



SHETLAND TRIPS – OUR REASONS FOR NOT TAKING THEM FORWARD

BACKGROUND

The ALK organised a trip to Shetland and Fair Isle for a small number of members around 10 years ago.

Since the growth of our membership and the popularity of Orkney and Cape Wrath trips, interest in Shetland as a possible ALK trip has been growing steadily.

We know that well over 50 members have said they'd like to go on any ALK trip to Shetland, and we've had at least one pencilled in for 2018 for some time.

We have managed to deal with the demand (similar levels) for Orkney by outsourcing the trip arrangements to a local company, Wild About Orkney, who are offering 4 trips across 2017 and 2018 to accommodate 48 members.

In May 2017 Roy Thompson led a small group to reconnoitre Shetland and Fair Isle and their lighthouses with a view to establishing viability, logistics and other issues for scheduled trips in 2018 and beyond.

Roy and I met for a full debrief soon after this trip and shared the information with the trustees, who have unanimously come to the conclusion that the ALK should not take on the challenge of organising group ALK trips to Shetland.

The factors they took into account were as follows:

SHETLAND vs ORKNEY AS A LIGHTHOUSE ATTRACTION DESTINATION

Orkney has more major lights (operational Northern Lighthouse Board (NLB) lights and harbour lights) than Shetland does and most Orkney lights are reasonably accessible by minibus and public ferries. Previous trips have secured internal access to at least 5 active NLB lights.

Orkney also is close to the many lights of the Pentland Firth area which have been, and will continue to be, offered as part of the Cape Wrath and Caithness trips which are ongoing.

Shetland comes slightly closer to Orkney in terms of lighthouse attractions but only if one includes the two lights on Fair Isle.

The principal lights on Shetland and Fair Isle are:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sumburgh Head (NLB, visitor centre open to the public) – mainland• Bressay (Discontinued, private ownership) accessible by public ferry from Lerwick – possibly open by arrangement with the community trust• Esha Ness (NLB, not open) – mainland.• Out Skerries (NLB, not open, remote)• Muckle Flugga (NLB, not open, remote)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fair Isle North (NLB, not open)• Fair Isle South (NLB, not open)
--	---

Realistically only two lighthouses on Shetland are likely to offer ALK group access, ie Sumburgh and Bressay. This would be disappointing given that many Orkney/Pentland Firth lights are more accessible and open by arrangement with the NLB. Out Skerries, Esha Ness and Muckle Flugga are simply not going to be accessible internally. Muckle Flugga and Out Skerries are both remote stations and the NLB never allow access to these lights. Muckle Flugga is virtually impossible to land at, even if a boatman can be found to take a party there, and Out Skerries internally is regarded as unsuitable for any kind of public access. Esha Ness is an NLB light but the keepers' accommodation is privately owned. The tower is very cramped internally and would be unlikely to secure approval for group access due to health and safety concerns. A stunning location with good photographic potential but not of huge appeal otherwise. So the first question the trustees considered was - is Shetland good value for money in terms of lighthouse access, and their conclusion was no.

DEMAND ON NLB RLK BRIAN JOHNSON AND NLB APPROVALS

The NLB Retained Light Keeper (RLK) for Shetland is Brian Johnson, a member of the ALK. He is based at Sumburgh. He accompanied our recce group as he was keen to meet fellow ALK members and gave of his own time to do so.

Although Brian holds the keys to all Shetland NLB lights, the NLB will not approve access to any of the lights he oversees (apart from Sumburgh which is open anyway) and so it would be largely pointless asking him to accompany future visits, which would in any case have to be on a voluntary basis and thus unreasonable for the ALK to have that expectation.

LOGISTICS FOR SHETLAND TRIPS

There are two major concerns here:

The organisation and logistical burden on Roy as leader of the recce group was considerable and his dedication and personal enthusiasm carried him through some highly stressful times. It would be wholly unacceptable, in the trustees' view, to ask Roy to undertake this again once, let alone several times. The complexities are such that the trustees' view is that no-one else in the ALK is as qualified and in a position to undertake it as effectively as Roy was able to.

Wild About Orkney, who are organising our Orkney trips for us, do operate wildlife and nature trips to Shetland but understand the logistical challenges involved in a lighthouse-related trip to Shetland/Fair Isle, and have indicated already that it is NOT something they would wish to undertake, partly as they don't have the experience of the ALK yet but mainly as they don't have a physical presence on Shetland for when anything goes amiss during a

trip, which they know can and will happen. However even if we found a Shetland equivalent of Wild About Orkney it would not overcome the next issue.

Weather and sea conditions. It's fair to say that Roy's recce trip fell apart in its latter stages due to weather. It was fog in this case. The group was due on Fair Isle on a Saturday. Both flights were cancelled due to fog. There are never any Sunday flights. The boat connection wasn't due to run until the Tuesday. So the whole Fair Isle trip had to be called off completely. Some of the group chose to go home and others chose to remain. For those who chose to leave the travel chaos continued, with Sumburgh Airport fogbound and no flights expected for a day or so according to the forecast. Two of the group ended up on the 13-hour boat crossing to Aberdeen rather than a 2 hour flight to Inverness. The rest of the group needed to sort out accommodation and transport for themselves.

It needs to be said that the small recce group was made up entirely of committed, knowledgeable members who completely understood and accepted the high risks involved with Shetland weather and remote lighthouse logistics. I myself have worked in both Shetland and Fair Isle and, of five business trips across three years, four of those five trips were impacted on by the weather, including forcing me to spend two extra days on Fair Isle due to high winds cancelling flights.

The first part of Roy's recce trip went very well and was most enjoyable, but the big anti-climax at the end was a great shame, though not wholly unexpected. Put simply, it goes with the territory for Shetland.

As Events Coordinator I would personally have grave concerns about opening up a series of trips for members who would see any such trip as a holiday highlight and have high expectations of things going to plan, a reputation we have carved out for ourselves over the years.

Even though at a rational level such a collapse in a trip is explainable and unavoidable, at an emotional level it is harder to accept.

FINANCIAL CONCERNS

Shetland is not a cheap place to travel to. Planning takes effort and thought and the relatively high costs of getting to/from and overnight accommodation are such that most people would expect a good bang for their buck, especially if the ALK is organising and branding it. The kind of disappointment which Roy's group experienced would be a sure fire certainty for at least some of the 4-6 groups we would have an obligation to if we took it on, even if some went to plan. The owners of Wild About Orkney and those of us who have worked or holidayed on Shetland know that travel disruption is the norm. Sumburgh airport is notorious for fog closures. The airline "Flybe" is widely known as "Maybe" locally!

Although the hospitality trade in Shetland knows about this, if the ALK had group booked a hotel or other facility for accommodation for 12 people and failed to turn up, the issue of deposit payments/refunds would arise, with possible forfeit. In Roy's group's case the Fair Isle Bird Observatory, which had been booked for accommodation, lost out big time due to our group not arriving, but proved understanding. Thankfully. Such generosity would by no means be guaranteed and personal financial loss could arise.

The ALK's considered view is that it is not reasonable of us to offer such a relatively costly series of trips knowing that some of them are almost guaranteed to fail at some point, with possible loss of deposits or full charges. That, coupled with grave doubts about added value (over individually organised trips) gives the trustees major concerns.

FINAL RECOMMENDATION

The view of the trustees in regards to organising Shetland trips for groups of member is that the ALK is not prepared to undertake to organise, or outsource, such trips under the ALK brand. The reasons for taking this view can be summarised as:

- Unreasonable level of demand on any volunteer organiser within the ALK – 4-6 groups requiring a phenomenal level of planning and logistics, and the absence of any volunteer with the experience, knowledge and time to undertake it
- Our key local contact and facilitator (Brian Johnson, NLB RLK) cannot reasonably be asked to help out repeatedly with arrangements for several trips for which he will not be reimbursed by the NLB
- The NLB will not permit access to any of their major lights on Shetland apart from Sumburgh. The trustees do not consider that an ALK-sponsored trip would add any significant value to holiday trips which might be organised by individuals. Normally this added value comes in the form of access to lights not normally open to the public. In Shetland this just won't apply. (Group access to Fair Isle lights is feasible with NLB permission but access to Fair Isle itself is the challenge).
- Wild About Orkney, a professional company whose advice we should not ignore, would not take this workload on for reasons of....
- The Shetland weather (fog, high winds) is 100% certain to adversely affect at least some of any ALK trips that might take place
- Any Shetland trip would require Fair Isle to be included in order for people to feel value for money was being delivered and this is notorious for its proneness to isolation due to poor weather
- The level of disappointment should the schedule have to be abandoned would be tangible and would not reflect well on the ALK
- Any major changes resulting from weather disruption would place a major and unfair burden on whoever has organised the trip
- The high cost to members of any failed trip would leave a negative memory

THE WAY FORWARD FOR MEMBERS WISHING TO VISIT SHETLAND AND FAIR ISLE

For any members who would like to go and see the lights of Shetland and/or Fair Isle, the ALK is aiming to produce an information pack which will contain suggestions about such things as:

- Getting to/from Shetland and Fair Isle
- Accommodation on the mainland, on Unst and on Fair Isle
- Getting around the islands
- How to get to view the main lights
- Key local contacts
- Warnings about weather uncertainties, which apply at all times of the year, not just in winter

This information pack will be produced during the late summer and early Autumn with the aim of making it available in time for the 2017 AGM, though this isn't guaranteed.

We are very sorry for the disappointment we know this will cause and are very grateful indeed to Roy Thompson for arranging a recce group, for coping with the fallout from its failure at the time and for the information he shared with the trustees which has led to them taking what we believe is a realistic, and inevitable, decision.

David Taylor

Events Coordinator and Trustee : June 2017