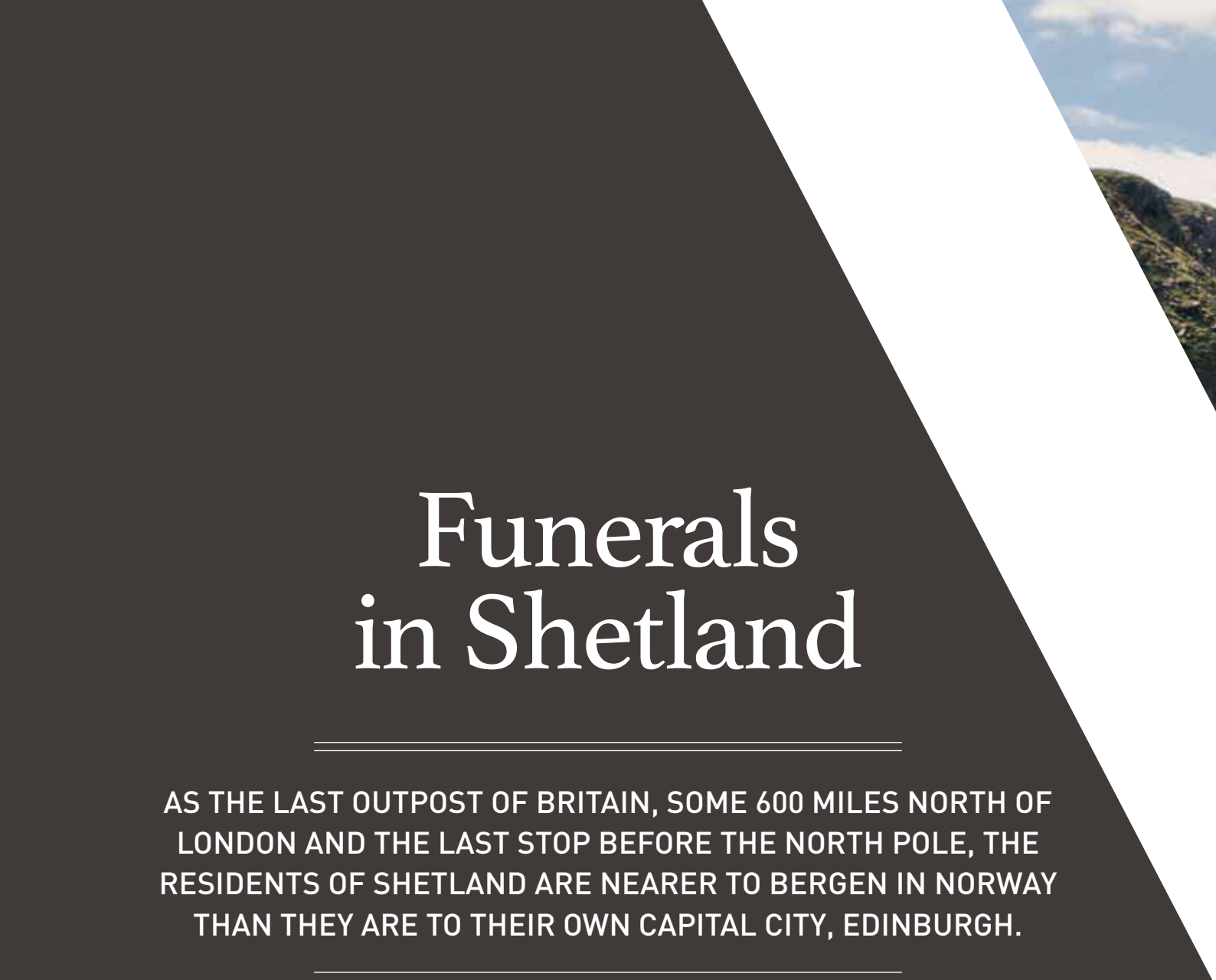




Funerals in Shetland

AS THE LAST OUTPOST OF BRITAIN, SOME 600 MILES NORTH OF LONDON AND THE LAST STOP BEFORE THE NORTH POLE, THE RESIDENTS OF SHETLAND ARE NEARER TO BERGEN IN NORWAY THAN THEY ARE TO THEIR OWN CAPITAL CITY, EDINBURGH.

A word to the wise. You are never ON Shetland, always IN Shetland. Don't upset the locals by calling it "the Shetlands" - this is a singular place. A place of beauty, a place of pre-historic and Neolithic remains, where wildlife dominates the skies and seas, from puffins to orcas.

Shetland is at the mercy of Mother Nature; the frequency of Atlantic depressions passing Shetland gives average wind speed readings much higher than that on mainland Britain. Shetland experiences 42 gale days a year. On 1 January 1992, Muckle Flugga Lighthouse recorded an all-time record wind speed for the British Isles at 173mph; the instrument was destroyed by a severe squall after 03:00am, but an unofficial record from an oil-rig, north east of Unst (Shetland's most northerly island) recorded speeds of 194mph, stronger than the winds speeds that devastated parts of America during Hurricane Irma. Two bird watchers were blown over the cliffs and the winds caused widespread devastation.



In Shetland,
Scotland, the
challenges facing
funeral directors are
unique.

It's fair to say that this makes the challenges facing Goudies, Shetland's only funeral directors, unique. They deal with all sudden deaths on the various islands, including Fair Isle, a remote strip of land three miles long by one-and-a-half miles wide, housing 61 people, where locals there have little choice but to carry out their own DIY funerals.

"The logistics of getting a ferry big enough to take a hearse over is virtually impossible," said Alan Dow, Principal Funeral Director at Goudies, which is based in Lerwick.

"If someone dies on the island, the family phone us and pass on the size of the deceased person and what type of coffin and trim that they would like. We then prepare the coffin to their specifications and transport it to the ferry. If the weather is bad and the ferry cannot sail, we have to transport the coffin to the inter-island airport to be flown over instead, and that would be our final dealings with the funeral.

"I recently attended a meeting in Inverness regarding legislation within the funeral industry, with our new Inspector of Funeral Directors, Natalie McKail. It was good to have a catch up with some of my colleagues in the profession. However, some wanted to know how such 'DIY' funerals would be regulated. There is no law saying that a family has to use a funeral director, and Fair Isle is an example where they logistically cannot."

Goudies Funeral Directors has been established for over 100 years and, says Alan, funerals in the islands have not changed much over the years.

"Funerals in Shetland are masculine," said Alan. "The men, who are the cord bearers, congregate at the chapel of rest and follow the hearse to the church or Public Hall; the coffin is taken into the venue at the start of the service, and the eight men all sit together in the front row beside the coffin.

"After the service the coffin is taken to its final resting place; the men each take a handle and carry from the hearse to the graveside. Some graveyards in Shetland have no access from the roadside so this may be over a fairly long distance and on an uneven surface.

"The interment is usually very short, mostly due to the weather. The eight men would normally formally line up to shake hands with the mourners who have attended, depending on the weather."

There are 65 graveyards in Shetland and most are beside a beach or a Voe (an inlet of water). In years gone by, most of the coffins were transported by boat or by horse and cart. All graves face east and you never turn your back to the sun, as is dictated by fishermen tradition.

Shetland is full of various traditions and folklore, stories that have been handed down from generation to generation. The Shetland Trow is but one; a mischievous creature, short in stature and shy in nature. Trows are nocturnal creatures and not seen very often, they venture out of their "Trowie Knowe", an earth mound dwelling, solely in the evening and enter houses when the occupants are asleep. Trows have a fondness for music, local folktales tell of their habit of kidnapping musicians or luring them to their dens. It is said that some Shetland fiddle tunes are said to have come to human fiddlers when they heard the Trows playing in their Knowes.

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Shetland enjoys the benefits of the "simmer din" (summer twilight) from May to July when the sun only dips below the northern horizon for a few hours. In fine weather this can bring the islands almost 19 hours of sunshine a day, but locals pay for these Scandinavian 'white nights' in midwinter when, by contrast, there are fewer than six hours of daylight. Sometimes, depending on conditions, it never really gets light at all.

Because Shetland lies closer to the north pole than any other part of the British Isles, it's the best place to see the 'Northern Lights', also known as Aurora Borealis but known locally as Da Mirrie Dancers.

Over a typical winter, a keen photographer checking the skies on every clear night could certainly expect to see the aurora several times, with quite a number of low-level displays and possibly one or two more spectacular ones.

At the end of January the Shetland people celebrate Up Helly Aa, a fire festival to celebrate the end of the Yule season (on the island of Foula they celebrate Christmas on 6 January and New Year the following week on 13 January).

Up Helly Aa is a Viking festival and includes the burning of a galley, a ritual that was carried out in ancient times when a chief Viking or Jarl died. He would be laid out upon a pyre, within his own ship and, after setting it alight, the galley would have been set off to sea to ensure that his soul was carried to Valhalla (Viking heaven). Once there, Father Odin would greet him and thus his final journey was complete.

