

SO MUCH TO SEA...

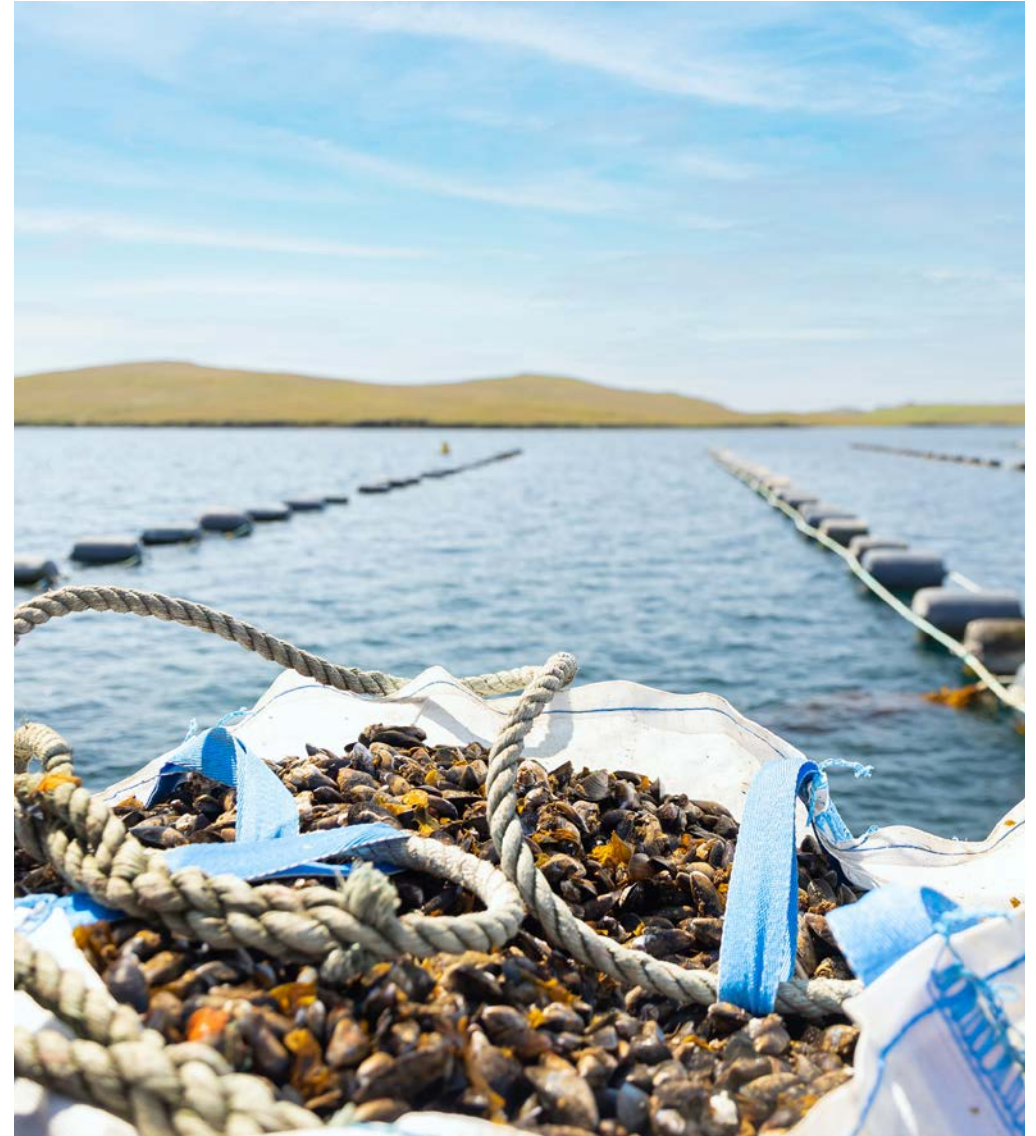
Years of the Shetland
Seafood industry



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Years of the Shetland Seafood industry

The seafood industry has shaped the Shetland Islands that we know today.

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1400-1900

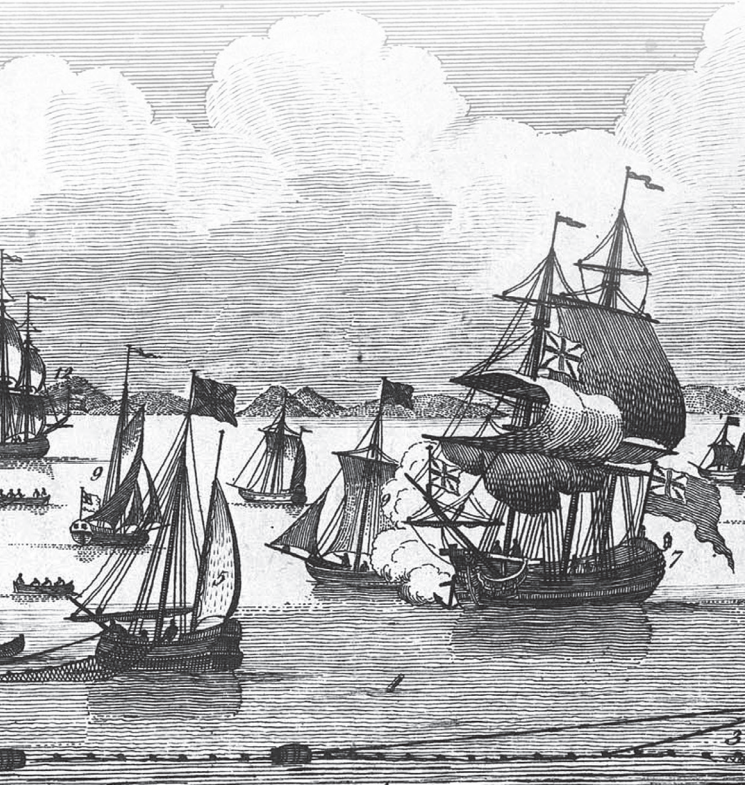


Illustration of Hanseatic Ships: On the right you can see a cog, the ship most commonly used by merchants in the Hanseatic League. They were big ships and could carry large loads. They often appear on the coats of arms of cities who were in the Hanseatic League.

15th century: Vital German trade

Shetlanders are trading their salt fish, and other goods, through the Hanseatic League of German merchants, in exchange for salt, cloth, spirits and hard currency. Trading booths or böds are set up throughout the islands, and this trade becomes the backbone of the Shetland economy.



There's an original Hanseatic böd in Symbister, Whalsay

1580-1700

The Dutch monopolise the North Sea fisheries, arriving every summer in Shetland to catch herring on their large decked boats called 'busses'. They use drift nets and process the fish on board. This industry brings a valuable economic boost to Shetland.



Hanseatic League: In the 12th century, merchants and settlements in medieval Germany came together to form the Hanseatic League. Members of the League looked out for one another, deterring robbers and building trade routes across the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. At one stage almost 200 settlements, from seven countries, were members.



Merchant: A person or company involved in trade.

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1707: Act of Union

The German merchants can't afford to trade here any longer as high salt duties on imported salt are introduced.

1710 – 1790: Local opportunity - 'fishing trade'

As the last of the German merchants leave, this presents a commercial opportunity to the local merchant-lairds who acquire ships and export fish to Europe.

1793 – 1815: Napoleonic War

The infamous Press Gangs are at large, rounding up young Shetland men with valuable nautical skills to go to war.

1820s - 1880s

For the first time Shetland fishermen are thinking beyond the bounds of their own technology and adopting new, non-Shetland, decked, safer and larger boats, allowing them to travel greater distances and accommodate bigger catches.

Cotton net has also been developed; nets are now lighter and better quality, to carry heavier weights.



Illustration of a Press Gang in action: Press Gangs would often target men with some seagoing experience, making those on Shetland ideal candidates. As a reward for volunteering men were given a King's shilling. But often Press Gangs were sneaky and put the shilling into a man's drink or pockets to trick them into accepting the money.



Laird: The owner of a Scottish estate / a landowner.



Press Gang: A group of men who have the power to force other men into serving in the army or the navy.

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c.1720–c.1900 - The Far Haaf: Shetland's first commercial fishing

When the German merchants left, the lairds saw an opportunity: they fitted out sixareens, and by the 1730s were salting and exporting Shetland fish, especially ling, to the continent.

Fishing for the laird

As the demand for haaf fishermen increased, landlords forced their tenants to go to sea and fish - or face eviction. The fishermen found themselves trapped in an impossible situation. With boats and gear owned by the landlords, they had no choice, knowing that their catch would then have to be sold to the landlords at very low prices.

This was a very successful fishery and brought prosperity to the lairds. However, for the majority of the population - the Shetland tenants - it was a time of great hardship.



Haaf: (in Orkney and Shetland) the area of sea used for deep-sea fishing.



Sixareens: A traditional fishing boat used around the Shetland Islands. Named sixareen because of the six men who crewed it, with each man using a single oar each.



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Danger of the haaf

Sixareens were made larger through the 1800s to allow fishermen to access the fishing grounds further away and, as a consequence, there was a greater danger to the crew. The haaf fishing was deep sea fishing in these small, open six-oared boats (sixareens) and the crew typically spent two days and one night fishing, twice a week.

This was a very dangerous and strenuous job and men had to be physically fit. There was no shelter and the boats could easily be swamped by waves. A peat fire was kept burning on the open boats for warmth and to heat food.

The crew would row out. Each man carried one packie (length of line). The lines were baited with herring or mackerel and, after two hours, were hauled up. On average it took four to five hours to haul the lines. Ballast stones were cast overboard to make room for the catch.

The end of haaf fishing

Fishing had always been a risky business and accidents were common, but with the added pressure of debt, the crew often took dangerous risks to remain at sea. There were two major fishing disasters, Gloup (North Yell) in 1881 and Delting (North mainland) in 1900, where many fishermen died, devastating the coastal communities.

This, combined with the upcoming herring fishery of the 1880s and the Crofters' Act - which meant that landlords could no longer compel people to fish, signalled the end of haaf fishing.



The Gloup Disaster Memorial: The memorial overlooks Gloup Voe and represents the 34 Gloup widows and 85 fatherless children left behind after the disaster.

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Haaf stations

Most beaches in Shetland were used in the haaf fishing, particularly in the north, and there was plenty of work on shore. Crews lived at seasonal stations during the summer, returning home most weekends. There was a summer migration of labour from the centre of Shetland to the coastline.

Fish curing on the beaches

Fish were landed at the haaf stations, where they were cured and dried by 'beach boys', boys who were too young to go to sea, and older men. They split and salted the fish, which were then put on the beach to dry. Livers were melted down and put in barrels. Once dry, the fish were stacked in the bōds awaiting collection at the end of the season by cargo ships bound for Spain.



Left: Men in front of the fishing bods (haaf station) at Stenness Beach, Eshaness
Right: Stenness Beach today

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Can you write a diary entry for a haaf fisherman?

If you need some help getting started, think about:

- What tasks you might have carried out?
- What you might have enjoyed about your day?
- What the conditions were like?
- What problems you might have encountered



What would have been the challenges of being a Haaf fisherman? What would have been the rewards?



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1820s-1880s

Hundreds of Shetland fishermen leave the line fishing to go to the Arctic whale fishery. Shetland fishermen start to fish around Faroe and Iceland for cod.

1830s - First national herring boom

Local merchants begin to realise that the shoals primarily fished by the Dutch around Bressay Sound each year are worth investing in and a decent sized fleet of 'half deckers' is built up.

1838-1840s

Bad weather destroys boats, nets and moorings, and this, combined with the collapse of The Shetland Bank, which financed it - affects the herring industry - and hundreds are out of work.

1886 - Crofters' Act

Lairds are less controlling and crofters have become owner-occupiers, which means fishermen can voluntarily go to the herring and potentially earn more.



Fishing grounds in the 1800s: Shetland fishermen started to fish for cod around Iceland and the Faroe Islands.



Half deckers: An open boat, with about half the area decked and decking around the outer edge.



Crofter: Someone who lives and works on a croft.



Croft: A small rented farm, usually in Scotland. The land belongs to a bigger estate and the landowner is the landlord of the croft.

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1887

Transition by the Scottish curers to sell herring by auction.



Auction: Goods are sold to the highest bidder at a public event.



1888

Bressay fish offal reduction plant in operation.



Fish offal: The heads and other parts of the fish which are removed as part of preparing fish for consumption.



Top: Gutting herring in Lerwick. **Bottom:** Fethaland fishing station was once the busiest, with around 60 boats operating from there.

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1880-1920s - Herring Boom

The Herring Boom was a time of great prosperity for Shetland - and it was all due to the humble herring. Fishermen were no longer beholden to the lairds as they could earn good money for themselves, and there was plenty of work for women ashore.

The herring fishery was of great national importance and Shetland saw a rapid development of fishing techniques, as the fleet increased in size dramatically.

At the time there seemed to be a limitless supply of herring throughout the summer and this, combined with renewed investment in the fleet, technological advances and the introduction of bigger steam drifters including the steam capstan, meant that this new fishery soon became the staple of the Shetland economy.



Steam capstan: A capstan is a winch used for hauling in nets using a revolving drum. In the late 1870s small steam engines were added, which turned the drum. The steam capstan could also lift nets from the water. This invention led to larger nets being used, as hauling no longer relied on the strength of 6-8 men. As the size of nets increased, so did the size of the boats.

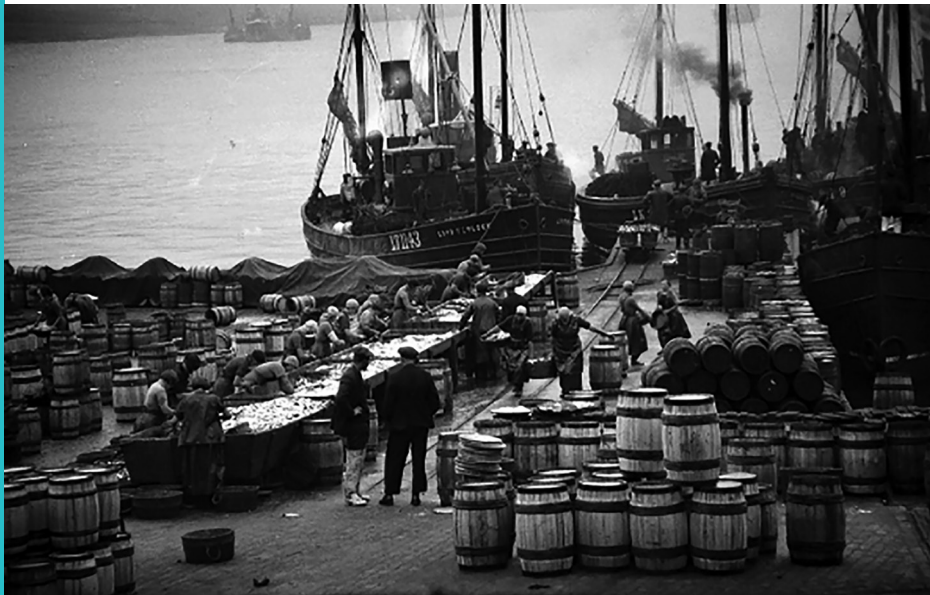


Herring: The fish that sparked great prosperity for Shetland

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Tens of thousands of migrant workers were attracted to Shetland throughout the summer's herring season and there was plenty of work on land for gutters, coopers, labourers, butchers, bakers and blacksmiths. Fish curing stations were set up throughout Shetland. The main markets for salt herring were Russia and Germany.

Herring station: A busy herring station in Lerwick



Cooper: Someone who makes or repairs barrels or casks.



Gutter: Someone who guts a fish, manually removing the organs from the abdomen.



Who bought Shetland's salted herring: The main markets were Germany and Russia.

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The Gutters – here come the girls...

It definitely wasn't glamorous and the work demanded grit and sheer endurance, but the life of a 'gutter lass' offered independence and opportunity for women who had limited options when it came to earning power.

Girls as young as 14 were given their first taste of freedom, as they followed the migratory route of the herring from Shetland down the east coast of England, gutting and packing these highly prized fish by the barrel.

Woken at 5.00am to the cry of 'up lasses and wup your fingers' the women would bind their fingers with material to protect them from the sharp knives and salt and then begin their long day which, if the catch had been good, could go on until midnight.

Based in huts at one of the many curing stations, the gutters would work outside, unprotected from the elements. Despite the hardships and basic living conditions, the girls were renowned for their tough work ethic and strong sense of camaraderie.

The gutting and packing women were integral to the success of the herring fishery.



Circa 1890's: Workers at a herring station below Stapness, Walls.

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Would you have liked to be a gutter lass?



Burra gutters, Lerwick in the 1930s:

L to R: Ruby Smith, Williamina Cumming, Jessie Smith.



Burra lasses at the gutting in the 1930s

Back L to R: Jessie Smith, Williamina Cumming, Mary Ann Fullerton. Front L to R: Lily Jamieson, Ruby Smith and an unknown woman, possibly a visitor.



An insight into gutting and packing herring in the late 1950s at J&M Shearer Ltd's curing yard at Garthspool, Lerwick.

Photo: Magnus Shearer.

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1900-1949



Fish drying at Blacksness Pier, Scalloway
(with Scalloway Castle in the background).

1901

Lerwick Fish Market established in Freefield introducing an auction price which ensures fishermen a fair price for their catch.

? Did you know?

Shetlanders built new ice houses. These were located all over Shetland and filled with ice, which was then used to pack the fish.

1914-1918 - WW1

War breaks out, the German and Russian fishing markets are closed, curers go bankrupt and life is thrown into chaos. Fishermen are drafted into the Royal Navy.

? Did you know?

After the war it was difficult to find support onshore as many Shetland women had found other work, including selling their knitwear.

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1919 - 1939

Severe economic depression in Shetland. Coal prices increase which means that steam drifters cannot operate economically. Fishermen investigate paraffin or oil engines and convert sailboats into motor boats, which is relatively cheap.

1930s

Fisherman from Scotland arrive specialising in haddock fishing. They lived at the north end of Lerwick and were known as the 'North Road Scotties'.

1945: Inshore Fishing Industry Act

The introduction of government grants for building of boats has a huge impact on Shetland's fishing industry. With state intervention and financial backing there is now great enthusiasm to rebuild the herring fishery.

? Did you know?

The Shetland herring fishery benefitted greatly from 'The Marshall Plan' of 1948. This was a structure put in place to help rebuild European economies after WW2, which included feeding people with cured herring.



The street in the foreground (North Road) was inhabited by the North Road Scotties.



Steam drifters: A boat without sails, powered by a steam engine. They had tall, thin funnels which released the steam high above the deck where the fishermen were working.



Paraffin: A flammable waxy substance, made from coal or petroleum and used as fuel.

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Recovery after WW2 - Fishing becomes a year-round industry

The effects of war meant the seafood industry had to change. With a shortage of manpower and access only to smaller vessels, a technological revolution in fishing followed. In the 1940s and 50s the recovery in countries in Eastern Europe resulted in a huge market for herring.

Boosted by grants and loans, many of the motor powered vessels from WW2 were converted to fishing boats.

The future of the industry also lay in dual purpose boats, which were adapted to be used all year round. They now carried drift nets in the summer for herring and seine nets for white fishing for the rest of the year. Fishermen were now fully committed to the fishing - and what had once been a seasonal earner, now demanded year-round attention.



British Sailors: Boats from Lord Charles Beresford's fleet at the Esplanade in Lerwick in September 1904.

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Piers and facilities to service these year-round boats were developed. Lerwick was in a good position, having established a quay, auction and harbour in its boom herring days.



What does this information tell us about how things were changing?



What advancements do you think will happen in the next 50 years from 1950 - 2000?



Circa 1948: A typical scene at Hay's Dock with wood piles and a vessel under construction.

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1950-1979



The fish meal plant: Shetland Fish Products, in Bressay was established to process the offal or fish waste from the processing plants across the islands.

1960s

Lobster fishery expanding

1963

White fish stocks starting to recover and fish processing plants are beginning to be established throughout the islands - boosting the local workforce.

1964 - 1968

There is a dearth of haddock and so whitefish fishermen turn to lobster.

1966 - Growing interest in shellfish - crabs and scallops

The Highlands and Islands Development Board provides capital for fish processing factories. Shetland is now able to compete with factories in Scotland and begins to export direct to the American market.

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1970s

Scandinavian purse seiners arrive in Shetland and, soon after, local crews start investing in this new technology. This rapidly replaces the less efficient drift nets. Oil exploration work starts in Shetland waters.

1973

Britain joins the EU and local fishing becomes subject to the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP): the mechanism and set of rules through which European fishing fleets and fish stocks are managed.

? Did you know?

Lobsters were kept alive in tanks until a good price could be guaranteed. Once there were so many lobsters that Scalloway shop owner, James Watt, had to resort to using the paddling pool on Main Street for storage.



Baskets of fish being landed on the pier.



Bringing the catch onboard.

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1950s-1960s - Technological innovation

The introduction of radar and echo-location made the fishing process much more effective, efficient and streamlined.

There were many advancements in terms of boats, gear and equipment which meant boats were bigger, more efficient and could travel further distances.



1961: Homeland LK 17 loaded with lobster creels.

Radio telephone

Fishermen could now keep in touch with other boats and follow fish movement more effectively. People ashore could monitor the movements of the boats.

Echo sounder/Sonar

This was used in the war to help with navigation, it gave fishermen 'eyes' under the sea, allowing them to follow shoals of fish as well as locating the bottom of the seabed.

Decca Navigator

Developed during the war, the decca navigator greatly aided navigation and was the forerunner of the modern GPS plotter, allowing fishermen to work safely into the night.



GPS: GPS stands for Global Positioning System and is a satellite-based radio navigation system.

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In the 1960s hydraulics were widely used on Shetland vessels, which had a huge impact on purse fishing. The power winch/block was introduced: a mechanised pulley that hauled in the wires and nets on seiners. Larger nets could now be used with fewer men. Sometimes the nets could be so big that they would cover the equivalent of three football pitches. These advances in hydraulics also meant that smaller boats benefitted, and could cope with bigger hauls.

Synthetic fibres

More and more synthetic fibres for ropes and nets were introduced in the 1960s. Despite the increase in cost, the fishermen soon realised that it was more economical to work with these more durable and lighter materials.

Mechanisation of fish processing

In the 1950s fish gutting machines started to be used. The traditional role of processing no longer took place on a beach or warehouse, but instead in a factory with operating machinery.



Hydraulics: Hydraulic systems push liquids through pipes or channels to create force.



Purse nets: A fishing net, where the mouth can be drawn together at the top, like a drawstring purse.



Seiners: Boats that use seine nets are known as seiners. A purse net is one of the main types of Seine net.



Synthetic fibres: Fibres chemically made by humans, compared to natural fibres that are found in nature and are made from natural products.



What innovation do you think was the most important?

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1974

Zetland County Council Act (ZCC) – this gave the new Shetland Islands Council (SIC) full control over the seas around Shetland, up to a six mile limit, which proved to be integral to the development of Shetland's future aquaculture industry.

1975

Shetland is beginning to be considered an ideal location to develop an aquaculture industry.

1975-82 - Mussels

Encouraged by the Highlands and Islands Development Board (now Highlands and Islands Enterprise) in 1975, several experimental mussel rafts are deployed at sites around Shetland, including Ronas Voe and Skeld. Shetland Islands Council takes the lead in aquaculture experiments and trial mussel rafts are designed and built. An infant mussel industry begins to grow.



Voe: A small bay or inlet in Orkney or Shetland.



Aquaculture: The breeding, raising and harvesting of fish, shellfish or other organisms in a water environment.



Landing a catch at Scalloway: white fish being prepared for landing in the 1960s



Michael Jamieson of Clousta with his first mussel crop from Cribba Sound.

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1980-Present



June 1993: Harvesting at Gonfirth Salmon

1980s

The salmon years begin.

1983

First salmon smolts to sea.

1983

Common Fisheries Policy and quotas introduced.

Shetland's fish industry forms professional organisations to represent its members and strengthen the islands' reputation for high quality produce.

1989

There are now over 60 salmon companies operating in Shetland.



Smolt: A young salmon, about two years old, which has turned a silvery colour and is ready to migrate to the sea.

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1980s

Floating fish factories, known as klondykers, from Eastern Europe begin to arrive in Lerwick to source pelagic fish from the local fleet.

1989

Pelagic fish processing plant, Shetland Catch, opens with investment from Shetland Islands Council, Shetland Fish Producers' Organisation and Lerwick Harbour Trust. Offal continues to be processed at the Bressay fishmeal plant.

1990s

Mussel farming is reborn - those who have been involved in early experimental mussel farming realise the business potential. Some of the early salmon farming entrepreneurs recognise a new opportunity to develop the emerging mussel farming industry.

1992

NAFC Marine Centre is formally founded (training, navigation, seamanship and aquaculture research).



Klondykers anchored in Lerwick harbour.



Pelagic: Pelagic fish live in the open sea, near the surface of the ocean.



Quota: A share of something that a person or group is entitled to. In this context the amount of fish a boat is allowed to catch from the sea.

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1993

Whitefish fleet faces severe financial difficulties due to a lack of quota.

2001

Extension to Shetland Catch makes it one of the largest pelagic processing facilities in Europe.



Right Dredging for scallops - George and Maurice Williamson off the Isles of Gletness, Shetland. **Left:** Aerial view of Shetland Catch in 2001.

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1990s - A period of consolidation

The 1990s was a period of high growth for the salmon farming industry.

It developed from a series of experimental sites to numerous independent businesses. With the global tonnage of salmon growing rapidly - often at odds with market demand - and the industry facing biological challenges, salmon farming underwent a period of consolidation. A series of mergers and acquisitions, led to operational efficiencies and the strength to withstand the price volatility, which had become a regular feature of the industry.

Nowadays there are even fewer companies, operating larger sites in tidal offshore areas with larger pens, automated feeding systems and sophisticated equipment to streamline the process. There has been a need and a drive to introduce Area Management Agreements between sites to ensure biological controls are in place.

It is safe to say salmon farming has now emerged from its entrepreneurial, high growth stage and become a more mature, controlled and sustainable industry.



Men working with salmon at Gonfirth in June 1993.



Do you know someone who worked in the salmon industry in the 1990s?

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2003

Decommissioning of the whitefish fleet through the Common Fisheries Policy.

2005

Following three decommissioning schemes the Shetland fleet is now more balanced to suit the stock levels.

2012

A world first with four Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) accreditations achieved for Mussels, King Scallops, Brown and Velvet Crab, recognising sustainable fishing practices.

2013

Plans to construct a new fish market in Lerwick are revealed.



Leading the way in Shellfish sustainability: the first in the UK to achieve the prestigious MSC Certification.



Decommissioning: Breaking down something so that it can be removed from service.

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1990s - Mussel innovation and growth

It wasn't until the mid to late 1990s that mussel farming started to gather momentum.

With the knowledge gained from the trials, several entrepreneurial companies began to look at new production techniques; long lines replaced the more traditional wooden rafts and for the first time the industry could look at growing in scale.

Shetland Islands Council policy stated that a separation distance of 500 metres must be applied between mussel sites and salmon farms. As salmon sites had to be 1,000 metres apart there was space in most voes around Shetland to establish several mussel farms. In addition, with the ongoing drive by the salmon industry to favour more offshore locations, many less productive salmon sites were converted to mussel production.



Walls, Shetland: Rope-grown mussel farming.

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Mussel farming is labour intensive and requires a real attention to detail with a focus on cost control. This has meant that the industry has, predominantly, remained in local hands.

From the beginning, mussel farming has always been heralded as a hugely sustainable farming method - borne out by successive MSC accreditation. Shetland's mussels have a strong reputation in the marketplace.



Michael Pottinger is one of Shetland's long-established mussel farmers.



Freshly harvested mussels.

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Having learnt more about the economics of fishing and how they've changed, when do you think was the best time to be Shetland fisherman?



How has the salmon farming industry evolved over the years?



A blustery winter day: Alison Kay heading in to Scalloway

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1 - Hanseatic Bod

Symbister, Whalsay, Shetland

2 - Delting Disaster Memorial

Mossbank, Shetland

3 - Curing on the beaches

Stenness, Shetland

4 - Fethaland fishing station

Fethaland, Shetland

5 - Artificial beach

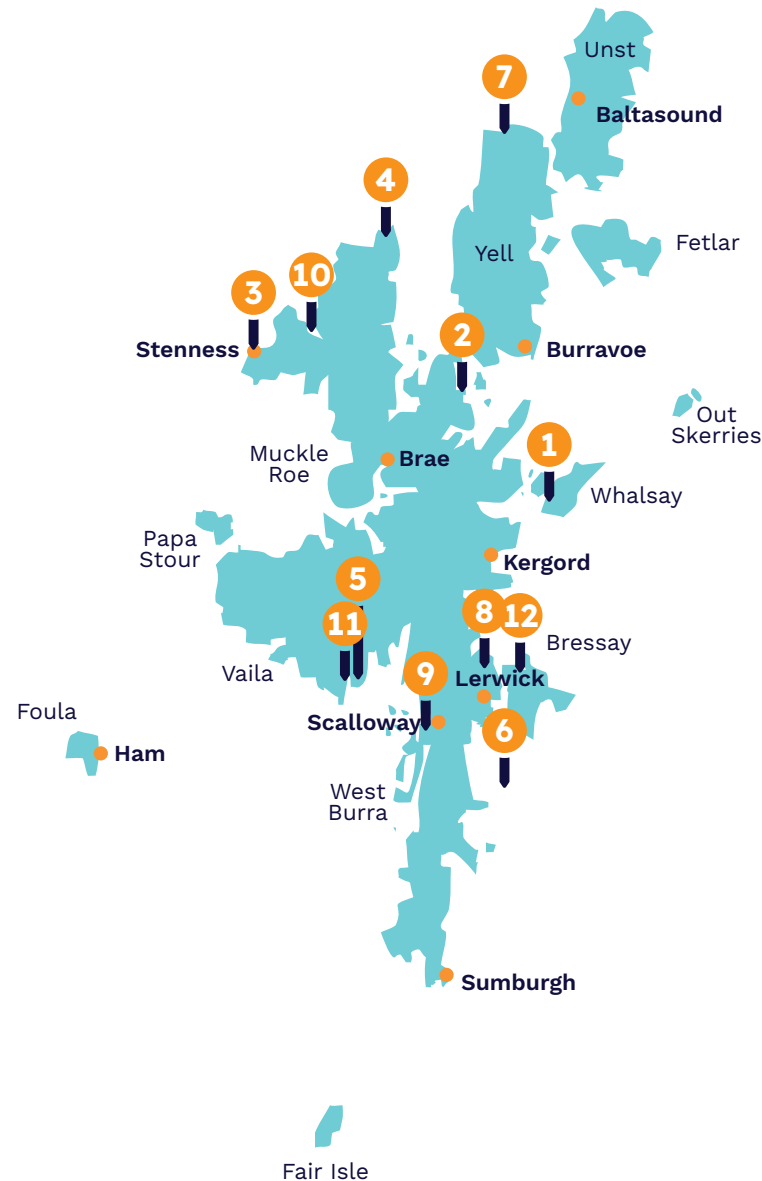
Reawick, Shetland

6 - Klondykers

Bressay Sound, Shetland

7 - Gloup Disaster Memorial

Gloup, Yell, Shetland



8 - North Road, home of the North Road Scotties

Lerwick, Shetland

9 - NAFC Marine Centre

Scalloway, Shetland

10 & 11 - First mussel rafts deployed

Ronas Voe, Shetland
Skeld, Shetland

12 - Fishmeal Plant

Bressay, Shetland

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Glossary

Aquaculture: The breeding, raising and harvesting of fish, shellfish or other organisms in a water environment.

Auction: Goods are sold to the highest bidder at a public event.

Cooper: Someone who makes or repairs barrels or casks.

Croft: A small rented farm, usually in Scotland. The land belongs to a bigger estate and the landowner is the landlord of the croft.

Crofter: Someone who lives and works on a croft.

Decommissioning: Breaking down something so that it can be removed from service.

Fish offal: The heads and other parts of the fish which are removed as part of preparing fish for consumption.

GPS: GPS stands for Global Positioning System and is a satellite-based radio navigation system.

Gutter: Someone who guts a fish, manually removing the organs from the abdomen.

Haaf: (in Orkney and Shetland) the area of sea used for deep-sea fishing.

Half deckers: An open boat, with about half the area decked and decking around the outer edge.

Hanseatic League: In the 12th century, merchants and settlements in medieval Germany came together to form the Hanseatic League. Members of the League looked out for one another, deterring robbers and building trade routes across the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. At one stage almost 200 settlements, from 7 countries, were members.

Hydraulics: Hydraulic systems push liquids through pipes or channels to create force.

Laird: The owner of a Scottish estate / a landowner.

Merchant: A person or company involved in trade.

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Paraffin: A combustible hydrocarbon liquid that's burned as a fuel.

Pelagic: Pelagic fish live in the open sea, near the surface of the ocean.

Press Gang: A group of men who have the power to force other men into serving in the army or the navy.

Purse nets: A fishing net, where the mouth can be drawn together at the top, like a drawstring purse.

Quota: A share of something that a person or group is entitled to. In this context the amount of fish a boat is allowed to catch from the sea.

Seiners: Boats that use seine nets are known as seiners. A purse net is one of the main types of Seine net.

Sixareens: A traditional fishing boat used around the Shetland Islands. Named sixareen because of the six men who crewed it, with each man using a single oar each.

Smolt: A young salmon, about two years old, which has turned a silvery colour and is ready to migrate to the sea.

Steam capstan: A capstan is a winch used for hauling in nets using a revolving drum. In the late 1870s small steam engines were added, which turned the drum instead of the crew. The steam capstan could also lift nets from the water. This invention led to larger nets being used, as hauling no longer relied on the strength of 6-8 men. As the size of nets increased, so did the size of the boats.

Steam drifters: A boat without sails, powered by a steam engine. They had tall, thin funnels which released the steam high above the deck where the fishermen were working.

Synthetic fibres: Fibres chemically made by humans, compared to natural fibres that are found in nature and are made from natural products.

Voe: A small bay or inlet in Orkney or Shetland.
