

# The New Shetlander



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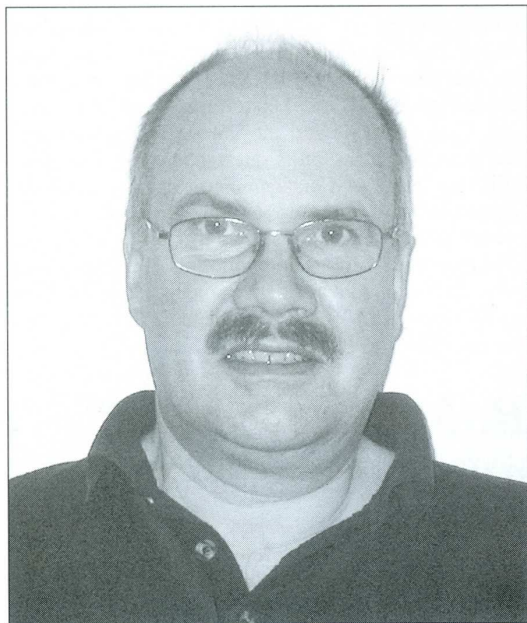
## Back to Jarlshof: Aage Roussell's return to Shetland in 1939

by Steffan Stummann Hansen

In 1931 the Danish architect and archaeologist Aage Roussell (1901-72) visited the Western and Northern Isles of Scotland. Roussell had become very interested in the morphology of Norse houses, farmsteads and churches. Three years after his return he published the book *Norse Building Customs in the Scottish Isles*.

Steffan Stummann Hansen, whose archaeological work in Shetland is well known, wrote an account of Roussell's visit to Shetland in the *New Shetlander* in 1997-8, and longer pieces about it in the *Review of Scottish Culture* and *Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* in 1998 and 1999.

Here, using newly-discovered papers, he describes Roussell's return visit to the Northern Isles, on the eve of the Second World War. Quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from letters kindly put at the disposal of the author by Yvonne Kargaard Thomsen (née Roussell), Copenhagen. Roussell's letters have been translated from Danish by the author.



Steffan Stummann Hansen. Photograph: S. Stummann Hansen

After his journey to Scotland in 1931 Roussell became director of four separate archaeological expeditions to Greenland, in 1932, 1934, 1935 and 1937. The results of most of these expeditions, and of one in 1930, were presented in his publication, *Sandnes and the Neighbouring Farms* (1936). He later produced a general survey of the then current

state of research into the Norse settlement in Greenland, in *Farms and Churches in the Mediaeval Norse Settlements of Greenland* (1941), a publication which resulted in his being awarded a Doctorate of Philosophy.

Roussell maintained communication with the Orcadians Hugh Marwick, and especially Storer Clouston, after 1931. It was these contacts which paved the road for Roussell's return to Orkney and Shetland eight years later.

### Correspondence with old friends

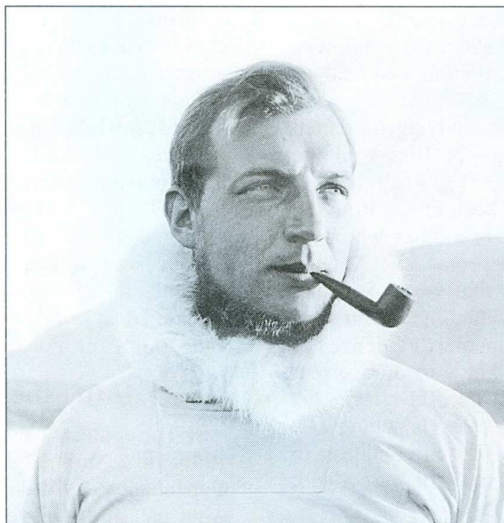
On 15 June 1938 Storer Clouston wrote to Roussell: 'I had hoped to be able to thrill you, or perhaps even tempt you to come back to Orkney, by the excavation this summer of the old *skáli* of the Orkney earls at Orphir. ... Walter Grant was ready to fund all the money, I was to superintend the operations, the Office of Works was interested, and we had hoped to attract Scandinavian archaeologists such as yourself? to come over to give us your advice' (Orkney Archives, D23/25/5/6). The whisky-distiller Walter Grant (1886-1947) was at that time sponsoring a lot of archaeological work in Orkney, particularly on Rousay, and had been Roussell's host there in 1931.

On 15 December Roussell replied: 'The very first thing I did when I opened your letter was to look at the plan, and at once I cried to my wife: He has found a temple! Afterwards I was aware, that you are of the same opinion, and I am quite sure we are right. It is a most interesting find, and I should be very

anxious to come over and see it. I am so lucky, being sent for an excavation-expedition to Iceland in the coming summer, a collaboration with Mr Thordarsson of Reykjavík and different Scandinavian colleagues - but no Norwegian! (They do not wish to take part in a collective work, they answer). As far as I can see for the moment, this [expedition] will take place in the last part of the summer, and I should probably be able to stop in Edinburgh and stay with you for some time, say in the month of June. Will that do?"

Roussell then received a formal invitation from H. M. Office of Works. In a letter of 4 April 1939 Roussell wrote to an architect whom he had met in 1931, James S. Richardson (1883-1970) of the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments in Edinburgh: 'Dear Mr Richardson. Thank you very much for your kind letter informing me that I have your permission to a visit to the excavations at the Brough of Birsay. Gratefully I receive your offer of sending me for perusal photographs and ground plans, which of course I shall return as soon as I have studied them. I wonder which point of time you would think it most convenient for me to come. The fact is that I must be at Iceland from about the 1 July until about the 1 of September. Consequently I can stay at Orkney about a week, either from about the 20th of June or first in September, according as which will fit best in with your program.'

Things were now in progress and practical matters had to be dealt with. On 20 June 1939 Margaret E. B. Simpson of the Office of Works wrote to Roussell: 'Thank you for your letter of the 9th June. I shall be delighted to make arrangements for your journey to the Orkneys. On Monday morning (26th) you would leave Edinburgh at about 10 o'clock by train for Inverness. The flight to Kirkwall takes 1½ hours and you would arrive there at 18.30. Mr Richardson would meet you at Kirkwall and make all further arrangements for you. P.S. On behalf of the office I shall deliver to you sufficient money for your expenses in Orkney.'



Aage Roussell, photographed at the excavation at Sandnes in Greenland in 1930. Photograph: Yvonne Kargaard Thomsen

On Sunday June 25th Roussell arrived in Edinburgh. The following day he went by train to Inverness in order to catch a flight for Kirkwall. He arrived at Kirkwall on 26 June, where he was received by Richardson and again met his old friends Storer Clouston and Marwick. However, the Office of Works had also, unnoticed by Roussell, planned for him to visit Shetland as well.

### Roussell and Jarlshof

On Tuesday 27 June Roussell was writing from the Sumburgh House hotel to his wife in Copenhagen:

'Then the time came when he [Storer Clouston] took me to the [Kirkwall] airport, where we met with Richardson. He and I were going to Jarlshof, down at the southern tip you know, where he is also excavating. Actually I had not noticed at all that my flight ticket was for Lerwick via Orkney. Yesterday the weather was not too bad, but today was windy and rainy and a rather depressing flight, mostly just above the sea. Now I know how it is to fly across the Atlantic, though [that trip would be] 30 hours instead of only one.'

'Do you remember the very big house which was situated right at the southern tip [of Shetland]? It is now a hotel and we stay there, together with the usual old ladies and anglers. And we stay here for tomorrow too.'

On 30 June Roussell was back in Orkney. He dined with the Marwicks in Kirkwall, and the following day he and Richardson visited Walter Grant in Rousay. On the Sunday Roussell arrived in Edinburgh, and wrote to his wife: 'I was in Shetland when I last wrote you. We had a good time there. The weather was not too bad, though cold, which it seems to be everywhere. We had a couple of good days' discussion in the ruins, and I have to say that Richardson paid the most perfect attention to me. One evening we discussed planning methods, and I explained mine to him; he put this down on paper and informed me that he would order the planners to use it my way.'

'He even suggested that I should come back next year and stay for a longer period, so that we



could go through it all together and prepare a publication. I am not too happy about that, and have to thwart it. It seems to indicate, though, that he does not regret having invited me.'

Roussell spent the Monday studying the small finds from Jarlshof and Brough of Birsay in the Museum.

That Richardson was very keen to see Roussell back to Shetland is made clear in a letter which he wrote to Mr Bushe-Fox, Inspector of Ancient Monuments: 'You must realise that we in Scotland have not had the opportunities which he has in such work. We have neither the documentary evidence nor the existence of wooden furnishings to draw from, whereas he can supply the needful from his knowledge on such matters, wooden benching etc. having been found by him in a frozen condition in Greenland' (National Archives of Scotland, MW1/966).

And in his report on the 1939 season at Jarlshof, addressed to Mr Bushe-Fox and dated 23 September, Richardson stated: 'Mr Aage Roussell, the Danish Inspector of Ancient Monuments, visited the monument on the 28th and 30th June and spent the time available with me making inspection pits in and about the Viking buildings. After due consideration of the evidence thus exposed we decided to withhold any work and to leave the investigations for underlying Viking structures until next season, when we hoped to be able to obtain permission from his department to assist in solving the problem which



Aage Roussell (left) with Swedish archaeologist Märten Stenberger (1898-1973), outside Reykjavík, a few days after he had left Shetland.

Photograph: Antikvariskt-Topografiska Arkivet (Stockholm)

confronts us. Since his visit, unfortunately, circumstances have altered the whole outlook and no arrangements for the future can be made' (National Archives of Scotland, MW1/966).

Meanwhile, Roussell had boarded the ship *Brúarfoss* in Leith, and headed for the Pan-Scandinavian archaeological project in Iceland. Roussell left Iceland again on 24 August. He managed to get away in time. A few days later Europe was at war, and communications became difficult if not impossible. The war meant that Roussell lost contact with his friends in Edinburgh and Orkney for more than six years.

### After the 'Damned years'

The contacts were re-established in the spring of 1946. On 4 April Hugh Marwick wrote to Roussell in Copenhagen: 'My dear Roussell, I cannot tell you what pleasure it gave me to get your letter 2 days ago, and to know that you and your dear wife and family had all survived these 'damned years' as you term them. We two have likewise survived, but it is a very different world we all have to inhabit now over here. Fortunately, we never had to endure the horrors of invasion and occupation such as was your lot, and further we are truly thankful. Nor in Orkney have we even had any real food shortage. ... You ask about Clouston. I regret to tell you he died 2 years ago, and I have not missed anyone so much for long. ... When are you to be in this country again? We should so much enjoy meeting you and Mrs Roussell again, and hope we may one day yet.'

Roussell also re-established contact with Richardson. On 1 May 1946 Richardson wrote to him: 'The books arrived safely. Please accept my warmest thanks for them. The parcel came like the dove to the Ark, for then I knew that you were safe and once more actively engaged in your own particular work. Little more than a week ago I was in company of John Bøe from Bergen, and I got from him slight news of you. It was therefore in my mind to write you and link up again that chain of friendship which was snapped by cruel war.'

'When war came about I was in Shetland working at Jarlshof on the Viking buildings. Then everything was stopped, and I hope to see the place again in June, when I am making a short visit of inspection to our monuments in the northern islands. All these places escaped damage, although at Jarlshof a bomb landed alongside the excavation. During the war I managed my work single handed, and my main job was to keep the Military from destroying ancient sites and structures which lay within the many training areas that were taken over

throughout the mainland and islands of Scotland. ... I had expected that we would have been in a position to restart some of our smaller work this season, but difficulties still curtail our efforts, viz. a lack of money and labour. The latter is in demand for the building of houses which are greatly needed. I hope that next year will yield something in the way of progress. I should like to see the Viking excavations completed and documented, and in this particular venture I do hope that what we had in view in the summer of 1939 [will take place], namely that you will be available with the permission of your Department to come and elucidate the features of these buildings of which you know so much about.

'So far I have not had the time to read your books, but will do so as soon as possible. You will probably recollect that on the Brough of Birsay, where we have the characteristic long houses stretching down the sloping ground towards the sea channel that separates the Brough from the mainland, we have also a communal dwelling on the east side of the monastic precinct which I always took to be of the Icelandic type.

'Will you please give me some idea as to whether you can give some help at the Viking excavations, and then I can take the matter up officially with the Head Office of the Ministry of Works in London, and get your appointment fixed through the Foreign Office. I am particularly anxious to get something done, as my time in the service is now limited to two more years. I reached the retiring age nearly three years ago!'

On the same day he sent another letter to Rousell: 'Paper shortage put a stop to official publications, our stock of guide books to ancient monuments ran out and nothing has been so far to produce new editions. ... It is a pity that the British Government do not appreciate the science and study of antiquity. When times were good they would produce the money for work connected therewith, but they denied the personnel that should have existed to supervise and give guidance. Thus we found ourselves in a difficult position when excavations were undertaken, for oftimes the Ancient Monuments branch of the Ministry of Works had to step in and carry on a work started by other people, with the result we got landed with more we could digest.'

### **Rousell's farewell to the North Atlantic**

At the Jarlshof site the excavations, conducted by Alexander O. Curle, had already been going on at the time of Rousell's first visit to Shetland in 1931. However, it was not until 1934 that the first

Scandinavian house was uncovered there. So Jarlshof was of much greater interest to Rousell during his second visit.

It is obvious that Rousell was regarded a leading authority in the field of Scandinavian architecture by his Scottish colleagues. Rousell, however, was reluctant to get too heavily involved in their activities, and Richardson's plea to him to help with methods of planning and drawing was never fulfilled. Neither was his plan to get Rousell involved in the publication of Jarlshof. Thus the plans of the Viking houses, which eventually turned up in Hamilton's publication of Jarlshof, show little, if any, resemblance to Rousell's plans from Greenland. Had Rousell involved himself in this work, we might have seen a much more standardised and homogeneous form of publications on the North Atlantic.

The reason for Rousell's reluctance was probably that he now had a permanent position in the Medieval Department of the National Museum in Copenhagen, and had little time to pursue his work in the North Atlantic. He probably regarded his thesis of 1941 as his final contribution to research into North Atlantic archaeology.

Interestingly, in 1957, Rousell published his last and only contribution to North Atlantic archaeology after the Second World War – a review of Hamilton's publication of Jarlshof (*Archaeological Journal*, vol. 114).

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## ***To all I sail with***

*Leaving Ireland*

*the sea is like old paintings,*

*each lump an oily brush stroke.*

*Through the ice white light of a force five*

*I watch a trawler ship green water by her bow,*

*homeward bound,*

*and I think of you*

*all of you*

*all around these oceans.*

*Are you home?*

*Are you warm?*

*Are you safe?*

*Are you still in love?*

*Of course you are,*

*you always are.*

*We all are,*

*our hearts broken down by these oceans*

*their pieces scattered on every shore.*

***Rachel Eunson***