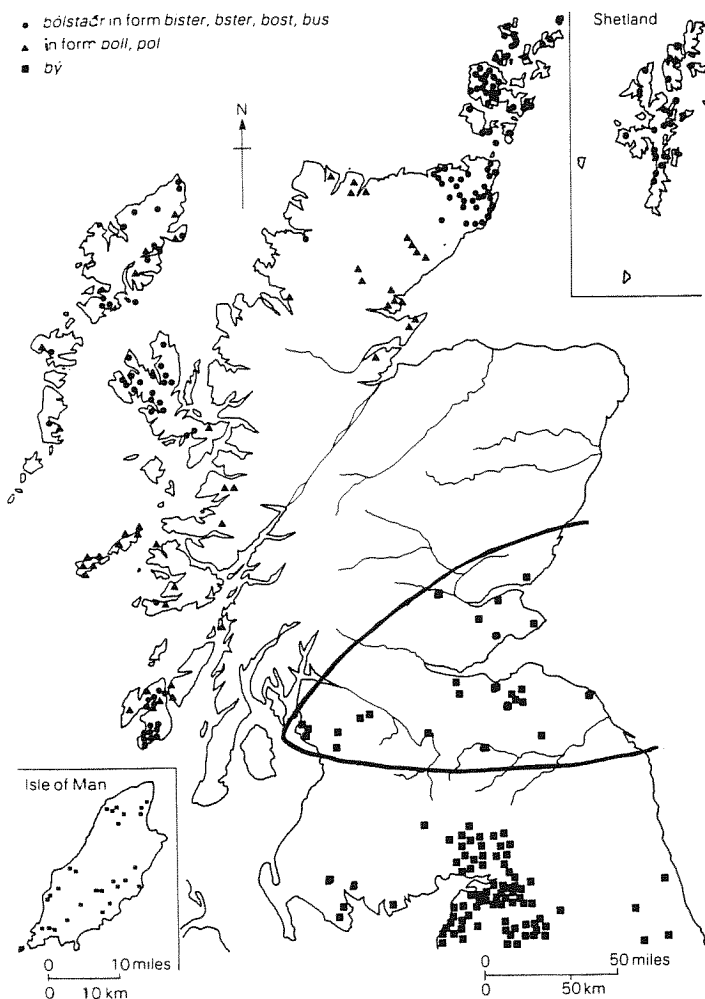


**Map 2.** The distribution of place-names in *-bólstaðr* and *-bý* in Scotland, northern England, and the Isle of Man; adapted from Barbara E. Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland* (Leicester, 1987), 99, with the permission of the author and of the publishers.



## Shetland Place-Names

Doreen J. Waugh

THE place-names of Shetland are of particular interest to me because I spent my childhood in the islands and I return at regular intervals as a visitor and an interested observer of the profound Scandinavian influence on the Shetland way of life. In fact, people in Shetland now regard themselves as neither Scandinavians nor Scots, but as Shetlanders. The echoes of Scandinavian forebears are all around, however, particularly in dialect and in place-names, and there is a strong feeling of cultural affinity with Norway—an affinity which certainly exists but is occasionally fuelled by feelings of alienation from government in London which seems remote both in terms of physical distance and of sympathy towards the needs of an outlying island community.

Sullom Voe and its oil installation have changed governmental perception of the islands, which are, once again, at the centre of vitally significant North Sea activities, as they were in Viking times. It seems appropriate that the name *Sullom* should be at the forefront of the oil bonanza, just as it must have been at the forefront of the Norse settlement of the Shetland Islands. ON *heimr* is a general term for 'dwelling place'; and, although names containing the element are frequent in Norway, they are mainly pre-Viking and only a few examples crop up in Shetland. Jakob Jakobsen cites ten, some more convincing than others.<sup>1</sup> Among those which have parallels in Norway are *Sullom* < *sólheimr* 'sunny' and *Sodom* < *suðheimr* 'south'. *Sodom* is where the eminent Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid lived while in semi-exile on the island of Whalsay; the Biblical connotations of the name would surely not have been lost upon him.

The Whalsay connection, in fact, leads me on to the man whose life's work forms the basis of this paper. John Stewart, whose book *Shetland Place-Names* was published posthumously in 1987,<sup>2</sup> was born in Whalsay on 18 July 1903. He worked as a teacher in Aberdeen, but had a variety of linguistic and historical interests which he pursued throughout his life. He had a deep interest in the Shetland dialect and its Scandinavian origins, but his major enthusiasm, commemorated in this book, was his study of the local place-names. As is pointed out in the introduction to the book:

<sup>1</sup>He had studied with relish the remarkable work of Jakobsen and Olsen and the 18 volumes of *Norske Gaardnavne* and in 1950 he conceived a massive

project to record the place-names of Shetland as far as they were remembered at that date. ... Over a period of several years he laboured diligently to put this mass of material in order, adding to it when and where the opportunity arose.<sup>3</sup>

What appears in this volume is a comprehensive study of Shetland island- and farm-names extracted from the vast amount of material collected by Stewart and, no doubt, inspired by the work of Hugh Marwick, whose scholarly study of Orkney farm-names appeared in 1952.<sup>4</sup>

Stewart's material is organized according to the supposed Old Norse generic in each name, rather than topographically. This organization has disadvantages for the anyone unfamiliar with the situation of the names, but I found it helped to give me a clear mental picture of the element distribution, from which it becomes possible to deduce something of what the Norse found when they came to the islands and, consequently, something of the way in which they chose to settle in their newly acquired territory.

One place-name indicator of pre-Norse habitation is ON *papi* 'priest', which is a reference to the *Papar*, the Irish anchorites who, it is thought, 'sought remote islands in order to shun all intercourse with men',<sup>5</sup> although some arguments against this isolationist theory have recently been put forward.<sup>6</sup> These *Papar* were, obviously, known to the early Norwegian Vikings when the latter were establishing bases as jumping-off points for raids further south and west; and there are names containing the element scattered along the western coastline of Shetland. To place these initial Viking sorties in a time-scale, I refer the reader to Dr Barbara Crawford's description of the initial process of 'ness-taking' (ON *nes-nám*) by the Vikings, which was a preliminary to permanent conquest. Dr Crawford suggests that this process may have started

'before the first historical record of the raids in the late eighth century and continued perhaps until the establishment of the [Orkney] earldom in the second half of the ninth.'<sup>7</sup>

After considering a variety of generics, only some of which I shall discuss here, I have formed the distinct impression that these Viking raiders appeared initially in the islands to the north of mainland Shetland (Unst, Yell and Fetlar) and thereafter made their way down the west coast, *viâ* Mavis Grind (ON *mæveiðsgrind* 'gateway of the narrow isthmus') to the south of the islands. The *papi*-names recorded by Stewart reflect such a progress (Fig.1). Viking raiders probably took note of the Irish priests as they sailed southwards on their pillaging forays, and 'took note' is almost certainly a euphemism, in view of finds such as the Celtic treasure

buried on St Ninian's Isle and never retrieved by the unfortunate person or persons who buried it.

Before going on to the ON generic *-borg* 'broch', I shall introduce readers to a few island names, some of which have already been referred to in passing (Fig.2). The names of the islands to the north—Unst, Yell and Fetlar, where I believe the Norse made their initial landfall—are obscure, and it is generally accepted that they are pre-Norse. Probably the early Norse raiders acquired knowledge of these local Pictish place-names because of their locational significance on the raiding-route. The specific in the name *Shetland* itself has likewise defied numerous attempts at clarification.<sup>8</sup> In the sagas the name is frequently recorded as *Hjaltland*, in which ON *hjalt* translates as 'boss or knob at the end of a sword's hilt'; and people have interpreted this visually in terms of the shape of the islands, with the south end of the mainland being the blade, but it is very much more likely that the name is a reinterpretation of a pre-Norse name.

The names of the other larger islands are mostly of Scandinavian origin, although in some instances the nature of the specific is obscure, as noted below:

<b>Out Skerries</b>	ON <i>sker</i> 'skerry, isolated rock in the sea'. <i>Out</i> is probably a later English addition.
<b>Whalsay</b>	ON <i>hvalr</i> 'whale' + <i>ey</i> 'island'.
<b>Bressay</b>	Possibly the Scandinavian personal name <i>Brusi</i> + <i>ey</i> .
<b>Mousa</b>	Specific of doubtful derivation, possibly ON <i>mosi</i> 'moorland, moss' + <i>ey</i> .
<b>Burra Isle</b>	ON <i>borg</i> 'fort' + <i>ey</i> .
<b>Foula</b>	ON <i>fugl</i> 'bird' + <i>ey</i> .
<b>Muckle Roe</b>	Recorded in 1642 as <i>Ru Øy Stour</i> 'big red island' < <i>rauðr</i> 'red' + <i>ey</i> + <i>stórr</i> 'large' (later replaced by Scots <i>muckle</i> ).

Having briefly considered these island names, which may be used as points of reference, let us return to the ON generic *-borg* 'broch', which can, arguably, be seen as an approximate indicator of the extent of Pictish settlement in the time immediately prior to the advent of the Viking raiders. Not that the original broch-dwellers were still in existence—they predate the Vikings by several centuries—but the brochs themselves were an excellent source of building stone and, where excavation has taken place, it has often revealed a sequence of settlement activity, sometimes stretching back to neolithic times. For instance, the *Orkney and Shetland* volume in the series 'Exploring Scotland's Heritage' published by the Royal Commission for Ancient and Historical Monuments in Scotland has

the following comment:

'It is likely that many broch sites where there are extensive remains of outbuildings would on excavation yield evidence of Pictish occupation long after the broch itself had ceased to be used.'<sup>9</sup>

It can be seen from the distribution map (Fig.3) that, apart from the attractions of readily available building stone plus land which had already been broken into cultivation, the broch sites would have appealed to the Norse in that many were built in coastal locations, for defensive reasons. The brochs are scattered throughout the islands, from north to south, and where there are brochs there is also subsequent Scandinavian settlement, but whether that settlement is consecutive or not remains debatable. I would argue that it is.

ON **borg** (gen. sing. *borgar*) can occur both as specific and as generic in Shetland place-names. As specific, it usually takes the form *Burra-*, as in *Burrafirth* (Unst), *Burravoe* (Yell), *Burraness* (the former name of Mossbank on the north mainland, renamed in the eighteenth century after the laird's house), *Burradale* (West Mainland), and *Burraland* (Sandwick). The generic in these names is more often than not topographical. As generic, ON **-borg** usually takes the metathetic form *broch*, sometimes shortened to [brɔ] ?[brə], as in *Sumburgh* and *Scousburgh*, but this loss of the final fricative [χ] is a relatively recent development. Stewart suggests some fairly imaginative specifics in *-broch* compounds, but the general pattern is one of reference to size, position, some feature of the surrounding topography, and the occasional personal name, which could be said of many Scandinavian habitative generics. The element also frequently occurs in the simplex form *Brough*. I should also point out that in Shetland ON **borg** is generally used of a broch rather than in its secondary meaning of 'dome-shaped hill'.

These *broch* names, therefore, give a strong impression of continued site use, but one suspects that the sites were not seen as being of prime agricultural value, because the place-names which are most frequently juxtaposed with *broch* names are *Houll*, *Houlland* and other variants thereof, in which *houll* represents ON *hóll* 'hill, height'. Both *broch* and *houll* names are present in quantity in the north isles, particularly Yell and Unst, and Stewart points out that 'they are generally in long-occupied land, and may be regarded as original names.'<sup>10</sup> In a few cases, the broch is now identified as, for instance, 'The Brough o' Houlland'. Brochs were built on high land and promontories for defensive reasons, as has already been pointed out, but such siting would also have had the desirable side-effect of leaving the good agricultural land free for cultivation—a feature which is often observable in the siting of many

Scandinavian settlements as well, and indeed is still true of Shetland croft houses in the twentieth century. One cannot afford careless liberality with the limited good land in Shetland.

Readers who are familiar with the Old Norse term *péttr* 'Pict' may wonder why I have chosen to neglect it, as it seems a potentially obvious indicator of previous occupation. The people using the plentiful supply of broch stone in their buildings in the period immediately prior to the arrival of the Scandinavians would have been Picts. The reason for this omission is that Stewart lists only one example of a croft name containing *péttr*: *Pettyfirth* on the island of Bressay, hardly meriting a distribution map. The element does occur in topographical references such as *Pettadale* and *Pettawater*, but the situation of the places concerned is such that it is difficult to believe that anybody ever coaxed anything out of the surrounding acid soil. Such names may date from a time when the Norse were fully established in Shetland and may reflect a vestigial memory of earlier inhabitants who had been pushed to the fringes of extinction by the numerically superior Norse.

Another group of names which certainly slots in alongside *broch* names as an indicator of early settlement-distribution is that consisting of those topographical names which have referred to habitation from their inception, an assumption which one can reasonably make because they have largely survived as the village names of today. Village names are not exhaustively recorded on the accompanying map (Fig.5), but are shown in sufficient numbers to indicate the extent to which the purely topographical names are interspersed with *broch* names (cf. Fig.3). This could mean that, in these latter names also, brochs were mentioned simply as a feature of the local topography; but, where archaeological information is available, the Norse settlement does appear to be adjacent to the broch: this points to rather more than admiration of the broch as a topographical feature. It may also be that the indigenous population, being knowledgeable about the farming potential of the area and the techniques required for success, provided an excellent source of forced labour. A great deal of archaeological work needs to be done before we can hope to understand more about the period of transition from Picts to Scandinavians.

Initially, I had hopes of finding place-names containing Scandinavian habitative generics such as *-staðir* and *-bólstaðir* (both general terms for 'farm') situated in obvious tandem with place-names containing *-borg*; but, as is often the case, these hopes of incontrovertible clarity in place-name evidence proved to be a little naïve. There does, however, appear to be some correlation between place-

names containing **-staðir** and place-names containing **-borg**, particularly in the northern part of the islands. For instance, the following **-staðir** names occur in close proximity to broch sites:

<b>Baliasta</b>	Adjacent to Brough (Unst).
<b>Ugasta, Oddsta</b>	Adjacent to Brough (Fetlar).
<b>Wethersta</b>	Adjacent to Burravoe (Brae).
<b>Benston</b>	Adjacent to Brough (Nesting).
<b>Clousta</b>	Adjacent to Noonsburgh (Aithsting).
<b>Blosta</b>	Adjacent to Cunningsburgh.

The emphasis in the specifics used with **-staðir** is on personal ownership, which points to carving up of land at a time when the islands were rapidly filling up with incomers from the Norwegian homeland.

In fact, it seems likely that such elements as **-staðir**, **-bólstaðr** and **-setr** were used by Scandinavians who had no doubts about the security of their situation in the islands, and who were, therefore, intent on dividing up the best land for farming purposes, having subjugated or partially wiped out the local population. Farms with names in **-staðir** may not represent primary settlement, but all the evidence points to the fact that, like **-bólstaðr** and **-setr**, the element was in vogue at the beginning of the mass Scandinavian incursion into the northern isles. Stewart points out that all the **-staðir** names appear in early rentals or valuation rolls; and it is true to say that some of the farms are situated on very good land indeed. The early rentals are useful in identifying **-staðir** names because, although the modern ending is usually **-sta**, the form **-ster** also occurs as a result of confusion with the pervasive **-setr** and, without the early rentals, it would be impossible to tell that these names contain **-staðir** rather than **-setr**.

The distribution of **-staðir** is slightly puzzling (Fig.6). There is a marked presence in the north isles, as one has come to expect, and there are also a few names scattered along the route to the south and the west, bypassing North Mavine, where the land does not, for the most part, readily yield to cultivation. Thereafter, there is a noticeable cluster of names in the central mainland and on the island of Bressay, reflecting, I would suggest, some feature of the social and political organization of the islands at the time, as well as the attractive quality of the land. It seems no accident that the only example of the name *Tingwall* (< *þingvöllr* 'parliament field') is in the heart of this central area at a spot which is easily accessible by sea from the north, west and south, and by land from the east through the long and fertile valley now known as the Tingwall valley. There were other local assemblies, subsidiary to the

main one at Tingwall, and these are now commemorated in the following district names: *Delting*, *Lunnasting*, *Nesting*, *Aithsting* and *Sandsting* (also two lost names, *Rauðarðing* and *Þveitadring*).

I have already mentioned the generic **-bólstaðr** (modern reflex **-bister**), which is like **-staðir** in that it is relatively rare in the north, west and south mainland of Shetland (Fig.7). There is a scattering through the north isles, down the east coast, and centrally. It is tempting to see the east-coast development, in particular, as exploitation of new territory, because none of the elements which we have so far looked at appears in any marked quantity on the east side of the mainland, towards the north. Stewart comments on the marked linkage between place-names containing **-bólstaðr** and the incidence of chapels, which definitely suggests an established Scandinavian community which had been converted to Christianity after contact with Celtic peoples, whether locally or further to the south.

Names in **-bólstaðr** are a feature of the colonizing period and they are more frequent in the Norse colonies than in Norway, although they are almost totally absent from Faroe. In the course of my work on Caithness place-names, I have noted that **-bólstaðr** names are, in some respects, parallel in application to Gaelic **achadh** names.<sup>11</sup> The term **achadh** probably started life as a reference to a field and, as these fields became small farms, so the term itself developed in meaning to 'farm'. In Gaelic-Norse hybrid names in Caithness, **achadh** is often combined with an earlier Norse name containing **-bólstaðr**. It is tempting to imagine one of the local Norse magnates in Shetland acquiring status in both the temporal and the spiritual community by donating one of his fields for the building of a chapel.

Stewart comments that farms with names in **-bólstaðr** seem to have a closer connection with the sea than those with ones in **-staðir**; but I am sure neither that I entirely agree with this observation nor what to deduce from it if it should be accurate. Certainly one can turn to Stewart's observation that the average **-bister** farm in Shetland is half as big as the average **-sta** farm, and suggest that the occupants of such farms might have needed to supplement their diet from the sea; but, conversely, one could argue that, because these farms are situated on the more fertile coastal land, a unit half the size could provide an adequate living without excessive dependence on sea-fishing. It is, in fact, probable that fishing was important in both instances, because, while some of the **-sta** farms are inland, they are usually situated near one of the numerous lochs which are dotted around Shetland's landscape.

The specifics which combine with *-bólstaðr* differ markedly from those which combine with *-staðir*. There are no personal-name specifics. All are references either to the nature of the land, e.g., *Fladdabister* 'flat', *Breibister* 'broad', *Wadbister* 'beside water'; or to the position of the unit in relation to other units in a community of farms, e.g., *Evrabister*, *Nedrabister*, *Outrabister*, *Norrabister*, *Sundrabister* and so on; or, finally, to some significant man-made object on the portion of land, e.g., *Kirkabister* 'church', *Crossbister* 'wayside cross', *Husabister* 'house'. One is left with the impression of a relatively humble unit in the onomastic social scale.

The last element to be discussed in this paper is *-setr/sætr*; and the singular 'element' is used advisedly because it is impossible to distinguish between *setr* 'hill farm' and *sætr* 'shieling' in most Shetland place-names. The generic *-setr* had a much longer life in Shetland than either *-staðir* or *bólstaðr*, and that longevity is reflected in its widespread occurrence and in the variety of specifics which appear in combination with it. Stewart lists 154 examples on the Shetland mainland and two on Fair Isle (Fig.8). Names in *-setr* are evenly distributed throughout Shetland, with heavy concentrations in those areas where *-bólstaðr* and *-staðir* were infrequent. Even the small *setr* or hill farms, however, are absent from North Roe and Eshaness in the north mainland of Shetland, an area of great scenic beauty but of extremely low agricultural potential. They are also absent from the Clift Hills area to the south of Quarff in the south mainland, which is equally unsurprising. What did surprise me, to some extent, was the obviously coastal orientation of a large number of the *-setr* names, particularly in the north and west. It seems that, while a large proportion of *-setr* names do indeed refer to hill farms, the element was being used more widely in Shetland to apply to secondary settlement created by udal division, at a time when the land in the islands was being fully utilized by the Scandinavian settlers. Coastal location might be interpreted as an argument against *sætr* 'shieling' as the source, although the land in Shetland is often so infertile that the terrain which one might reasonably associate with a hill farm occurs at sea level.

Specifics used with *-setr* cover the whole gamut of available terms, reflecting its general significance in the social organization of the islands. There are, as one would expect, various specifics which confirm the pastoral use of such farms: e.g., the widespread *Swinister* 'pig', *Hestinsettr* 'horse', *Cruster* 'sheep pen' (ON *kró*). There are some directional specifics as in *Susetter* 'south', *Estasetter* 'east, outer'. There are several personal-name specifics: e.g., *Gunnister* with *Gunni*, *Gremister* with *Grímr*, *Kettlester* with *Ketill*.

There are some specifics which give information about the nature of the farm's situation: e.g., *Murrister* 'boggy', *Voxter* 'beside the voe or bay', *Urisetter* 'beside the gravel beach', *Linksetter* 'on heathery ground', *Turvister* 'on peat', etc. There is one example of *Kirkasetter*, for which Stewart suggests *kirkja*, but early forms indicate *krókr* 'bend or nook', so the name is probably not akin to the various *Kirkabisters*.

It seems appropriate to conclude this brief survey of elements with *-setr*, which gives such an unequivocal picture of the extent of Scandinavian influence on the place-nomenclature of Shetland. John Stewart devoted his life to studying the cultural and linguistic influences which can be traced in the islands, and I shall conclude with his statement of the purpose behind his lifelong dedication to the study of place-names:

'We can get behind the names and learn much about the people themselves; some of their personal names (and very few men and women live fortuitously down the centuries), their homes and holdings and animals and daily pursuits, their material culture and social cohesion, their sense of the appropriate in sound, their humour, their fears and superstitions and even longings'.<sup>1 2</sup>

EDINBURGH

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND NOTES

This article is a revised version of the paper given on 1 April 1989 at the XX1st Annual Study Conference organized by the Council for Name Studies, held at the University of St Andrews. Its publication has been made possible by a gift to the University of Cambridge in memory of Dorothea Coke, Skjæret, 1951.

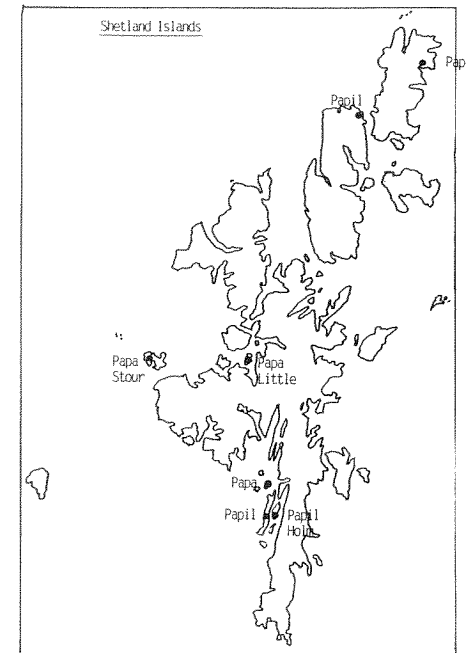
- <sup>1</sup> J. Jakobsen, *The Place-Names of Shetland* (London, 1936), 53-8.
- <sup>2</sup> J. Stewart, *Shetland Place-Names* (Lerwick, 1987).
- <sup>3</sup> *ibidem*, 8.
- <sup>4</sup> H. Marwick, *Orkney Farm-Names* (Kirkwall, 1952).
- <sup>5</sup> R. Cleasby and G. Vígfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd edn with supplement by Sir W.A. Craigie (Oxford, 1957), 474.
- <sup>6</sup> R. Lamb, article in B. Smith and V. Turner, eds, *Shetland Settlement Past to Present* (forthcoming).
- <sup>7</sup> B.E. Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland* (Leicester, 1987), 47.
- <sup>8</sup> A. Fenton, *The Various Names of Shetland* (Edinburgh, 1973); W.B. Lockwood, 'On the early history and origin of the names Orkney and Shetland'. *Namn och Bygd* LXVIII (1980), 19-35.

<sup>9</sup> A. Ritchie, *Exploring Scotland's Heritage—Orkney and Shetland*, R.C.A.H.M.S. (Edinburgh, 1985), 118.

<sup>10</sup> Stewart, *Shetland Place-Names*, 139.

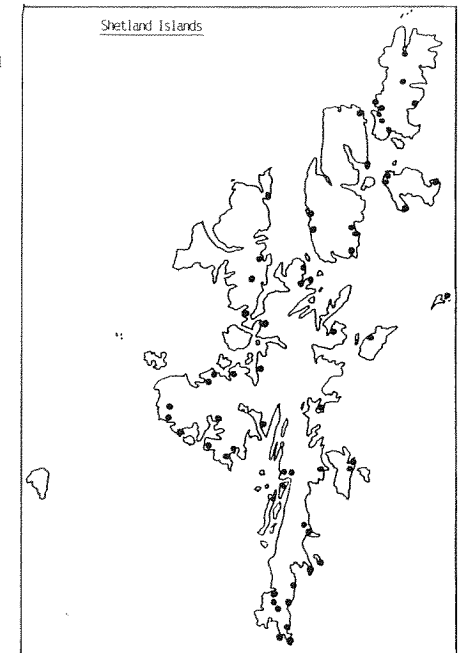
<sup>11</sup> Compare Doreen Waugh, 'The Scandinavian element *staðir* in Caithness, Orkney and Shetland', *ante* XI (1987), 61-74, at 67.

<sup>12</sup> Stewart, *Shetland Place-Names*, 9.



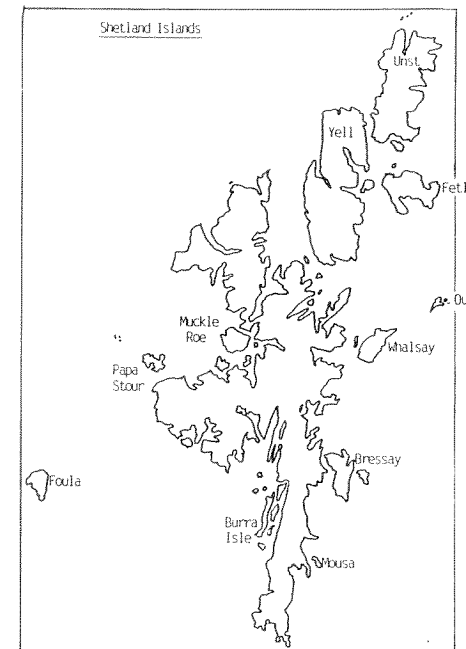
Names containing ON papi 'a priest'

Fig. 1



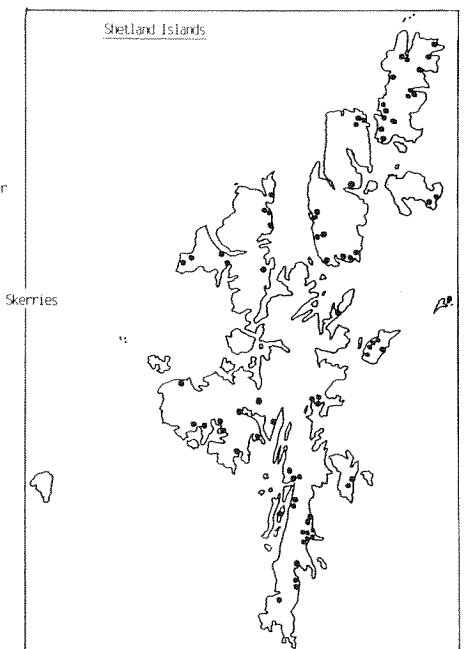
Names containing ON borg 'a broch'

Fig. 3



Island names

Fig. 2



Names containing ON höll 'a hill or height'

Fig. 4

## Along an Atholl Boundary

John Kerr

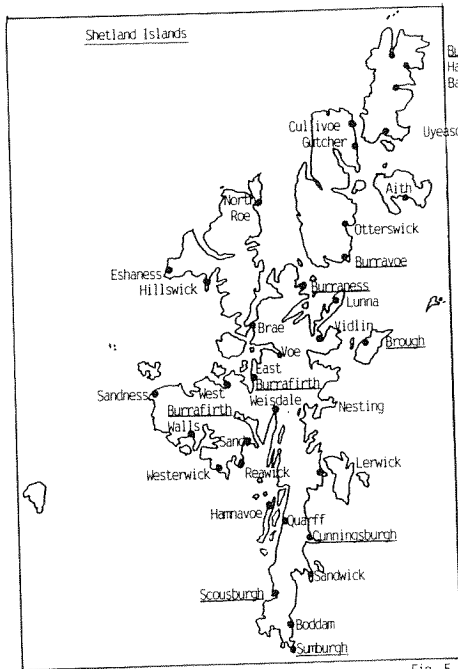
AN eighteenth-century report of Perthshire boundaries tells us that:

'The boundaries of estates are marked according to the nature of the country. In the valleys of the Highlands different proprietors are separated by substantial stone walls without mortar or by a river or a brook, or by a range of rocks or some other natural limit. The lower hills too are sometimes bisected by these walls, but more generally by boundary stones, fixed in the ground or set up singly; in other instances, if the stones are small, they are piled in heaps. The higher mountains are frequently divided in a similar manner, especially when different proprietors occupy the same side; but when they occupy different sides of the same ridge or general line of mountain, as continually happens between parallel glens, their properties are determined as "wind and water divides", which means the line of partition on the top of the mountain, between the windward and lee-side, or as it is still more nicely marked, by the tendency of the rain water after it falls upon the ground' (J. Robertson, 1795).

Many of the features mentioned in that report form part of the Commonty boundary between Glen Tilt and Glen Fender, situated in the south-east corner of the parish of Blair Atholl in north Perthshire. In Scotland, a 'commonty' was land beyond the head-dyke, used primarily for grazing, and the subject of this paper is the names of the features on this boundary and of the adjacent settlements. Because of the diversity and remoteness of this boundary, there were many disputes between tenants, and so in 1808 a definitive and detailed map was drawn up by David Buist, Land Surveyor. Entitled 'Plan of the Common of Glen Tilt', it was produced following submissions by a number of witnesses called to testify on behalf of the two lairds involved: John Fourth Duke of Atholl and General Robertson of Lude.

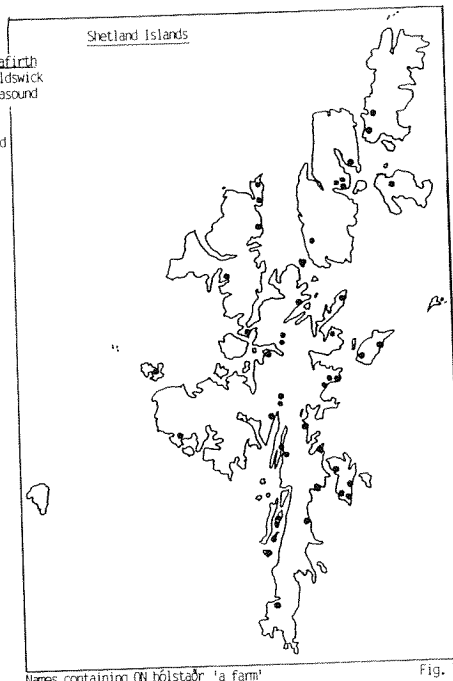
The Commonty was divided into three parts: a small portion of 30 acres being allocated to the parish minister, while Lude received 590 acres and the lion's share of 1,290 acres went to the Atholl Estate. It comprised a strip of land six miles in length and less than a mile wide, which for centuries had been a common property used for grazing purposes by the thirty farms in the vicinity. These enjoyed a servitude of pasturage and of fuel, feal (thick sods of earth for building walls) and divot (turves for thatching).

The west side of the boundary is situated in Glen Tilt and follows a line about two-thirds of the way up the steep side of the glen, while to the east, in Glen Fender, it follows mountain tops and



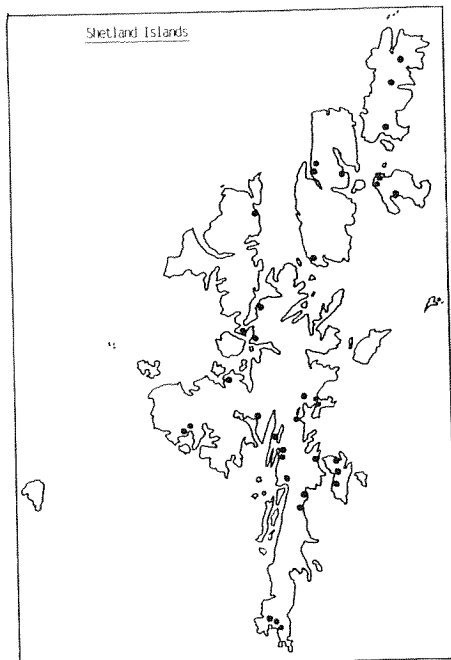
Village names

Fig. 5



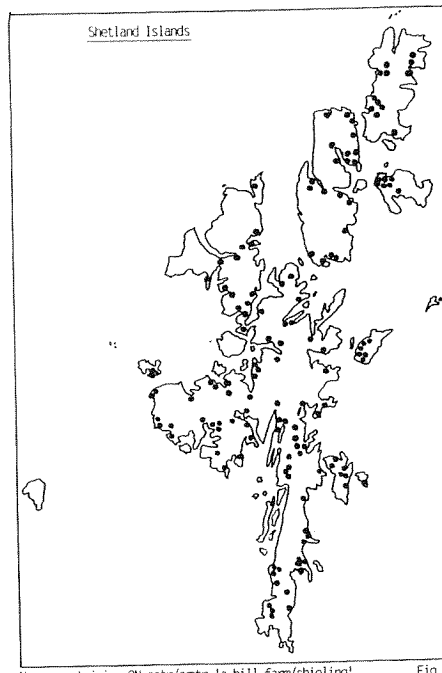
Names containing ON *bōlstaðr* 'a farm'

Fig. 7



Names containing ON *staðir* 'a farm'

Fig. 6



Names containing ON *setr/sætr* 'a hill farm/shieling'

Fig. 8