



Shetland revival episode four

By David Powell



The two weeks I spent vacationing with friends in Southern Italy proved to be some of the hottest and most insufferable on record. Even the idyllic island of Stromboli offered no relief from the suffocating heat. I secretly longed for the anticipated respite offered by the Shetlands.

Back in an also sweltering Toronto, I took a few days to recover and re-pack. I was more than anxious to head off once more across the Atlantic to witness the progress on the “wee house” and to bask in the cooler climes of Scotland

and the North Sea. After a greatly delayed departure, my well-worn Boeing 757 finally rumbled and creaked down the runway shortly after midnight and with one last groan lurched into the darkened skies. For the next two hours it pitched and heaved as if traversing a badly rutted road, unable to break through the turbulence until well over the Atlantic. A Graval ingested early on provided necessary but fitful sleep in anticipation of the two long days of travel that lay ahead.

Arriving to a decent morning in Glasgow, I still had to endure a taxi ride to the city centre in order to catch a train to Edinburgh. There, I would board a bus to the airport for the final flight of this part of the journey, to Sumburgh on the Mainland of the



Shetlands. At the Edinburgh Airport I found Pierre relaxing in a massage chair in the departure lounge nursing a back in painful spasm. He enthusiastically filled me in on the progress on Fetlar and updated our anticipated agenda for the next few days. We were going to be good and busy!

The relatively short flight descended through the dense fog of early evening, and after picking up a rental car we travelled the short distance to our now familiar B&B, “Setterbrae.” We were welcomed by Jean, the owner, with the offer of a much-appreciated glass of whiskey. By this time I was

included and would require separate shipment. Hasty arrangements were made before we departed on the first of our series of ferries to Fetlar.

It was a closely timed race, speeding across islands from one ferry terminal to the next, a wayward sheep falling victim to our haste; the poor thing was definitely dazed by the experience. At the terminal at the north shore of the island of Yell we pulled in behind a trailer loaded with the big rolls of “cozy wrap,” curiously standing bolt upright, creating a definite aerodynamic challenge. On the other side we were greeted by the enormous lorry that was return-



beginning to feel the effects of my travels and would willingly have succumbed to the siren’s call of bed. However, Pierre had arranged a dinner of locally caught lobster at the nearby Spiggie Hotel. By the time we finished it was nearly midnight, but by no means dark. I was relieved to finally crawl under the duvet and lose myself in the intense silence of the prolonged Shetland twilight.

A roof over our heads

The next morning we were greeted by a pleasantly cool, heavily overcast outlook—a typical mid-summer day in the Shetlands. A hearty Scottish breakfast got us ready for the long day ahead. Off to an early start, we made various stops on the Mainland. Time flew as we raced between meetings with building suppliers, contractors, consultants and transporters, and checked on a container filled with construction materials that was about to be shipped to Fetlar for us. As it was being hoisted (all 5.5 tonnes of it) onto the back of a lorry, it was discovered that the “cozy wrap” (insulation) had not been



ing from delivering the container to our site, its bulk testing the limits as it lumbered onto the little Fetlar ferry. With mounting anticipation we sped across the island and, cresting the final hill, caught sight of the wee house, or “Mio Ness,” as it was known locally. Despite the general chaos of construction, scaffolding and the haphazard collection of shipping containers, cara-

vans and “tea sheds” scattered about it was thrilling to glimpse it roofed, possibly for the first time in more than 150 years.

A solid Welsh-slate roof now covered the original portion of the house, and the roofers were hard at work on the new extension. We were ecstatic as we approached, but all too soon Pierre was informed by the slaters that there might not be sufficient material on site (even after extensive calculations by the suppliers, consultants and engineers). Organizing another shipment from Wales could take weeks—even months!

While Pierre went off to discuss this dilemma with the contractor and workmen over their dinner hour, I wandered about inspecting the construction, somewhat overwhelmed but definitely delighted by the dramatic views of the sea and cliffs framed by the new window openings. Later in the evening back at Nic Boxall’s B&B we were treated to an artery-clogging meal of thick potage, fish and chips, fruit crumble and ice cream, all home-made and very tasty. Nourishment was extremely welcome since breakfast had been some 14 hours earlier. By nine I had wandered off to bed, leaving Pierre to struggle with the frustration of navigating the intermittent internet service.

Pointing 101

Early the next day we hurried to the site through a promising Shetland morning, overcast but not raining. The roofers were already at it and I was excited as I was meeting a mason sent

from the Shetland Amenity Trust. He was to give me a lesson in pointing so that I could attempt to “deep” point the exposed portion of the interior stonewalls. Philip was a lovely gentleman from the island of Yell, who possessed an incomprehensible local dialect. As hard as I tried, I could not grasp even the simplest of his responses to my questions. I eventually fell back, content to allow him to work away, the process appearing infinitely more complex and time consuming than ever imagined. Some things, it was decided, were best left to the experts.

The afternoon brought good news. Miraculously, a supply of slate from the same Welsh quarry had been located in Aberdeen and could be delivered within a week if an order was placed by 11 am. While a definitive answer to the amount of slate required was being sought, I busied myself around the site, measuring everything and discussing solutions to anticipated issues with Kevin, the contractor, and his crew.

Framing for the interior was in progress and I learned, for instance, that in Britain a “two-by-four” is known as a “four-by-two” and that when it is planed and dressed it is referred to as Canadian Lumber Standard. A solution for the ceiling was required as the original intent to keep open rafters was not feasible. This I resolved on the spot with a few hasty sketches. I also discovered that not even here is a jobsite immune to the invasion of a raspy, clapped-out ghetto blaster, played at full volume and seemingly tuned to the same highly irritating heavy-metal/rap music I despise.

“The world’s most beautiful bus shelter”

The next couple of days were spent measuring, cleaning and attempting to bring order to the chaos of the site, both inside and out. Pierre and I unloaded palettes and stacked them neatly to one side, and cleaned up loose debris, broken slates and garbage. All the while the weather turned from cheerless, to damp, to decidedly wet. Late each day we returned to the B&B, thoroughly chilled and desperate for a hot shower and a meal.

On Sunday, while the crew enjoyed a day off, we caught the ferry to Unst,



a neighbouring island, for a day of recreation, general sightseeing and the chance to inspect the stout “Nordam” windows that had arrived from Norway and were being stored within the contractor’s warehouse.

The remainder of the day was spent touring the island, enjoying an ideal Shetland day—moderate temperatures, light cloud cover with joyous bursts of sun illuminating distant hills and valleys. We strolled the length of an isolated sandy bay, marvelling at two young girls screeching and frolicking in the frigid North Sea surf. Pierre, unconvinced, kept his knitted wool hat and gloves resolutely in place! A highlight before catching the evening ferry back was a visit to possibly the most famous structure on Unst: “The World’s Most Beautiful Bus Shelter.” Initiated several years ago by a local lad trying to bring some beauty to this bleak corner of the world, it has become a unique community project and each year a theme is determined. This year’s was obviously “Orange”! The previous one was “Barbie” and very pink.

The final day was spent in meetings with the site contractor and the electrician to finalize the lighting specs and review the installation and critical dimensions. I looked on, fascinated, as they installed the modular red plastic panels for the in-floor heating, a neat system into which a continuous flexible PVC tube is inserted. Even more exciting was seeing the framed walls (or kit) lining the original stone being installed, for now we were able to more clearly imagine the finished space. Sadly, however, most of the beautiful stone and the two little fireplaces on the east gable would now be obscured forever.



Another caravan had been towed to the site to provide additional accommodation and along with it came a beguiling little “site dog,” Boots.

Pierre had arranged for an evening meal for all of the crew at a local house in the nearby village of Houbie. Packed into the small-ish kitchen, the men ate with determination and speed, uninterrupted by conversation until, nearing full, they broke into light-hearted banter. Dinner was easily accomplished within 20 minutes and the crew returned to work to take advantage of the extended light (or “simmer dim” as it is referred to locally).

While they continued, Pierre and I took a long walk on Tesla Beach. Even now, at the height of tourist season, it was completely deserted! We returned to the B&B and celebrated our accomplishments with a fine bottle of Bordeaux while surfing the net in search of “cattle guards,” a device to dispense with the necessity of installing a gate at the road.

At 10:45pm, I decided to call it a day. The sky was inky dark (Waterman’s Blue/Black), signalling that summer, short-lived here in the Shetlands, was on the wane. The days would now march into darkness toward a winter that I couldn’t even imagine. However, having agreed to return in late October, I might just get a taste of it. ■