

# Shetland

## S2. Papa Little, Aithsting

centred HU 337 609

Soil Survey of Scotland Land Capability; Class 63  
Population in 1841: 11

Papa Little is, as the name tells us, a much smaller island than Papa Stour, and is so named to distinguish it from its larger neighbour. It extends to well over a mile in length and rises to 272 feet in the middle. It lies in a much more favoured location, the famous sheltered deep-water anchorage which Swarbacks Minn leads into from St. Magnus Bay,<sup>1</sup> and dominates all the narrow voes and sounds around it, which cut deep into the mainland of Shetland. The island is named on the majority of the earlier maps (Blaeu 1654; Keulen 1727; Bruce 1745; Preston 1781; Depot Generale de la Marine 1803b; Arrowsmith 1807; Thomson 1827; Thomas 1838; Blachford 1846).

Its early history is obscure and it does not appear to be recorded in the medieval period, nor probably inhabited (per. comm. B. Smith). There used to be a belief that mice and rats could not live on 'this once holy island' (Manson, 1933, 162), and the people from around it used to take earth from it and put the earth under their haystacks, 'which thereafter remained free of mice' (ibid.).<sup>2</sup> Prior to 1700, there is no evidence for any cultivation on Papa Little in the documentary record, although one 'Nicole in Papa Little' was before the 'fold' (legal officer) concerning the 'kenning' mark of his sheep at the very beginning of the seventeenth century (Donaldson, 1954,) which suggests that he was resident on the island, even if only as a sheep farmer. He appears as Nicol Olasone in Papa [Litt]le, cited with many others in an action raised by Marjorie Fermor and Andro Mortoun in 1614 (Barclay, 1967,76)<sup>3</sup>.

As with other small islands Papa Little grew good grass pasture for grazing sheep (Fenton, 1978, 423): although the Land Capability class of 63 indicates land of the lowest grazing value. 'all the scheip in Litill Papaye' are mentioned as among the many possessions of Vincent Hawick of Scatsta in 1573 (Ballantyne and Smith, 1999, no.203). By the end of the eighteenth century it comprised three merks of rental land, which was cropped by a single [unnamed] tenant (Bryden nd, 102). The island had been held in steelbow, but then paid a yearly rent of £20 to the proprietor, Sir Arthur Nicholson, and a stipend of 13s 6d to the minister (ibid.). One of the three ploughs in the parish, pulled by four ponies, was operated on the island (ibid., 117). The rental land was of very good quality, although the rest of the pasture had 'a parched appearance, consisting principally of stunted heather' (ibid., 102). In the summer months, the island could support around ten score sheep and fifteen head of black cattle. At the time the OSA was written, the native sheep were being replaced by crosses with white and black-faced types, although the tenant was of the opinion that the island would not support such 'heavy' breeds (ibid.).

On the early editions of the OS map, a single cluster of buildings, including one partially roofed structure, lie within what appears to be a head-dyke on the north-east side of the island, to the north of the Bight of Warwick. One of these buildings is again shown as roofed on the modern map. Enclosing a slightly larger area, is a further parallel head-dyke; this is not depicted as improved pasture, but has a sheepfold (possibly overlying earlier structures) built against the inside of the wall. A Mill loch and a Mill burn, the latter entering the sea, close to the north end of the more northerly head-dyke, suggest the presence of a once self-contained community and confirm the late eighteenth-century evidence for arable land on Papa Little. The island is divided into two districts - the North and South Wards - again suggesting this was once a well-settled island, at least in the

post-medieval period. In 1851 there was, however, only one person, a pauper, on the island (info from Brian Smith).

### Parish History

Papa Little lies in the parish of Aithsting. In 1321, two priests from the Bergen diocese were appointed to Shetland; of most importance here is Thorkel Hånafson who was assigned to *Thweitathing*. *Thweitathing* has been identified with Twatt, the location of the principal church in the parish of Aithsting (Cant 1976, 14, 18 n.50 & 62). While also assuming that Twatt in Aithsting was the parochial centre throughout the medieval and post-medieval periods, Jakobsen (1936, 126) takes *Thweitathing* to mean a much larger area, called Westside, incorporating the two parishes of Walls and Aithsting, where all the farms called Twatt are found (however, elsewhere he refers to Westside as also including Sandsting, Sandness, Papa Stour and Foula (ibid., ix)). During the medieval period, the bishop of Orkney possessed half the corn teind of the parsonage, the residual teinds being reserved to the vicar (Goudie 1910, 306; Cowan 1967, 5). Although Pitcairne implies the parishes of Sandsting and Aithsting were joined prior to the sixteenth century, it is perhaps more likely that this union took place after 1530 when a vicar of Sandsting is mentioned (*RSS* (1529-46), no. 555; Pitcairne 1607-1615, 156; Cant 1976, 14, 18, n.47). There appear to have been churches at Twatt and at Sand from the Reformation; the minister preached at each on alternate Sundays (Bryden nd, 113-4; *FES*, Vol. VIII, 704; Cant 1976, 18, n.50). Pitcairne also mentions subordinate churches at Gruting and at Aith (1605-1617, 156), the latter confirmed by Sibbald (1711, 29). Two burying places are mentioned in the NSA - at Aith (the Biggings, RCAHMS 1946, no. 1463; NMRS no. HU35NW16) and at Twatt - while chapels at Uyeasound (Our Lady at Sound, RCAHMS 1946, no. 1462; NMRS no. HU35SE4), Tumblin (RCAHMS 1946, no. 1464; NMRS no. HU35SW13) and on Vementry (NMRS no. HU35NW14) are all mentioned in the Name Book (Cant 1976, 18, n.51). A central church, serving both parishes, was not constructed until 1780 (Bryden nd, 113-4; *FES*, Vol. VIII, 704).

### Preliminary Evaluation (ed.)

There appear to be no archaeological remains on the island

By the late nineteenth century, as part of an attempt to encourage people to remain on Papa Stour following the exhaustion of its own peat supplies, Alexander Fraser was allowed to occupy an empty house and to employ someone to cut peats for him on Papa Little (Fenton 1978, 223). Certainly there were restrictions on Papa Stour tenants gaining access to peat-banks in Walls (ibid.), so arrangements were made by the landowner, Sir Arthur Nicholson, for them to lift peats on Papa Little, although the question of available manpower, when the men were busy at the fishing was a recurring problem (ibid., 611). Given the distance of Papa Stour from Papa Little - a round trip of thirty to forty miles (Crawford 1984, 45) - this sort of arrangement could only have come into being through common landownership. Does it indicate a link between the two islands from a much earlier period? The question arises as to whether a long-standing relationship between the two Papas - thus explaining the naming of Papa Little - was based on the complementary resources which the two islands possessed. It has been suggested by Raymond Lamb that this Papa and the Papa off Burra (Site S3 below) may have been used as 'pasture islands' in conjunction with the richer lands on Papa Stour and Papil (1995, 16).

### OS maps:

*Ordnance Survey*, 1878 (1881). First edition. 1:10,560. Sheet XXXVI.

*Ordnance Survey*, 1900 (1902). Second edition. 1:10,560. Sheet XXXVI.

*Ordnance Survey*, 1973. 1:10000. Sheets HU35NW and HU36SW.

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<sup>1</sup> The outlook from the pier on Papa Stour is straight across St. Magnus Bay to the entrance into Swarbacks Minn, about 12 miles away

<sup>2</sup> A lack of vermin, for which the island was evidently noted, was no doubt a corollary of it being uninhabited; this folktale also tells us that it was a source of supply of earth or turf for surrounding communities

<sup>3</sup> Nicol Olasone is 'in Papell' in 1615 (Donaldson 1991, 11); but this may be a mistaken reading as he is 'in Papa Little' in an earlier citation (ibid.5)