



Puffin David Gifford

Birding and sea life

Most of Fair Isle's coastline boasts impressive cliffs, including the spectacular **Sheep Craig**. Birding enthusiasts travel from all over the world to see the spring and autumn migrations. Lying on the intersection of major flightpaths from Scandinavia, Iceland and Feroe, Fair Isle can produce impressive numbers of common species but is also famous for the rarities that can appear.

The island is an internationally important seabird breeding site. From April to August the cliffs are busy with the sound (and smell!) of thousands of Fulmars, Kittiwakes, Razorbills, Gulliemots, Black Gulliemots, Gannets, Shags and Puffins, while Skuas and Terns fiercely defend their nests on the moorland. Fair Isle is one of the best places in Europe to view Puffins as they waddle within feet of a quiet observer.

Things to see and do

Kirkj Geo Beach, South Harbour David Gifford



For more than 50 years the internationally renowned **Fair Isle Lodge and Bird Observatory** has carried out scientific research on bird migration and the island's magnificent breeding seabird colonies. Sadly, the observatory was destroyed in a fire in 2019 but work is being carried out to rebuild it. See the Fair Isle Bird Observatory website for the latest updates.

In terms of marine life, grey and common seals are frequently seen, with harbour porpoises mostly sighted in summer. Whales and dolphins sometimes cruise close inshore. White-beaked and Atlantic white-sided dolphins, orcas and minke whales are often spotted from the ferry on passage to and from the Shetland mainland.



North and South Havens David Gifford



Stackholl Stores, Stronjbrek David Gifford



Good Shepherd IV Daniel Craanen

Getting to Fair Isle

Travel to Fair Isle is by sea or plane and must be pre-booked. The ferry *Good Shepherd IV* carries 12 passengers and takes 2.5 hours. It leaves from Grutness Pier at the southern tip of Shetland and once a fortnight (summer only) from Lerwick. Please note that this is not a car ferry. View the timetable on the Shetland Islands Council website. Due to the limited number of places to stay, accommodation must also be booked before you arrive in Fair Isle.

Most flights leave from Tingwall Airport, six miles west of Lerwick, and take around 25 minutes. View the latest timetable on the Airtask website.

Useful information

Ferry booking office
+44 (0)1595 760363

Ferry information
+44 (0)1595 743978

Air booking office
Tingwall Airport | +44 (0)1595 840246

Museum
George Waterston Memorial Centre and Museum

Shop and post office
Stackholl Stores

Medical assistance
District nurse | +44 (0)1595 760242

2024 | **Disclaimer**
All details believed to be accurate at the time of going to print.



shetland.org/fair-isle



Life in Fair Isle

The 50 or so islanders live in traditional crofts on the more fertile southern third of the island, the remaining land being rough grazing and rocky moorland. Crofting is a system that gives each household a stake in the island and its future. It's a lifestyle based on low-intensity subsistence farming. Islanders grow a lot of their own vegetables and the increasing use of polytunnels allows a wide range of produce to be grown. The island is powered by its own electricity company and has full fibre-optic broadband.

The crofting year has a task for every season with most islanders combining several part-time jobs with their croft work. As well as the ferry, school and other public service jobs, income also comes from knitting, yarn and other textiles, wildlife tourism, a local building firm and the shop and post office.

Fair Isle is just 3 miles long and 1.5 miles wide, so ideal for exploring over a day or two. Rental and bed and breakfast accommodation is available on the island. The views and cliffs are spectacular, with plenty of stacks and arches to admire from above. The highest point on the island is **Ward Hill**, which is marked by a cairn.

Fair Isle is a tiny jewel of an island, lying halfway between Orkney and Shetland. It is one of Britain's most successful remote communities, pioneering projects in wildlife tourism, sustainable management of the environment and use of wind power.

Welcome to Fair Isle

Fair Isle

A jewel in the ocean





↑ Fair Isle is famous for its knitwear [Shetland Amenity Trust](#)

Flora

Fair Isle has over 250 species of flowering plants. In summer the wetter areas are dotted with the bright yellow of Bog Asphodel, the deep purple of Northern Marsh Orchid and, perhaps rarest of all, the Frog Orchid. From late May the clifftops are awash with the delicate blue of Squill, which gives way in June to a bright carpet of Sea Pinks, with the cliffs draped in carpets of yellow Birds-foot Trefoil and white Sea Campion.

Prostate Juniper – rare in Shetland – is abundant on the heather moorland, with alpine species like Least Willow and Alpine Bistort on the summit of **Ward Hill**. A wide variety of more familiar plants thrive in the hay fields, cultivated rigs, grazing lands and along the roadsides.

Fair Isle knitwear

While Fair Isle knitwear is available to buy throughout Shetland, the island which bears its name is where you'll find the genuine article. For hundreds of years islanders traded with passing ships, bartering their hand-knitted hosiery and fresh produce for goods they couldn't make themselves. While the island's men were at sea the women and children stayed at home creating the distinctive patterned designs. Today the tradition lives on, and you can pick up real Fair Isle knitwear from local knitters and crafters during your visit.

Historic sites

Fair Isle has been intensively studied by archaeologists who have found evidence that the isle may have been settled by Neolithic people up to 5,000 years ago. There are traces of oval-shaped stone houses, perhaps 3,000 years old, and lines of turf and stone walls, or dykes, which snake across the landscape. The **Feely Dyke**, a massive turf rampart which divides the common grazings from the crofts, may also be prehistoric.

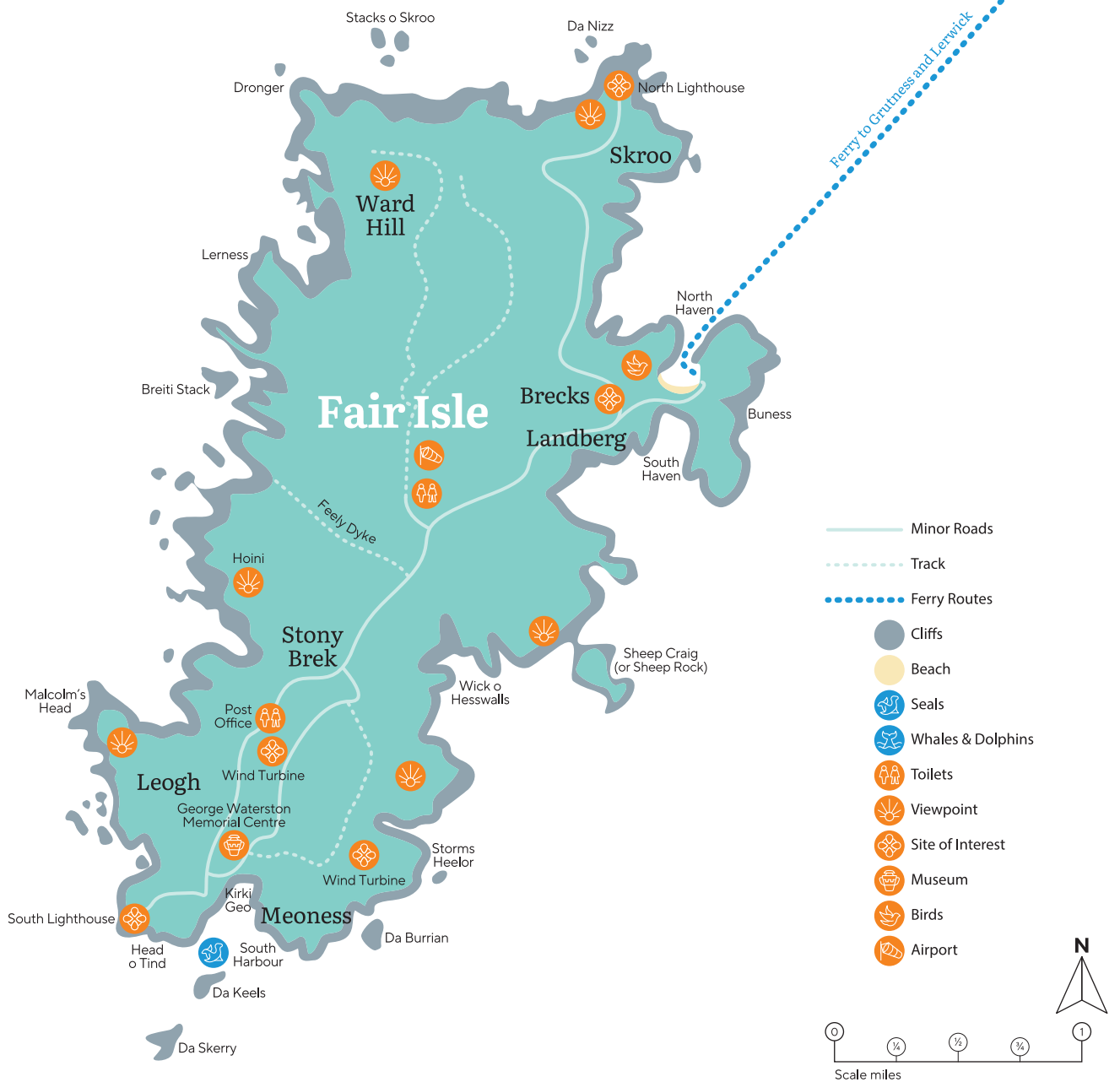
The archaeological remains include curious burnt mounds – piles of blackened stones which were heated in a fire and used to heat water. The purpose is unknown but they may have been for cooking, tanning, preparing cloth or even a primitive sauna.

There are two known Iron Age sites – a promontory fort at **Landberg** and settlement underlying an early Christian church at **Kirki Geo**. Most of the place names date from after the 9th-century Norse settlement of the Northern Isles.

The Norse settlers named it Fridarey – the island of peace – but this stepping stone between Orkney and Shetland was also vital in times of strife, when the Earls of Orkney, and Viking warlords before them, used it as a lookout and for sending fire signals to and from the Shetland mainland.

In all, Fair Isle has 14 scheduled monuments, ranging from the earliest signs of human activity to the remains of a Second World War radar station. The two lighthouses, now automated, are also listed buildings.

↓ Skroo [David Gifford](#)



Map of Fair Isle

Shipwrecks and seafaring

For thousands of years Fair Isle has been a useful landmark for shipping but, in storms and fog, its coastline is highly dangerous, with at least 100 known shipwrecks – the most famous of which is probably the Spanish Armada ship *El Gran Grifon* wrecked on Fair Isle in 1588.

Over the centuries, the island changed hands many times, paying rent in butter, cloth, dried fish and fish oil – usually to absentee landlords who rarely visited.

Communications with the outside world were difficult and sporadic. Only in the late 20th century did the island acquire a safe summer harbour, at **North Haven**, and even today the mailboat has to be hauled out of the water from the reach of winter storms.

At **Kirki Geo** are the ancient noosts, where men who rowed and sailed to the line-fishing hauled up their instinctive Fair Isle yoals (small sailing craft). The boat-shaped noosts remain in use today.

George Waterston Memorial Centre and Museum

George Waterston OBE (1911-1980), the former Scottish Director of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, was a much-loved figure who had a massive and positive influence on Fair Isle. He bought the island after the Second World War and co-founded the Bird Observatory in 1948, giving the isle's economy a much-needed boost. In 1955, the National Trust for Scotland succeeded him as landlord and helped islanders to stem emigration and revitalise the community.

Dr Waterston's memorial is a fascinating museum in the former Fair Isle School, packed with displays of the island's history from prehistoric times to the present. A guided tour is available on request, or you're welcome to browse this collection of photographs, documents and artefacts for a unique insight into Fair Isle's past and a better understanding of its present.



South Lighthouse
[David Gifford](#)