

Shetland revival episode five

By David Powell



I was excited at the prospect of combining my next visit to Shetland with a week in Europe. The apartment renovation I had been involved with in Paris was virtually complete and the task of sourcing accessories and soft goods to complete the picture meant five or six days of shopping. Not exactly a penalty!

Yet this time, I was feeling a little apprehensive. France had recently been seized by general strikes and media reports were suggesting a state of chaos. Train travel had been suspended. Gas was in short supply and public protests and their associated disruptions were all predicted. Needless to say, I departed fearing the worst kind of complications and delays. However, at Charles de Gaulle Airport, before my transfers to London

and Edinburgh, I found everything functioning as usual, with the exception of the disquieting presence of heavily armed soldiers.

I managed to find Pierre among the throngs of travelers at Heathrow. Before our next flight we spent three hours reviewing the project and his determination to have the work finished in order to spend Christmas and New Year in the Shetlands...with Debbie! I was hesitant to divulge my apprehension until I had taken stock of the on-site progress, but it seemed like a long shot to me.

Wet, wild and worrisome

There was another lengthy stopover in Scotland so it was a happy moment when our small turbo-prop plane was ready for its early evening flight to



Shetland. I dozed intermittently until, without warning, the lights of Sumburgh airport appeared through the low clouds. We bumped abruptly down onto the slick runway with heavy winds buffeting the aircraft. With an alarming skid, the plane lurched to a stop. After catching our breath, we stepped off the plane (with great relief) into a wet blackness. It was colder than anticipated and the wild gusts made it even worse.

Tired and hungry, we descended on Jean's familiar B&B, where we were welcomed by a home-cooked meal and a lovely bottle of burgundy retrieved from Pierre's luggage. (Pierre never leaves France without a supply of fine wine in his luggage, making him an ideal travel companion.)

I was anxious to get to bed, but after dinner Jean pulled me aside to open an enormous square box, which sat taking up a considerable amount of room in her lounge. I had requested a delivery of samples from the owner of "The Isle Mill," located near Perth (which supplies us with fabrics for our Powell & Bonnell textile collection). The box was filled with heavy sample books and I made my selections strategically and speedily—I couldn't possibly transport them all to Fetlar.

Chillier than ever

An early start was anticipated. Nevertheless, sleep and warmth eluded me until about 1:30 a.m., when I slipped on a pair of thick wool socks and grabbed an extra duvet off the



other twin bed. Pitch blackness and rain pelting against the window greeted me all too soon the next morning, as I awoke and prepared to leave for Lerwick, where we were hoping to get commitments from reluctant cabinet-makers, building suppliers and shipping companies.

The drive through northern Mainland and Yell was exquisitely beautiful, with striking scenes of distant, snow-dusted hills, punctuated by

patches of intense sun. The occasional rainbow formed over shimmering lochs, belying the fact that, much to my dismay, it was growing colder and windier as we travelled northward. The last small ferry from Yell to Fetlar heaved through rough swells with steady resolve, but I was nonetheless comforted when we reached the tiny dock and drove onto the island. The low sun slanted across the rolling hills, illuminating the far-off cliffs and white-capped seas—but in the distance, dark clouds threatened to release their wrath. As we approached Funzie Beach (pronounced "Finnie"), the sun's last few rays were magically focused on the cottage, now heavily shrouded in scaffolding and plastic sheeting to afford the masons some protection from the elements.

By the time we had navigated the rutted, muddy track to the little house, frozen rain pellets were beating on the





car and the sheeting was flapping madly in the fierce wind. One lone mason clung to his scaffold. All the other workers had fled—not so much, I suspect, because of the approaching storm, but to avoid Pierre's and my arrival.

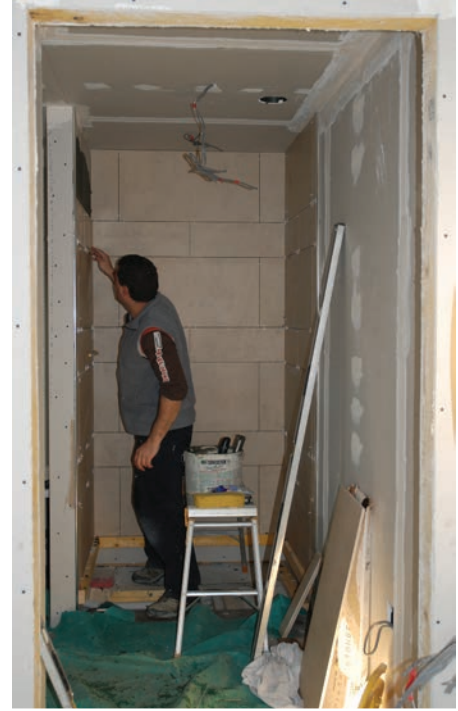
Entering the site, we were immediately disheartened. Clearly, the workers were well behind what we had expected. The tile floor appeared to be complete and correctly laid, yet it was obscured by drop cloths, cardboard and construction debris. A loathsome ghetoblaster raged furiously to an unseen audience. Several serious problems quickly became apparent, none more glaring than the omission of the drain in the kitchen. In an unsuccessful attempt

to locate a drain, parts of the floor had been rudely chipped away. Pierre was understandably upset, but even more frustrated with the lack of anyone with whom to discuss these issues.

To Yell and back

By the time we left to catch the late afternoon ferry, we found ourselves in a full-on sleet/snow storm. It grew dark as the vessel ploughed through heavy seas back to Yell. On land again, locating our unfamiliar B&B at North-a-Voe became somewhat difficult when we found ourselves at the bottom of a long, winding road. Fearing we were lost, Pierre enquired at the dead end's lone cottage. We had, in fact—rather miraculously—ended up in the right spot. A warm welcome and a hot “cuppa” from the owners, Mary Jane and her husband Sandy, set things right. Later, after a hearty dinner and interesting conversation stimulated by a bottle of Pierre's Beaujolais, I headed to bed accompanied by a hot water bottle, the simple comfort of which I had all but forgotten.

A six a.m. start to get back over to Fetlar revealed overnight snow on the ground, making the steep hills and tight bends a potential hazard. Pierre proceeded with uncharacteristic caution. After a smooth crossing, we were greeted by a dramatically lit pale-pink dawn hanging over the island and a light



layer of snow on the ground. Our day was consumed with various meetings with contactors and the like: folks from Shetland Hydro, representatives from the Shetland Amenity Trust, a satellite television installer and an attractive tax evaluator from the local council.

Despite the raw chill of the unheated shell and the blasts of frigid North Sea air each time the door was opened, I remained relatively warm in the cottage due to my many insulated layers. However, my hands suffered badly as I was kept busy taking measurements and making notes...gloveless activities. All the comings and goings greatly upset the Hungarian “tile setter/prima donna,” who tried to insist that no one should be in the house while he was working!

By late afternoon, many of the problems uncovered the day before were resolved, including the discovery of the missing kitchen drain. We left feeling much more encouraged. On the 4:50 ferry back to Yell, and during the drive back toward North-a-Voe, nature gave us a treat. The intense blue of the sky



above the russet and deep-purple hills was layered with banks of voluptuous white and salmon clouds, and a pinkish-golden hue was cast as far as the eye could see. Breathtaking.

On the same wavelength

Later, after a satisfying dinner and a pleasant wine-infused visit with the same B&B hosts, Mary-Jane and Sandy, I was more than pleased to find my hot-water bottle already tucked in the foot of my bed. Sated and snug, I succumbed quickly to the silent night. At the crack of dawn, we were picking our way along slush-covered roads to Yell's south end, where we caught a small ferry to the neighbouring island of Whalsay. We were scheduled to meet Mary Anderson, a pleasant woman who operates a sewing workshop out of her whitewashed cottage.

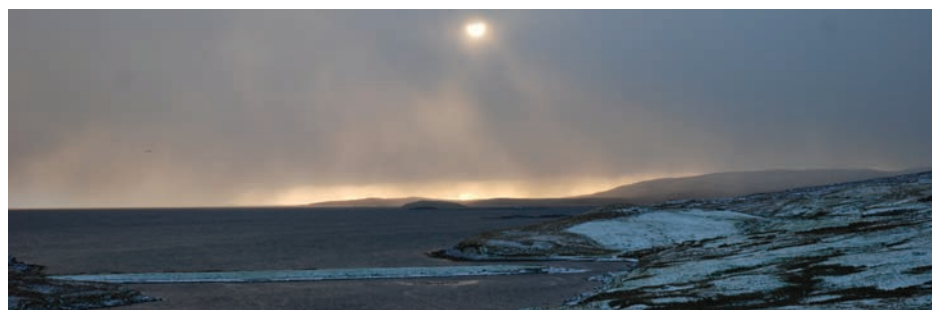
Mary had agreed to make curtains, blinds and cushions for us, and she gave me the no-nonsense impression that she knew her trade. Speaking the same "language," we soon sorted out what was needed as Pierre stood silently by, amazed by our "short-hand" communication skills. Mary confirmed my



with issues that had arisen on site during the previous days. We were encouraged by our reception at the kitchen cabinetmakers, as well as the helpful efficiency we experienced at the building suppliers. Mr. Leask, the door maker, was cheerful and patient while we sorted out hardware, locksets and door swings. And Cecil Tait, a gifted local cabinetmaker, was pleased to reveal he was making excellent progress with the various custom furni-

and convincing the young plumber to remain on the island to complete his tasks. Hamish, our "missing in action" electrician, reluctantly showed up just before 10 p.m., full of lame excuses, but after Pierre doled out several thousand pounds of encouragement, he agreed to return to Fetlar and get on with it.

It was nearing midnight when we finally arrived back at Jean's B&B. She had waited up for us and, without prompting, poured us both a generous slosh of single malt and listened while we relayed our last few days' adventures and frustrations. I slipped away to re-pack my "left behind" bag, which had been stowed in the cubby under Jean's stairs, and to organize my luggage for our early departure. The alarm was set for 5:20 a.m. It had been a long, eventful and fully satisfying day.



yardage calculations and was clearly pleased by the quality of fabrics selected. This business neatly concluded, we were able to catch an earlier ferry to Mainland. Ahead of schedule, we were able to stop on various occasions; to leap from the car and capture photos of these decidedly other-worldly landscapes and dramatically backlit cloud formations. Moments like this feed the soul and keep drawing me back to this oddly compelling group of islands.

What a rush

Back in Lerwick we began an erratic race about town, with frequent stops at various suppliers and contractors, working out final details and dealing

ture pieces that had been ordered. On and on we went, racing from one end of town to the other...and back again. Finally, as Pierre attended a late afternoon meeting with his solicitor, I was treated to a brief but welcome interlude, content to sit in the waning light huddled in a cold car, buffeted by wind and freezing rain.

A dinner meeting had been arranged at the Scalloway Hotel to discuss issues related to Brough Lodge. Afterwards we raced off to nearby Cunningsburgh to meet with Kevin, the framer, who by default had found himself (with growing frustration) functioning as the general contractor. His role at this point was crucial in locating the "sparky" (electrician)

Fair warning

As this part of our adventure drew to a close, I left Shetland feeling, along with a sense of accomplishment, some grave apprehensions concerning Pierre's intention to return at the end of the year. There were only two scant months to make the cottage habitable and there was an enormous amount to complete—even for the most rudimentary requirements. I felt it only fair, while appearing outwardly confident to Pierre, to send a warning message to Debbie so she could prepare herself for the worst.

As did I, for very different reasons, in approaching the upcoming week in strike-ravaged Paris. But that's another story. ■