# HEAPS, HUMPS AND HOLLOWS ON THE FOULA SKATTALD

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## A historical framework

Foula is a small, remote, mountainous island west of the Shetland mainland. It is well-located with regard to once-rich fishing grounds, and lies close to the west-side seaway between Norway, north-west Scotland, the Hebrides and Ireland. Its hills provide good grazing; its seabird colonies were once harvested in considerable quantities; its eastern coastal strip contains some good, albeit limited arable land. It would have been attractive, therefore, to early settlers, and it is of little surprise that evidence of prehistoric settlement has periodically come to light. By far the most part of Foula's 'heaps, humps and hollows', however, belong to the last 200-300 years or so of life on the island; and they interrelate, more-or-less, with the overlordship of the Cheynes (c.1572-1696) and the Scotts (early 1700s-1893).

Foula, as part of the lands of Vaila and associated lands in Walls and Westside, formed part of estates in Norse Shetland that were maybe established c.1300, before passing to the Giske family. In 1490, they were apportioned to the Rosen family, following the death of the eldest sister of the last male Giske heir. The last Rosen heir — an heiress — was Fru Gorvel Fadersdatter, who died in Sweden in 1602. By 1572, however, she had not only appointed Robert Cheyne as manager of her lands in Shetland, but had formally leased him the lands. Fru Gorvel transferred her lands to the Danish crown in 1582 (in exchange for lands in Scandinavia); by 1664, through a labrynthine series of grants, charters and mortgages, and by successfully playing off the Danish crown against the Scottish crown, the whole of Foula (under Scots law at least) had been acquired by the Cheynes.

Foula's economy and lifestyle would seem to have changed but little during the overlordship of the Cheynes — though the cottar 'roumes and lands ther called Hamb and Ararer', first recorded in a sasine of 1698 (Vaila Papers, D.10/8/4 — J. Ballantyne/B. Smith pers. comm.), had seemingly been established sometime during the 17th century, if not earlier. By the later 17th century, however, the Cheynes were in financial trouble; they wadsetted heavily to James Mitchell of Girlsta, a Scalloway merchant, and by 1698 they were bankrupt. Mitchell's daughter and co-heir married John Scott of Gibbleston in Fife, grandson of Sir John Scott of Scotstarvet (who had been a member of the Privy Council in 1617, and Lord of Session in 1649); and the couple probably administered Foula from the early years of the 18th century. Along with a number of other Westside properties, including Vaila and Melby, Foula was formally made over to Mitchell's grandson in 1736. The Scotts continued to hold tight rein on Foula until the estate was sold first to Herbert Anderton in 1893, and then to W. Ewing Gilmour. It was sold to the Holbourns in 1900 (Holbourn 1938: 114).

#### Nousts and skeos

During the 18th and 19th centuries in particular, Foula's economy focused so strongly on the sea that it is appropriate to make some reference to surviving features associated with sea-based activities before concentrating on the 'heaps, humps and hollows' on the skattald.

The fisherman had few needs — his boat, gear, clothing and food. He also required access to the shore, and winter shelter for his boat. On Foula, the only sheltered inlet is at Ham Voe (ON *höfn*, haven, harbour + *vágr*, creek, bay), and before the pier was built, small boats simply landed at the rocks or at the head of the Voe. The larger fishing boats that took away cattle to market tied up on the south side of the Voe, at the clett below the Orkneyman's Gait (J. Holbourn 1995). Although a small pier was built in 1914, extended in 1947-48, and reconstructed and further extended in 1989 and 1993 (when the Voe was blasted and deepened), for most of its known history Foula's small boats were overwintered in low hollows or nousts (ON *naustr*, boatshed), hugging the coast a little above high-water mark.



Fig.1. Nousts at the tun o' Ham, Foula. Before the building of the new pier in 1989/93, small boats were drawn up on the ayre during the summer; those remaining in the nousts year-round are old boats, no longer in use. The building just above the ayre once held equipment for the 'Advance' — the former mailboat, a converted sixern. Late 1950s.

## Nousts

Nousts [Fig. 1] are simply boat-shaped hollows, rounded to something approaching a blunted point at the upper end and open at the lower end. Frequently — and particularly at the Riggs, the Ayre o' Ham and the Banks Ayre — the outline of the hollow has been raised by a loose stone dyke, especially at the upper end. These rough walls may be some 4/5 courses high. The atypical example at Ham, with walls apparently rising to as much as 2.3m on the upper side and 0.8m on the lower side, is not in fact a noust. A J. D. Rattar photograph shows it once roofed with an upturned boat and closed off with a wooden door. It housed the gear of the 'Advance', a converted sixern and the island's mailboat until c.1950; it no doubt served also as a store for fishing equipment, and was subsequently used as a saw pit (J. Holbourn 1995).



Fig. 2. Distribution Map: Nousts, Fishing Lodges and Skeos, Foula.

Nousts were scattered in five locations along the island's eastern shore: 7 at *da Riggs*, 5 at *Skeld*, 7 at *da Ayre o' Ham* (or *da Ham Ayre*), 1 at *Ham Little* and 12 at *da Banks Ayre* at the Hametoun — known variously as *da Hame Banks* or *da Doun Banks* [Fig. 2]. They are generally 4.5-7m long, 1.8-2.4m wide and 0.4-0.6m deep at the inner end — though on occasion they may extend to perhaps 8.2m long, or up to 2.7m wide and up to 1.4m deep.

Islanders recall that only fourerns (and smaller boats) were overwintered in nousts; sixerns — though also beached in summer at the Riggs as well as at Ham — were beached for the winter at the head of the Voe where the gradient is but slight and the distance across the fine shingle relatively short (except on a low spring/neap tide when you could wade out to the 'most westerly moorings' in the voe: D. Gear 1973). The sixerns might be drawn up on the ayre itself, or above or west of the Ham doun yard; and on occasion they were even taken into the Ham yard (J. Holbourn 1995).

Surviving nousts feature the use of stone in a number of ways. Sometimes the slightly sloping inner sides of the hollow were lined with flattish stones [Fig. 3]; and stones, as well as pieces of timber, would be used underneath the boat to steady her and *shord* her up (ON *skorða*, to keep balanced, especially to put stays under a boat). Stones were placed inside the boat to weight her down; and the boat would be secured with ropes or heavy iron chains to a large anchor stone (or log, or lump of iron) at the head and foot of the noust (Gear 1983: 66). For it was vital to protect a boat against winter *flans* (Icel/Nor *flana*, to rush on blindly, to tumble) — roaring,



Fig. 3. Nousts at the Banks Ayre, Hametoun, Foula. 1969.

turbulent gales from the Atlantic which collide with the 155-368m high western cliffs of Foula. The winds shoot upwards under great pressure, burst over the top of the cliffs, nearly 3.5km in length, then race down the landward side, sometimes as whirlwinds, sometimes as near vertical gusts. Such winds take away and destroy anything not extremely well-secured — corn and hay stacks, sheds, roofs, wheelbarrows, boats (Mylne 1959: 13; L. A. Holbourn 1969; Gear 1983: 13, 66, 73, 144-5; J. Holbourn 1995).

#### Skeos

In addition to these boat-shaped hollows on the coastal fringe of the skattald, there are a number of other hollows or heaps of stone associated with the fisheries — two rock-cut rectangular 'tanks' where fish were washed, not far from the foundations of the factor's/merchant's Booth below the Haa and the former Shop; carefully-built fish drying 'beaches' of boulders close by the Grøps and Mogil; the remains of a mainland fishermen's summer lodge on the Head o' the Baa immediately south of the Voe (and possibly also at the Riggs, Nort Tuns); and the ruins of numerous *skeos* used to wind-dry those young saithe, haddocks and other small fish caught and eaten locally (ON skja, shed; Nor *skjaa*, a drystone shed, drying hut; Icel *skja*, shelter). Because they were not salted down, they avoided obligatory sale to the owner's factor — part of the ill-favoured truck system.

Skeos were small drystone huts, loosely-built without mortar, with gaps or slits left in the walls through which the wind could pass. In other words, the insides were not 'clayed up'. They were roofed with pones (thin turves) and left unthatched (Mr & Mrs J. A. Gray 1970; R. & J. Isbister 1977). All surviving Foula skeos are highly ruinous, many having been built into the corners of a yard or garden dyke, far enough away from the main cluster of buildings for the wind to be unimpeded. Otherwise, skeos were built on exposed sites on the skattald, close to the low eastern cliffs, better to catch the salt-impregnated winds blown inland off the sea and also to minimise the smell — for 'Nothing can smell stronger than a number of these Skeos placed near one another' (Low 1879[1774]: 90)!

Whilst many houses, therefore, had a skeo close by, there was also a remarkable concentration at *da Skeos/Skoes o' da Ness* [Fig. 2] — one still referred to as *da Skeo o' Goteren*, after one of the medieval farms. The many scattered heaps of stones, formerly skeos, lie close to the cliff-top outside the Bankwell dyke, just south of the Hametoun Burn where it trickles over into the sea.

In former times (though much in decline by the 19th century), not only fish but unsalted meat could be wind-dried in skeos — whether sea birds, beef (*vivda*: ON *voðri*, muscle; Nor *vovde*, *vodve*, muscle), or mutton (*blawn* meat, *reestit* mutton). Furthermore, early 17th century lawsuits for elsewhere in Shetland show that butter, cheese and meal were stored within, and barrels

of *blaand* (ON *blanda*, whey mixed with water) might be left there to mature/ferment (Fenton 1978: 160, 442-3, 451; Gear 1983: 82). Skeos, therefore, served as cold stores for dairy and other products, not simply as curing sheds; they could also be used for drying clothes (Jakobsen 1928-32). Their multi-purpose use closely resembled that of the Faroese *hjallur* — an outhouse for drying and storing, e.g. fish, meat and seabirds, where at least two of the sides were made of vertical, gapped wooden slats which let the salt-laden air blow through. Fish might still be wind-dried in a skeo into the early 20th century; when they became obsolete, however, they gradually fell into disrepair or were adapted to other uses.

#### Kros, buils and dykes

Most of Foula's heaps, humps and hollows have nothing to do with the sea. They are to be found well away from the coastline in association with landbased activities, and it is these features that form the main part of this paper.

Shelters out on the skattald were vital aspects of livestock husbandry on Foula. The stone-built *kro* or fank for rounding up sheep is found widely across the island; and only in the late 1980s was a new and large breeze-block fank built beside the road at Bloburn to replace sundry smaller and older facilities, and be easier of access to vehicular transport. All the kros have splayed stone dykes leading to an inner compartment that might be circular, semi-circular, square or rectangular, and older examples were called a *rett*. A *gripster*, by contrast, was a much smaller enclosure, in the cliffs, where just one or two sheep would be caught by hand.

The C-, T-, S- or Y- shaped *buil* or *snaa-buil* was also built of stone, but was intended more specifically as a place where sheep might shelter in bad weather — for instance, on the lower slope of the Noup, behind the Biggins. Natural hollows might fulfil a similar function, and the term *buil* can refer to anywhere an animal rests. *Da Kubel(s)* on the croft of the Gravins — latterly a squarish, once-cultivated field — was doubtless a one-time resting-place for cows (ON  $k\dot{u}$ , cow +  $b\dot{o}l$ , resting place); *da Green Buils* lie between Harrier and Kruger.

Kros and buils have been examined in fuller detail elsewhere, as have lines of dykes across the South Ness built or re-used in association with the milking of ewes (Baldwin 1978: 97-127). By contrast, the (apparently rather insubstantial) dyke starting just outside of the Hametoun hill-dyke, running uphill behind the Baxter Chapel to the crest of Bodlifield and continuing to roughly the 250m contour, was said by Harry Gear of Mogil to be some 250 years old (first half of the 18th century). It was a *cooie-dyke*, built both to prevent Hametoun cattle from straying northwards and falling in the face of the Hamnafield, and to help lead them home again for milking. This is probably SMR site 2284. The Lammus o' da Wilse is almost on the line of it (W. G. Simpson 1971: pers. comm.). Given the nature of Foula's terrain, there are numerous other such dykes built to keep cattle out of the cliffs. Some were built of stone, some of turf, others just earth with a ditch. The earth and ditch dyke at the southern (Kame) end of the Nort Bank is particularly massive; whilst the longest dyke stretches from the Sneck o' da Smallie at the western end of the Daal, up to and above da Hus a Borri (Seim 1938)/da Hooses o' da Borri. This area of the Ufshins — precipitous and extremely rough slopes ending at the cliff-top edge of the Muckleberg — is a progression of natural hollows and passages with rock fissures which have been blocked off with short lengths of rough dyke.

Such dykes were frequently of turf, or turf on a footing of stone; though with the reorganisation of the infields in the earlier 19th century, the more important — mainly hill-dykes — were built entirely of stone. The most notable stone dyke on Foula is that around the Hametoun. It was built by men by the name of Abernethy from Walls in the 1880s — the south/south-west sections being fashioned with stone, reputedly quarried in large part from the prehistoric site on the South Ness (J. A. Gray 1977, 1988). Lengths of earlier, older hill-dyke survive on the infield, however, both as fossil features on the ground and on the Six Inch Ordnance Survey map for 1900 (surveyed 1877).

Some such earlier dykes undoubtedly suggest pre-enclosure loanings for the movement of stock from byres to hill grazings — notably at the Biggins, Norderhus, Goteren and Kwenister, but with an emerging *closs* at the Brekkans also. They represent an earlier interface between the infield and the skattald. Apart from a further partial *closs* at North Harrier, and a 'very old' dyke partly visible in the same area and running from Bloburn over Skiordar towards the Nort Tuns (J. Gear 1993; J. & I. Holbourn 1989, 1995), known hill-dykes north from the Hametoun are almost all likely to be 19th century in date. Burns and Loch were not in existence in 1860, and Mornington — close by Hamnabrek — was possibly not broken out until 1885-6 (J. A. Gray 1974). Burns is the smallest croft on the island, and perhaps the last, since Peter Gray said that he was 'no longer young' when he and his father finished cutting the peat that created the large rig south of his house (J. Holbourn 1995).

Not all stone dykes were solid like the Hametoun hill-dyke. Loose and untidy-looking single-thickness dykes were favoured by the late Peter Manson of Bloburn, for instance — the carefully-planned gaps between the stones, bridged by larger single stones, allowing easier passage of the strong winds and flans that would have damaged a more substantial dyke in these particular parts of the island (Fenton 1978: 97). Furthermore, many hill-dykes north of the Hametoun (eg at Sloag) were simply old peat banks. The area where peat had been removed, as at Burns and Ham for example, became either new rigs or *ootrun*, bounded by the edge of the peat bank (J. Holbourn 1995).

Hill-dykes apart, other surviving dykes lie within the present-day infield, enclosing a number of specific features — gardens, kailyards and

punds. But just as sections of the older hill-dyke at the Hametoun appear to have been kept in a reasonable state of repair to act as a *cooie-dyke* — to keep cattle on the rough infield grazing or *ootrun* away from the unfenced arable land — so also were shorter dykes used not only to enclose particular fields and yards to keep stock out, but also to enclose particular areas of land within the infield to keep stock in (eg SMR 2273, 2274 — just west of Punds). What survives today of the several *punds* is a low stone footing; at one time they were perhaps heightened by the use of turf in the manner of those *krubs* at the tun o' Ham recorded in 1902 (Baldwin 1984: 47-50; see also Fig. 6 below).

## Krubs

Like punds, yards and skeos, krubs went with individual houses and families, rather than representing wider community resources. The term *krub* appears



Fig. 4. Distribution Map: Krubs on Foula. (Based, with amendments, on the Ordnance Survey 6 Inch Map, Sheet LIV, revised edition 1900).



Fig. 5. Krub cultivated by Edith Gray, Dykes, Foula. Wire-netting helps keep out sheep; the bits of cloth tied to a rope slung across the krub help keep out birds. Tiny kail seedlings have appeared by August. 1969.

to equate with Nor/Swed/Far *krubba*, a crib or box for holding fodder, or possibly with Icel *kro*/Gael *crò*, an enclosure, fold (particularly for sheep). On Foula [Fig. 4], as in many other parts of Shetland, it refers to a small enclosure where kail was sown in July/August, and overwintered as seedlings before transplanting the following April/May into the kailyard. (It is old Shetland kail, particularly good at surviving salt spray, that continues to be grown on Foula). A substantial load of manure is given at transplanting time, but very little, if any, when the seeds are sown as this would bring them on too fast to survive the winter.

Foula *krubs* (the term *plantikrub* was not widely used), are circular almost without exception, and where they are rectangular they appear to represent the re-use of an earlier structure. More generally in Shetland, krubs may be circular, rectangular or square, often within the same district. Shape appears to have been of no significance, unless it reflected simply the nature of the available stone or the skills and/or preferences of the builders.

The single-thickness walls were sometimes built as tightly as possible to try to keep out rabbits. Many, however, were built of evenly-sized stones with gaps between, so as to let the winds blow through without creating a back-draught which would blast the growing seedlings (Fenton 1978: 97). On occasion the choice must have been difficult — but either way they provided a sheltered environment for young and tender plants.

Most Foula krubs [Fig. 5] are single, with an inner diameter of 3-4m and an overall diameter of up to 4.9m — though the largest extends to some

5.6m internal diameter and 6.4m overall. External height averages 0.9-1.4m, on occasion reaching 1.7m according to the lie of the land. If necessary, little surface drains were dug around the outer sides of a krub to prevent it getting waterlogged within. Internally, the application of muild and manure, as well as turf stripped off the skattald and chopped up with a *dellin spade* over a considerable number of years, has raised ground level to give an average internal height of 0.6-1.2m — on occasion over 1.5m. In other words, internal ground level may be 15-30cm or so higher than that outside.

Since brassicas exhaust the soil in a very short time, kail or cabbage roots had to be pulled up each year to prevent re-sprouting, and on Fetlar the old chopped-up turf and earth was to be removed every two or three years from the krubs and new turf added — the old turf being returned to the skattald to replace the newly-cut turf. In practice, this does not seem to have happened — fresh turf and black muild, as well as byre manure simply being added to the krub as required (Fenton 1978: 103-4, 281). Nowadays, no special preparation is necessary on Foula according to Edith Gray (1969), since the soil/muild is already there. She simply adds a very little dung before sowing the seed, and peat ash was also commonly added (J. Holbourn 1995).

Very much the exception is the double krub, where (as beside the Crooked Burn below Harrier) a 'three-quarter' circular krub is built onto the first. Eppie's krub (towards the Doun Banks, close to the Hametoun nousts) is another — originally single but later extended (J. A. Gray 1993). Equally rare is a step built through the wall either side to allow easier access (in another krub close to the Crooked Burn). You normally expected to climb over — or take down a part of the wall.

Stakes were frequently jammed into the cracks towards the top of the wall, protruding outwards and slightly upwards. Strings (or more recently wire netting) were then tied from post to post to discourage sheep and rabbits. Another length of rope, with bits of rag attached at intervals, was often slung across the middle of the krub to scare away birds — though in other parts of Shetland, as now also on Foula, a piece of old fishing net is draped over the whole krub. This is particularly useful in keeping out the *maalies* (fulmars) which, once inside and unable to get out, completely destroy the plants (J. Holbourn 1995).

Surviving krubs are built entirely of stone. Evidence survives, however, of a different kind of building tradition — in stone and turf. For around the tun o' Ham, close to the meeting of the New Tun o' Ham and the back of the Gravins dyke, an early 20th century photograph [Fig. 6] shows only the footings to be of stone: the rest was a *fealie-dyke*, carefully constructed of layers of turf or *feals* cut from the surrounding skattald and weighted down on the wall head with stones.

Turf krubs were the exception, however. They required a lot of maintenance and were only worthwhile on crofts some distance away from a suitable supply of stone (J. Holbourn 1995). Kail needed the minerals from

the clay that underlies the peat, so turf (like stone) krubs were frequently found only where the turf and peat had already been scalped. The stone footings and the infill of muild and chopped-up turf raised the seed bed a little above the surrounding scalped land, providing natural drainage. As with stone-built krubs, these krubs too were topped by wooden stakes, inserted towards the outer edge of the uppermost layer of turf at some 46cm intervals, and angled outwards by about 10°. Three lines of rope tied between the stakes helped keep out unwanted animals. Such turf krubs have not existed on Foula for some considerable time, and they have left virtually no trace in the landscape. For at some point after they became obsolete, the turf walls and well-worked tilth within would likely have been removed to enrich a garden or kailyard (passing first, perhaps, through a byre).

There is no evidence that krubs were in use at an early date; in fact they appear to have developed very much as a response to increasing population and pressure on limited cultivable land in the 18th — early 20th centuries. It would seem that tenants could build and use as many as they wished, and that there was no restriction on their location on the skattald. Eppie's krub, for



Fig. 6. Krubs built of 'feals' or turf, on stone footings. Back of the Gravins dyke, close by its junction with the Ham New Tun, Foula. E.C. Curwen Collection. 1902.

instance, was built by James Andrew Gray's great-grandmother — his mother's grandmother, Eppie Isbister — four generations ago (J. A. Gray 1993). That some Foula krubs, notably at the Hametoun, are within the big stone hill-dyke rather than outside, suggests that they may have been in existence before the reorganisation or planking of the township in the 1830s — though their location on the *ootrun*, close to the inside of this hill-dyke, may simply reflect the continuing need to keep the plants secure from stock grazing *innadykes*. Some krubs within the hill-dyke, however, undoubtedly post-date the abandonment of certain crofts in the late 19th-early 20th century. On the old Bankwell land, for instance (only taken in as a croft c.1873-5, and abandoned early), new krubs were built by the Isbisters and the Ratters in the first decades of the 20th century (J. A. Gray 1974, 1993).

As the indigenous population has died or moved away, most krubs on Foula have been abandoned. Where traditional methods are still in use, however, even though fragmentarily, a few krubs have continued to be dug over and planted. The Mansons of Bloburn used a krub just east of Mucklegrind until 1950; it was taken over by Alastair Holbourn until 1960 and by John and Isobel Holbourn until 1989. One close to Ham was still worked by the late Andrew Umphray of Lerabakk in 1971; and on the skattald close to the eastern edge of the Hametoun, from Kru Kaitrin south to Bankwell, certain members of the Isbister, Gray and Ratter families still work the occasional krub.

## **Roogs and peat cutting**

Krubs represent only one form of building or structure found on the skattald. Others are associated with the intensive use of top turf and peat.

Sometimes over 3.1m deep, peat extends over the whole of the eastern lowland of Foula. It extends up the Daal and also up to and around Overfandel and the Fleck. Being an isolated island, difficult of access and with a still-abundant supply of peat, peat cutting continues to be a regular seasonal activity. Peat banks are generally 'hereditary' until the peat runs out — though if left uncut for more than two years you lost your right to that bank (R. & J. Isbister 1974). New peat banks were allocated by the laird or his factor/ground officer, and the key to selecting a good bank lay in the grass. Short rich grass on top usually indicated better quality; if there were knots of 'horse-flesh' in the peat (a brown/black mass of vegetation), the peat would simply sag and break under the *tuskar* (P. Gray 1974).

Once the ground was dry enough in March, the top turf was (as it still is) flayed off and the feals turned on their edges and left to dry. This made them lighter and cleaner to handle. It was usual to employ an ordinary dellin' spade, generally without a foot-peg and worked horizontally like a breast spade (J. Gear 1969; R. Isbister 1969). The top of the bank was then cleaned, but only just in advance of casting — for if done earlier it would begin to harden over and make it difficult for the peat spade to penetrate. The peat was, and is, cast or cut with the *tuskar* (ON *torfskeri*, peat spade) — generally two or three peats deep and with stepped 'ledges'. This allowed more than one man to work the bank at the same time, and lessened the chance of the face collapsing. The peats can be laid flat on the ground both above and below the bank, or set in gapped 'dykes', three or more rows high on top of the bank, where they are left to dry for about two or three weeks. Once sufficiently dry, they are raised into small conical stooks (some four or five peats, capped with a single peat), or set on edge, herring-bone fashion, each resting along a line of peats laid long edge to the ground. When dry, the peats are either taken directly back to the house, or built in a stack or *roog* on the moor.

Although but temporary in nature, these *roogs* (ON *hrúga*, a heap) were constructed with great care in order to keep the peats dry [Fig. 7]. The bluish-



Fig. 7. Peat 'roog' north of the tun o' Ham, below the Hamnafield, Foula. 1960s.

black peats, generally from the third layer down in the peat bank, dry first and will decay if they get wet again. If not taken home immediately (difficult in the fine days of summer when time was at a premium), they were put into the centre of the roog and protected on the outside by a wall of the larger, more fibrous peats from the upper layer, built with their damper sides outwards (Miss E. Gray 1969). When the outermost peats were dry, they were then all ready to be transported back to the house where they were piled up inside one of the outbuildings or rebuilt carefully as an outdoor stack.

The secret of building roogs or stacks of peats — generally subrectangular, with a flattish top — was to have gently tapering sides, which were not so tapering as to cause the bottom to slip away sideways. The peats in the outer skin, morever, should all stand at the same angle, and the corners were rounded to minimise wind resistance. Rounded corners also allowed best use of the more irregular, wedge-shaped peats which had come from the eroded outer face of the previous year's cutting. Once completed, the top was covered with turves so placed as to allow the rain to trickle down the outside of the roog, rather than penetrate to the hard blue-black peats within (Miss E. Gray 1969; Nicolson 1978: 93-4). These covering turves could be secured with large stones laid on top, though nowadays the ubiquitous nylon fishing net has once again replaced the natural material.

#### Scalping and muildikusses

Above the peat, however, was the turf — which had first to be stripped away to get at the more heavily compacted vegetation. Best practice required these thick divots not to be removed for use as a building material or chopped up in a krub, but to be placed in neat and regular order in the bottom of the peat bank. Here they would grow back in and thereby continue to provide maximum grazing and avoid the spread of large expanses of black boggy wasteland. In practice, this frequently did not happen.

#### Turf off the skattald

In the early years of the 20th century, *feals* or sods/turves were still cut to build not just all but the lowest courses of *krubs*, but the *upperhooses* of water mills, *møldikusses* and parts of dykes, sheephouses, henhouses and byres (P. Gray 1974). No doubt they were also used for duck-houses, gable infills and other similar minor building works. Surviving oral evidence suggest that turf was used more at the tun o' Ham than at the Hametoun or further north — the result of an absence of suitable building stone (either poor quality or difficult to obtain) in an area of deep peat that would have been combed clean for ballast for fishing sixerns based in the Voe. Indeed, except for Mogil and the upper corner of Lerabakk, there is no sandstone in the tun o' Ham. Once abandoned, turf buildings would break down under the impact of frosts, wind and rain, and they tend not to survive in the landscape in the way that ruinous

stone buildings can. However, it was even more likely that obsolete old turf walls close to the house would simply have been broken down and carried off — perhaps to provide earth for a kailyard or krub, but more frequently into the byres. Most old folk kept a cow for as long as they could, and in more recent times at least (when more of the younger islanders had left), if not also formerly, it was much easier to take dry turf from an old building than to cut, *'hurl* or carry it from a piece away' (J. Holbourn 1995). Little evidence would be left on the ground, therefore, except perhaps for occasional grassy or heathery humps following the now-concealed footings of a building or krub.

Feals for building dykes and walls were quite distinct, however, from pones used in roofing. Pones (ON spánn, shingle for thatching; Nor. dial. panna, roof tile) were much thinner than feals. They were roughly rectangular strips of green top turf taken where possible from dry, shallow, clay ground. They were often small, 23cm x 18cm x 5cm thick, though sometimes they could be up to 90cm x 47cm x 7.6cm thick at the centre, thinner at the edges, before drying out (Mrs A, Gray 1970). A flaughter spade such as that owned by Scott Umphray, South Harrier, in the 1950s-1960s, and referred to on Foula as a *muckle shovel*, might be used to pare off the turf; more generally it was the ordinary Shetland delling or digging spade. Just as for a peat bank, the tough upper surface of the moor was first notched with a ripper - a 25-30cm iron blade, set roughly at right angles into the end of a 1.2m long wooden shaft and sharpened on the outer edge. According to Peter Gray, the rinner was first introduced to Foula sometime between the 1870s and the 1890s; his own was made by Thomas Isbister, probably in the 1930s (J. Gear 1969; R. Isbister 1969; Miss K. Manson 1969; P. Gray 1974).

#### Scraping off the muild

In John Holbourn's youth, turf and sludge from field drains would be collected in *roogs* and left to rot before being spread on the rigs. This was a very different process, however, from *scalping* or stripping the surface off the skattald — whether the top turf alone, or the additional practice of scraping off the upper layers of fibrous peat, sphagnum or light mossy earth, once this had dried out following the removal of the top turf and, where appropriate, before peat-cutting.

On Foula, scraping muild was carried out with a *shul* (L Sc. *shool*, shovel) [Fig. 8]. Modern examples, referred to simply as *scrapers*, have a rectangular board nailed at right angles to the end of a long shaft; with earlier versions the board, with cut-off upper corners, was attached obliquely at approximately  $45^{\circ}$  and could have a bevelled edge. In design this is very similar to the *møldin-klubb*, *møldinklog*, or *mildin-stump/-stick* used variously in different parts of Shetland to smooth down the top soil after sowing (ON *mylda*, to cover with; Far/Nor, to smooth the muild). And it is not dissimilar to the Faroese *klárur*, used to pound rather than smooth the



Fig. 8: A 'shul' to scrape up dried peat muild on Foula. The muild was used as byre litter, then added to the midden for spreading on krubs, yards or rigs. 1971.

muild (Williamson 1948: 208, 210) — though it is the bottom, outer edge of the *shul* that is used for scraping, not the flat face. Pushed away from you, the *shul* could also be used for spreading manure (R. & J. Isbister 1974). Traditionally blades, like shafts, are of wood, though a metal head was noted in 1969.

An area of skattald thus scraped for byre muild was known on Foula as a *møldiblett* (ON *møld*, earth; Far./Icel. *blettur*, spot) or a *møldigrøp* (ON *gróp*, pit, hollow) — whence the house name *da Grøps* (=Magdala) in the tun o' Ham (R. & J. Isbister 1974). (*Mosiblett*, by contrast, is a mossy spot on Taing Head, east of the Sloag: Seim 1938). Gathered in the summer, the granulated peat or muild was intended as winter bedding for livestock, in order to save precious straw for fodder. In the process it absorbed urine and was used to bulk out the manure. In John Holbourn's time it all went into the midden — either every day, or every few days depending on the number of kye and the amount of storage in the byre. In earlier times, when corn for meal was the most important crop, great care was taken with the middens; and although also dug fresh into the land in spring, seaweed was often added in layers to rot in the midden. There were, however, two kinds of midden. The winter middens were the ones furthest away from the byres — folk had time enough to spare then, and these middens were normally covered with feals to prevent leaching. Excess fish, by contrast, might well end up in the summer middens, nearest the byres. These old middens, then, could be some distance from the buildings, convenient for spreading in the spring (perhaps with an added creelful of coarse sand from the shore). They created definite hollows in the landscape, amongst the rigs (Gear 1983: 138; J. Holbourn 1995).



Fig. 9. Distribution Map: Stone-Built Muildikusses. Foula.

## Storing the muild

Muild could be taken direct to the croft in a *kessi* or creel carried on the back by a rope around the shoulders, and it was stored in a special corner of the byre. Alternatively, and since gathering muild was a summer activity when time was at a premium, it could first be piled up on the skattald and protected from the elements in a *møldikus* (ON \**møldar*, earth, muild + ON *kos*, heap).

A low circular wall was built on the *møldigrøp*; the scraped-off dried top peat (or sphagnum moss) was piled inside, and the conical structure roofed. In more sheltered parts of the island, and generally where peat was being cut concurrently for fuel (notably, in recent times, between Ham and Harrier), wall and roof were built of *feals* — often secured since the late 1960s with bits of old seine net weighted down with stones. In more exposed places, one family in particular opted for stone-built structures, and it is these examples, abandoned by a rapidly declining indigenous population, that have survived, atypically, and been mistaken for some kind of cairn (Simpson 1968: 315-6). Whilst turf-built muildikusses seem to have been erected amongst the peat banks during and beyond the 1970s, by their very nature they are impermanent. They were in use for just a year or so, whilst a particular piece of skattald was being cut and scalped; then, thereafter, just like turf-built krubs and other turf-built structures, they began to disintegrate. They disappeared altogether once the peat underneath them was cut.

Identifiable, albeit heavily decayed stone-built muildikusses survive east of the road between the Baxter Chapel and the southern edge of the tun o' Ham. Other likely sites are at Overfandel, Netherfandel and in the Daal, but the best examples are at the North End, on the Skiordar ridge and exceptionally — on the tail of Soberlie where the peat cover is thin and lying on rock [Fig. 9]. Examples on Skiordar and Soberlie [Fig. 10] are some 2.7-3.8m diameter, to an overall height of up to 2m. Actual wall height varies between 0.5-1.8m according to the angle of slope; and the inner wall of carefully constucted courses of stone 0.5-0.6m thick is reinforced by an outer wall of large, long and narrow, flat stones laid upright at an angle against it. This 'reinforcement' appears to echo a building tradition characteristic of some turf-built muildikusses (or small roogs), where photographs from the 1960s show that feals in the lowest course were sometimes stacked upright on the short edge. This would help protect the heaps both from collapsing outwards and from being dislodged by livestock or by flans. On occasion, some of these stone-built muildikusses apparently incorporated a narrow entrance way; others are a complete circle, all the muild being put in from the top. In all cases the conical structure was roofed with flattish, roughly overlapping pieces of stone [Fig. 11]. To extract the muild, therefore, the stone roof and part of the sides would be dismantled — to be rebuilt only if the muildikuss were to be re-used.

According to the late Alastair Holbourn, the stone muildikusses around Hamnabrekk were built by Georgesons and Mansons, relatives of the

Mansons of Bloburn. Peter Manson of Bloburn, helped by his sister, the late Katie Manson, built the Soberlie muildikus not long before his death c.1960. It was the last stone-built muildikus to be built on Foula (Miss K. Manson 1969), and between 1969 and 1993 suffered significant deterioration and partial collapse. In another 10 or 20 years it may well be a fairly shapeless and largely unrecognisable rickle of stones, even more easily misinterpreted as some indeterminate 'cairn'. In earlier times, however, like peat roogs and fealie krubs, it would likely not have survived at all, except perhaps as a slightly raised piece of ground surrounded by the remains of a circle of stones. For once the natural resource was exhausted, its purpose became obsolete, and another muildikus would be built on a suitable area of skattald nearby.



Fig. 10. Muildikus on the tail of Soberlie, Nort Tuns, Foula. 1971.



Fig. 11. Decaying muildikus on Skiordar, Nort Tuns, Foula. The covering stones have begun to fall away, revealing the friable muild stored within but long abandoned. 1969.



Fig. 12. Muildikus on Skiordar, Foula, surrounded by artificially bleak, boulder-strewn moorland. Scalped land on the tail of Soberlie is also clearly visible. 1969.

## The introduction and impact of scalping

Scalping was not popular with landowners or visitors to Foula. For once too much of the overlying peat had been removed and the bedrock exposed (as along the slopes of the Daal, or outside the Hametoun dyke, or on the Skiordar/Soberlie ridge), serious soil and gully erosion took place, further removing peat, soil and pasture [Fig. 12]. One account refers to 'the bleak moor, a veritable picture of desolation, owing to the wanton scalping, and dotted with the ugly little mouldie heaps. Here too is death where once all was green and fair' (Holbourn 1938: 180). Other landowners thought similarly. Long ago the Scotts tried to forbid the practice - albeit to no effect — when the entire population of the Hametoun reputedly received a subsequently unenforced notice to quit (*ibid*: 180). Made illegal under late 19th century crofting legislation, and an offence for which a crofter could be evicted (L. A. Holbourn 1972), scalping has continued through to modern times. That bare areas are now beginning slowly to grow over again is undoubtedly welcome, and some re-colonisation is by non-peat-forming plant communities — although invasion by crowberry perhaps suggests a reversion to peat in the very long term (J. Holbourn 1995). Meantime, it may be that in certain places, and over the medium to long term, scalping - however unintentionally or unscientifically - could have brought about an 'improvement' in the potential vegetation. Regeneration owes as much to reduced trampling by cattle, however, as it does to reduced scalping (J. Grav 1988), and reflects the terminal decline in traditional crofting life. Reintroductions of stock at the South Biggins apart (and the grazing there of first a few goats, later of a cow, has been restricted to the infield), the last four cows were removed from Foula in 1974.

The lands on Foula laid waste by peat-cutting, turf-cutting and scalping are clear to see [Fig. 13]. The distribution of those lands, morever, reinforces the view that the Hametoun was the primary centre for settlement (Baldwin 1985: 33-64). At one time, according to James Andrew Gray, you could have rolled an egg from the top of the Noup to the back of the Goteren dyke! Gradually the skattald surrounding the Hametoun, up the Daal and along the sides of the Noup was stripped, exhausted and degraded (with the exception only of a small area left around Kru Kaitrin), and the inhabitants of the Hametoun had to look to the skattald around and north of the tun o' Ham for fuel, turf and muild.

At Kru Kaitrin, by contrast, the land was left unscalped, reflecting island traditions that it was once inhabited by one Katherine Killyoch or Kirlyoch (R. Isbister 1974) — otherwise referred to as Karioch/Kurioch/Kirkyoch (A. Umphray 1974), but also as Asmundder by Mrs Mima Gear and by Professor Holbourn (1938: 45-55), who suggested she was born in 1568. She was supposedly descended directly from the old Norse families — Foula's last Norse heiress and the 'last Queen of Foula'. Whether the land was left unscalped by order of the landowners or out of respect is unclear. The



Fig. 13. Distribution Map: Peat Cuttings and Scalped Lands, Foula. 1969.

old people, however, told James Andrew Gray not to go and dig there (J. A. Gray 1974, 1993), and the Royal Commission noted that ashes and a number of bits of pottery had been found in the small enclosure some years previous to 1930 (RCAHMS 1946: 153, site 1687).

As with krubs, there is no early evidence for scraping muild on Foula. According to island tradition, it coincided with the arrival of (H)ellen/Ellie Walterson. She was a great-great-great-grandmother of the late Bobbie Isbister, and reputedly descended from one or two Faroese who had drifted ashore on the Westside in bad weather and ended up in Walls. From Dale, Westside, so the story goes, she came to Foula to marry one Peter Jamieson who lived in the Brekkans/the Grind (Hametoun) before moving to Breidfit. This might put her arrival on the island as late 1700s/early 1800s. She was said to be a wise woman, by some a witch (Holbourn 1938: 95-7; J. Gray 1977, 1993; R. Isbister 1974) — perhaps because she retained words no

longer understood in Shetland? By this time — 100 years on from when the Scotts first acquired Foula — the haaf fisheries were well-developed, the population had increased substantially and the lands had been much divided to accommodate the fishermen and their families. Her husband, it is said, died early leaving her with five small children to feed, so that whether or not she introduced to Foula the practice of scalping muild, and whether or not she later remarried (she is said later to have married Andrew Jamieson, but is also referred to as Mrs Peterson), it is evident that a widow with five children would have had to maximise her land resources — for she could hardly go off to the fishing. She would have had every reason to scalp the skattald.

At the same time, we must remember that the arable heartland on Foula had always been limited, and that from at least the mid/later 18th century, the amount of land available to each family, particularly bere land, was much too small. Bere, therefore, was always grown in the same place, and the same land dug over each year. It was never rested and required a good deal of manure each year — hence the growing dependence on scalping. Fresh muild was added in the byre each night and was cleared out every 3-4 days. In addition, feals were cut and placed under the cows' hind feet, and these too were taken out and added to the midden every few days. Given that the muild was well-impregnated with byre manure, it is hardly surprising that scalping was generally accepted as producing much better crops; and it is hardly surprising that families each had maybe seven substantial muildikusses (J. A. Gray 1977; R. Isbister 1977).

#### Conclusion

The landscape of humps, heaps and hollows as we see it today, therefore, is largely a legacy of the Scotts, superimposed upon a frequently indeterminate blend of fragmentary prehistoric and medieval features - notably burial cairns, burnt mounds, ecclesiastical sites and other earlier landuse and settlement features. To generate substantial income from their properties primarily through developing the commercial fisheries — the Scotts needed fishermen. They allowed the sub-division of the earlier farms; they imported new families (mainly from their other Westside properties); and they encouraged the breaking out of new small-holdings on the skattald, particularly in areas outside and to the north of the Hametoun. It would appear that they were 'in great wrath', nonethless, when they discovered that the Nort Tuns had been broken out; and they unsuccessfully sought to get the people to break out land in *da Green Buils* instead — an area of relatively sheltered skattald between Harrier and Kruger, where sheep naturally gathered and had improved its fertility (Baldwin 1978: 117). Ironically, the Nort Tuns never did prove particularly successful, on account of the salt blast (J. Holbourn 1995).

In due course, mainly in the early 19th century, the Scotts reorganised the townships to give small consolidated holdings to a population far in excess of what the island could realistically support from the land; and it is this landscape, now largely uncultivated and fossilized, that survives to the present-day. Because none of the 18th-19th century tenants were in any position to increase their holdings, or to take advantage of the improved agricultural methods and equipment increasingly favoured on larger farms elsewhere, they were entirely dependent upon traditional subsistence practices which, perforce, were further refined and extended under the pressure of a greatly increased population. Thus it would be that — although krubs and scalping would seem to be essentially 18th century developments — they are rooted somewhat deeper perhaps in the island's Norse past.

The essentially detrimental impact of these later practices is clear for all to see. The responsibility for environmental degradation does not lie directly with the ordinary people of Foula, however, who had little option but to skin the land in order to survive; rather does it lie with those proprietors, merchants and factors who sought to exploit the resources of the sea — as they did the island's human population — in such a way and to such a degree that the quality of life and environment on Foula declined in proportion perhaps to the increased wealth that accrued to themselves.

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