

A possible 17th-century Scottish merchants' booth at Eastshore, Dunrossness, Shetland

Nigel D Melton*

ABSTRACT

This paper identifies and describes a building at Brough Head, Eastshore, Dunrossness, Shetland (HU 4020 1125) and suggests that it is likely to be a 17th-century Scottish merchants' booth. Documentary evidence for the activities of Scottish merchants at Eastshore in the 17th century is outlined in order to present a context for the possible identification of the building.

INTRODUCTION

In the 16th and 17th centuries the economy of Shetland was based upon the export of dried and salt fish, fish oil and other products that included wadmél, butter and hides. Trade was dominated by German merchants from the ports of Hamburg, Bremen and Lübeck but in the parish of Dunrossness in the south of Mainland Shetland there were also significant numbers of Scottish merchants active from the latter part of the 16th century. This mercantile activity was based at both Grutness and the Pool of Virkie (illus 1) (Melton 2001, 126–48; 2004).

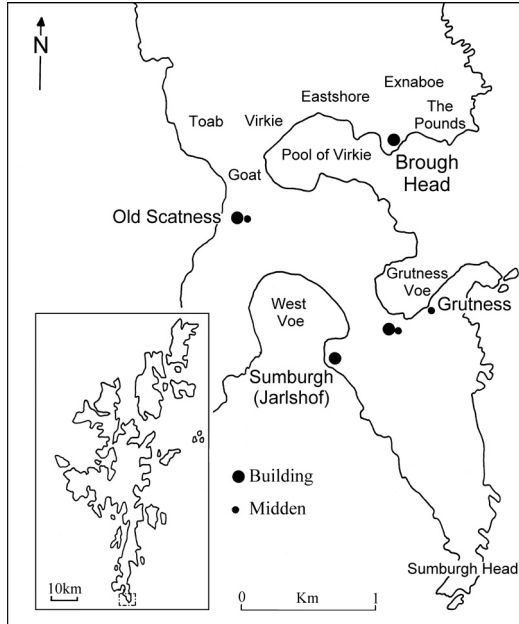
Although the Hanseatic merchants favoured the north of the archipelago (Friedland 1983, 91), the sheltered haven of the Pool of Virkie with its adjacent fish-drying beach and rich agricultural hinterland provided an attractive site for the German and the other merchants who were trading in the south. Eastshore is situated on the northern shore of the Pool. A survey of Brough Head at Eastshore that was carried out in 1983 (Carter et al 1995) described how the site, which is now occupied by an abandoned 19th-century township, was built over the eroding remains of a broch and

a possible Norse building. This paper outlines the documentary evidence for the activities of Scottish merchants at Eastshore in the 17th century. It also proposes that one building within the extant township at Brough Head represents what is possibly the only remaining example in Shetland of a 17th-century Scottish merchants' booth.

SCOTTISH MERCHANTS AT EASTSHORE AND THE POOL OF VIRKIE

The Pool of Virkie is usually associated with the German merchants, such as Gerth Hemelinck of Bremen, who were trading in Dunrossness in the 16th and early 17th centuries (Donaldson 1958, 66; Smith 1984, 14, 23). Captain John Smith, who visited Shetland in 1633, referred to the Pool as 'Hambrough Haven' (Smith 1670, 60) and James Kay, in his c 1680 account of Dunrossness called it the 'Dutch [Deutsch] Pool' (Kay 1680, 37). It is significant, however, that Kay referred to the German merchants at the Pool of Virkie in the past tense, while Smith described it as the 'Ladeplace for the Hamburgese Scots'. This suggestion by Smith

* Department of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bradford, Bradford BD7 1DP



ILLUS 1 Southern Dunrossness: location of extant and excavated 17th-century buildings and middens

that there were Scottish merchants at the Pool of Virkie in the early part of the 17th century is backed up in the documentary record.

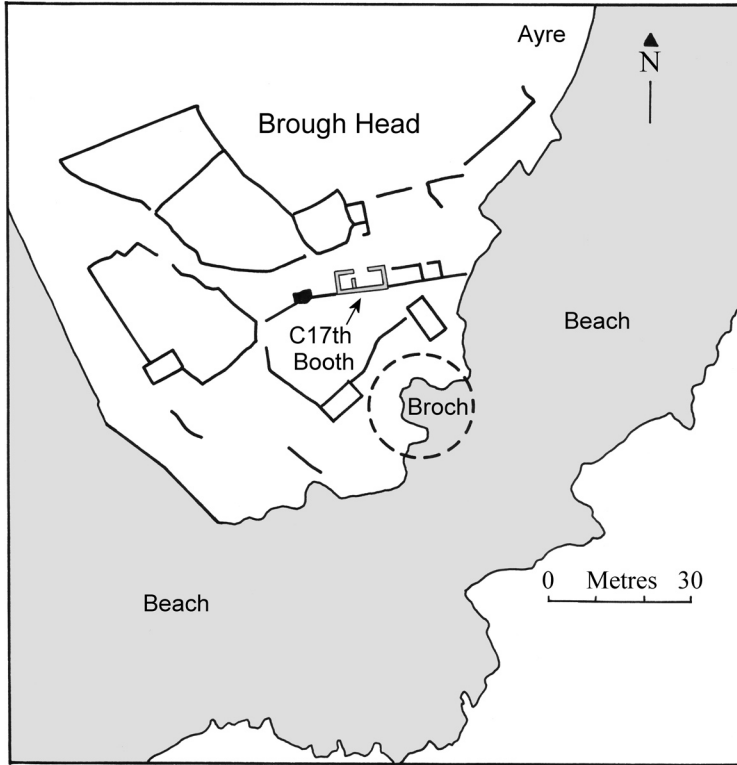
Early references to Scottish merchants in Dunrossness include one relating to a John Wilson of Pittenweem who was a party in a deal for eight lasts of herring that was drawn up at Sumburgh Head in 1596 (Ballantyne & Smith 1994, 107). In 1603 the Dundee merchants Patrick Kinnard and Jhone Mill made a claim against William Fermour, the foud of Dunrossness (Donaldson 1954, 88, 97). The merchants in these early references could have been based at either the Pool of Virkie or Grutness. However, a contract drawn up in 1611 between Isobel and James Sinclair of Quendale and a David Adesone reveals that the latter's father, Andro, a St Andrews merchant, and uncle had land at Exnaboe and Eastshore upon which they had constructed booths, houses and a yard (Ballantyne & Smith 1994, 270). Andro Adesone was involved in

an incident in 1604 in which he agreed to transport Laurence Bruce of Cultmalindie from Sumburgh Head to the Scottish mainland. He was prevented from doing this following a proclamation by Earl Patrick Stewart that barred, under pain of death, the transport of Laurence Bruce from Shetland. When Bruce disembarked from Adesone's vessel he was detained by the Earl's men and forced to walk to Scalloway Castle where he was detained for three or four days (ibid, 226–30). It may well be that Andro Adesone can be identified with the Andro Edmesburt of St Andrews who is recorded in 1604 as dwelling in a booth at Exina [Exnaboe] (ibid, 176).

These early Scottish merchants at Eastshore had established contacts with the local land-owners. In addition to the 1611 contract between Isobel and James Sinclair of Quendale and David Adesone there are other references that point to a close association between Adesones' mercantile activities and the Quendale estate. These include the purchase of a ship, the *Johne*, by Malcolm Sinclair of Quendale from his 'good friend' Andro Adesone in 1609 (ibid, 241); David Adesone's dealings with James Sinclair of Goat (ibid, 270, 274); and an action brought by David Adamson [Adesone] against Adam Sinclair of Brow for money owing from the provision of beer and other merchandise (Donaldson 1991, 43).

The range of goods being exported from Dunrossness in the first half of the 17th century is illustrated by an action that was taken out in 1628 by James Sinclair of Quendale and John Wright of Dunrossness against a James Edmistoun, skipper of Gravaland. In this, the latter was alleged to have disposed of a cargo of goods in Norway rather than at the agreed ports of Montrose or Dundee. The cargo in question was listed as containing herring, salt fish, oil, butter, dried cod and ling, salt geese, hams, reisit [smoked] mutton and salt hides (ibid, 147, 156).

In the latter part of the 17th century there are no references to German merchants in southern



ILLUS 2 Brough Head, Eastshore: the extant structures (after Carter et al 1995)

Shetland, and merchants from Dundee and other Scottish east coast ports are dominant in the local trade. They were operating from both Grutness and the Pool of Virkie. Kay (1680, 36) described the location of their booths at Grutness, and the 'Dundee vessel' taking on its cargo of fish, butter, oil, hides and tallow there. Foremost among the Scottish merchants in the latter decades of the 17th century were the Donaldsons. In 1668 a William Fergusson and brothers William (#1) and John (#1) Donaldson, all described as Dundee merchants, purchased a ship, the *St Jaine*, from Colonel William Sinclair (NAS RD3/18, 42–3). In 1678 John (#1), William (#1) and William Fergusson's wife, Margaret Rodger, made an agreement with the Dundee skipper Thomas Ross for him to sail to Sumburgh Head to deliver his cargo and to return laden with local products (NAS RD2/47,

8–10). This latter reference corresponds with Kay's account of the Dundee merchants at Grutness and there is evidence that the Donaldsons owned a house and booth there (SA SC.12/53/1, 54–5). Seventeenth-century middens that are likely to have been associated with Scottish merchant activity have been located and sampled at two sites at Grutness (illus 1) (Melton 2004). The documentary evidence shows, however, that the Donaldsons also owned land at Scolland (SA D/8/36 & D/8/39), Scatness (SA D/8/32/5 & D/8/41) and Eastshore on the Pool of Virkie. At Eastshore, John (#2) Donaldson, the son of William (#1), is recorded as having erected a booth

and constructed an ayre (SA SC.12/53/1, 116–9; NAS RS3/73 folio 256).

John (#2) and his father William (#1) were described in 1695, after the former's death, as 'constant stepple merchants and traders in the parish of Dunrossness and buyers of such quantities of butter, fish and oils as could be furnished by the tenants of Laurence Sinclair of Quendale in Fair Isle and Zetland' (SA SC.12/53/1, 46–8). After the death of John (#2), his brother William (#2) continued trading into the early part of the eighteenth century, forming partnerships with various Scottish and local merchants. The latter included the Virkie-based Robert Alison (SA SC.12/53/1, 289). The last record of William (#2) in Dunrossness occurs in 1706 when he issued letters of horning against Laurence Sinclair of Quendale over the latter's failure to meet the terms of



ILLUS 3 Brough Head, Eastshore: possible 17th-century booth from the south-east
(author)

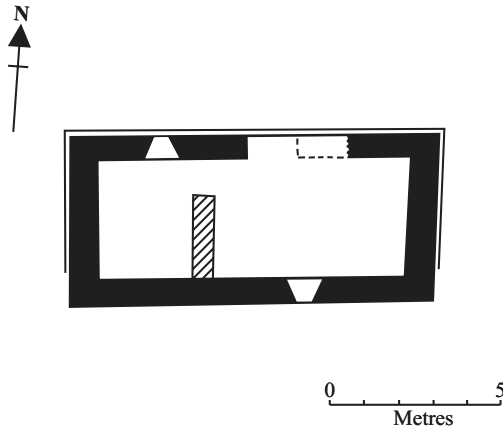


ILLUS 4 Brough Head, Eastshore: the west end of the possible 17th-century booth
from the north (author)

a bond issued in 1695 (SA SC.12/55/1, entry Nos 171 & 172). After this time the local trade appears to have been taken over by John Scott of Scotshall (Scotshall is likely to have been the old manor at Boe (Melton 2001, 140–4)). Scott acquired John (#2) Donaldson’s booth and ayre at Eastshore in 1700 (SA SC.12/53/1, 116–19).

THE BOOTH AT EASTSHORE

The location of John (#2) Donaldson’s booth at the Pool of Virkie is described in late 17th- and early 18th-century documents as ‘betwixt Eastschoare and the pounds’ (NAS RS3/73, folio 256; SA SC.12/53/1, 116–9). This position corresponds exactly with that of the extant



ILLUS 5 The 17th-century booth at Brough Head

township on Brough Head (illus 1). Furthermore, the only potential location of the ayre described in the same documents as constructed by Donaldson is the beach immediately to the north of Brough Head. No 17th-century buildings were identified during the 1983 survey of the township (Carter et al 1995) and no reference was made to 17th-century activity there. It was acknowledged, however, that there was scope for buildings of this date to be concealed in the rubble of the 19th-century settlement (ibid, 450). In the Shetland Archives there is a correspondence dating from 1943 to 1951 between R Stuart-Bruce and Tom Henderson that questions this interpretation. In this correspondence the latter refers to John (#2) Donaldson's booth as being extant and identifies the beach to the north of Brough Head as Donaldson's ayre (SA D/1/252 & D/25/46).

Given the contemporary description of the location of John Donaldson's booth as on a site that corresponds with that of the later township at Brough Head and the reference to it being considered as extant in the middle of the 20th century, a re-examination of the surviving buildings at the township seemed appropriate. It was apparent that one building, located in the heart of the township (illus 2), is architecturally different to the others, being distinguished by its splayed window openings, thicker walls and

more steeply pitched roof (illus 3 & 4). The building has suffered recent decay; a photograph taken by the author in 1999 reveals that roofing rafters were present in the western part of the building, whilst pictures in the Shetland Museum photographic archive (PO7082 & PO7083) indicate that both gables were standing in 1960.

The building (illus 5) is single storey, aligned approximately E/W and constructed of local flaggy sandstones with double-faced drystone walls. It measures 10.6m × 4.9m externally, with internal dimensions of 9.0m × 3.6m. These dimensions are comparable with those of the German merchants' booth at Hamnavoe, Papa Stour (S Strachan, pers comm), although that building had an upper floor. The Eastshore booth is divided internally into two unequal rooms by a partition wall that butts the southern wall of the building. The western gable wall, which would originally have been c 4.6m high, stands to a height of 4.15m and shows that the roof had a pitch of 45°. The eastern gable wall has collapsed into the building. There are indications, including a possible lintel, of a blocked fireplace in the western gable but there is no evidence for a chimney and it appears that this has been lost in a rebuilding of the upper gable (S Strachan, pers comm). No chimney is visible on the eastern gable of the building on the photographs taken in 1960. Other 17th-century booths on Shetland that have fireplaces include the German merchants' booth at Hamnavoe, Papa Stour and Building B at Cruister, Bressay which may have functioned as a booth (Strachan 2001, 23–4).

The splayed window openings are located in the north-west and towards the south-east of the building and measure 0.5m × 0.7m externally and 1.1m × 0.7m internally. Their location suggests that the internal layout of the building is in its original form. The entrance to the building was situated approximately centrally in its northern wall, opposite the window opening in the larger room. The wall to the east of the entrance has collapsed but there are indications that the latter may originally have been some 1.4m wide.

A foundation course is visible on the west, east and north walls. It projects 0.15m from the outer faces of the walls. Eaves height is c 2m and is marked by a course of thin stones that project 0.05m from the wall faces. The smaller western room has been fitted out as a byre for two animals at some time and was roofed in the 1960 (Shetland Museum photographs PO7082, PO7083). Although the rafters have now collapsed, the lowest courses of flagstone tiles survive in situ, together with the remains of their turf cover.

SUMMARY

A number of the architectural features present in the building at Brough Head, Eastshore are indicative of an early, probably 17th-century, date. It is likely that it can be associated with Henderson's c 1950 reference to John Donaldson's booth being extant at Eastshore, especially when early descriptions of the location of that building are borne in mind. The documentary evidence relating to the booths, houses and yard owned by Andro Adesone at Eastshore and Exnaboe at the beginning of the 17th century means, however, that the building may relate to this earlier activity. Given the documentary evidence for the range of structures constructed at Eastshore in the 17th century, it is possible that further sections of the post-medieval structures and walls at Brough Head could date from this period and a further detailed inspection is merited.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The early features of the building described in this paper were first noted by Tony Dawson, a University of Bradford undergraduate student working on the excavations at Old Scatness. I am grateful to Brian Smith and Angus Johnson in Shetland Archives for the help and advice given on numerous visits there, to Angela Redmond for assistance in recording the

building and to Sabina Strachan, Historic Scotland, for her comments on its architectural features.

REFERENCES

- Ballantyne, J & Smith, B 1994 *Shetland Documents 1580–1611*. Lerwick.
- Carter, S P, McCullagh, R P J & MacSween, A 1995 'The Iron Age in Shetland: excavations at five sites threatened by coastal erosion', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 125, 429–82.
- Donaldson, G 1954. *Court Book of Shetland 1602–1604*. Edinburgh.
- Donaldson, G 1958 *Shetland Life under Earl Patrick*. Edinburgh.
- Donaldson, G 1991 *Court Book of Shetland 1615–1629*. Lerwick.
- Friedland, K 1983 'Hanseatic merchants and their trade with Shetland', in Withrington, D J (ed) *Shetland and the Outside World 1469–1969*, 86–95. Oxford.
- Kay, J 1680 *A Description of Dunrossness*, in Bruce, J (ed) 1908, *Description of Ye Countrey of Zetland*, 30–48. Edinburgh.
- Melton, N D 2001 *Archaeological Visibility of Cultural Continuity, Contact and Change in Southern Shetland from the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries AD*. PhD thesis, Univ Bradford.
- Melton, N D 2004 'Cod and ships: Scottish merchant activity in southern Shetland in the seventeenth century', in Housley, R A & Coles, G (eds) *Atlantic Connections and Adaptations: economies, environments and subsistence in lands bordering the North Atlantic*. Oxford (=Symposia of the Association for Environmental Archaeology, 21).
- Smith, H D 1984 *Shetland Life and Trade 1550–1914*. Edinburgh.
- Smith, J 1670 'A description of the Island of Shetland and the fishing thereabout', in Macfarlane, W (ed) 1908 *Geographical Collections Relating to Scotland*, vol 3, 60–5. Edinburgh (=Scottish History Society [1st series] V.51–53).
- Strachan, S 2001 'The Haa of Cruister, Bressay, Shetland. Three generations of the mercantile Bolt family: their role in 17th-19th-century Shetland society and their architecture', *Vernacular Building*, 25, 19–42.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Shetland Archives (SA)

SC.12/53/1, Lerwick Sheriff Court, Register of Deeds.

SC.12/55/1, Lerwick Sheriff Court, Register of Hornings.

D/8/32/5, Copy sasine in favour of Robert Alison, merchant in Dunrossness, following on disposition by William Donaldson, skipper in Dundee, of 9 merks land in Scatness, 7 Nov 1695.

D/8/36, Disposition by William Donaldson, skipper in Dundee, to Robert Alison, merchant in Dunrossness, of 9 merks land in Scolland, 4 Nov 1695.

D/8/39, Disposition by William Donaldson, skipper in Dundee, to Laurance Strang, merchant in Dunrossness, of 4 merks land in Scolland, 4 Nov 1695.

D/8/41, Instrument of sasine in favour of Laurance Strang, merchant in Dunrossness, following on

disposition by William Donaldson, merchant in Dundee, of 13 merks land in Scatness, 7 Nov 1695.

D/1/252; D/25/46, R. Stuart-Bruce letters.

Shetland Museum Photographic Archive

PO7082; PO7083

National Archives of Scotland (NAS)

RS3/73 folio 256, Sasine in favour of John Scott, merchant in Edinburgh, by Andrew Bruce of Muness, of 30 merks land at Eastshore, Exnabo and Boa. 8 Feb 1698.

RD.3/18, 42–3, Sale by Col. William Sinclair to William Fergusson, William and John Donaldsons, of the ship the *St Jaine*. 21 Jan 1668.

RD.2/47, 8–10, Charter party between Thomas Ross, skipper in Dundee, and William and John Donaldsons and Margaret Rodger.