

THE NEW SHETLANDER



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A DANE IN SHETLAND

Aage Roussell and his journey to the Scottish Isles in 1931

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PART ONE

IN 1934 a small book with the title *Norse Building Customs in the Scottish Isles* was published by the Danish architect and archaeologist Aage Roussell of the Danish National Museum. The book was based on material he had recorded during a visit to the Western and Northern Isles in 1931. There is no record of any other Danish archaeologist having visited the Northern Isles since Jens Jacob Asmussen Worsaae's (1821-1885) pioneer journey to the British Isles and Ireland in 1846-1847. Worsaae, who was to become one of the fathers of Danish and European archaeology, was then only 26 years of age. His journey was undertaken at the request of the Duke of Sutherland, among others, and with the support of King Christian VIII of Denmark. Worsaae conducted his visit in order to trace what might have survived of remains of the Scandinavian settlement in these areas during the Viking Age and Medieval Period. Although Worsaae travelled to many places

in Britain and Ireland, he did not, however, visit Shetland.

With the present Danish involvement in Norse archaeology in Unst, I have found it appropriate to do some research into this first Danish archaeological visit, in 1931. Who was Aage Roussell, and why did he visit Shetland?

Aage Roussell was born in Copenhagen in 1901. He graduated from the School of Fine Arts in 1922 with an architect's degree. During the years 1924-1926 he was employed at the Ivigtut chryolite quarry in Greenland and here he became involved with the historian Paul Nørlund (1888-1951) of the Danish National Museum, who had initiated archaeological research into Norse Greenland in 1921. Nørlund employed Roussell as his assistant on archaeological expeditions to Norse farmsteads in Greenland in 1926 and 1930.

The intense Danish archaeological activity in



Aage Roussell and his car at a ferry-place somewhere in Scotland.

Photo: Danish National Museum

Greenland produced a lot of archaeological material to which there was very little comparative material at the time. In 1930 Nørlund published, with the help of Roussell, the excavation of the church and the churchyard at the bishop's seat of Gardar in Greenland. One of his conclusions, based on details in architecture and artefacts, was that *"there is no doubt that, at any rate for a certain time, there has been direct communication between the Norsemen in Greenland and the Norse North Sea Islands or the British Isles."*

Roussell, as an architect, became very interested in the architecture of the Norse houses, farmsteads and churches and it was his involvement in Nørlund's work in Greenland which eventually led to his journey in 1931, strongly encouraged by Nørlund.

Nørlund approached the Carlsberg Foundation in Copenhagen, applying for money to send Roussell to Mainland Scotland and the Scottish Isles. This application, still preserved in the archives of the Carlsberg Foundation, gives the background for the journey and places it clearly as part of Nørlund's research strategy for the North Atlantic. Nørlund wrote that he *"through his research had become aware that there in various ways had been direct cultural links to Greenland from the Norse isles of the Western Seas around the coast of Scotland (i.e. the Northern and Western Isles) who again for their part were in close relation to Celtic and Anglo-Saxon culture. It would be of great importance to gain a better knowledge of the building customs, especially those which had been prevailing on these islands during the early Medieval Period."*

It has not been possible to establish the exact dates for Roussell's journey but from the account he later handed in to the Carlsberg Foundation it appears that he was away for 56 days. The only description of the route that seems to have survived is the one given by Roussell in his book: *"Accordingly, in the summer of 1931 the author of this short paper embarked upon a journey which took him through Scotland by way of Orkney and Shetland, the Hebrides and the Isle of Man."*

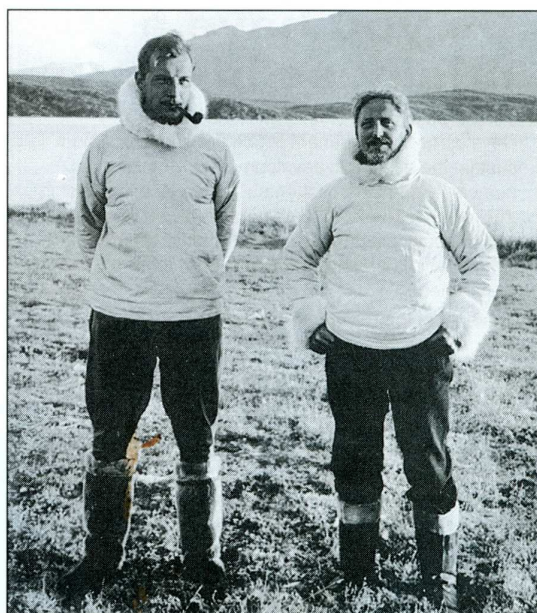
Roussell initiated his journey in Edinburgh where he arrived by steamboat from Copenhagen, probably in mid-July. He then spent some days studying the collections and archives in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland. Roussell describes how the officials of the museum in Edinburgh were helpful and supportive in every respect, but also had a very sceptical attitude to his project. He wrote: *"It turned out that in archaeological circles in Scotland it was the view that the Norseman always used wood as a building*

material, and as every relic in Scotland is of stone and earth, it cannot be of Norse origin."

At the Scottish National Museum Roussell was provided with the names of various specialists to visit as he travelled around the country. He then headed north to Thurso on the north coast of Mainland Scotland where he started to plan, photograph and describe old farmsteads, inhabited as well as abandoned. In the following month he travelled through Orkney and Shetland, and from there went to the Isle of Skye and the Outer Hebrides, finishing his journey on the Isle of Man.

Unfortunately there is virtually no material preserved in the Shetland Archives and rather little in the archives of the Danish National Museum that illuminates his stay in Shetland. However, we know that he planned and recorded what he saw as the two most old-fashioned farms on the Mainland, those of Effirth and Staneydale, both in Sandsting. Also crofts and outhouses were recorded at North Brae in Delting, North Roe in Northmavine, as well as two farms at Dunrossness, one of which was Skelberry. Roussell also paid attention to the numerous horizontal mills which he saw as clear indicators of Scandinavian impact.

There is no doubt that some of the 'local informants' whom he had been advised to contact



Aage Roussell (left) with Paul Nørlund at excavation at Sandnes in Greenland in 1930.

Photo: Danish National Museum

when he left Edinburgh became extremely important to his work. He thus seems to have had intensive co-operation with the Orcadians Hugh Marwick (1881-1965) and J. Storer Clouston (1870-1944) documented by correspondence preserved in the Danish National Museum and to a smaller extent in the Orkney Archives. Roussell maintained contact with at least Clouston until the beginning of the war.

We don't know if Roussell contacted any local specialists in Shetland. However, he seems to have chosen the Shetland farms wisely. He had very early examples, with central fire (e.g. Effirth); late examples, with no inter-connecting outbuildings (e.g. North Brae); extensive farms, with circular kilns (e.g. Skelberry). He must have had one or more knowledgeable Shetland contacts, but who they were is unclear.

The exact date of his visit to Shetland is also unclear. We do know that Roussell arrived in Shetland at the beginning of August 1931. In a postcard to his father and mother, dated Lerwick, 9th August, he wrote: "*We have now arrived to the Shetland Islands. Today, Sunday, I have had some long negotiations with locals, to much amusement for Lillie. We have been travelling quite a lot around on*

bicycle but it has now become too stormy to continue that practice. I miss the little green one! We are both fine."

The problem with going around on bicycle was also mentioned in Roussell's comments on his final budget to the Carlsberg Foundation. He obviously felt he had to explain why he had spent so much money at the entry "alternative transportation", on which he wrote "*mainly covers car driving. In the most remote parts I had to travel in the Scottish Isles, this is virtually the only way to go from one place to another. There are no railways, and the bus connections are few. Considering the high rate — up to 1 shilling per mile — I tried to travel around on a hired bicycle. This, however, turned out to be impracticable, the distances and the hills are too long and the wind too strong.*" Also, the entry "accommodation" was worrying but the explanation ready: "*Despite the highest degree of economy, I thus kept myself with food, I couldn't get below 20 kroner per day. At each location there is rarely more than one hotel or guesthouse, and they are intended for wealthy sportsmen.*"

One is really left with the picture of a hard-working Danish researcher making his way through Scotland and struggling on his bicycle with the steep hills and strong winds in order to do his job. When I started my research into this journey I approached the Danish National Museum to see if they had any photographs preserved from the journey. First the answer was negative but suddenly something turned up. A number of brilliant glass-plate photographs were found behind an old cupboard. Most of them stemmed from Roussell's recording of the crofts but two photographs gave me some insight into the way his journey was conducted.

The first one illustrates Roussell posing next to a beautiful open car, but no! — the number plate is issued in Copenhagen. In other words, Roussell brought his own car, which is the "little green one" he referred to in his postcard from Lerwick. Now, who had photographed Roussell? The other photograph probably gives the answer to that question. This photograph, taken in the north-western corner of Mainland Scotland, again shows the car. But behind the front screen one can see the face of a pretty young woman. That woman is the "Lillie", also mentioned in the postcard from Lerwick. Her full maiden name was Elisabeth Mathilde Velschou and she was the woman whom Roussell had married a few weeks earlier. Besides being a research tour this journey seems to have been Mr and Mrs Roussell's honeymoon.

(To be concluded)

Do you have a business idea?

The purpose of the Shetland Islands Council's Development Department is to help, encourage and sustain the economic development of Shetland. A number of grant/loan schemes are in place to assist in this respect. These schemes are reviewed regularly and the outlines of those currently available are contained in a brochure available from the Department.

The staff of the Department can also provide help and advice to businesses in drawing up business plans.

Please write, phone or call in to the Department to discuss any proposals you may have with a member of staff.

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