

# **Shetlanders and Fishing: historical and geographical aspects of an evolving relationship.**

## **– Part 1 –**

James J.A.Irvine and Ian A.Morrison

There is a measure of truth in the old adage that whereas in the past the Orcadian was a farmer with a boat, the Shetlander was a fisherman with a croft. While 40% of Orkney's land can be classed as agriculturally productive, this can only be claimed for 5% of Shetland (Graham 1979). Much of this difference reflects geographical constants, such as differences in bedrock geology, with their implications for terrain, soils and microclimates. Orkney for example is characterised by horizontally bedded and relatively friable sandstones, whereas Shetland has more intransigent ancient metamorphic rocks. Their dearth of viable agricultural land has always led the Shetlanders to place a relatively heavy emphasis on the resources of the seas around them. It would however be a mistake to assume that they perceived and responded to these geographical constants in their difficult environment in ways which were themselves unvarying.

Popular conceptions of “traditional folk life” often seem more rigidly bound by traditions of immutability than those ways of life themselves perhaps ever were. Thus, some may envisage the archetypical Shetlander as one engaged in an immemorial “Far Haaf” fishery, rowing out sixareens of unadulterated Viking lineage to work so far offshore that only Ronas Hill shows, sitting like an upturned kishie upon the waters... As is so often the case, however, the stereotype tends to be dominated by an eclectic recollection of elements from a relatively recent past. Rather than perpetuating practices of the time when Earl Rognvald ventured out so incompetently among the fishermen of Sumburgh, the nature of this

fishery and the particular form of boat required to carry it out both appear to have been essentially 18th century developments. What is more, though these developments certainly did foster a way of life that became an intrinsic part of Shetland for nearly a century and a half, it was only one part among many, and the developments arose as much in response to conditions created elsewhere as to factors endemic to the islands.

In much of the past, as at the present day, the story of fishing in Shetland appears instead to be essentially one of change. This has involved a complex multi-way interplay of social, economic, technological and indeed psychological factors. There have been periodic reassessments of the problems and potential of the physical environment on land and at sea, as perceptions and aims have evolved. Things as tangible as the locations of fishing stations and even of the major settlements of the isles may be viewed as resultants of these interacting forces. Their distribution pattern has altered radically, and sometimes remarkably rapidly. Such changes have not only reflected pre-existing trends. By setting up new patterns, they have in turn contributed towards further changes. Let us now explore the types of factors involved, seeking to identify phases when change was particularly significant.

There seems little doubt that inshore fishing has been an important element in the subsistence of Shetland communities from prehistoric times onwards. Orkneyinga Saga certainly gives a vivid vignette of this from Viking times, to supplement the archaeological evidence. Early evidence for large-scale commercially-oriented fishing by Shetlanders is however fairly sparse. Although by the 17th century a great deal of truly commercial fishing was going on in the waters around Shetland, most of this was being carried out by highly organised fleets from ports such as Emden, Lubeck, Hamburg, and particularly from the Low Countries. In the earlier part of that century, the Hollanders alone were operating between 2000 and 3000 herring busses in the North Sea. Compared to this scale of operation, the Shetlanders' own activities generally appear local in scope. Though in the 16th century and at the start of the 17th their herring exports had been of some importance, by 1633 in his "Description of the Islands of Shetland and the Fishing thereabout", Captain John Smith talked of the Shetlanders catching just a few barrels of herrings inshore. It is a measure of the

impressiveness of the foreign operation that he believed these fish were mere leftovers, scattered from the main group offshore by the activities of the huge Dutch fleet. The main export commodity for the Shetlanders during the 17th century in fact tended to be whitefish, rather than herring: primarily ling, with some cod, tusk and skate. Hance Smith (1984) suggests that an annual figure of around 500 tons seems a reasonable estimate for all their whitefish exports during the latter part of the 17th century.

Up to the end of that century, it was trade with the visiting foreigners, rather than any large scale fish-marketing system of their own, which provided an effective commercial outlet for the islanders. The North Germans, though latterly less important in the herring fishery than the Hollanders, had a vital merchant role for 17th century Shetland. Sandwick Bay appears as “Hambourgh Haven” in Blaeu’s ‘Sea Mirrour’ of 1625, and even in living memory Whalsay had its “Bremen Strasse”. Although the Pool of Virkie was known as “da Dutch Pool”, this is believed to refer not to Hollanders but to “Deutsch”. The foreign merchants came from May until the end of August each year, and Gifford of Busta noted that they paid a considerable “rent for their booths, and for the use of the ground upon which they cure their fish” (Bruce 1922, p50). The remains of several of these booths can still be seen; there is a particularly well-preserved one on Whalsay (Irvine, J.J.A. 1982).

The Shetlanders offered them their wind-dried stockfish, and dried and salted ‘klippfish’. Their other principle exports were fish oil, made by boiling down sillak (saithe) livers, and butter. The oil and butter were often produce from rents paid in kind, and traded by the estates. There were more individual kinds of barter, too. Lerwick, essentially a 17th century creation (Irvine, J.W., 1985), grew out of trafficking with the busses which came to lie in the shelter of Bressay Sound, and it seems that it wasn’t just woollen cloth, gloves, garters, feathers and cosy socks which were exchanged for tobacco, brandy, rixdollars and ducatoons. In 1625, the town was ordered to be burnt to the ground as a den of vice, and thereafter it was made illegal for any woman to sell stockings to the Hollanders at Bressay Sound, unless accompanied by her husband... Often there would be several hundred busses lying there (one French raid caught and burned at least 150, perhaps 400). With their international marketing connections in addition to their

immediate needs, these regular visitors offered a ready outlet for the surplus products of the small Shetland community, as well as bringing in consumer goods which were otherwise hard to come by. From them the islanders obtained fishing gear, salt, tobacco and drink, together with textiles and a whole range of domestic goods such as soap and candles, as well as basic foodstuffs. When attempts were made in the 1660s by the Government in Scotland to ban trade with foreigners, the Shetlanders succeeded in having these overturned on the grounds that starvation would result, such was their dependence on trading through Lubeckers and Hamburgers, among others, for vital provisions. These included three-quarters of their corn supply.

Then, as the 17th century moved into the 18th, the pattern began to change. War and internal political problems had put Dutch maritime power and fishing enterprise into decline. By the time peace came at the end of the War of the Spanish Succession in 1713, their Russian market for fish had largely gone to the Danes and Norwegians. The effectiveness of the North Germans had also declined, and the raising of customs dues in the first decade of the 18th century made them turn their attentions elsewhere. It has sometimes been said that the end of the foreign merchants' operations in Shetland was due to the salt tax of 1712, which put a levy on all foreign salt, and offered a bounty to British nationals who cured fish using British salt. By 1712, however, it would appear that these merchants had already given up any real hope of continuing, and the salt tax seems to have merely rendered an already doomed trade entirely unviable. The new rigour of the customs originated five years earlier with the Union of the Parliaments of England and Scotland in 1707, and even by 1708 the Calendar of Treasury Papers could report "since the Union, the few Hollanders or Bremens that used to come to buy commodities such as fish, herrings, butter, oil etc... were so discouraged by the duties that they gave over their trading" (Irvine, J.J.A., 1982).

For the Shetlanders, the local result of these far-flung international events was recession. The basic resources of the seas around them remained, but the mechanism for the export market had dwindled away. The Shetland landowners, often of Scottish extraction, had to attempt to take over the merchants' role. As Goodlad (1971) has pointed out, in the first part of the 18th century these lairds ran into considerable difficulties, and several went bankrupt. They were short

of working capital for financing ships and foreign ventures; understandably, the discomfited Germans did not welcome them into their traditional markets; and they lacked experience when they came to tackle untried markets up the Baltic and in southern Europe.

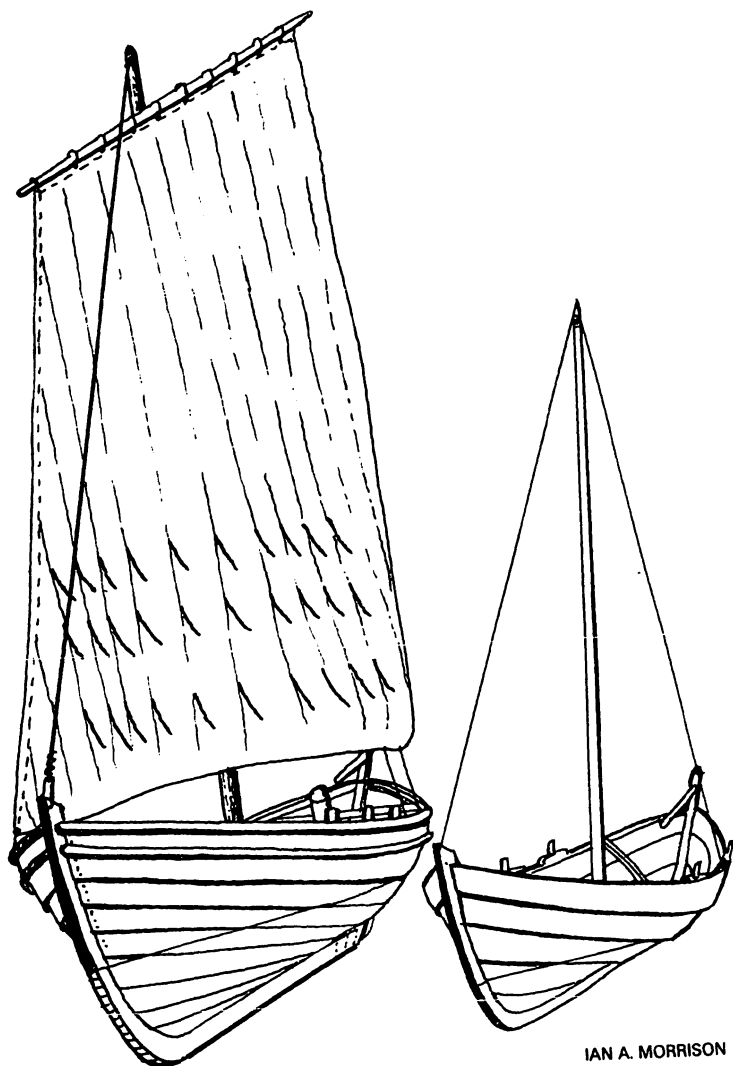
The tide appears to have begun to turn about the third decade of the century. 1727 brought a British government bounty on Scottish cured fish. Ports such as Danzig and Gothenburg began to offer less problematic outlets for Shetland herring than Hamburg had become; and Spain started to develop into what would be the main whitefish market for Shetland throughout the next century. In the 1730s, the prospects were further enhanced by developments in fish processing. In Shetland as in Norway, a new curing method was adopted for fish such as cod and ling. Split fresh from the sea, pressed, lightly salted and hard dried, these earned an international reputation for quality.

From the 1740s onwards, things began to gather momentum. There were failed harvests in Shetland then, leaving many families heavily in debt to the landlords. Faced by these difficulties with their resource-base on land, they sought to expand their fishing. Besides reflecting local exigencies, this shift of emphasis was also once again influenced by distant developments. Efficient middlemen were beginning to appear outside Shetland, and the local landlord-merchants were able to reduce their own risks by turning from direct-dealing with the problematic continental markets to sell their fish on contract to dealers in mainland Scotland (for example in Greenock) and in London. Many of the parish ministers who wrote the Statistical Account of the 1790s perceived the 1740s and '50s as decades of change. For example, the Reverend W. Jack of Northmavine wrote "to the year 1740, the fishing was not distant from the shore above 8 or 10 miles, carried on in 4-oar boats with few lines, so that the quantity caught was few, compared to the numbers now... about 1740 the boats increased much in number, which induced them to seek out further to sea... they enlarged their boats, and increased the number of lines, till they gradually arrived to the present state." It is with this expansion to make regular use of grounds as much as 50 miles (80km) offshore that the Far Haaf fishing proper may be said to have really got underway.

This is confirmed by records of the Shetlanders' boat imports from Norway. Thus, whereas of thirty boats imported in 1733, all were 4-

oared yoles suitable for inshore working, a decade later Gifford's 1743 order to Bergen included eight 6-oared boats (Bruce 1931). It would certainly be wrong to imagine that 6-oared boats had not been used in Shetland waters long before then, in one role or another, but it is from this time onwards that their use for fishing far offshore becomes very apparent. Versions specifically adapted to cope with the conditions out there were developed, and from these the classic Shetland-model sixareen emerged. The notably light construction and deep V-section which allowed the smaller yoles to cope with the confused waves amid the skerries inshore were less important, and vessels with higher freeboard, greater beam and longer keel evolved, with more directional stability to reduce the risk of broaching-to when running long Atlantic rollers. In their developed form, they were characteristically 18-22 foot on the keel (ca 5.5-6.7m), and around 25-30 foot overall (ca 7.6-9.0m). As duration of trip and catching capacity increased, the carrying capability of the boats became more important. This was secured by their heavier construction, a flatter bottom and less sheer amidships than the yoles. Up until about 1860 (by which time yoles and sixareens were ordinarily built in Shetland from imported timber, Nicolson 1981), many of these boats continued to be built in Norway, where shipwrights catered specifically for the changing Shetland requirements (Thowsen 1969). So that they could be shipped across compactly, they were often constructed with temporary fastenings of wooden pegs, then knocked down for export as a flat kit. This "skow of a boat" was then reassembled in Shetland and clinched up with iron nails and roves. Right up to the end, when the coming of motors rendered them obsolete, the Shetlanders were still seeking to refine the sixareen. After the main fishing season closed, boats might be partially dismantled and modifications made to the lines of bow or stern by readjusting the clinker planking (Henderson 1978; Morrison 1973, 1978).

Interacting with the developing technology of boats and fish processing, a key socio-economic element in setting the pattern of the Shetland sixareen fishery was the truck system. As we shall see, the continuation of this, right through until the latter part of the 19th century, had much to do with the way the use of open boats for long-line Far Haaf fishing was maintained in Shetland, well after safer and potentially more productive methods had become apparent. This system of barter controlled by the landlords was by no means uniform,



IAN A. MORRISON

but developed in a variety of ways (e.g. Edmonston 1809; Goodlad 1971; Gray 1978; Smith, H. 1984). While it often came to exhibit the oppressive aspects of monopoly, it would be simplistic to assume either that the monopoly was ever absolute in effect or that the truck arrangement was entirely devoid of advantages from the point of view of the fishing families.

In the period of relative recession which characterised the earlier decades of the 18th century, the system did indeed offer some balance of merits on both sides. It was not just that the fishermen relied on the landowners to provide a marketing mechanism for their catches. The crops the tenants grew were often barely enough to feed them through half the year, and they could not of themselves finance major boats and the regular replacement of the equipment needed for fishing on a commercial scale. The landowners-turned-merchants advanced them the grain and gear they required, in return for agreements combining rent with rights to purchase their forthcoming produce. In years when meal was dear furth of Shetland, when the fishing was poor, or when the merchants failed to break into the foreign markets, the advantage might very well lie with the tenant. Bankruptcy could face the landowner. As Graham (1979, p39) has put it "Landlords, as well as tenants, were prisoners of a system not altogether of their making". In 1786, when the system was at its height, Fall said he did not see how the fishermen could have carried on the fishery without the assistance of the lairds. In some cases, fairly equitable arrangements developed. The right of priority in buying the tenant's fish might be agreed in consideration of a low money rent level; or a higher rent might be set, which could be met either in money or in fish on a named day, the tenant otherwise retaining freedom to sell his own fish.

As the 18th century drew on, however, as indicated above the trading risks for the Shetland landlords were reduced by the growing involvement of professional middlemen located elsewhere in Britain. This was not matched by an abandonment of the truck system. On the contrary, some landlords at least saw it as an ideal system for maximising their profits. It had given them control over the prices at which their tenants had to buy provisions from them, and also over what they offered in return for the tenant's fish and other produce. It was common practice for landlords to decide retrospectively how much the fishermen's catches were worth, setting their figure at the



end of the season. They could thus regulate the valuation to ensure tenants stayed in debt to them. With Shetland's limited land resource base and increasing population pressure, there was little scope for avoiding those estates which not only imposed high rents but made it in effect a condition of tenure that the tenant must sell his fish to his landlord at less than open-market rates.

The tendency for developments to be impeded by the perpetuation of the negative aspects of the truck system was exacerbated by the landlords' policy of subdividing holdings and encouraging early marriages. They aimed to increase the number of men they could get to participate in their fishing. The tenants found they had even less chance of getting out of debt, as the smaller land areas allotted could only provide enough sustenance to cover very few months of the year. By the end of the 18th century, the average holding contained only "potatoe ground, a cabbage garden etc, very little, if any, being allowed for corn." (Fea 1775 p134). More and more meal had to be provided by the laird, and consequently more and more of the tenant-fisher's produce had to go to his landlord in repayment. As a Shetlander and a seaman, Captain Halcrow considered subdivision "the most retrograde movement, economic or otherwise, the Islands had seen." (1950 p128).

Shetlanders, however, have always shown a robust disregard for ill-conceived attempts to regulate them. Quite certainly by the last quarter of the 18th century, and very probably from as early as the restrictive aspects of the truck system had become apparent, ways had been found to circumvent it. Naebody but da Lord kens how mony fish come oot o' da sea... so bonded fishermen soon seem to have found independent buyers for at least part of their catches. The growth of this undercover trade played a significant role in the development of fish-traders who were not landowners. It was thus one element which contributed to the final collapse of the truck system, though this took most of a further century to come about. Geography was on the side of the landowners. Outsiders often forget just how extensive the Shetland archipelago is, and how intractable many of the sea and land routes were (and sometimes still are), particularly in heavy weather. Even by the middle of the 19th century, when most rents had come to be paid in cash and free-fishing was undertaken openly, the fishermen had the problem of delivering their catches from their outlying fishing

stations to the independent merchants. These were still few in number and mostly to be found in Lerwick. It was a long time before their scale of business overtook that of the landowner-merchants. Their problems were compounded by the fact that the fishermen could not afford to turn to them until the capital of the independents had built up sufficiently for them to provide the same level of credit that the landowners could supply.

The truck system thus persisted through much of the 19th century. It remained a cardinal factor in the organisation of the Far Haaf fishery, and by conditioning the style of operation, it went far to maintain the use of the sixareen despite the complex changes (social and economic, internal and external in origin) which affected Shetland in the 18th and 19th centuries. In Part 2, we shall consider ventures into other types of operation, notably cod fishing from larger decked vessels, and herring fishing, sometimes using half-decked boats. However, the lack of fluid capital characteristic of the truck system tended to constrain both tenants and landowners from responding to change. The tenants were seldom far enough ahead of their debits to take initiatives requiring new styles of boats. The landowners, despite their local importance, possessed relatively minor resources, and as constant creditors (with money outlying in boats, gear, and six or seven months of basic food supply for their tenants each year), they too had relatively little scope for experimenting, even if they wished to do so. Many did not. It needed particularly strong incentives to persuade lairds to risk departing from established practices which they perceived as favouring them.

Thus, though the level of activity of the Shetland fisheries showed a general increase as time proceeded, this was not necessarily reflected in the standard of living of the fishing families. This in turn must surely have affected the attitude of the fisherfolk towards technical advances. The way in which innovations were actually received would appear to confirm this. For example, in 1772 a Mr Cobb visited Shetland and demonstrated a simple and inexpensive method by which catches could be improved markedly when long-lining. Long-lining rather than trawling was the Shetlanders' characteristic method for catching bottom-living fish, such as ling, tusk and cod (in order of usual importance). It had been employed there from at least 1570 (Balfour 1859). The lines were made up in handy lengths of 50 fathoms (300

feet, ca91m) called baukts. These were joined and paid out onto the seabed. Until around 1733, it is likely that only 40 baukts were used per boat, but as craft got bigger and the fishing moved farther offshore in the late 18th and through the 19th century, this increased until as much as 7 miles (ca 11 km) of line with 1,200 hooks might be set by a single sixareen. The hooks were each attached to a trace about 4 feet long (1.2m) called a toum, these being spaced at five fathom (ca 9.1m) intervals along the lines. Cobb's innovation was to add small floats to the toums, so that the hooks were held clear of the bottom, and he "proved that three fish were caught by his mode for one in the common way" (Edmonston 1809, p362). The efficacy of this method has since been confirmed by Swedish fishermen (Goodlad 1971). Yet Fea (1775) tells us that as soon as Cobb left the islands the men returned to their old ways. They had no incentive to increase productivity if an increase in through-put merely meant more work for them, and more profit for the lairds without any real advantage to their own families.

Conservatism and resistance to change were certainly elements in the psychological make-up of the sail-fishermen, as Shetlanders themselves readily acknowledge (e.g. Halcrow 1950; Henderson 1978). But this was no mindless recalcitrance. As the Cobb incident suggests, their attitude often arose out of a shrewd appraisal of the realities of the economic and social predicament in which they found themselves. Another element in their reluctance to depart from traditional ways of doing things was the high-risk profession in which they worked. To support their families, week in and week out throughout the fishing season they had to take calculated risks with the North Atlantic and North Sea weather. When this turned against them, they often had to run long distances in heavy seas, with a tiring crew weakened by exposure needing all their faculties of mind and muscle to exploit their open craft's qualities as seaboats. As they approached the shore, their dangers did not diminish. On the contrary, Shetland's iron-bound coastline brought its own perils, with tide-strings, breaking cross-seas and half-hidden reefs complicating the entrances to most of the safe havens. They were fully aware that in the real world, risk inevitably involves losses, and that these could sometimes be on a catastrophic scale for the community, let alone an individual family (Morrison 1981; Henderson 1964).

In a psychological environment of that kind, one is unlikely to accept

change-for-change's-sake in tried and tested boat types. When the late Tom Henderson was a boy, his father owned a boat which the old seamen of Spiggie agreed was perhaps the most beautiful that one noted yole builder of Dunrossness had ever turned out. Yet they were suspicious of the *Jeannie*, and would not acknowledge that she was a yole at all, because she had 15.5 foot of keel, just 6 inches (0.15m) longer than the length hallowed by tradition. The Dunrossness yoles are one of the oldest boat types in use around the coast of Britain, showing particularly clearly their Viking lineage (Henderson 1978; Christensen & Morrison 1976; Morrison 1973, 1978). Despite her speed and apparent sea-kindliness, they felt that so strong a tradition for the proportions of the yoles (15ft of keel, 22.5ft overall, 5.5ft beam, 21inch inside depth amidships) would not have arisen down the centuries without very good reason, and that in some particular extreme of sea conditions the *Jeannie* might prove fatal to her crew. Their loyalty to tradition was thus anything but mindless, and arose from their canny (and humble) appreciation that the evolution of boats for the hazardous sea conditions around Shetland was likely to require the experience and wisdom of more than one generation.

This caution over innovation, when survival at sea was involved, did not imply a simplistic rejection of change. This was demonstrated by the way that the 6-oared boats for the Far Haaf fishing had emerged, and were developed. It has been said that the sixareen was "a wise man's weapon", and we have seen that to the very end of its era, skippers sought to hone it to their needs, even subtly altering an existing boat's lines at the season's end. Though the old men of Tom's boyhood commented so cautiously on the *Jeannie*, it was that generation and their immediate forebears who had brought the long reign of the sixareen to an end. Whilst manifestly maintaining their respect for the sea, at the close of the 19th century they showed they were capable of adopting other boat-types and styles of fishing with remarkable rapidity, once they were convinced that the overall combination of economic, social and technological developments made it to their advantage to do so. There is thus perhaps less of a psychological gap than is sometimes assumed between the sail-fishermen of "traditional" Shetland and their successors in the present-day world of rapidly changing fishery politics and high-technology gear. Both have had to make hard decisions, and have based these on their own perception of their human and maritime environments. This

perception, rooted in their own very particular experience, has not necessarily coincided with that of those with land-centred perspectives, whether these have been centred on Shetland estates, or in Edinburgh, Whitehall or Brussels.

## REFERENCES

- Baldwin, J., [ed] 1978 *Scandinavian Shetland*. Edinburgh
- Balfour, D., 1859 *The Oppressions of the 16th century in the Islands of Orkney and Shetland*. Edinburgh
- Bruce, R.S., 1922 & 1931 Haaf Fishing and Shetland trading. *Mariners Mirror* 8 (1922) 48-52; 17 (1931) 356-376.
- Christensen, A-E. & Morrison, I., 1976 Experimental Archaeology and Boats. *Int.J.Naut.Archaeol.* 5.4: 275-84
- Edmonston, A., 1809 *A View of the Ancient and Present State of the Zetland Islands*. Edinburgh
- Fall, R., 1786 *Observations on the Report of the Committee of the House of Commons appointed to enquire into the British Fishery*. London
- Fea, J., 1775 *State of Orkney and Shetland*. Edinburgh
- Goodlad, A., 1971 *Shetland Fishing Saga*. Lerwick
- Graham, J.G., 1979 *The Statistical Account for Scotland: Vol.XIX Orkney & Shetland*. Ilkley
- Graham, J, & Robertson, T., [eds] 1964 *Norderen Lights*. Lerwick
- Gray, M., 1978 *The Fishing Industries of Scotland 1790-1914*. Aberdeen
- Halcrow, A., 1950 *The Sail Fishermen of Shetland*. Lerwick
- Henderson, T., 1964 The night that Mowat was lost *in* Graham &

Robertson [eds] 53-8

Henderson, T., 1978 Shetland boats and their origins *in* Baldwin [ed] 49-56

Irvine, J.J.A., 1982 The location of Shetland's fishing stations 1700-1914, with particular reference to the Far Haaf and Herring fisheries. *Unpublished MA thesis, University of Edinburgh*

Irvine, J.W., 1985 *Lerwick, the birth and growth of an island town*. Lerwick

Morrison, I., 1973 *The North Sea Earls*. London

Morrison, I., 1978 Aspects of Viking small craft in the light of Shetland practice *in* Baldwin [ed] 57-75

Morrison, I., 1981 Maritime catastrophes, their archaeological and documentary legacies: with reflections on the centenary of the Shetland fisheries disaster of 1881. *Northern Studies* 18:20-29

Nicolson, J. 1981 *Shetland's Fishing Vessels*. Lerwick

Smith, H., 1984 *Shetland Life and Trade 1550-1914*. Edinburgh

Thowsen, A., 1969 The Norwegian export of boats to Shetland. *Sjøfartshistorisk Arbok* 145-208