

COUNCIL OF EUROPE  
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Strasbourg 5 March 1984

SN-ZP (84) 24



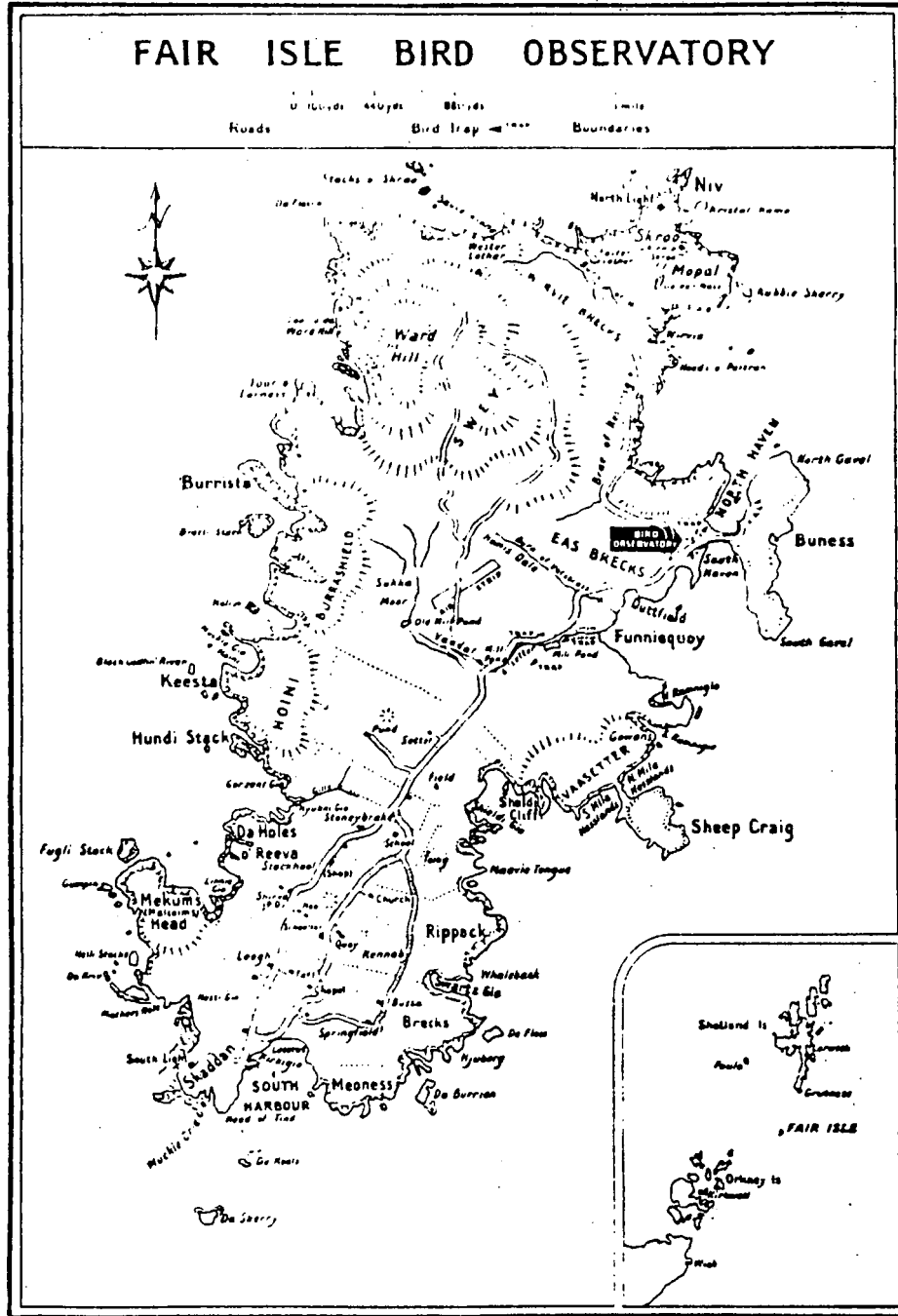
COE174481

EUROPEAN COMMITTEE FOR THE CONSERVATION  
OF NATURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Fair Isle (Shetlands, Great Britain)

On-the-spot appraisal  
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## Fair Isle

Fair Isle is a lonely place  
Not many people live there  
The wind is strong upon its face  
The waves are wild in that wild place

(Lisa Courtney)

### 1. Introduction

On 9-10 May 1983 the United Kingdom asked the committee of experts - protected areas to award the European Diploma to Fair Isle (Shetlands) (cf SN-ZP (83) 24). Having studied the application, the committee recognised its European interest, for the following reasons:

- landscape interest: particular type of site, due to the island's varied and spectacular coastline;
- cultural interest: flourishing rural community with many interesting innovations;
- scientific interest: the island is an extremely important breeding ground for seabirds and a stopping place for migratory birds.

The committee therefore ordered the required on-the-spot appraisal to be carried out and the Secretary General sent myself and Mr Peter Baum, the Council of Europe staff member responsible for the Diploma. During our visit to the island, from 8 to 12 July 1983, we were accompanied by Mr William P Prior of the Countryside Commission for Scotland and Mr Richard Seligman of the National Trust for Scotland, which owns the island.

Weather conditions made it necessary to extend our stay, which enabled us to meet nearly all the inhabitants of the island and to talk to visitors and young people on a youth camp. We were able to take a boat trip round the island; we were accommodated at the Fair Isle Bird Observatory.

In Lerwick, administrative centre of the Shetlands, we met representatives of the Shetland Island Council, including Mr E Tomason, Vice-Convenor of the Shetland Island Council, Mr R R Bentley, Member for Dunrossness South, with responsibility for Fair Isle, Mr G Richardson of the Nature Conservancy Council, Mr G L Mann, Director of Planning and his assistant, A Hamilton.

### 2. Short description of the island

#### 2.1 Preliminary comment

For further information, reference should be made to the European Diploma application (SN-ZP (83) 24) and the documentation used in preparing this report (see bibliography). The following comments reflect above all our personal impressions, supplemented by a brief statement of the natural and socio-economic conditions which prevail.

## 2.2 Attraction of the site

### Situation and climate

In an isolated position where the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea meet, half-way between the Orkneys and the Shetlands, 39 km south of the main island of the Shetland group, Fair Isle is 5 km long, 2.5 km wide and has an area of 830 ha. Its climate is strongly influenced by the Gulf Stream; the temperature rarely falls below 2°C in winter while the average over the year is approximately 8°C, according to the information provided by the local meteorological station. A feature of the climate is summer mist, observed on average 21 days each month.

### Character of the site

The island is largely devoid of trees. The sub-soil is of old red sandstone; typical features are the numerous cliffs and the varied coastline, which make the island extremely attractive. Its highest point is only 217 m, but is the most noticeable feature of the coast, together with Sheep Rock and Malcolm's Head, cliffs which rise up sheer out of the water.

There are two types of landscape on the island. The northern part is classic windswept heathland bounded by cliffs where large numbers of seabirds nest. The southern part is less rugged and rather more fertile, being used for grazing and, in places, field crops (cereals and potatoes).

### Socio-economic aspects

Since 1954 the entire island, except for four houses in private hands, has belonged to the National Trust for Scotland. The population is almost entirely dependent on agriculture, with minor sources of additional income. In recent years numbers have stabilised at around 70 inhabitants (71 on 30 June 1982). There are 18 small-holdings averaging 6 to 7 ha, with a maximum of 20 ha, not counting their share of common grazing land.

The crofters, who are a kind of hereditary tenants, keep some 70 or 80 sheep each, slightly less than half of them on the common grazing land. They export approximately a thousand lambs a year.

This production makes full use of the island's agricultural potential. The few other permanent activities are those of the teacher, the midwife, a craftsman and the head of the ornithological station. The lighthouse keepers come from elsewhere and stay on the southern lighthouse during their tour of duty.

The main secondary activities are: ownership and operation of the boat "Good Shepherd" which carries goods and passengers; boat trips for tourists; knitting and weaving (production of approximately 200 pullovers with traditional motifs); fishing; coastguard duties; generation of electricity; airstrip; Grazing Committee; assistance for the two lighthouses; Hall Committee; fire service; post; meteorological observations; lay preachers; National Trust liaison agent; parents' association; shop.

Through all these activities, self-help is a traditional institution; religious feeling (Anglican and Methodist churches) and family ties are strong.

### 3. Importance of Fair Isle in the protection of nature and the cultural heritage

#### 3.1 Natural and cultivated landscape

On a clear day the island is a fascinating sight; the typical intensity of the greenery, very varied terrains with abrupt changes of slope; a coastline which is nearly all sheer, with rugged cliffs, strange rock formations, natural arches and creeks of particular charm. In the northern part, which is wilder and strongly influenced by salt winds, the poorer land provides common grazing while the southern part, which is more sheltered and more fertile, is inhabited and cultivated on an individual basis by the islanders. The groups of dwelling-houses in traditional style blend with the landscape. Typical stone walls separate the individual fields from the common grazing land. Other outward signs of human activity are isolated fodder barns in the open fields and ruined mills beside the only sizeable watercourse.

#### 3.2 The people and their activity

The landscape of Fair Isle has been shaped and given its identity by human activity. It is a fascinating example of social, cultural, economic and ecological interactions in a small community under very special conditions. Each member of the community has a specific job to do, which is vital to the community. During our meetings, we were greatly surprised and impressed by the high intellectual and cultural level of the population, and this has made it possible to introduce really interesting projects and innovations, such as the knitting co-operative, the Grazing Committee, a newspaper, the use of alternative technologies with an aero-generator and cabled electricity network (6 km), the creation of two houses for old people, the community hall, youth camp facilities for up to 12 people and an information centre on old crafts and musical instruments.

#### 3.3 The natural heritage

W Scott's undated list of flora contains 238 vascular plants. There are three main types of vegetation: the coastal salt meadows with *Plantago maritima*, *Armeria maritima* and *Scilla verna* as typical species, the grass meadows with *Festuca vivipara* and *Potentilla erecta*, and the heath with *Calluna vulgaris*, *Erica carnea*, *Empotrum nigrum* and *Juniperus communis*. There are some ponds and peatbogs in the heath.

Bird-life has been observed here for more than sixty years; an ornithological station has been in existence since 1948. Three hundred and twenty seven species have been recorded to date. Fair Isle is one of the most important stopping places in Europe on birds' migration routes and the ornithological station is particularly important because of the seabirds. Approximately 70,000 pairs nest there, including the common guilemot (*Uria Aalge*), the puffin (*Fratercula arctica*), the razorbill (*Alca torda*), the fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*) which is increasing in numbers, and the kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*). The great skua (*Stercorarius skua*)

and the Arctic skua (*S. parasiticus*) nest on the grazing land; for them, Fair Isle is an important land-base in Great Britain. Birds are caught for ringing with Heligoland-type nets. In addition, thanks to large numbers of volunteers, some 10,000 young seabirds are also ringed each year. All observations are included in a written annual report.

The grey seal (*Halichoerus gryphus*) is found all around the island.

#### 4. Legal status

Statutory provision for the protection of the island's culture, landscape and wildlife is as follows:

##### Cultural interest

The island belongs to the National Trust for Scotland, an institution founded to protect and conserve cultural and scenic assets; the British may be envious for its existence. The island has been declared "inalienable", which guarantees it a priori protection in accordance with the foundation's aims.

##### Scenic interest

Fair Isle is subject to the provisions of the direction on National Scenic Areas in Scotland; this makes it possible to impose certain restrictions on development, in agreement with the Shetland Island Council.

##### Scientific interest

The island is classified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Any development project must first be referred to the Nature Conservancy Council.

These three outline provisions should prevent any untoward development; they also demonstrate Scotland's desire to keep Fair Isle unspoilt.

#### 5. Problems and threats

Local conditions arouse fears more for the maintenance of a permanent, unspoilt island community than for the safeguard of wildlife and sites. The following are some examples:

##### Critical number of inhabitants

With some 70 inhabitants, the population has reached the lower threshold of day-to-day self-sufficiency. It is scarcely possible to intensify agriculture, nor is this desirable. Moreover, there is no possibility of non-agricultural income. The inhabitants nevertheless clearly demonstrate their desire to remain on the island or to return to it after schooling; their high cultural level, already mentioned, bears witness to this.

### Difficult access

The island is served by the Loganair airline, but as we found, the frequent mists often make landing impossible. This makes a safe harbour all the more important; the present harbour is inadequate, being over-exposed to bad weather and too shallow. The "Good Shepherd" boat, owned by a group of islanders, is unsuitable for the use to which it is put. Difficult access causes several other problems.

### Country holidays and activity holidays

For Europeans, the Shetland Islands occupy a peripheral situation and are expensive to reach. Fair Isle suffers even more from these disadvantages; its tourist appeal is very limited and any attempt to broaden it hampered by the difficulty of access; there are the problems of transport and accommodation in the hostel at the ornithological station. In present circumstances, there is at the moment absolutely no risk of tourist over-development. On the contrary, a few improvements could bring a little prosperity to the population through limited, controlled development in this field.

### Special problems

#### Deterioration of the heath

There is a visible deterioration in the populations of Calluna over fairly large areas of the common grazing land; we were not able to discover the causes of this or the seriousness of the situation. Is this a natural phenomenon or possibly the result of over-grazing or of acidification of the soil? In view of the danger of soil erosion, it will be worth observing developments.

#### Attacks by Arctic skuas

The islanders are calling for a reduction in the number of Arctic skuas; their nesting in some relatively fertile areas of the common grazing land in the vicinity of the airstrip is undesirable. In Great Britain this species (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) is protected and Fair Isle is one of the bird's important grounds. This "conflict" situation, which is not found elsewhere, is due to the nesting birds' silent attacks on walkers; it is feared or believed that they cause sheep to fall over the cliffs. A survey carried out over several months in 1979 on behalf of the National Trust did not confirm the islanders' opinion. There is certainly a psychological element in the complaint of an isolated population which can do little to reduce the ravages of nature.

#### Military ruins on Ward Hill

The easily visible rise of Ward Hill is spoiled by the ruins of military installations dating from the second world war.



## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

Taking into account the visit to the site, many meetings on the spot and the documentation and bibliography studied, I fully support Great Britain's application for the European Diploma for Fair Isle. I confirm the European interest of the points mentioned in the report. In accordance with the regulations set out in Resolution (73) 4, I suggest awarding the European Diploma to Fair Isle, recommending its classification in category C, in view of the particular importance of the social aspects.

Fair Isle is a model of interaction between mankind and nature, without nature being in any way harmed. The island is an example for other distant regions, particularly other islands.

In view of the present situation, I wish to make the following recommendations, mostly of a socio-economic nature, aimed at guaranteeing the long-term functioning of a prosperous community.

### 6.1 Construction of a safe harbour with breakwaters

Guaranteed accessibility, and in particular a connection with the main island of the Shetlands, is the key to continued development. All the other suggestions and proposals depend on the harbour being safe which will have repercussions on all the other activities and projects. The most urgent recommendation is therefore for an improvement in existing facilities by constructing a breakwater and a quay for the supply boat and fishing boats.

### 6.2 New additional sources of income

As we have seen, agricultural potential is used to the full and any intensification, even on the common grazing land, is undesirable. To safeguard prosperity, non-agricultural occupations must be created, forestalling emigration in the next five to ten years. All possible solutions depend on the harbour being safe; this would then, for example, make it possible to revive the modest activity of specialised fishing.

### 6.3 Controlled development of country holidays

There is already a very little of this type of tourism, thanks to the hostel set up in 1969 at the ornithological station. It is open from March to October and has 12 rooms with a total of 24 beds. Each week Loganair provides three connections and the boat makes two trips to the southern tip of the main island of the Shetlands. Fair Isle currently receives 1,200 visitors a year. Once accessibility is improved, this type of tourism, at present limited to a specific public, could be made easier by a few precise, controlled measures, and would provide non-agricultural jobs. The number of beds should be increased somewhat; this could be done on a bed-and-breakfast basis in the islanders' homes. One family already has a house which would be suitable for this.

The other proposals concerning country holidays cover activities supplementing bird observation, particularly in bad weather, but they presuppose a certain number of visitors. This development of tourism should however not be allowed to harm the flora and fauna.

#### 6.4 Encouragement of other activities

The development of other cultural activities should be suggested by the islanders themselves, and then supported systematically, within the framework of a general scheme. The following are particularly interesting examples of the ideas put forward:

Information and activity centre in the old school (George Waterston Memorial Centre), with a public exhibition on social and cultural aspects of life on the island (eg traditional musical instruments, knitting, weaving and painting classes, workshops, etc).

#### Improving the youth camps

The present youth camps, which last two weeks (four or five groups of six to ten participants each year), seem to be welcome. They add a little life and create lively contacts with the islanders. Facilities should be improved all round, with the collaboration and support of the islanders. Camps could be organised to coincide with events at the activity centre.

#### 6.5 Other socio-economic aspects

Children attend school on the island up to the age of 12, when they have to go to the administrative centre of the Shetlands, Lerwick, only returning home for weekends. This disrupts family life, and is quite rightly seen by many islanders as taking place too early in the child's life. The possibility of extending school on the island to the age of 14 should be looked into.

#### 6.6 Restoration of old objects

Certain objects, highly typical evidence of the island's history, are worthy of restoration with outside help. Here we are thinking of the mills beside the stream, the most striking stone walls and a few cereal driers.

#### 6.7 Construction of a model house

All the dwelling-houses except four belong to the National Trust. As a part of measures to protect the cultural heritage, it would be a good thing for new houses to be built in the local style in harmony with the location, and with a certain standard of comfort. The construction of a model house of this type could encourage the building of others.

#### 6.8 The Arctic skua problem

Since there is no proof that this species causes any damage and is only aggressive during the hatching season when it attacks to defend its territory, there should not be any reduction in numbers; indeed this could not be

justified from the ecological standpoint. Shooting birds of a protected species would be bad publicity that Fair Isle can do without. In fact the islanders are extremely proud of their natural heritage, particularly the seabirds.

#### 6.9 Miscellaneous comments

We feel that the cost-benefit ratio of more intensive use of the common grazing land makes it unadvisable. In fact there should first be a study of its ecological impact.

The Ward Hill ruins should be removed either by the army or civilian personnel.

From the ornithological standpoint, the spread of the fulmar (or fulmar petrel, *Fulmarus glacialis*) is undesirable, but all methods for reducing their numbers are met with a certain amount of scepticism.

Lastly, it goes without saying that all outside activities, such as oil prospecting near the coast or development on the island are undesirable if they involve a sudden change in the ecological and socio-economic system.

#### 7. Afterword

It remains for us to thank all those who helped us in our work, particularly Mr Seligman and Mr Prior, whose work and friendly contacts with the islanders impressed us greatly; they also explained to us the human aspects covered in our report.

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