

## **Information about Shetland**

### **Geography**

The Shetland Islands (also referred to as 'Shetland' but not as 'the Shetlands') include 100 islands located roughly 100 miles north-east of John O'Groats in the North Sea. Fifteen of the islands are inhabited and the total population is 23,000 with 7,500 residing in the town of Lerwick. The climate is cooler than mainland Britain although winters are milder than in Highland Scotland with heavy snow rare over the past two decades. Strong winds are the most significant feature of the climate across the largely treeless moorland landscape. The islands have many fjord-like inlets known as voes which ensure that you are never more than three miles from the sea. There are no significant rivers but many lochs. Transport between the inhabited islands is by local council run ferries or by small passenger planes (7-seater).

### **Economy**

The major industry is fishing and maritime support services provide many jobs in Lerwick and Scalloway (the second settlement and historic capital until the eighteenth century). Beyond these two settlements most of the population live in small, rural, fishing and crofting communities. Crofting cannot sustain a family on its own so most crofters have other employment as well. The oil industry and, increasingly, tourism are significant elements of the economy. Unemployment is at low levels.

The development of the North Sea oil industry from the mid 1970s transformed many aspects of Shetland life. The agreement for the development of the Sullom Voe Oil Terminal provided income used to develop the infrastructure of the islands. Roads are excellent and even the single track by-roads are well maintained. There are excellent recreational facilities including seven swimming pools. Finance from the oil industry supports the Shetland Charitable Trust which supports a number of other funds and groups including the Shetland Churches Council Trust.

### **Culture**

Shetland has a rich cultural life with a strong musical tradition featuring fiddle and accordion music played by all ages. There is a film festival in September each year as well as literary and several other music festivals at other times of the year. Shetland Wool Week attracts visitors from across the world interested in textile crafts. The local dialect reflects the historic links with Scandinavia and is derived from an extinct language called 'Norn'. Links to Norway continue to be a valued part of Shetland culture.

Social attitudes may seem quite conservative and traditional but incomers have been welcomed warmly, especially over the past forty years. Social problems include the abuse of alcohol and drug related issues. Mental health problems may be exacerbated by the long dark nights of the winter months.

### **Politics**

Shetland is governed as a local authority within Scotland. Shetland Islands Council has approximately 34 councillors who are almost all independent members. The local MSP is a liberal democrat as is the current Westminster MP, who also serves Orkney. Generally Shetlanders have a positive attitude to being part of the United Kingdom despite our remoteness.

### **Ecumenical**

As in mainland Scotland, the Church of Scotland has the largest number of congregations however many of these are small and struggling and the 'Kirk' are looking to reshape their mission in Shetland. The

Baptist Church has a healthy presence in four areas and have recently appointed new pastors in two churches. There is one Roman Catholic Church in Lerwick and a half time Anglican priest serves Episcopal congregations in Lerwick and on Yell. There are also a number of smaller independent evangelical churches and a Salvation Army worker is based in Lerwick. Shetland Bible Week (a Keswick Convention related event) is organised ecumenically and held in Lerwick Methodist Church in early September each year. The Shetland Churches Council Trust (which has underwritten Bible Week) has funds to support property projects and activities such as training and seeks to help to coordinate some of our outreach. An ecumenical team provide a monthly page of church news in the Shetland Times. Other ecumenical mission activities are being developed and advocated by local ministers.

### **Methodist Church**

This is a single Methodist Circuit (Lerwick and Walls Circuit) located across Shetland from Fair Isle (25 miles south west of Sumburgh) to Haroldswick on Unst (the most Northerly Church in Britain). Methodism is generally well recognised within Shetland's communities. There are currently 16 congregations (7 of the smallest churches are governed by a single church council as the Shetland Rural Methodist Church, with one bank account) and the total membership is 190.

The Lerwick and Walls Circuit seeks to offer Christian worship, teaching and fellowship in welcoming and safe environments. It seeks also to reach out to the people of these islands with the gospel through word and mission service, working in partnership with other churches where possible. The two full time presbyters have responsibility for their own allocated churches and share responsibility for the Shetland Rural Methodist Church congregations. The Circuit leadership team including ministers, circuit stewards, the treasurer and synod secretary, meet every 6-8 weeks and are committed to helping the Circuit's members embrace new opportunities for mission across Shetland.

Congregations are mainly conservative evangelical in approach and ethos. Monthly, Saturday 'Compass Praise' gatherings have helped to promote a sense of togetherness or even connexion across the District as worship has moved around the different buildings. Messy Church sessions take place monthly at both Lerwick and Scalloway.