

The First World War in Shetland

The War at Home



Ships being examined in Lerwick Harbour

The Northern Patrol intercepted suspect ships and sent them into port for examination.

1914—1918

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Shetland before the War



Women shearing corn at Brouster

The early 1900s saw a decline in the fishing industry in Shetland and many men joined the Mercantile Marine as a result.

People also began moving to Lerwick and Scalloway to seek paid work.

The majority of the population lived in rural areas and were tied to the land and the seasons through crofting. Families and communities worked together to complete tasks like digging fields.

Women and children did most of the farm work and women sold knitted goods to buy products such as sugar and tea.

Throughout the 19th Century there was a move towards Shetlanders earning money, rather than just living off the land and the sea. Islanders wanted to earn money to buy things like paraffin lamps, lino for the floor, crockery etc.

Income came from;

- Men's wages from going to sea on merchant ships
- Men's wages from going fishing
- Women selling knitted goods
- Men earning a fee from joining the Royal Naval Reserve (R.N.R) or a retainer from the Territorial Army (T.A.)



Territorial Army detachment for the coronation of George V

Men who worked in Lerwick and Scalloway often didn't have the sea skills to join the R.N.R so many joined the Army reserves (T.A.).

The men were paid a yearly fee and had to attend a couple of weeks training sessions (drills) a year. They knew they would be called up to serve in case of a war.

There were 200 army reservists and 1400 naval reservists in Shetland just before the war.

Communication to the rest of Britain was by telegraph or mail boats. There were no telephone cables to the mainland, but there was a very small phone network within Lerwick of about a dozen phones at local businesses. Limited phone lines were put in to meet the needs of the armed forces.

Shetland before the War

In 1904 the defensive focus of Britain moved to the North Sea and Shetland acquired strategic importance. However, the Germans had already become aware of the potential usefulness of Shetland. Squadrons of the German fleet had visited Shetland in 1894, 1895 and 1900.

In July 1904, over 30 German warships visited Lerwick harbour. They opened up some ships to the public, held searchlight and firework displays, there was a football match and social gatherings. This was met with interest and genial hospitality by Shetlanders but suspicions began to arise that there might be another reason for the visit - to gather information. The Germans now held accurate information of the harbour and there were rumours of landings in remote places.

A request to visit Fort Charlotte was refused. The officer-in-charge 'buckled on his sword, closed the gates and informed them that "he wasn't having any, thank you"'. A plan to stage a night attack on Lerwick was also refused.



German fleet off the Knab

In reply the entire Channel Fleet visited Shetland in 1905 and over the next few years there were several visits by both British and German ships.

Various discussions were held regarding Shetland's status as a naval base and the importance of the Northern Isles in a war situation.

Despite all the planning there was no special urgency, nobody thought war would come so soon.

'Shetland News' - end of 1913

"It need not be repeated to Shetlanders that it is extremely unlikely that anything will ever happen in the course of the 12 months which would materially affect one way or another the life and work of the people of the county"

This forecast, was, of course, wrong.

Outbreak of War

2nd August 1914

The Royal Naval Reserve (R.N.R) are the first to be called up and ordered to report to their headquarters in Lerwick. Hundreds of men begin pouring into Lerwick from nearly every district in Shetland.

3rd August 1914

A call to arms sent out to the local Territorial Army (T.A) of the Gordon Highlanders. They were trained and drilled in Lerwick along with a large number of new recruits.



R.N.R. Mobilizing at Custom House, Lerwick

4th August 1914 - War Declared



HQ Shetland Companies, Gordon Highlanders
(now Garrison Theatre)

A few days after war was declared the ladies of Lerwick formed an Emergency Association to help any wounded men coming into port. The result of this was 1100 knitted articles to soldiers and sailors, 930 to the Gilbert Bain Hospital, 2427 bandages, 208 articles to fever hospitals, 123 to the Church Army Hut at the back of the fish market and 71 to Dr Walkers Hospital at Gremista.

A committee was also formed to tend the graves of naval men interred at the graveyard in Lerwick.

The Church Army Hut at the back of the fish market in Lerwick was extensively used by service men. First aid, food and clothing was provided to men and women rescued by the Northern Patrol from ships torpedoed or mined in Shetland waters.

The Post Office Affair

Post Offices were open day and night, especially the Head Office in Lerwick. This was the main transmitter and receiver of tremendous numbers of official messages. There were often more than 1000 messages telegraphed to London daily.

The Scottish Office had introduced a number of security measures to protect Scotland from enemy action and there were many rumours of spies across the country.



Lerwick Post Office

Alfred Hay	28	5	9	W	Lerwick	\$	Robertson James	Johnston
Andrew B. Jameson	47	5	9	W	do	\$	3 Commenced St	Johnston
Robert Stout	34	5	11	W	do	\$	Lerwick	Johnston
Thomas L. Sinclair	17	5	7	W	do	\$	St. Olaf Street	Johnston
Robert MacKay	37	5	10	W	do	\$	Lerwick	Johnston
James J. Robertson	45	5	9	W	North Westing	\$	James Street	Johnston
Robert Galt	53	5	1	W	Lerwick	\$	3 Green Place	Johnston
John Johnston	37	5	7½	W	do	\$	Sergeant	Johnston
Alexander MacKay	40	5	8½	W	do	\$	Water House	Johnston
Robert Williamson	18	5	5½	W	do	\$	Lerwick	Johnston
William D. Arthur	18	5	9	W	do	\$	1 Commenced St	Johnston

Prison Register

On Sunday 1st November 1914, the warden of Lerwick Prison was instructed by Lieutenant-Colonel H.C. Evans, the Commanding Officer of HM Forces based in Shetland, that he would be receiving the Postmaster and 39 other members of staff of the Lerwick Post Office (LPO). No information on any charges was given, other than that Evans was "acting on confidential Admiralty instructions".

Evans then armed himself with his pistol, and with an armed guard went to the Post Office to detain the staff. The Staff were kept initially within the post office, until all members of staff had arrived and were then marched under an armed naval escort to the prison and their homes were searched.

Only the Postmaster had been told that there was a suspicion that secret correspondence passing through the LPO for the fleet had been tampered with. The men had been detained under numbers 12 and 13 of the Defence of the Realm regulations, relating to the extinguishing of lamps and the movement of citizens.

There were only 11 free cells in the prison so the LPO staff were kept in very crowded conditions. The prison warden complained about the inadequate accommodation but was told it was the only place the men could be held. Food and comfortable bedding was brought in by friends and families and the prisoners were allowed to smoke and play musical instruments.

The men were detained in prison until 7th November when the Admiralty finally ordered their release.

After release, the names of the men were struck through in the prison register and a note was inserted at the bottom of the page which read; "All the above named men were released at the instance of the Admiralty who expressed themselves satisfied that the charges against them were wholly unfounded"

Joining Up - Volunteers

It was thought that Shetland was at risk of being invaded and a secret plan had been drawn up at the start of 1914. It was put into effect on the outbreak of war and consisted of four main areas: cable guards, watch huts, gun crews and sea patrols.

Cable Guards

Telegraph cables provided vital communication between Shetland and the rest of the UK.

Soldiers were posted to guard all the places where the telegraph cable came ashore including Sandwick, Mossbank, Ulsta, Belmont and Burwick.



Sandwick Cable Guard

Watch Huts

Huts were built on all the major hills in Shetland, initially there were around 30.

They were staffed 24 hours a day by older R.N.R. men from the local area.

They were on the look-out for submarines, and if spotted any then they alerted the nearest gun crews.



Watch Hut, North Hillswick

Gun Crews

Seven gun crews were stationed from Belmont to Sandwick.

Gun would be towed to the nearest place the hut had spotted the submarine and it was then fired at the Submarine.

The guns never actually fired at any submarines but the crews spent a lot of time practicing hitching up the gun, setting it up, firing it etc.



Yell Gun Crew

Sea Patrols

Several dozen fishing boats were commandeered by the Navy.

They watched over the coast looking for mines and trying to detect submarines.



H.M.D. Benaigen
(peace time name BEN AIGEN)

Women

A Shetland Branch of Queen Mary's Needlework Guild was formed on 3rd September 1914 to knit and sew garments for soldiers and sailors. Thousands of Shetland women made 15,496 knitted items throughout the period of the war. Letters were received from men who had received articles and women often sewed notes to their articles for serving soldiers.

They also raised £406 12s 1d and the balance of £60 19s 3d that remained at the end of the war was given to the funds for the erection of a war memorial for Shetland's Fallen Sons.

Statistics

15,496 items -5638 pairs of socks, 1925 scarves, 1136 helmets, 1123 belts, 558 jerseys and cardigans, 424 wristlets, 416 mitts, 378 pairs of gloves, 225 pairs of operation stockings, 204 sleeping socks etc

Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) was established in Lerwick in 1917, enabling some women to participate in auxiliary forces. Their work was to support the Naval base and jobs included cleaning, cooking and service food but also jobs like telephone operators. They were based at the naval base in Lerwick.



Women's Royal Naval Service,
Naval Base, Harbour Street, Lerwick

"their record of achievement will stand as a lasting monument to their devotion and womanly sympathy with the men who were undergoing the most severe hardships and exposure"

Young women in Shetland did not have the same opportunity as women south to join the various auxiliary forces formed during the war.

Shetland women who were south joined either the W.R.N.S., W.R.A.F., or the W.A.A.C.

W.R.N.S.—Women's Royal Naval Service

W.R.A.F.—Women's Royal Air Force

W.A.A.C.—Women's Army Auxiliary Corps

Children

Boy Scouts were used as messengers for the naval base at Lerwick in order to free men for other duties. They also performed various other duties as required.

Rear-Admiral Greathorex of 10th Cruiser Squadron based in Shetland, sent a letter to the Honourable Secretary of the Shetland Branch of the Boy Scouts Association, an expression of his appreciation of their assistance.



Boy Scouts on Admiralty Coast
Watching Service.
Lerwick Station
Fort Charlotte
1918

Children would also
have been involved
in collecting eggs
and moss for the
appeals.



Collecting eggs at Cunningsburgh

Collections and Appeals

An urgent appeal was made for sphagnum moss which was largely used as antiseptic surgical dressings. 'Moss Day' was organised for 9th August 1917 when young and old, rich and poor, flocked to the hillsides and moors and collected 2500 sacks of moss. A further 3000 sacks were collected in August and September 1918. The moss was despatched to Aberdeen and Shetland Moss was described as being 'of the very finest and pure quality'.



Sundew and Sphagnum Moss: both native to Shetland's water-logged soils

The Shetland Times and the Lerwick Emergency Organisation held First Aid classes in case war wounded were taken to Lerwick. They also raised money, collected used clothing for men and women who had survived their ships being torpedoed in Shetland waters.

Money was also raised through National Days, such as Flag Day and by people buying war bonds. It is impossible to accurately estimate the amount of financial help to numerous war charities. Victory Loan Week raised £173,000. £2574 15s 3d was raised for the Scottish Red Cross. £192 8s 10d raised for the Scottish Hospital for limbless sailors and soldiers.

In total over £200,000 was raised and an additional £100,000 was raised by the sale of war savings certificates and war bonds.

In January 1919 another appeal was launched to make clothing to keep warm the "destitute and starving children of our vanquished enemies" on behalf of Save the Children. Within a few weeks 1518 garments had been made and sent to Lerwick to be forwarded to the HQ in Edinburgh to be sent to Central Europe. In addition a sum of £122 7s 4d was raised.

Collections and Appeals

National Egg Collection for the Wounded. Eggs were collected from every parish, then sent to Aberdeen and distributed to the war wounded in hospitals or preserved for use in the winter. In proportion to the population Shetland contributed far more eggs than any of the Northern counties in Scotland.

300, 636 eggs were collected in Shetland and £121 19s 7d was contributed by people who couldn't supply eggs.

Many young Shetland ladies received warm letters of thanks from wounded men in reply to the good wishes or other messages of hope written in pencil on the eggs sent away.



The 'Shetland Times' Cigarette Fund

This opened 4 weeks after war was declared and received generous support. When the fund closed in Feb 1919 a total sum of £563 6s 7d was raised and 1,589,500 cigarettes had been despatched to Scottish regiments at the front. This was seen as being good for morale. There were obviously no health worries about cigarettes then!

The 'Shetland News' made an appeal in October 1916 and raised £281 11s 6d.

Lerwick

Shetland became one of the leading advanced Naval bases in the country. The general base was in Lerwick.



Royal Naval Reserve on parade

In November 1914 Lerwick was established as an Examination port and foreign ships were stopped in the seas around Shetland and made to come into port at Lerwick. Ships were searched to make sure they were not trading items such as weapons with Germany. The whole of Alexandra Wharf was commandeered by the Admiralty.

In July to September 1916, 269 ships were examined in Lerwick. 150 suspects were removed from intercepted vessels in 1 year, often German reservists heading home to join the army.

The Port was also used as a base for North Russian operations.

During the war 306 Admiralty colliers delivered approximately 270,000 tons of coal to Lerwick, 43 steamers discharged 16,000 tons of naval stores and 30 oil tankers brought north 52,000 tons of fuel for ships.

A Kite Balloon base was established at Gremista, Lerwick. Kite Balloons were towed behind naval ships and had a basket, attached to a balloon, where an officer sat in to do reconnaissance and to observe where shot from gunnery fell. The balloons went up to about 1000m high.

Regular steamers went from the mainland to Lerwick and stopped at country ports.

The *Earl of Zetland's* route was Lerwick to Unst, Fetlar Yell, Whalsay and Skerries.

The *St Clair* served the west and north mainland routes of Walls, Aith, Voe Brae, North Roe, Hillswick and Ollaberry.

Servicemen in Shetland

In May 1917 a seaplane base was established at Catfirth, Nesting to patrol for submarines in the North Sea. The plan was for 18 seaplanes but it soon became clear that the location was not suitable and it was decided to review the use of air stations.

“Flying in Shetland was at the margins of current capability”



Seaplane at Catfirth

One of the two guns that guarded the entrance to Swarbacks Minn



In 1918 a hydrophone station was established at the Ness of Sound and was in use before the end of the war. Scores of outlook posts were erected on headlands, hills and high cliffs. In 1917 there were 350 patrol and look out guards, in 1918 the number was 264. Telephone lines were laid to remote islands.

10th Cruiser Squadron

Based at Swarbacks Minn under the command of Rear-Admiral W.B. Fawckner from June 1915 and then Rear-Admiral Greatorex from November 1917.

This was a squadron of fast armed liners and cruisers who patrolled the seas from Ireland to North of Iceland and intercepted and dealt with 15,000 vessels. Duties were to stop goods from reaching Germany, destroy warships and prevent the enemy landing in Shetland.

4 batteries were established, 2 at Bressay (Aith and Bard), 1 at Vementry and 1 at the Knab—these were manned by the Marines. Batteries armed with six-inch guns but there was never any occasion to use them.

A powerful ‘eavesdropping’ wireless station at Cunningsburgh was used, and was the means of picking up most valuable information, chiefly concerning the movements of U-boats leaving and entering the North Sea.

7 gun crews were trained—Unst, Yell, Hillswick, Voe, Walls, Sandwick and Lerwick and powerful motorcars were provided to pull the guns quickly to any point where they might be required.

Servicemen in Shetland

Thousands of servicemen visited Shetland during the war.

It was seen as being a 'foreign' posting as shown in a letter from the Ministry of Munitions in 1918, "the Shetlands count definitely as a Foreign Naval Station, and all ratings there are treated as on an Active Service Foreign Station".



Football team from
guardship *HMS Saxon*

Country

There were few amenities at Swarbacks Minn. The Church Army Hut near Brae provided games, refreshments and writing facilities. An improvised football ground and a golf course 'with no made-up bunkers but plenty of natural hazards' were at Busta. Films were shown on ships and crews performed concerts and 'theatricals'.

Time was spent walking or at church services. There was also the chance to go fishing or shooting, and there was a daily car service to Lerwick.

"This is a very desolate corner of God's earth" wrote Midshipman Alexander Scrimgeour in his diary, and also claimed to have cycled 7½ miles without seeing another human.

Lerwick

The town offered a bit more in the way of entertainment and the officers were welcomed in the social life of the better-off townspeople. Concerts, dances and social evenings were held.

Over 50 servicemen married local women.

Some servicemen returned to Shetland after the war for holidays.

Convoy System

The Mercantile Marine

- Civilians who served on British ships that carried goods to and from Britain
- Merchant ships suffered heavy losses as they were attacked by enemy ships
- Convoy system introduced in 1917 to try and reduce the loss of shipping
- Many Shetlanders worked on merchant ships before and during the war.
- After the end of the war the term 'Merchant Navy' was given to these ships by King George V in honour of the sacrifice of the seamen in the war.

Merchant vessels had two naval gunners with them and also guns fitted to their vessels to help defend themselves. They suffered heavy losses due to German submarines. Later on ships travelled in convoys from east and west coasts of Britain up to Lerwick where they crossed the North Sea and vice versa.

Merchant ships were escorted by fast ocean-going destroyers and armed trawlers. A number of Shetland reserve men were lost while serving as gunners on merchant ships.

Between 18th October 1917 and 10th January 1918, 4150 vessels passed through the channels of the approaches to Lerwick, channels that were constantly menaced by hostile submarines and minelayers.

More merchant vessels of all nationalities brought to Lerwick than total amount in its entire history as a seaport.

By the beginning of 1918 the British Navy had the upper hand of the U-boats and Lerwick ceased to be a convoy port (this was moved to the Firth of Forth). In its place came the Northern Patrol Force.



British C Class Destroyer *HMS Cheerful*. Blown up by a mine 2 miles east of Aithsetter on 30th June 1917

41 killed, 25 saved

The Home Front

There was a rise in the price of food. This was caused by

- Heavy losses of merchant ships
- Many men and horses that used to work on farms were now at war

The Government had campaigns about not wasting food and advised that items such as tea, jam, cheese, oatmeal and rice should be used less or with care and also tried to set prices on some foods.

Rationing

Rationing was introduced across the UK by the summer of 1918.

Households were allowed 2lb of meat, 1/2 lb sugar and 1/2 lb total fats each a week.

Most islanders already grew vegetables and raised animals on crofts for their own consumption and women and children already did most of the agricultural work on the crofts as men were away at sea or fishing.

<p>S. I. II.</p> <p>RETAILER'S SUGAR TICKET.</p> <p>This Ticket is issued under the authority of the Food Controller by:</p> <p>(Holder's Name and Address, written or stamped)</p> <p><i>Walter Maxwell & Co</i></p> <p><i>Scapa</i></p> <p>In respect of the person named in Part A on the back, being a member of the household of—</p> <p>(Householder's Name)</p> <p><i>John Grant</i></p> <p>and must be presented to the Retailer upon every purchase of sugar in respect of that person.</p> <p>NOTE.—The name shown for the household on the ticket and Part A on the back must be filled up immediately upon receipt of the Ticket and in any case before it is presented to the Retailer.</p> <p>TRANSFER ON REMOVAL, Etc.</p> <p>If the person named on the back removes all or part of his or her family to be a member of the above household on the ticket, Part B on the back should be filled up and the Ticket should then be taken to a Post Office.</p> <p>GRAN. 1918. 1011. 1012. 1013. 1014. 1015. 1016. 1017. 1018. 1019. 1020.</p>		<p>Part A</p> <p>Surname <i>Maxwell</i></p> <p>Christian Name <i>Walter</i></p> <p>Address <i>Scapa</i></p> <p>Part B</p> <p>Birthdate { Month <i>August</i></p> <p>{ Day of Month <i>22</i></p> <p>Year of Birth <i>1870</i></p> <p>Address <i>Scapa</i></p> <p>Post Office <i>Scapa</i></p> <p>Signature of holder <i>John Grant</i></p> <p>Any person wilfully making a false statement in respect of any matter specified on this ticket is liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding £100 or six months imprisonment, or both.</p>
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Ration card for sugar



Attempts were made to live as normal a life as possible during the war. This photo is of the Laird's picnic at Reawick in 1916.

Losses at Home



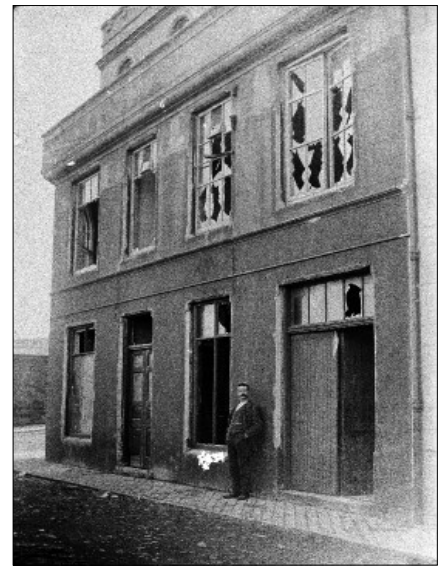
27th August 1914

The White Star liner *Oceanic* struck the submerged reef Hoevedi Grund, known as the Shaalds, 2 miles off Foula while on patrol duty and was wrecked.

12th April 1915

A considerable quantity of TNT exploded in a store on the Alexandra Wharf. 7 men were killed and 12 injured.

Damage to buildings in the town was estimated at £12,000.



23rd/24th June 1915

2 large German submarines attacked the Lerwick Herring Fishing Fleet 25 to 40 miles off Skerries. 16 drifters were sunk by bombs and gunfire and 1 fisherman died as a result of his wounds.

Convoys were very successful against submarines. However, the Convoy system led to losses and a rare convoy disaster occurred between Lerwick and Norway.

In October 1917 nine neutral steamers and the destroyers *Mary Rose* and *Strongbow* were sunk by two fast German light cruisers. 135 officers and men were lost from the destroyers.

On the 12th December 1917 *HMS Partridge* and four armed trawlers were sunk by four enemy destroyers and six merchantmen were killed.

February 1918

A depth charge exploded on the trawler *Tenby Castle* while lying at Alexandra Wharf. Four men were killed, one was injured and much damage was caused to adjacent buildings.

Armistice

Armistice was declared on the 11th hour on the 11th November, 1918. The Armistice, although not officially the end of the war, brought peace for most.

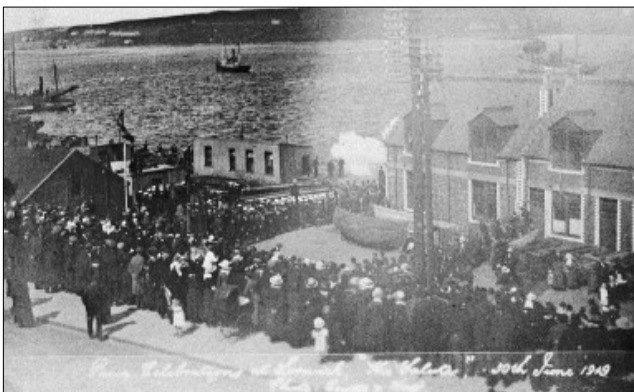
Placards and printed handbills were distributed through the town by schoolboys. *The Shetland Times* reported, 'Thank God, peace has come' but no indication of 'hilarity' and no pretence what is commonly described as 'popular' rejoicing. However, the end of the war was marked in Lerwick by bell ringing, ship sirens, rocket firing, displays of flags and bunting, the brass band played and young people sang patriotic songs.



In an article for the 1862-1962 Anderson Education Institute Centenary Book, John Johnston describes Armistice while at school, in a class taught by the Headmaster Joseph Kirton;

"Suddenly, at 11 a.m. On that memorable day, there bust out a wild pealing of bells from the Town Hall and an ear-splitting whistling and hooting from all the ships in the harbour, signalling that at long last the weary 1914-1918 war was over. A loud whisper ran round the room, 'The armistice! The armistice is signed!' Kirton rounded on the class in anger. 'Quiet, there!' he shouted, glaring at the whisperers. There followed an immediate, almost shocked silence. To me he said gruffly, 'Go on with your translation, John'.

Yet this stoic was the self-same man who, on prize-day at the close of that academic year spoke so feelingly of the long roll of ex-pupils who had died in the war. He had little use for heroics: he felt only the tragic waste of their young lives. 'However the public may see them,' he said 'they will always be for me my boys,' and then broke down, unable to speak from grief."



Peace Celebrations parade at the Esplanade, Lerwick

The official celebration for the end of the war occurred in Lerwick on June 30th 1919 following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles on 28th June 1919.

When the war ended 630 Shetlanders had lost their lives out of the 3,600 that had gone to serve. The prospects for servicemen who returned to Shetland were poor and many chose to emigrate.

Remembrance

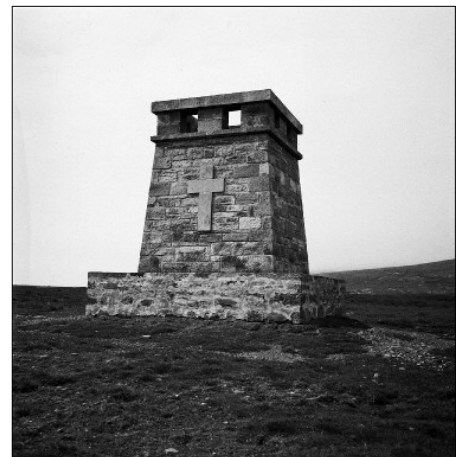
Overall nearly 10 million men lost their lives during World War One. Their families and loved ones didn't want their sacrifice to be forgotten and different ways to remember the fallen were developed.

In Shetland a committee was set up in 1918 to discuss and decide on an appropriate war memorial for all of Shetlands' fallen. After five years of discussing and planning, the War Memorial on Hillhead was built. Local memorials were also erected in most districts in Shetland, sometimes in churches, sometimes outside.

In 1920, Shetlands' Roll of Honour and Roll of Service was published. It was a book listing people to be remembered for their brave actions during the war. The book was the work of a committee led by Thomas Manson, the editor of the *Shetland News*, and who went to great lengths to compile the roll of honour as a memorial.



Unveiling the War Memorial at Hillhead, Lerwick
6th January 1924



Foula War Memorial



Page from Roll of Honour

“...what is told will give an idea of the loyal and patriotic part played by the ‘old rock’ and its sons and daughters in the greatest struggle in the history of the world, and show to posterity that in love of country and willingness to sacrifice to the uttermost limit in the cause of Freedom, the people of the Shetland Islands who lived through the tragic years 1914-1919 proved themselves worthy descendents of the brave, unvanquished Norsemen”

Lerwick, May 1920

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