

Shetland revival episode six

By David Powell

New Year's Day, 2011.



Our few days spent visiting the site in October proved to be extremely timely and productive. Issues that had arisen were dealt with, for the most part, and the project seemed to be back on track. At least, while our presence was still apparent!

We departed Shetland with Pierre feeling somewhat more confident. I, on the other hand, had grave misgivings as to whether he and Debbie would be able to spend the Christmas holidays in the house, as they intended. I kept these feelings pretty much to myself but secretly contacted Debbie to advise her of my doubts.

At best, I felt she should be prepared for some inconvenience and hardship. I headed on to Paris, unsure of what I would find—my friends there advised me the news was not good, with the city apparently crippled by a civil strike.

Pierre made another journey back to Fetlar in November, and this time I am certain he began to feel hesitant about the reality of having the house habitable by mid December. Delivery of the furniture, which had been ordered from BoConcept in Denmark, had to be delayed. Custom curtains and window coverings were ready but the site wouldn't be in an acceptable state to consider installation for many months to come. His plan to have the house furnished and complete for Christmas was unravelling. The back-up plan, which had been discussed, was becoming more of a possibility by the day. Mary Jane and Sandy had kindly offered to let Pierre and Debbie stay at their B&B on Yell, even though they were planning to be away on vacation during that



period. They explained that the couple were more than welcome and would find the house open! No one, it seems, locks their doors on Shetland.

Pierre emailed me with one disappointment after another. Winter had set in early and the work force was for the most part absent. His determination was being tested. The kitchen arrived but was a hopeless jumble of boxes. The built-in closets and cabinetry had been made with no allowance for the thickness of the drywall, despite my many notations and reminders that site measurements were to be verified prior to production. Disappointingly, none of them fit and the openings had to be stripped of drywall and re-worked to accommodate them. Coordinating plumbers, electricians and installers was next to impossible.

I could feel Pierre's distress and mounting anxiety from afar. From my vantage point, his plans for the holidays seemed distantly optimistic. However, he forged on with his usual resolve.

Unfinished and unfurnished

Pierre and Debbie's arrival just prior to Christmas coincided with an onslaught of frigid temperatures, howling winds and blowing snow! Debbie had insisted there should be heat, running water, a toilet and, most importantly, internet service. Pierre had made good on his promises...to a degree. The wireless internet was operational—a miracle in itself on Fetlar—and for the first time I could witness the progress on Skype.

This also afforded me a glimpse of a plastic tarp billowing noisily in the opening between the two parts of the house. The frigid air whistling through the unfinished windows and fireplace of the old stone house sought to overwhelm what feeble heat the in-floor system could muster (operational, but not as yet properly adjusted). The toilet was functional...one pail of water at a time. The faucet in the kitchen offered water, but the drain had not been hooked up below it. Ironically the drain for the bathroom sink was connected, but the faucet wasn't. The glass shower door had been smashed upon arrival and the bathroom was frigid. None of the stylish recessed lighting had been installed. The only illumination was

from a portable construction lamp, which was carted from room to room as needed. The furniture, delivered on Christmas Eve, required days of complicated assembly. Cold and discouraged, Debbie sought comfort from her misery in the luxury of the custom "Hypnos" bed and the folds of Frette sheets.

Discomfort and joy

Christmas Day eventually dawned to reveal blizzard conditions that did little to lift their spirits. The tiny rental vehicle proved hopeless in these conditions and could not be persuaded to budge as the snow drifted over the frozen, rutted driveway. While Pierre vainly attempted to steer the vehicle out, Debbie was enlisted to clear a



path with a broken plastic shovel, the scoop of which, accompanying each shovel-full of snow, had to be retrieved and reattached.

They eventually abandoned this effort and decided to walk the distance to attend the Sisters of SOLI's midday Christmas service, trudging for two hours through the fierce North Sea winds and blinding snow. With no offer of a ride back, they returned through the waning daylight to arrive in the dark, exhausted and half frozen, to the cold, cheerless house. Struggling to open the metal gate at the end of the drive, Debbie tells me she muttered to herself, leaning into the fierce gale, "Merry f*cking Christmas!"

Debbie was rapidly becoming aware, the hard way, that in this isolation it



is vital to be very organized with menus and inventories of supplies on hand. Basic commodities need to be stockpiled. This had been somewhat underestimated, and the reality was that a trip to the Tesco store in Lerwick, a six-hour adventure at the best of times, was out of the question. Debbie began to panic, stranded as they were with supplies running low. A call to the local shop thankfully provided some badly needed basics and a kindly neighbour delivered them on his ATV. Meanwhile, Pierre was extending invitations to curious locals, anxious to see the house, with expectations to be entertained.

A few days later, high winds swept the snow from the island and the pair were finally able to extricate the car and make their way down the long track to the road. During this period, Pierre was able to convince the electrician and the plumber to return and hook up the essentials. They were

suddenly sympathetic to their plight! He also busied himself with the task of sorting out the assembly instructions for the BoConcept furnishings, struggling with unfamiliar bits and pieces and cryptic diagrams. Slowly a few creature comforts began to be materialize. And the new year dawned!

The weather warmed and the sun came out just as Pierre and Debbie were packing up to leave as planned. It had been an unusually challenging time. As Pierre closed the door, he reports he was suddenly consumed with sadness and already longing to return. Debbie, for her part, was merely relieved to have survived the ordeal. She sat in the car, anxious to hurry back to the warmth of southern France and the creature comforts of their seaside apartment. ■