The Shetland Islanders
and their contribution to the fishing industry in Island Bay

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The Shetland Islands comprise a group of 100 islands (including Fair Isle) of which 13 are inhabited by approximately 22,000 people. The language of the Shetlanders is a dialect based mainly on lowland Scots, which is fairly close to English.

It is not surprising that Shetland is not easily located on a map of Europe, as it is usually put in a box in the corner of the map, or worse still, in the middle of the Moray Firth (Inverness). It lies between Scotland and Norway, is situated 60° north of the equator, with a climate which is tempered by the influence of the Gulf Stream.(the great warm ocean current that flows out of the Gulf of Mexico, and eventually washes the shores of the British Isles). The winter temperature seldom drops below freezing point, and the summer temperatures are seldom above 17°.

Shetland women were and still are highly skilled knitters, famous for Fair Isle knitwear and very fine lace shawls that could be pulled through a wedding ring. Fishing has always been very important to the Shetland economy, with several Shetland families having a huge investment in fishing boats. Because of its geographic outline anyone growing up in Shetland is never far from the sea, and in the past most people derived their living from the sea, either directly or indirectly.

There was a time however, when traditional living conditions became unsustainable due to overpopulation created by the improved general health of the islanders. From the late 1700s up to 1881, the population increased to over 31,000, and despite an upturn in the economic conditions between 1890 and 1914, emigration to other parts of the globe became an attractive proposition, with many seeking a new life in New Zealand. Over the years, migrants were influenced by the gold rush in the South Island, the opportunity to purchase land cheaply, better employment opportunities, and New Zealand Government assisted migrant fares from 1871 to 1888, which were resumed from 1904.

Shetland men are renowned for their seamanship and in the past Shetlanders were frequently the target of the Royal Navy press gangs.* In both World Wars there were disproportionate numbers of Shetlanders in the Royal and Merchant Navies to those serving in the Army and Air Force. So it is not surprising that a large number of Shetlanders who settled in Wellington ended up working for various shipping companies, the Harbour Board, as watersiders and stevedores, or became fishermen working out of Island Bay.

One of the best known Shetland fishing families in Wellington were the Tait brothers, Jack and Peter. Jack was the first Island Bay fisherman to be known as “Mr Cook Strait”. There were about 250 Shetlanders in Wellington, with a number of families established in Island Bay, including the Arthurs, the Bruces, the Duncans, the Hunters, the Inksters, the Irvines, the Isbisters, the Johnsons, and the Pottingers. The Bruces lived in Bristol Street, the Duncans, Johnsons and Taits in Beach Street, more Taits in Queens Drive, and Inksters, Isbisters and Taits in Brighton Street.

Island Bay fisherman Jack Tait hauling aboard a groper on the San Marco, ca 1920
(Des Davies Collection, Museum of Wellington City and Sea)

Island Bay was chosen by the early Shetlanders because of its proximity to the fishing grounds in Cook Strait. Also the bay was reasonably protected from the prevailing north westerlies and Tapu te Ranga Island gave some shelter from the southerlies, depending on their severity. The weather and sea conditions in Cook Strait would have been more familiar to the Shetlanders than the Italians, who would not have had to contend with strong tides and rips in the Mediterranean. It is generally accepted that the Shetlanders taught the technique of long-line fishing to the Italians. Coming from the Mediterranean, the Italians did not have to contend with much tidal variation, and they were generally net rather than line fishermen.

The Shetlanders introduced the use of hand-made canvas buoys, capable of withstanding tidal conditions. They were made in six panels, sewn together, leaving a hole for inflation. The canvas was oiled inside and out with linseed oil, then painted with red lead to make it waterproof. Sometimes tar was also used. These were much more reliable than the barrels or drums used by the Italians which could not withstand the water pressure and would sometimes implode with the loss of the attached fishing gear.

Oilskins could be bought ready-made but the Shetland fishermen preferred the home-made versions, called 'smookies', which the Shetland women made out of canvas and lined with calico. They were oiled with linseed and hung out to dry – which could take weeks. Most fishermen had two oilskins as they were not completely waterproof.

A slump in 1921-1922 saw William Bruce leave the fishing industry, selling up his boat after only 18 months. In 1928 Lew Irvine sold out his share of the San Marco to go into partnership with Peter Isbister to set up Cook Strait Fisheries, which operated at 129 The Parade, previously Howard and Tilyard's butchery (the butchery had relocated to 127 The Parade). In 1934 Peter Isbister bought out Lew Irvine and Cook Strait Fisheries continued trading until a few years ago.

The 1930s Depression saw depressed prices for fish. This led to the establishment of the Wellington Fisherman's Cooperative Ltd with Shetland, Scottish and Italian fishermen participating. The Cooperative stabilised the market by purchasing, preparing and selling the catch to retailers and to fulfill government contracts. They paid a minimum wage to their members. Their best known outlet was in Cuba Street. The Cooperative was successful until 1963 when internal divisions led to its demise. It also led to some Shetland families leaving Island Bay for more lucrative markets. The Inksters, Duncans, Pottingers and Mouats went to the Chathams. Jack Tait and his family moved north to Napier, where Jack's son Peter eventually became Mayor of Napier and was subsequently knighted.

The Shetland and Italian communities cooperated together but seldom socialised, although the Island Bay Fishermen's Football Team of 1921 was made up of both Italians and Shetland Islanders. The Shetlanders in Island Bay formed the Thule Tennis Club which was located on the corner of Beach Street and The Esplanade

When the Progress was wrecked in 1931 several Shetlanders were to the fore with the rescue attempts. The Captain of the Progress, Alex Copland, was also a Shetlander and his first words on being rescued were "Thank God it's Laurie Duncan!" Peter Isbister, along with other fishermen and police, received a medal from the Royal Humane Society for his part in the rescue.

Fisherman from the 'River Nile' bring their catch ashore at Fisherman's Creek, western Island Bay
[Peter Tait is on the far left]
(Des Davies Collection, Wellington Museum of City and Sea)

THE BOATS

The Foula was the first boat owned by Jack Tait. He also owned the San Marco and later had the River Nile built for him. It was named, not as one might expect after the River Nile in Egypt, but after the Nile River Cemetery at Charleston on the West Coast of the South Island. The cemetery is largely made up of Shetland graves from a settlement there in the 1870s. The River Nile was one of the largest in the fleet and was the first fishing vessel to be fitted with a winch, which was made from the rear axle and differential from a motor vehicle and was reputed to be rather temperamental. Winches were later fitted to many of the Island Bay boats which made life a lot easier, saving the fishermen from back breaking work pulling the lines in by hand. The Lerwick was owned by William Bruce and Magnus Arthur and sold by them in November 1923 for £360.

The Norna was built in BJL Jukes' boatyard in Balaena Bay in 1922 for Laurence (Magnus) Johnson, and at 55ft was one of the largest ever to fish out of the bay. Laurence Johnson died of pneumonia after being caught out in a storm in Cook Strait and the Norna was later owned by another Shetlander, Andrew Tait. When she sank in 1927 the Shetland community pulled together to assist in the salvage. One of the reasons it took so long for the New Zealand fishing industry to develop was the lack of insurance underwriters, which meant that many of the boats were not insured.

These are the only boats that we (the Shetland Society of Wellington) are aware of that were named with a connection to Shetland.

The San Marco was also owned at one time by Jack Tait along with another Shetlander, John Pottinger. It was sold in 1926 to Lew Irvine (also a Shetlander) and brothers Alexander and Nicholas Wilson (from Nairn in Scotland). Towards the end of the Depression the San Marco was about to be sold by the Wilson brothers to Peter Tait and Jack Mouat but it came ashore in a southerly storm and was wrecked on the rocks in Island Bay, and only the engine was salvaged. The Silver Fern or Fern as she was called at times, was owned by Laurie Duncan, the Dawn was owned by John Inkster, who was related to John Pottinger of the San Marco. John Inkster was highly regarded as being 'the most efficient of the young fishermen' at the time. Sadly John Inkster died, also of pneumonia, when he was only 38.

The Dawn, the San Marco and the Silver Fern were very similar in construction, about 30ft in length and were all moored close together near the western entrance to Island Bay. The Wild Duck was owned by another of the Tait Brothers, Peter, along with Jack Mouat. Jack Mouat eventually married John Inkster's widow Meg, who was a daughter of Laurie Duncan of the Silver Fern.

As you can see the Shetlanders were almost one large extended family, married to and working for each other.

*Press-gang: the name given particularly to those naval parties who carried out the task of impressments, an ancient and arbitrary method of obtaining men for military and navy service dating back to the early 13th century, until improvement in pay and conditions in the 1830s encouraged adequate voluntary enlistment. Impressments has never been abolished.
Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable. 14th edition by Ivor H. Evans : 198