

The Special Qualities of the Shetland National Scenic Area

Shetland has an outstanding coastline. The seven designated areas that make-up the NSA comprise Shetland's scenic highlights and epitomise the range of coastal forms varying across the island group. Some special qualities are generic to all the identified NSA areas, others are specific to each area within the NSA. The seven individual areas of the NSA are: **Fair Isle, South West Mainland, Foula, Muckle Roe, Eshaness, Fethaland, and Hermaness**. Where a quality applies to a particular area, the name is highlighted in **bold**.

- The stunning variety of the extensive coastline
- Coastal views both close and distant
- Coastal settlement and fertility within a large hinterland of unsettled moorland and coast
- The hidden coasts
- The effects and co-existence of wind and shelter
- A sense of remoteness, solitude and tranquillity
- The notable and memorable coastal stacks, promontories and cliffs
- The distinctive cultural landmarks
- Northern light

Special Quality	Further information
<p data-bbox="225 1144 932 1173">• <i>The stunning variety of the extensive coastline</i></p> <p data-bbox="188 1211 708 1473">Shetland's long, extensive coastline is highly varied: from fissured and fragmented hard rock coasts, to gentler formations of accumulated gravels, sands, spits and bars; from remarkably steep cliffs to sloping bays; from long, sheltered voes to cliffs exposed to the full fury of the Atlantic ocean.</p> <p data-bbox="188 1514 724 1776">The landscape is an intimate mix of sea and land. The sea reaches far inland by way of voes, firths and sounds, an inland coast in marked contrast to the dynamic outer coast of wild Atlantic 'oceanscapes'. Here the land reaches into the open sea on many points and promontories.</p> <p data-bbox="188 1816 708 2011">This huge variety has arisen from the interaction between geology, glaciation and sea level changes, and results in the dramatic coastal scenery as encapsulated within the seven areas of the NSA.</p>	<p data-bbox="751 1211 1378 1294">South West Mainland, stretching from Fitful Head (Old Norse <i>hvitfugla</i>, white birds) to the Deeps, displays greatly contrasting coastlines:</p> <ul data-bbox="751 1312 1401 1451" style="list-style-type: none"> • Clifed coastline of open aspect in the south to long voes at Weisdale and Whiteness. • Numerous small islands and stacks, notably in the area west of Scalloway. • St. Ninian's Isle with its fine tombolo. <p data-bbox="751 1469 1390 1520">Both Muckle Roe and Eshaness are outstanding stretches of coastline that enclose St. Magnus Bay with:</p> <ul data-bbox="751 1538 1394 1704" style="list-style-type: none"> • Remarkable high red granite cliffs at Muckle Roe. • At Eshaness, fine headlands, vertical cliffs, skerries and stacks, Calder's Geo, the Holes of Skraada, and the Grind o' da Navir, where western storm seas have breached the cliffs to toss up boulders of ignimbrite rock forming a gigantic, inland storm beach. <p data-bbox="751 1722 1385 1861">The North Roe peninsula further exhibits a range of skerries, stacks, islets, geos, caves, headlands and natural arches. Its complex geology lends the area distinctive variations in coastal landform and colour between Fugla Ness, Uyea Isle, Fethaland and the Ramna Stacks.</p> <p data-bbox="751 1895 1390 1977">At Hermaness on Unst, the coastal topography varies from the 175m high cliffs at the Neap, to the sandy beach and machair at the head of the narrow Burrafirth.</p>

	<p>Fair Isle, remote from the Shetland mainland, has a great diversity of cliffs, geos, stacks, skerries, natural arches, isthmuses and small bayhead beaches. Sheep Rock, with its smooth, sloping top and vertical cliffs, is a notable feature, as is The Kirn of Scroo in the north, an 80m subterranean passage which terminates in a gloup.</p> <p>Also a remote island, Foula's coast has a distinctive mix of coastal forms. <i>'The island is outstanding for its assemblage of hard-rock coastal landforms, which include the second-highest sea cliff in Britain. With the exception of well-developed shore platforms, examples of most of the features and stages of coastal landform development in rock are found... conditions have facilitated the development of a fine assemblage of sheer-faced and composite cliff forms, geos, sea caves, tunnels, arches, stacks and stumps, many of which show clear relationships with geological structure.'</i> Hansom (2003b)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coastal views both close and distant 	
<p>Such a variety of coastal scenery allows for a magnificent range of coastal views. In places distant islands lie low on the horizon, in others there is a near view to an inshore island, or to a neighbouring shore of this articulated coast.</p> <p>The striking form of distant Foula, with its great height of 418m and the Kame cliffs rising to 366m, catches the eye along many stretches of the South West Mainland.</p>	<p>Fair Isle is less prominent as a visual feature than Foula – except when travelling by sea to or from Shetland when the ferry can pass close by.</p> <p>Other notable views within the scenic areas are views across St Magnus Bay to Papa Stour from Eshaness and Muckle Roe; and views of St Ninian's Isle from South West Mainland.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coastal settlement and fertility within a large hinterland of unsettled moorland and coast 	
<p>Thousands of years of human occupation has given the landscape a rich archaeological heritage, including ancient brochs and modern crofts.</p> <p>Settlement has always been constrained by the nature of the land, largely confined to strips of ground rarely out of sight of the sea. Houses are concentrated at the heads of voes or in sheltered bays, well placed to make use of the sea and coastal resources.</p> <p>The green, inbye land of the crofts and farms contrasts with the common grazings of wild, unimproved and uninhabited moorland and bog. There are also long lengths of remote and uninhabited coast.</p>	<p>The settlement pattern of Shetland is unique in that it was not affected in a major way by clearances: pre-improvement townships were converted to crofts in the late 19th century. Larger farms have always coexisted amongst smallholdings/crofts. There are good examples of crofting townships with strip fields and planticrues.</p> <p>The divide between inbye land and moorland has changed little since the mid-19th century, although there has been some intake of moorland in recent years, together with improvement of grazing. The moorland areas contain extensive peat diggings. Fishing has also been vital to the islands' economy.</p> <p>Within South West Mainland the larger islands of Burra and Trondra show the underlying crofting settlement pattern, although this is now tending to be lost through modern development. The areas adjacent to Bigton and the Loch of Spiggie show crofting farmland, and are a more fertile, enclosed and humanised landscape. Bigton Farm is recorded in the early 18th century, and was noted for its productivity even then. St Ninian's Isle is renowned for its early medieval chapel and silver hoard found on the island.</p>

	<p>The landscapes of both Fair Isle and Foula can be divided into an inhabited area of crofts and inbye land and the common grazings of uninhabited moorland. On Fair Isle the ratio is about 50:50; Foula, by contrast, is 90% moorland with two small crofting areas and an additional half a dozen isolated crofts.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The hidden coasts 	
<p>Because the land is undulating, markedly so in the western mainland, the actual brink of the coastal edge may be hidden or difficult of access. This brings an element of surprise when caves, geos and gloups are suddenly encountered, inviting further exploration.</p>	<p>To suddenly encounter an unseen cliff, geo or gloup (a hole arising from a collapsed sea cliff) when walking along the coast can also be a terrifying experience.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The effects and co-existence of wind and shelter 	
<p>The wind appears ever-present and the absence of trees, or even shrubs, gives an open and exposed feel to much of the landscape. The frequent gales can be awe-inspiring, and in high seas <i>fröde</i> (sea-foam) can fleck the coastal grasslands, well-inland from the coastal edge.</p> <p>Weather, skies and light are rarely static, with continual movement of clouds, waves, sea-spray and grasses. The interplay of light and shade moving across the sea, the coastal grasslands or the interior moorland adds a special dynamism.</p> <p>With wind a determining force, so the presence of shelter is acutely perceived. Hence, an awareness of both wind and shelter is a particular quality of these areas. There may be the distant sound of stormy seas pounding the mouth of a bay or voe, while inland waters or a sheltered hollow remain still and calm.</p>	<p>The islands are delightful on fine days, and this can happen at any season; but '<i>winter hurricanes they are awe-inspiring. This is the land of the oilskins and the parka, or 'Terre de Vent' (The Land of the Wind), as the French photographer Georges Dif recently described it in his beautiful portrait of the islands.</i>' (www.shetlandtourism.com)</p> <p>The drama and dynamics of the ocean's power on the land is epitomised at the Grind o' da Navir at Eshaness where the velocity of the water moves boulders up to 3m long, 15m above sea level, depositing them in ridges up to 3.5m long. The boulders themselves frequently exceed 1m in length and are deposited up to 60m inland.</p> <p>Images of airborne, wave water at Eshaness show spray reaching a height of 80m above Dore Holm. (www.fettes.com)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sense of remoteness, solitude and tranquillity 	
<p>The feeling of being at the northern limits of the British Isles is marked. The Shetland Isles are remote in themselves, and within the archipelago there are also degrees of remoteness. Fair Isle and Foula are the remotest inhabited islands in the British Isles – although they have</p>	<p>The northernmost and most isolated islands in the British Isles, Shetland lies some 150km north of mainland Britain and 340km north of Aberdeen. They are the nearest the British Isles come to Norway, with Lerwick 370km west of Bergen. Muckle Flugga, within the Hermaness section of the NSA, is further from the Scottish/English border than Lands End (Haswell-Smith, 2008).</p>

both been long-inhabited with a rich history of human settlement.

Most of the coastline is undeveloped and natural, and long-stretches can be traversed without seeing anyone or any human influence.

Hence solitude and tranquillity underpin much of the NSA coast, and it is easy to wander with only the seabirds for company. However tranquillity can give way to alarm as the wind picks up, the rain begins and an Atlantic storm sets in.

Fair Isle lies 39km south-west of Sumburgh Head, and **Foula** lies 29km west of Walls. Access to both Fair Isle and Foula is limited by weather and sea conditions, accentuating their remoteness.

• **The notable and memorable coastal stacks, promontories and cliffs**

Where open to the full fury of the Atlantic Ocean, the sea has carved impressive cliffs, forming spectacular, towering, vertical scenery, varying greatly in colour according to the complex geology.

The coast also contains many distinctive stacks, promontories and other features that form memorable images. Within the NSA these include:

- Muckle Flugga with its distinctive sloping, pointed rocks.
- The imposing cliffs of **Hermaness** itself, with its nesting seabirds. Also the western cliffs of **Muckle Roe**, the Clift Hills area of **Southwest Mainland**, and the lower cliffs on the west of **Eshaness**.
- Ramna Stacks, a group of skerries seen off the Point of **Fethaland**.
- The Drongs of Hillswick within the **Eshaness** area, the outermost and most curious of a series of stacks that emerge from the sea in St Magnus Bay.
- Dore Holm (Old Norse 'doorway islet') within **Eshaness**. Its natural arch 21m high on its western side is a remarkable feature.
- Verdant St Ninian's Isle, joined to the mainland with its distinctive tombolo, within **South West Mainland**.

Shetland has nearly 400km of cliffs, a fifth of Scotland's total length (SNH, 2002). The most notable and accessible within the NSA are:

- **Eshaness** (from Old Norse *Aesju Nes*, headland of volcanic rock): vertical rock faces and volcanic cliffs, and The Holes of Scraada, a deep collapsed sea cave.
- Hillswick Ness: a series of dramatic Moine rock cliffs, associated with The Drongs.
- **Muckle Roe**: red granite cliffs.
- **Foula**: Old Red Sandstone cliffs on the west coast rising spectacularly at the Kame.

The Grind o' da Navir (Gateway of the Borer) at **Eshaness** is a unique site displaying a window onto the Atlantic '*between its twin bastions ...in which storm waves thunder through the portal.*' (www.fettes.com)

The Drongs are a series of thin, rocky pinnacles that resemble a fleet of sailing ships in the distance. Their appearance varies with the light and on a misty night they have been compared to a ship under full sail. They include a high rock pillar known as Slender Drong, the taller Main Drong and the two smaller stacks, Slim Drong and Stumpy Drong. David Henry Parry (1793-1826) drew the images for Samuel Hibbert's *Description of the Shetland Islands* published 1822, engraved by Thomson of Edinburgh.

The distinctive headlands of **Fair Isle** and **Foula** tend to have cliffs on the seaward side, with gently-sloping downward profiles inland.

The top of Sheep Crag of **Fair Isle** has 4ha of pasture. This was of value to the islanders who used to climb it with chains, then used ropes to raise and lower the sheep.

The presence of large landslide-blocks along **Foula's** west coast indicates that large-scale failure of the cliffs continues to the present day as a result of failure along bedding planes in the sandstones. Nowhere is this more dramatically displayed than at the Sneck ida Smaalie.

- Fitful Head, a reference point in many views within **South West Mainland**, and from the northwest Mainland at Eshaness and Hillswick.

On Fair Isle:

- Sheep Crag, a distinctive headland semi-detached from the island's east coast.
- Bu Ness (Old Norse *Home Headland*) joined to the island by a narrow isthmus dividing two sheltered bays, North and South Haven.
- On the west coast, a series of distinctive eminences add variety to the coastal scenery, notably Malcolm's Head.

On Foula:

- Five distinct peaks all sloping northwards, of which The Sneug is the highest at 418m.
- Sneck ida Smaalie, a spectacular rock cleft 60m deep, 1m wide and that extends for 50m.
- The stacks of Gaada, Sheepie and The Brough; Gaada is dissected by two arches, capped by eroded and loosened boulders.

• ***The distinctive cultural landmarks***

There are many cultural features that bear witness to the Shetlanders' long history and their economic reliance on the sea over the centuries. Those that provide focal or incidental points within the over-arching natural landscape of the NSA include:

- The lighthouses of Muckle Flugga, Esha Ness, and the North and South Lights of Fair Isle.
- The ancient broch on the Loch of Houlland (Eshaness).
- The remains of the böds and fishing lodges at Stenness and Fethaland.
- Noosts (protective, on-shore boat berths) on Fair Isle.

Böds were two storey buildings combining shop, residence for the beach master or factor and a store for fish and gear. Fishing lodges were singly storey buildings lived in by the fishermen during the fishing season. Those at Fethaland belonged to the largest Shetland fishing station, with up to sixty boats operating to 50 miles west, to the Far Haaf, the edge of the continental shelf.

Hillswick was developed in the 18th century as a haaf fishing station by Thomas Gifford of Busta. The western edge of the **Hermaness** area contains the northerly military installations in the British Isles at Saxa Vord. The summit of Ward Hill on **Fair Isle** contains military installations dating from the Second World War.

- **Northern light**

At midsummer there is still light in the sky at midnight, the 'summer dim'. At midwinter the short hours of daylight are highly appreciated, and the general absence of light pollution enables the night sky to be appreciated in all its glory.

On some days there is great visual clarity, with long views often highlighted by intense rainbows; at other times, long days of low cloud and mist restrict views to the immediate vicinity.

Truly dark skies cannot be experienced everywhere on Shetland as there is light pollution from the Sullom Voe oil terminal, Lerwick and some of the larger settlements.

Selected Bibliography

- Berry, R. J. & Johnston, J. L. 1980. *The Natural History of Shetland*. London: Collins.
- Donaldson, G. 1990. *Scotland and Norway: A Northern Commonwealth*.
- Fenton, A. 1997. *The Northern Isles: Orkney and Shetland*. Tuckwell Press.
- Hall, A. & Fraser, A. 2004. *Shetland Landscapes*. Available at www.fettes.com/shetland/
- Hansom, J. D. 2003a. *St Ninian's Tombolo*. In Coastal Geomorphology of Great Britain Volume 28. Chapter 8: Sand spits and tombolos – Geological Conservation Review site reports.
- Hansom, J. D. 2003b. *Foula*. In Coastal Geomorphology of Great Britain Volume 28. Chapter 3: Hard-rock cliffs – Geological Conservation Review site reports.
- Haswell-Smith, H. 2008. *The Scottish Islands. The Bestselling Guide to Every Scottish Island*. Newton Abbot: David and Charles.
- Knox, S. A. 1985. *The Making of the Shetland Landscape*. Edinburgh: John Donald.
- Laughton Johnston, J. 1999. *A Shetland Naturalist*. Poyser.
- Scottish Natural Heritage 2002. *Natural Heritage Futures: Shetland*.
- www.fettes.com/shetland Geology and scenery of Shetland. (accessed December 2008)