



tangle

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Flat Time & Fluid Space: Re/collections from Sanday

On re/collecting

The re/collections form the main body of this work and are my attempt to share firsthand stories and impressions about Sanday: to collect recollections. Some additional quotes are cited from other texts. The Preface situates the re/collections and all words after that are quotes.

"That local view is so important. You need it. Without it, you've got nothin'."

The re/collections come from research activities, public workshops, and story-gathering interviews, with others submitted directly. The work overall reflects conversations with several dozen people since 2022, some who preferred not to be named or quoted but inevitably shaped the process.

"I did find a couple of interesting stories but I've no real proof."

The collage of selected quotes reflects my own views as editor. This structure is meant to echo the disorientation I feel when trying to make sense of so much information, overlapping and contradictory, without clear start, end, or reference points. It also saves me pretending that it can all be reconciled into a clean, singular narrative. I invite you to make your own sense of it, it is meant for you to read however, wherever, and in whatever order feels interesting. I have tried to remain faithful to the spirit and language in which things were shared, and have verified and attributed them where permitted.

"You can call yourself a scientist or whatever, but I'm a yokel and I always will be. And I'll tell you things you'd never know any other way. And the best part is, half of it'll be lies [laughs]."[1]

All mistakes and misunderstandings are my own.

Some placename origins

In order of appearance. ON = Old Norse.

Sanday: ON *sandr*, sand; ON *ey*, island

Kettletoft: ON *kettil*, personal name, from *ketill*, kettle or cauldron; ON *topt*, dwelling

Start Point: ON *stertr*, tail

Loth: ON *hjlóð*, sound (of the sea)

Elsness: ON *elds*, fire, for the numerous burnt mounds; ON *nes*, a point

Scuthvie: ON *skúta*, to project; ON *vágr*, bay

Tafts Ness: ON *topt*, dwelling; ON *nes*, a point

Riv: ON *rif* / Faroese *riv*, reef

Ness o' Brough: ON *nes*, a point; ON *borg*, stronghold

The Keld: ON *keila*, a narrow sound

The Clogg: Scots *cleuch* / Old English *cloh*, a ravine

Cata Sand: ON *keyta*, foul water, for extreme shallowness

Tresness: ON *trés*, tree or wood, of driftwood; ON *nes*, a point

Newark: Scots *new wark*, new work

Saville: ON *sae*, sea; ON *völlr*, field

Holms of Ire: ON *hólmr*, island; ON *eyjar*, islands

Torsker: ON *þórir*, personal name; *garðr*, farm

Scar: ON *skör*, rim or edge

Stove: ON *stofa*, room

Erraby/Ayrabae: ON *eyre-boer*, farm by a beach ridge

Burness: ON *bára*, a tidal race; ON *nes*, a point

The Treb: ON *þref*, loft / *þrep*, ledge / Icelandic *þref*, platform

Kirk and Kill: ON *kirkja*, church; Gaelic *cill*, church

Eccles: Welsh *eglwys*, church

The Hammer/Hamarr: ON *hammar*, a projecting rock

Bea Loch: ON *boer*, farm

Lopness: ON *hlaup*, a leaping out; ON *nes*, a point

Loch o' Galilee: nickname, where Jesus practised walking on water because it's only five foot deep

Quoyness: ON *kví*, enclosure; ON *nes*, a point

Heilsa Fjold: ON *heilsa*, health, greeting; *fjǫlð*, multitude


The Riv
Whitemill Bay
Tafts Ness
Kirk & Kill
Scar
North Loch/Loch o' Galilee
Holms o' Ire
Otterswick
Torsker
Scuthvie Bay
Saville
Start Point
Ness o' Brough
Black Rock Jetty
Burrian
Cross Kirk
Whale Head
Taing o' the Pund
Newark
Cata Sand
Bay o' Lopness
Lady
Bea Loch
School
Airport
The Welly
Bay o' Pool
Erraby/Ayrabae
Cross Kirkyard
Heilsa Fjold
Heritage Centre
Whale monument
Bay o' Newark
Lamba Ness
The Clogg
Stywick
Kettletoft
Tresness
Backaskaill Bay
The Peedie Sea
Lashy Sound
The Hammer/Hamar
Elsness
Quoyness
Loth
Stove
Holm o' Elsness
Spurness
The Keld
Holms o' Spurness
0
5
10 km
Shetland
Fair Isle
North Ronaldsay
Westray
Faray
Eday
Mainland
Stronsay
Shapinsay
Kirkwall
Stromness
Pentland Firth
Scotland
0
20
40

Reference ports

Kirkwall: Start Point, Loth, and Elsness
Aberdeen: oot East of Start, quarter-hour ahead of Aberdeen
Dover: the Skerry (back of North Ronaldsay), and North Ronaldsay Firth

The wan year, we got peedie books fae the oil companies. Kirkwall was in it. Then it disappeared. So we worked aff Aberdeen. Then Orkney Harbours cam oot wi' a tide book but I never bothered wi' it. I never had anything written doon. Was all in the heid.



1. The Start's an oor earlier than Kettletoft, same as Kirkwall. Not much tide in the bays, just runs straight doon. Mile oot off the Start and it's three oors later.
2. Scuthvie's a funny piece. The East end, fae Tafts across to North Ronaldsay, it's the same as Kettletoft.
3. Then when you go aroond, peedie bit further round here up to the Riv Dyke, it's an oor afore. No distance apairt!
4. North Ronaldsay pier's four minutes eftir Kirkwall,
5. and Otterswick Bay's an oor and a half afore Kirkwall.
6. Then the Heid o' Ire, it's a peedie bit ahead of Otterswick.
7. The Riv's actually earlier, totally different. I've seen us gan up the Ire, gettin' the ebb tide all the way here, then it's flowin' at the Heid of Ire. Unbelievable.
8. Change Day's the day of the New Moon. The Brough, oot that way, Change Day it turns quarter-past-ten, used to coont on it. Oot-by, it's later. Y'ken? Couldn't explain it all.
9. West side, tide runs nine oors north, three oors sooth. Just at Ness o' Brough. Shallow piece runs oot here, we call it Bow o' Hermaness. It runs north there. Sometimes you're comin' up the west side, dodgin' the tide, you head in there and cut across for the Taing o' the Pund and you'll catch the ebb tide up there.
10. See when it's comin' oot through Lashy here, seen it doin' 15 knots.
11. Loth, it's the same as Kirkwall,
12. but through the Keld it's an oor later. Awful lot of tide comes through Spurness, runs right up.
13. In Stywick, the tide runs the opposite way it should.* It runs for a certain time, the flood goes north instead of south. The time's more or less Kettletoft, but flood gan into the Clogg, into Cata Sand, maybe creates an eddy oot here and the tide gaes north.
14. Comin' home on the flood, when ye come to Tresness, f*** me the thing just slowed doon. That's the way the tide ran, just gaed north there**.**

*For so long, I tried to tell the Coastguards that. One time we were lookin' where the boy had been lost, the son and the faither was both lost in Stywick, fae Newark. We were gan oot, and I said we should go north of Tresness. The Coastguard telt me, "why?" I said the tide'll be gan north. Fella with the Coastguard argued with me. "It doesn't tell me that on my screen." Wouldna believe me. We cam home, one of the boys fae Newark was wi' us, he said he'd need to go home and speak to his mither, and we fairly agreed wi'm. So we came back oot, telt the Coastguard we were back oot on the search again, doon tae Tresness. Never answered me. I said, "F*** ye, I'm gan tae the Start," so we steamed the other way and just cam back along and found the son by Newark. If the Coastguard listened, we might have found them livin', y'ken? It really did *piss me off*. An Orcadian cam on, said, "ye seem to ken more aboot this than we do, whaur d'ye think we should search?" Think they're a bit late.





Glossary

These definitions mostly come from Gregor Lamb's *Naggles o Piapittem*[2] and *Orkney Wordbook*[3], reflecting Sanday's linguistic diversity through Old Norse, Faroese, Icelandic, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Gaelic, Scots, Welsh, Old High German, Old English, Shetlandic, and Orcadian.

Bairn: child
Bent: grass, especially on dunes
Bere: a type of ancient barley common in northern Scotland
Bruck: rubbish
Creel: lobster pot
Croft: a small farm, historically rented
Cuithe: a 1–3-year-old coalfish
Drooth: drought or drying air
Groatie buckie: a small shell which brings good luck
Gruelly belkie: a 'gruel belly', nickname for people from Sanday
Guga: a gannet chick
Holm: a small island
In-by: within; the part of a room facing a fire
Ken: know
Kirk: church
Laird: landowner
Land sea: a heavy, oceanic swell coming ashore
Links: sandy coastal meadows, sometimes also referred to as machair
Mainland: Orkney's largest island, formerly Pomona, Hrossey, or Meginland
Mind: to remember, recall, or consider
North Isles: a group of islands within Orkney, north of Mainland
Ness: a point or headland
Out-by: beyond
Partan: edible crab
Peedie: little
Selkie: a seal; shapeshifter who changes between human and seal forms
Sillock: a coalfish in its first year
Snibbing: to remove the sprouts of potatoes
Soulka: the space between sea and sky; the circle of the horizon; summertime festivals held in Sanday; a mass gathering with a hint of disorder
South/Sooth: Beyond the Pentland Firth, mainland Britain
Spoots: razor clams, named for the jet (spout) of water which reveals them from beneath the sand
Staithe: rock platform for drying tangles; the foundation of a haystack
Taing: a projecting coastal landform, often (partly) submerged by tide, from 'tongue'
Tangles: kelp, especially the beachcast, dried, or bundled stipes
Town: Kirkwall
Treb/threve: ancient earthen boundaries, specific to the North Isles
V-notching: marking breeding lobsters for conservation
Ware: seaweed growing below low water
Wilks: whelks, but can also refer to winkles
Yarn: story, tale

Preface

Sanday is in the north-east of Orkney, to the north-east of Scotland. It is exposed to the Atlantic Ocean on one side, North Sea on the other, and wind from all directions. It connects to Britain via Mainland, Orkney's biggest island. Beyond that is simply *sooth*. Over 5,000 years of recorded habitation, its population has been as large as 2,000, and around 500 people call it home today. Other residents include internationally significant populations of birds, seals, and flowers, with astonishing ecologies from shellfish beds, through forests of kelp and seagrass, over sands, links, and lochs. This island off an island off an island is a spectacular place, from psychedelic meadows, through flowing dunes, to cosmic shell sand beaches.

Named by Viking settlers for its expansive beaches and dunes, Sanday is, unsurprisingly, very sandy. The 107 km of coastline are winding, shifting, ever-changing, and (to a visitor like me) can be as disorienting as they are mesmerising. Some quirks and contradictions can be seen in names like *Scuthvie* ('the bay that projects') or *Saville* ('sea field')[2]. When re-read across time and languages, others like *Start* ('tail') or *Holms of Ire* ('island islands') take on new meaning. Much of the North End sits below sea level behind protective dunes. Almost all of Sanday is within one kilomtre of the sea, and its land area swells by a third with the falling tide[1]. Twice a day, the edges are washed over—leaving an archipelago of eleven-ish tidal islands—before resurfacing, subtly changed with each breath[4].

Across air, water, and land, motion is constant. Elements mix and collide: churning waves, blown sand, sideways rain. The veil between land and sea and air feels thin. Life in Sanday seems to accept and resist movement by turns. More houses have wind turbines than stairs. The few trees grow like secrets, whispered in quiet corners. Only rippling water shows the wind, the beaten-down vegetation stays still in its tension and gives nothing away. Sand washes up and blows in, settling behind and around ecosystems that absorb Ocean swells and storms. Shellfish build their bodies into reefs that crunch under the breakers of a *land sea*[5]. Kelp fronds drag and pull against waves on rubbery stipes clinging to rocks below[5,6]. Seagrass meadows slow water and hold sediments tight with their roots, gathering bits of land headed back to sea. *Bent* blankets the dunes against gales that can take a car door, given the chance. These living systems hold the island more-or-less in one place[7,8].

Rising seas and erosion driven by climate change are reshaping Sanday profoundly. Irregular weather patterns bring bigger storms from different directions at unexpected times of year. Risk maps and projections show an island which will break into many[8]. Little can be known about how people and ecosystems will respond, and Sanday Development Trust's restoration and

monitoring will be crucial[8]. The fluid spaces of Sanday have always shifted, but they are changing very fast now.

Societies sit within ecologies, and Sanday's dynamic land-sea-air hosts fluid human populations. Unusually, Sanday's chambered cairns (ancient spiritual sites) face the sea rather than settlements[9]. For looking out? In? Both? Neolithic settlers, Picts, Celts, Vikings, itinerant agricultural workers, passengers of the *Johannes*, stationed troops, herring girls, a flourish of hippies, people seeking peace or fortune or somewhere to be more fully themselves. 'Incomers' are nothing new and the sea is a route, source, and draw. As in many islands, centralisation and globalisation have lured and driven people away. Small populations risk cuts to public services, particularly under austerity and managed retreat. Connections across Sanday and wider Orkney have varied dramatically over time, changing where people are born, educated, make livelihoods, retire, and more. Ferries, roads, airports, dummy airfields, ambitions to leave or settle, dialects, trade, and the gossiping 'van man' with his shop on horse-and-cart. I admire the hard work, ingenuity, and rebellious spirit I have met here, among "both Sanday-born and Sanday-settled"[10]. The population of Sanday has always shifted, but it might shift very fast soon.

Thinking about time helps make sense of space, particularly as new places emerge with environmental change[11]. In Sanday, I feel time as 'flat': non-linear, blurred, and simultaneous. Walking past Neolithic monuments, ageing plastics, exposed geology, daytime owls, rusting agricultural equipment, eroding dunes, and beachcast kelp shrivelling in the wind and sun. I wonder what of the old ways can help navigate a future of rising seas, intensifying storms, and warming. Island of many islands, some made by the rising tide, others from the ancient bed of Lake Orcadie[12], connected and disconnected by the movement of sand through water and air. All of this, I experience at once, a flatness stretching to the horizon at my front, sides, and back.

What does the visible horizon, a threshold in observed space, share with our sense of the present moment, a threshold in experienced time[13]? Cata Sand. Low tide. In a place like this, open and unknowable and without dominating features, I agree with Noreen Masud that there's "no right or wrong way to look"[12]. Fringed with dunes and saltmarsh, this intertidal square mile will become sea again in some hours. With that tide the island changes: something taken from surrounding archaeological sites, something left behind sandbags resisting erosion. The next tide runs across something different and constantly reformed, land and water and air and living beings moving with and against each other. The sea catches a falling gannet, who pops up with a fish.

John Latham's flat time considers the material world through events: physical objects as temporary (re)configurations of matter in space, occurring in relation and over time[14]. Howard Hardiman's love letter to Sanday's drystone building,

Rag Stones[15], captures Sanday's flat time well. Ancient rocks, placed with care and attention to build and maintain structures of living heritage. Quiet, persistent work keeps them in shape against toppling by animals and elements. "That's centuries of work there. Each builder with his faither's voice at his shoulder."[15] Dusted and crusted with lichens, softened by moss, and entombing cigarette butts and whalebones, the walls are stout monuments to enduring presence on the land.

There is much to be learnt from what worked before, and time flattens against the wind, waves, and sands that always move here[10]. Soaring costs and climate change push farmers to experiment with seaweed in dune soils, inspired by crofters past and present. Hens returned to stone huts after a storm flattened the wooden houses built to produce for a wartime egg boom. Steady practices sit beside innovations in fishers' self-built gear, drystone wall design, wind-strong tubular greenhouses made from fish farm rings, new sailing methods for rescues in heavy weather[16]. Welcoming people in need and on the move, the reception of the *Johannes* has much to teach about meeting boats coming ashore today[17]. While many island voices are pushed to the edge of this archipelago nation, there is much to admire in Isles' sustainability, adaptability, memory, and grace through change. What do we mean by 'progress' in increasingly unpredictable times, and what are we willing to trade for it?

Flat time asks me to be mindful of the future while learning from the past. Fluid space shows me that the world will change around us, the places we know as one thing will become another. Spending time with Sanday pushes me to try and be more pragmatic, generous, rebellious, and move with greater attention to past and future.

I've been lucky to work in Sanday since 2022, mapping the marine environments, cultural understandings, and lived experiences which form the seascape. Sense of place and meaning are fundamental to knowing ecosystems as they are lived by individuals, societies, and wider ecological communities. Place-based knowledges are often neglected by scientists, managers, and decision-makers[18]. We certainly could not have mapped Sanday's seascape without local help. Many key findings came from meandering conversations and following 'tangents'[19]. Stories hold information, reveal unique perspectives, and motivate action—they are key to making and sharing and using environmental knowledge. So to consider peopled ecologies, environmental stewardship, and climate justice, we must also understand the stories, best told by those who live them.

Telling stories is one way to deal with change: yarns that teach the past and guide the future. Orkney has a rich storytelling lineage through fiction, fact, and wherever they blur: George Marwick, Margaret Tait, George Mackay Brown, Tom Muir, Amy Liptrot, Harry Josephine Giles. Sanday is

no exception, with Walter Traill Dennison, Patrick Fea, Gregor Lamb, Karl Cooper, Eric Stockton, Howard Hardiman, Jake Ghaleb, Sandra Towrie, and many more. Betsy Skea's moving book, Island Images[16], tells yarns from the Nortwa across one period of flux. Oral histories project, Sanday Voices[10], keeps tales which may otherwise have been lost. *Beside the Ocean of Time* articulates the slipperiness of stories, history, and place: "I think the saga of the island can never be told now… You did well in your day. Now be at peace, wherever you are."[20] Margaret Tait's film-poems situate people in-place as nature within dynamic landscapes, notably in *Land Makar* (poet of the land). Most touching to me are those archaeologists, artists, historians, farmers, wildlife watchers, beachcombers, walkers, fishers, and citizens who have directly shared with me the stories they hold.

Here, I have compiled some of what has been shared with me in Sanday. In homes, schools, community centres, distilleries, museums, pubs, and shops. On boats, beaches, and tractors. Over maps, pints, fences, drams, creels-in-the-making, and tea. Through historical records, snorkels, and online meetings. Beachcombing tidal islands for lucky shells, watching a dolphin dissection, bottle-feeding lambs, hunting for spoots, the last night of the pub. Contributions from the island(ers) reveal ever-shifting mixes of land, sea, air, people, and ecologies over time. Like the shell sand at Start Point, these re/collections each come from their own places, but combine to become another thing. Please beachcomb through, with any luck you'll find something interesting. In collage, I hope they bring you closer to Sanday, invite reflections on other places called home, and draw support for these places to thrive in a daunting world.

"It is true that islands have a 'Quality of Life' which is all their own […] but it is not exactly the life perceived by romantics and escapists. For one thing it was far from changeless. […] If there was an enduring 'Quality of Life', it existed despite change; Sanday was no utopia immune from the pressures of the outside world."[16]

"Old memories stir, one yarn leads to the next and forgotten incidents are recalled. Times past and present are blurred in such a way that the listener can hardly distinguish between recollection and legend. There is that timeless quality where a story about someone dead a hundred years or more has the same immediacy as the latest news about a neighbour."[16]



Any of that area here, I'd say that's important tae me. That's me livelihood, where I was born, brought up, where my kids are growin' up, y'ken? I don't know where to start with that because it's all important.

Arguably, the whole island is practically marine.

It's tranquil and peace and quiet, but in a storm it's noisy and it's just different. It's a unique day, I suppose.

The power of the sea, a winter gale…

Mind just haulin' in here wan day, just below Newark. Boat stern on tae the tide, stern tae the weather. Bugger me, just aboot finished the rope and there's a bigger roller cam in. Broke over the stern and filled the deck. Filled me boots. That's what happens, y'see, just that wan rogue wave.

Some of those waves were 40 foot. Coming roond one day, it was fine, flat, we're having a cup of tea. We come aroond the point and the tide's running. *Whoosh!* We're left in the air. 36-foot boat. And as we come down I could see the skipper's tea in the air. We're just f***in' droppin' off the wave and it fell back in the cup.

It hopefully can make me or save me a few pound over the years through things sold and things found. 20, 30 years ago, when the kids were younger and we were first married, it was more important because we could make money through tangles, cockles, lobster, crab. Nowadays, it's mostly pleasure. It's stress relief for me, lookin' at the sea. I'd miss it *severely* if I didna see it. I'm allergic to stress [laughs].

Nothin' better than lookin' at the sea. Every morning when I get up, first thing I do is go tae the kitchen window.

I remember driving up from Harrogate, going past Newcastle. All of a sudden, I say to the kids, "smell that? Smell the sea." Came up the east coast, first thing was I could smell the sea. I don't mean in a bad way [laughs]. It's that *salt tang*.

The sea's always the boss, you never try to fight it. If you do, you're f***ed. The old man telt us that when we were peedie boys, oot in the dinghy. Mind him gan oot to save the creels, wan day at dinner time. Motion coming on, he

had creels oot in the bay there. He just got the last of them aboard, turning the boat, and the wave cam in and just pushed the side of the boat right in. Took his feet and pushed the side right oot tae hold it. Thank Christ it was tight and he got home with it. He always telt us that: "mind on boy, the sea's the boss."

Disna need to be much of a storm now and the waves can climb up the dunes. Even just at high water it's at the bottom of the dunes. When I was younger, you used to see rock and whatever along the bottom, it was a bit further back. It won't be long until there's a major breach on some of the road systems. Every year there's seaweed and stones washed up. Some day, the road'll disappear and you'll end up wi' huge flooding, and it won't be repairable either, I wouldna think. Matter of time before it happens. There's so much of the beach needs to be done, I think Mother Nature will tak its course and that'll be it, Sanday'll be back to bein' seven islands or whatever it was thoosands of years ago. The sea'll win over eventually.

There's so much of Sanday that's like a saucer. The dunes and the marram's high, but inside you're below sea level. The North End is nearly all like that. Elsness too, the beach there is high and then low in-by. So it would flood huge areas if that edge goes, there's nothing there to hold the sea back then.

The beach's gan away, island's getting smaller. The sea's getting higher.

In 30 year, there's a few fields where I've had tae take the fences back every five year. Just disappearing intae the sea. Ye see it. The dunes are gettin' a lot steeper, or else they're being washed away. Thankfully, most of them are building up the way, eventually they come back in again with the spring wind that blows the dry sand up the way. It does fill in again but they're definitely getting steeper. Changing weather systems aroond here.

At Start Point there used to be a car track, and a road's width past it. Now, there's no track there, you can hardly walk.

Further up the island there's three or four danger points. A few bits where the sea comes across maybe once or twice every year. If the sea breaches across, we'll have no main road. That'd have a huge knock-on.

I think the grass that holds up the sand, which I know gets eroded with the storms, that's an important feature. It's hopefully stopping some of the erosion.

It was threatening to flood hundreds of acres if it got through. Old implements and old cars and stuff filled holes on the beach. It was a huge success because

the wind blew, the marram grass grew among it and filled up the hole that was just eroding fast.

That was for helping the erosion, quite a lot of the beasts as well. We found a full horse in the banks, it was just buried but now it's eroded… They just buried the animals in the dunes. I'd say, in my ignorance, that there wasn't a lot of change out there, in the dunes, until it did change. Now it's changing rapidly. But it must have been a different place, because if you go to Tresness, you can see an old road, further away from the sea. It's been uncovered recently again, not a modern road, an old road, just the sand they go on. Compacted bit to go on and the stone. **There's always something comes up.**

There's at least 150 archaeological sites in Sanday that are at risk of erosion.

The archaeology is just everywhere. There's a map at the Heritage Centre and they are just *dotted* everywhere, all round the coast.

There's probably no many fields in all of Sanday that's no got archaeology in. Bits and pieces the whole way doon here.

Never been excavated. Like 90% of this island. In our garden, I've had Neolithic flint arrowheads, loads of paving slabs, and the house has a Viking name. The one at Newark is completely unexcavated because if we started the sea would come in and take the road away. That consists of a Viking fish factory. When the Vikings were Christianised, quite early on, it was Catholic religion. Fish on Friday. So what you find, all round Europe, is an increase in the catching of fish. But behind it is an eroding site, bigger than this building, and eroding all the time. There's massive stuff in Sanday.

I could never get me heid roond archaeology, why'd they want tae f***in' dig up something fae 1,000 f***in' year ago?

There isn't the capacity there, or the funding to keep track of it. Lots of archaeological things, widely scattered.

All the staithes round the place for drying seaweed.

And the boat burial! We took the school to that. Nothing there to see now, that's all eroded back too.

When it was buried by the Vikings it was 1.5 km inland.

Here at Start Point, Mount Misery is where the lighthousekeepers stored potatoes, and there was a sailors' graveyard as well.
I've researched over 200 shipwrecks and got them in different types of lists.

That's my intention for my book, list the ships in date order, then group order, with a paragraph about all from each group. That's the least I can do, then give a fuller account of some shipwrecks from each group. The earliest recorded is 1596, the *Odessa*. The worst area on the island, for the death of people, would be Riv. It's known as the ship's graveyard of Sanday. Five went down in Otterswick on the 12th of September 1882, *Alexander, William, Robina, Nancy, Vigilant*. And that's the most sheltered bay! Ship Maggie, it's a Walter Traill Dennison story in connection with the *Earl of Chatham*, the boat we've got in the tank. It's reputed that she made it come ashore, with her spells. In 1863, there was a ship called the *Cecilia*, came ashore at Torsker. There were two girls on it, one married someone in Sanday, and one went to the Mainland, i.e., Kirkwall, *that* mainland [laughs]. Eileen was born on the island, her middle name was Celia after the boat.

Me great, great, great… grandfaither wis fund on a beach in Westray, aboot 1771. He wis a young boy, only survivor of a shipwreck. They fund a piece o' wood, too, wi' *Archangel* on it. So they christened him Archie Angel. I like tae say I'm descended from angels [laughs].

Bay o' Pool, did the Vikings not use tae shelter in there?

Well they probably did, there's a Viking site there… People always have.

Even after they built the lighthouse, there was still plenty. I find that strange, just as many after as before the lighthouse was built. It's all the currents and things, and the boats would come up because Orkney was a trade route, y'see, so they knew Orkney. They'd come up the North Sea rather than through the channel and across. That's the main reason I see why they came to Orkney, but then got swept in a storm and drifted off. There was some mix-up with the Sanday light and the Fair Isle light as well…

Have you seen Fair Isle? Some days you can, some days you can't. On a really clear day, you can actually see the houses, 25 miles away. This island, which gives rise to these myths of the disappearing islands, we can see it one day, then not for two weeks, then it's there for three weeks.

There's bits of whale all over the place. People use them as fenceposts, the ribs. People do collect them. The radar station in the war was called RAF Whale Head. The whale head is still there. There's a big hummock which they're still not sure whether it's natural or a chambered tomb, and the skull was on top of a pole on top of that. They removed it when they built the RAF station in 1941, but it's still in the dyke.







This petrified wood, it's 6,005 year auld. They told me it's 6,000 year auld when I found it five year ago [laughs].

It's such a rich area for heritage, archaeologically too, you never know what you're going to find. Up at Scar, where the boat burial was, you wonder what the environment was like then. Particularly with low tides, there was this ancient forest that shows up occasionally. What was the island like 1,000 years ago, 5,000 years ago? And what will it look like in 500 years? Will it even exist? Or will it be a series of broken islands, just the high bits… It has always changed, but it's the speed now.

That bit's changed more in the last year than it had in the last 40 or 50.

When you think aboot the Bay o' Stove here, you walk on the beach and look back at the face, you see the archaeology. Going back 5,000 years. Realise folk've been here for that long. You can see the line of the buildings, just with the stonework. There again, it's slowly eroding. Change and history and time. *When* they did. And they had an area aboot the same size as that coffee table, just in the field, just above the beach. They did three small holes, and I can't mind how long they spent takin' artefacts outae that three small holes. *Weeks*. And they didna go doon very far. There's a site there's bigger than Skara Brae. Flint arrowheads and all that kind of stuff, just lying on top of the soil. They were just amazed the amount of stuff, artefacts, they took oot of that small area.

It is otherworldly here. A time warp.

In the evening, it's so atmospheric. When you come across all these remains, you know there was stuff going on long before you were here, and there's nobody there now. You're there, walking along with all the kelp pits, and you know that at one time there were all these people there busily doing things where there no longer is.

You have to move with it, you can't stay behind. You can't live in history, have to move ahead. You just have to.

He was a farmer, engineer, at home in the modern world, but I knew the ruin he was born in. I'm fascinated with ruins, how they fall into it. I'm managing the decay of the house my mum and dad are in. And I'm not entirely sure why. Very little comfort, or what we call comfort at least. Maybe it's always been like that.

We were far too late getting stories. Because a lot of the Orcadians are now gone, either dead or moved, we're losing that. We have a few, but not nearly as much as we could have had.

I dunno, this is just where my home is. It's not just a house, it's 650 acre of land. Neighbours that I grew up with, remembering them, y'ken? A lot of their bits I've been farming as well, they've passed on, and no another generation coming in so I've been renting them. Remembering people you were fond of when you're growing up is a big part of it. Miss a lot of them. Different days now.

When we came here 20 years ago, Orcadians were 60% of the population. Now it's only about 10%.

There're few local folk left in Sanday, we're a rare breed now. It's good that somebody's come in because what would the island be like if we hadna had new people come in. But it is sad that there's not many locals left. **You can't grow human 'beans'** [laughs].

One thing I could not believe, early on, is that a lot of the people I thought were born and bred in Sanday, were not. One had to follow the jobs, some Sanday folk came from other islands, Eday, Westray, Faray. Absolutely amazing, it struck me. In the 90s, to me that was the biggest change. A lot of people left Sanday to retire into the town, Orcadians.

I was born in Westray, moved here aged 2. Me faither born in Sanday, and his mither in Westray.

Sanday's a beautiful island, we miss our family that's still there. Jim lived there all his life, and he misses the cattle and fairm too. But it's more convenient here, with hospital trips. First we left the fairm and moved up into the village. We're still working at that time, we go up to the fairm and do things to help. Just got older and no so fit [laughs].

In my class, there's one child with a Sanday parent. An Orcadian parent. When I first came, there were a lot more Orcadian families, and in those ten years children have grown up and left.

And after Covid, there was a massive influx of new people.

45% of the school population started in those last few years.

There were houses for sale for years, then suddenly there weren't any. And with working from home, people used to have to come for a job and there weren't

many jobs. Whereas now, and that's a disadvantage, they come and have to hide away working. Fair enough, people have to work, but it can be hard to get to know people.

I mind on a Sunday, I woulda been fifteen, afore I started going tae the pub. I'm seeing twenty youngins sat here, three or four cars parked along the road. I'll stop, somebody's yarnin', just sitting in the ditch oot here. You'll no see that noo. There's no enough youngins coming to the island to keep it gan.

I just felt Sanday got quiet for us. We were so busy on the fairm, and the airfield, seeing lots of folk. Slowly it just got really quiet. When we were first married, there was lots of folk that Jim's friendly wae, and me relations was there too. Me dad's ones originally came from Sanday too. Jim has his ones too, lots of ones we visited and socialised wae. And then slowly some of them left the island, and a lot of them died.

I remember when we first moved here, there was a lot of visiting people.

That I find so sad. Always at eight o'clock, you'd have a knock on the door…

…In fact, if you see Billy, his mum made my mum and dad supper when they first moved here. My goodness, I've never seen anything like it. She pulled out a trolley: pastries, sausage rolls, sandwiches, cakes, tea. We were gobsmacked.

And then we'd all chat, play Scrabble, things like that. Don't get that now, everybody just watches telly.

With the fibre outage we've got now… In London everything comes to a standstill.

Well y'see, when I married and I'd go aboot and come home and I'd say to Jim, "I've seen this body, and he's such and such, and he speaks like such and such, he looks like…" and he'd tell me who it was [laughs]. And then he'd tell me who they were related to, married to, all that kind of thing.

It's just a feelin' of home. Away from the place ye miss it. The whole North End. Anybody that knows me knows where I'm from.
Each island is their own. We're gruelly belkies, Stronsay's limpets, Westray's auks. It means 'gruel belly', because Sanday was the grain capital o' the North Isles, the auld-fashioned barley, the *bere*. Always the first tae come oot, first tae harvest. Lighter sandy land, that's why there's such a Viking heritage, the land was easy tae till.





Going back tae the 1960s, with the binders. You widna be finished your harvest, building the stacks outae sheaves. But your next-door neighbour would be finished. There was never anything asked, but if they were finished they'd come, give you a help on a dry day, tae help ye oot. Never anything asked. Only thing that wid come oot of it, whauever came used tae get a *damn* good meal, and a coupla glasses of homebrew. That was the kind of thing, never any money exchanged, it was just the done thing in them days. Ye just did it.

I was two oors in my bed that morning, I was never in bed again 'til we cam home Friday night. Three days on deck, fish hid tae be done y'see. Didna matter, ye just hid to dae it. Nae gutting machines then. You can sleep when you're deid [laughs]. Mind nippin' intae the pub for a pint before I cam home. There's a dance on that night and I wanted to sleep before. Met an auld fella in the pub and he was desperate for getting his oats cut. I says "jeez that's a shame, I've no been in bed for a while." "Och it's only two acre, it'll only tak us a few oors." So I gaed up and drove the tractor (he was on the binder), cut the crop, gaed to bed, woke up, and went to the dance. Lovely when you're young.

It's the relationships that are important here. How you get on with people. When I broke my leg, I had hundreds of people I could call on, on an island of only a few hundred. My 85-year-old neighbour's alarm clock broke. Someone on Mainland that day picked one up, put batteries in it, set the time, and then her alarm as well. It really makes a difference.

There's good community spirit, people pullin' together tae do stuff. Folk comment on the community here, no just a bunch ae folk, it's a community. And like most communities we have oor problems, but we get on. The people that come in have been made to feel welcome. They pull the island up. Folk who've come in and fitted in have done a good job, anyone who hasn't has gone away again.

1944, me dad came here as an 8-year-old. Tail end of the Second World War, country was starving, so anything ye could do. There's a war camp here on the site, 300 personnel. It was a lot to keep everybody fed. Me granny, she'd 1,000 hens, and they paid the bills of the fairm, any animals that you had was extra, that was your profit. Imagine having 1,000 hens now, and having a profit, y'ken? Ridiculous. The personnel that were in the camp, they'd ship away fresh eggs. Couldna get them in the cities, so they'd ship them away. Two, three, four dozen in the box, and the folk sooth would send up fresh fruit, gie it to me granny and grandad. Great wee barter system. Me grandad didna like the top dog, general or whatever he was. He'd make the guys walk, as the tide went oot

he'd mak them stand in the sea, they'd walk out and then walk back. Two foot from the edge of the sea. One of those mental people in charge kinda 'hing. My grandad thought that was terrible. "Wouldna treat a dog like that." And the personnel, they liked me grandparents. They thought Orkney was the pits when they came here, but they didna want tae leave when they had tae leave.

A lot of folk come and stay, a lot of folk come and go.

Sanday's always been a refuge. It doesn't half attract disparate people. I put it down to the military occupation in the war. They had a radar station, 500-odd people sprung up in a camp in a year. And the decoy runway, one of my teachers was in the Home Guard. Influx of people from 'civilisation'. A cinema, instant-built huts for entertainment. That must have been massive, opened their eyes to the world. That set it up for the hippies, they might have struggled with some other islands…

I say there's good and bad among people who come in, they're not all nice people. But the local people weren't all nice people either, there were people that were born and bred in Sanday that were not very nice sometimes either. You can't generalise, you just have to take people as you find them.

The main one I've written up is the *Johannes*, 1861. That was a Prussian ship from Bremen to Baltimore. It was foundering and the people of Sanday directed them to the Sands of Erraby. It was an immigrant ship. It was motioned into shore so everyone could get off safely. They had to stay here for a month, all over the island, then the *Anna* came for them. At that particular time, the Cross Kirk was being built and as a thank you to the island, they gave the ship's bell to the Cross Kirk. It hung in the belfry for ages, until the Belfry was taken down. It was the same time as the 1861 census, so all the Germans are listed in the 1861 census, biggest one in Sanday's history. Everybody got off the boat. In Covid, somebody contacted the Development Trust as a descendant of one of the passengers. We had some back and forth communication and I was sent a photograph of the *Anna* at Baltimore. Two boys stayed behind, and they were called Rohan. But I can't find that surname. Rohan was made Scottish, Orcadian, to Rowan.

They came from Faray. That was the kind of place to get a fairm to rent, as a stepping stone on to something a wee bit bigger, y'ken? Lot of people came to Sanday to do that. I mind those families coming, the horse and cairt coming by our hoose. We got so used to people coming, there wasn't much suspicion. The hippies came and the first I saw of them was people going by the window

on the track. What struck me was they were carrying a little baby, in their bare feet, in the snow! The women were wearing long, flowery skirts, someone said it was the curtains of the hoose they'd moved into [laughs]. They looked lovely. There were a few families. Slim moved eventually to the North End, he was the one who stayed. He's buried there in the field. Then it was the schoolteachers, always new schoolteachers, headmasters changing. The teachers and their families set up the play group, that was brilliant. The next lot that came was the archaeologists. A lot gaed on wi' the archaeologists. Made a lot of differences to the dances, the hall would be full.

They came in the '60s, robed and jewelled from Marrakesh. My dad moved to Sanday with a group of friends which included artists, performers, storytellers, jewellery makers and actors. They were seeking and building an alternative communal lifestyle which they successfully managed for many years. Fish House was used as a hen house when he bought it. There was no electricity until I was 11, we used a wind generator and heated hot water through a twin tub washing machine run off a car battery for bathing and laundry. My dad was respected because he farmed. Everyone fished and farmed in those days, it was more community-oriented. So here I am coming home to Fish House. We're still renovating but there's a lovely cottage that was a wood store and hen house, then my dad's workshop. Come and stay, you can write from there.

Pace of life is completely different. When you're self-sufficient, you're not depending on the outside world. It's just a different life completely. If it disna happen tomorrow, so what? You can do it next week. Not many people left on the island that've lived that way, but right up to our 70s, 80s, while we had the farm, we were self-sufficient. A different pace of life. **Are we one step forward or one step back?**

Most of your living was what you could grow. You grew your own vegetables, you had hens for chicken and eggs, you had a coo you could milk for butter, cheese. You had your little boat and you fished. You had that so you didn't need to buy very much really. You didn't need much money. Self-sufficient living really, and they've gone completely away fae that. When we were young, many a time the steamboats widna come for a week in the winter. So what? It would come next week. We didna need it. Two bakeries on the island, two butchers. Very little waiting for the boat to come in. Noo if the boat misses one day, shelves in the shop empty. No milk, no bread, no vegetables. They think they're going ahead but it's going backwards fast, completely dependent on food coming in which is not a good thing. Much healthier food as well, when you grew it you knew who you were eatin' [laughs].

This end of the island that I'm happy livin' in, possibly **I like knowin' or carin' for it so it can look after me**, I'm kind of lookin' after it I suppose. That's more the land, not the sea side of it. The sea's its own animal. Tryna be a bit more self-sufficient, rather than takin', takin' the whole time. Tryna put a bit of goodness back intae the soil. Hopefully.

Our vegetable garden's been there for at least 150 years because we see it on the old map. And it has wonderful soil to a depth, then it's solid sand underneath. So that's been putting seaweed, donkey's, donkey's, donkey's years. That would have been common: horse manure, cow manure, and seaweed.

I just grab whatever's there, kelp, bladderwrack, y'know? Whether it does any good I don't know. Not sure on the joy of collecting either because it does me back in something shocking!

There's been a few neighbours over the years, sayin' aboot the benefits of the seaweed. But. Until two years ago I hadn't done any of it. Especially with the drier summers that we have, the alginate should be soakin' up what we do get. That's a main interest, see how we can retain water. It's just pure sand, blown dunes most of it, reclaimed from the sea. Longer list of what elements aren't in the soil than what is [laughs]. Copper, cobalt, selenium, manganese, zinc, more. Sodium and iodine's the only two that we're high in, everything else we're low. That's from salt spray, we're only, at most, half a mile from it in any direction, it's all coming from the sea.

Might just be something that I try and it disna work, then I know it's something that disna work. It's something I've been thinkin' aboot for a few year. Price of fertiliser doubled two year ago, as expensive again noo. Just ridiculous, when you're spending a fifth, sixth of all yer money on buyin' in an artificial fertiliser that disappears wi' the water in the winter. Oor soil's that sandy that it disna get retained, just keeps leachin' doon and it's gone. At least wi' puttin' on seaweed, it's got copper and cobalt and manganese and all the 'hings that the soil's lackin' in. That's the biggest part, and trying tae save some money on it. We'll see about the money, but I hope it'll improve the grassland. Less buyin' in minerals tae feed the cattle. We'll see.

It's gone on for generations in the past because that was the only fertiliser we did have, and it helped subsidise their income as well when they sold it. It's not being done so much nowadays, and there's certainly not the seaweed on the beaches there used to be. It's either overfishing, or sea temperatures, or bigger storms, something's knockin' it back and it's not coming ashore.

There's less tangles than there used to be, it was a big industry. It was a good extra for a small farm, what we depended on even to buy groceries for the

hoose. It was an extra, it wasn't so easy to find extra work. We didn't have a good bit of beach to work, we only had a little bit but it was help.

It was actually in your title deeds that you could go to certain beaches for the seaweed. You had a right. All along those sections here, there's staithes for dryin' tangles, but the beaches are steep. They must have had a real job puttin' them up. Over boulders, stones, no very easy to walk up. You were really workin' hard for it. When you're carryin' 50 kilos at a time you want tae know where yer feet's goin'. Slidy stones. Certainly wisna the health benefit I was doin' it for. Windy, cauld day thinkin', "why am I here?" Puttin' yerself through misery for savin' a few quid.

Tangles, it was free money, just time. Got me a car at the end of the year. We were just first together, I was 21. Wisna much option for makin' extra money thenadays. Lots of long oors on the beach [laughs]. Ten, twelve years old, used tae do tangles wi' me parents. Grandparents used tae do it, dry the seaweed and send it sooth in the 50s, 60s. It's in my blood a wee bit, I like being outside.

Putting up the tangles as a kid, it was character building. Snapping them, getting slime everywhere, running up and doon the dunes in a gale. Great high banks of them. **Didna really think about where it'd come from, but there must have been great forests oot there.**

The kelp pits they used for burnin' the stuff too. It was all the women that did the kelp burnin', it was very rare that men did it, because they said it was an art form to get it burnin' withoot spoilin'. There's an art tae buildin' them on the staithes as well. If you didna get it right, it would just rot, had tae get the air through it. If it was heavy rain and didna shed the water, it'd just rot and that was it. There was different ways, some used tae build it in a curve over the top, others, like oor dad, showed us tae do it flat, like at the North End. We always used tae do it flat, and people… "You don't know how tae do it!" [laughs]. The couple up at Riv, they'd have 60–70 tonne of tangles every year, that was their main livelihood, in the wintertime. Then in the summertime they're oot tae the creels. They lived aff the sea.

When they came to build them on the staithes, that was oor job when we were boys, laying them heids aroond y'ken? Heids all at the wan end, bundles that faither'd lift and sit on the staithes and build them, mackin' them intae bundles. We were aboot five year auld. Me faither made a machine for mackin' the bundles, lay them in and push doon the lever to tie them. Oh he was no fool, faither, I can tell you, a bloody good blacksmith.

They said it was cheaper to harvest them doon in the southern hemisphere than it was to get them fae Orkney.

The people have to be the same as the ware, have to be strong and flexible as well.

Working with the weather, you have to do that. The weather has a big bearing. There's times you can do very little, you just have to wait until the time comes that you can work. Some years, springtime was early and you got the seed in, then harvest would be a bit early that year. Then the next year, very much later, but you just have to accept that. You can't plough the land 'til it's dry enough. Can't have the crops 'til they're ready. Just has to happen wi' nature. Can't work against nature.

We are entering the strongest El Niño on record which will likely cause a harsh winter over here and potentially more storms. This might be why pups are looking like they are going to be early (although this has been happening year on year elsewhere so maybe we are just catching up!). Grey seals are able to do delayed gestation so they can essentially 'plan' when they pup. Early pups perhaps indicate it's going to be a harsh winter. We'll see!

We had hundreds and hundreds of hens, it was a good income. Then the battery hens started sooth and the price just… We couldna sell them anymore. And there was the big gale in 1952 that just wrecked all the henhooses and killed the hens. People then packed them into the empty hooses, empty sheds, rather than putting them in houses that'd blow away again.

There used tae be shell sand export up there, on Start Point itsel'. A lot of mussel shells.

Do you know the story behind the shell sand? During the war, somebody spotted it and realised it would be ideal for hardening hens' eggs. So after the war, they started a business there. They exported it to Birmingham!

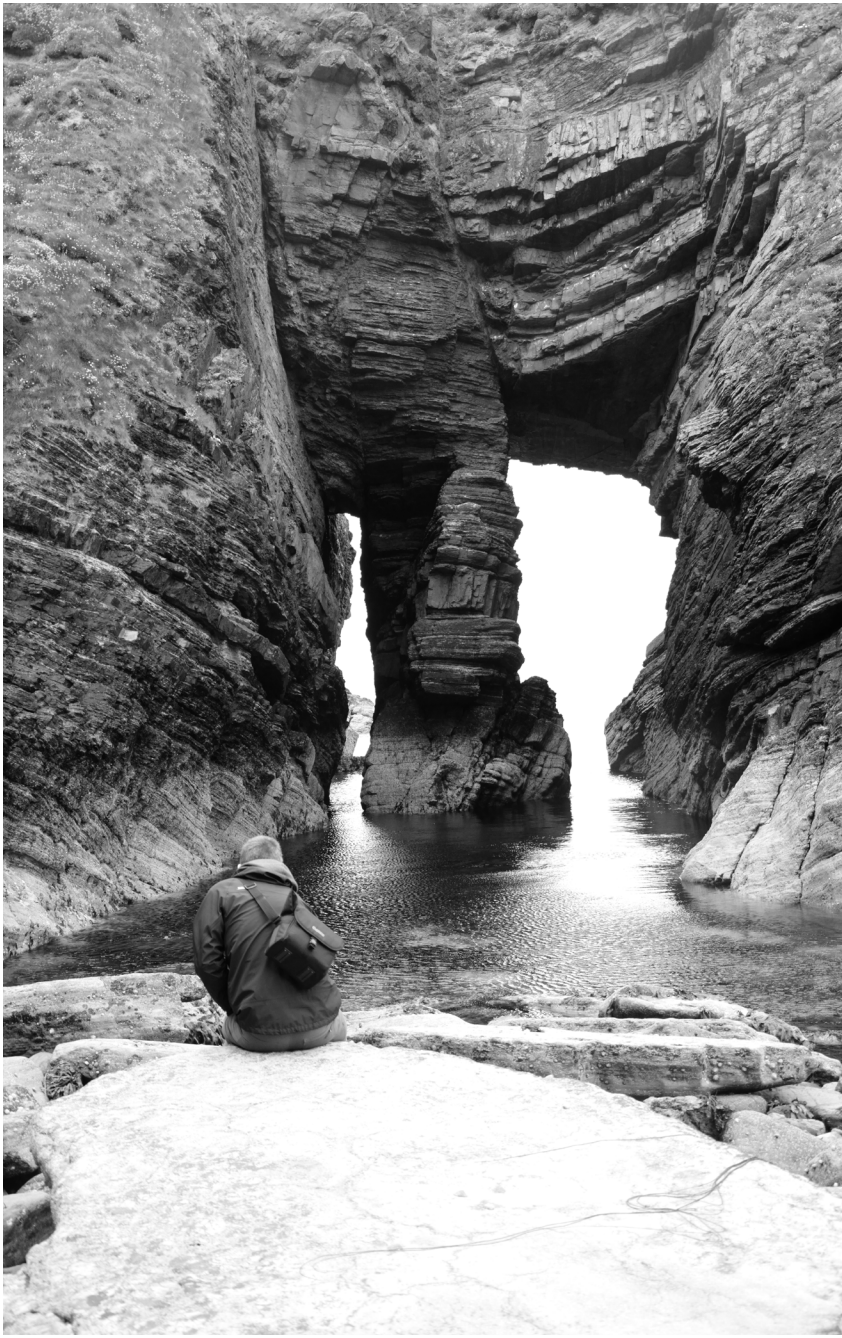
The shell sand, the kelp, and the gathering of shellfish woulda been done commercially. Creelin' too. Knittin' was certainly commercial, as a paid wan.

They used tae pay the farm rents here with the wool. Now you couldna buy a box of chocolates with it [laughs].

Costs more tae take it off than ye get for it if you use a contractor. And yet, go intae a store, for a nice woolly jumper, ye pay through the nose for it. There







used tae be the Sanday Knitters.

People do still knit with the Craft Hub. They've still got a Sanday Knitters jumper. Pattern that your mum used to have, everyone wants to buy one of those now [laughs]. I used to knit for them. We used to get £17 for a jumper, and that took hours and hours and hours by hand. Of an evening, sat down watching telly or listening to the radio. Feel like you're doing something.

A lot of the men used tae do it as well. Mostly the machine knittin', and the cuffs were sewn on. Gave a lot of income tae folk that didna have income before.

And it was extra income that was sorely needed. A lot of work, but it was needed tae eke oot the rest of the money. Sanday Knitters'd go across tae Paris, New York, Berlin, London twa or three times to promote the knitting. Japanese designs even, big baggy sleeves, short bodies. One big chunky wan made on broomsticks.

Widna think that'd be too warm?

It's *fashion*, warm disna come intae it [laughs].

Aye, no everybody lives in Orkney [laughs].

I find that November could be a long dreich month and I mind, y'ken, we had an old shed there at Seaview. It used to be an old henhoose or something, and we kept tatties in it. I spent a while snibbin' tatties to put on sale. I mind it was November time and I was working at this, and everything was grey, y'ken? I was standing there looking around outside, and everything's grey. The sky. There was a greyness about everything and that was November. Sometimes that can be quite a long month. But then winter! One winter, we had two weeks of frost laying on the ground and moonlight. **I dried the claes in the moonlight** because it was better drooth at night with the moonlight than it was in the daytime. It was so calm, there was no wind.

It's a beautiful place, in all different weathers y'ken? The first time I saw that side of the sand dunes, the turquoise sea and all that, I thought it must be paradise. Just amazing.

There's a saying here wi' a nor'east wind: "it's no fit for man or beast or sea." It's a haird wind. A cauld wind. Nothin'll grow wi' it.

We dig down sometimes to keep the plants out of the wind.

The vegetable patch is like that.

That's when **the sunflowers taught me the wind is a tyrant.** I've been out a couple of times when I've thought, "I agree."

The weather's always a bit better than the forecast says. I think it's a mix of the landscape and the attitude of the people that makes that.
Strong things to stand the wind.

If we hid a cauld or somethin', when we were younger, if there was half a gale fae the north-west, the sea was brackin' white doon on the beach, me dad would always say, "just go and tak a walk doon along the shore. Ye'll come back and your cauld will be gone." Damn cauld, but the cauld is gone [laughs]. Sea air! *Medicinal*.

He had a wind machine in his hoose, and he recorded 98 knots, something like that. We cam home in that, I told the boys not to bother washing the decks that day [laughs]. Doon fae Scuthvie to Kettletoft, south-west wind right on the heid of the f***in' thing, holy Jesus what a rumble. *Horrible*.

That's my favourite bit, just up there. Good sharp rocks, waves like multi-storey hooses. Sit there for oors. It gives me peace and quiet, seawatching. Just where the lobster pots go in, I often look doon at it. Catching for the pot certainly gives me that peace and quiet too. I look forward to doin' at the end of the week or day. I just do it by the hoose, I'm no goin' far [laughs]. Oot and back in an oor, so it disna take long.

When I was young, every house had a small boat. Catching fish was part of your living. Fish through the summer, just dinghies, then you salted it and that was your food through the winter, the saltfish. No freezers, you couldna freeze it. Mostly cuithes, but I remember my dad coming home with herring. They went further out with long lines and fished herring. That was really good. Less and less haddock aroond but there is some still. People were saying no haddocks came in last year. The haddock just came in at certain times of year, same as the herring. The gutters followed the herring up the east coast and down the west coast. Only a certain time of year the herring were there. The haddock was the same, just came in at harvest time, didna get them any other time of year.

The thrill of not knowing what you're catchin'. Disna matter if you catch anythin' or not. **It's the anticipation of it.** Most of the work you know what you've got in front of you, but when you're oot at sea, it's just… A joy to be oot there, always liked it, the thrill of what ye *might* get. 10-foot porbeagle shark I caught the one time, doon off the lighthouse. *S***!* Fishing line all roond me feet, this shark goin' roond the boat. Big as the boat. *S***!!* It was a frightenin' experience, but it was quite cool. You can see the fish, when you're pullin' up

the fish. See this black shadow, looked up, thought, "hmm, there's no clouds." The line went tight. "Holy s*** that's a big fish." Then I see the fin. *Hoooly S***!!!* Just on a handline. It ended up over the side.

Mind being five year auld, gan tae the creels with faither in that dinghy. If you saw a lobster… We'd be leaning over the side watching him haul the creels up. If there was a lobster in it… Me and my brother used tae fight aboot where we would each sit on the side. So many creels each and we'd swap aroond. Faither used tae get mad, only a 12-foot boat and wi' him on wan side, hauling a creel, fuckin' boat was over like that. "Sit over boy!" [laughs]. Great laugh, man. That's the rush, always was there since I was a peedie boy.

Eftir 40-odd year, I still got up looking forward to gan to sea. Used to start at six o'clock every morning. Never even hardly needed an alarm clock, unless you'd had a drink the night before. The fresh air. I really enjoyed it. Nothing can mak your heart speed up like hauling a creel wi' three lobsters in it. It just made ye go, the boys on deck was the same. We hid the boat rigged that everything was done very easily, safety conscious something cruel. Ye gaed oot to get home.

Bill McArthur makes paintings of the sea. He was actually a fisherman. He was an artist before, came up here years ago. Fished for years and then sort of retired and paints seascapes.

It was lovely to hear the fishing boats trundling down in the morning. That house on the beach used to be the storehouse. You can see there being a roof and the two fireplaces.

I think they lived up and the store was downstairs.

There's a rectangle that used to be a well. Apparently people used to get off the ship and walk down this well to get fresh water.

And pick up their stores from the storehouse.

We met someone who was born at that house. His grandparents used to live there.

It's amazing how many kids haven't been to the beach, or only come with school. Parents are just busy and don't take their kids to the beach. We take the children down to two beaches regularly. The Peedie Sea goes underwater, the beach goes underwater twice a day basically.

I used to go swimming when I was a kid. Swimming in that bay, and fishing and cockling through my childhood. Playing on the beach, we used to do that all over.

Saville used to be the swimming pool. That's where people learnt to swim and it's where I took my kids. It's a large bay, it warms up well, and there's not much current on a nice day. My kids love going in the sea, my eldest boy's just off to town recently and he's swimming there as well. Maybe one day they'll teach their kids at Saville.

Hopefully kids do take on board what's out there, and appreciate it. Use it.

To Whale Community,

In the summer, 77 whales washed up on shore in the night. In the morning, we found them. Some animal people came but it was too late, so some local farmers helped us. We tried to help them, but every time we put the living ones back in the sea they kept washing ashore. We took samples to prevent this happening again. We tried our best to save part of your community and are really sorry we could not help them. They are buried in a field near the sea, close to home. Again, we are very sorry for this loss. We have to help better next time.

S.C.S. (Sanday Community School)

Translation in whalish: *Wooh, wooooqah waaaa waooay woooyah waaa wyhah wahghah wooghagha woongghayah wayhyas wooh.*

They're essentially like us, only better evolved to be honest.
So many *bloody* intestines.
Their brains are amazing…
…Much more folded than ours is, much more surface area basically…

We do all of the basic stuff, then advanced sampling, dissection, full examination, internal examination, whatever you want to call it, all under the guidance of the Scottish Marine Animal Strandings Scheme. We work very systematically, taking samples of every major organ, check the reproductive organs, stomach contents, photographing step by step. We don't tend to check the brain here 'cause we're not really set up for it but we'll take the head off, freeze it and send it to them. You can just disarticulate it at the top of the spine and it pops right off. Use the local community and volunteers. If you give them ownership of it and let them do stuff, it gives them the opportunity. And you've got people there who love it, they'll take it as far as they can. I think volunteers are the way to go[7].

[ribs cracking]

They're really good at encouraging people to do things themselves, really value different ways of doing stuff, being able to do this on a video call. We'd never have got this south in time. I never thought I'd be able to do stuff like this, and









I think it's an absolute privilege. It's why I'm really supportive of anything that works with volunteers, gives them ownership of this sort of thing. We're quite unique here, there's so much coastline, especially the coastlines that get the most stuff.

When the pilot whales came up we had pretty much everyone…

…Pretty much every expert in the UK…

…Lots of people come up.

We did that training, then we were straight out to Stronsay for a fin whale. Right in at the deep end.

Yeah, and then we had a minke whale that came in here, entangled. It was really fresh, wasn't it, and they couldn't get up so asked if we could take some additional samples, which we did, and it's gone from there. They trained us up to do…

Their issue is, of course, is, obviously, invariably it's…

Getting here.

…y'know, quite often it's bad weather, when things wash in, and of course they can't get here. They've got to come up and now they can ask us.

Be patient with that, that takes a bit of time. It's worth being patient with. The main thing is to figure out bycatch from live stranding.

Potentially, I suppose, there might be a bit of sand in the oesophagus, which would indicate live stranding as well…

…It's not a sandy beach though…

…There is some sand…

…I guess…

…We can feel the grittiness even if we can't see it…

That foam coming out of the left lung indicates it was probably live stranded.

We had pretty rough seas on the weekend and it only washed in yesterday One local walked the beach in the morning and didn't see it. It could just be that he didn't see it…

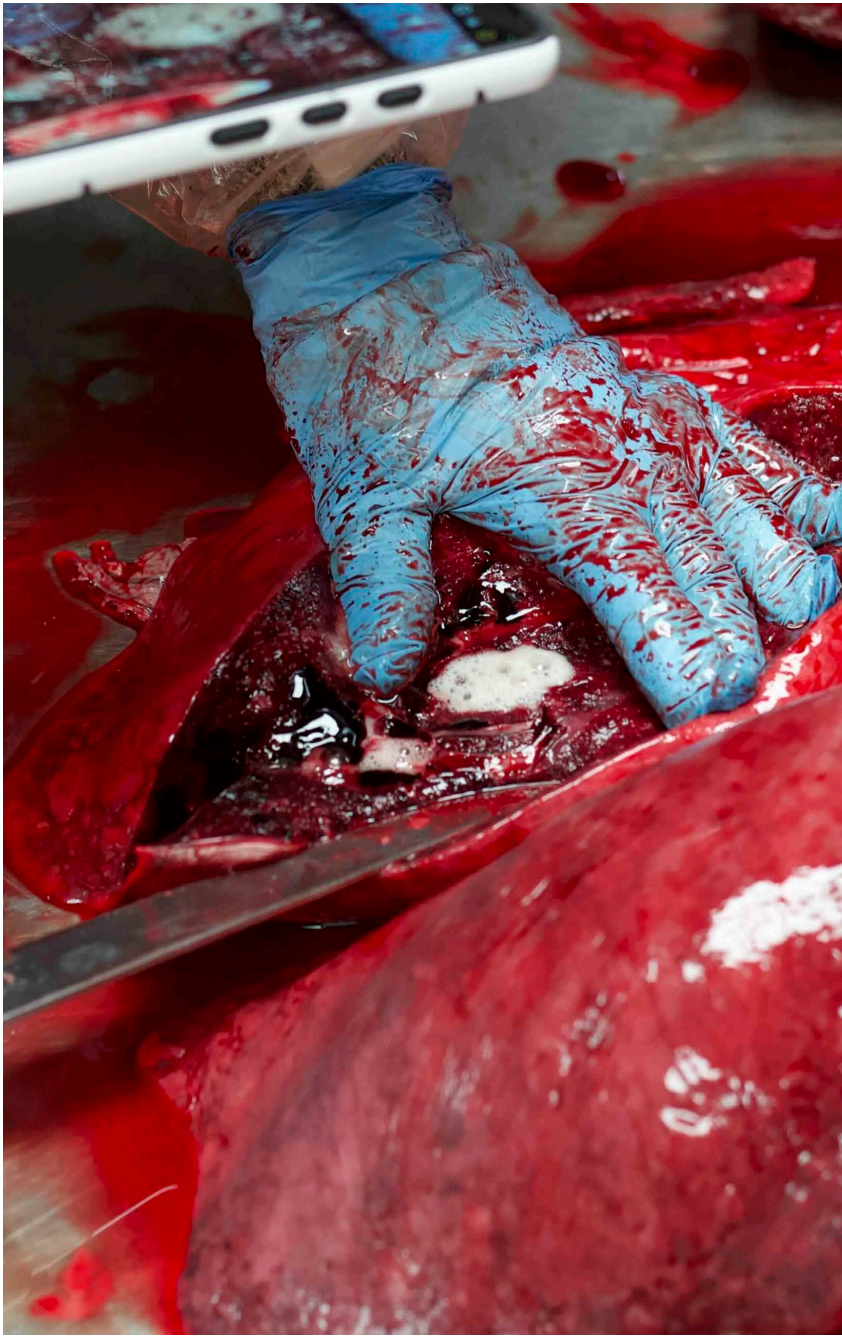
…He's normally pretty good at spotting stuff…

…Yeah, and it was spotted about midday, just as the tide's on the way out. It could have just come in then, but it had been pretty rough…

…And there's been dolphins off Westray too, so we know they're around. But as the pilot whales prove, things wash up in strange places.

The information you can get from this is so important. Which is why the fresher you can do it the better as well. Another reason why we pushed that we can do this. You've set us up, so use us. And, as I think you've gathered, we quite enjoy it as well, as much as you can…

We've still got the turtle, haven't we, in the freezer?



You must be telepathic, I thought this earlier, and was just thinking it then!

[laughs] Loggerhead. Very rare up here, but a second one came in a few days later, also dead but they've been seen alive. Massive influx into the UK last year, I think sea warming, jellyfish, there was a storm as well.

The temperature's definitely gone up. My thermometer was reading 15 °C today. Normally 14 °C is the highest, and that's in August.

All year round, we're swimming. It's a real challenge and adrenaline rush, even just paddling around.

The fear of not knowing what's underneath and overcoming that as well. In the dark, I felt something brush against my leg and jumped *out of my skin*. Then I realised it was the float [laughs]. But the idea of what it could have been? That gave me more of a buzz than just a cold-water bath.

I put a pair of goggles on and went under the water at the weekend. I think I'm going to do that more. I saw a crab about to nip Nicky! Our swimming is mostly social. After lockdown, it was very important. **I lie on my back and think I'm so lucky to be here.**

A year of sea swimming with the Sunday Selkies

All the swims in Sunday were in Skywick bay, unless otherwise stated. The numbers denote the swim total through the year. Other places I swam were: Shetland, Aberdeen, Barra and Vatersay, Eriskay, Stonehaven, Weston-Super-Mare, Shapinsay, Thurso, Copenhagen, Loch Etive, and Oban. On reflection, recording where I've swum has created much more than simply a 'Swim Diary' but a document of memories for everywhere I've been. Trips and adventures always include a swim!

2025

Swim no.

Sat 4th January (1)
with Nicky
The latest New Year swim, as it's usually 1st or 2nd Jan!
Very cold!

Sat 11th January (2)
with Nicky, Jess, Marz, Vicky and Hilary
Frost/ice on the sand but sunny. Very, very cold!

Sat 18th January (3)
with Nicky, Hilary, Jessica and Marz
Sun, no wind, waves!

Sat 8th February (4)
with Anna
Quick, early one before the plane to town.
Wavy and BALTIC!

Fri 14th February (5)
with Nicky, Kim, Jessica, Fenella and Mac
Quick one before going to Shetland.

Sat 22nd February (8)
with Nicky, Kim, Anna + Jess
Whitemill due to the wind direction.
Cold. Big pull. A bit choppy with a few huge waves. Sun!!!

Sat 1st March (9)
with Nicky + Jess
Usual place, usual cold. High tide. Sun came out afterwards and there was a nosy selkie in the same spot that we'd been in the water.

Sun 16th March (11)
with Nicky
Sneeky one after walking. Sunny!

Wed 19th March (12)
with Anna
At Scar. Cheeky post-work swim as it's such a sunny week.

Sun 30th March (13)
with Nicky
Quick dip after walking. Sunny and still but sheltered from wind.

Wed 16th April (16)
with Nicky, Jess and Ilse
No sun and a chilly wind but a few waves.

Fri 18th April (17)
~~Sunny and calm.~~
with Nicky and Ilse
Sunny and calm. Low tide. Loved the heat of the sun.

Sat 10th May (18)
with Nicky
Sunny - wallowed in the shallows which were warm!

Sat 17th May (19)
with Nicky and Jess
Very sunny - low tide so shallow a long way out. A lovely bob about. Cow and calf on track when we arrived!

Sat 31st May (20)
with Hilary
Windy and choppy.

Sat 14th June (23)
with Nicky, Clare, Kim C, Maz, Heather, Pip and Anna
Fairly calm but cloudy. Lots of rocks. Tested out my new "not-suit" - bit too much like a wetsuit!

Sun 29th June (24)
with Kim and Laila
Sideways waves due to wind direction. Weird photographer bloke that Kim had to ask to leave whilst we got dressed. Saw a lion's mane after getting out!

Sun 6th July (25)
with Nicky
After cleaning up an unofficial dog poo bin at Cata.

Mon 7th July (26)
with Nicky, Kim P, Vicky, Maz, Jess and Kim C
Celebrating the beginning of the holidays with a nosy selkie.

Thurs 17th July (29)
with Nicky. Vicky. Kim P, Kim C, Steffi & Laila.
Lovely. Sunny and warm.

Fri 18th July (30)
with Nicky, Vicky, Kim C, Laila & Maz
Another hot day. On jellyfish alert.

Tues 22nd July (31)
with Kim P, Nicky, Vicky, Laila, Kim C, Jess and Fenella
Kim P's farewell swim with picnic after.
Very low tide and lots of jellyfish sightings (but no LMs). Started in the mist and finished in full sun.

Tues 29th July (34)
with Nicky, Laila, Kim C & Vicky
Crystal clear water and very calm. Sunny!

Sat 6th Sept (43)
with Anna
At Scar. Fab swim spoiled by the post coming and annoying people on the beach.

Sat 13th Sept (44)
with Anna, Gilles, Barry & Amilie
At Scar. Lovely low-tide swim with a second breakfast afterwards. 8am Saturday swims are the best!

Sat 20th Sept (45)
with Anna, then Gilles & Adam
At Scar. HUGE waves. Loads of fun. Played with the body board but better without it. Got brave enough to dive under the waves. Loved it! Another 8am swim (09)

Sun 28th Sept (47)
with Anna and Nicky
At Scar. Rejuvenating 8am dip after an epic day yesterday.

Thurs 2nd Oct (48)
with Anna
At Scar. Sneaky post-work swim. Sea lovely and calm with the odd wave.

Sat 11th Oct (49)
with Nicky
Wallowed in the shallows in the drizzle. Wet sand over everything afterwards.

Mon 13th Oct (50)
with Nicky, Hilary, Vicky, Marc, Kim C + Laila
Swim before heading south. Flat calm, not at all like an October swim. Selkie came up quite close (3)

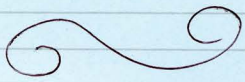
Sat 8th Nov (52)
with Kim C
The start of wearing my not-suit (not-a-wetsuit-swimsuit) for winter.

Sat 15th Nov (53)
with Anna and Heather
At Scar. First swim with Heather as a Sanday Resident. Typical Scar waves - Fab!

Sat 22nd Nov (54)
with Anna
At Scar. Weedy and wavy, followed by fried egg pitta sandwiches.

Sat 29th Nov (55)
with Nicky
The one I forgot about!

Tues 30th Dec (58)
with Nicky, Heather, Kim, Helen, Maz & Laila
Cold, waves and a selkie! Last swim of 2025.



* I managed at least one swim a month, which is something I aim for, and averaged over 52 swims a year. Didn't quite make it to 60 though - that's the next goal!

* For point of reference, the first diary entry ~~was~~ in 2026 was:

→ Sat 17th Jan
First swim of 2026 - it took 17 days due to snow and wind!
with Nicky, Jess, Laila, Kim, Maz and Heather
Cold and wavy but the waves had no power.
Not sure I'll reach 60 swims this year so hope for 52 at least.

* That was the only January swim and the next one was 21st February due to weather. At the end of June, I'm only at 15 swims after being out of action for two months due to knee surgery.

Me, I've tried it when I was younger, but I can't swim. My co-ordination was… I'm suckin' in when I should be blowin' oot [laughs]. I tried it and tried it….

We saw one once, about 15 years ago. We walked down with some friends (a little inebriated). Beautiful evening, flat calm the sea. Silver. Suddenly *whoosh*. That's the only time we've seen them, but they're always down there, on the way to North Ronaldsay they think.

Stywick, that's where we go, it's lovely. We saw orca there last Sunday. We weren't swimming but we went for a walk, I was just having a coffee and *wheew*.

As far as we're aware, it's the only successful orca refloat in the UK. It's a bit of Schrödinger's dolphin, it's alive *and* dead because we have no idea. But as far as we know, it swam off OK and was never seen again. He was very noisy, calling the whole time. I got the phone call from Tresness: "We can see a dolphin on the beach. You'll hear it." What? Sure enough, we got out the car and could hear it calling. What the hell is that? That's not normal. Back towards me, about 3.5 m, fairly sizeable dorsal fin. Big dolphin maybe? Walked up to it, I was on the phone to Russell, and as I walked round the head, it's calling—and you could hear it couldn't you?

Mmm!

What the hell is that? Saw the eyepatch and just said, "oh f***! It's a killer whale," to which he went, "oh f***!" We'd had some of the local killer whales on Christmas Day, and my initial reaction was that they'd left one behind. An animal that everybody up here knows. I'm always pragmatic about these things and know that, chances are, it's not going to have a happy ending. It was during Covid, and there was no way of getting anyone out. *There's something weird going on with this animal. It is, it's pus.* So we phoned people we knew would help, and be sensible. They know if I phone it could be something weird. It was… *Can you photograph this please? Oh it's telling me my face doesn't match. Scroll. Push. Screen up. Side button again, your hand's slightly wet. That one. That's it. Then it's 3657446. That is… pus-y.*

Can you see that in the blowhole?

Yep, never seen this before, this is quite interesting. Mainly friends from the local coastguard team that are safe in the water and willing to get involved. Plus we were very conscious of Covid too. We didn't have much kit, we'd just had another rescue and fundraised and bought these dolphin stretchers. They'd arrived two days before. Without them we wouldn't have got it out. We had to shimmy the stretcher down from the head, leaning against it, four of us, to keep it upright. Waves crashing—it wasn't rough, just quite *swelly*—right over it and over us. Every time the water would lift it, we'd pull the stretcher back

a little bit and eventually we got it underneath. After that it was quick, in the water they become quite light. From me getting to the beach to it swimming off was an hour and a half. *I've got another lesion, not sure if they want it but I'll take the sample.* The tide was coming in and starting to surround it. The big problem was the sand sucking it down. It was lifting its head up to breathe, and alert enough not to breathe when the water was over its head.

It's a bit like if we spend time at sea and come back to land a bit unsteady. If they're out of the water too long, they lose their equilibrium, so they can just roll over.

If we hadn't got there it would have drowned. If they lay on their side, they get capture myopathy. Their muscles start to break down and the myoglobin, in the wrong place, becomes toxic. They basically poison themselves. It's a tight timeframe depending on the species, orca are quite good, but the really deep-diving species… We were lucky, we were so lucky. It was an amazing experience, one that I never, ever thought I'd get to do. Being with an animal like an orca, arguably more intelligent than we are, in its own environment. To actually be with it. Unbelievable. Amazing. Mind-blowing.

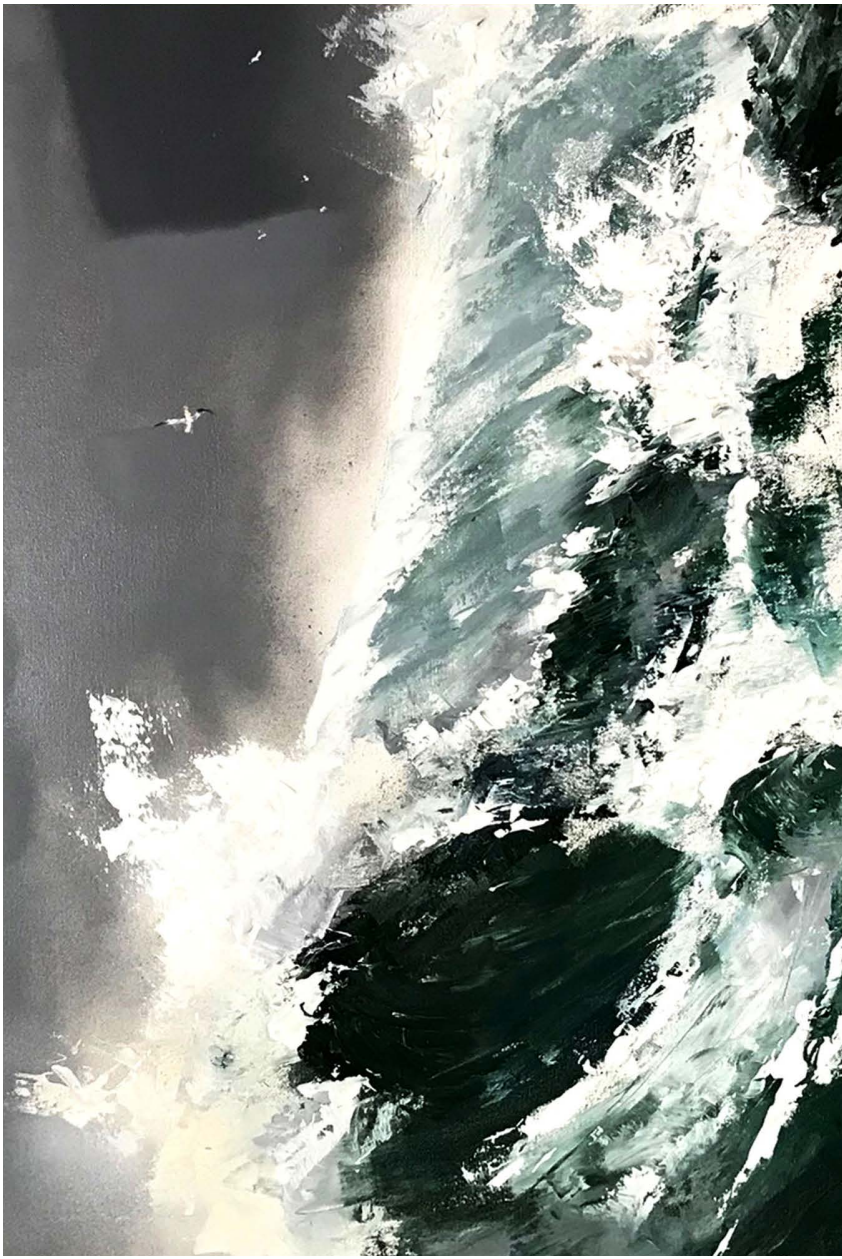
He was hauling creels, and the seal came in with an orca chasing it. The seal jumped in the *bloody* boat!

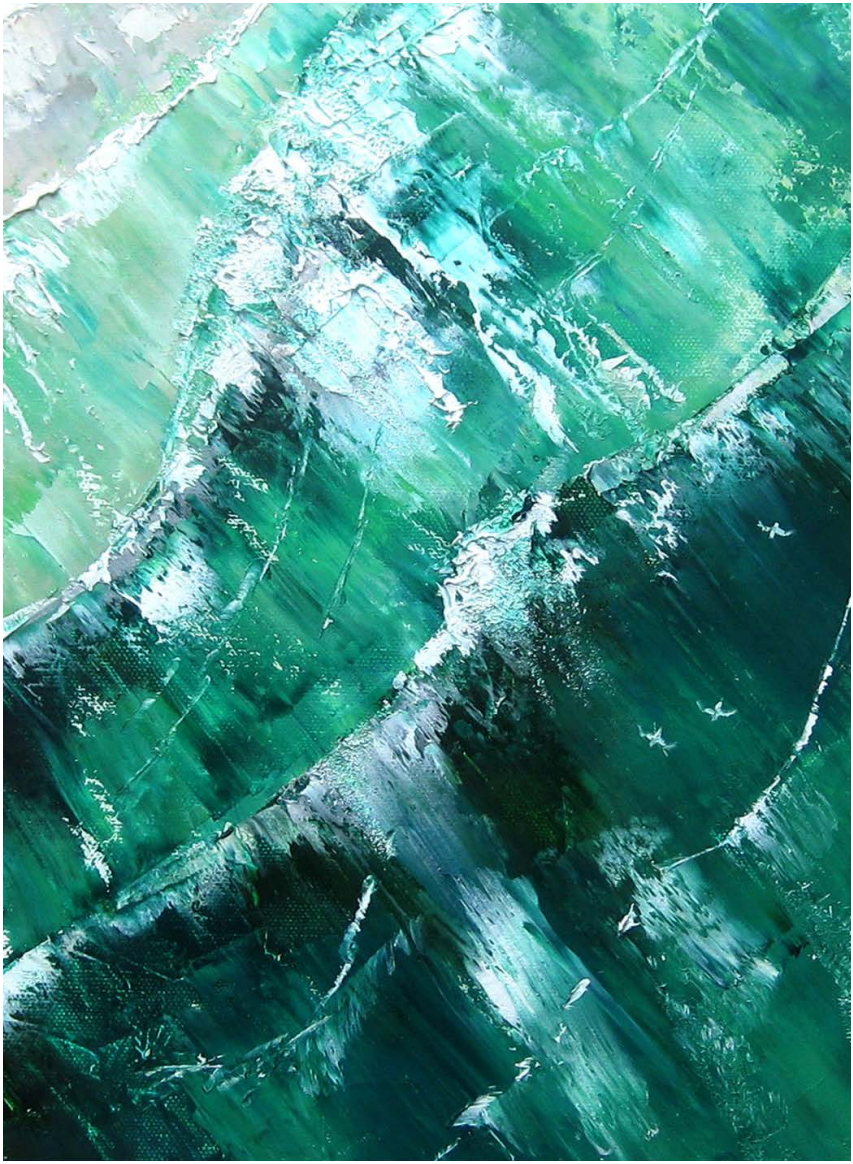
Shark bit through the engine intake, water came pouring in. Just off Start Point.

He's fished all over, out to St Kilda even. I asked him, as I'm desperately interested in sharks, what's the largest porbeagle he'd seen. He reckoned 13 foot long, in Scuthvie Bay. The largest one ever caught was just in Pentland Firth, that was about 900 lb. Point being, if you go snorkelling out there, be careful! [laughs] And don't forget the killer whales too. If you've got a suit with bright colours, wear that so they won't mistake you for a seal [laughs].

Springtime, that sand doon there's just *black* with seals. Never saw them any other time. I mind fishing roond here, and an orca come in. That day particularly, we stopped for a cup of tea, half hauled. Cup of tea and a sandwich, standing watching the whale gan back and forth along the Start. Seals up on the rocks. Tide turned, started to flow and you see the orca. Just gaed up, knocked the seal in the water…

You see a lot of common seals in the summertime, grey seals for November pupping. There were certain seals that would never leave the pups, you could just walk right doon. They knew that you werena gonna harm them, and they'd get used tae it. Then you'd get a right *snorter* [laughs]. Mak you jump, they may be small and fat but by Jove they could mak a noise [laughs].





There's a lot of seals on this beach here, and when it's a really calm evening you can hear them singing. Incredible. Eerie, very eerie sound if you didn't know what it was.

She's my favourite seal, just because I can watch her for hours with no-one around.

Primarily for me, wildlife watching and conservation is connection to wildlife and nature, being part of nature. We're part of the environment. Being out there, the sights, the sounds. You never quite know what you're going to see. Just appreciating it.
The striped dolphins we've had, one live strand and refloat, that was New Year's Day I think, can't remember the year. Southern European species, going up the Irish Sea we think. So to get two, on this island, in the same bay is a bit freaky. One in the winter, one in the summer. What is going on? In warming waters, we're seeing fish that aren't supposed to be here, here now. And they're predating on fish that aren't used to those predators. We've seen a lot of bluefin tuna around, they've washed up on the beaches, and the fish that are here aren't really equipped to deal with it.

Locals have said to me that 15–20 years ago, you never used to get swallows here. So are they moving up? The same birds from down south? Nuthatch, speckled wood butterfly, all sorts. Something's going on, it's a changing shifting thing, even the sand. Take Whitemill, named for the lovely white sand. Turn up some days, look over the dunes and there's no sand there. Few days later it's all back again. Constantly changing, especially at the top of the tideline.

There's a lot of nutrients deposited on the beaches and dunes. Everything getting washed up gets turned over and you end up with lots of organic material mixed in the sand. **The plant populations are remarkable, transient and yet returning. It's magical really.** You never know where something'll be one year to the next, it's so dynamic. It shuffles around and tends to settle into a pattern that persists. But it's hard to know where you are within that pattern from a snapshot. It's random from year to year, but there's a pattern there. I wonder what will happen with climate change. There has been enormous change and we're in another period now, as things re-sort themselves out. Obviously with sea level rise, a lot will change. Sanday's so low, so much of it's post-glacial loam sediment, if you alter that basis everything else will change with it. I'm less worried about the storm events and increased instability. It'll have effects, but there'll also be a response. Sand dune's gone, but it's over there now, that channel's deeper, or moved. Unless you have a

big population of these coastal plants, a big storm event can wipe them out. They tend to recolonise and move around, but they need a critical mass. These things happen, things come and go.

At Cata Sand there's that rare *Viola*, that mostly grows in Sanday. A little *Viola*, a pansy that's almost unique to Sanday.

We've got oysterplant down here.

That patch has gone now. It's just died off, the sea's washed it away. It alters so much down there.

I've a feeling that it might not be there today but might be there next year.

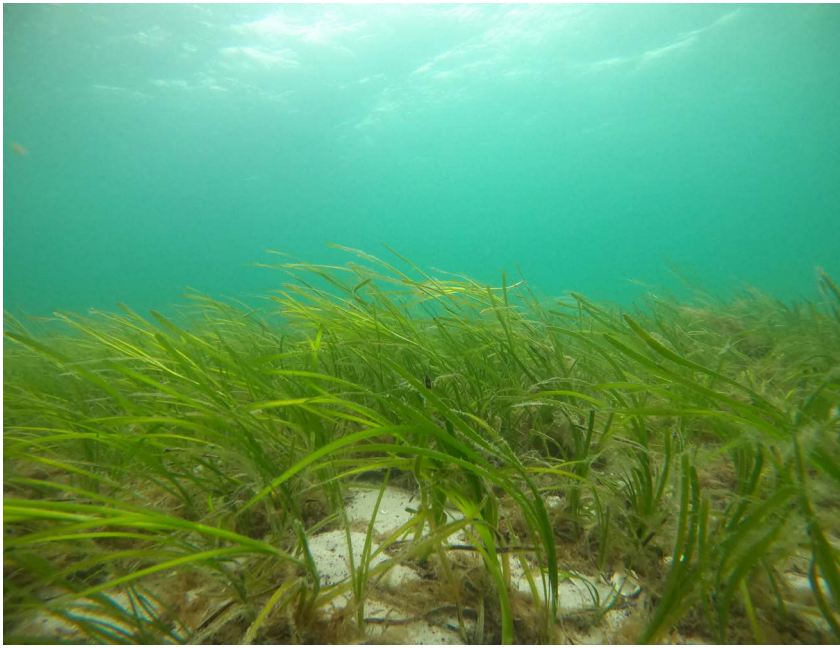
Just doon by us, they also discovered a sea kale. One of the first in Orkney!

The dune pansy, *Viola tricolor* subsp. *curtisii*, is a perennial form of a relatively common annual species. It used to be more widespread maybe 100 years ago, but now Sanday's *the* place for it in Orkney. It's normally yellow, but in Sanday it's a violet colour which is more unusual.

Oysterplants, they're described as under threat, disappearing, this and that. But 10 years later, they're often back. They could be lost in a really big storm, but they do tend to come back. The populations are receding northwards, and that's clearly a result of climate change. It's still doing pretty well up here, but it's gone from a lot of England and southern Scotland. The distribution in Orkney is now entirely eastern and southern coasts. It won't grow on very sheltered beaches, and it won't grow on very exposed beaches. It needs dynamic sediments, open shores, but open Atlantic can be too much. It does pop up on western coasts, but tends not to last for too long. Competition will wipe it out. It's never quite been worked out.

Just behind the dune ridge, there's some really rich vegetation growing on the back of it. Could be blown seaweed, or something else, but something's going on. They're growing too well for it just to be sand.

I'll tell you a plant I have got a rare record of in Sanday: wild cabbage, the ancestor of all the domestic varieties. I found it growing on the top of a beach, 7–8 years ago. It can be mixed up with records of cultivated forms so it's hard to be certain, but I'm pretty sure it was the only one in northern Scotland. It grows differently, it's a woody perennial that doesn't form a hearting cabbage, it's more like a small bush with miniature cabbage ends. How on Earth it got to that one place in Sanday I'll never know. It could have been bird-sown, maybe the rock doves and feral pigeons. I think it might be gone now, that area's become a building site for a renovation. I have some growing from seeds I took, I should really return it to the site…





Whenever I go somewhere I'm learning about it, whether the first time I've been there or eightieth. That's what's so cool about the coast, it's always changing. Every time I run a certain part, a big chunk will have fallen off, or there's a new nest from a raven, an otter that would have been denning there has moved for some reason. It's always changing. Going back to those places and seeing how it's changed and gaining more knowledge. **The more you know, the more you realise you don't know.**

Every time you go out you never quite know what you're going to see. But there's always something to see. Lots of random stuff too… Books are only a guide, I've been watching stuff long enough now to know that a book from 10 years ago was accurate then but it's not gospel. Common garden birds down south… I've been up here eight years, haven't seen a blue tit, seen one great tit. But lots of stuff we get up here, you just don't get down south. Though I suppose that only applies to someone from down south or who knows what's there… You're always learning.

Arguably, they're the northernmost blue-tailed damselflies anywhere in the country. Which is pretty cool. If you like that sort of thing.

That was a stilt sandpiper, another American wader. I'd only seen one before, about 25 years ago. And as it transpired, it was the first one for Orkney. As a geeky birdwatcher, seeing a rare bird is great, then identifying is good, and recording it, especially if it's a first for a county or something, even better. I like to record stuff, make a note of where it was, when it was and stuff. Everywhere, anywhere. Any birds I see, of significance or otherwise, I put into BTO's BirdTrack system. I suppose it's conservation in a citizen science way, recording stuff that if no-one else is recording it and then it goes missing, no-one ever knows it was there anyway. Cetaceans, marine mammals, birds, other mammals, flora, insects, damselflies, butterflies, bees, hoverflies, all of that kind of stuff. It takes people to know what they're looking at and actually make a record, or nobody knows it was there. Pretty much all the breeding species, we know the populations are going down. About the only one that's stable is the shag.

Years ago, a young visitor brought us back an egg from the Holms of Ire, hidden under his jumper. Well, much to our surprise, our hen hatched the goose egg and abandoned her eggs to look after Goosey. We had a collie dog called 'Masho'. In Burmese that was 'girl nuisance'. Between the brown hen and Masho, they seem to have brought up Goosey, a wild greylag goose. The greylag geese do usually come back in winter and I used to tell Goosey,

"why don't you go and join them?" She would look up at them, but *no*, this was home, and so she took up residence in Saville. Because her eggs weren't fertilised, she couldn't be a mum, you see. So Maurice got some eggs over the internet, which could hatch. So every year, we swapped the eggs around, put these other eggs in, so she could hatch some. Goosey lived to 17 and was last seen on the 31st December 2025. She was hanging around, like she was trying to tell us she wasn't well. Heavy snow and very cold, we discovered her body under the Scots pine tree in January 2026.

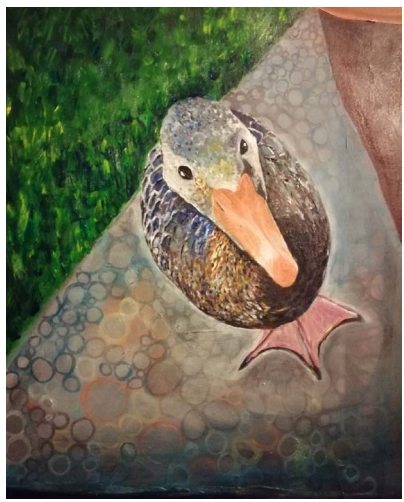
I remember her pecking on the back door, *peck-peck-peck-peck-peck*. Who's there? Got any bread? [laughs]

I'm doing a bit of a project on otters and seals as well, but that's only just started. Population growth, density, and their habits. How they interact with each other too, I like that.

Do you remember when the walrus came? I remember it was during the Beast from the East. It was freezing cold that day, and when I got home I could not warm up because I'd spent ages standing there.

We took all the children out from school. Everyone in the staff, "I'll come back, you go." I was there when it waddled off. Walloped off.

They reckon that the walrus that was here a few year ago was exactly the same wan that was here last year. They coonted the rings on its tusks. They reckon it's exactly the same walrus, except bigger! [laughs] What a smell was with it, it was *rank*. The walrus, you didna want to be downwind of it. The *smell*!



The bairns were playing with a ball in that flat area, I was sitting a peedie bit up on the dunes, keeping an eye on them. They came, they were playing, and the wind was blowing that way. Suddenly there's some squeaking, y'ken? And at that time, something flickered, out the corner of my eye I saw something flicker. There was nothing. But there was otter marks. It must have come right up beside me, and the wind blowing that way it wouldna smelled me. It was only when they squeaked that something flickered. It was quite amazing.

There's various things you spot from being here that are out of the ordinary.

I get more pictures of otters as I get to know them and their routines. I've seen them swimming out towards Eday. That's fascinated quite a few people.

Folk, professional, semi-professional, comin' oot fae toon or further afield. I've done a few walks over the years. Flora, fauna, different 'hings. I certainly wouldna say I've learnt anybody anything [laughs]. I've always been interested, working chickens, cattle with me dad when I was a kid. We'd always see different stuff, he was quite keen on it as well.

Sounds a bit twee, but it gives me a lot of surprise and delight. Even something that you regularly see, but doing something different, or in an unusual place. There's an American wading bird called a pectoral sandpiper. I've seen three or four now here, there's maybe a dozen records a year in the UK. Saw one the other day, but traditionally it's an autumn migrant, should be breeding right now up in the high Arctic. Spring plumage, adult bird, and displaying. I've never seen a pectoral sandpiper displaying before. It's the last bird I sketched.

They're all over the place, all year round, really. Mainly for the migration times, but people come down for the puffins too. The real twitchers come in autumn. Locals are interested, the locals interested in birds are out all the time.

Aw this area here's just full of flora and fauna. Just the bits I know, y'ken? Aw the way through the dunes, just full of it. Dunes that we have up this end of it, we get the bulbous buttercup.

Rumoured to be Scottish primrose down here, at least historically there were.

Links share a lot with machair, but that's a Gaelic term for a cultural system, as much as the landform, integral to Western Isles crofting communities. It's wrapped up in the agriculture and crofting there in a way it's not here. Machair

was historically cultivated but links never were. People tried, did a bit round the edges. Some areas where the sand's been more stable it's been more cultivated. But there were better places around so it was very little done on the links. It just hadn't been used for much, except catching rabbits. This was before there was so much fencing, so it wasn't really excluded nor particularly included. Bits of Sanday where the sand's blown in over good soils, black earth with a lot of sand in it, that was always excellent for crops, there's a little edgy mixture in there too. Proper links were rabbit territory, plus some feral sheep, similar to the seaweed-eating ones in North Ronaldsay. They had the run of the links too at that time. The botany's deteriorated enormously from what it would've been, largely because of stocking pressure over winter changing the soil. So a fair bit of plant diversity has retreated into less heavily used areas, of which there's still quite a bit. The plant life is certainly unique, but it has diminished. That's where the machair similarities come in, you could do a comparative study with Lewis or somewhere and Sanday and there'd be relatively few differences.

We're part of nature, but the question is what we're doing and is it negative? We know a lot of it is, for all of us. So hopefully on this island we can help each other.

It's a big change, before I got to Sanday in the 1970s, the links wasn't fenced much at all, that livestock density really came up from the 1960s onwards. It was just at the end of a time where agriculture was less mechanised. More people, more animals, it felt different to how it does now. I'd come up from Cambridge, and I hadn't had much contact with that kind of life, it was much more stratified by class in southern England, whereas in Sanday there wasn't so much of it. Everybody was there on their island, doing the best they could, with elements and land they understood very well and a long history of familial relationships. Those relations took me a long time to grasp, a different society to what I'd seen anywhere in my life. Different to what it is now, too. Little bits left, but not much. I felt it an incredibly egalitarian place, people acting as individuals and collectively. Well-informed, thoughtful, caring people. It surprised me, but it really shouldn't have. It's a special place. An awful lot's been lost of that—almost entirely, I suppose—in quite a short time, 50 years. But it's always changed. In the 19th century there were enormous changes! The square-field system you see now, just wasn't there, it'd been an open-field system with housing clusters and outlying farms. Unrecognisable. Probably more recently transformed than anywhere else in the UK in that manner.

Oh I've done nothing new, just fished all me life. **The Ocean's where I got my living. Need to look eftir it.** No like those fly-by-night wans gan oot to

mak a quick poond. Well, I think Orkney'd be better if they'd got a regulating order like we tried to get in the back end of the 80s and 90s. Every time, the government wanted to ken this or ken that, they wouldna… The Scottish government said it hid to be 100% fishermen before they could agree to it. Which I thought was f***in' *stone mad*. The number of oors we put into that… Couldna get 100% of fishermen to agree on *anythin*' and they knew it.

On a coastal level, we need to be more aware about where we fish, and the amount taken. Who's catching it, that's more political, but increasingly we're learning about what's where, what's using it, what's reliant on what, and what effects we're having. Being aware that it's not just there for the taking. The more understanding we've got of what's out there and what's reliant on what areas, the better we can manage what we do that affects them *and* us. If there's no seagrass, there's no fish nurseries, there's no seals, no fish to eat our *share* of—not just our fish, their fish, *everyone's* fish.

The whole thing's important. That's what we always thought. Hid to look after it. That berried lobster would have about 5,000 eggs, and they reckon 10% survived. So that wan lobster was worth a lot more than ten peedie wans, tae v-notch it and release it. You ask some of the boys that's fishin' aboot here noo. Those saying, "ah it'll never do no good," *you're wrong*. My nephew, oot of Kirkwall, fishes around here, says he's never seen so many lobsters as were aboot last year. A lobster, taks it seven year tae grow tae size. The wans we were v-notching thenadays, that'll be them comin' on the go noo. **Maks me feel proud.** I fought wi' a lot of them, said it wasna worth it, but I stuck to me guns. Even the crew, I got them convinced it was the way tae go. They were mad aboot it first, when that scheme closed, I said just cairry on. "We're losing money." I says, "f*** off." Kind of money they were mackin', shouldna be worried aboot it. We paid well, it wisna bad.

Shame it's not aroond as it was 30 year ago. Tonnes and tonnes of cockles got raked by hand and sent away. Whether a disease got in it, got overfished, I dunno, but something happened and in two or three month maybe, went fae fairly good tae no-so good. Wisna for that long, maybe five, six, seven year, at those big amounts.

We also went regular to the cockles and wilks. Didna need such a big tide for that so you'd get them more often. Rake them by hand, sort out the big ones and the little ones should have thrived, but they just moved. They do just move, even from the places we didn't harvest them. Nobody knows why.





Up ta few year ago there used to be a *heck* of a lot of cockles there. I think they're comin' back noo again.

Me and my brother gan doon when we were staying doon there. Just a peedie trip doon wi' a bucket, fill it wi' wilks for our supper. Boil them on the fire 'til they open up, tak them oot the shell. Lovely wi' a bit of vinegar.

The wilks have disappeared. Haven't found any in a long time. Used tae gather them up in your t-shirt, take 'em home, tie a knot in a t-shirt and gather 'em up.

Took *ages*. Put it this way, you were still hungry by the time you'd finished [laughs]. There wisna an awful lot of filling food in it, but they were tasty.

Fished the scallops one year, two year. Pick them up for breakfast, no need to cook them. Same wi' spoots, far sweeter, far tenderer without cookin'.

And did you eat spoots? Oh there's *nothin'* like it. Such a treat when you can only get them in the spring, three or four times and then you couldna get them any other time of the year. If it was really really *cauld*, like frost, sometimes they'd be stickin' up a bit and you just go along and pull them oot. That was easy but that didn't happen very often.

Spoots, ye need tae ken the tides and where tae go. There used to be a lot up there but they've disappeared. Don't know what happened tae them. There's ones in the sea at Backaskaill, the electric fishermen came and gathered them up.

The boat came in and divers went down. They said it was just wi' a net, and I'm not against them doing that, but that wasn't how they gathered them. They worked with some kind of machine to take them up. There were dozens of dead spoots on the beach after that boat'd been in. That's what maddened me. I didn't mind them harvesting spoots, if they were mackin' their living, I'd have accepted that. It was the dead spoots on the beach, they were doing something that was killing spoots that they werena gathering. That maddened me, the number wasted.

The spoots there you can only get by diving. Even at low water it's too deep to go out. There was a boy out of Kirkwall, came out a few weeks at a time. Did spoots off Stronsay as well. Think most of it went off tae Japan. Stone mad. Drives me mad with world markets, we send our sheep off tae China, get our lamb fae New Zealand. *What!?*

They used tae fish the spoots up there. Divers cam in where the locals used to go and catch them at low water. The divers cam in, they f***ed it. No been a spoot on it for years.

That many spoots in the early days you could hardly move. You'd be backing into folk.

It was annoyin' tae watch. As the saying goes, "that's me spoots you're gan tae catch."

I think things caught here should be eaten on the land.

Folk used tae keep sheep on the Holms o' Spurness.

Used to go up there once a year to dip the sheep.

Holms o' Spurness lamb, that's a different taste altogether.

The auld folk used tae collect the black-backed gull eggs. Me grandpa and that generation caught rabbits, ate gull eggs, limpets. Our garden's littered wi' limpet shells. And mussels, but nobody wants to tell where they are.

Seagull eggs were eaten for generations because folk didna have the income. They went over the cliff, eldest holding onto the next and the next. Scooped the eggs oot the nest.

Their poor mother!

It's just what they did. Gull eggs were all roond the cliffs, anywhere wae cliffs. I know somebody that did try a fulmar's egg, but it wisna so good.

There was the fulmar nesting here, and I started feeding the chick.

The chick was very cold.

Normally you go up to them and they're spitting up at you, but this one I could go and handle it. Then the ranger came along and he put a ring on it. And then there was another nest further down and he tried with that one but it spat at him [laughs].

Around here there used to be loads, always nesting on the cliff there, every few metres, when we first came. But there's hardly any now. This little fulmar was just on the sand bank, it kept falling out of the nest. That's how Maurice started feeding it. And the mum used to watch, that was the amazing thing, she never attacked him or anything.

All the birds round here know my dad. He puts on that yellow jacket, feeds the sparrows, the crows, the starlings. The raven! Every time he goes out, I think they have their eyes on him.





When they see him, they call out. If I go out walking on the beach they call out as well. I bring food in my pocket and if I hear them I just drop it and they come down and pick it up. I used to think at first it was somebody's mobile phone, then I realised it was the ravens calling out.

They always used to nest there, then after they put the rings on the babies, they wouldn't nest there anymore. But they still come there to call out.

Someone came here and wanted to do some wild camping. After she left, we were walking there and we found a hedgehog skin. I'm just presuming she caught and ate it, I've never seen a hedgehog skin before, with the prickles and everything. They say you roll it up in clay and put it in the fire, that's what the gypsies do, then when it's cooked the quills come out in the clay. But this was just the skin. I've not eaten hedgehog, but I've eaten porcupine, in Burma when I was a child. My parents did a lot of hunting and the food was shared out in the village.

See I find that interesting, in these modern times. Why would you want to do that? Why would you want to go out in the wind and eat a hedgehog? [laughs] But at the same time, I can appreciate how nature heals people, they get something out of doing that kind of thing.

I think more people are catching on to the mental benefits of just getting out in the environment. Which is maybe why more people are getting up here, post-Covid. I did exactly the same thing, to get away. Immediately such an impressive environment. A whole new suite of things to see.

We thought we'd miss trees, but the big skies make up for it. You can't have both.

Two things I was worried about: the lack of trees and the long dark nights. He said you get used to the trees, and the dark's not that bad. It's a short period and then relatively quickly starts accelerating. Now, in June, I lose track what time of day it is. Nine o'clock in the evening and haven't had tea yet, still full daylight outside. You just lose track of time. So yeah, I do wonder what some other people do in the depths of winter. Even for us, with the seasons changing. Summer now I'm, thinking flora, breeding bird, dragonflies, butterflies. Come autumn, bit of different flora, autumn migration starts, birds etc. Late autumn, it's seals and the birds calm down, a few interesting wintering birds. Orca still around possibly. Late winter, still got a few wintering birds around, January–February's a bit of a quiet time but we start thinking "ooh, spring!". The spring flowers coming out, more birds. For us, there's always the next bit of wildlife coming to keep us going.

In Covid, I took loads of photographs of all the flowers, right down to the Point. Every day, all through the seasons.

Start Point lighthouse, it's on a tidal island. People just love it when they go across. Something *weird* aboot the place, like it's got its own energy with the tide aroond. The noise, the wildlife, seems to have its own weather system, it's a funny place.

I got a job wi' twa fellows paintin' the lighthoose. They geed ower the edge in a bosun's chair to paint the ootside. I wis workin' oot there on me 18th birthday.

I remember we waited once at Start Point, had to wait a wee while because the tide wasn't down far enough. All of a sudden, a big swoosh out and it was clear. It's amazing.

You just hid to learn everything. Learn whaur the rocks was. What kind of forecast to go here, there, and everywhere with. What forecast was best for fishing. There's an awful lot of stuff to learn. Plenty of places taught me. The tides to work the certain pieces. That corner there by Start Point: if it's a sooth-east wind and ebbin' water, you never keep in to the shore, wisna safe. Normally plenty wind to keep clear of the tides, but it wisna safe to do that. Someone went roond in just a peedie fast boat, 26-foot. Very little wind. Thought his boat was going right back over. It's just stupid things like that that you learn, y'ken? But we learnt that if you're *right* in to the rocks, it's alright, gaed roond it, but if you tried to go oot-by a peedie bit, you were f***ed.

Those two pillars there, when they're in line, you can get inatween the skerry and the Swarf, it's deeper there. Get through there, saves you gan away right roond. Come oot here fae Kettletoft, keep clear o' the reef, clear o' the holm, then get the two in line, you go in-by there and heid oot aroond.

Emma sent the video off to a lass in Norway, said there's definitely some Norwegian dialect in there. Which stands to reason because the local pods that come round, they know the bays, how far they can go in. We've had them come in past the Holms with a young calf, showing it the route, passing it down the generations. They know where's safe to go, where not to go, what tidal state. This animal was not familiar with this area, it's come into the bay and got caught out by the tide. Suddenly it's got no water under it.

We'd a yacht from, I think it was Norway or Sweden, caught in the tide, away off the lighthouse. We're headin' up tae North Ronaldsay on *not a nice day*, we're

all goin', "probably shouldn't even be goin' up here." Mayday came across, we were able to go and get a line ontae her and tow her intae Kettletoft. I don't know, but it was *not* a good day. We got tae the pier, and a woman got off and she kissed the pier. She was absolutely petrified. We stayed in contact for a while, spoke a few times after that.

We got married on Cata Sand and then went to the pub. The next day, I had to take our boat over to Mainland to drop my son off. She's still in her wedding dress. We *crawled* back on the pier that next day…

Kettletoft is not like the place it was. It was the social centre of the island, when that was the pier where the boats came in. Kettletoft's a dead place compared to what it used to be.

Shipping of cattle was a big thing fae Kettletoft. Movin' your animals. There was no big lorries driving on the boat then. You had to drive your beasts to Kettletoft on foot, which was not an easy job. And if there was gates open… they were looking for any road, any gate they could escape. That was some job, driving them. Then the boat was often an oor or two late, depending on the cargo they'd had, depending how many islands it hid to go tae, it wisna always there on time, as it is now. So yer stanning there, eftir walking to the pier, chasing cattle, sweating, yer stanning there shivering, really cauld. There was a yard, put the cattle in the yard to wait. Shut the gate and then you're waiting. Sometimes people'd say, "come on in for a cuppa tea, yer freezing cauld, come in." God that was welcome.

And then you had to drive them down the pier and onto the boat. Well they didn't like that, didna like being on the pier, didna like going up a gangway. Imagine. Cattle. Driving them up a gangway on the boat, and then to pens. And they were penned up with different cattle, maybe from different fairms and they were fighting. There were different incidents. I can remember twice they jumped over the end of the pier and swam out. Swam straight out. Tak a boat and lasso it and tow it in. So that was a bit of drama. I mean, they were scared, they were traumatised. They hated it, going in that boat. Lassoing a beast and towing it back in.

The boat came in and it was probably in for two oors: lifting all the cargo off, lifting the feeding stuff off, putting the eggs back on. Hundreds of boxes of eggs. Took a long time to load the boat and that was a social gathering. People on the boat fae Westray, fae Stronsay, they would come off while it was lying at the pier and you'd have a yarn on the pier. That inter-island mixing disna happen anymore noo 'cause each island's going straight into Kirkwall, they're no going right round the islands. Had to go to Stronsay, Eday, Westray, then

Fordson

into Kirkwall. Eight oors, with loading time on the piers. **Wouldna want to go back to that noo, but there was something about it** because of that socialising between the islands. We used to know lots of people on the other islands and now we don't know hardly anybody because we just don't have that interaction between the islands.

The ro-ro is like a bridge. That thing, *Loth*. Totally artificial. It was nowhere, maybe go down there to see the otters. **Kettletoft was the centre of the universe.** I remember as a child thinking it was like Rotterdam, you could get anything there. Boat came in three times a week, high tide only because there's no bloody water there. Not much of a harbour really. People with no business just coming in to see what came off the boat. It was great fun.

We live on the main street! With street lights, God help us…

The Kettletoft Hotel closing, that's a big blow.

That's sad, a big loss for the island. Lovely fish and chips, used to get the speedboat come over to pick them up for Stronsay.

You've a story, some time in the war, someone's landin' and pickin' up eggs.

Ya, there was a plane landing, we were just right at the airport. The men came out, looking to buy eggs because everything was rationed, y'see? Black market. They got the eggs, and they actually werena pilots, they just got in the plane and cam oot. And they took off the wrong way and went through the fence [laughs]. Right through the fence and the plane had to be cairted away. They got in a right bit o' trouble for that [laughs].

They didna stick around long.

Oh no they were arrested and taken away.

When the air service started, that was a big thing. 1967. Jim was there 50 years.

Ya, it altered so much. It started off just the one body at Loganair that would come doon, y'ken. It ended up with the Cooncil, all the officials, rules and regulations. I just had no time for it.

When it started off, the first aid instructions was just small.

There was no toilet or nothing. Until one of the Cooncil came out, and his wife needed the toilet and there was none. We definitely got a toilet put in eftir that [laughs].

It was just a widden hut, was the first toilet. Tell him about the Cooncil.

Oh ya, I said the hut was just completely rotten. **The Cooncil stood there saying, "there's nothing wrong with it," so I just pushed my hand right through it** [laughs]. We got a new one eftir that [laughs].

Well there was no hardly any service at the time, and it was the minister's wife started haemorrhaging after childbirth, and they phoned to the pilot. "Don't worry," he said, he'd come oot. So he phoned me and said, "I'll be half an hour," and put the phone down. It was night and I couldna tell him I didna have anything wi' lights. I'd no tractor wi' lights. So I ran to a neighbouring fairm and stole a tractor [laughs]. Parked it one end of the runway and he cam. He'd asked for one each end but I couldna do it, so I went for the one end and he landed. Saved her. He was the pilot that started it up, fae County Wicklow in Ireland. Hell of a character, just a rebel. Ya… He was a great character.

The place can be quite anti-establishment. My friend Eric ran a magazine in Sanday, *Lady Godiva*. An article in that got me thinking about this island as a functionally anarchist place, not chaotic but rejecting hierarchy.

Sanday's always been rebellious.

At that time, a lot of people didn't know where Orkney was, hadn't heard of Orkney. I was getting fed up working for London Transport, and I picked up a magazine and saw this place advertised [laughs]. So I showed it to Jean, she said OK and we went to travel agents to come and see the place. They said, "where's Orkney? Will you need passports, will you need currency exchange?" [laughs]. And we flew up, stopped at Kirkwall airport. The building was quite small and we were waiting, looking up. A little plane came in, and it was covered in mud from landing in the fields. Jean said, "I'm not getting on that thing," and she was making a will out in case the plane crashed [laughs]. So we came up here and stayed the weekend. I'd brought things with me, some food. I thought we'd walk round the island, but of course we didn't get very far. Not far at all [laughs]. We stayed at the Belsair, which was run by the postmaster. We said we wanted to come up to Saville, and he says, "I'll take you in the post van," so I say thank you, then he asks us to buy two stamps [laughs]. So we went back and I handed in my notice, and that was it.

I really found, when I moved here, somewhere I could be fully myself.

We'd been up on holiday, we were working offshore. Said we wanted to go to Orkney and a mate came here every year, birding. Really enjoyed it, and as it was there was a development being built at the end of our road. Down in Essex on the coast. Excellent saltmarsh.

Hence we're really keen on saltmarsh.

One of the islands, just down the road, that's where they did one of the first

experiments on managed retreat, where they let the seawall go and let the sea come in to re-flood and create more saltmarsh.

We got back home and the digger was at the bottom of the road. We thought, this is it, we'd been thinking about moving anyway and having been up here we thought it just fit. It was only a few weeks later, I happened to look online and saw a job for Sanday ranger with the Development Trust. We thought, that's a bit spooky. Try it and see.

I might have been here 32 years but I'm not a local!

I moved from Shapinsay to Sanday when I married Jim. He was always there, born in Sanday, and we lived there for 55 years, just moved away two years ago. Jim's family worked with another fairm in the harvest time. It was a help to both families. I was in Sanday at the time, working with them. And that's how I met Jim.

She was completely smitten! [laughs]

He was building the sheaves on the top of the trailer, y'see, and it was at the far land, right out by Elsness. It was a good distance, and I was walking, and he says, "you can come up here," but he had to reach doon, and I had to sort of climb and get pulled up into this trailer with the sheaves [laughs]. So that's how we met. I *love* that story. I love *Sanday*, y'ken? But it was kind of different then when we married and I moved here. I felt kind of cut off then, the plane was too expensive, and the boat didn't do a daily run at that time. It would stop at every pier, then round to the next one. If I wanted to go to Shapinsay I'd have to come to Kirkwall. Many a time you'd have to come in the day before because you just couldn't get it all done in one day.

This is Orkney, but an awful lot of sooth folk call it 'The Orkneys'. And for another thing, if they're living on Sanday and coming into Kirkwall, they'll speak about going 'off-island'. **Y'see, we never say things like that, we'd say we're gan intae the toon.**

The sea is the biggest isolation. You can be stuck for days in winter gales.

It's not as bad as it used tae be. It comes doon tae if the right things are goin'. The negative side is the ferries keep brackin' doon, and we're no gettin' new wans.

Long overdue aren't they? Another thing is that it's so expensive to get anywhere, you've got to get from Sanday to Kirkwall, then Kirkwall across to Scotland. You know these things when you come and accept 'em, but…

It's £40.22 tae cross the Firth, and 22 litres of diesel tae Edinburgh [laughs]. Every time. I know how agricultural I am when I go doon tae Princes Street [laughs].

The sea's a big influence in getting on and off the island. **You've got to be used to not wanting to go away.** You could be stuck here, and for me that's absolutely fine, but if you want to be commuting it's not the place [laughs].

The pilots go down—I don't know if they do any more—when they saw things like whales. I was going into hospital to have Polly literally that night. I was at the front, they had to test if the spare wheel would get in front of my belly. There were loads of seals, it wasn't whales, and he said, "oh, do you mind? Have you got time, love?" [laughs] "I've got a week." But I didn't have a week actually. It was a gorgeous November day, crystal clear. There must have been a visitor on board.

You need a daily boat when you're not self-sufficient. No milk, no bread, no nothing on the island. You need your daily boat, but then we didna. When you had a farm you couldna leave, the coo had to be milked, chickens had to be fed. Couldna leave the farm.

There was a lot of movement of farm servants. Big families, if you couldna work on Sanday you'd go to Stronsay or Shapinsay, maybe get some work on a farm there. But there's no employment on the farms now. Just get a bigger tractor instead of another man. They're just huge machines now, and I think, "do they really need that size of a tractor?" We used to work the land with something much smaller, pulled all the implements fine.

That *Dexta* is totally valuable here, because we've got these peedie byres. Can't get one of the modern ones into it any more. I can't drive it, it's a real wind-it-up kind of machine.

That wee tractor has to start every day. Most important one we have. It's the best we've got, everything else can be done by something else.

There used to be 14 families living off this farm.

There were a lot more people working here on agriculture. And a lot more people combing the shore for useful goodies or food, supplement the diet. A handful of people do a bit of sea fishing now, you can just go to the shop. So yeah I think a lot of people have lost that relationship, connecting with the island and the sea. It's a lot more recreational than it was, not really by necessity. Dragging seaweed up on the fields, whereas now… Well with the cost of fertiliser these days, we might see more people go back to that.

There's no so many youngins interested. Every fairm servant doon there had a dinghy and gaed to the creels in summertime. That link to the sea is passin', it's droppin'. His faither did the creels, so he carried on. Still with the bairns, carried on and gaed to the creels. It's in yer blood, once it's in yer blood ye can't get rid of it. No hardly any locals left for a start, 70 Orcadians left on the island. Maybe. *Maybe*. Out of 500? So the traditions are no gan on.

[Nailing stays into the creel frame]

I've tied thoosands of creels in my time. I mind when I was workin' wi' a boy here. Faither was wantin' to go to the creels, hadna been at the creels for years. I just made 70 during one winter, just at nights. Taks a peedie while to mak wan. We used to mak aw oor creels like that, we were workin' 360 of 'em then. That net, y'see, the bundle of net, you cut strips aff it and put it round. Then you knit the ends in. Auld-fashioned way. Now they just put the net right around, outside of it all. We knitted nine kilo balls of twine in one morning. Twal boys aboard the boat, all they did was fill needles for us all morning. Nine kilo of twine put in the net that f***in' morning.

Just go tae the beach and mak the stones. I was workin' wae a boy wan time, he was lost in 1977 aff the *Burness Queen*. Mind there wasna weather to go to sea and he'd ordered a lot of new wid. He thought, "och we'll go to the banks and find twa or three stones." I thought, "f***, he'll only be wanting 20 or 30." We go doon to the Riv, spent the whole morning there with a gale of north wind and sleety shoowers, hammer in wan hand, brackin' stones. We made the stones before we take them home y'see, then if we took them home and they broke they were no use, need to mak them first. Sat doon there on the holm, back of twal o'clock, coming round one o'clock, we get home and his mither had made us sausage rolls and beans. It was hot. Right *damn* good it was too. And then he decided we'll go to the Start noo and get more stones. I thought, "for *ffff****'s* sake." Think it was 50-some-odd we had in the morning, we humped them around his hoose, whaur he'd a shed. So we set off tae the Start then, f***in' spent the afternoon there. Gale of north wind and the f***in'… I mind just stopping by me uncle's, staying at the north end wi' him and getting sat on top of the fire for a while, just that f***in' cauld. And he was frying pork, it made me that hungry I just about f***in'…

[Bangs down creel, now finished]

They've not made a living, not walked the beaches when they were kids. Maybe seen it on a summer's day and think, "oh it's a really nice place," but don't see it the same as what I do anyway. She's a dangerous beast. There's less of a link, less opportunity, less people workin' on the sea for a start. There's











definitely less… not 'appreciation', that's not the right word… I'd say there's less *connection* now. No putting up tangles, gathering cockles, less understanding of the tides. Always people stop and say, "Oh, I can't get across to the lighthouse." "Yep, because it's tidal. You'll have to wait 'til the sea goes oot." I would say if you're not born and bred here, you don't have the same awe of the sea. I think people that are born here see the friend but also a foe, maybe people that come up from sooth possibly don't realise the ferocity she can throw when she wants tae. It can be quite scary at times when you're seeing rollers not far from the house that are 30, 40 foot high rolling down the bay. "Jesus, I hope this stops." [laughs]

We'd take the wooden creels out every year, dry them oot. The steel wans, if you took them oot they just rusted away. So we used to shoot them oot in the deeper water where they were safe, not so much motion. Because they were bigger, the crabs didna fight so much so more of them survived. Best creel we ever had, 30-inch creel had been out four or five days. Hadna had the weather to get oot to them, wintertime oot in that deeper bottom. I remember I took five lobster oot of it, biggest was about seven poond and the rest three–four poond. All in the same creel.

That connection is quite strong. Not as strong as it used to be, I don't think. Now, more people are using the sea recreationally. We only have one fisherman and most of his stuff gets sent away.

Oh hell ya, there was more fishing before. We retired, some had no sons, me son didna want tae be here. I telt him to pack his bags and try something else. I did the same when I was young. Ye have to, when you're young. If ye don't then, ye'd never bloody do it. Shetland, skippering a boat up there. The boy offered him a job so he took it, jumped aboard and away to sea. Thoroughly enjoys it, brought up with it, y'see? When we was aboot ten year auld he could skipper the boat. Mind there was three of us in the boat, 50-odd feet, just had a peedie lever for steering. Someone quit working for us and just so happened it was the Easter holidays, so I said come and steer the boat for us. Gearbox and all that forward but we couldna steer. So put a fishbox on the floor in the wheelhoose so ye can stand to see oot the window. Keep the boat up in the rough no problem at all, ten-eleven year auld. We're hauling up'n the East End up there, and he says to me, "whaur ye gan shoot this?" I said, "twa tenths doon on the deck there," and by the time I'd got to the hauler, he'd the boat ready to shoot, and I said, "crack on then." He would never shrug a job, learnt that fae his grandfaither across the road there. He's learnt the same way we were. Just the way everybody did. In fae school, change your claes and oot tae work on the croft.

When I started school that was just when the school centralised, 1949. I started school at the small school in Burness for a few months before I went to central.

The transport altered things, and the school becoming the one central school, that altered a lot.

Black Rock jetty is a place you spent a bit of time.

Well, I built it! [laughs]

Again, not singlehandedly [laughs].

The post boat used tae come fae North Ronaldsay. Then they decided to build the jetty there, did up the pier in North Ronaldsay the year afore that. Then the next year the plane service started. Just got the jetty finished and the plane started [laughs].

South End, North End, different accents then. The other islands even more so. Jim's sister married a lighthousekeeper fae North Ronaldsay, and the day they got married, the young folk all came in with the ferry in the morning for the wedding. But the parents came over with a small boat to Black Rock around lunchtime. When the parents came in, it was like switching the wireless onto a different station, just couldna understand them. Fine when they were speaking to ess, but when the parents came in they went into a broad North Ronaldsay accent. Certainly different words, different bits of the island used different words. Your own parish had its own school, its own kirk, youth club, football team. You didna mix, I was never in the North End of the island until I was 14. I got a bike and I managed to cycle there then, but we had no cars, no transport to get round the island. Never got to the North End, there was no need to go there. That was foreign land [laughs].

There was a wife lived in the North End had never been out there her whole life, lived and died in the North End.

My mother lived in the South End, left school at 14 and went to work in the North End. They didna ken what she was saying, thought her very proper. She got to the North End on her bike. There was some boys in Lady on the road home who saw her light wisna very bright. One of those auld lights that needs water to mak it bright, y'ken? So they called her to stop to put it right, but she didna ken them and she was terrified!

There's a certain stone, a big black boulder in Otterswick, that maks the three parish boondaries.

What's that big stone up by Scar, then? Witches' stone.

That's an erratic, it was dumped in the Ice Age. Just the other side of the kirkyard up there in the field. It came ashore at Saville, but the laird up at Scar decided he was going tae make a feature of it. They made their money up there on kelp. The crofters that took the kelp up, they were told by the laird, "that's how much you're getting and I'm taking the rest," that was part of their rent. They had a wagon and it collapsed, carrying the stone. They hid enough free labour, they just ordered the crofters tae move it.

So movin' that stone's a bit like building the pyramids? [laughs]

The Treb! They're only found on Sanday and North Ronaldsay. They're boundaries, sometimes also called threves. Probably Bronze Age boundaries, there's five or six on Sanday. You can tell how old that one is, because on the top of the treb they built a chambered tomb.

Have you been to see the whale monument? In 1994, eleven sperm whales stranded at Backaskaill Bay, and last week a new monument opened. There, just past the farm and the kirkyard, that's the new picnic site, with a life-size whale sculpture.

All those whales washed up. That was a lot of meat to throw away! [laughs]

I don't know if it's something to do with the repetition of things. There's always been whales stranding, but we're now in a stage that it's been more this last wee while. A lot of pilot whales, another sperm whale. At Tresness again, they had the boats and drove them ashore for their oil and things like that, so there's always been something to do with that too.




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RECOVERY





Orkney Mythology of Land and Sea

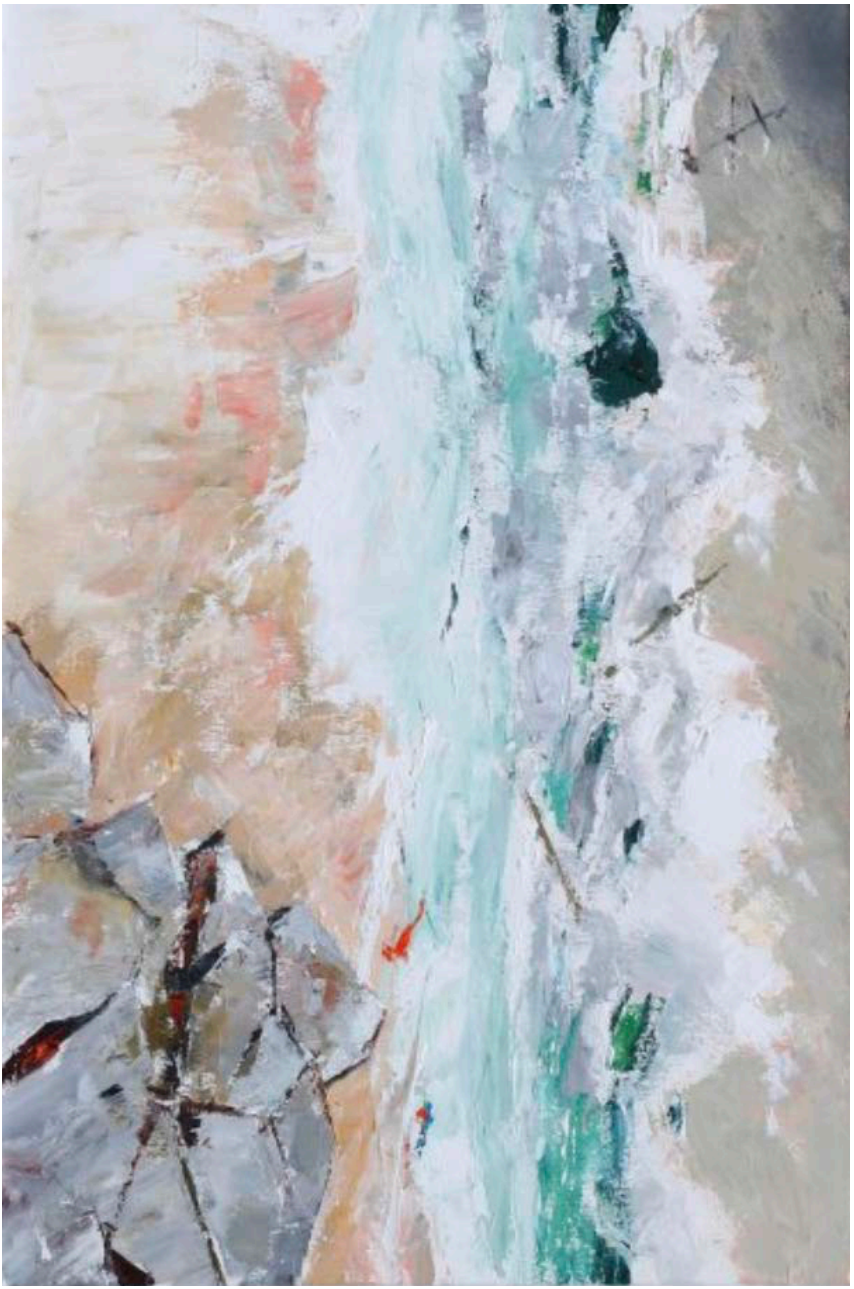
Ragnhild Ljosland, University of the Highlands and Islands.

Orkney's mythology firmly connects isles and sea. The landscape continues into a seascape. The Orcadian people on land have their counterparts both on the surface and under the water, in sailors and shipwreck survivors, and in 'Fin Folk', seal folk, and mermaids.

We can thank the Sanday man Walter Traill Dennison (1825–1894) for passing on much of this mythology to us and future generations. Born into the landed gentry class, he straddled the worlds of the educated elite and the oral traditions of islanders. He liked to visit crofts and listen to the stories people had to tell. He listened attentively, and sometimes wrote in the dialect of the island community. He was therefore able to capture in writing the oral culture and tales that had been passed down through generations. At times, he made edits and put together details and strands he heard from different people, and his own ideas, into one tale to make it more coherent than it was when he heard it. But then again, living folktales are reborn each time someone tells them, so Dennison is no different to other storytellers in this respect, except in that he committed his materials to the page.

If you want to read Dennison's work, it is most accessible in Tom Muir's 1995 edition *Orkney Folklore & Sea Legends*[21]. I will now tell some of his tales in my own way, which fascinate me and show the magic in Sanday's relationship with the sea.

The isles were first born as a sea monster, the Stoor Worm or great serpent, thousands of miles long and with a tongue that could sweep whole towns, trees, and hills into the sea. His realm was the deep ocean, but he devoured people on land, especially young lasses. The Stoor Worm personifies the danger of the ocean: it can swallow you and take bites out of the land. But at the same time, the serpent is the land, it is the isles. Then an unlikely hero stepped up to the danger: Assipattle, the younger brother who spent his days by the hearth. He let himself be swallowed, and set fire to the serpent's liver with a burning peat from the hearth. Assipattle's victory is the battle of elements, fire against water. It is the home and civilisation's victory over nature's dangers. As the serpent's liver caught fire, the smoke made the Stoor Worm sneeze Assipattle out, and in its death throes the serpent knocked its teeth out—which became the islands. Its great body lies further north, where its liver still smoulders deep down in the volcanoes of Iceland.



The weather and seasons are personified as the Mother of the Sea and Teran. The Mother of the Sea gave vitality to every creature living under the waves. She had her summer residence in the ocean. But her rival Teran, with his furious anger, whipped up storms and gales. Every spring the two would battle: in the *Vore Tullye*, the clash of the March gales, she would bind Teran and confine him to the bottom of the sea for the blessed summer season. But around the autumn equinox, battle would resume: in the *Gore Vellye*, Teran would break his bonds, and this time the Mother of the Sea would be overcome and flee the ocean, leaving Teran to reign for the winter.

The fields and cattle pastures of Orkney are mirrored on a grander scale in the realms of the Fin Folk. These sea fairies inhabit their own magical islands, invisible to the human eye except in extreme conditions. To the fogbound or storm-tossed sailor or fisherman, on the brink of certain death, the island of Hildaland would reveal itself as a peaceful land of plenty, abundant with green grazing, fat cattle, and glittering freshwater streams. Hildaland, at once, is and isn't one of the Orkney Islands. It comes and goes and its position is not fixed. One mysterious character who once turned up at the market in Kirkwall said he came from an island "east of Stronsay, east of Sanday," where there is no island.

In another tale, a farmer and his sons manage to fix a come-and-go island in place after the wife and mother of the family has been captured and taken there by the Fin Folk. The farmer, "the Guidman o' Thorodale," crawls around an ancient standing stone called the Odin Stone and looks through its hole to be able to see the magical island. Once he has spotted it, he keeps it in sight while instructing his sons to join him in rowing out to it with a load of salt. Drawing rings of salt around the island fixes it in place, enabling the family to fetch their wife and mother home. The island has since been permanent, named Eynhallow—the holy island—but since the ninth circle of salt was a little bit short of being completed, it occasionally vanishes even to this day.

Vanishing islands and sea serpents taking bites out of the land are poignant images of the sad reality of coastal erosion that threatens Sanday. Dennison observed and commented on this in the notes accompanying his mythological tales. He describes former fields which have become bays and headlands turning into islets, giving measurements of how much land had been lost in the living memory of the islanders. Further back in time, Otterswick, he wrote, was once a bonnie forest. Such shifting will gain even more pace with climate change and sea level rise.

The rich environment of sea life under the surface is reflected in the dazzling underwater realms described in the mythology. There, under the waves, are the homes of seal folk, mermaids and mermen. And, of course, the Fin Folk have a home there, too. In 'Finfolkaheem' the sand is gold dust. The palaces of the Fin Folk are built of coral and adorned with pearls and precious stones that shine like stars. Richly coloured seaweed grows in the gardens. Flocks of tamed whales and sea cows graze the sea meadows, and are milked by the mermaids. Fin men hunt on sea horses while otters and seals serve as dogs. The tables are laden with a great feast of the riches of the ocean: roasted and boiled whale meat, some of it stewed in whale blubber. Roasted and boiled seal and otter. Fish of all kinds, and whale and seal soup thick with cod roe. Seaweed boiled in oil or stewed in seal fat, but no bread, as that is the food of dry land. The underwater realm is a land of plenty, but also an otherworld, from which few humans return. Arthur Deerness might have spent the rest of his days there, with a mermaid bride, Auga, had old aunt Marion not worked her magic and brought him back to his bride-to-be on Sanday.

Shipwrecks could be both a disaster and a bounty, and anyone able to wield some control over the elements held a great power. Dennison says that once, even the minister prayed from the pulpit that if it were the will of the Lord to wreck a ship, then please may it come ashore on Sanday! Some islanders had the reputation of being 'storm witches', with the ability to predict or even control the weather. When, in 2024, the shifting sands revealed a substantial timber shipwreck, Ben Saunders of Wessex Archaeology, working with Sanday community volunteer researchers, managed to identify the wreck as the whaler, *The Earl of Chatham*. Storyteller Tom Muir, whose family also hails from Sanday, felt the name rang a bell. He realised he had read the name of the ship in Dennison's work. Dennison wrote of a 'storm witch' nicknamed Ship Maggie for her supposed power to bring ships ashore. She carried a staff much longer than herself and always wore one white and one black shoe. When the *Earl of Chatham* was wrecked on Ayrabae, writes Dennison, the ship's mate in the middle of the drama had spotted Ship Maggie on the foretop just before the vessel struck. Surviving the wrecking, next morning the mate spotted her again, this time walking along the shore, and he recognised her from her white 'rivlin' leather shoe. He then called out for his gun to shoot at her. This was remembered in Sanday since 1788! Dennison claimed to have a small piece of Maggie's long staff.

Sanday's mythology, as captured by Dennison, speaks eloquently to themes that still have a striking resonance and are perhaps even more topical today. Orcadians live in a close relationship with the sea, in which the sea

simultaneously sustains and endangers human lives and communities. Folk memory teaches us that storms can bring both disaster and unexpected bounty. Tales of 'storm witches' share the insight that humans have tried to wield some control over the tempestuous ocean but that such control is beyond the ordinary person and islanders are left to the mercy of nature's forces. The duality of the sea is also reflected in the understanding of the sea as home to a parallel world, with its own people, animals and pastures, a splendid world complete with aristocratic halls. It is not quite a mirror of the human world; it is an otherworld, just out of reach, eerily familiar and at the same time strange. Understood as animated, the sea has power and agency. Like a sea serpent, it can devour and reshape land beneath Orcadians' feet. Fields, links, and even whole islands can disappear, so the boundary between land and sea is never quite fixed. The relationship between land and sea, humans and nature, is unstable, shifting, fragile, dual and interdependent. The stories that Dennison has passed on to new generations resonate in the day and age of changing ocean currents and weather patterns, increasing storm surges and sea level rises, acute coastal erosion, and shifts in the ocean's ecosystems.



Beachcombing is everywhere, any beach.

Our favourite is Scuthvie Bay, it's beautiful and there's lots of groatie buckies there.

They say if you've a groatie buckie in your purse, you'll never be poor.

And it's a great one if you blow it, it can whistle like nobody's business.

A groatie buckie disna whistle! [laughs] Looks like a peedie wilk, folded in on itsel'.

There's folk absolutely fanatical aboot them.

I know Sanday's known for the sand, but I love the rocky bits. Round Start Point and the shell sand.

Yes, the shell sand, with the groatie buckies!

Beachcombing, nothin' like somethin' free comin' ashore [laughs]. All aroond below the hoose here and oot the back. Usually it's a case of you're goin' tae check animals or something, and they're doon near the fences, stick yer heid over and have a look. It's not just, "och, I'm goin' for a walk oot that way," you're doing two things at once. 99 times oot of 100, I'll look over and there's nothin' there.

As far as I'm concerned, you go beachcombing after a gale, because you never know what you're gonnae find. Could be anything. Best places for beachcombing depends on the direction of the wind. We'd go all the way up tae the North End, you can work it oot, all the bays that catch. All along these bays here for a sooth-east wind, up at Riv for north-west wind. But you never know…

I fund a red torch. Picked it up, flicked the switch and it came oan [laughs]. A shepherd's lantern, that's what they used tae be called. Gas mask as well, must've came off an oil rig or something. Helmets, hard hats.

Tins of paint too, in the greenhouse. That's still painted grey [laughs]. Those planks came ashore here in the 90s, walking miles with them.

Bits of wood in the greenhouse cam aff the beach.

Mind when I was 13 or 14, this whole pile of wood came ashore there. Think it was in the Pentland Firth that it got washed off. It started comin' ashore in Shapinsay the night before, and the guy there knew the tide'd be pushin' it up here. He phoned me dad at 11 o'clock at night and said aw this wood's coming ashore and ye might want tae have an early look. Spent the whole next day,

thoosands of metre-long pit props. Firewood, split them up for logs. '83, year before I went intae Kirkwall tae finish me schooling. A fisherman used tae keep his boat up there, it broke its anchor and cam ashore there. They're tryin' tae tow it back oot, havin' a hell of a job wi' the wood in the way [laughs]. Cam ashore wi' the west wind.

Not much driftwood comes ashore any more. A lot of that came from wooden boats, people relied on it for winter fuel.





Sea Transformations
Sanday Afternoon Club

Once growing on a tree
Washed up by the sea
A pretty birch bark ring is
curled around a finger
A spiral hard and strong
Like the finger it is on
A fisherman's hand
Tough, but brittle, like all living things
Might snap if you wind him up.

A roll of paper, curled in a bottle
A silent invitation to an island wedding
Rings on fingers, of gold, not birch bark
But no-one got the message
No-one found the bottle
Shouting messages of love and friendship
Into a silent abyss

The sea is money!
A groatie buckie in your purse
makes sure there's always plenty
A row of Russian cork
is now holding pencils

The sea is fertile!
People now get back to carting
seaweed to their garden
for vegetables to grow.

The sea brings riches!
My parents worked the tangles
Dried them on the stone staithes
Sold them by the bundle
Long, long hours
Cold, hard work.
Transformation of the tangles
In the factories, in the cities
Made us ice cream

Made us sticky chewing gum.

Transformations, ways of seeing
If you see one, you see others
Groatie buckies, lucky cowries
in the tangles, on the sand
Make us riches, bring us fortune
Curls of happiness and fun
I found one, my son found fifteen
But despite the help we gave him
poor Ricardo spotted none.



The thing I notice is the amount of plastic that gets washed up here.

The local council organise the Bag the Bruck thing, which is good. And a lot of people do pick it up when they're going around, I've invariably got some bits of string or something in my pockets.

We never really gaed to the shore much at all. We were too busy. The tide would come right in up over the field there in the lower land, and we'd have to go and clear all the rubbish off. Had cattle coming in and didna want them gobbling bits of plastic. With a high tide and a big gale the sea would come right up. But the salty water didna kill it.

They say that Bay o' Stove used tae be a golf course. Not sure if there's any truth in it or not.

The sea's encroached there. There wis a field in there, and it wisna exactly a golf course, but folk hit a golf ball there once upon a time [laughs]. If ye look at the bay, there's a big sand bank there, and this side, it woulda been saltmarsh, there's remains roond the side doon there.

Oot on the sand at Stove, it's just the chimneys is all they can see. You don't realise there's a hill in the sand, so when the sea comes in it can be quite dangerous. It comes in very quick. There's sinking sand there.

Just where the sand leaves a wee hollow. We used tae swim there. Dusty fae workin', jump in there. It was always warm. On a warm day, the sea goin' oot and the warm sand heated up the sun. Better than any bath [laughs].

With the shifting sands, I couldn't believe it. I'd never seen a rocky beach on this particular bit, I was blown away. And then the next time I went it was all covered again.

If you go round Peedie Sea, there's a lot—on't Low Road—pebbles are always covering't road, it's all wearing away there.

After a *high* tide, they have tae get a big digger oot tae clear the road. It happens regular, more regular now than it's ever done. I would say. Never used tae get that high tides.

It's all eroding round that bit at Kettletoft as well. If you go down to Kettletoft and walk round. The grass and stuff is hanging down where the underneath's been taken away by't tide.

Things have altered so much, y'ken?

The same what happens on land happens in the sea.

This end of the island, let's say 1,000 years ago, 1,500 years ago, was a series of rocky islands. And in-between, the windblown sand. Our house is nine metres above sea level. You can get an idea of this with the modern maps of flood risk zones. Our little spot is just above water. These little islets, joined together by windblown sand. There's two little hummocks there, maybe 70 foot above sea level—high for the north end of Sanday—called Kirk and Kill. That tells you there were two churches, one Viking and one Celtic. My belief, knowing this was a rocky islet all those years ago, is that this was exactly the sort of place Celtic monks would come to get away.

We started the chapel in 1993. Bishop Geddes visited Saville in 1790, there were two ladies who lived here. Someone came from New Zealand to do research on the Reformation, she found it all. When Bishop Conti came, he used to love it. He felt it was really wonderful that Catholics were back here. A bishop from the Solomon Islands read about the chapel in a magazine, sent a letter, and has been in touch since. God has a way of knitting us all together.

I went to the chapel in Aberdeen, when you were in hospital, and someone from Sanday was studying there and he said, "you must stay with us, Jean, we'll look after you, you'll stay with us. There's a little chapel just round the corner." Such a lot of stairs getting up to his flat! [laughs] There's a little brass plaque, outside the chapel, saying Bishop John Geddes was interred here. I thought, "what are you trying to do Lord? Where's all this coming from? It seems to be coming together."

There's a field there, Eccles, which ties to 'eglwys', which is Welsh for church, and Cill and Kirk and the old Celtic monastery idea.

My relationship to the sea is entirely spiritual.

It gets you in touch with the important things really, that inner journey. It's contemplative to spend time with the sea. Sensory too.

It's here now but it wisna here when you were looking for it. The sand moves there so much, it's not surprising that it's there one year and not the next. The whole beach changes year to year. Some bits are mackin' up and other bits are being eroded away. Quite frightening really, I'm afraid they'll not come back. I'm sure it's got more.








I mind that road being there, and another 20 feet outside the banks. All gone. There's an awful piece less bloody land there than there want tae be. There's a dyke roond the ness, used tae be a road roond the back. No road noo. Island's getting smaller. S*** happens, it's happened for years.

Some of them did bits, built dykes roond the beach to stop it eatin' away. Did a lot of that at Burrian. The guy there built a lot of stone roond the back. There was stone built there afore, the sea took it away, and he replaced it all. Stop the sea tackin' oot the sand.

Now and again, if all the sand blows away, you might see the seawall.

The Clogg is the water, the Hammer is the land.
Oh is it?
It just doesn't say on the maps.
Oh right!
It's usually full, even at low tide.
There's quite a current there, isn't there, as well?
I like that this is on the 1800-something map as land. The water only broke through more recently, it's very lovely.

This loch, there's three springs. If it freezes in the wintertime, you see three circles. You never see them unless it freezes over on a calm night.

Bea Loch is our main freshwater supply, and if seawater got into that, then we would be in trouble. It used to be part of what we now call Backaskaill Bay, but with sand being deposited it eventually got cut off from the sea and filled up with freshwater. It wouldn't take a great deal of rise in the sea level, with a gale in the right direction, for it to erode, intrude, and even breach.

There's tree roots in the sand.
We dug there for them, they were lookin' for auld earth that was buried underneath all the sand here. Like peat below. They took core samples there but I'm no sure what happened to them.

The bent's certainly a big thing for holding the beach, but it just gets ripped out in a big gale. Sometimes all along the beach, like tangles, there was a roll of roots of the marram. Just torn out and washed along, nothing but the bare roots.

I don't know whether haulin' up lobster pots doesn't do damage and you've less of a wave-wall ootside, with the red weed that captures energy. I don't know,

it's the livin' plant that needs to be looked after. Dredgin' in other places in the sea, it's horrendous what it does to the seabed, I can't see that being good for anythin'. As far as I know, there's no dredgin' up this way. Too rough, mostly divin' and lobster pots.

You can't look after somethin' if you don't know it's there. It's a bit like us playin' in the seagrass in Finstown, me son would be divin' down and snorkellin', but at really low tide we'd be walkin' through it. On the little starfish! So we don't do that any more, we need to look after it, the seagrass and loadsa creatures here. But you don't really think about it until you go in and ask, "what's under my feet?"

Don't touch it or it's doon like a bullet.

I wonder if… The spoots don't live where the sands move much. So I wonder if, because the sand's no movin' much, where the spoots are you'll find seagrass? They tried it years ago, found a lot of juveniles there and put them here—must be 50 year ago—and it didna work, they didna survive because the sand was movin' too much. Maybe if there's a correlation wi' other islands where there's spoots to be found and seagrass aroond that.

There was seagrass roond there, but it's disappeared again. Still small deid roots in the sand. When we were gan tae the spoots and the sea was oot, you'd see bits of seagrass. As far as the tide went oot with the spring tides. The spoot tides, as we call them.

A lot of people who went to the spoots knew about the seagrass. But not a lot of people went to the spoots by then, I was the only one on the sand many a time. I loved to take people with me and show them. "I'll trap it with my knife and you can pull it." I was finding it hard to get up and down so somebody wi' me was quite handy.

Access to the beaches might be a bit difficult for less able people. The dunes are getting that bit steeper, access is being lost every winter. Six-foot drop, can't get doon withoot jumping.

There's someone lives up there who was struggling getting down the dunes to the beach. A few folk built some steps out of tyres to make it a bit easier.

There's a welly on a stab. You can go up a path to the welly, then drop down onto this beach. But if you're doing it from the other direction you can't see the gap. So you look for the welly.

The welly boot is full of memories. I touched it when I began and touched it again 17 hours later or whatever it was. I've got favourite parts I'll go back to, but I wanted to do it all in one go. 107 km. That was really the start of a journey for me [laughs], in terms of that journey round the island and the journey I've kept on going on, round other islands.

The byres is just right by the airfield—it was no airfield at that time, it was fields, y'ken? There was a hoose on it and it had steps gan up ootside, they called it The Galdry. He said he minds tincklers coming and staying there. That's another thing we had when we were young, was tincklers gan aboot. A tinckler, they went aboot wae a big pack on their back, a big sheet with all the wares they were gonnae be selling. They'd knot it up, put it on their back and you'd see them coming drudging along the road. They were living on the Mainland and they'd come oot to the Isles.

The kids come into Kirkwall for the Grammar School, a lot of them don't come back. Some of our kids did. Our oldest son left Sanday when he was 21, he'd been working on a fairm and there was just no young folk on the island. Seemed to be nobody and there was no girls [laughs]. So he came into Kirkwall and that was that. He misses it too.

Some of the best days was bein' oot, when I was working at the lobsters. Everybody's got their own path, but it means a lot to me. It's how I met me wife. I'd left the fairm, had enough ae that. Move away, be my own person. Extended holidays at Christmas being a fisherman, went intae Kirkwall and met me wife. Back tae the fairm, that was the end of peace and quiet then [laughs]. Summer fishin's no very good roond here, back tae the fairm, see how I got on with it, and that was 32 year ago.

I'm sure there'll be changes yeah. What kinds? Who knows. Hopefully positive for the environment, but who knows what's going to happen. Got to wonder the impacts of some of the big commercial fishing vessels that come here. What's happening for the grass, for the farmers. Environment grants, agricultural schemes, hopefully some of that will carry on. Some farmers are better than others at the wildlife stuff, but at the end of the day you've got to make a living, otherwise we wouldn't be here at all.

I was workin' the horse for quite a few year, I was the last one. Till the plane cam. I'd get a message to go and it just didna work for the animals. It was a time-taking thing because you had to feed the horse so they'd be ready for yoking. Folk wouldna want to do that noo.

Younger people coming in, a lot of them are working fae home. This scenario with the broken internet the last couple of months, it might put people off. A lot of younger families have come in working fae home but if their computers canna work they can't do that, can they? It's keeping the school going, might be some of those young folk that stay, take up a job. Better to have people on the island than empty houses, empty school. You lose the services if you don't have the people.

That's very good to have a Sanday band again, that's lovely. There was a time we had no music, so that spoiled the dancing. It's not the same dancing to tapes… There used to be two bands before that, they just got auld and died. Nobody then to take it up. There's less and less dances, used to be one a month, at the very least.

We werena allowed to *sing*, amazing the things you couldna do. And I was following all the rules, washing doorhandles, going to the shop and washing everything when we got back. I like it because looking back it reminds us so much of what were weren't allowed to do. Me and my friend did lots of walks on the beach during Covid, just by her house. It used to be the North End school.

A writer in Kirkwall did a six-week course during Covid, and we zoomed into it every week. It was great. One day she said we had to write aboot a new place, look up the internet. I found Berlin, and it reminded me of when the Berlin Wall came doon, things like that. So I read up a lot aboot that, y'ken? And then, I wrote aboot reading aboot it, and how it reminded me of the Cauld War. I was 13, woulda been '63. Me and this boy were walking tae catch the schoolbus. We were speaking aboot, "can ye hear that Vietnam on the TV?", that kind of thing. Hearing aboot this and thinking whaur would be the safest place tae go, y'ken? Whaur would ye go here, if the Russians landed—'cause it was all about Russians. We think the safest thing to do would be to dig, live underground. Writing aboot this, I was thinking that we had little knowledge at that time that this was how the Vietnamese were living. Living underground to keep themselves safe. In the fairmhoose, I was working in the kitchen, single-pane glaiss, and because we live near the school I could hear the schoolbairns playin', screekin', and laughin'. And suddenly, it threw me back to this feeling: "whaur will I go if the Russians come?" Y'ken?

Me dad and me granny would speak about the Russians. There was always this big, big boat ye could see in the distance. Me dad would say, "there's Russian boats lying off of the islands here." What are they doing there? Y'ken? I wondered whether Covid might have the same effects on the children as the Cauld War.

All the family—well they werena *all* family—but oor uncle, kinfolk fae Glasgow, we would come and have a barbecue and everything. It was just… *Oor* beach [laughs].

And the waterfall, fill your kettle for tea. Flat rocks that drop off, place tae jump in the sea. Magical place. And there's 50p there, in the sand. Me cousin hid 50p there for the kids and lost it [laughs].

It was just a *ritual*, every July we came oot. In them days, woulda been the auld steam puffer. It was always good auld-fashioned burnt sausages and sand [laughs].

There's a rock and a pool behind it, always full of sillocks. Peedie fish. Put them in the pan, eat them whole.

The sea would just come in over that rock and scoop the sand oot.

Stove's the same, full of wee flounders. Grandchildren hated it, every time they set their feet.

Halfway between Holm of Elsness and Elsness point, there's a shallow swale. Few boats have gone agroond there, picked the wrong tide. The two tides meet, wan goes wan way, wan goes the other, wan goes under the other and it leaves a wall of water. Saw a yacht go intae it wan time, and it just turned aroond and went back [laughs]. The auld steam puffer cargo boat used tae go through it. If they timed it wrong, they didna have the speed, they'd just stand still until the tide turned that wee bit and they'd slowly move off. Same up here at Lamba Ness wae the tidal race, Lashy Soond.

There's a deep channel feeding Peedie Sea, but around it's quite flat, so the water's only got the drop a few inches and then, suddenly. They're over here, the channels over here and they can't get there.

You can walk right across the bay.

They say there's sinking sand there.

When I was able to walk a lot, I always thought the cliffs were the most spectacular. Wildlife, all the birds nesting, puffins, everything. And there was places you could go doon, that wisna very safe. We used tae go fishing off the rocks, certain places. The wan, there was a rockfall. The other wan, you needed tae be very careful were you went, and that the weather was right. The rocks came up in a slope, then a big drop. If you had what we call a land sea, big swells comin' in, if you didna know whaur you're goin', the wave would come right up and almost over the top. Never happened, because we never went there when it was like that. But it was uncanny.

It was a pleasure, I used to enjoy it. No wind and bright sunshine [laughs]. I mind just haulin' along here one day. Bloody gale of north wind. The snow was blowin' off the land. That was the cauldest day I ever put in at sea in me life. Standin'. Guttin'. Hood up, f***in' standin' there guttin' by hand, y'ken? Cam to go in aff the deck, and the skipper cam doon fae the wheelhoose and said, "ye'd better gie yersel a dab before comin' in the galley." F***in' covered in snow all on me shoulders and heid. Wi' yer oilskins on you never found the cauld. Standing bloody cuttin', movin' yer feet to keep them going. Standin' at the end of a fishbox, guttin' bloody fish.

Fishin' and creelin's the main bit I do. Seaweed collection too, I suppose. Put up aboot 1,000 tonne last year. Most of it's one lodder-full at a time, or fillin' the trailer and then having tae tow the other tractor up. If you're needin' to be feedin' animals, you can't be doin' both at the same time. Cocklin' woulda been the 90s. Spoots too, went last year for the first time in a while, early spring when the fairm's busy busy. Takes a coupla oors by the time you're there and back. Usually got plenty of other things to be doin'. Tangles, that woulda finished aboot 1996. The cocklin' kinda took over after the tanglin' disappeared. For every four tonne you put up, you got a tonne of dry stuff. Hard work. I think wetter and milder winters was a part of it, the stuff didna dry as it should do. Soft and rotten when you went tae tie them up. Some of it, there was a lot more boats as well, haulin' up pots, brackin' the plant so it never came to maturity. Certainly these last two years, there's been a lot more seaweed aboot on the beaches than there's been, and there's a lot less boats. Maybe the connection's just in my head, I don't know. There's not much you can actually do on the beaches here that I've not been doing. It's more saved money, instead of buyin' it fae the shop. You're either makin' money or eatin' them [laughs].

There was an auld guy used to live up here, and the commercial boys would put their backropes at the point there. You'd see him oot on his wee dinghy, backropes across the stern, pullin' up the commercial ones. Used tae complain about them being heavy, the big double-eye creels. Everybody knew he did it, but there was no point in speakin' to him. It made no difference, he just carried on doin' it, done it all his life [laughs]. "I'm damned if I'm gonnae change…"

We fish all round the island, that's all we ever did. Certain pieces different times of year. Hairvest-time we used to work fae oot here and across the soond, Stywick, Lopness, Newark, right over tae Stronsay. October then ye shifted north. Where the wife comes fae, Stromness, we used to be there about the County Show time, first of August. I was friendly wi' a boy there, Peedie

Willy Sinclair, and he was starting the lobsters around the County Show time. We had three weeks before we'd get them doon here. Local knowledge y'see [laughs]. His was one of the earliest pieces. They'd start in the Outer Hebrides in June, came up the Cape then, that would be first week, maybe middle of July, then north. Just got later and later every year. Shetland they never got lobsters there until a way intae October, September.

Always washed away in the winter, and spring wind brings some of it back again. Then it's on to the fields and that does its own damage. It's not easy. Certainly at this end of the island, the sand that's been on the beach is now on the land. Been blowin' over for years, well, thoosands of years. The amount of salt spray that comes off the sea has to dictate what the land does. We're intae the start of June and we still have no grass: it's too dry, too much salt spray, and things don't grow. It makes a very, very long winter. Start feeding in October and not finish until July, it's a long, long season to be feedin'.

It's like a motorway service station, all that kelp, the amount that builds up with all the flies and grubs and insects. Particularly for the ones that are moving north. The sanderlings and terns and things here in May time, unbelievable.

There's massive kelp forests down there, used to be a population of porbeagle sharks too, at least there were 20 years ago.

That connection with the environment, feel the wind, feel the sand.

It was March time, March–April. Cold wind but sunny. We walked along and they were gonnae go further along to the point. I say I'll go back, we decided to go back the far side. I set off and because it was cold and windy and I had walking poles, and I was walking along and the wind was blowing and the sand was lifted up. It was like walking in a sandstorm. I had a cap with a peak and I had me glasses, and me poles, and I felt like I was walking in the Arctic or something. Linda couldna believe it, she was absolutely awestruck. The sun was shining on the baldy bits of the dunes, and then the grassy bits, and the sand blowing along here, and the sea coming in turquoise and white, y'ken? It was just… she was just absolutely blown away. She shouted, "come walk doon here!" But I was enjoying it [laughs]. I'll never forget that.

We've been in this house since 1995 and the change is striking. The dunes are moving left. Getting taller on the left-hand side, and flattening out on the right. A friend, long gone now, told us about a road that ran along the top of the dunes. Hard to imagine now, must have been much more even along the ridge.

They say it's going to become three islands one day.

It's about the ebb and flow of life really. And I've come here to prepare to die.

The Soulka is the space between sea and sky.

"Welcome to *our* island." I don't really like that, maks ye feel like ye own it. And I don't think ye own an island, do ye?

When I arrived in Kirkwall, someone asked where I come from. I said, "I come from the most beautiful place in the world. I come from Sanday."







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