

FOULA HERITAGE

Ranger service

Airstrip to 'Da Sneck'



Sneck o da Smaallie

Guided Walk No. 4

Distance **2.8km**
Difficulty **Easy**

(You may wish to use the toilets at the airstrip before setting out.....)

The area around the airstrip is a favourite breeding ground for Arctic Skuas, but they are under continuing severe pressure from Bonxies encroaching on their territory. There are two colour phases of Arctic Skuas. Some are plain dark brown while others are a smart combination of brown and white. They look very different, but they are all the same species, and breed with each other regardless of colour.

The Baxter Chapel (1), opposite the top end of the airstrip road, was built towards the end of the 19th century. The money was gifted in memory of a Congregationalist, named Baxter, by his two sisters. Now, the building is maintained by the Church of Scotland, but there is no longer a resident minister.



The Baxter Chapel

A little south of the church, there is a ruined plantie crub, a small, round, stone enclosure for growing kale seedlings. It has been built on top of a much older site, known as Cru Kaitrin, and you can also see the remains of ancient dykes here. Archaeologists think this site may date back to the Iron Age

Nearby is the south water tank, painted green. Water is tapped from springs, at the foot of Hamnafield, and the pumping station at the Mogle Brig pumps it up to two tanks, one at each end of the island. From these, water is gravity fed to all the consumers. The water scheme was installed in 1981. Before this, water had to be carried from wells. Walk along the Bredfit road. The land here has been scalped and used for bedding in the byres, before being spread on the land, which is why it is shallow and stony. You can see how much greener and more fertile the croftland in the Hametoon is.

Notice how the heather grows – the exposed sides of the clumps are grey and dead, burnt by the salt laden winds of winter. This is a good area for finding white heather. Look for Crowberry (berry heather), Tormental (bark), Spotted Heath Orchid (milloories), Milkwort (white, pink or blue), Heath Rush (burra), Common Sedge and Heath Bedstraw.

Look for ringed plover, known as Sandy Loo in Shetland, which often nest in this stony area.

Above **Bredfit (2)**, outside the dyke, is an archaeological site, date and usage unknown. There is a small, boat-shaped ring of stones immediately above it, possibly the remains of a Norse boat grave. Further along the dyke is an old stone cruie with a long styaggi, or fank. Sheep were gathered from cliffs, on the west side of the isle, and driven into the cruie. Built into the west end of the styaggi is a plantie crub, usually still being used. The net across the top is to stop the Fulmars getting in.



Sneck o da Smaallie

At the corner of the Bredfit dyke, where the well is, or further down in the boggy bit at the edge of the burn, those interested in plants may find Butterwort, Sundew and Lousewort, and, with a bit of luck, Lesser Twayblade.

Running westward is a rough track, built by members of the International Voluntary Service (IVS) in 1992 to give better access to the now disused Wasten Cruie. As you follow this track, you will see the remains of old mooldie kuses, where the scraped up dried peat dust was stored, until it was needed.

All around is Bonxie breeding territory. Foula has the biggest colony of Bonxies in the world, with about 2500 breeding pairs, and hundreds of non breeders. They may swoop at you if you are near their nest or chicks. This can be scary, but hold something up above your head, even your hand if you have nothing else, and this will usually deter them from coming too close.

About a third of the way along the Daal, you may be able to see the remains of **the old Mill Dam (3)**, which dammed the burn to form a mill pond. When the water was released from here, it turned seven mills along its length.

The Daal is a U-shaped glacial valley, rounded out by the ice-cap which spread out from the Shetland Mainland and pushed through the valley. The bottom of the Daal is covered by Blanket Bog, a common habitat in Shetland, but very rare worldwide. The most important plant in its formation is Sphagnum Moss, which underlies much of the vegetation, often forming hummocks, but also forming bright green sphagnum lawns. Although these sphagnum lawns may look enticing, do not attempt to walk across them as you will sink in.

As you walk, look out for Meadow Pipits, Skylarks and Wheatears. You will also see sheep grazing. They are the primitive Shetland breed and care is taken to preserve the whole spectrum of natural colours and markings.

Further west, past the furthest peat banks, you may be able to pick out the faint remains of a circle with a few stones sticking up. It is not known what it was for.

At the west end of the Daal notice how the vegetation changes to maritime sward, with Sea and Buckshorn Plantains, Sea Pinks, Sweet Vernal Grass, Red Fescue and Yorkshire Fog.

Head for the interpretive board near **the Sneck (4)**. This spectacular crack in the cliff formed when a big chunk of rock slid outwards. **BE CAREFUL NEAR THE EDGE**. Listen for Wrens singing and admire the Red Campions (Sweet Williams), Sea Campions (Anchor Kegs) and Scurvy Grass, moss and ferns that grow here, out of reach of the sheep. From the grassy slope to the south of the Sneck, you can watch Puffins, Razorbills, Guillemots and Shags, and see Gannets flying by.






On the slopes above the Sneck, you may notice the remains of old cooie dykes, built to prevent cattle, grazing on the hill, from straying onto steep, dangerous places. On the flat area of Liusabrik is an old stone snaabul, built to shelter the sheep in snow.

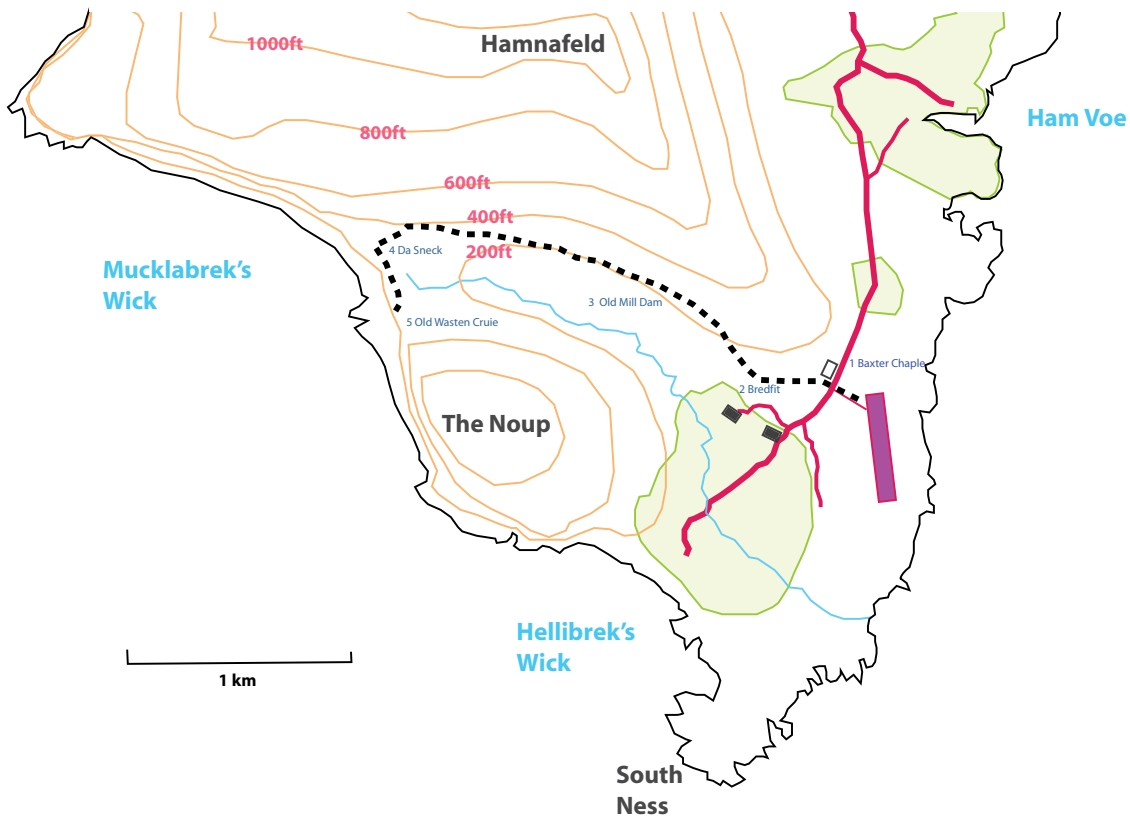
Further south along the cliff edge, a bit down from the top of the edge, on a small headland that sticks out, is **the old Wasten Cruie (5)**. Sheep were driven down from the high slopes, across the mouth of the Sneck, and along a narrow path under the cliffs and into the pen. Nowadays, the sheep are driven through the Daal, across the airstrip and into a new cruie on one of the crofts near the harbour.



The old Wasten Cruie

KEY

-  Road
-  Croft / feild boundary
-  Walk route
-  Dwelling house
-  Structure



1 km

North

