Fishing in Shetland

Through the years

Secondary 1-3
Early people

We think settlers in Shetland went fishing, but also grew crops and kept animals in periods of warmer weather.

Few relics have survived from the early periods of Shetland’s history.

It is likely that the earliest settlers in Shetland hunted wild animals, fish and birds.

Remnants which may have given us information about diet and hunting methods decayed long ago before we could assess them.

A warmer climate greeted Shetland around 2500BC.

These bone ‘disgorgers’ are for removing fish hooks and gorges from the mouths of fish. They were found in Shetland and used between 3000BC and 1100AD.

This broken quern was discovered in Sumburgh—it dates from the bronze age, which means people in Shetland at that time did grow and grind crops.
The Picts lived in mainland Scotland from around the 6th to the 9th Century, possibly earlier. Indications of a burial at Sumburgh suggest that Picts had probably settled in Shetland by 300AD.

We think Picts went fishing, but also grew crops and kept animals in periods of warmer weather.

They cultivated the land, before the Vikings made their way to Shetland from Norway.
Vikings!

Viking boats that travelled to Shetland were strong, sea-worthy but lightweight.

The design of the Viking boats developed into the 'Shetland boat' style in later years.

The Orkneyinga Saga is an Icelandic saga probably written after 1200.

We think men went fishing in local and inshore waters. Fish were plenty so they didn't have to go too far out.

Species of bone found from this era include cod, saithe and ling.

"...and Uni took three Hjatlanders, and they took a six oared boat... in Sumburgh Voe a poor old bondi drove out as each was ready..."
Types of boats over the centuries

At first, boats arrived from Norway—Shetland didn’t have enough wood to build their own.

Small whilly—The smallest of the open boats—it can be used close to the shore for fishing or visiting the shop!

Haddock boat—Used for winter haddock fishing. It had to be strong and sea worthy!

Fourareen—boat with four oars! Fourareens can be lots of different shapes and sizes—they are often painted colourfully!

Sixareen—There are ponies in the boat!

When more roads were built, people started using them regularly, and used their boats less often.

These boats arrived in parts, and the Shetlander put all the parts together.

Used for winter haddock fishing. It had to be strong and sea worthy!

Sixareens are the largest of the open boats and has a crew of 6 or 7. They were used for haaf fishing far out at sea.
In the Middle Ages the Hanseatic League had a trading port in Bergen.

They were powerful and controlled Norwegian trade with Shetland.

The Hanseatic League had rules on trading. From about 1450, merchants from North Germany decided to ignore these rules.

They travelled over to Shetland from Germany, and traded directly with Shetlanders over the summer months.

They arrived in May and set up trading booths all over the isles. They stayed until September.

The story of the German merchant families is found in Whalsay's 'Bremen' or 'Hanseatic' Böd in Symbister.
Bartering

Bartering

Shetlanders got most things from local sources, but swapped things like cloth, butter and fish for items they couldn’t get, make or grow in Shetland.

Bartering (verb) - to trade or exchange goods

These items were brought over by foreign trading merchants.

Shetlanders bartered with the German merchants.

They swapped fish, butter, meat and knitwear for salt, fish hooks, tar, beer, tobacco, linen, pottery, flour or rye meal.

German merchants sailed to Shetland for nearly 250 years—they were a vital part of the local economy.

German merchants residing in Shetland in 1685

- Delmar Lanhanow
- Derick Cuning
- Claus Derick
- Barthol Hinch
- Delmar Lanhanow
- Ellart Martens
- Castin Hackman
- Frarick Dicken
- Herman Badiwish
- Adolphus Westerman

Trade continued even after the passing of Shetland into Scottish hands.
Dutch fishing fleets

The abundance of fish stocks also attracted the Dutch fishermen.

Merchants and fishermen travelled from the Netherlands to Shetland from the end of the 16th century.

Hundreds of boats and fishermen gathered in Bressay Sound harbour, and started fishing on the 24th June each year.

The Dutch fishermen slept on their ships, and salted their herring onboard.

They traded tobacco, gin and cash for the goods Shetlanders gave them.

This map was drawn in 1741 and shows Dutch busses positioned around the islands.

Quite often, Shetlanders could understand Dutch and German because of their trade with their summer visitors.

They also came ashore to socialise, and they held an annual fair at Hollanders' Knowe near Lerwick.
Economic Depression

There was severe cold between 1690 and 1700—severe storms hit Shetland around 1696, destroying crops and disrupting trade and fishing.

Did you know?
‘Johnnie Notions’ of Eshaness came up with a vaccine for smallpox! He cured 3000 people and lost none!

As well as the famine from the poor harvests, smallpox spread around Shetland—there were epidemics from 1700-1760.

Merchants avoided the isles at this time. They were no longer appealing to traders—their wealth was dwindling and their health was a hazard.

In 1703, when France was at war with Holland, around 400 Dutch busses were burned in Bressay Sound, with huge impact on Shetland.

Wars between the Netherlands and Great Britain in the 17th and 18th centuries made the crossing through the English Channel dangerous.

The 1707 Act of Union made trade with non-British countries very difficult. To German merchants and Dutch traders, Shetland was no longer worth trading with.

Shetland fell into an economic depression. Local merchant-landowners were to take control in this crisis.
Lairds and the haaf

In the 17th century, lairds in Shetland began to take control of land previously shared equally between crofters.

Crofters and fishermen were 'tenants' to the laird and liable to pay rent.

The lairds started sending ships over to Germany to trade.

Lairds did not simply trade with the German merchants abroad; they utilised their tenants for their manpower.

Truck System: lairds provide tenants with basic necessities—buys their goods from them at a low price.

Crofters then had to go out and fish—the laird took a lot of the fish they caught. Tenants were almost always forced to fish for the laird or risk being evicted.

The lairds got much larger boats and sent their tenants further out to sea—the well-known 'haaf' fishing began.

Lairds sent so many men out to fish for them that soon there were too few fish left inshore!
Before they set off they would stay in small huts.

Six or seven men would row out in six-oared boats called 'sixareens' for a voyage of several days.

Fishing far from land in an open boat is very dangerous.

Some died of lack of food or warmth. Others perished in wild storms.

These men wouldn’t have nets. They used long-lines to catch fish.

Cooking, eating and sleeping were difficult when haaf fishing. Sleeping in the boat was unlikely, and men were out for 2 or 3 days and nights at a time.

Long-lines could have 7 miles of line stretched out on the sea-bed—hauling these in when they were full of fish must have been incredibly hard!
From 1730 whaling vessels from Britain stopped by Shetland on their way to Greenland. The ships would arrive in March to recruit Shetland men to complete their crews.

Many Shetland men saw whaling as a way of getting experience at sea before taking on jobs on fishing or merchant ships.

There was a whaling boom from 1820-1880.

Whalers would often be away at sea from March/April-November.

In March 1859, 50 Greenland whaling ships were at anchor in Lerwick.

Whaling was a very dangerous affair.

Accidents could happen from harpooning the whales, and the route was often cold, icy and threatening storms could cause huge casualties.
The end of 'Da Haaf'

Tenants could now fish without giving any of their catch away.

On the 16th July 1832, a great storm off Shetland claimed 107 lives and 17 boats—the haaf was a huge risk, but many had little choice until the second half of the century.

In 1881, 58 men were lost off Gloup, North Yell when another freak summer storm left 34 widows and 85 orphans.

Pages and pages of this report detailed the deceased and how many were dependent on them. A saddening case—hundreds were left in severe poverty, aided by the government in 1834.

In 1886, the Crofters Act changed crofters lives for the better!

The Gloup Memorial, remembering the fishing disaster of 1881

These open boats were too ill-equipped for deep-sea fishing, and people were beginning to count their losses.
In the 19th century there was a cod fishing boom in Shetland.

Man drying cod or ling on Foula, around 1902

Many cod schools had not been discovered before 1800 as they didn’t swim in the fishing areas commonly used by locals.

Cod had previously been overlooked—long-lines sitting on the seabed couldn’t catch cod as they swim half way between the surface and the seabed.

The number of cod may have increased since the Dutch fishing fleets left in the 18th century, giving the species time to populate again.

John Johnson and his wife in the early 1880’s. John went out to the cod fishing around Shetland, and followed many Shetlanders further afield to the Faroe cod fishing.

Strong fully-decked boats, new fishing methods and navigation equipment all played a part in developing Shetland fishing.

Sixereens were still going out to the haaf at this time.
Shetlanders had never fully taken advantage of the sheer quantity of herring around the Shetland seas. In the 19th century there was a huge herring boom.

The herring boom was hugely important for Shetland's economy!

The herring industry grew and fell rapidly in bouts.

In 1874 only 1100 barrels of herring were cured ashore in Shetland and the fleet was up to 50 boats. In 1881 the total cured had risen to 59,586 barrels and the fleet to 276 boats.

By 1884 the number of barrels cured was 300,117 from 932 boats.

The Dutch were the first to exploit the herring population in Shetland waters. The locals didn't get there until the late 19th century.

Around 1830 the industry grew rapidly but had fallen dramatically by 1840.

Women played an important part gutting fish at the herring stations.

Women gutting fish as men take their catch ashore.
20th Century

By the First World War, few people still went out fishing in sixareens—the herring booms had paved the way to motor engines.

The 'seine net' was developed.

The seine net is a bag-shaped net. It is operated by ropes and has a higher catch rate than line-fishing.

The white fishing (demersal fishing) bounced back after the wars with a good number of local fishing boat catches.

A loan and grant scheme was introduced through the Inshore Fisheries Act 1945 which gave economic incentive to those working in the fishing industry in Scotland.

Shetland fishing industry was coming in line with Scottish industry, and were helped along by the grant scheme.

The Shetland fishing industry today includes demersal, pelagic, and shellfish and there are some local fish farming companies too.
Today, the best of Shetland seafood is marketed worldwide.

We even have our own Food Festival!

Shetland lamb, salmon and mussels are fiercely sought after by Michelin star restaurants.

There are a number of local salmon farms around the isles, as well as farms owned by large national companies.

Processing factories employ people to clean, gut and package fish caught in Shetland.

Fisheries made up nearly 10% of the employed population of Shetland in 2010.

The total value of all kinds of fish landed in Shetland in 2010 was £80,494,356!
Today's Special

**Smoked Haddock Pasties with Leeks and Clotted Cream**

Serves 6

**Ingredients**
- 2lb chilled puff pastry
- 12oz smoked haddock
- 6oz cleaned chopped leeks
- 10oz peeled cooked tatties
- 4 tbsp clotted cream
- black pepper and salt
- 1 egg

**Method**
- Preheat oven to 200°C or Gas 6
- Roll out pastry to create 7.5 inch circles
- Cut haddock to 1 inch chunks, slice the leeks and cut tatties into 0.5 inch cubes
- Mix haddock, leeks, tatties, clotted cream and seasoning
- Divide mixture between the pastry circles, then bring pastry edges together and crimp.
- Transfer to a lightly greased and floured baking tray, brush with egg and cook for 35 minutes
- Serve hot, warm or cold

Recipe from Seafood Shetland (www.fishuk.net/seafoodshetland)
Recipe donated by Eunice Henderson
Bibliography

Books
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Online resources:
BBC Learning Zone: www.bbc.co.uk/learningzone/
Shetland Museum and Archives: www.shetland-museum.org.uk
Scran: www.scran.ac.uk
Scotland on Screen: www.scotlandonscreen.org.uk
Scotland’s History: www.educationscotland.gov.uk/scotlandshistory/

Good Resources:
Shetland Museum and Archives—Fishing Discovery Box

All pictures from Scran or Shetland Museum, unless stated otherwise.