

NOTHING BUT A SHEPHERD AND HIS DOG

The Social and Economic Effects of Depopulation in Fetlar, Shetland¹

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Adam Grydehøj: What do you think Fetlar will be like in 50 years?

Annie May Robertson: Finished. Nix... There'll be nobody here in less than 50 years' time.

(From an interview with Annie May Robertson, a 91 year old native of Fetlar)

Abstract

Fetlar, one of the peripheral islands in the Shetland archipelago, is blessed with rich soil, a local shop, frequent ferry connections and a strong sense of community. Nevertheless, it is an island at risk, its population having dropped to just 48 individuals. This article compares the situation in Fetlar with those of Shetland's other peripheral islands, some of which are now home to stable, economically successful communities and others of which are social disaster zones, with dwindling populations riven by feuding. Taking into account social, political, and economic factors, the article analyses why Fetlar has proven particularly vulnerable to depopulation. With the help of ethnological fieldwork, the article looks at how Fetlar's problems have affected the local community, how members of this community are coping with their island's decline, and what they are doing in an attempt to reverse it. Finally, the article argues for more focused and sensitive investment into the community by the municipal authorities.

Keywords: Fetlar, Shetland, Depopulation, Economic Development

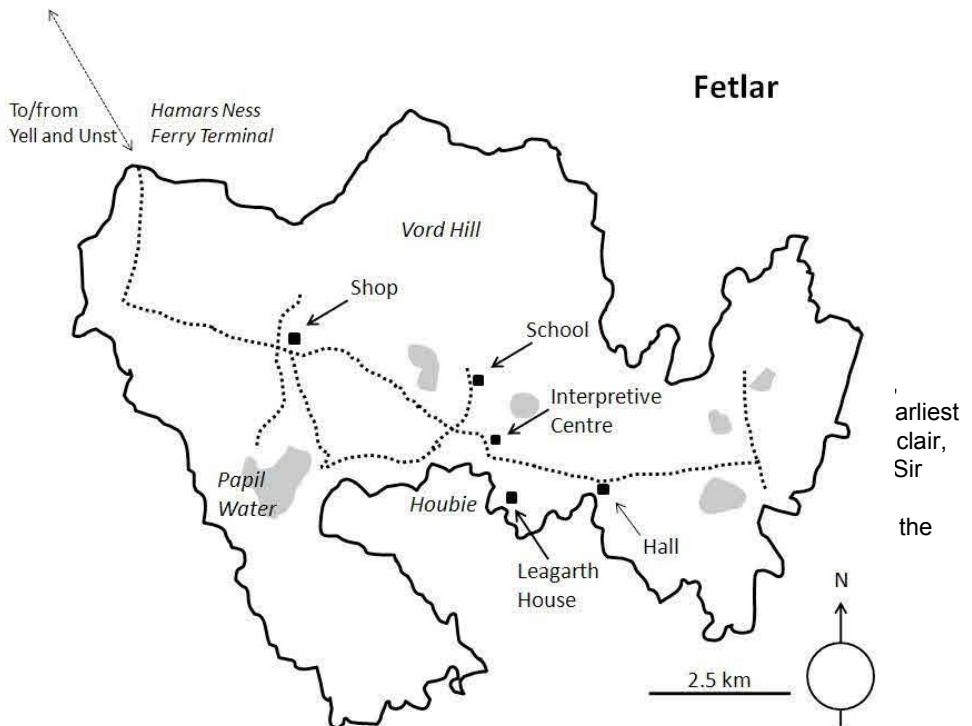
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At 39 km² (for comparison, about half the size of Guernsey), Fetlar is the fourth-largest island in the Shetland archipelago. Archaeological remains suggest that Fetlar has been inhabited for the past 5000 or so years, and local legend goes so far as to say that the island was the arrival site of Shetland's first Viking immigrants 1200 years ago. Settlers would, after all, have good reason for appreciating the island: Fetlar is known as 'The Garden of Shetland', an epithet acquired thanks to the richness of its soil, especially in relation to the peaty, rocky ground of neighbouring Yell and Unst. Nevertheless, Fetlar has long been associated with forebodings of doom. Local tradition holds that in the 19th Century a now-unidentified elderly woman predicted a

series of events that would precede the island's depopulation. One version of this prophecy goes as follows:

There will be a mansion on the Ripples
Soldiers on Vord Hill
A harbour in Papil Water
And nothing but a shepherd and his dog.²

Even today, some Fetlar residents have faith in the prophecy's accuracy, noting that the first two preconditions have already occurred, and the third seems imminent.



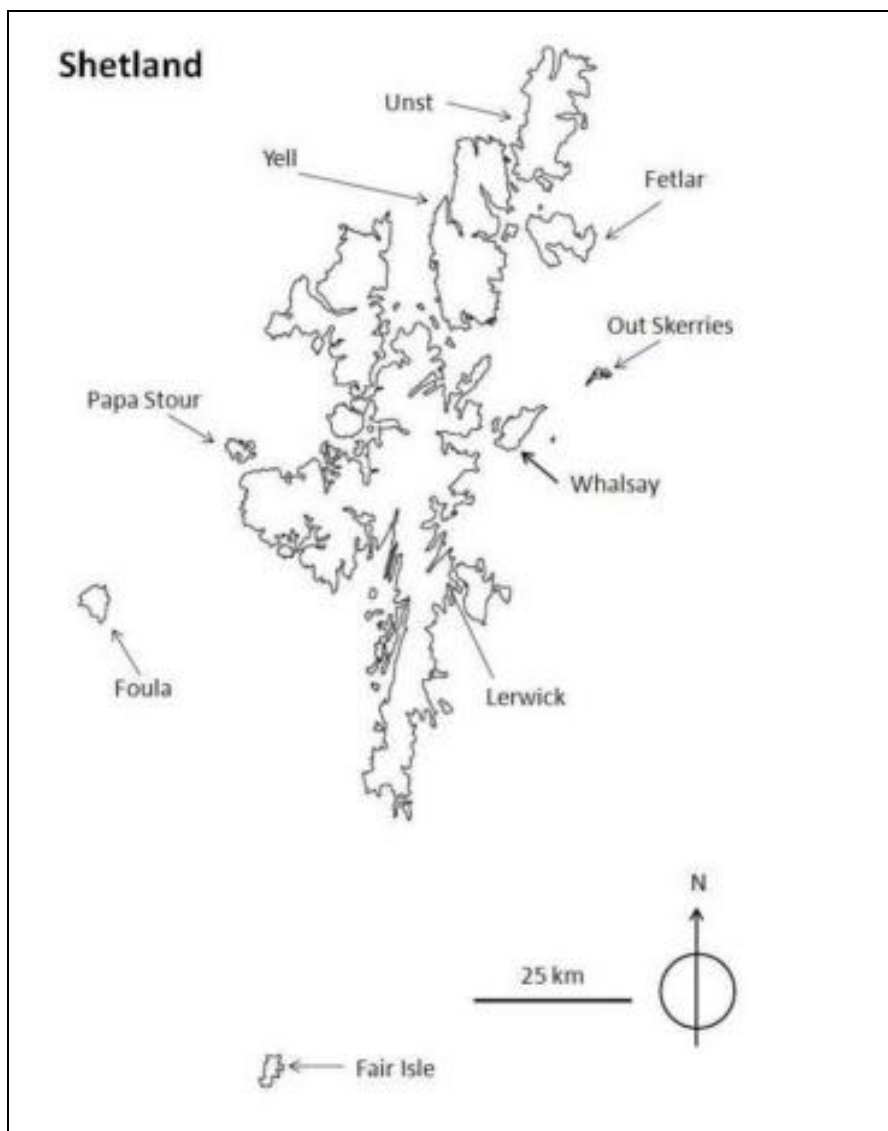


Figure 2 - Map of Shetland, showing locations of the peripheral islands ³
(Adapted from Shetlopedia, 2008)

As Table 1 shows, although Fetlar's earlier population density was not exceptional, its relative decrease has been exceptionally dramatic, dropping by at least 93.7% since 1841. Among Shetland's peripheral islands, only the much-smaller Papa Stour has fared worse, having dropped by 97.6% and gone from 46 residents per km² to 1.1 per km² during these years.

Island, Area	1841	1891	1931	1961	1971	1991	2001	2008
Yell, 215 km ²	2653	2529	1883	1155	1191	1075	957	1000*
Unst, 122 km ²	2808	2961	1341	1151	1140	1055	720	600*
Fetlar, 39 km ²	761 ¹	363	217	127	101	90	86	48
Whalsay, 20 km ²	628	927	900	764	1025	1041	1034	1000*
Foula, 13 km ²	215	239	118	54	45*	42	32*	24*
Papa Stour, 8.3 km ²	382	244	100	55	35*	35*	24	9*
Fair Isle, 7.7 km ²	232	223	108	64	69*	67	69	70*
Skerries, 2.6 km ²	122	164	110	108	88*	87	76	80*
Shetland as a Whole, 1466 km ²	30558	28241	21421	17814	22768	22522	21988	21880 (2006)*

Table 1 - Populations of Yell, Unst, and Shetland's Peripheral Islands ⁵

(* = Estimated)

These insular population drops are striking, particularly since they far outpace those of the archipelago as a whole, which benefited from an influx of money and workers in 1970s, when the Sullom Voe Oil Terminal was built on the Shetland mainland. Because the new oil jobs were not associated with the traditional industries of fishing, agriculture, and livestock rearing, they failed to bolster the populations of Shetland's outlying islands: Instead, the oil era contributed to Shetland's urbanisation as people from the periphery relocated to the central town of Lerwick, where many of the new jobs were based, not least those in the burgeoning municipal authority, the Shetland Islands Council (SIC) (Cohen, 1987: 165-166). This is not to say, however, that oil has had a purely negative impact on Shetland's peripheral communities. The SIC – enriched and empowered by the new industry – set about developing Shetland's infrastructure and apparatuses for cultural and economic development (Shetland Local Economic Forum, 2002: 5), with the result that, at present, the SIC is the largest per capita employer of any municipal authority in Scotland (Reference Economic Consultants, 2006: 35). The local government can thus supply Shetland's periphery with an admirable range of services. For example, with the exception of Papa Stour (which has no school-age children), all of the peripheral islands are supplied with a primary school. Fetlar Primary School, for its part, is truly cutting edge, complete with an interactive digital white board. A further provision for local children is the well-outfitted youth club at Fetlar Community Hall. Fetlar is even blessed with that standard-bearer of insular vitality, a local shop.

	Whalsay	Fetlar	Skerries	Papa Stour	Foula	Fair Isle
Departures per Week	122	57	13	10	3.5	3.5

Table 2 - Departures per Week to Shetland's Peripheral Islands, Summer 2008

The peripheral islands have also been supplied with relatively frequent ferry connections to the Shetland Mainland or, in the case of Fetlar, to Yell and Unst. One oft-mentioned impediment to life in Fetlar is that the ferry schedules do not permit residents to make the two-hour commute to Lerwick in time for normal work shifts. Be this as it may, Whalsay is the only one of the peripheral islands from which such a commute is possible, and a comparison of Figures 3 and 4 does not suggest that number of ferry departures is a decisive factor in insular Shetland population.

With fewer residents than the miniscule Fair Isle and Skerries, Fetlar seems to be in a particularly vulnerable position. Although Fetlar's geographic expansiveness may prevent total abandonment (a fate conceivable for Papa Stour and Foula), it is a problem for development that Fetlar's many apparent advantages have been insufficient to secure a stable population: After all, the island is the fourth largest in Shetland, it is the most fertile, it is supplied with a school and youth club, and it boasts frequent ferry connections. Why has Fetlar failed to regain its step while smaller, less-fertile, and more peripheral Shetland islands (Skerries and Fair Isle) have so far managed to survive both 19th Century Clearances and 20th Century industrialisation?

The case of Fetlar is all the more concerning because the island is home to a vibrant, generous, welcoming community. This is in stark opposition to Foula and Papa Stour, the two other peripheral islands that seem to be in terminal decline. Papa Stour in particular is infamous for communal ill-will, with stories on the locals' fractious dealings with one another occasionally making the national news (for example, Crawford, 2003; Martin, 2005; and Urquhart, 2008). Foula's situation is less extreme, but community relations are not ideal there either (Henley, 2008). Furthermore, both islands are affected by high rates of joblessness, placing many residents at the mercy of unemployment support, with all the social and economic insecurity that such a position entails.

Fetlar has escaped these troubles and enjoys strong community relations. The island even seems free from the studied social wariness and conformity that plays such a role in the Whalsay described by Cohen (1987) and the Sumbøur (Faroe) analysed by Gaffin (1996). Every Saturday night, the bar opens at Fetlar Community Hall and about half the island's population – residents of all ages, both natives and incomers – gather to enjoy themselves with small talk, music, and drink. So far are the people of Fetlar from having descended into feuding that they have set up a Fetlar Development Group in order to bring new jobs to the island. Fetlar would thus appear perfectly placed for drawing new residents and retaining old ones. This has not, however, been the case.

Fetlar has been known as a failing community for some time: Already in 1912, the Yell-based antiquarian, Lawrence Williamson, referred to the island as "the ancient home of my fathers, now going to wreck" (Cohen, 1983: 264). In the 1970s, a prominent Shetland writer labelled it "a problem island... with a fast declining population" (Nicolson, 1979: 14-15). At the time, partial blame was placed on the island's not

having an all-weather harbour. Indeed, it was only with the building of the old pier in the mid-1970s that ferries were able to dock at Fetlar; previously, it had been necessary for the ferry to lay about a quarter of a mile offshore and for cargo and passengers to be transported between the ferry and the island in a small 'flit boat'. The harbour is still an issue today since even the new pier built a few years ago is unusable under certain weather conditions for lack of a breakwater. It is easy to look at the thriving of Skerries' and Whalsay's fishing- and fish processing-based economies and to attribute them to the islands' harbours. This attribution may be correct, but there are many communities in Shetland that possess good harbours but that do not possess professional fishermen. Nevertheless, there are those in Fetlar who are confident that Fetlar could become a base for scalloping and fishing operations (Brimacombe, 2008b), noting that the island is "sitting in the midst of some of the best fishing grounds in Shetland" (Boxall, interview, 2008).

Figure 3 - Kenny Ritchie and his flock at his croft (2007)

Traditionally, crofting (growing crops and raising livestock) was the primary occupation of Fetlar residents, to an even greater extent than it was elsewhere in Shetland, where deep-sea fishing predominated. Over time, however, the decline of purely-subsistence agriculture greatly reduced the number of people 'living off the land' that Fetlar could support, and this has resulted, as it has on Foula (Gear, 1983: 18), in the amalgamation of crofts. The negative effects of this concentration of property have been exacerbated by the Shetland-wide tendency toward decreased soil quality as crofting ceased to be a full-time occupation and sheep were given access to ever-wider swathes of arable land (Cohen, 1987: 98-110). There is also local concern about absentee crofters: At the moment, a large parcel of land is being held by a man in Yell, who raises sheep on the property but does not contribute to the community. Some Fetlar residents feel that it is necessary to block further encroachments of this sort.

Although no households in Fetlar are today entirely dependent on crofting, most able-bodied residents are involved in crofting to some extent, if only because it is difficult to find full-time employment, and raising hill-sheep is an inexpensive way of getting some meat in the freezer. Indeed, when Roger Brimacombe (aged 61) and Naomi Smith arrived in Fetlar in the winter of 2006, Roger's part-time job at the Fetlar Interpretive Centre did not start until the summer, so the two incomers were driven to undertake the traditional subsistence occupations of inshore fishing and harvesting limpets (small shellfish that cling to rocks in the tidal zone) to get by in the meantime.

The most pressing issue facing the island at the moment is Fetlar Primary School's impending closure. At the time of writing, it is anticipated that two students (age nine and ten) will be enlisted for the Fall 2008 school term. Unless a new child moves to the island, the school will close in summer 2010, when the last of the present pupils goes on to study at Lerwick's Anderson High School, which provides residential facilities for students from outlying areas. School closure need not be permanent, for if a new family moved to the island, the school could simply reopen again. The problem, like so much in Fetlar, comes down to jobs.

When I first visited Fetlar in May 2007, my wife and our nearly three year old son accompanied me. We were staying with Jane (aged 60) and Kenny Ritchie (aged 61), the former of whom is a Fetlar native who brought the latter home from Edinburgh in 1973. My wife and I went to the Fetlar Community Hall with Kenny on Saturday night, and I fell to talking with Roger Brimacombe, of whom I had heard previously. After a short while, he suggested – with no apparent irony – that, as it seemed that my wife and I liked the place, we should move to Fetlar. Our son was the perfect age since he would be ready to start at the school in the vital 2010 Autumn term. This, he told me, would provide the island with four jobs: Headmaster, teacher, assistant teacher and cook.

At the time, I was struck by how the need to preserve jobs and attract incomers could result in such social desperation. Although no one else has quite so open about it, over the course of my three visits to Fetlar, I became accustomed to strong hints that my family should relocate to the island. I also found that rumours of potential incomers were a constant topic for discussion among the islanders. The one subject could even evolve into the other, as I discovered one evening when Jane and Kenny brought me to speak with two of Fetlar's most-elderly residents, Helen Jamieson (age 86) and Annie May Robertson (age 91). At one point during the evening, Kenny brought up the news that someone had applied to rent a property in a local SIC-owned housing development:

Jane Ritchie: Right, I see. Who told you— ? Did you hear that?

Kenny Ritchie: Paul (Gill).

Jane Ritchie: Oh, Paul said. That's the teacher.

Helen Jamieson: Oh, yes, I know. Very good.

Jane Ritchie: That's nice. I hope that...

Kenny Ritchie: He was tryin' to persuade Adam to move up as well.

Annie May Robertson: (To Adam Grydehøj) Well, there's a couple of empty houses you could easily move into here.

Kenny Ritchie: (Jokingly) And you could study the folklore.

Annie May Robertson: Oh, you could... You couldna find better neighbours anywhere.

Jane Ritchie: No, no. They're brilliant. I'll admit that. I can tell you that, Adam.

Annie May Robertson: Open doors all the time. Walk in any time. There's no doors shut here.

Jane Ritchie: It's true.

Annie May Robertson: Well, you shut them at night, maybe, when you're going to bed. But, but anybody is welcome.

In Fetlar, population worries have made all residents potential salespeople for the island.

This welcoming attitude is, in my experience, unusual for small, insular communities: The necessity of acquiring new residents does not always outweigh suspicion of incomers, a suspicion that might be reasonable in light of the divisive effects of immigration to Papa Stour (Crawford, 2003), Foula (Gear, 1983: 209-210), and even Unst (Hunter, 2007). Not so in Fetlar: The local shop is owned by Nic Boxall, who immigrated from England in 1992 after having learned about the island from a Fetlar Community Council radio and magazine campaign advertising for new residents. Even more remarkably, Brimacombe, an Englishman who just came to the island two years ago, has been welcomed as an active participant in the local community. So has his partner, Naomi, despite her being the first ethnic-minority resident in Fetlar's recorded history. Also notable for his contribution to the community is Paul Gill (age 36), the schoolteacher, originally from England, who has recently been elected chairman of the Fetlar Development Group, an organisation of which Boxall and Brimacombe are also members.

Eager to find out more about the problems facing Fetlar and what is being done to solve them, I contacted Boxall by telephone in May 2008. Since Fetlar's population is so low, Boxall only keeps his shop open for two hours a day, five days a week. Even so, business "just about breaks even". When I asked him whether Fetlar has an unemployment problem like Foula and Papa Stour, he responded:

Nic Boxall: Of the working population, I think there are only, maybe, two who would qualify as unemployed... There's nobody here who's unemployed who wishes to be employed, I think, is probably the answer to that.

Adam Grydehøj: It's just hard to think of where there'd be space for new jobs.

Nic Boxall: You've got to create something for those people, really, or have something available to them. Because the jobs that are here are taken up. I mean, people are working at them... And some of them are working long hours because we're maybe doing two or three different jobs. I mean, I've got, I mean, I'm working the shop, the post office, I'm a retained firefighter, I've got 19 hours a week with the water board, um, I'm doing bed and breakfast, coastguard occasionally... and I'm responsible for the SIC campsite.

In a sense, Fetlar's economy is nearly as artificial as those of Foula and Papa Stour. Some residents have told me that the coming of the oil era has had no great impact on Fetlar, yet this is an overly-simplistic view of things. Even though few Fetlar residents have been directly employed by the oil industry, it is scarcely imaginable that the SIC could support Fetlar's current level of services without its oil profits (both directly and

through taxation). Consider, for instance, Boxall's many jobs: Besides the bed and breakfast and the shop (from which he makes little profit), the rest of his employment is public-sector work. Similarly, the ferry plying the triangular route between Yell, Unst, and Fetlar employs five Fetlar men; Kenny Ritchie drives a rubbish collection truck in Yell and Unst; Fetlar Primary School has three employees; Bob Leaper delivers the mail; Roger Brimacombe works at the Fetlar Interpretive Centre; a number of people are employed as home helps for the elderly and infirm; and when you add up all the people like Nic Boxall with no primary employment but just a jumble of marginal jobs related to maintaining Mainland-quality public services in Fetlar, you find that nearly every working resident of Fetlar is dependent on either the SIC or another public body for employment.

These jobs exist because people live in Fetlar, but with the exception of Boxall's shop (which receives SIC support), none of the jobs or businesses represent the community investing money in itself. Fetlar is sustained by municipal and national public funds, yet these funds make little long-term contribution to the community. Furthermore, dependence on a public-provisions economy is self-limiting: Fetlar Primary School will never employ more than a handful of people unless the population climbs to undreamed of heights. Therefore, quite pragmatically, Fetlar residents are often reduced to thinking of local employment as a zero-sum system, one in which the total number of jobs is constant. For example, Boxall tells me about the postman, Bob Leaper:

I mean, there's a possibility of there being some sort of potential there in the future, in the fairly near future, because Bob is approaching retirement age... Something that the Council has funded in the past was, uh, a leaving scheme for crofters to increase, encourage crofters to give up land, they got an outgoing payment as it were. They would be given money to give up their crofts, effectually. And there's the possibility of there being some scope for that in the near future, I would think. Because quite a few of the guys are getting on in years and maybe looking to give some of that up. So, at least that then gives people a basis for a start.

Because Fetlar passes along the costs of health care, social care, and pensions to higher authorities, the community sees retirement as beneficial since retirees do not fill the sought-after job slots. As far as the SIC is concerned, when Leaper retires, he will be yet another member of the archipelago's aging population who is in need of support. For Fetlar, however, Leaper's retirement will effectively add a job to the island: someone else will start delivering the post for a living, and he will start receiving his pension.

While it is necessary to work on attracting visitors and new residents, attention is also being paid to considering how these people might help support the community once they are on the island. For example, the people of Fetlar have been active in marketing the island as a tourist destination, both for ornithologists and general-interest visitors. Yet when tourists do come to the island, however much they may enjoy their stay, there is very little on which they can spend money besides overnight accommodation, should they choose this rather than opting for a day trip. Not even Boxall's shop can really cater to visitors: Because of the store's low turnover, Boxall operates sales of fresh food and many other supplies on a pre-order basis, meaning that all but the best-prepared of tourists will have trouble purchasing so much as an apple there. And even so, it must be recalled, the shop produces only negligible profit. It is a chicken-or-the-

egg problem: you cannot run a profit-making service business in Fetlar without a substantial increase in visitors and/or residents, yet it is very difficult to draw visitors and/or new residents without a service sector in place.

This problem is not limited to Fetlar. Although there has been improvement this year, with three different eateries available to choose from, visitors to Unst in 2007 were restricted to a single restaurant. Meanwhile, Unst's local shops are under the same sorts of pressures as those on Fetlar. The situation in Unst was explained to me in 2007 by Peter Hunter (aged 42) from the village of Uyeasound (which, with a population of about 150, is substantial by Shetland standards):

Without some kind o fokk, you could end up with a Fetlar situation... Da thing is, without fokk, your shop shuts, your school shuts, your post office shuts. You ken, you don't have enough fokk for a dance, you don't hae anything, you ken? An ya canna hae a sailin club because there're only three men dat can sail,.. you ken? Der's aa dis things, ya ken, dat ya need fokk tae do... Up til ten year ago, der wis two shops here in Uyeasound, an den waan guy became retirin age, an he packed in, an den da other waan ends up at — . But I mean, ageen, within Unst, der wis probably, when I was goin tae da school, der wis probably eight shops. Noo, dey're doon tae three, an in reality could probably only justify waan. Because der's no turnover... 'Cause, ageen, da ferries are so subsidised, heck o a lot o fokk go tae Lerwick waans a week or whatever an buys da stuff i da supermarket, ya ken?

It is an interesting commentary that the SIC's excellent level of services might in some way contribute to peripheral communities' decline: There is no need for people to buy food from the local shop when they can just drive to town and buy the same items themselves at lower prices.

Hunter also tells me that even though Unst receives many more visitors than does Fetlar, it likewise earns little money from them:

Hermaness gets 5,000 visitors a year, da nature reserve. But at least fifty percent o dat will leave Lerwick wi a car i da morning an drive up an do da four-hour walk an go away ageen. Taen deir packed lunch wi dem. Dey dunna spend anything... OK, if dey stop at da hotel for soup an sandwiches or somethin i da middle o da day, it'll be a few pound, but as ya say, it's dodgy.

The Fetlar Development Group is attempting to overcome these economic obstacles and is seeking SIC funding for their ventures. A wide range of sectors are represented in the Development Group's planning.

Brimacombe, who works at the Interpretive Centre, has led an initiative to create walking trails around Fetlar. Six trails have been installed at present. There have been attempts, in collaboration with the Shetland Folklore Development Group, to link some of these trails to local legends about 'trows', the Shetland variety of fairy (Trows.org, 2008). Although I doubt the wisdom of this strategy and feel that that these trow associations will have little impact on tourism, the creation of walking paths in general are an excellent initiative: The project can be undertaken at a grass-roots level and at

very little material expense.⁷ The trails may never function as a primary tourist draw, but they represent an easily achieved value added to the Fetlar tourism product. As far as the trows are concerned, it is interesting that the people of Fetlar are using elements of their intangible cultural heritage in an attempt to draw visitors. For its part, the importance placed on material heritage can be seen in the excellent Interpretive Centre and Brimacombe's bid to raise money for restoring the Brough Lodge manor house.

Brimacombe's efforts can be viewed in light of Vera Rebollo's contextually different suggestion that "goals of integrated coastal area management should be reconciled with those aimed at the recovery of historical and cultural heritage" (Rebollo, 2001: 66). But whereas Rebollo is interested in reclaiming insular Mediterranean coastlines from over-development of tourism facilities, Brimacombe is concerned with reclaiming Fetlar's heritage from underdevelopment caused by the pervasiveness of low-intensity crofting: both over-development and underdevelopment inhibit heritage preservation efforts.

Figure 4 – The Bay of Funzie with ruined croftthouse on the hill (2007)

Another recent Fetlar development project was the temporary café that operated in the hall during the summer of 2008, serving sandwiches and baked goods. The café was truly community run, with many people lending a hand. Although this sort of venture is vital if money is to be made from local tourism, it seems unlikely that a temporary café will, in itself, convince visitors to stay on the island for longer periods of time. A purpose-built facility seems necessary for this. However, for the same reason that Boxall cannot stock food for tourists, a permanent eating place could hardly be a viable business at present.

The issue remains one of creating new jobs for incomers. This is precisely what the Fetlar Economic Development Group is trying to accomplish. As Boxall explains to me:

One of the things that we're trying to get in place at the moment is a full-time development worker... somebody who'll actually have the time to look into some of the proposed projects and do some of the groundwork... to get these things close to fruition. Because... there's actually some good ideas floating about that could, indeed, be money-making enterprises, but we can't get off the ground because people don't have the time to put in to the development of them. I mean, what we're looking at here is developing proposals that might create one-stroke-, possibly two-stroke-, possibly three jobs. But in order to get those things off the ground, you, you've got have somebody to do the legwork, to, you know, feasibility studies and all the rest of it.

Among these ideas is a plan, spearheaded by Brimacombe and Paul Gill, to boost Fetlar agriculture by using polytunnels to grow vegetables that could be sold to local shops in Yell and Unst. Job creation is, of course, a particularly pertinent issue for Gill, who just moved to the island three years ago but may find himself out of work if the school closes in 2010.

There is also local hope that the coming upgrade of Fetlar's broadband service will attract internet workers. However, the quest to attract ICT workers to peripheral communities is not a new one, and evidence is mixed on how these efforts work in practice (Malecki, 1997: 32 and Malecki, 2002). The advantage to ICT workers for peripheral regions is that they can come in and run low-impact businesses without the host community having to first make significant investments in infrastructure. The disadvantage, however, is that such workers provide relatively-little value added to the community: They help support the local shop, but generally speaking, they do not help stem the outward flow of capital. As noted earlier, this may be the most significant problem with the SIC's current Fetlar strategy: the public sector pours money into Fetlar, but only a small amount of that money stays on the island. The rest seeps out to the Lerwick shopkeepers.

One issue that becomes clear in an analysis of these various development drives is that they amount to something very distant from a joined-up approach. Brimacombe, for example, is simultaneously working on projects that may well be mutually exclusive. Most obviously, he is looking into the possibility of large-scale windfarm development in Fetlar, an initiative that has been opposed by a culturally interested non-resident with family links to the island. Regardless of the relative merits of this project in itself, it is hard to view it in tandem with Brimacombe's own attempts to use Fetlar's intangible and built heritage to draw tourists. The same may be said of the polytunnel project which, if realised, may become a significant boon to the community, helping them emphasise an island-wide 'ethical living' message, but it will do no favours to any attempts at promoting agritourism. Indeed, it could even work against subsequent attempts to take "advantage of the 'Garden of Shetland' brand name in marketing initiatives" to "help promote Fetlar produce and products" (Shetland Islands Council, 2004: 2). Thus, debates concerning the potential trade-offs between economic and cultural development are of relevance to more than just mass-tourism destinations. If nothing else, the sometimes conflicting variety of Fetlar development projects may in part be a reflection of a more general disconnection between the SIC and stakeholders on the ground, which is apparent in broader Shetland branding and tourism policy (Grydehøj, 2008).

One question to which no one really knows the answer is what population level represents the point of no return for Fetlar. James Rendall, chairman of Fetlar Community Council, notes that:

The realisation is starting to hit that without doing something within the next five to ten years, there'll be nobody here in Fetlar... We'll be the last ones here, my generation, the folk that's now [in their Fifties] – that'll be the last folk that's going to be on the isle. (Riddell, 2008)

Some consider the potential closure of Fetlar Primary School to be the watershed. People are inclined to wonder what new family would want to move to a community in which their child would have no peers with whom to learn at school and with whom to play in the youth club. Additionally, there is no guarantee that even as active a community member as Gill would be willing or able to stay in Fetlar with no work, just in the hope that a family with children might come to the island and reopen the school.

Also, there is evidence that merely attracting the interest of potential new residents is not enough. In 2007, Fetlar's population problem featured on a national television programme, leading to hundreds of queries from prospective incomers. However, "there was no mechanism to deal with the influx of demand, meaning the community council clerk simply had to refer interested parties to the council's housing department" (Riddell, 2008). In the end, none of those who expressed interest as a result of the programme actually moved to the island.

In 2008 Brimacombe told me that he feels that the biggest impediment to local economic development is "lack of Council interest," noting that the SIC has prioritised building a cinema and music venue in Lerwick over constructing a breakwater for Fetlar. Regarding Foula, Gear wondered "if there is a policy to rid such islands of their inhabitants... simply by long-term neglect, decay and obstructionism" (Gear, 1983: 208). This sentiment is pervasive in Fetlar as well, with John Coutts, a former chairman of the Fetlar Community Council, writing that:

When we asked for help it was rarely forthcoming. Ultimately, we were afraid to express our views as they were repeatedly misrepresented, misunderstood and ignored, even within the North Isles itself. We were sometimes represented out with the island by those who did not have the island's best interests at heart and who seemed blind and indifferent to the problems it faced... Maybe I'm just too cynical, but I've been there too many times before, and I'm afraid I will believe Fetlar's salvation at the hands of the SIC when I actually see it! (Coutts, 2008: online)

It would be grossly unfair to claim that the SIC has abandoned places like Fetlar, Foula, and Papa Stour, yet it is understandable that peripheral communities might find it easier to externalise their problems than to confront the fact that they are faltering despite aid from the local government.

It will come as no surprise to the people of Fetlar that what their island needs is greatly-increased short-term investment from the SIC, with the aim of weaning the community off of complete public dependency. The SIC needs to help Fetlar overcome the chicken-or-the-egg problem. This may be by providing substantial support to a number of major, well-planned community-run projects in full knowledge that it will take time before these projects bear fruit (in the case of primary sector initiatives, like

polytunnels) or cause visitors and/or locals to spend money in the community (in the case of service sector initiatives, like a permanent café). It will also be important for both the community and the SIC to look at development prospects holistically: With so much hanging in the balance, Fetlar may not be able to afford experimenting with conflicting initiatives. There are signs that the SIC is moving toward a new approach to Fetlar. Thanks to the Fetlar Development Group's efforts, the SIC may fund a temporary Fetlar Development Worker position. The SIC has already assigned a Community Learning and Development Officer to look into helping the island, and in August 2008, the decision was made to set up a special SIC Fetlar taskforce.

Although these are grounds for hope, there are still reasons for concern: The SIC distributed a survey in Spring 2008, and one of its questions asked whether the people of Fetlar would mind if Eastern European immigrants moved to the island. This is a disturbing question, not because the local community should have anything against Eastern European immigrants but because implicit in the question is the idea that the only people who would want to live in such a peripheral community are people who have little other choice. The success of places like Fair Isle, with its large proportion of incomers, disproves this assumption. More importantly though, the assumption shows ignorance of what Fetlar really needs. It does not primarily need new residents who can commute to work in Yell or Unst. Like the quest for ICT workers, the search for commuters is just a way of avoiding the real problem. Fetlar needs jobs that help retain capital for the good of the community. Until it gets these things, Fetlar will remain a community at risk. And if this continues for too long, it may someday cease to be a community at all, may someday become no more than a sheep farm for absentee crofters. And if this happens, if the prophecy is fulfilled, and Fetlar becomes the home to none save a shepherd and his dog, it will represent something more than just the emigration of a few families. It will mean the death of a community that for five millennia has tended the Garden of Shetland.

Endnotes:

¹ I would like to thank Ian Russell and Roger Brimacombe for reading through and commenting on this paper. This paper would not be possible without the help of the 75 Shetlanders with whom I conducted personal, digitally recorded interviews as part of an ongoing ethnological research project with the Elphinstone Institute at the University of Aberdeen. Only a few of these individuals – who represent a wide range of ages, social situations, and communities – are named in this paper, but my talks with them have informed many of my statements on the situation in Shetland's peripheral communities. As regards stances and opinions that might be considered inflammatory, I have not cited my contributor sources.

² The prophecy has been fulfilled in the following ways:
There will be a mansion on the Ripples = In 1901, Leagarth House was built on the piece of land known as the Ripples, near the village of Houbie.
Soldiers on Vord Hill = During World War II, Vord Hill, Fetlar's highest point, was the site of a military watchpost.
A harbour in Papil Water = Waves are eroding the beach and thin stretch of turf separating the loch, Papil Water, from the sea.

³ In this paper, the term 'peripheral islands' refers to Fetlar, Whalsay, Foula, Papa Stour, and Skerries. Although other islands lie off the Shetland Mainland, these are either connected to Mainland by bridge (Trondra, Burra, and Muckle Roe), a brief ferry

directly into Lerwick (Bressay), or are too large in size to be comparable with Fetlar (Yell and Unst).

⁴ Note, Nicolson, using the 1841 New Statistical Account, gives a different figure for this year, claiming for Fetlar an impressive 859 residents (Nicolson, 1978: 62).

⁵ Statistics in Figure 3 are derived from: 1841 and 1891 (Cluness, 1967: 52-53); 1931-2001 (Economic Development Unit, 2006: 11); 2008, Yell (Shetland Heritage, 2008c) Unst (Hunter, 2007), Fetlar (Brimacombe, 2008b), Whalsay (Shetland Heritage, 2008a), Foula (Henley, 2008), Fair Isle (Wheeler, 2008), Papa Stour (Shetlopedia.com, 2008), Skerries (Shetland Heritage, 2008b), and Shetland (Executive Services Department, 2007).

⁶ Fair Isle is frequently characterised as being uniquely advantaged since the National Trust for Scotland owns and administers much of the island and many of its buildings. This is, however, debated. Much of the benefit gained from this association took place in the 1950s and 1960s, that is, before the oil era helped spread similar boons elsewhere in Shetland (Tallack, 2007). Furthermore, the most-often commented upon of these benefits – the National Trust's vetting of potential incomers – has not been particularly necessary in Fetlar, which has avoided the social problems of Foula and Papa Stour.

⁷ I have written previously on the present-day conceptualisation of trows and why this conceptualisation is too narrow to be of general visitor interest (Grydehøj, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, and 2007d).

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ⁱ Note, Nicolson, using the the 1841 New Statistical Account, gives a different figure for this year, claiming for Fetlar an impressive 859 residents (Nicolson, 1978: 62).