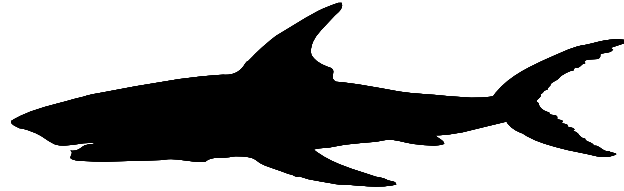


# "Roond About Birsay"

## News for and by the people of Birsay



Autumn 2010

Issue 37

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### Editorial

Well, here goes once more. I suppose we have to start with the weather as usual but that seems to have been a bit kinder to us than it has been in the last few years. No doubt many will disagree but at least most of the harvest is safely under control and there were even some peats cut this year so it can't have been too bad.

I know there was a lot of rain earlier because I was attempting to get the kirkyard grass under control but, as I'm sure many people noticed, I wasn't too successful. I have never had an year like this for breakdowns and with some of the spares for the engines having to come from America, there were some serious delays. Then, when I finally got it going again, something else would break, sometimes after just a few minutes. Then, it would rain again with the final result being that the kirkyards were not as well looked after as I would have liked. Funny how so few people noticed that they were reasonably well kept over the past twenty odd years I have done the job, or at least how few people mentioned it, but when the job is not being done well, there



are plenty of complaints made, some even direct to the OIC rather than to myself or to our clerk. Well, I have now given up the job so someone else can have the pleasure in future.

Finally, I could not let this issue of our local newsletter pass without mentioning the loss of one of our Community Councillors who was an extremely well known and popular

Birsay man and a close personal friend of mine who was prominent not only in the Community Council but was also one of the founder members of the Birsay Heritage Trust, apart from all the other things he was involved in, too numerous to mention. Sandy Scarth unfortunately passed away last month and he will be sorely missed by many. I know you will all join me in extending our condolences to his family.

**Johnny Johnston**  
**Editor**

### **Birsay Community Council**

Things have been moving along much as usual in the Council since last time. We have been trying to do something to improve the parking situation down at the Palace but it is not an easy thing to do. The latest plan is to get the use of a part of the park across the road from the kirk, between The Cottage and the back of Forst. There would be room for about 12 cars there, which would be some help. We are still negotiating about this bit of land so we'll see what happens. There is plenty of room out along the road from the Historic Scotland huts towards Zanzibar but no one wants to walk back from there in bad weather.

We have also got the burn cleared out again at the brig. This should make a big difference to the water flow through there. Last time we did this, we decided to leave an island in the middle in the belief that the water would pass both sides of this island and through the two eyes of the brig. This didn't actually work too well and it just silted up at the south side and eroded the land away at the other side. This time, it certainly looks a lot better and we hope it will last longer as well.

You will perhaps have noticed that we now have a new tourist brochure out. The old one was a bit out of date with some things and in any case there were very few copies left so all the West Mainland Community Councils got together once more to design a new one. This one has been done by Isla Rosie, of Idesign in Quoyloo and we are delighted with the finished article. We think it looks far better and gives people a far better idea of where to go and what they will find there.

There has also been an improvement in the way the re-cycling centre in Dounby has been used and we are delighted about that. There is still room for improvement. For example there are still papers being dumped in the big paper skip in polythene bags and such like but things are much better. It is vital not to abuse this facility or it will be removed and that would be a great loss to people who are not so fit or who do not have transport to get to the Amenity Sites.

**Johnny Johnston - Chairman**

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### **Birsay Toddler Group**

We meet every Tuesday 10am - 12noon at Birsay Hall (1st Tuesday of each month is Lunch Day and we stay on till 1pm)

Everyone welcome, no need to be resident in Birsay.

The response to our 2011 calendar has been very encouraging. We all had great fun doing it, especially the bairns who all made excellent models. Buy early for your Christmas pressies from Dounby Post Office, Harray Stores, Isbisters, Birsay Farmers, Northvet, or the Mart. The money raised is going towards new equipment for the group, and the start of fund raising for a play park at (hopefully) the New Birsay Hall. Priced at £5.95 it is worth every penny.

We will be holding a Halloween party again this year on Saturday 30th October. There will be mince and tatties, ice-cream and homebakes. Neepie lantern and fancy dress competition for the bairns, and lots o fun games. For all bairns primary age and under, and take along your parents, grannies, grandads, aunties and uncles too, a fun night for all. At Birsay Hall from 5pm- 7.30pm

And before we know it Christmas will be here, we have asked Santa to come along again this year so hopefully he will manage to fit us into his busy schedule, and for all the bairns that have been really good all year, he might even have a present for them.

**Avril Hay - Birsay Toddler Group**

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### **Dounby Flower Club**

Meetings held in Dounby School every third Tuesday of each month at 7.30pm

Posters in shops and post office with details of meetings

Everyone is made welcome

Its fun

Our new syllabus started on the 21<sup>st</sup> September 2010, a workshop  
"A Recycled Container" with Katrina Gray

19<sup>th</sup> October workshop "Designer Board" with Cindy Miller

16<sup>th</sup> November Open Night, demonstration, sales table, raffle. Admission £1 including supper, at 7.30pm in the school. All welcome, please come along, it's an enjoyable evening.

December no meeting

18<sup>th</sup> January 2011 New Year's Party

15<sup>th</sup> February workshop "Creation with Candles" with Sandra Davies and Alison Grieve

15<sup>th</sup> March workshop "Inspiration from the Kitchen" with Christine Groat

19<sup>th</sup> April workshop "Spring is in the Air" with Karen Johnston and Debra Kirkness

Yvonne Paice - Secretary

Birsay, Harray and Sandwick Churches

### Summer's End by Pamela Turner

Swooping swallows,

Long, light nights,

Laughing children:

Reward-sure weariness trudges home,

Hay bales high,

Weather dry,

Combine quiet.

Raucous crows,

Fast-blanketing dark,

Stick-thin, large-eyed children:

Resigned, staring fear trudges home,

Effort in vain,

Withered, scarce grain,

Bullock dead.

It is the end of summer for us. Strong wind and heavy rains remind us that we live in the far north of the world and do not have much baking hot sunshine, even in summer, as people south. However is this a reason to greet each other so often with a moan and a groan that we have really had no summer at all? Which of those two harvests are we, give or take a raincloud, enjoying?

Many people enjoy coming to church, because church is all about positive values, living well and being loved by God and how we can live that kind of true love among each other. But it can be a natural tendency of us humans to be negative. So come and join us and practice positive thinking and encouraging others by your presence and sharing your talents. Bring your children to learn some great stories about good living and have a rest and a time of refreshing your mind and soul on a Sunday morning in the Harray Church at 11am (until we have built the new Milestone Community Church!).

There are plenty of other things to join in with: The Guild , The Forum, The Youth Group or the Book Group, The Church Choir or the Tea Rota or the Flower Rota to name but a few. We are always looking for new participants. We need your help to be church in our community, to mark the cornerstones of life and the cycle of the year with meaningful celebrations. Harvest Thanksgiving will be on 31 October and Remembrance Sunday on 14 November. The Guild will lead the service on 21 November and on 28 November the new church year starts with Advent leading up to Christmas . Watch the posters for details on services. We would welcome you and yours wholeheartedly.

**Andrea Price**

**Birsay Heritage Trust**

#### IN MEMORIUM

Mr. R. A. Scarth

The most difficult task a Secretary must do is to report the passing of a fellow member, in this case, Sandy Scarth, the Chairman of the Birsay Heritage Trust. Sandy was a founding member of the Trust, and his extensive knowledge of farming and farmers has been an essential element in the success of Barony Mills. Add this to his warmth and friendship, Sandy will be dearly missed. The Trust members extend our condolences to Sandy's family.

#### THE BARONY MILLS

Summer is over and the tourists have gone. It has been a record season with nearly 3000 visitors, up from last year's 1880. Brian's reputation as a story teller must be growing. Now it is back to work of a different kind: we have taken in some 13 tonnes of corn, and grain drying has begun.

During the tourist season visitors could buy bere meal, several grades of stone-ground oats and wheat along with bere biscuits and some of Argo's products when available. These items are still available at local shops. To put it all together, we offered a RECIPE BOOKLET which sold well; it is still available whenever the Mill is open. Or turn to our web-site, [www.birsay.org.uk](http://www.birsay.org.uk). Don't forget the 6Bs (Birsay Bay Barony Bere and Berry Biscuits) await you at the Birsay Bay Tea Room.

#### THE TWATT AERODROME

The highlight of the season was the open house held 29 August at the Control Tower of H.M.S. Tern, the Navy's term for the aerodrome.



The Open Day was held in conjunction with ODIN (Orkney Defence Interest Group) and the open day at the Ness Battery in early September. (BHT supplied part of the display there as well.) About forty people came to Twatt, that number being the limit we could handle. Tea and coffee were served and discussions were lively, as the photo shows, and a walking tour of other remains followed. BHT thanks all those who helped to prepare the building for the visit- clean-up, lighting, grass cutting, and for the refreshments. Thanks also to Anne Billings and Joyce Grey and their groups for gathering the crowd, issuing route instructions, and for arranging our displays at Ness. We hope these Open Days will stimulate interest (and funds) to continue preservation of wartime remains. 'Lest we Forget.'

**Frank Zabriskie - Secretary, Birsay Heritage Trust**

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### **The St Magnus Church Birsay Trust**

A request for an article for the second "Roond About Birsay" of the year means that summer is definitely over. Summer? It's hard to know when - or if - we had summer this year, but some of the usual events helped us to keep track of what time of year it actually was.

#### **St Magnus Festival Concert**

The St Magnus Festival Concert on 23<sup>rd</sup> June was as popular as ever, with a capacity audience from all parts of the UK and much further afield. A distant relative from Winnipeg, whom I had never met, spent three days in Birsay with her husband, and they thought the concert was wonderful. They were lucky with the weather during

their short stay and they were able to see and photograph what is left of the Biss and Folster homes.

The singers who were giving the concert, I Fagiolini, came out to rehearse before lunchtime and had time to enjoy the view and the food at the Birsay Bay Tearoom before the afternoon concert, which was a delightful mixture of serious and light-hearted music, ranging from William Cornyshe, who lived at the time of Henry VIII, to a humorous song by Flanders and Swann, with French and Cornish folksongs for good measure.

Festival-goers love the excursion to Birsay; they come out through Harray and take the scenic route through Evie back to Kirkwall, and for some of them it's the only sight seeing they have time for. Many remark on the spectacular view they have when they turn down at the Bu towards the Palace. There is so much of Orkney in that vista of fine agricultural land and open sea, framed to the North by the Brough with its Viking settlement and to the South by Marwick Head with Kitchener's Memorial, and with St Magnus Kirk and the ruins of the Earl's Palace in the foreground.

Audience members are highly appreciative of the Birsay hospitality. "When the programme said "Light refreshments," I didn't expect anything like this" said one lady who had obviously not been to a Festival concert in Birsay before. We must once more thank the ladies of the SWRI for their baking, a dozen others for making sandwiches, and still others for packing the sandwiches and cakes or making and serving tea, not forgetting my Canadian relatives who fetched and carried before and after the concert and loved the feeling of being involved in the community. The rain held off till half an hour after the concert - another Magnus miracle - which meant that the audience could wander round at their leisure. I'm told that the sea wall was lined with people enjoying the view and watching for seals while they had their picnic. What a memory to take back to central London!

#### The "Magnus Tapestries"

We are very grateful to Wendy Hourston for again displaying our tapestries by Sheila Scott at the Hundland Gallery throughout the month of August. If you haven't seen them yet, make a point of seeing them next year.

While the tapestries were on display, I played recordings of Scottish metrical psalms in the kirk on Sunday afternoons. Hearing music in the church appealed very much to those who visited - mainly tourists who had found out through notices in the shop and at the kirk gate. The pictures and photographs in the gallery also aroused a lot of interest. The most recent addition is an ariel view of the Egilsay kirk by Craig Taylor.

#### An Orkney Night

Following the success of the "Mini Orkney Night" section of the programme based on **Willie's World** for the Orkney Science Festival last year, we decided to make the whole programme this year an "Orkney Night" like those of the 1950s and 1960s, and a very big audience turned out to hear it. The standard of performance was extremely high, with Issy Grieve reading two humorous poems by Hazel Parkins, Robin Nicolson as George Corrigan, Kristan Harvey on solo fiddle, Sarah Jane Gibbon singing two Orkney songs, Frank Keenan singing four of his own songs, accompanied by the other members

of "Login's Well" and five young musicians from Stromness playing a variety of traditional tunes. The links by compère Harvey Johnston were very much part of the performance and added to everyone's enjoyment.

#### Another St Magnus Church

##### St Magnus Presbyterian Church

One visitor who was particularly interested in the church was the Reverend Des Botting, who was minister of St Magnus Presbyterian Church near Duntroon in New Zealand from 1974 to 1982. This church was built in 1897 and took its name from St Magnus Church in Egilsay, so there must have been strong Orkney connections. It closed earlier this year.

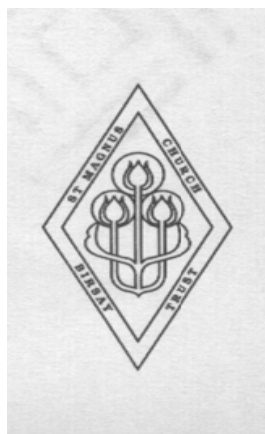
Another visitor, whose name looks like Faith Fack, from Stratford, Ontario, says "Discovered great-grand-parents here." Unfortunately, she doesn't tell us who they were.

Visitors throughout the summer have been numerous in spite of the weather - or perhaps because of it, since none of those who have signed the visitors book mention shelter from the rain or wind. Several mention that they are visiting the church for the second time or "again", including a couple from Austria, but not the same Austrian couple who have written our most unusual comment "Lets get married!"

The words "peace" or "peaceful" are mentioned 57 times and there must be a similar number of comments which express the same idea in different words, e.g. "quiet", "calm", "tranquil". One says "All this time!", which is obviously a reference to the long history of the church. Visitors from Poland say "Thanks, Orkney" and a visitor from Wales writes "This church questions my soul". There are many other comments which indicate that visitors to this historic church find it a very moving experience.

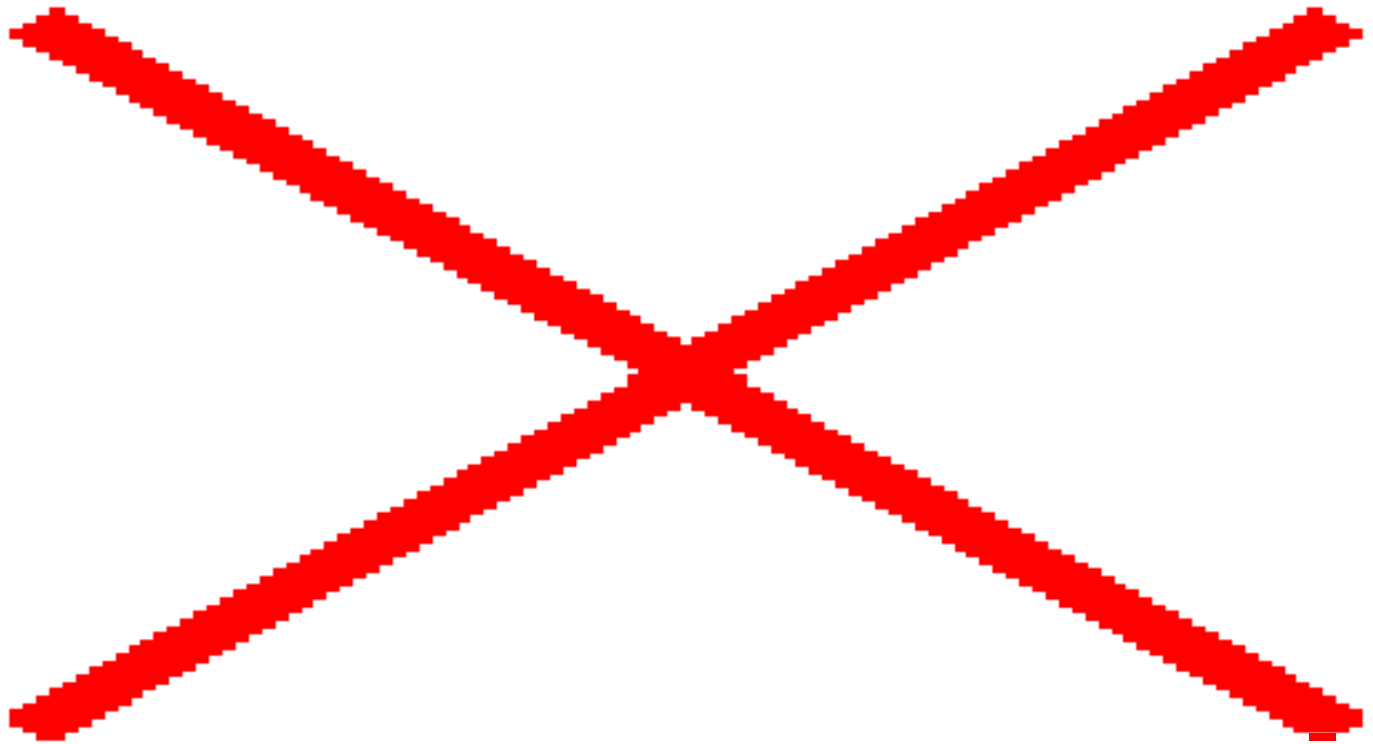
#### Favourite Carols

On Monday 20<sup>th</sup> December at 7pm we plan to have an evening of favourite carols for everyone, probably with the Bea Choir as guest artistes so that you don't have to sing non-stop if you come along! Put the date in your diary!



**Bertie Harvey-Secretary**





### **Wings over the Waves**

In the Spring edition of the Birsay newsletter I saw your mention as editor of the Twatt airfield and wondered if you would be interested to mention in the newsletter about the new forthcoming book about a Fleet Air Arm pilot (my uncle) who was stationed at Twatt in 1941 and who subsequently went on to lead the air strikes against the German battleship Tirpitz from Orkney in 1944.

Overall in the book there are numerous references to Orkney, from when the pilot first arrived in Orkney in 1940/41 during the Bismarck scare. He was in Hatston again in 1943 until his death in summer 1944 when on a mission from Orkney.

The book is entitled: Wings Over the Waves: Fleet Air Arm Strike Leader against Tirpitz, The Biography of Lt Cdr Roy Baker-Falkner DSO DSC RN by Graham Roy Drucker Publisher: Pen & Sword Aviation. 30 October 2010

ISBN: 9781848843059

[http://www.pen-and-sword.co.uk/?product\\_id=2584](http://www.pen-and-sword.co.uk/?product_id=2584)

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Graham Roy Drucker  
Author - Wings over the Waves



### MOVING HOUSE and OTHER STORIES

In 1955, ill-health struck my father and I was granted exemption, aged fourteen, to leave school and work at home on the farm. Barely two years later, the farming part of my life ended when my father passed away and the farm had to be sold. The sale of the Stock, Crop and Implements took place in November, 1957, and I then had to look for a job. I replied to an advertisement in *The Orcadian*, in which the builder from the village of Dounby, Alfie Tait, was in need of a '*strong and willing apprentice joiner*'. He had earlier erected a small wooden house alongside my grandmother's house, for my mother and I to live in. It had been part of an army hut and cost £600. I started my apprenticeship on 6<sup>th</sup> January, 1958, and the starting wage was 1/- (5p) an hour.

The firm also did undertaking and one of the first jobs I had to learn was how to make coffins. As I was that little bit older, I was often called upon to drive the hearse at funerals. The hearse was a 1924 Austin 20, which had gate-change and three levers on the steering column - hand-throttle, advance & retard and mixture. She was a bonny vehicle and was used until about 1970. I understand she is still in existence, although she has now been converted into a shooting-brake.

In those days, there was no demarcation of duties and we developed a wide range of other 'skills'. We would be called on to mix concrete if a foundation or a floor was going in and, of course, we got labourer's pay for this - a welcome addition when your gross weekly wage was only £2. Insurance and income-tax took away 5/3d (26p). John Spence of Norton started his apprenticeship at the same time as me and, if sand was needed, we would both be despatched to the sand-pit on Boardhouse Links in Birsay with the five-ton Bedford lorry, a distance of about five miles from the workshop. I wonder what the youth of today would say if you gave them a shovel and told them to load a lorry with sand? I can't remember what the record was for the two of us loading the lorry. Twenty minutes seems to ring a bell, but it may only be a '*fiction of the imagination*'. I think the Bedford lorry was an ex-army one. All I can remember about it now was the big round bar across the front that protected the radiator, and the colour - Battleship Grey. The firm also owned an International Farmall tractor and loader, but I suppose it wouldn't have been economical to send this out to the sand-pit each time sand was needed. I can, however, remember being at the Links with it helping Eric, Alfie's youngest son, to do some 'tirveen' (removing the grass to expose the sand underneath). I was amazed at the depth of sand beneath the grass and often wondered how long it had taken to build up.

On one occasion, Alfie's oldest son Freddie and myself were to go for a load of sand, but it was hampered somewhat as we could only find one shovel. His father disappeared through to the back of the workshop and came back with a barn-shovel. "*There you are*," he said, handing it to Freddie. "*Hell*," replied Freddie, "*who do you think I am - Superman?*" Guess who had to use the barn-shovel?

The firm also had a small two-ton Austin lorry, navy-blue in colour, and John and I had to paint it on one occasion when work was maybe a bit slack. Eric usually did all the lorry-work, but I was once sent to Walliwall Quarry with the Austin, about fifteen miles away, to collect a load of chips (aggregate) for Redland in Firth, where a byre or a shed was being built. I had never had to venture any distance with either of the lorries and, looking back, I now wonder if I was legally qualified to drive them at the time. Anyway, I reached the quarry and descended the long, sloping road to the bottom and asked for the two tons of chips as instructed. I can still recall the panic as the lorry howled its way up out of the quarry in first gear - it seemed to take forever. It was then a case of heading for the weighbridge at the head of the Kirkwall Pier to have the load weighed. No wonder the lorry had struggled - there were three and a quarter tons on board! I got reprimanded by Freddie for over-loading the lorry when I reached Redland. The man who loaded the lorry at the quarry must have thought it was a joke or, it has since occurred to me, he was perhaps a good salesman as you paid for the amount on the lorry, not what you asked for.

Probably one of the most exciting jobs that I was involved with was the shifting of army huts. Rather than take them to pieces, they were jacked-up until it was possible to reverse a huge four-wheeled trailer underneath. The hut was then lowered on to the trailer and towed to its destination, where the



procedure was reversed. Two huts were taken from Ness Battery in Stromness by this method. The tractor did the towing and the Bedford came behind, also attached to the trailer in case it had to hold back when going downhill. As we came out along the shore road, we had to take the top off the dyke at one or two places before we could negotiate the corners. The road is on the sea side of the wall and near to the cliff edge in places. There was perhaps a forty or fifty foot drop to the foreshore. It appeared to be fraught with danger and Freddie told me to be ready to jump. Whether this was to frighten me or not, I wasn't sure, but it certainly put me on edge. The police were always notified and accompanied us on such journeys, and the hydro and telephone engineers were also on standby to lift any of their wires out of the way.

I also recall a wooden building being taken from the Leigh Hotel in Stenness and delivered to a foundation that had been made ready for it in a field out towards the farm of Arion, about six miles away. On this kind of work, the Bedford was loaded-up with the jacks, blocks of wood, battens, barrels, crowbars and all the other things that were needed during the lifting and lowering process. As I waited with the lorry at a road junction, Sergeant Bews, one of the local police officers, came over to speak. During the conversation, he asked how long I had worked for Alfie Tait. *"This is it,"* I thought, *"he's going to book me for not being old enough to be at the wheel of the lorry."* However, it didn't turn out to be a leading question and he duly waved me on my way when the tractor and trailer came up behind.

The nearest we came to disaster was when we were dismantling a big wooden house at the farm of Quanterness, near Kirkwall. This building had provided accommodation for some of the farm workers, and was replaced soon after with the present day, semi-detached, block-built house. The building had been taken down in sections and the whole thing had been loaded onto the big trailer. It was late one Friday afternoon when the tractor pulled out onto the gravel road leading down to the public road. It was Freddie who was driving. We hadn't thought we would need to hook the lorry up to the rear to hold back. Anyway, the weight of the load was too great and began pushing the tractor down the road in front of it when the brakes were applied. We ran with six-inch concrete blocks which we threw under the trailer wheels and this managed to bring it to a halt. It was very nearly what some folk call *'a brown trousers job'*.

A boat-load of cement always seemed to arrive in Orkney on a Friday, and many contractors went to collect a load directly from the ship. I imagine this was cheaper than buying your requirements from the local builders' merchant as you needed it. I lost count of the number of times a lorry-load of cement arrived at stopping-time and had to be unloaded. It made a good start to the weekend, especially if you had to play in an important football match later in the evening. Still, you had never-ending resources of strength at that age, or so it seemed.

The worst lifting job of all was the unloading of crates of glass. They were usually delivered by Geordie Sinclair from Stromness, who drove a Bedford lorry similar to Tait's one for the firm of Banks. If he arrived at a time when there was no-one else around to help, it was quite a struggle for the two of you. There's a lot to be said for the invention of fork-lift trucks.

You might think from the foregoing that I did very little joiner-work. This wasn't the case - it just seems that these 'extra curricular activities', to use modern terminology, seem to stick much more clearly in the mind. No matter what job one does, the other life-skills gained during the serving of an apprenticeship are equally important and, although you don't realize it at the time, they remain with you and shape the rest of your life in so many ways.

I certainly enjoyed the wide variety of jobs that I was involved in during my apprenticeship at Alfie Tait's. The modern-day apprentice has a different way of life, and I imagine that Health & Safety Regulations will now totally forbid any of the 'activities' that I had to undertake, especially the hut-shifting. I wonder if that's really progress?

(Harold Esson - c.1998)





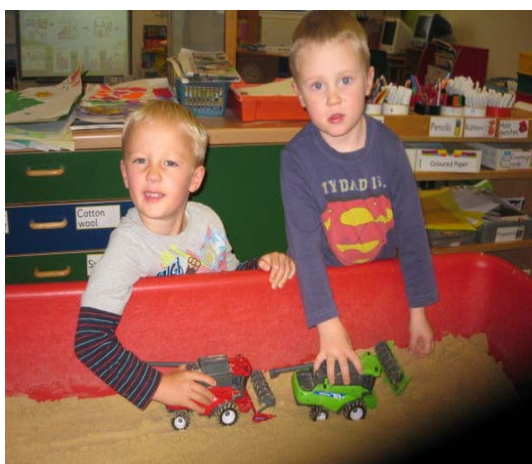
THE 1924 AUSTIN HEARSE OUTSIDE ALFIE TAIT'S WORKSHOP SOMETIME  
IN THE EARLY 1960s, WITH JIM TAIT STANDING ALONGSIDE  
(Photo: Harold Esson)

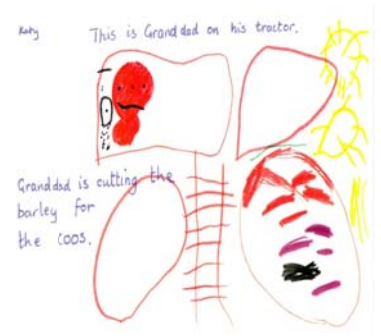


THIS HUT WAS MOVED FROM HOLM VILLAGE TO A SITE ABOVE NETHERBUTTON PRE-1953  
L-r: Alfie Tait(wearing raincoat), James Kirkness, Jack Muirden, ? ?, Freddie Tait, Billy Merriman  
(Photo: Eric Tait)



## DOUNBY COMMUNITY SCHOOL





These are some pictures of the Dounby Nursery children in connection with their project on harvest. They had a trip to the Barony Mill to see how meal is ground and Brian visited them at the school to show them DVDs and to speak to them about the Mill and about grinding meal. Duncan Hay took a combine to school to let them see a real one. This caused a lot of excitement.



**I n t**