



A Social Life of Peat

Ethnographic drawing in Shetland

.....

Bérénice Carrington



A Social Life Of Peat

YELL IS AN ISLAND IN THE SHETLAND ARCHIPELAGO THAT LIES TO THE NORTH EAST OF THE BRITISH MAINLAND AND OUT OF SIGHT FROM THE ORKNEY ISLANDS THAT NESTLE OFF SCOTLAND'S NORTHERN COAST. IT IS AN INHABITED ISLAND. ITS POPULATION LIVES, AS IT ALWAYS HAS, MAINLY IN THE COASTAL AREAS IN TOONSHIPS. BY FAR THE MAJORITY OF THE STUDY CARRIED OUT FOR THIS PROJECT CENTRES ON YELL.

Nowadays with inter-island ferry systems operating, some of the inhabitants make their living by commuting to jobs on the Shetland mainland, but the better part stay and work on the island, most of the time. Historically the residents of Yell needed to survive on the resources the island had to offer, and on what could be taken from the voes and open sea that bordered their land. The layout of the little human communities reflects this *limitation by confinement* in a repetitive model

of crofting toonships, comprising clearly defined zones of sea, arable land, ootrun, hill dykes and scattald.

It is an archaic system familiar to many northern hemisphere island groups. It's a measure of this system's durability that relatively small islands (Yell is less than 20 miles long) in which this arrangement operates are still populated today; the sea provides food and fertilizer in the forms of fish and seaweed, the arable land

provides food for humans and fodder for beasts and the ootrun provides pasture for controlled grazing.

Of course, all these components are essential to the whole, but it is the scattald with its dominating scale and extensive provision of resources that determines the success and continuity of the communities managing it. And the greatest and most important of these resources is, and always has been, the peat beneath the scattald.

Cover left: Detail, *Anne at the Raisings*

Cover right: *Lynsay, 1990 Virdiefields, Dunrossness* (photo from Elaine Thomason)

THE HILL

When Yell folk talk of going to the hill they are referring to a place traditionally called scattald. If they talk of going to the sheep, that would indeed involve going on to the scattald where the sheep graze and live out their lives. But when they talk of going to the hill, it is peat they are thinking about, and it is a part of the process of bringing that peat home that occupies them. For the people of Yell, the hill has always been a vast reserve of peat and an endless supply of fuel, if such a supply was ever needed. Always expanding, never eroding faster than it grows.

The time for going to the hill is determined by the season. Peat casting can only be carried out



successfully within the confines of the beginning of summer after the late frosts, and the end of summer before the hill turns wet again, after this short seasonal drought. But it is neither the calendar nor the clock that draws folk to the hill at the right time each year. It is something else, more to do with the calls of breeding lapwing, curlew and oystercatcher and the growing length of the daylight. It can be an impulse from a childhood memory of seeing fathers, uncles and grandfathers with wooden implements heading for the hill with the sky this

Peat Reek in North-A-Voe, 2018

.....

particular shade of blue, and the sun high in the morning and still so high on the evening of that same day.

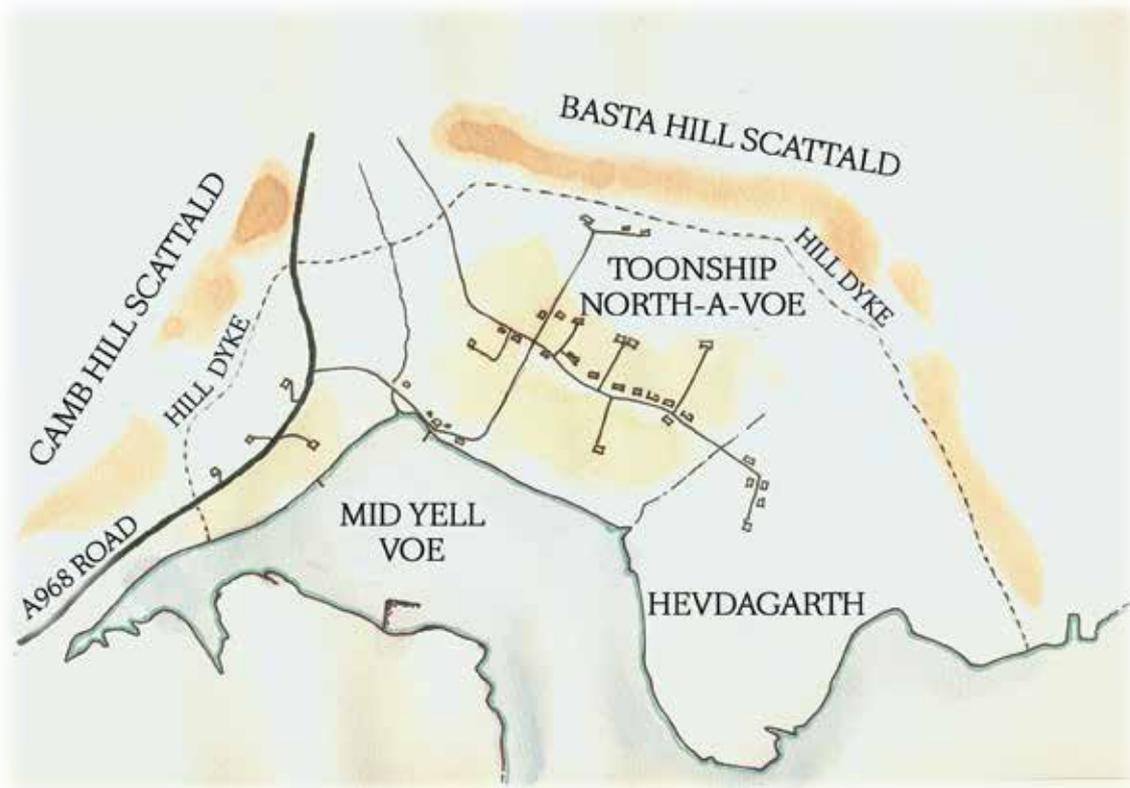
The hill mostly raises from the sea, and the steeper the incline the shallower the peat below is the general observation. Within its frame there are dales, extensive flat planes of often deep peat, burns, bogs, lochs and shuns. Some sites offer boulders and grasses with little or no peat.

The model toonship illustrated below is based on North-A-Voe in Yell. It illustrates the classic concentration of crofts and houses on gentle slopes looking down to a voe, entirely enclosed by an unbroken line of hill dykes and protected by the hills of Camb, Basta and Hevdagarth. The croft and dwelling houses of

an area are located within the hill dykes, with very few exceptions. The hill is not a place where people live. There are Yell variants to the North-A-Voe pattern. In Da Herra, croft houses cling to the steepest slopes on high hills that look down on arable land lying above Whaal-Firth Voe (see drawing, page 7). At Otterswick in

East Yell some crofts border the coastline above rocky cliffs. But what all share in common is the salt water before them and the peat hills behind them.

.....
Toonship model



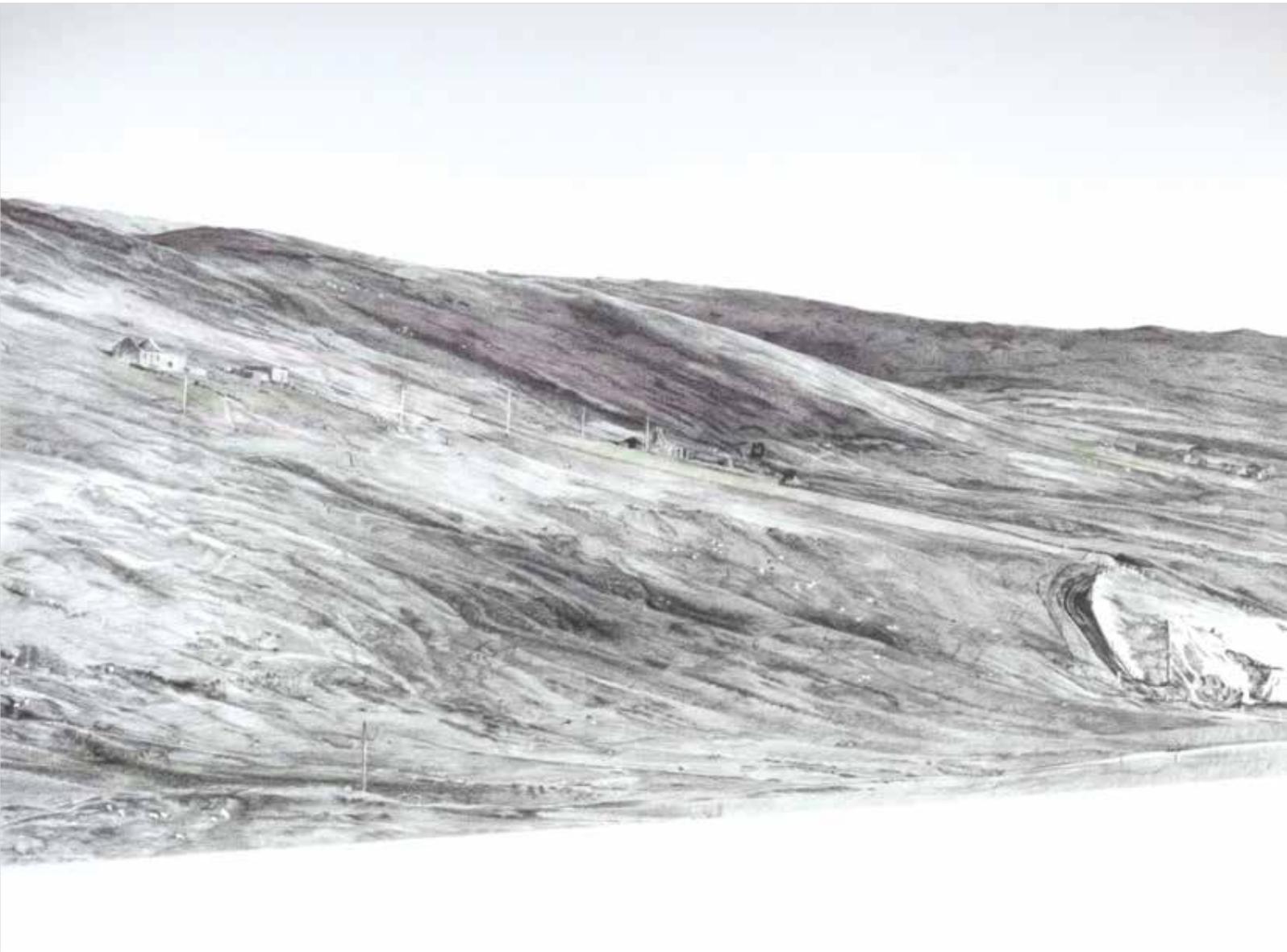


THE OBJECTIVE AND THE EXHIBITION

Peat in Yell has a cultural force that can be traced as it moves down from the hill to integrate into the lives and customs of the population. The people and the peat co-exist in a symbiotic relationship; the place in which the folk live shapes the way that they live, and the way they live has a tangible and visible impact on the place. This was the context in which my curiosity with the

hill grew, around observations of historic peat banks (some possibly early 19th century) and the bare peat faces and ridges created by the sun, wind and water, animals and ice. Where human activity has sculpted the landscape there is an unmissable order and the signatures of the men and women who shaped it are there to be identified.

• *Left: Willie Spence, Smiddy,*
• *North-A-Voe, c.1950*
• *Right: Coonty Boys and Peat*
• *Stacks c.1998*



• Herra,
• 2018, 760 x 560 mm, charcoal, watercolour on paper
•
•
•
•
•
•
•
•



To make peat into a fuel, you have to transform it.

This is not the same as gathering wood or mining coal. A walk in company across a flat mantle of deep peat often surprises, as the shock from footsteps causes gentle tremors that are easily detected by the soles of feet, revealing something of the unique properties of the hill.

Ingenuity was needed to devise a system that could take from this peat yet preserve it at the same time. And the system that evolved is ingenious indeed.

The well-maintained peat banks of someone who knows their way are elegant, with a human - not a mechanical scale - that is as intriguing as it is delightful in its simplicity. The appearance of the peat bank is often a reflection of the physique and character of the architect.

• *In The Hill,*
• *2018, 560 x 760 mm, charcoal,*
• *watercolour on paper*
•
•
•
•
•
•
•
•
•
•



A Social Life of Peat was conceived as an ethnographic examination - using drawing and photography - of the extent to which peat has permeated the lives of people living in the toonships of Yell. A broader base of experience than simply my own was required to facilitate the study and a series of workshops, culminating in an open day at Lerwick Museum, was devised to bring in expressions of interest and experience from further afield.

Peat Diaries Open Day, Shetland Museum and Archives, 2017

WORKSHOPS

Using peat diaries as a framework six broad themes about peat emerged: childhood, stoves, work in the hill, bogs as places that preserve things, as a particular form of landscape and a substance that makes its own mark on the landscape.

Two of the workshop participants, Cilla Robertson and Elaine Thomason - both from Yell, agreed to allow their work to be included in this catalogue, and both are featured in the exhibition, *A Social Life of Peat*, at Da Gadderie



CHILDHOOD

Ta be a bairn i da paet hill is ta be clos ta möld. Doon amang da dry moor dat is sae saft apo knees. Doon whaur da aert is fu o speedirs, hunchiclocks an fleas. Aa da peerie stripes get dammed wi faels an weet paet an every clod dats turned has a forty fitter, dat nicht juist nip dee, runnin fir ony

hol. Dir lambs fit prints i da ootlay fae dastreen an Mirk has fan da stenkle's nest i da greff. Hits ower hard ta keen whits a rabbit purl an whits a yowes an dir no much atween meenies oo an hentilagets edder. Da tae fae da flask is ower haet an da bannocks hae better butter. Da sky is sae blue an bricht

you canna watch dat speck o a warblin bird geng ony higher an higher an higher still. But da wind has come up an da hill is a swirl o stoor an dye een is fu o mots ageen. Dan, faider wheeps dee up an licks awa da tears wi a great tongue laek a coo.

.....
Left: Wheelbarrow, 2017, 270 x 210 mm, combined lino print and digital drawing, inkjet print

Right: Peerie Tushkars, 2017, 560 x 760 mm, watercolour, charcoal on paper

CILLA ROBERTSON

“When I was peerie I was always feart for the flickering shapes that the open fire made on the back wall and I imagined it to be lions and tigers and monsters coming to get me. It was very real to me and I would have to go under da bed claes.”



Hunchiclock Tale

It is not only peats that come home in bags, sometimes insects come home from the hill too, and once at the side of the peat fire, beetles like to get into footwear. It is not always easy to detect this invasion, even when the footwear is being worn. But once the hunchiclock has been discovered it's sometimes not clear whether the human or the beetle is in the biggest panic.





Left: *Enchantress - imagined, 2016, 210 x 150 mm, watercolour on paper*



Centre: *Diamond logo - imagined, 2016 150 x 105 mm, watercolour on paper*



Right: *Kettles full of boiling water, 2018, 50 x 90 mm, pen and ink on paper*

Before the advent of functional stoves with back-boilers, like the Raeburn, a range of elegantly designed and beautifully named small stoves were the household's principal source of boiling water. Fairy, Enchantress, Diamond, Duchess and Victress were all common throughout the island. There are bits of them still to be seen all around the toonships

of Yell. Broken hotplates and fractured legs lie in the ebb, barnacled and half-buried in black sand. And in the peat hill, old stove backs and doors are a favourite roof for ant colonies. Most remain ruined and broken nearby the houses they once heated. Although to a large extent their style hides the aesthetically important naked flames of the

glowing peat, their charm is undeniable and the rooms heated by them are congenial with a warmth far beyond the physical. They provide a comfort that cannot be measured in terms of *units of heat produced*. The growing internet interest in old fashioned peat stoves reflects changing attitudes suggesting that their day is far from over.

BURIED IN THE PEAT

At the south end of the Vatsetter loch in East Yell is a wall of peat bristling with the remains of birch trees. There are branches and trunks, replete with bark, imbedded into the bottom of the moor. As the waters of the loch rise and fall and splash against the peat face, the trees become exposed. The same deposits of trees exist at the head of Whaalfirth-Voe and locally in the Camb hill amongst the North-A-Voe peat banks, with some trunks being greater than six inches in diameter.

When encountered during peat casting, typically three or four peats down, they are called 'widdies'. The branches of the trees are usually thin enough for a sharp tushkar to slice through them and the pieces of wood simply become incorporated into the peats. The trunks often have to be cut around and left where they are, or dug out with a spade.

While casting his peats at Rou in west Yell, Hamish Polson found hazelnuts in his third or fourth peat at about eight feet down. These nuts are on display at Da Aald Haa Museum in Burravoe, Yell.



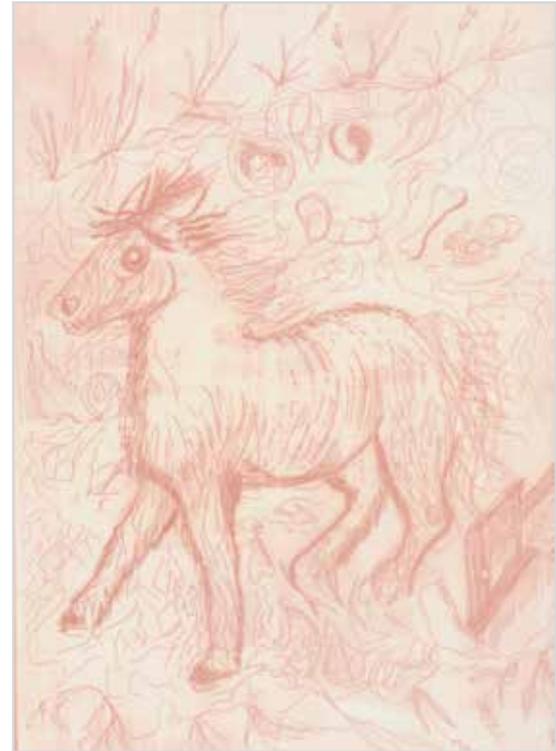
• Birches,
• 2016, 210 x 290 mm,
• pen and ink on paper

ELAINE'S STORY

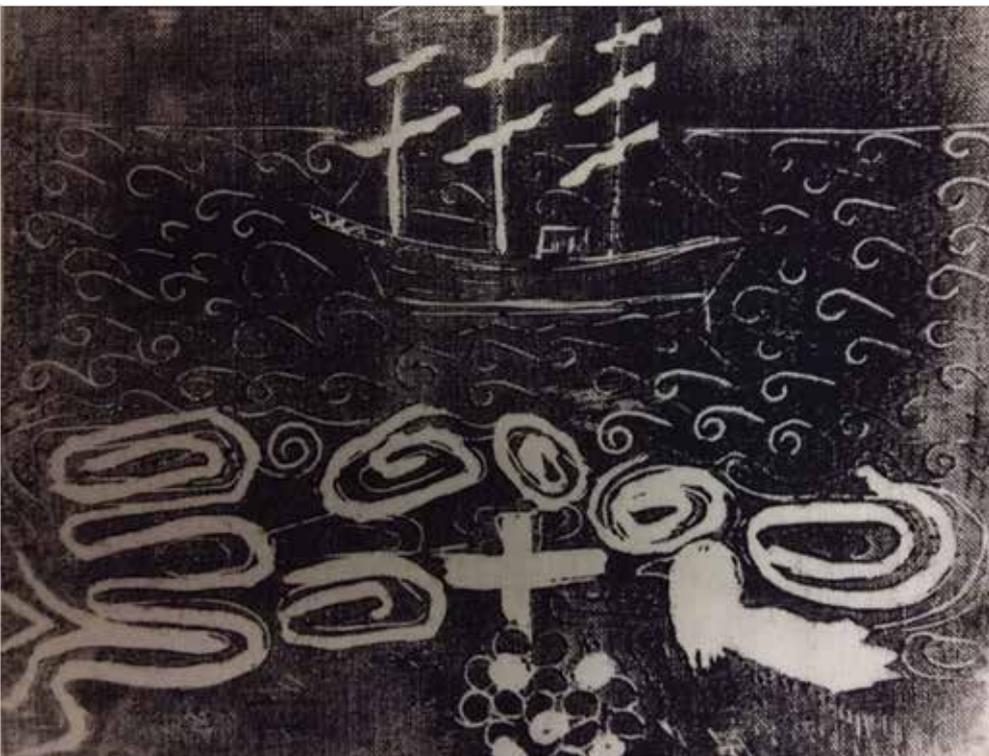
A family in the north of Yell came upon the legs and hooves of a pony while they were casting their peats. Carefully, they continued to cast without damaging the pony, and the animal remains in the peat bank where it died or was buried.

There is a grave in North Yell not far from the dead pony, reputed to be that of a boy. At the end of the Napoleonic Wars, around 1816, a naval vessel came up the Voe and a boy of 19 named Peter Holmes fell to the deck from the rigging and was killed. Being so close to shore, he was buried on land rather than at sea, and the grave was marked.

A local man who lived adjacent to the croft and peat banks where the boy was buried, could mind back to an old man tending the grave which then had a white fence around it. When casting threatened to encroach on the grave that section of the bank was abandoned. The current tenant of that croft found the stones marking the grave. He maintains the grave by keeping the stones painted white.



• *Sheltie,*
• *Elaine Thomason, 2017,*
• *210 x 290 mm,*
• *cliche-verre photographic print*



THE GUNNISTER MAN

In 1951 a few yards from the Gunnister road near Johnnie Mann's loch, two peat casters, James Johnson from Muckle Roe and James Bigland from Brae, discovered the remains of a man in a peat bank. The daughter of one of these men recalls as a six-year-old girl being refused permission to see the find, as a mark of respect to the dead man. As a boy her father used to walk from Gunnister to school at Sullom. The gaet through the hill that he followed joined another track at a point where he later found the Gunnister man. These tracks are ancient ones, and it's not likely that this man had wandered from the beaten track to meet his death..

• Peter Holmes,
• Elaine Thomason, 2017, 150 x 125 mm, lino print

HANDED DOWN: HOW TO CAST PEATS

RIPPING

A single continuous slit, the depth of the spade, is cut or ripped the full length of the bank. The width of the feal is determined at this stage.



TURNING THE FEAL

The area of moor to the inside of the ripped line is cut into identically sized segments called feals. Each feal is cut out by the spade and tripped to stand on its end. These can be very heavy if lifted down into the greff right away, but if left for a few days in dry weather they lose most of their water content.



LAYING DOWN THE FEAL

The feals must be lifted down and carefully laid in the greff. The more precise the laying of the feals, the better they grow back together again and the more useful the greff is for raising peats in.



PONING

After the feals have been laid down, most banks still require being poned. This is where the rugged piece of moor left by the removal of the feal is levelled and smoothed off. It is much easier for the caster to stand on the even surface that is left.

As the years pass it becomes more and more difficult to tell where the feals were laid.

CASTING THE FIRST PEAT

No two peat banks give an identical casting experience and there are many obstacles encountered, while casting, which must be addressed. Horseflesh, tawse, widdies and gurrily eyes are all terms familiar to seasoned peat casters. These can often be a hindrance, but are easy enough to overcome if you know how.

An inadequate tushkar, however, must be avoided. A good quality tushkar is a precision instrument. Arguably the best that exist were made by blacksmiths Lowrie Broon and Wullie Farquhar (Smiler). They left the letters LB and S stamped on the back of their tushkar irons.

Most important of all is that the tushkar must not be blunt.



THE OOTLAY

The name given to all the cast first peats is: "ootlay". Again it is an advantage to be neat and systematic. The tidier the peat casting, the easier it is to proceed.



CASTING THE SECOND PEAT

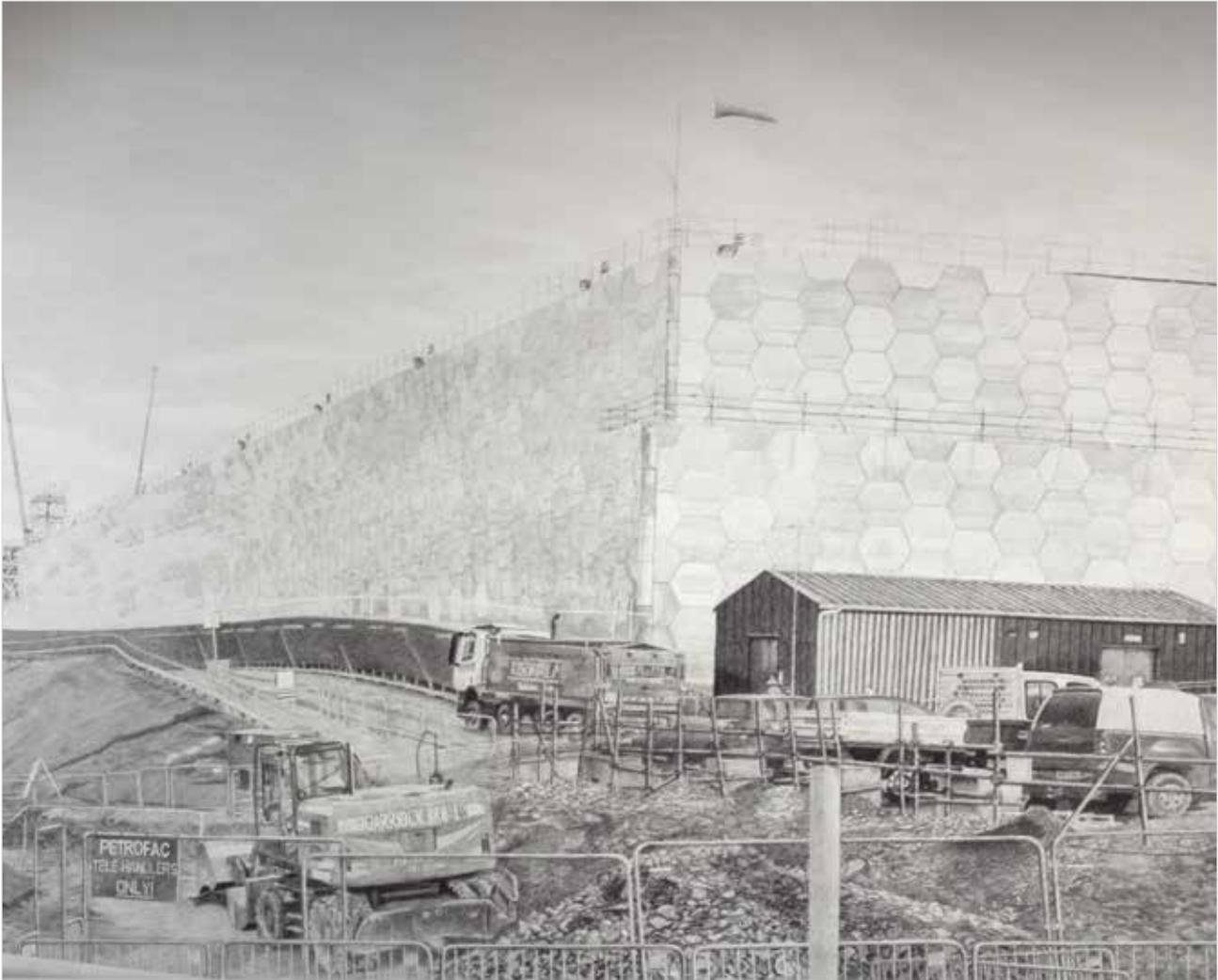
Where the moor is deep enough a second peat is taken out. This is built into a dyke structure on top of the first line of peats in the ootlay. The dyke should ideally have spaces between its peats to allow the drying wind to pass through.

RAISING

After about two weeks of good dry weather the peats are ready to raise. The ootlay must be lifted back far enough to leave a space for the dyke to be raised into.

Casting peats in the common grazing is the right of every crofting tenant in the North -A-Voe toonship. Non-crofters can purchase a casting right on an annual basis from the landlords. On Yell, most of the peat banks occur alongside roads or tracks. This is common sense because without a road of some kind how do you get your peats home! As the roads in Yell access such a small part of the island it follows that most of Yell's peat reserves are out of reach to the peat caster.





At Sullom Voe in the North of Shetland there is a gas plant adjacent to the oil terminal. When this gas plant was constructed a giant building was erected to store all the displaced peat.

• *Big Peat Store,*
• *2018, 1400 x 1130 mm, charcoal on paper*

Teenie lived in the Linkshoose cottages in Mid-Yell. She said that one of her favourite sights was looking across the voe to North-A-Voe around the end of dinner time each day. You could tell when the eating was over in the houses by the new reek belching out from freshly banked-up fires.



A stag party was coming home by hired bus in the early hours on a day in June. The sun was already up and not a cloud in the sky. A collective call of nature was 'requested' and the driver pulled into the nearest draw off on the deserted road.

As the men were relieving themselves the driver got out and drew their attention to three banks of cast peats close to the edge of the road. "Boys, see that peats," he cried.

"Would it no be a great fun if we all got stuck-in and raised the lot? Imagine what the folk would think when they come bye here tomorrow."

The drink was still in the stags and the whole busload were soon over the stank and raising with enthusiastic roars and laughs. In less than fifteen minutes every peat was raised, greff and all, and the bus was on its way again. Spirits aboard were high, and the party was back on.

It turned out that the peat banks belonged to the bus driver.

.....
Left: Bird pellet containing heather berry seeds, placed in a mussel shell. Found on the road, the pellet is a sign that the berries are ripe for picking in the hill. A treat while working with the peat.



Left: Plantress Stove, Aywick in the 1980s, 2016, 170 x 900 mm, pencil on paper
Right: Detail Houll, 2018, 1400 x 1130 mm (whole drawing), charcoal on paper

Peat is a fuel that has a cultural force in the lives of those who harvest it. Intrinsic to Yell, the transformation of peat into fuel can be an act of self-reliance that engenders a sense of security. It has a symbolic value as well as a practical function in the lives of the Islanders.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Shetland Arts, Shetland Museum and Archives, and Silverprint Ltd for their sponsorship of the peat diary workshops. I am grateful to Lizzie and John Nicholson for donating the kastik for me to draw. I am indebted to the many Shetlanders who participated in this project for their generosity with their time, and stories about peat.

Graphic production of *A Social Life of Peat* catalogue by Baden Smith, Adelaide, Australia.

© 2018 Bérénice Carrington. All rights reserved.

www.berenicecarrington.com