

Scotland

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Shetland

Digging into the Auld Sod (Shetland)

MURDER in the making

Two distant figures walk the tombolo between Mainland and St Ninian's Isle. Will both be alive in the morning?

Digging into the Auld Sod (Shetland)

SOURCES: Underlined words link to them.

The weekly opening scenes are remarkably similar. A distant figure walks on a bleak and deserted beach.

The wind blows.

Then comes the closeup of the walking figure, usually dressed in dark clothing, pulling the neck of the jacket neck close around the neck.

The wind blows.

Then the camera position shifts again. The waves are washing over something dark at the edge of the water, alternately covering it with more sand or stripping it away. DI Jimmy Perez and his sidekick, DS Alison “Tosh” McIntosh, will be here soon. They’ll want to know about the time of death from the coroner, Cora, and she’ll explain again about how long exposure to cold seawater may complicate her estimate.

The wind blows.

It’s the weekly murder on the British TV series *Shetland* — an archipelago of about 100 islands with fewer than 23,000 inhabitants — rivaling only the U.S. series *Murder She Wrote*, in the fictional New England town of Cabot Cove, and *Longmire*, set in nearly uninhabited fictional Absaroka County, Wyoming, for having the highest per capita homicide rate of any places on earth. The four of us are big fans.

“I think we’ve had two murders here in the last 40 years,” said our tour guide, Grant Redfern, conceding that in this case, murder is good for business. He showed us around Lerwick, the 7,000 population capital and only town, and much of the rest of Mainland, one of the seven occupied islands where the sheep graze, the seabirds soar and the wind blows.

It is the northernmost point in Scotland and the United Kingdom — about the same latitude as Anchorage, Alaska — and not close to anywhere. It took a 12-hour all-night ferry crossing on the North Sea to get there from Aberdeen. The closest airport and seaport to Shetland isn’t the Scottish mainland at all but Bergen, Norway, 140 miles due east.

Almost forgot. In addition to the murders and the sheep and the seabirds and the wind, Shetland’s economy is booming with murder-inspired tourism and a sizeable share of Scotland’s North Sea oil revenue.



Tough old bird

This Atlantic puffin is one of the early arrivals for the spring-summer mating and hatching season. Last winter he/she (they have the same coloration) spent its time fishing in northern waters stretching from Russia to Canada.



Shetland pony

The origin of Shetland ponies is uncertain but believed to be a mix of Celtic ponies from the main British Isles and ponies brought by Norse settlers 4,000 years ago. They are usually less than 4 feet tall and weigh about 400 pounds.



CROFT

Crofts are small farms, especially those with animals, on which the farm family lives, usually as tenants. In addition to beaches, they're a likely place to find a TV murder victim, often because of a land dispute.



Jarlshof

The ruins unearthed by a Scottish laird (lord) who built his house here incorporate 4,000 years of human settlement by different civilizations dating back to the Bronze Age. It is the largest of many such archaeological finds throughout the islands.



mv hrossey

Our ferry's name is the Old Norse word for "Orkney," another group of Scottish islands served by NorthLink ferries. Most place names and many customs on Shetland date back to the time it was settled by Vikings.



Dinner on the ferry

At least two of us had fish and chips. I had kedgerée, a dish of smoked fish — salmon in my case — with rice, hard-boiled eggs, curry powder, lemon, salt and cream. Its origins are believed to be in India.

Notes on photos

MURDER IN THE MAKING — The particular kind of sand bar shown here linking the islands of Mainland and St Ninian's is called a tombolo. It results from tide or wave action that works back and forth between two islands to push up a sand bar that is also a land bridge.

TOUGH OLD BIRD — Sixty percent of Atlantic puffins call Iceland home, but the larger puffin family, which includes two Pacific species, all likes cold, arctic waters. What makes them unusual among arctic wildlife is their colorful plumage and bills, which stand out in winter among other species of birds and mammals that turn white for camouflage. When they're on land for the mating season, they favor rocky cliffs where their eggs are safe from non-flying predators.

SHETLAND PONY — Most Americans probably first heard the word "Shetland" in connection with this tiny pony, whose mane and coat grow long to protect them during Shetland's cold and wet winters. There are about a thousand of them on the islands, a few of them wild. The second time Americans encounter the word is reference to wool sweaters and the Sheltie dogs who herd the sheep who first wear them. More than a quarter-million sheep live on the islands.

CROFT — This word usage is common throughout Scotland but crofting is a huge part of Shetland's culture. Most Shetland land is unsuitable for growing crops, so crofting involves raising sheep for wool and meat. We were on Shetland at the beginning of the lambing season, which Grant told us would temporarily double the number of sheep on the island's crofts.

JARLSHOF — Until 1469, Shetland was part of Norway ruled locally by a Jarl (yarl), or lord. That year, Norway's King Christian I pledged the islands to Scotland as the collateral on a dowry loan for his daughter Margaret, whom he wanted to marry King James III of Scotland. The debt was never repaid and Scotland's Parliament voted to permanently absorb Shetland in 1472. However, as Grant repeated to us several times, there is no treaty between Norway and Scotland on this matter. Shetland residents, largely Viking descendants, maintain many Norse traditions such as the Christmas-New Year's fire celebration called Up Helly Aa, which brings light to the long winter nights, and involves Viking costumes, burning torches and torching a Viking longboat, and — it almost goes without saying — considerable alcohol consumption.

MV HROSSEY and **DINNER ON THE FERRY** — The *Hrossey*, a Norse word for the Orkney Islands, and *MV Hjaltland*, the Norse word for Shetland, are sister ships that have been doing the daily Aberdeen-Lerwick-Aberdeen run for NorthLink Ferries since 2002. Each can carry about 600 people, some of whom spend the nighttime voyage in one of 100 cabins with a total bed capacity of 300. In addition to a vehicle capacity of 140 cars and trucks, the ships also have bars, restaurants and a movie theater on board.

FANCY MEETIN' YOU 'ERE — While we were waiting for our tour guide to pick us up in downtown Lerwick the morning of our arrival, I walked down to the harbor to check it out and noticed a 48-foot sailboat with "WAYFARER Beaufort NC" painted on the stern. I've been to Beaufort, North Carolina in the eastern part of the state before but couldn't believe this boat would have done that, or that I would run into an N.C. connection this far away. But I had. The woman who climbed down from the boat to shop for some groceries said she was Rebecca Hoyt from Beaufort. She said her husband, Evans, was a graduate of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, New York, who is currently working as the first American captain of the Cunard Line's *Queen Victoria* after previous stints as the captain of other Carnival, P&O and Norwegian Cruise Line ships. They had sailed their boat across the Atlantic from North Carolina to Bergen, Norway, where he took command of the *Queen Victoria*. Then she sailed it to Shetland, where she's doing some volunteer environmental cleanup work. When he finishes his three-month shift, they plan to sail to Svalbard for vacation. Svalbard, a group of Norwegian islands, is the closest inhabited place on the planet to the North Pole. Local law requires residents who walk outside its only town of Longyearbyen to carry a gun to protect against polar bears. Well dang.



Captain Evans Hoyt

Master of the
Queen Victoria



Γαντζ meeτiν' ζου 'ere

Rebecca Evans, master of the *Wayfarer*