

# COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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# CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

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## EUROPEAN COMMITTEE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF NATURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Committee of experts - protected areas

FAIR ISLE  
Shetlands

Application for the award of the  
European Diploma  
submitted by the United Kingdom

EUROPEAN DIPLOMA: APPLICATION FORM

Name: FAIR ISLE, SHETLAND ISLANDS

Name and Address of body  
responsible for its management: THE NATIONAL TRUST FOR SCOTLAND  
5 Charlotte Square, Edinburgh

Country: UNITED KINGDOM

1. Type of area:

Located where the Atlantic Ocean meets the North Sea, Fair Isle is the southernmost island in the Shetland archipelago. It lies some 24 miles (39 kilometres) south-west of Sumburgh Head, the southernmost point of the Shetland mainland, and a similar distance from the northernmost of the Orkney islands to the south-west. The island extends some 3 miles (5 km) in length by up to 1½ miles (2½ km) in breadth, with a total area of some 830 hectares.

2. Characteristics and scientific, aesthetic, cultural or recreative values justifying conservation:

Fair Isle has a rugged and spectacular coastline, with high cliffs on the west, north and east, giving way to rocky but accessible beaches and a harbour on the south. The Old Red Sandstone of which the island is composed was laid down some 350-400 million years ago and now provides a remarkable diversity of cliff, geos (rocky inlets), stacs (rock pillars), skerries, natural arches, isthmuses and bayhead beaches. Although its highest point, Ward Hill, is a modest 217 metres, it has several eminent headlands, including particularly the prominent and beautifully shaped Sheep Rock on the east coast and Malcolm's Head on the south-west coast. The northern end of the island is mainly heather-clad, with salt- and wind-swept swards of grass on the clifftops. The southern half of the island is relatively more fertile, although with only minimal soil cover over the rock in places.

The island is included within one of the 40 National Scenic Areas identified by the Countryside Commission for Scotland in 1978 in its assessment of the outstanding scenic resources of the Scottish countryside, 'Scotland's Scenic Heritage' (1).

The human population on the island has traditionally depended on small-scale farming and fishing for its livelihood. The population in 1861 was recorded at 380 people, but since that time numbers fell under pressure of disease and poverty until positive measures were taken to prevent complete evacuation of the island. The population has now stabilised into a community of some 70 souls. The primary school takes children up to the age of 11 and is well patronised, at present (1982) there are 11 pupils at the single teacher school. There is a strong tradition of self-help and religious worship influences moral attitudes more decisively than now occurs on the mainland. The social and economic systems practised on the islands are an example to small isolated communities in other parts of Europe, being based to a considerable extent on the family unit in which father and sons on separate crofts tend to amalgamate crofting duties and to share, through co-operative schemes, agricultural plant and equipment, with individual skills being developed for the benefit of the whole community. Fair Isle has given its name to the world-renowned traditional Fair Isle knitting patterns. These patterns are still knitted today on the island by the Fair Isle Knitting Co-operative, with small sales which provide added income and a sense of community spirit.

This small community has been responsible for the execution of numerous projects, including the improvement of the common grazings by re-seeding, the construction of the new community hall and the development of the licensed airstrip. The isolation of the island, with consequential high costs of freight and transport, has resulted in efforts to employ alternative sources of energy. In 1982 a commercial aero-generator was installed with financial support from the European Economic Community, the Highlands and Islands Development Board and Shetland Islands Council, and all the crofting community now benefit from this in an area where wind power is perhaps more reliable than in other parts of the United Kingdom. All these developments have attracted support from Shetland Islands Council as well as from central government and its agencies, but without the determination and initiative of the community itself, none of these external factors could have achieved these purposes.

In addition to its importance scenically and culturally, Fair Isle has a particular scientific interest for ornithological reasons. It is an important breeding station for seabird populations and has been described as a crossroads for migratory bird species in spring and autumn, being a landfall for birds moving between North Africa, southern continental Europe and mainland United Kingdom/

Kingdom to and from Scandinavia, Siberia, Iceland, Greenland and even vagrants from North America. It has been recognised as an important bird observatory for most of the twentieth century, with particularly important developments taking place since 1945. Some 327 species of birds have been recorded on the island this century, Fair Isle was identified in 1977 as a key site by the Nature Conservancy Council in its publication 'A Nature Conservation Review' (2). In the review Fair Isle is described as:-

'This is another cliff-bound maritime island, with numerous breeding seabirds and a largely grass and heath vegetation above the cliffs. There are large populations of guillemots (10,000 pairs), razorbills (1,200 pairs), puffins (15,000 pairs), kittiwakes (12,000 pairs) and fulmars (17,300 pairs). Great skuas (10 pairs) and Arctic skuas (180 pairs) breed on the slopes above the cliffs. Fair Isle is important as a migration landfall, and the bird-ringing station and observatory here is a northernmost of a network of key stations scattered round the coasts of Britain.'

Arrangements exist for ornithologists to participate in the work of the bird observatory, for research workers and for the more general visitor to stay on the island.

All of this demonstrates the unique character and value of Fair Isle within a European context in both scientific and recreational terms.

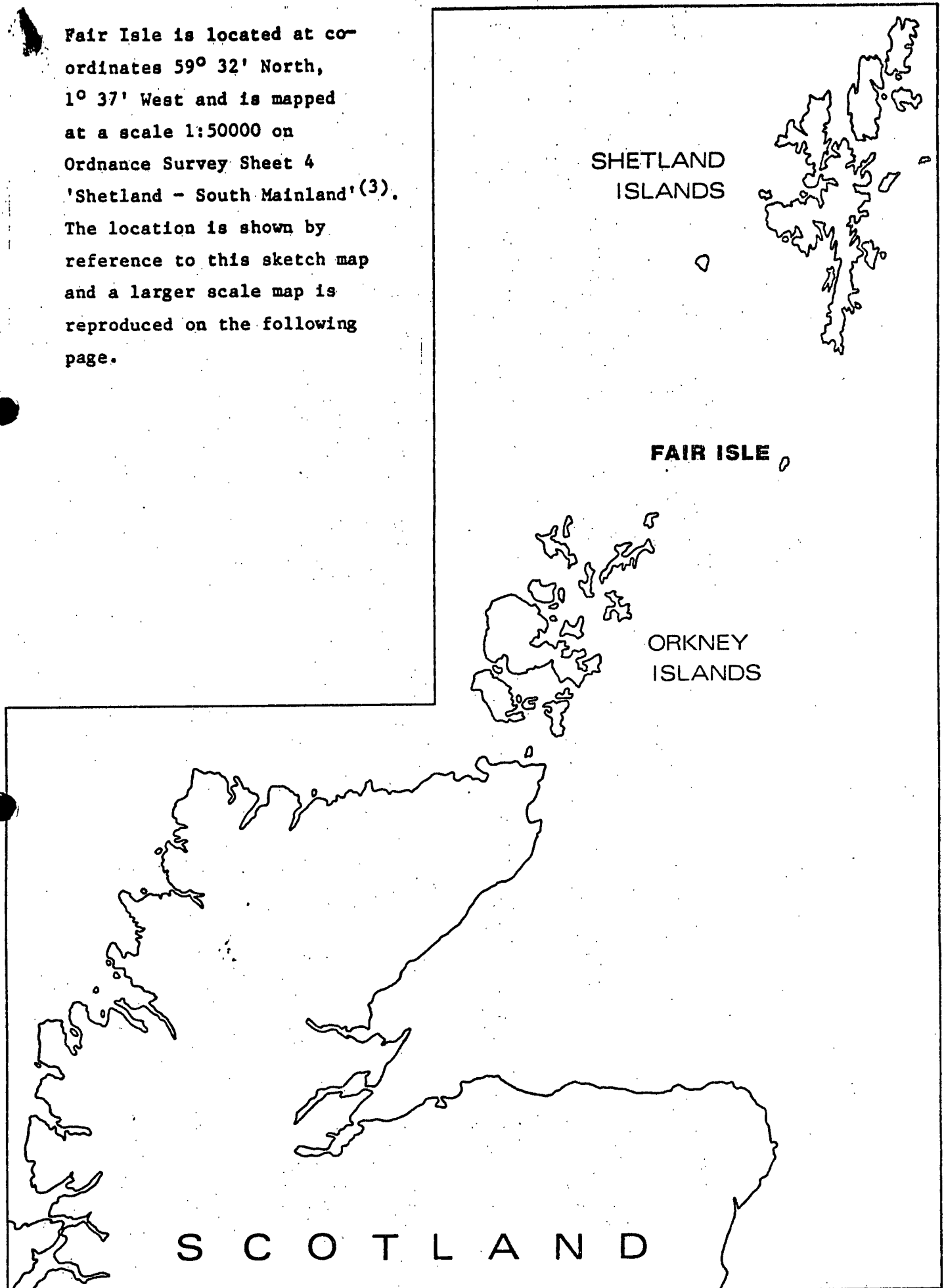
### 3. European interest justifying the application

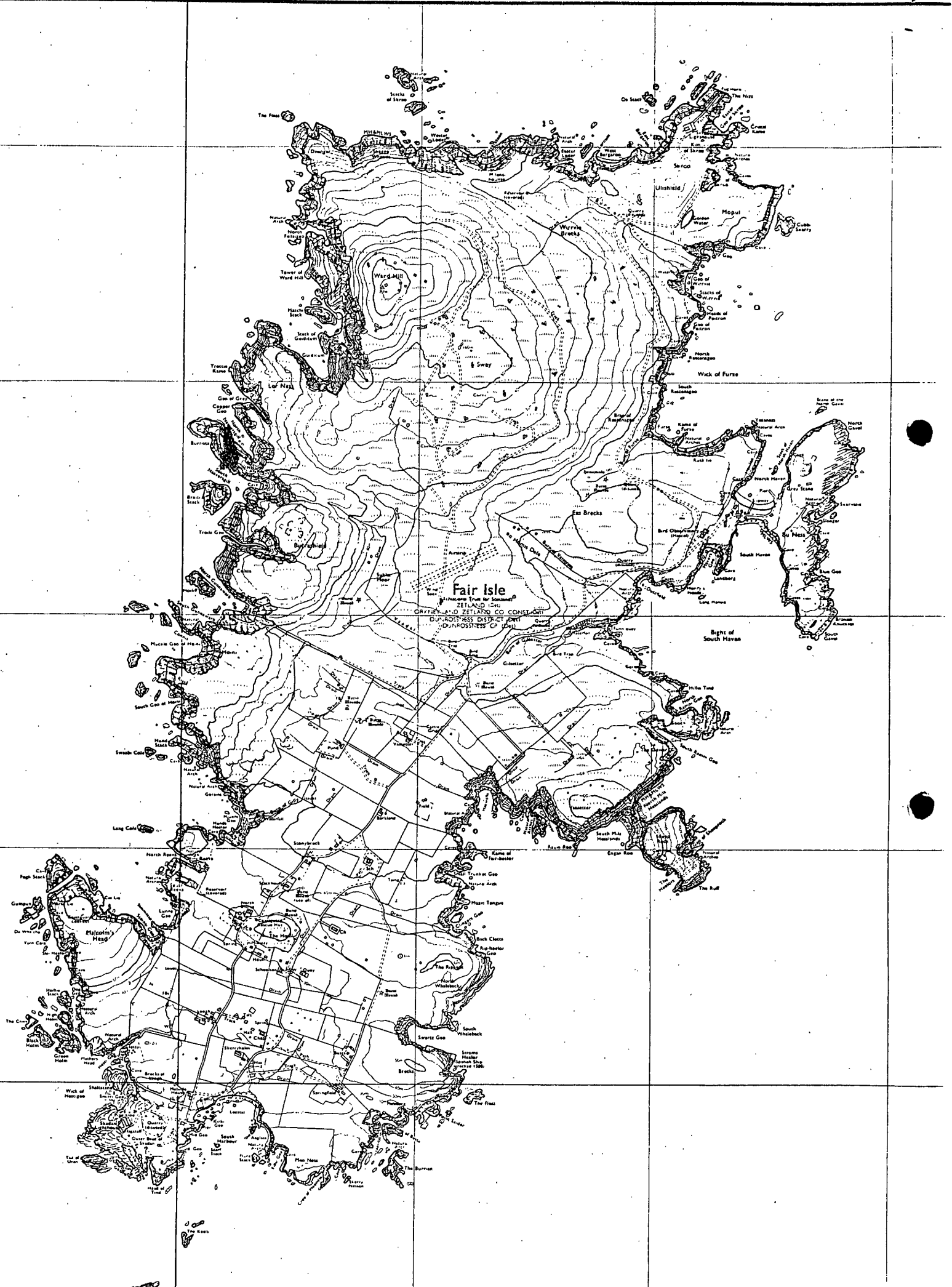
Fair Isle is one of the most isolated communities within Europe. It is outstanding for its ornithological interest and for its scenic beauty. In cultural terms, it is also one of the few thriving crofting communities in Scotland where unemployment has, to date, been negligible, but where initiatives have been taken at both local and national levels to conserve the social, economic, scientific, scenic and cultural resources for the benefit of the residents and of Europe as a whole. Its survival depends upon continuing local initiatives by the islanders themselves, supported by the enlightened management exercised by the National Trust for Scotland as owners, combined with sensitive local and national government involvement and support.

Recognition by the Council of Europe of what has been achieved and expressions of support for further measures would undoubtedly make a significant impact for good on the local community and on decision-takers in local and national government.

4. Description of geographical position and/or sketch or outline on a map

Fair Isle is located at co-ordinates  $59^{\circ} 32'$  North,  $1^{\circ} 37'$  West and is mapped at a scale 1:50000 on Ordnance Survey Sheet 4 'Shetland - South Mainland' (3). The location is shown by reference to this sketch map and a larger scale map is reproduced on the following page.





5. Photographs illustrating typical aspects of the natural area, site or feature

A brochure of photographs has been prepared and is submitted with this application (available in the Secretariat).

6. Conservation measures taken so far or contemplated

The relevant statutory texts are referred to below and are attached or relevant sections reproduced in the annex to this application (available in the Secretariat)

The Cultural Interest

Ownership of the island was acquired following the Second World War by the late Mr George Waterston, an outstanding figure in the history of the conservation movement in Scotland. Ownership was transferred by Mr Waterston to the National Trust for Scotland in 1954. The Trust is established by Act of Parliament for the purposes of promoting the permanent preservation for the benefit of the nation of lands and buildings in Scotland of historic or national interest or natural beauty. The island has been declared 'inalienable' by the Trust in terms of paragraph 22 of the National Trust for Scotland Order Confirmation Act 1935. The effect of this declaration is to protect the island against any compulsory purchase procedures for development purposes, except by means of a special resolution required to be passed in both Houses of Parliament. The management policy implemented by the National Trust for Scotland since its acquisition of the island has been to conserve the physical features of the property, to carry out improvements to the dwelling-houses and other buildings, to encourage limited commercial development which is compatible with the social and physical features of the island and which, in turn, will generate revenue for the island community, whilst preserving its essential characteristics.

The National Trust for Scotland works closely with the Fair Isle Bird Observatory Trust, set up in 1948, encouraging access to the island in the knowledge that its isolation will limit overall numbers and thereby minimise any adverse effect which might otherwise be caused by visitors. The Trust works closely with the Shetland Islands Council and the Highlands and Islands Development Board in the promotion and funding of development projects.

The Scenic Interest/

### The Scenic Interest

On 19 August 1980 the Secretary of State for Scotland issued two directions, entitled 'The Town and Country Planning (Notification of Applications) (Scotland) Direction 1980' and 'The Town and Country Planning (Restriction of Permitted Development) (National Scenic Areas) (Scotland) Direction 1980' which had the effect of introducing special planning control measures in 40 designated national scenic areas in Scotland, including Fair Isle. Under these arrangements certain additional categories of development were brought under planning control within national scenic areas and the planning authority - Shetland Islands Council in the case of Fair Isle - were required to consult with the Countryside Commission for Scotland about all major developments before proceeding to determine planning applications. In cases where the Commission and the council are not in agreement about the disposal of applications for planning permission, the matter is required to be reported to the Secretary of State for Scotland who considers whether or not to call the matter in for determination by himself in the light of all the circumstances of the case. In addition, planning authorities are advised by the Secretary of State that he expects structure and local plans prepared by the planning authorities to contain special measures in respect of areas of high quality scenery or national interest to ensure that due consideration is given to the protection of this national resource. The relevant directions were issued under cover of Scottish Development Department circular number 20/1980.

### The Scientific Interest

The special scientific interest found in Fair Isle is recognised by the notification of the island as a site of special scientific interest to the planning authority by the Nature Conservancy Council in terms of Section 23 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, now superseded by Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The effect of this action is to require consultation with the Nature Conservancy Council before planning permission is granted for any development which might affect the scientific interest. In addition, in terms of the 1981 Act, the Nature Conservancy Council will shortly be issuing to the owners a statement setting out other forms of activity which do not require planning permission, but which might affect the scientific interest and which must therefore be notified to the Council and agreed before implementation.



The Fair Isle Bird Observatory, set up by the Observatory Trust, was first established in some former naval buildings. In 1969 these were superseded by a modern, purpose-built observatory in a position commanding fine views on the north-east side of the island. In the years between 1948 and 1980 over 150 thousand birds have been observed, ringed and measured and the Observatory is now one of the foremost institutions concerned with the study of migratory birds within the European Economic Community.

#### Site Inspection

Access to the island may be made by air or sea, but is always dependant upon the prevailing weather conditions. Accommodation for the inspector can be arranged at the observatory. The Countryside Commission for Scotland should be contacted about making the necessary arrangements.

7. References to published descriptions

The following publications have already been referred to:-

- (1) Scotland's Scenic Heritage. Countryside Commission for Scotland, 1978.
- (2) A Nature Conservation Review. Nature Conservancy Council and Natural Environment Research Council, 1977.
- (3) Ordnance Survey, 1:50000 map series, sheet no 4, 1976.

In addition, the following publications are relevant:-

Fair Isle: The National Trust for Scotland (pamphlet)

The Birds of Fair Isle, an illustrated check list. John F Holloway and Roderick H F Thorne. Shetland Times Ltd 1981.

The Fair Isle Bird Observatory. Report for 1980. (Ed John Arnott). Fair Isle Bird Observatory Trust, Edinburgh.

Fair Isle. Roger A Broad and Gerry Eunson. Published by W S Wilson. Fair Isle (undated).

The Shipwrecks of Fair Isle by Gerry Eunson. Published by W S Wilson. Fair Isle (undated).

A Check List of the Flora of Fair Isle by Walter Scott. Fair Isle Bird Observatory Trust, Edinburgh (undated).

Fair Isle: Report by the Children and Staff of the Gloucestershire Fair Isle Expedition, 1980. Ed. I H Jones.