

# SCOTTISH ISLANDS

EXPLORER

THE UK'S ONLY MAGAZINE DEVOTED TO EXPLORING THE ISLANDS OF SCOTLAND

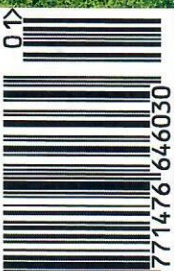
## Duart Castle

Isle of Mull

Iona  
Winter

JAN/FEB 2016 £3.95

ISSN 1476-6469



9 771476 646030

**Arran**

VICTIMS OF THE PEAKS

**Easdale**

MAKES AN APPEAL

**North Ronaldsay**

ALSO APPEALING

**Plus:** Vanishings & Sightings - The Ba' Game - Which Bernera? - and much more ...



# North Ronaldsay Sheep

Kate Traill Price supports the flock that survived



There are many reasons why North Ronaldsay - the three-mile stretch of land dotted at the very tip of the Orkney Islands - is known as 'The Island That Time Forgot'. Whether you arrive sardine-packed in Loganair's tiny Islander aircraft or via the ferry, chopping through the North Sea, it feels like a *journey*. One that transports you to a place that remains unchanged from the grainy black-and-white photographs that chronicle its past.

Save for the ever-revolving wind turbines that have sprung up in recent years, the island's landscape remains much as it has done for centuries - all flat, windswept fields and traditional stone crofts, the lighthouse dominating the far end overlooking the North Atlantic, while the sea and sky surround you entirely as they blend into ever-deepening shades of blue. ◻





The copyright photographs of the North Ronaldsay sheep were supplied to The Orkney Sheep Foundation by Selena Arte.



#### Further Information

To support the work of this charity, in general, and to assist in the preservation of North Ronaldsay sheep, in particular, please start by visiting

[www.theorkneysheepfoundation.org](http://www.theorkneysheepfoundation.org)

For Accommodation on North Ronaldsay

The Bird Observatory & Guest House

[www.nrbo.co.uk](http://www.nrbo.co.uk)

01857 633200

My family's roots connect back to the island since 1727 and I have been fortunate enough to visit North Ronaldsay every year of my life. Here's a chance to slow the pace, breathe a lungful of clean, cobweb-clearing air and delight in the contrast of a place so familiar yet ultimately mysterious.

#### Gruesomely Thrilling

If anything does change it is immediately perceptible - I can still remember my surprise the first time I felt the Islander land on a newly-built runway rather than just a field, and actually missed the cowpats that would splatter against its windows on arrival - a gruesomely thrilling welcome.

The Orkney poet Robert Rendall remarked that 'people go to Sanday or Westray, but they get to North Ronaldsay', and this sums up the heightened sense of adventure, the extra push that it takes to get there, and the faith that it will be worth it. Even the lack of reliable wifi is a welcome invitation to, however reluctantly at first, put your phone away and look around.

While evidence of modern life creeps into

your peripheral vision - telephone poles that run alongside cattle fields and cars that chug past, albeit sometimes with a missing door or two - overall your eye is drawn to the sights that remain the same whether you are witnessing them today, one hundred or five hundred years ago.

#### Recognised Worldwide

These include the docile seals that bob like buoys and sunbathe belly-up; the distant outline of Fair Isle on a clear day; the abundance of migrant birds that make the island a celebrated birdwatching site; and then of course there are the sheep, the native flock of unique, seaweed-eating sheep are recognised worldwide.

Often people will know of Orkney, but not North Ronaldsay. Alternatively, they will have encountered the name but cannot place why. Mention the sheep and immediately it's "Oh yes, I've heard of them! They're the ones that eat seaweed." The breed's unusual diet stems back to the 1830s when the then Laird, John Traill, ordered the construction





of a drystone wall (or 'sheepdyke') around the island's entire 13-mile circumference.

This was in order to utilise the land for cattle and crops - a radical strategy in response to the collapse of Orkney's kelp industry, and one that banished the sheep to the foreshore in the process. Suddenly confined to just 271 acres of sand and rock, the ancient breed defied the odds as it not only survived ... but thrived.

### Archaeological Spotlight

Small and hardy, the sheep adapted to their new seaweed diet - a lush, abundant natural source that now feeds around 3,000 sheep on the foreshore - and became the island's celebrated focal point in its own right. Recent studies show that Orkney sheep have been grazing on kelp as far back as 4000BC, a discovery that puts the ancient breed back under the archaeological spotlight and explains why these sheep survived where others in similar conditions died out.

Seasonal and select, North Ronaldsay mutton is now outsourced to restaurants nationally and held by some in the same regard as truffles and caviar for its uniquely strong and gamey taste. Keeping historical links intact, the breed is still managed under the UK's last remaining example of community agriculture.

This includes the unparalleled 'Sheep Pund' - the process of rounding up the animals to be dipped and clipped in a process that is a highlight to witness and partake in. Wild and loose, the sheep are chased by foot across the beach and rocks into small stone 'pund' enclosures in an exhilarating game of cat-and-mouse. Visitors stand little chance.

### Of Paramount Importance

Devastatingly, the future of this magnificent breed is in jeopardy. The sheepdyke was severely damaged by storms and is in need of urgent repair. So adapted are the sheep to an oceanic diet that they risk copper poisoning from eating grass inland, and with the danger of cross-breeding polluting their bloodline, keeping the sheep on the shore is of paramount importance.

While the island's population once hovered around 500, today's islanders are friendly but few and unable to maintain the sheepdyke as they once did. A new charity, The Orkney Sheep Foundation, has recently been established to help raise funds to repair the dyke and conserve the noble breed. Without support this remarkable and unassuming piece of living history could vanish forever.

It was man who put the sheep on the shore, and now it's up to man to ensure that they stay there. ●