

Orkney Sheep Foundation launched

CRAIG TAYLOR

“Our mission has two strands: to raise and allocate funds to restore and maintain the ancient sheep dyke of North Ronaldsay, an historic listed structure which is essential to the survival of these unique seaweed-eating sheep on the island shoreline.

“The dyke is the key to their survival in this very special habitat, and therefore our ultimate mission is to secure the future of the island flock on their native isle.”

This is the message from those behind the Orkney Sheep Foundation — a charity whose mission is to conserve the future of the rare North Ronaldsay seaweed-eating sheep.

The official Orkney Sheep Foundation launch took place earlier this month during the Orkney International Science Festival.

The Orkney Sheep Foundation itself was actually founded at the start of 2015, with the objective of securing the future of the native seaweed-eating sheep on the foreshore of North Ronaldsay. On February 2, it was registered as a charity, and incorporated as a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation.

The foundation says it is now in talks to raise considerable funds for the repair and preservation of the storm-damaged sheep dyke.

Those behind the foundation say that the trustees of the charity bring a wide range of experience to the organisation; importantly, they share a strong

commitment to conserving the native sheep on the island.

They go on to say: “This is born out of respect for the island people, and underpinned by the fact that the historic and cultural importance of North Ronaldsay, its sheep and its ancient sheep dyke extend to the wider world, far beyond the shores of this tiny island.

“The sheep dyke is badly damaged and faces recurring and relentless challenges from the sea. Without a viable sheep dyke, the future of this unique sheep breed in its native habitat is severely endangered.”

The foundation explains that, except for a few short months each year when ewes and lambs are brought inland to graze, the sheep are confined to the seashore by the drystone dyke that encircles the island.

North Ronaldsay sheep belong to the ancient northern short-tailed group of breeds, and bones of similar animals dating from the Neolithic period have been found at Skara Brae. A genotype survey organised by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust in 2009 demonstrated that the breed survives virtually unchanged from that original type. So, this living link with our past has established its place in history, and now carries forward a vital genetic blueprint as one of the early building blocks in man’s relationship with farmed animals.

They are the only domesticated sheep to be still managed under a communal system of farming, in which key events in the shepherding calendar bring together the whole community.

As such, the significance of this small hardy little sheep extends far beyond the shores

of its native isle.

The foundation says that the dyke is regarded by Historic Scotland as “probably the largest drystone construction conceived of as a single entity in the world.” It is over 12 miles in length, and stands some two metres high — enough to deter a “louper” (jumping sheep).

It is listed Grade A by Historic Scotland, and highlighted in the Buildings At Risk Register for Scotland.

It was completed in 1832 to confine the native sheep to the foreshore, and so protect the cultivated land and crops from their wanderings.

Once built, the dyke required regular attention to be an effective barrier. The rules of the island’s Sheep Court therefore laid down procedures for sharing the responsibilities and tasks of maintaining the integrity of the dyke upon which the existence of the native sheep relied. This tried and tested system sufficed for many generations, and the sheep dyke stood proudly as a symbol of vision and enterprise.

In more recent times, however, its fortunes have changed dramatically. During December, 2012, and January, 2013, the island was hit by fierce storms and rip tides — the worst in 40 years — and substantial damage was done to the sheep dyke.

Several miles of the structure were laid low, and the depleted island population faces a mammoth task. The damaged dyke faces the recurring and relentless challenge of the sea, and its current state requires major reconstruction.

The foundation adds: “The community is working hard on regeneration and welcoming



North Ronaldsay Sheep on the shore in spring. The new foundation hopes to safeguard their future, and is dedicated to raising funds to restore and maintain the ancient sheep dyke of North Ronaldsay.

new islanders, and has pressed forward energetically with various developments for the future.

“Support for the repair and restoration of the sheep dyke will not only conserve a remarkable historic structure and an internationally significant ancient breed; it will also ensure the survival of the traditional system of community flock management that has preserved sheep and dyke for so long.”

Those involved in the foundation are:

Hunter Peace, convener and trustee. Hunter, whose family roots are in Orkney, has worldwide experience in the commercial property market and in the management of major development projects. Hunter and his wife keep a flock of North Ronaldsay sheep on their

small farm in Hertfordshire.

Peter Titley was appointed secretary and trustee earlier this year. Peter retired from a career in the Criminal Justice System in 2004. He is also a commentator at agricultural and countryside events throughout the UK, and has maintained a conservation smallholding for over 30 years.

Robert Brewis was appointed treasurer and trustee back in February. He lives on a five-acre holding in Buckinghamshire, where he and his wife keep a flock of North Ronaldsay sheep and share an interest in sheep conservation.

Howie Firth was appointed as a trustee earlier this year. As Orkney Islands Councillor for North Ronaldsay and its neighbouring island of Sanday, 1990-99, Howie was involved in various developments in the

North Isles.

Kate Traill Price was appointed as a trustee last April. Kate is a direct descendant of the Traill family, who purchased the island in 1727. The family still own the original Laird’s house and the estate, which encompasses the dyke as well as the foreshore.

Her family founded the ancient North Ronaldsay Sheep Court to preserve one of the few remaining examples of community agriculture in the UK. Kate is a former director of the North Ronaldsay Trust, and remains actively involved with its projects. Further information can be found online by visiting www.theorkneysheepfoundation.org.uk and on Facebook www.facebook.com/theorkneysheepfoundation.

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