

There is a strong tradition among the Scandinavian and Celtic peoples of storytelling in song. Today it is still found in the Gaelic songs of the north and west of Scotland and in Faroe where history and legend appear in the form of ballads and are sung as the music for ring dances. When George Low visited Unst (the most northerly island in the Shetland archipelago) in 1774 he witnessed one species of dance which seems peculiar to themselves a dozen or so form themselves into a circle, and taking each other by the hand, perform a sort of circular dance, one of the company all the while singing a Norn Visick .¹ He also comments that this dance is being superseded by the reel .² In Shetland by the end of the 18th century the song words had all but disappeared and tunes become fiddle oriented the singing traditions had almost vanished. The voice was the one instrument seemingly impossible to silence or to drive underground costing nothing, but priceless; easy to conceal but a force to be reckoned with when used. How could such an important part of our cultural heritage be suppressed so completely?

Handed over to Scotland in 1468 as part of a dowry which was never redeemed, Shetland found itself under new management. The Reformed Church in Scotland saw education as the way forward in religion and morality, and the civil authorities consisted mainly of lairds and land owners who had a vested interest in controlling their tenants. Their combined influence had a profound effect on the language and culture of the Shetlanders. Kirk and school forbade the music of the Norse forebears; ministers refused to baptize children unless Scots names were given; in schools pupils were forced to read and write in English and, over time, much of the Norn was lost. The islands lie at the centre of a major sea route; in the days of sail they were influenced by many cultures and languages. In the hiatus between the old order and the new, a miscellany of extraneous words was incorporated into the everyday speech of the local population. The resulting dialect, as the poet Vagaland so succinctly put it in his poem *Shetlanrie*, is said to

be full of brokken English, brokken Scots, an idder bruk firbye , the old songs were no longer sung.

By the end of the 19th century there was a renewal of interest in folk

Starka virna vestilie
Obadeea, obadeea
Starka, virna, vestilie
Obadeea, moynie
Stala stoit a stonga raer

O whit says du de bunshka baer³

O whit says du de bunshka baer

Litra maevi drengi

Saina papa wara

Obadeea, obadeea

Saina papa wara

Obadeea moynie⁴

[You can hear the _____ performed by *Friðarey*.]

Possible translation:

Strong west wind

Oh, let it be calm

(Trouble our men)

Put in order and support the mast and yards

Do you think the boat will carry her sail?

We must be strong young men

(I m pleased with that, boys)

We are our father s sons

(Bless us our Father)

The link between song and spoken word cannot be ignored. Today, interest in preserving what is left of the dialect is growing. Dialect is encouraged in schools and young writers are given every opportunity to use it. A group dedicated to promoting and celebrating Shetland dialect, [Shetland Forwards](#), was formed in 2004, and they record, publish, broadcast, and are involved in education at all levels. Museum and archive collections throughout the islands promote a pride in Shetland s heritage and a desire to learn more. A fascination for genealogy by the descendents of emigrants has had the unexpected bonus of returning older versions of tunes and songs to the Isles.

Though still overshadowed by the fiddle, the singing voice is definitely back on

the agenda. The various music festivals held in Shetland every year cover the full spectrum of musical genres. [The Shetland Folk Festival](#), held every year since 1980 with venues in all the country halls and in the islands, is now one of the foremost folk festivals worldwide. Guests include instrumentalists and bands from every continent and singers, though still outnumbered, do feature, and their number is growing. All of us who have taken part in a singing session where nationality, language and culture did not matter, harmonies transcended all previous experience and the walls were left ringing will make sure that the voices do not fade away. Song is now recognized as a valid platform from which to tell a story in dialect, and there is a new generation of singer/songwriters who have the skill and talent to ensure that future singers have a wide range of material to draw on. Once upon a time we were almost silenced but the danger has passed. Singing is now a vital and growing part of the culture of Shetland.

¹ *Norn* old Norse language spoken in Shetland; *Visick* folk song (Old Icelandic *vísa* verse; Norwegian *folkevise* ballad)

² from *A Tour Through the islands of Orkney and Schetland* (collected in 1774), published in 1879, reprinted 1978.

³ *Whit says du* what are you saying or what do you think is still used.

⁴ William Ratter, transcr., *Shetland Folk Book*, Vol.2 (1951). The song was collected in Unst by Jacob Jacobson at the end of the 19th century; William Ratter, a colleague of Jacobson, transcribed this version from the singing of J.J.Stickle.