

# Shetland

## S7. Papil, Fetlar

Site of chapel	HP 6043 9013 RCAHMS no. 1236 SAM	NMRS no. HU69SW12 SMR no. PRN 28
Papil Water	HP 60 90	

Soil Survey of Scotland Land Capability Class 62? (see below)  
Population of Fetlar in 1841- 761

The third of the Papil sites in the north Isles of Shetland is situated on the Wick of Tresta in the south-western part of Fetlar. The topographical circumstances have certain similarities with Papil in Yell in that the name, and the two supposed chapel sites, are in close association with a secluded coastal location and a freshwater loch. The level and relatively sheltered ground around Papil Water must always have been one of the most attractive places for settlement on Fetlar; <sup>1</sup> the possible burial cairn on the north side of the loch bears witness to this (RCAHMS 1946, no. 1242; NMRS no. HU69SW10), although post-medieval settlement is restricted to the south-west facing slopes to the east of the loch, just above the parish church. In the eighteenth century, Fetlar was described as the best cultivated of the North Isles, after Unst:

'the soil in general thin, but the valleys abounding with Corn and Grass, both good in their kinds' (Archibald, quoted in Low 1774, 164).

### Ecclesiastical Structures

In the sand dunes between Papil Water, known more commonly today as the Loch of Velzie or the Loch o'Tresta (NB, Shetland, Book 12, 38; Jakobsen 1936, 172-3; Stewart 1965, 184; Lamb 1995, 15) and the Sand of Tresta is 'A piece of rough pasture generally known to be the site of an ancient Romish Chapel' (NB, Shetland, Book 12, 38; RCAHMS 1946, no. 1236; Brady 1998, 14, Site 4.6; Brady and Morris 2000, Site 5.6). The chapel site is shown as a roughly circular enclosure on the OS First Edition map (1878) and lies just to the west of the Fitsyi Burn, which drains from Papil Water. On this map, the whole of the area between the Loch and the beach - apart from a small expanse of dunes to the south east of the chapel - is shown as improved ground, traversed by a track at the back of the beach. This area extends from the present parish church, at the south-east corner of the loch, to a boundary dyke separating it from the rough pasture on the peninsula of Lambhoga.

Jakobsen states that on the shore of the loch were 'some ruins, which according to tradition, were the site of a church' (1936, 172-3), but no such obvious traces can now be seen. MacDonald and Laing noted a turf-covered sandy mound, 69ft N-S by 43ft E-W approximately and, where it survived best, about 5ft high (1969, 130, no. 6). In a largely stone-free area, a few stones were visible around the mound, both on the surface and in rabbit burrows, while numerous boulders protruded from the sand to the west (ibid.). However, an arc of walling, 0.9m thick, within a sandy gully was all that was noted by the OS surveyor a year later (information contained in NMRS). It is possible that this is the very slight bank, from which stone protruded, seen by the HS monument warden in 1994. The warden also recorded a low, straight bank running between the dunes slightly further to the north (information contained in SMR, PRN 28). Site visits by Turner in 1989 and by Brady and Morris, as part of the Shetland Chapels Project in 1999, revealed no traces of walling (ibid.; Brady and Morris 2000, 12). A local informant observed to Brady and Morris

that he had not seen walling in this area since the 1950's (2000, 12). The site is exposed both to the weather and the activities of rabbits.

Foundations are visible underneath the later parish church, built in 1790 and recast around 1860, although Muir could find 'nothing at all interesting' in the graveyard (Gordon 1793, 287; Watson 1841, 32; Muir 1885, 78; Hay 1957, 257; Cant 1976, 48; Brady 1998, 17, Site 4.9; Brady and Morris 2000, 15-6, Site 5.9; NMRS no. HU69SW39, HU 6075 9053). There are faint traces of a platform to the west of the church, and even more ephemeral vestiges of similar platforms to north and south; these may be nothing more than disturbance created during the construction of the present building (Brady and Morris 2000, 16). More certain confirmation of a pre-existing church on this site is provided by an early eighteenth century armorial stone, which has been set up in the western extension to the church (*ibid.*, 15). In addition, there are a number of simple, probably early, gravemarkers within the burial ground and built into the wall of a lair in the north west corner (*ibid.*). The latter appear to be concentrated in the south and west part of the burial ground, close to visibly eroding human bones. On the south side, outside the current graveyard wall, are traces of a curving wall, which could be an earlier boundary (*ibid.*). The find spot of two Roman coins is marked on the modern OS map (*ref.*) on the south side of the adjacent manse.

### Parish History

There are very few early documentary references to Fetlar.<sup>2</sup> The bishop possessed three-quarters of the corn teinds of the parish of Fetlar at the Reformation, the residual teinds pertaining to the vicarage, which was the poorest in Shetland (Cowan 1967, 65). At the Reformation and for some time after, the parish was united with that of North Yell (Sibbald 1711, 30, 69; Goudie 1910, 306; *FES*, Vol. VII, 295; Cowan 1967, 212). Pitcairne calls the head church of Fetlar, *Crocekirk*, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, while Sibbald states that there were ten or eleven chapels on Fetlar, in addition to the head church (1711, 30, 70). The author of the NSA noted: 'St. Hillary's kirk above Feal, Old Kirk at Fetchie Burn, Roman Catholic chapels at Oddsta, Urie, Rossiter, Gruting, Strand, Hubie, Funzie, [and] North Dale' (Watson 1841, 25). Although the names differ and there is a potentially later chapel site at Hillside (*cf.* Muir 1885, 145; *FES*, Vol. VII, 295; Cant 1976, 17, n. 21; RCAHMS 1946, nos. 1232-5, 1237; Brady 1998; Brady and Morris 2000), this number equates well with the total of ten known scattalds on Fetlar (Stewart 1965, 176-7). By the end of the nineteenth century, both Irvine (Tresta, Halliara and Strand) and Tudor (Halliara, Strand, Funzie and Oddsta) could list only three or four chapels (Irvine *nd*; Tudor 1883, 554; quoted in Brady 1998, 19, 20), while Muir was told that barely any remains of the chapels listed in the NSA survived (1885, 74, 145-6).

A possible monastic settlement has been identified on the Inner and Outer Brough of Strandburgh (RCAHMS 1946, no. 1240; Lamb 1974, 86-91; Brady 1998, 10-2, Sites 4.2 and 4.3; Brady and Morris 2000, 8-9, Sites 5.2 and 5.3), with a further stack site off the north coast at The Clett (RCAHMS 1946, no. 1229; Lamb 1974, 78; Brady 1998, 16, Site 4.8; Brady and Morris 2000, 14-5, Sites 5.8). The dating of these eremitic sites is extremely tentative, although Lamb has argued for them being a possible combination of late Celtic *and* Norse, or medieval, monastic communities (1975-6, 149-50). They are therefore another facet of the 'papar' problem, and one which is not taken into account in the present study.

### Preliminary Evaluation (ed.)

The situation regarding the churches and chapels of Fetlar is not at all easy to attempt to unravel. There are no early Christian stones to give any pointers to pre-Norse

ecclesiastical sites. Although the parish was called St. Bartholomew's in 1558 and 1575 (Cant 1976, 15, n.18), Pitcairne in the early seventeenth century names the 'Cross-kirk' as the chief church of Fetlar (Pitcairne in Goudie 1904, 157), which 'strong local tradition' identifies with the site occupied by the old parish church at Papil Water (Cant 1976, 15, n. 19). If this is the case, St. Bartholomew's can perhaps be identified with Kirkhouse at Strand, where a fair-sized building can still be seen (RCAHMS 1946, no. 1233; Cant 1976, 15, n.20; Brady 1998, 13, Site 4.5; Brady and Morris 2000, 10-2, Site 5.5). However, it is possible, as Cant proposes, that the dedications were simply interchangeable (Cant 1976, 15, n.20).

If the old parish church was at Papil then it would appear to have shifted from Papil to a new site, slightly closer to the main centre of population. The assumption is that there would have been a chapel site at Papil but evidence for it being a parochial church appears to rest on the 'local tradition' as cited above.

#### OS maps:

*Ordnance Survey*, 1878 (1882). First edition. 1:10,560. Sheet XVII.

*Ordnance Survey*, 1880. First edition. 1:2,500. Sheet XVII.3.

*Ordnance Survey*, 1900 (1901). Second edition. 1:10,560. Sheet XVII.

*Ordnance Survey*, 1900 (1901). Second edition. 1:2,500. Sheet XVII.3.

*Ordnance Survey*, 1973. 1:10000. Sheets HU69SW and HU69SE.

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<sup>1</sup> The class of land is difficult to ascertain south of Papil Water on the Soil Capability Map but appears to be 62, although the rest of the area around the loch is 63. It would seem that this does not represent accurately what the quality of the land was in former times, which can be assumed to be as good as that around Houbie, which is 42, and capable of growing a 'limited range of crops'.

<sup>2</sup> The first supposed reference to Fetlar, in an ecclesiastical context, in 1383, when John, the rector of 'Pentlar' became Bishop of Orkney (Cant 1976, 14, n.64) is a very uncertain interpretation of the name.