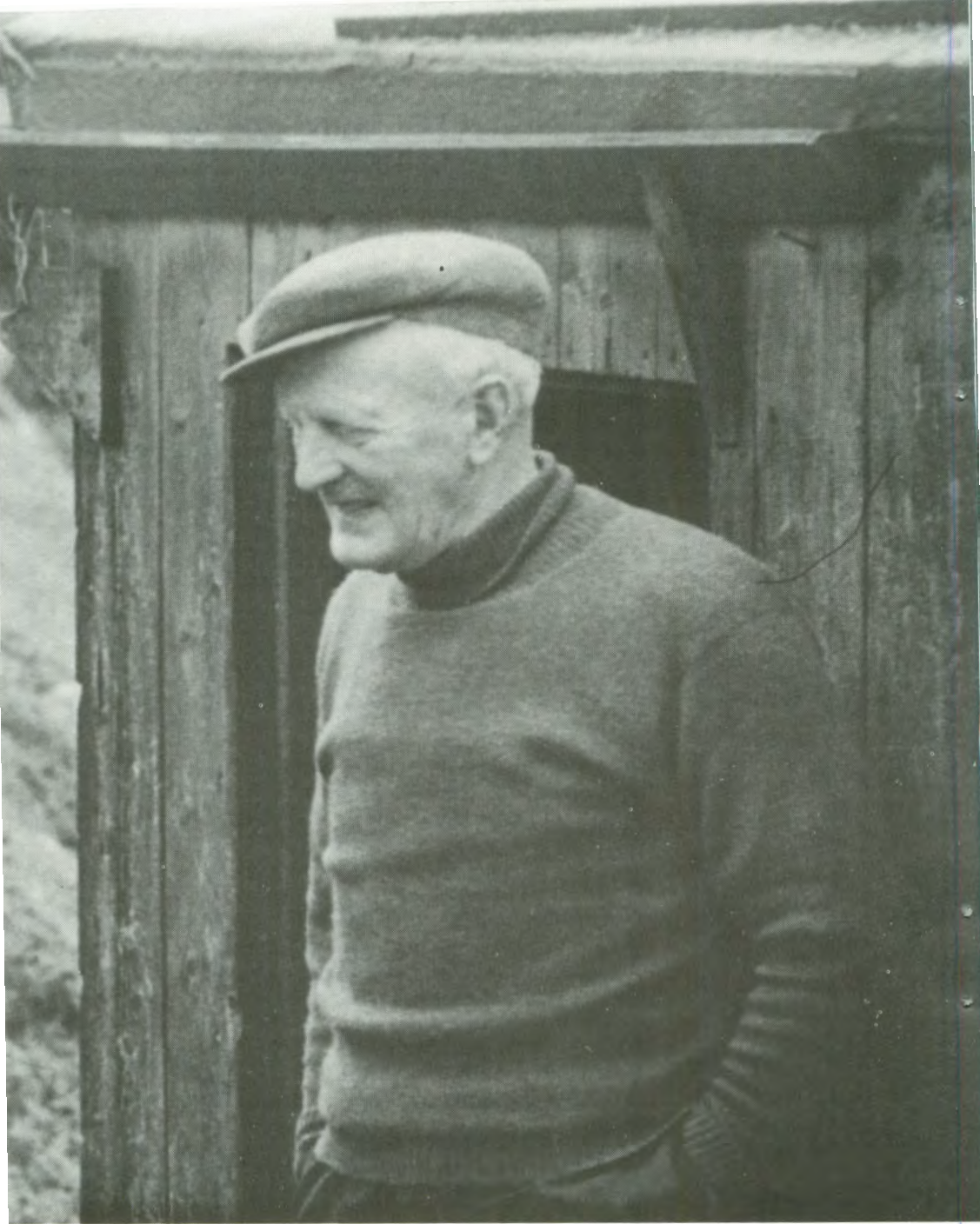


Fig. 8.1. — Walter Duncan (junior), boatbuilder in Hamnavoe, Burra Isle. To launch new boats, Walter and his brother Phillip have partly to demolish their shed. 1975.

(Photograph: J.R. Baldwin)

constructed in the open at a site by a herring station, some use of an existing building was also obtained, and then, in 1893, he was able to erect his own shed on the present site. A building floor was levelled out of the hillside, a shed built and the practice established of manhandling completed craft down the grass slope for launching. Since that time the site and structure have undergone few changes, the largest perhaps being the extension of the original shed in 1910.

At first boatbuilding was not a full-time business, but was combined with fishing and other activities, an occupational pattern that was quite common in other areas of Shetland at that time. It was also essentially a family concern; occasional part-time labour was made use of, but no apprentices were ever formally taken on. However, continuity of skills and production were achieved by the introduction of the sons into the system from an early working age. For them though, there was an even more marked seasonal approach, with the summer generally spent at the fishing, and winter assisting with boatbuilding; whilst general joinery, house carpentry, etc. also formed a staple occupation for long periods. The place of the boatbuilder in the community was certainly an important one, and one obviously accorded some quiet respect — an understandable situation when one considers the trust and confidence which most members of the community had to place in his products.

At the turn of the century the boat-types most in demand were of the traditional Burra pattern — the 16 ft.3 in. of keel boats (24 ft.6 in. to 25 ft. length overall) used in the springtime cod and ling fishery; similar craft at 14 ft. to 14 ft.6 in. of keel (23 ft. length overall) for the winter haddock lining; and of course a whole range of general purpose *fourerns* and close inshore or *eela* craft [Fig. 8.2]. All were open rowing/lug-rigged boats of traditional Shetland design, built by 'shell building' clinker techniques, with few strakes and inserted sawn frames. One slightly unusual feature was the 'extra' mid-room frame worked into the larger craft.

However, it would be quite wrong to assume that boats were only built for the immediate locality, since Duncan-built boats were well known in most of the west coast districts. Although they did not have the impressive size of the *sixerns*, or the exceptional lines of types such as the *Ness yoles*, they were extremely functional and well-thought-of craft of their kind, representative of the mainstream of Shetland boatbuilding and with a basic design that lasted well into this century.

The period 1900 to 1920 though saw an increased need for decked boats of sixern size, which would be less expensive and easier to run than the larger 60ft. to 70ft. Scots herring boat. Walter (senior) achieved some prominence in providing a local answer to this, with decked craft in the 35ft. to 45ft. range, suitable both for drift and line fisheries as circumstances required. Their production was relatively short-lived, but they were interesting craft combining some design and structural features of Scottish influence with overall building methods, appearance and handling characteristics that marked them as definitely Shetland in nature. As sailing craft their normal rig was the gaff-mainsail dandy smack but the age of the auxiliary motor had then begun, and Burra Isle skippers became particularly active in this respect. The

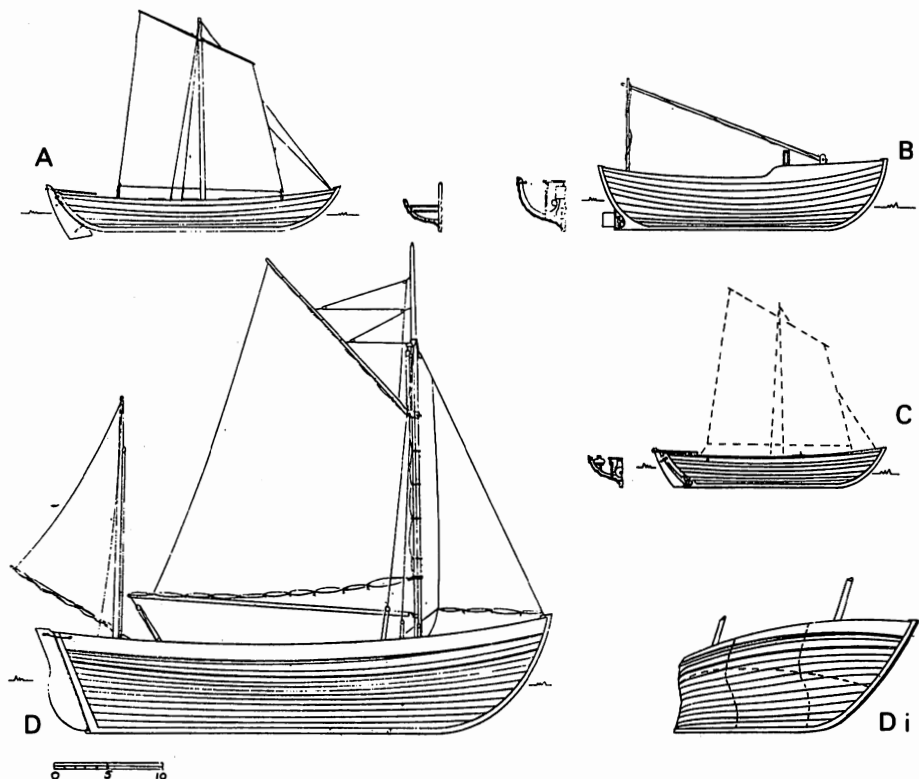


Fig. 8.2 (A) – Sixteen foot of keel *cod* boat (circa 1890). Although the 18-22 ft. of keel *sixerns* were the characteristic vessels of most Shetland haaf fisheries, they were not used from Burra. Here, the haaf grounds were relatively closer inshore and smaller classes of boat, the cod and haddock boats, were employed in longlining.

(B) – Seventeen foot of keel *shellfishery* boat (1950s). The similarity in form between this purpose-built motorised type and the original sailing/rowing craft is very apparent, but increases in freeboard, depth and displacement (on much the same length) were all required. Other new features included the provision of a half-deck and adoption of the cruiser stern.

(C) – Twelve foot of keel *fourern* converted to motor (1945 onwards). The fourern, maid-of-all-work in the islands, has proved easily adapted to the use of a low horse-power motor. However, although they still exist in great numbers, their use in the community has often become more casual than essential.

(D, Di) – Forty foot overall, decked, *motor/sail fishing* boat (1910-1920). The hull of these vessels was based on the large *sixern* types, but a straight sternpost was adopted to strengthen rudder mountings and obtain a suitable propellor aperture (not shown). A full sailing rig was necessary for safety and fuel economy and, as indicated original freeboard was sometimes raised by later owners.



Figs. 8.3; 8.4.— Bow and stern three-quarter views of the UTILISE, LK 589. This is a fine example of the purpose-built motor craft built by Walter and Phillip Duncan for the inshore fishery during recent years. The lines of hull and planking, the functionalism of layout and fittings, epitomise attitudes and skills that represent the best of the ongoing Scandinavian tradition in Shetland. (Photographs: A.G. Osler)

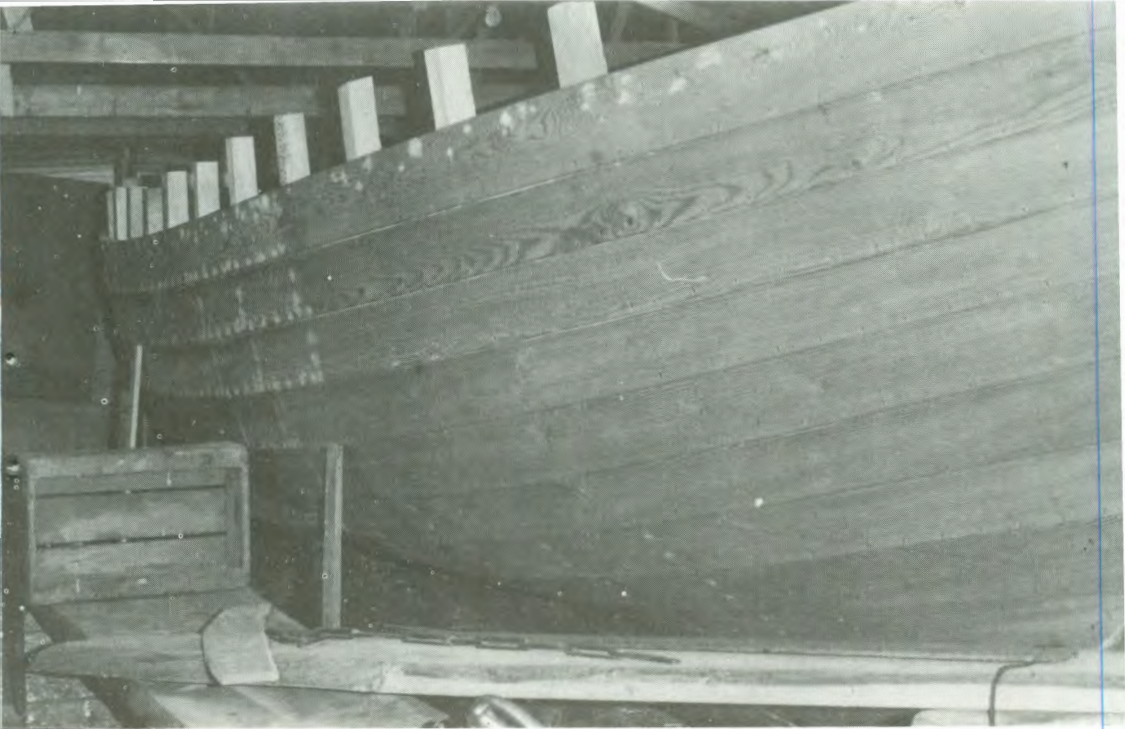


45 ft. SYLVANUS built by Walter (senior) in 1910 had a 25 horse power motor fitted before the First World War, and some work was carried out motorising craft built elsewhere. Amongst this generation of motorised boats built by Walter (senior) were the PIONEER, SYLVANUS and WELFARE (ex-HOMELAND) — the hulks of the last two still surviving at Blacks Ness and Freefield.

The demand for the open, smaller boats, did not cease by any means and many continued to be built in completely traditional rowing/sailing pattern until after the Second World War. Indeed, despite the great changes in post-war fisheries, the need for wooden craft up to 35ft. continues, particularly for shellfishing, some lining and personal use. Additionally, the engining of earlier open craft has been required, particularly in Burra with its large fleet of small boats, none of which had engines pre-war. During the war itself the Duncans carried out a number of unusual jobs for the Scalloway-based 'Shetland Bus'. Indeed, wartime use in centres such as Scalloway introduced the knowledge and chance to practise the skills necessary for the successful motorisation of small craft of the traditional type; a process which continues to the present day. [N.B. During the German occupation of Norway, 1940–1945, a continual trickle of boats plied between Shetland and Norway, landing weapons and supplies, and rescuing refugees. This 'service' was referred to as the 'Shetland Bus'. — Ed. See also Smith 1978. above].

But even these modernisations were not always suitable for new requirements, and in 1949 Walter (junior) and Phillip completed what was for them the first of a new generation of boats [Figs. 8.3; 8.4]. Intended for lobstering and their own personal use, it was built round an old 6 to 8 horsepower Brit engine, was 17ft. on the keel (23ft. 10in. length overall), 7ft. 5in. beam, with 10 strakes per side and a half-deck forward. Besides the motor itself, the greatest innovation was the rounded cruiser stern, which was introduced as a neat and seamanlike method of accommodating the stern gear and rudder, without compromising the basic nature of the Shetland hull form. Boats resulting from the development of this post-war type can now be seen at many places in Shetland, and needless to say, such craft have proved extremely satisfactory in use, whilst the building requirements in terms of size and technology have remained economic and practical for the Duncans. Building requests from prospective owners from outside Shetland have also increased in recent years, and several such craft have diverged from fishery-related types into the fields of educational, pleasure and training purposes. This is a trend that shows just another aspect of the small boatbuilder's ability gradually to change and adjust his 'traditions'.

The building processes and materials used by the two generations of the family differ little from the shell-built clinker methods of other Shetland/Scandinavian areas, and this principle has been employed from the smallest to the largest craft [Figs. 8.5; 8.6]. Boats are built without plans or line drawings in the accepted sense, excepting nowadays the occasional reference sketches needed for owners seeking government grants. Building 'by eye', however, is a vast simplification of an extremely complex and positive process that involves factors of accurate visual memory, empirical knowledge of boat behaviour, the



Figs. 8.5; 8.6. — Views of the exterior and interior of a 18 ft. pleasure/fishing craft under construction by Walter and Phillip Duncan, 1975. The larch wood shell planking is complete and the interior frames are being inserted, although temporary braces inside still help hold the shape fore and aft. The whole structure has been built with no physical 'memory aids' other than the occasional use of a simple midships check-mould, and a stem pattern used for an earlier boat. (Photographs: A.G. Osler)



safe limitations of materials, actual ability to create designed structures in wood, and not least of all, the creative element that ensures a gradually progressive tradition in place of sterile copying. Naturally errors may be made, but these are rarely ones of major proportions. In the shed itself there is a deceptive simplicity of layout with a large open building floor, wall-length working bench, low roof trusses, windows facing good late daylight conditions, etc. Strict organisation is not apparent, but it is there, based upon customary usage, practicality, and personal preferences. A stranger would certainly find it difficult to replace a tool in its proper place.

Tools and equipment have changed little, the ownership of some being easily traced over several decades, though an electric bandsaw was acquired post-war to relieve much tiring and time-consuming hand sawing. But tools seem to outlast men, and it is an unfortunate fact that both Walter (junior) and his brother Phillip are now of retirement age, although they seem unlikely to do so in the conventional sense. This does, however, serve to highlight the fact that the most important resource of any craft-based activity is the craftsman himself, and his ability to hand on accumulated skills, knowledge and attitudes. Knowledge of the Duncans' craft will perhaps demonstrate the factually correct but quite unfounded concern of Walter's that people must 'not expect a big business but only an old boat shed'. Fortunately real history is as often found in 'old boat sheds' as in castles.

Acknowledgement

These notes would have been impossible without the information patiently supplied by Walter and Phillip Duncan. To them I am grateful. Any errors that may appear are the author's responsibility.