

The Shetland Chapel-sites Project 1997–98

by Christopher D Morris & Kevin J Brady with a contribution by Paul G Johnson

The work described in the following report formed part of an archaeological research programme begun on the island of Unst in the summer of 1997 as part of an overall collaborative study between the Shetland Amenity Trust, and the universities of Copenhagen and Glasgow – the Viking Unst Project. The survey was limited to an audit of known chapel-sites: assessing their state of preservation and potential for future work, and updating the previous survey undertaken in 1982 by Dr Christopher Lowe (Morris & Brady 1998). This work marks the inception of a new stage in research conducted by the Viking and Early Settlement Archaeological Research Project – VESARP (based in the Department of Archaeology, University of Glasgow) on early chapel-sites in areas associated with the Scandinavian settlement in northern and western Britain in its North Atlantic context. The continuation of the work in 1998 on Unst (Brady & Johnson 1998) and its extension to the neighbouring island of Fetlar (Brady 1998) is also reported here.

Viking and Late Norse settlement on Unst

Unst, the most northerly major island in Shetland and the closest to Norway, has naturally attracted attention over the years in relation to connections with Scandinavia. Whilst Jarlshof at the southern tip of Shetland has largely dominated academic and popular attention respectively in terms of the complexity of its structures (reflecting the overall time-depth) and as an accessible site in the care of the Secretary of State, the northernmost isle is also of major significance. The work in the 1960s by Alan Small (then of the University of Aberdeen), sometimes in conjunction with staff at RAF Saxa Vord, and then in the late 1970s by Gerald F Bigelow (then at the University of Cambridge), established by excavation the existence of two Viking and Late Norse settlement sites at Underhoull and Sandwick (south), and other possible sites were postulated from survey work.¹ Small's work was published promptly in 1966 (Small 1966) and was followed by a number of general articles (Small 1968; 1969; 1970; 1971) in which he compared the evidence from Underhoull with

Fig 1 Map of Unst showing location of sites identified by Lowe (1988) and additional sites identified by the current project (Illustration: J Sieveuright after C E Lowe)

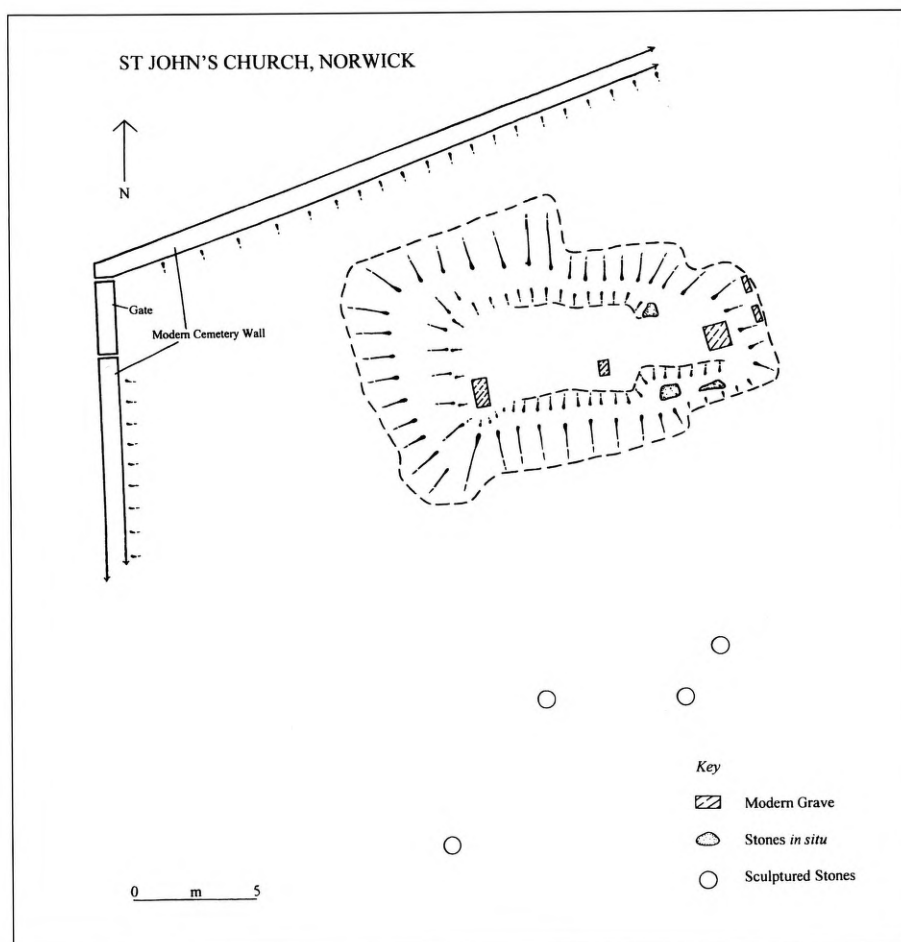


Fig 2 Survey of St John's Church, Norwick (Illustration: D Swan after K J Brady & P G Johnson)

that from Jarlshof, which had been published fully in 1956 (Hamilton 1956).

Bigelow's post-excavation work on the Sandwick material was presented as part of his PhD thesis (Bigelow 1984a) and he, too, has followed this up with a number of articles discussing the site in a broader Pictish-late Norse context (Bigelow 1984b; 1985; 1987; 1989), as well as providing an overview article on Shetland at this period (Bigelow 1992) to update the survey work by Frederick T Wainwright (Wainwright 1962). The final report on the Sandwick (south) site is in preparation (see, for example, Bigelow 1993).

The Viking Unst Project

The most recent work has seen survey

on settlement sites in Unst in 1994 and 1995, followed by trial excavations in the island in 1995 and 1996, by Steffen Stummann Hansen and Anne-Christine Larsen of the Institute of Archaeology, University of Copenhagen (UCIA), in collaboration with the Shetland Amenity Trust (SAT), which have been reported on in interim publications (Hansen 1995a; 1995b; Larsen 1997; Hansen & Waugh 1998). This work forms the basis of 'The Viking Unst Project', established in 1996 by SAT and UCIA.

The emphasis of the Project so far has been upon Viking-period secular settlements (along with the collections of artefacts in the Shetland Museum). The work by both SAT and VESARP explicitly aims to broaden the context to encompass both the wider extant settlement evidence (both spatially

and chronologically) and the evidence of religious sites, specifically Christian chapel-sites, burials and monuments.

VESARP, under the direction of Christopher D Morris, has already been involved in the church archaeology of Scandinavian settlements in the north and west of Britain for over two decades: work around the churchyard on the Brough of Birsay, Orkney from 1974 (Hunter 1983; Hunter & Morris 1981; Morris 1993); within the churchyard and chapel on the Brough of Deerness, Orkney from 1975 (Morris 1977; Morris 1987; Morris with Emery 1986a; Morris with Emery 1986b); similar work at Keeill Vael, Michael, Isle of Man from 1979 (Morris 1983); and some small-scale survey work at St Moddan's Chapel, Freswick, Caithness in 1984 (Batey *et al* 1985, 45; Morris *et al* 1995, 1–3).

In late 1996 it was agreed that VESARP staff and Glasgow students would join 'The Viking Unst Project' to develop a further strand in the overall study, concerned primarily with a project on the chapel-sites.

The Chapel-sites Project

Work by VESARP on the church archaeology of the 'Northern Isles' and elsewhere, through excavation and survey, has acted as a background for broader considerations. In the early 1980s, following the work at the Brough of Deerness and Keeill Vael, Michael, the writer encouraged broader research in this area through the supervision at Durham University of an MA dissertation (Lowe 1981) and then the PhD thesis of Christopher Lowe, who undertook between 1982 and 1984 a field survey of chapels in selected areas of the 'Northern Isles' and the Isle of Man, together with a very interesting analysis of the nature of church organisation in Shetland, Orkney and Man (Lowe 1988). The thesis has been accessible since 1988, with field-material also available in the National

Monuments Record for Scotland (NMRS) and the Manx Museum.

As far as Shetland was concerned, Dr Lowe's work concentrated upon Unst and in 1982 included the overall archival work and basic survey of 21 chapel sites. For many of these, his was the first serious fieldwork undertaken since the work of Jessie M Saxby (essentially of oral history) published in 1905 (Saxby 1905), which identified the traditional location of many of these sites, most of which had long gone out of use.

Summaries of Lowe's work appear in two Appendices to works by Morris (Lowe 1983; 1991a) and an important analytical paper, deriving from a conference in Shetland in 1989 is awaiting publication (Lowe forthcoming). Dr Lowe has continued important work in church

archaeology, principally through work on individual sites in Orkney and Dumfries (Lowe 1991b; 1993; 1998), although he has not been able to return to the more general themes of his work in the north. It is hoped that the Project will bring his important work the wider recognition it deserves.

The more general Shetlandic background has been illuminated by a number of studies of church organisation and buildings by Dr Ronald Cant, both of Shetland itself and the broader study of the medieval church in the north and west of Britain (Cant 1972; 1975; 1984; 1986; 1993; 1996). In these works, most notably in the latest which focuses upon Shetland, Dr Cant has defined the three major phases ('Christian Origins', ie pre-Viking;

'Norse Initiatives'; and 'Towards the medieval church order'), as well as delineating the latest phase.

Meanwhile, Morris, as excavator on the Broughs of Deerness and Birsay in Orkney, addressed some of the major issues relating to chapel-sites in the two northern archipelagos in his 1989 Jarrow Lecture on *Church and monastery in the Far North. An archaeological evaluation* (Morris 1990; also see 1996). This reviewed, from an archaeological perspective, the position since the work undertaken by Dr C A Raleigh Radford in Orkney in the 1950s (Radford 1959; 1962a; 1962b; 1983; also see Cruden 1958; 1965) and by Professor Charles Thomas in Shetland in the 1960s and early 1970s (Thomas 1968; 1971; 1973; 1974; 1983). One major conclusion was that an 'Early Christian' attribution to sites such as the Broughs of Deerness and Birsay in Orkney and St Ninian's Isle and Papil in Shetland was perhaps something of a straightjacket to interpretation, and that the Viking/Late Norse contribution and/or relationships had been downplayed in the past. The latter could be seen to be critical by considering them in a North Atlantic context (see Morris 1991b). Dr Raymond Lamb, indeed, had proposed that the buildings around the chapel at Deerness were Norse and suggested that there were a number of Norse monasteries in Shetland and Orkney, comparable with sites elsewhere in the North Atlantic region in Iceland and Greenland (Lamb 1973; 1974; 1976).

It has always been the intention to return to active consideration of aspects of Norse Christian archaeology in the North Atlantic context and, in 1997, 'The Viking Unst Project' offered an opportunity. Within this framework there is an opportunity to take the previous work forward, building on its base and linking it to the settlement site project in a holistic manner. In the

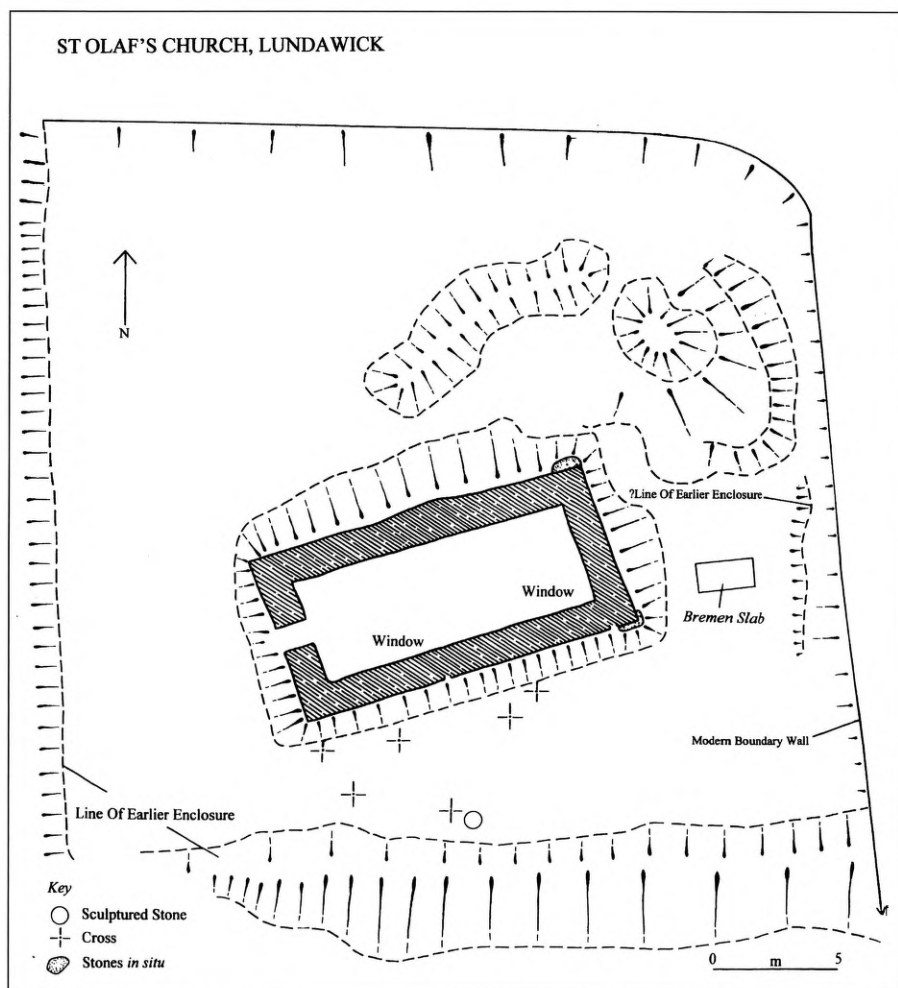


Fig 3 Survey of St Olaf's Church, Lundawick (Illustration: D Swan after K J Brady & P G Johnson)

initial season of 1997, it was intended to update Dr Lowe's 1982 survey by both observation in the field and further archival and historical study. This would serve as a base upon which to make strategic decisions for future survey and excavation.

At the same time, there is an awareness of the need to place the Unst material in a wider context – not least in relation to the adjacent islands of Fetlar and Yell. Concurrently with this project plans are being developed for a more comprehensive chapel-site project both within Shetland and more

generally in the North Atlantic region. From a purely historical perspective, it will be important to relate the chapel-sites to the changing structures of church organisation: from the pre-Norse missionary and/or monastic situation (perhaps reflected in the Papil place-name: see Lamb 1995), through what may well be a private farm–church structure of the later Viking and Late Norse periods (perhaps related to the land-units of the *scattalds*: see Smith 1984), to the adoption of a full-blown parochial system, which resulted in the 12th and 13th centuries in the demise of

such private chapels and the abandonment of many in favour of concentration upon a few 'head-churches' as centres of the new organisation (see Cant 1975; 1984; 1996). Inevitably, a different structure of landscape organisation developed (Smith 1984), some detailed aspects of which have been examined by Dr William Thomson, for instance in relation to the island of Fetlar and the area of Norwick in Unst (Thomson 1970; 1998). From an archaeological perspective, then, the only logical way forward for understanding the remarkable dataset for chapels is both holistically within the islands of Unst, Fetlar and Yell, and more generally within North Britain and the North Atlantic region.

Unst Chapel-sites survey, 1997

As explained above, this work takes the PhD thesis of Dr Christopher Lowe as its main reference point and potentially early ecclesiastical sites on the most northerly isle of the Shetland archipelago were examined in the order that they are presented there.² The report on this work (Morris & Brady 1998) is not a reworking of that earlier thesis, where more detailed information should for the moment be sought. Some additional information not recorded by Lowe is offered in the report as well as minor revision of measurements, orientations and visible features. In addition, there is an appraisal of the potential for further work. A comprehensive photographic record was taken of each site.

Of the 21 sites surveyed by Lowe (Fig 1),³ ref to endnote 3, 19 are assessed in the report. The two sites not covered were Kirkamool at Cliff (not located by Lowe, the RCAHMS in 1946 or the Ordnance Survey, and difficult to access) and Uyea chapel, where attempts to visit the site were defeated by a thick sea fog. An

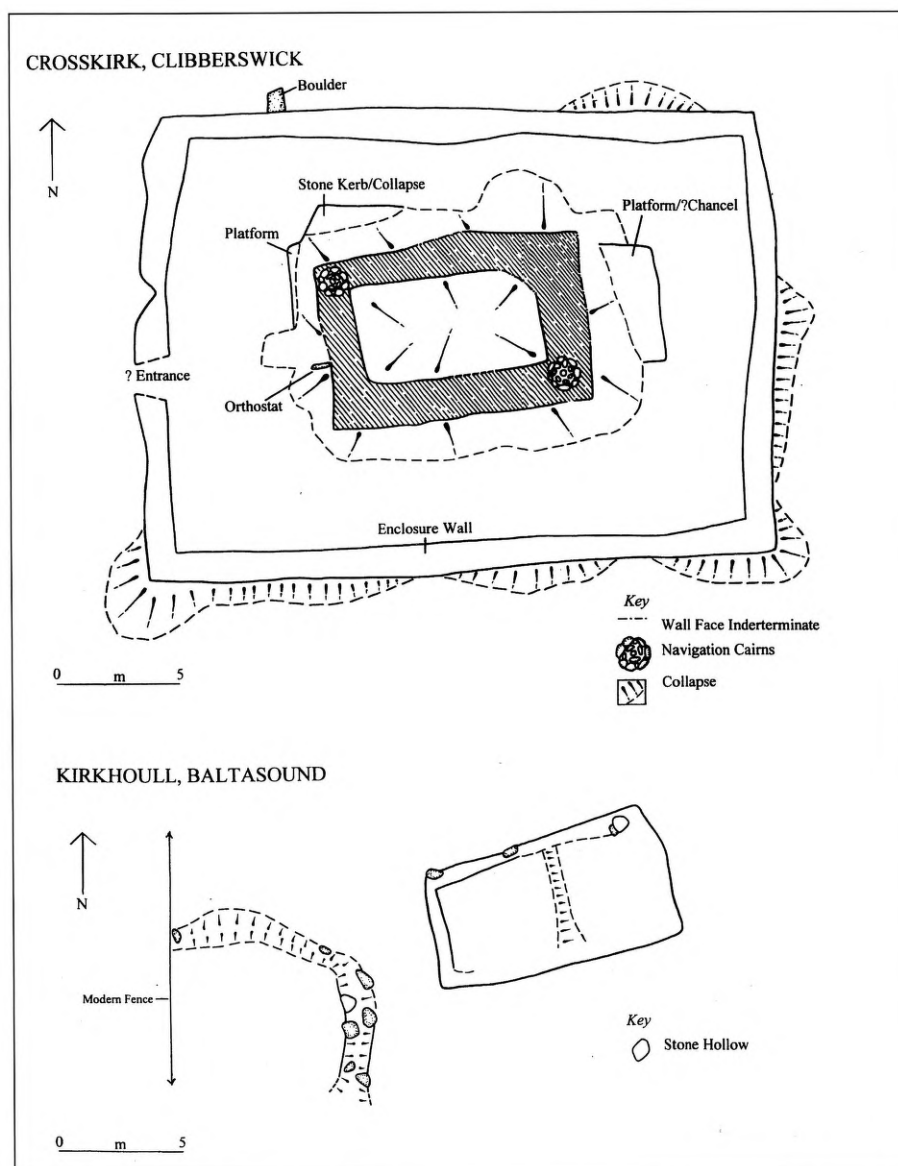


Fig 4 Survey of (a) Crosskirk, Clibberswick; (b) Kirkhoull, Baltasound (Illustration: D Swan after K J Brady & P G Johnson)

assessment of the latter site will be a priority at the next stage of the project.

Four additional sites were also examined: Blue Mull (HP 5587 0425: no 22) and Papil (HP 6454 1289: no 23), with their potentially ecclesiastical association, were known to the authors through the work of Dr Raymond Lamb (Lamb 1973, 78, 84, 95; 1995, 15–16); Kirkton (HP 6126 0900: no 24) and Crosbister (HP 5815 0390: no 25) were visited on the basis of the promising place-names.

The information accumulated at the chapel-sites during the survey season in 1997 has shown clearly the potential value of further, more intense commitment to these ecclesiastical monuments. The extensive field and documentary observations of Dr Lowe (1988, vol 2) have provided an excellent background to, and basis for, the rapid formative season which this project has added. It is the strong belief of the authors that these sites can yield still greater results when examined at a number of different levels in a long-term project.

Five levels of work have been defined, ranging from further 'desktop' research, through various stages of survey, clearance and small-scale trial investigation, up to large-scale intervention. In addition, the archaeological potential of each individual site and the feasibility of undertaking work has been indicated in the report. For the immediate future the planned phases are: (I) general assessment of data about chapel-sites; (II) questioning of these data at targeted sites; and (III) large-scale, detailed examination at individual sites.

It is therefore intended that more detailed survey and other work will be undertaken across the 25 sites in Unst, including geophysical survey and comprehensive photography, and structural survey where appropriate, supplementing Lowe's work from

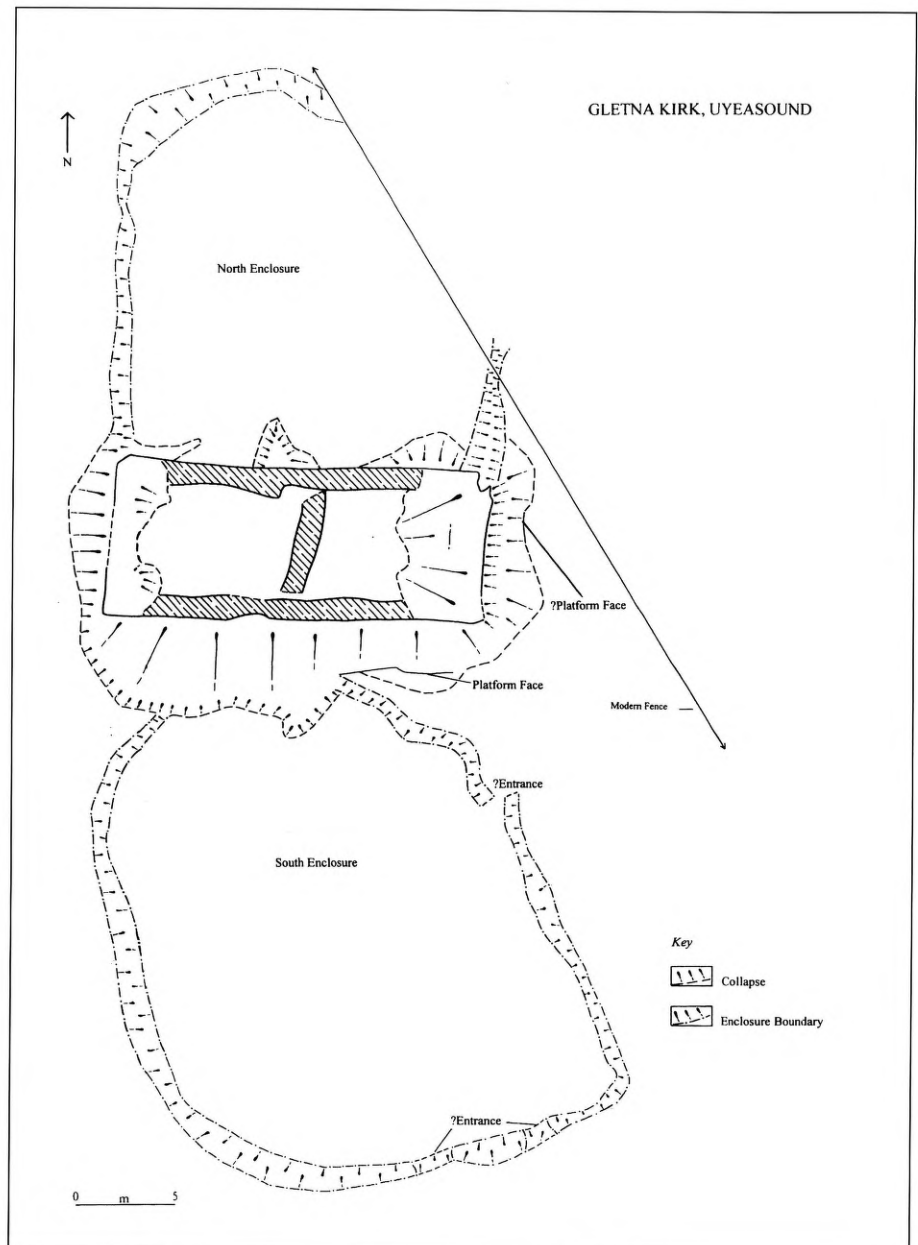


Fig 5 Survey of Gletna Kirk, Uyeasound (Illustration: D Swan after K J Brady & P G Johnson)

1982. In addition, perhaps six sites would be selected for small-scale trial excavation during the first two seasons, aimed at addressing the particular structural and academic issues thrown up by Lowe's work and the subsequent assessment and survey work undertaken by this project. This limited, but focussed, fieldwork programme will form Phase II of the chapel-site project, with the intention that Phase III will involve detailed and comprehensive excavation over a further two or three seasons.

Shetland chapel-sites survey 1998

October and November 1998 saw the first phase of the recommendations of the 1998 survey initiated (Morris & Brady 1998, 67). Of the 25 sites visited in 1997, five were plane-table surveyed to produce detailed ground plans (Brady & Johnson 1998). These were St John's Church, Norwick; Crosskirk, Clibberswick; Kirkhoull, Baltasound; St Olaf's Church, Lundawick; and Gletna Kirk, Uyeasound.

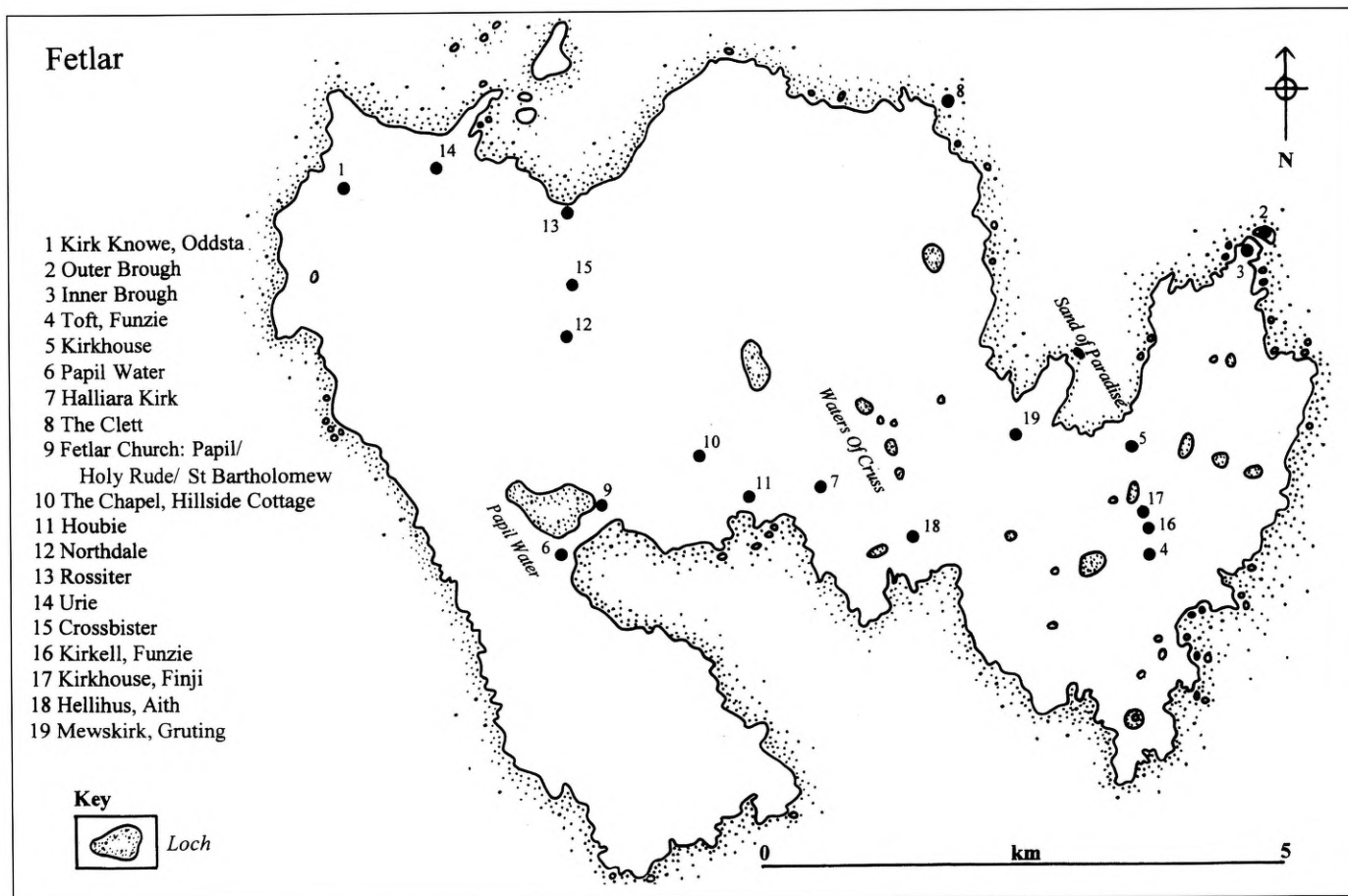


Fig 6 Map of Fetlar showing location of sites with ecclesiastical connections (Illustration: D Swan after K J Brady)

St John's at Norwick remains as little more than grassed mounds with the odd protruding stone (Fig 2). However, the chancel and nave are still clearly discernable, as are parts of a surrounding bank which predates that of the modern graveyard enclosure. The graveyard itself has seven pre-modern gravestones *in situ*, including two carved stone crosses. Large-scale excavation is, however, out of the question as the site is in continued use for burial.

The picture is almost identical at St Olaf's, Lundawick (Fig 3). The dedication to the Norwegian saint is important and there is ample evidence within the graveyard to suggest earlier features than the crumbling kirk which dominates the site.

Crosskirk at Clibberswick is represented by a jumble of collapsed masonry within an enclosure (Fig 4a).

The site is aligned east–west and seems to be unicameral. There is little doubt that the structural remains once represented a church. There are no modern burials and it is envisaged that this will be a focus of the excavation phase.

Kirkhoull in Baltasound presents an altogether different picture (Fig 4b). The ephemeral structural remains associated with the place-name are clearly those of an agricultural outhouse from the post-medieval period. Indeed, the place-name remains the only evidence to date for any ecclesiastical connection.

Gletna Kirk at Uyeasound is a complex site including a bi-compartmental structure flanked by two enclosures (Fig 5). There is a third, large enclosure located some distance away to the north-west. On surface examination this would not appear to be an ecclesiastical structure

but the place-name remains evocative. Targeted excavation will hopefully solve this enigma.

A further seven sites were visited by Paul Johnson to assess their potential for geophysical prospection. These represent a mix of upstanding post-medieval churches (eg St John's Church, Baliasta), the footings of seemingly medieval chapels (eg Kirkaby, Westing) and place-names with no apparent ecclesiastical remains (eg Kirkamires, Underhoull). Five of these merit geophysical survey. A third field campaign is planned for late summer 1999.

In order to broaden the Unst survey to encompass all three main islands at the north of Shetland a desk-based study of the chapel-sites of Fetlar was undertaken in 1998 (Brady 1998). A total of 19 sites where there is some evidence of an ecclesiastical connection was gleaned from various

sources (Fig 6). Many of the sites are identified by place-name evidence alone, eg Kirk Knowe (HU 5838 9381) or Papil Water (HU 6043 9013). The sources record that previous visitors were unable to locate any structural evidence to associate with these names. Other sites are post-medieval with no tradition of an earlier foundation, eg Fetlar Church (HU 6075 9053). Several sites are presumed monastic foundations eg the Inner (HU 670 930) and Outer (HU 671 931) Broughs at Strandibrough.

The next phase of work, involving basic field assessment of the sites identified, will be undertaken in late summer 1999.

Conclusion

The work described above marks the beginning of a new phase of research on chapel-sites in Shetland. Initially conceived as part of the 'Viking Unst Project', it has re-examined the evidence on the ground for the remarkable density of chapel-sites on this most northerly island of the Shetland archipelago. As well as establishing a comprehensive programme of work here to be undertaken over several years, the project has expanded out to the neighbouring islands, of which the initial work on Fetlar is also described. There is an opportunity here to carry forward our understanding of the Norse church in relation both to the Pictish ecclesiastical organisation before it, and the later medieval parochial church organisation. It is also vital to compare this evidence from Shetland not only to other areas under Norse control in the British Isles, but more particularly to the other expressions of the adoption of Christianity by the Norse in the North Atlantic region. It is the intention of the authors and their colleagues in the VESARP team to focus their work upon this area of research over the next few years.

Acknowledgements

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Christopher D Morris has been the Appointed Professor of Archaeology at the University of Glasgow since 1990, having formerly been Reader in Viking Archaeology at the University of Durham, where he founded VESARP in the 1970s. He specialises in Viking Age and Late Norse archaeology in the British Isles and the North Atlantic region, but also works on aspects of pre-Viking archaeology in Britain, for instance at Tintagel in Cornwall.

Kevin J Brady graduated in Archaeology from the University of Glasgow and is a Project Officer in GUARD with special responsibility for VESARP projects. He has undertaken work in Orkney, Shetland, Sutherland and Cornwall for VESARP and has a particular interest in Early Christian and Viking Age archaeology.

Paul G Johnson graduated in Archaeology from the University of Durham. He is currently Research Technician in Archaeology, having formerly been Chief Technician from 1990, at the University of Glasgow. He has specialised in survey, both topographic and

geophysical, and has a particular interest in the Early Medieval period.

Notes

1. The terms 'Viking' and 'Late Norse' are used in the sense discussed and defined by Gerald F Bigelow (1985, 104–5).
2. The National Monuments Record for Scotland, the RCAHMS, the National Library of Scotland, the Shetland Archives, the Shetland Room of Lerwick Library, Shetland Museum and the Shetland SMR.
3. Chapel-sites identified in Unst by Lowe for investigation:

1	St John's Church, Norwick	HP 6516 1411
2	Bartle's Kirk, Norwick	HP 6488 1463
3	Crosskirk, Clibberswick	HP 6503 1231
4	The Kirk, Burrafirth	HP 6078 1391
5	St Mary's Church, Bothen	HP 6357 1270
6	St John's Church, Baliasta	HP 6026 0959
7	Kirkamool, Cliff approx	HP 603 115
8	Kirkhoull, Baltasound	HP 6197 0867
9	St Sunniva's Chapel, Balta	HP 6595 0809
10	St Olaf's Church, Lundawick	HP 5668 0412
11	Gletna Kirk, Uyeasound	HP 5922 0208
12	Kirk, Gunnister	HP 5873 0407
13	Kirkhoull, Gunnister	HP 5858 0400
14	Kirkaby, Westing	HP 5664 0640
15	Kirkamires, Underhoull	HP 5747 0415
16	Kirk, Underhoull	HP 5775 0406
17	Kirk Knowe, Westing	HP 5720 0567
18	Kirk of Millyskara, Sandwick approx	HP 631 022
19	St John's Chapel, Colvadale	HP 6220 2453
20	St Mary's Chapel, Framgord	HP 6191 0293
21	Uyea Chapel	HU 6082 9854

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