

The beach below the road around the head of the bay is partly man-made and was used to dry salt cod and ling during the heyday of the line fishery from sixteens – open, six-oared boats – in the 18th and 19th centuries. The inner harbour is crowded with colourful dinghies and the distinctive ‘Shetland Model’ boats which compete in local sailing and rowing races. The lines of these double-ended skiffs reveal their Viking origins.

Vessels owned and crewed by local families through the sheltered dock, from the smallest creel boats to huge pelagic trawlers. Next to the Whalsay Boating Club, which is a licensed clubhouse with toilets and showers, are the remains of a former herring curing station.

The harbour at **Symbister**, where the ferry arrives, is the hub of this successful fishing community of around 1,000 people – and a constant source of interest to islanders and visitors alike.

Places to visit

Whalsay, with its heritage rooted in fishing, is a centre of the industry in Shetland. Just five miles long and two miles wide, Whalsay, nicknamed Da Boonie Isle, has easy and attractive coastal scenery. From the highest point, the Wart of Clate, there’s a panorama of the east coast of Shetland. Important archaeological sites and a wealth of birds, seals and wild flowers make it a fascinating destination for a day trip or a longer stay.

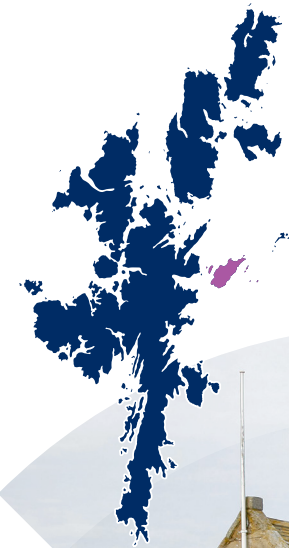
Welcome to Whalsay



Shetland
Islands of Opportunity

Whalsay

A thriving fishing community



The local history group has converted part of the outbuildings into the **Whalsay Heritage and Community Centre**, which is open during the summer months. The centre has two permanent exhibitions – ‘Whalsay’s fishing heritage from the 13th century to modern times’ and ‘The Lords of Whalsay’ – and also offers seasonal exhibitions.

The Bruce family acquired most of Whalsay and oppressed islanders for over 300 years, but virtually bankrupted themselves building **Symbister House**, or the New Ha. Now part of Whalsay Junior High School, this is the finest Georgian mansion in Shetland. It’s built of granite blocks, quarried in North Nesting, and taken by rorts across the sound. The New Ha had courtyards, stables, byres, a farmhouse, a mill, a dovecot and even a “high-rise” three-seater outdoor toilet.

Symbister House

For hundreds of years the salt fish trade was in the hands of merchants from North Germany. The fascinating museum in the **Hanseatic Booth** tells how ships from Hamburg, Bremen and Lübeck sailed to Shetland every summer, bringing seeds, cloth, iron tools, salt, spirits, luxury goods and hard currency, to exchange for the Shetlanders’ fish. The Germans were forced out by import duties after the 1707 Treaty of Union between England and Scotland. The picturesque old building, restored with its dock and cargo hoist, was one of two bōds, or warehouses, in Whalsay. The key for the Booth is available from the shop.

Hanseatic Booth

↓ Ferry arriving at Symbister Harbour VisitScotland / Paul Tomkins



↑ Symbister House Robert Harding / Alamy Stock Photo

For most of the 1930s the Scots Communist poet Christopher Grieve (“Hugh MacDiarmid”) lived in Whalsay in the croft house of Sodom (from the Old Norse súðr-heim – the southerly homestead). This often tormented genius wrote much of his finest poetry here (including *On a Raised Beach*) and, via the Whalsay post office, conducted a long correspondence with the leading writers and thinkers of his generation. Grieve was called up for war work in 1942 and never returned to Whalsay.

Grieve House

Useful information

- Ferry booking office**
+44 (0)1595 745804
- Museums and visitor information point**
Whalsay Heritage and Community Centre
Hanseatic Booth
- Public toilets**
Symbister
- Post office**
Harlsdale
- Shops**
Symbister | Harlsdale | Shoard
- Fuel**
Symbister
- Leisure centre and swimming pool**
Symbister | +44 (0)1595 807707
- Golf course**
Skaw | +44 (0)1806 566705
- Doctor**
Symbister | +44 (0)1806 566219
- Police** 101

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



shetland.org/whalsay



↑ Spring Squill David Gifford



↑ Brown Trout Promote Shetland / Euan Myles
↑ Hanseatic Booth VisitScotland / Paul Tomkins



↑ Otter Louise Poole

Things to see and do

History and archaeology

People have lived in Whalsay for at least 4,000 years. Traces of former settlement range from hilltop burial cairns and prehistoric field boundaries to nationally important monuments such as the two Neolithic houses of **Yoxie** and the **Beenie Hoose** and **Pettigarth Field** excavated by Charles Calder and Whalsay-born John Stewart in the 1950s.

There are indications that Whalsay had at least two ancient brochs and there are signs of an Iron Age fortification on a holm in the **Loch of Huxter**. Other archaeological remains include burnt mounds, foundations of prehistoric dykes buried under peat, and traces of Bronze Age houses at the **Loch of Sandwick**.

↓ Kirk Ness Colin Nutt



↑ Red-throated Divers Kevin Hazelgrove / Alamy Stock Photo

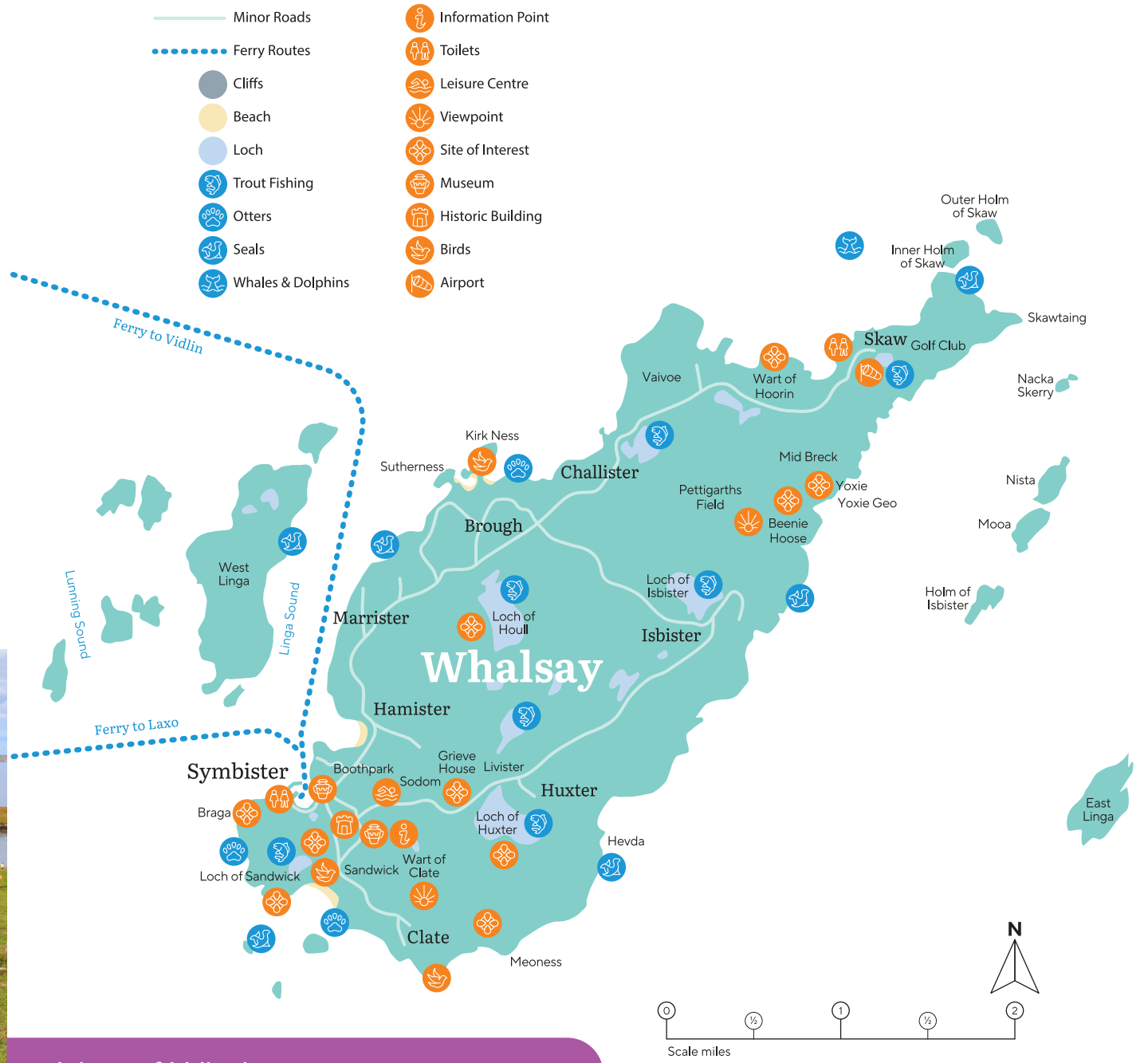
Geology

The rocks of Whalsay are schist and gneiss, formed at high temperature and pressure beneath mountains which were eroded away hundreds of millions of years ago. In places you can see large fragments of the original rocks – known as xenoliths – mixed up with the formerly-fluid mass of granitic gneiss.

On the north-east coast are outcrops of crystalline limestone and contorted calcium silicate bands. The landscape of Whalsay has been carved and smoothed by successive ice ages and the coastline etched by incessant battering of the sea.

Getting to Whalsay

Whalsay is accessible by car ferry from Laxo, 30 miles north of Lerwick. However, sometimes in poor weather conditions it leaves from Vidlin. The crossing to Symbister takes 25 minutes and it's advisable to book during peak season. For timetables and booking information, see the Shetland Islands Council website.



Map of Whalsay

Wildlife and flora

For thousands of years beachcombing has been a favourite Whalsay pastime, as is evidenced by the astonishing profusion of shoreline placenames.

As well as flotsam, the coastal walker will encounter most of Shetland's seabirds, including Puffins (April to August). Ducks and waders gather at the shallows behind the beach at Symbister and at the houb (lagoon) on **Kirk Ness**. Inland lochs harbour several pairs of breeding Red-throated Divers. In spring and autumn there are often good "falls" of migrating birds from Scandinavia and further afield.

The shore pastures are carpeted in summer by the pink flowers of Thrift and Campion, and the blue of Spring Squill, while at the **Geos of Yoxie** on the east side one of Shetland's rarest plants grows – Sea Aster – but be careful when viewing from the cliff!

Below the tideline, there is a profusion of sea life in the rockpools. Otters are common but shy, except around **Symbister** where they've become used to harbour traffic and are sometimes seen at close quarters.

The tidal sounds and off-lying rocks around the isle are among the best places to see porpoises and occasional dolphins, minke whales and orcas. Keep a lookout during the ferry crossing and you may see why the Vikings called it Hvals-øy – the island of whales.

Loch fishing

Whalsay is a popular island for anglers with some fine trout inhabiting the lochs; the record being a 9lb 4oz brown trout from the **Loch of Huxter**. See the Shetland Anglers Association website for information on fishing permits.

Golf

Whalsay has a cracking 18-hole **golf course at Skaw**, which is the most northerly course in Britain. Non-members are welcome and you can find out more about green fees and tee times on the Whalsay Golf Club Facebook page.