

3

THE SHETLAND EXPERIENCE

A Local Authority Arms Itself for the Oil Invasion

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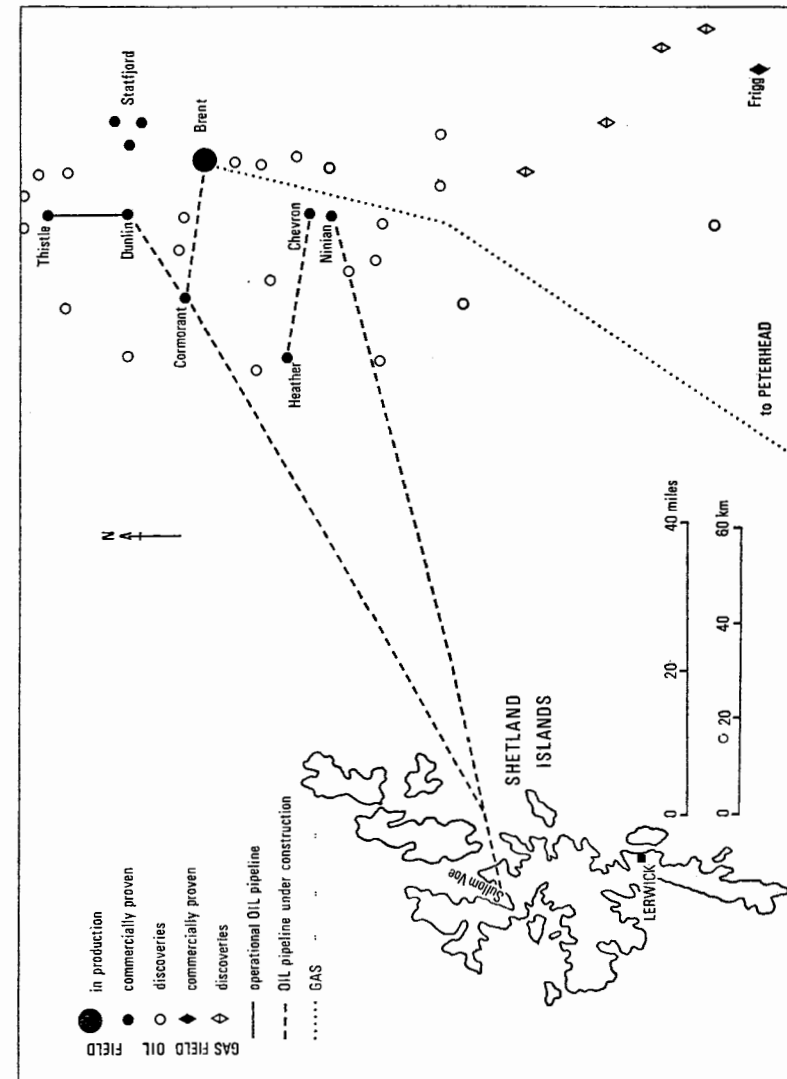
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In the far North of Britain, roughly equidistant from Faroe, Norway and Scotland, lies a salt-sprayed group of about 120 islands, 16 of which are inhabited and which together form a unique local government unit.¹ The island group is almost 100 miles long and about 35 miles wide; its "landscape" is as much water — restless, treacherous water — as land, and much of the land is covered thickly with peat and is almost treeless. The climate is cool, wet and windy but at the same time the most equable of any place with a latitude of 60°N: others include Leningrad, Oslo and Cape Farewell.

The population of the island group is 19,500, about one third of whom live in the main town and cosmopolitan port of Lerwick. A century ago, the population exceeded 30,000: by 1966, it had fallen to 17,000. Whatever they have totalled at any one time, the people of the islands have remained independent, resilient and resourceful. These qualities found them a living, whether at home or elsewhere in the world, during a long history of depression and decline. The same qualities enable them today to face up to, and take what benefits they can from, a radically different economic climate. The islands lie 100 miles south-west of the greatest concentration of oil-fields so far discovered in the North Sea. By a historical accident millions of years in the making, Shetland finds herself today the most important strategic area of Britain.

Pre-oil

The history of Shetland in the century before North Sea oil was discovered explains much of the local authority's attitude since. In a century when much of Britain was emerging and consolidating as an industrial society, crofts in Shetland were being left as families departed for New Zealand, Canada and



elsewhere and families which were left were being periodically — sometimes permanently — deprived of menfolk, bound on whalers to the wastes of the South Atlantic. Little wonder that before oil arrived, the Shetland people were making strenuous efforts to revive and expand the home industries of fishing and fish-processing, knitwear and agriculture.

In the late 1960's these efforts, aided by the establishment of the Highlands and Islands Development Board in 1965, bore fruit: population decline was halted and reversed, and new fish-processing and knitwear factories were established in many places throughout the Islands. During the same period, the Zetland County Council argued forcefully against the proposals of the Wheatley Commission² to absorb the islands into a Highland region and were successful in achieving a commitment to a special all-purpose island authority status for Shetland, which was conferred also on Orkney and the Western Isles. These new all-purpose authorities in fact came into being in May 1975. Their functions are summarised in Appendix 5.

By 1972, the general mood of Shetlanders, given a recent economic transformation and the prospect of a continuing and improved control over their own destiny, was one of optimism. At the same time, however, evidence of North Sea oil was being seen in the increase in helicopter traffic at Sumburgh airport and in the beginnings of land speculation by oil companies and entrepreneurs in places as far afield as Unst and Lunnasting in the northern parts of the Islands. In the summer of 1972, the Zetland County Council commissioned the first of their oil consultants, Transport Research Ltd., to carry out a study to determine the best potential site in Shetland for major oil-related developments and began preparing an Interim County Development Plan to act as a "stop-gap" planning measure. Included in it, as a "special study area," was a place shortly to become a household word in Britain — Sullom Voe. The Council also began, in a climate of rumour and possibilities, the long Parliamentary procedure which was to result in the Zetland County Council Act 1974.

Behind all this lay two clear thoughts: one, that Shetland, having dragged her home economy to viability and having full employment, did not want oil; and two, that if oil was inevitable, Shetland was to be armed and ready.

The first of these has clearly distinguished Shetland's approach to North Sea oil from that of many parts of Scotland

where employment growth was the major, if not the only criterion. The second crystallized the first lesson to be learnt by any community facing dramatic change: preparedness.

Preparedness

It has been said that the Shetland Council used the two years between mid-1972 and mid-1974 to buy its ticket to the dance. The purchase price consisted of a clear objective, determination and sheer hard work. The objective: to safeguard the interests of Shetland in the face of a major invasion. A chronology of the main events during those two years gives an indication of the workload:

July 1972

Transport Research Ltd. completed their "Preliminary Evaluation of Potential Oil Terminal Sites in the Shetland Islands." They had looked at five natural harbours in Shetland and had assessed the suitability of each to accommodate "very large crude carriers." Their advice to the Council confirmed the Sullom Voe/Swarbacks Minn area as having the greatest potential.

August 1972

The Development Office of the Council began to prepare the Interim County Development Plan, the first of its kind in Shetland. The Interim Plan emphasized the Council's determination to prevent any proliferation of oil-related developments throughout the Islands; to allow major facilities at Sullom Voe only, and then only under joint-user arrangements between the companies involved; and to direct service base and smaller developments to three or four specific locations. It began to develop policies on housing, communications, conservation and other subjects.

November 1972

A provisional Order, which was to become a Private Bill and was to be enacted as the Zetland County Council Act 1974, was first lodged in Parliament. It was framed to supplement the Council's normal planning controls and to secure an orderly and co-ordinated development. When enacted, it provided for the Council:

- (i) to exercise jurisdiction as port and harbour authority in the Sullom Voe area.
- (ii) to control maritime works — dredging, pipe-laying, structures in or under the sea — within a 3-mile limit around Shetland's shores.
- (iii) to acquire land for the purposes of the harbour undertaking or for oil-related development within a designated area of almost 3,000 acres.
- (iv) to establish a reserve fund to make good deficiencies or defray expenditure incurred by the Council's duties as harbour authority and to be applied for any purpose which in the Council's opinion "is solely in the interests of Shetland or its inhabitants."
- (v) to enter into commercial enterprises connected with oil-related developments.

Apart from its financial benefits, the environmental controls written into the Act have meant that developers, faced as they are with a landlord as well as a Planning Authority, have been unable to perform in Shetland as they have done in other areas.

January 1973

The Council commissioned a multi-disciplinary team, headed by Messrs. Livesey and Henderson, Consulting Engineers, to examine in detail the suitability of the Sullom Voe area, from both marine and land planning aspects, for major oil-related developments; to formulate proposals for the area which would minimize environmental disruption; and to determine what provision would be necessary in the way of new housing, roads, schools and other facilities for the increased population.

March 1973

The Interim County Development Plan was completed and submitted to the Secretary of State for Scotland.

May 1973

As a follow-up to this "stop-gap" measure, a leading firm of planning consultants, Messrs. Llewellyn-Davies, Weeks, Forestier-Walker and Bor, were commissioned to prepare a full County Structure Plan.

August 1973

The Livesey and Henderson study was completed. Public discussion on its findings commenced.

September 1973

A separate Planning Department was established by the Council, with responsibility for advising on all matters relating to physical planning in the Islands.

December 1973

Work commenced on the "Sullom Voe District Plan," which was to translate the findings of the Livesey and Henderson study — amended as a result of public comment — into statutory Local Plan format.

April 1974

The Zetland County Council Act received the Royal Assent. In the same month, a Joint Planning Group, set up by the Council and the oil industry to consider the requirements of a crude oil terminal in Shetland, submitted for Council approval an "overall development plan" for the terminal. The Council subsequently accepted the document, with modifications, in October 1974.

July 1974

After considerable negotiation, the first formal agreement between the Council and the companies of BP, Shell and Conoco on behalf of the oil industry was signed on the 12th of the month. It committed financial payments to the community as compensation for the disturbance which had been and would be caused by oil-related developments and was based on a complex formula taking into account the number of pipelines, the quantity of oil passing through Shetland, inflation and guaranteed minimum payments. At the time of the signing, it was calculated that the minimum payment up to 31st December 1999 would be £19,250,000. Two years later, with a second pipeline announced and with inflation, this figure had risen to £28,000,000.

It is probable that any future historian, considering the subject of Shetland and Oil, will conclude that the 1972-4 period saw the construction of a firm foundation, laid step by

logical step. The same historian, if he was to look behind the bald facts, would see the demise of land speculation in the Islands; a growth in understanding — after a shaky start in the face of new and alien pressures — between policy-makers and the people of Shetland; and the beginnings of a relationship between the Shetland people as hosts and the oil industry as guests, in which the former established certain house rules and the latter were expected to condition their behaviour patterns accordingly.

Perhaps above all other things, the Council used the period as breathing space to achieve a state of readiness — and in this they used it to the fullest possible extent. The Sullom Voe District Plan was approved by a meeting of the full Council in September 1974. In that same month, planning permission was given to an access road and construction jetty at Calback Ness, on the eastern side of Sullom Voe, and work started on the site of the Shetland Crude Oil Terminal.

Since that time, a controlling structure has gradually been erected on the foundations then laid: large areas of land zoned for development have been purchased; the Sullom Voe Association Ltd. (the main Council/oil industry body formed “to control, supervise, and generally organise the design, construction, operation, management and maintenance of the Terminal”) has been established together with technical, marine and environmental advisory groups; consultants have been appointed to advise on the development of the terminal and on the design and operation of port facilities; a Ports and Harbours Department has been established within the Council; a Ports and Harbours agreement — to safeguard the Council’s and ratepayers’ financial position in taking on the construction of marine facilities at Sullom Voe — has been drawn up; development briefs have been prepared for the settlements it is proposed to expand; and the “reserve fund” has been established. The Council have taken a majority voice in Grandmet Shetland Ltd. (managers of a major construction village at Firth); Shetland Towage Ltd. (who will provide tug services at Sullom Voe and in whose affairs the Council’s involvement could ensure not only co-ordinated port operations but also that suitable maritime jobs can be filled by Shetlanders rather than “southmothers”); and the Zetland Finance Company (formed as a stand-by to help the Council raise money as cheaply and efficiently as possible). In these three ventures, the Council have been logically extending their policy of con-

trolling operations, of seeking a direct voice in them, of making profits or gaining financial benefit for the community, and of helping ensure that job opportunities become available to local people. The same considerations will no doubt apply in future in other fields. As each company periodically publishes its financial position, and as the job situation is regularly reviewed by a newly-established Council-oil industry employment monitoring group, so the community will be able to gauge the success of their elected representatives.

In addition, in the area of physical developments, the Council have built about 250 houses in the four communities proposed for expansion; educational and social facilities have been, and are being, developed in phase with housing expansion; major road improvements have been carried out; and contracts have been awarded for three major tanker jetties, a small boat jetty, the main port administration building, port radar and navigational aids and a major water supply scheme.

This list may not be comprehensive but it is indicative of the Council’s direct involvement in developments and of the scale of change which is taking place even at the start of those developments. More importantly, it lays squarely on the line the Council’s intention to continue controlling that change, accepting it in the national interest, but directing it, in the words of the Sullom Voe District Plan, “in the interests of Shetland — its people, its environment and its way of life.”

Participation

The Council’s involvement in oil-related developments and the degree to which they have assumed controls over them may well increase their vulnerability in relation to future decision-making and actions: greater involvement usually equals greater responsibility. The alternative, however, is barely worth contemplating. If it is dwelt upon at all, the first and only question which need be considered is how many unco-ordinated and unsuccessful oil-related developments may otherwise have been proposed and embarked upon, and with what benefits to Shetland? No doubt there are arguments of degree, which can safely be left to a responsible historian . . .

There has, however, been another aspect of participation in the “Shetland experience” which deserves to be recorded and, if possible, emulated: the participation of the community affected by oil in their Council’s plans towards oil.

It is understandable that the arrival of an industrial Goliath on the doorstep of a rural David should cause mistrust and apprehension. It is a time for solidarity. In Shetland, towards the end of 1972, it caused a rift within the house of David — both between the community and the Council, and within the Council itself. In fact, a rift was hardly remarkable given a local authority and administration geared to looking after a small population in a remote rural outpost now suddenly faced with major change, international conglomerates, the media and national priorities.

It is easy with hindsight to question tactics. The fact remains that in November 1972 the Council had to take the opportunity, which presents itself only twice-yearly, to promote private legislation in Parliament or see Shetland more or less engulfed by speculators. The legislation in question contained controversial clauses, notably those giving extraordinary powers of compulsory purchase over land, but in the event the opportunity was taken — at a price. If some members of the Council felt they had been railroaded, members of the affected communities felt worse.

The rift opened with a fanfare of accusations ranging from mismanagement to secrecy and tyranny. It found expression in a “night of the long knives” when local elections took place in the Spring of 1973 and when, to put it mildly, there were some changes. Ironically, the changes involved, on the debit side, the then Convener of the Council — whose foresight in pressing for legislation has since been entirely vindicated. It also found expression in the House of Commons Select Committee appointed to consider the “Zetland County Council Bill,” when members of the Shetland community gave evidence in opposition and the Council’s Chief Executive and new Convener were grilled at length and with severity. Although painful, this process and the controversy behind it was eventually to result in a generally improved piece of legislation. And it must be said that through out it, with limited exceptions, the oil companies, whose influence otherwise directed could easily have blocked the Bill, and who could have had no doubts as to its potential effects on them, chose instead to go along with local aspirations.

It was almost a year before the Bill became law. From the start, considerable work was put into healing the rift, into projecting the Council’s objectives and winning community

support for them. This work reached its peak following the Livesey and Henderson study.

In the first week of October 1973, three meetings took place in the villages of Vidlin, Aith and Brae, all within a few miles of Sullom Voe. The population of the Sullom Voe study area then totalled about 1,200: almost half attended these three meetings. Members and officials of the Council, together with their consultants, and aided by exhibition material and hand-out pamphlets, presented the findings of the study. Their message to an initially restless, if not distrustful, audience was simple:

- (i) These are the consultants’ proposals for the development of the Sullom Voe area. They have not yet been considered, much less decided upon, by the Council.
- (ii) It is right, and it is much more effective, for the people of the area to influence decisions before they are made than to try to change them once they have been made.
- (iii) Members and officials of the Council will come back, and back again, until they are sure that the decisions they make will reflect the community’s wishes.
- (iv) These decisions will be incorporated in a Local Plan for the Sullom Voe area. This will not be the consultants’ plan, nor the Council’s plan, nor the oil industry’s plan. It will be the community’s plan.

The people of the area, people in Shetland generally, those with statutory responsibilities, Government Departments, oil companies and other bodies were requested to make their comments by the end of November 1973. Advertisements and a series of articles summarizing the consultants’ findings were published in “The Shetland Times,” the latter subsequently being drawn together in a separate booklet. A volume of constructive and well thought-out comments one inch thick was built up. Many related to the housing proposals — the consultants had proposed that four communities be expanded: Voe, Brae, Mossbank and Toft. Many people felt that the first two would be over-expanded; objections to the whole idea of expanding Toft were severe; the alternative of creating a single New Town attracted support.

Towards the end of the year, the Council instructed their Planning Department to prepare a revised plan. A draft was

produced in March 1974, but between December 1973 and March 1974 fifteen more meetings were held — public meetings and meetings with District Councils and Community Associations. The pros and cons of a New Town as against expanded communities were discussed; Toft was deleted and Firth substituted; housing proposals for Voe and Brae were reduced.

The draft Plan was advertised and another two months allowed for public representations. As with the consultants' study, it was presented as the planners' report, taking into account first-round comments. A second volume of representations, significantly smaller than the first, was built up. Another eight meetings were held and the plan was again amended. At the last meeting, among other things, a vote was taken on the subject of a New Town v expanded communities. The majority in favour of the proposals for Voe, Brae, Mossbank and Firth was 7: 1.

The Sullom Voe District Plan was finally advertised in June 1974. It included provision for the biggest oil port in Europe and up to 1,000 incoming families. It was finally approved by the Council in September 1974 without a single outstanding objection.

It was something of a victory for the idea of public participation — given a courageous, approachable and perceptive community. In Shetland, it meant that the dark days of 1972/3 might be forgiven, if not forgotten.

Problems

Shetland Islands Council's handling of the oil industry, together with the work of its predecessor authority, the Zetland County Council, has received considerable admiration and acclaim world-wide. The Council's philosophy is ably summed-up in a Biblical parallel drawn by their former Chief Executive: the seven years of plenty followed by seven lean years. In Shetland's case, however, the purpose is not the laying up of food and corn in store against what the future may hold, but the accumulation of capital with which to support indigenous industries and help new job opportunities once oil-related employment declines. This capital will come from several sources: from the disturbance payments voluntarily agreed by the oil industry, from the Ports and Harbours Agreement, from the Council's income as landowners, from their participation in commercial enterprises and from investment. Domestic

revenue from rates will also increase greatly once the terminal starts operating.

What the capital from sources other than rates may total at the end of the 20th century is not known: at the time of writing, it totals between five and six million pounds, and one of the Council's problems is to discourage the press from ill-founded speculation upon it! Another, more serious, problem is to ensure that the purpose of, and necessity for the capital is understood. It is not to be confused with, or used to meet, the short-term requirements of the oil industry and incoming population for services and facilities. These services and facilities — roads, houses, schools, drainage systems, water supply schemes, etc. — are needed to support the oil industry and spin-off activities, and the oil industry is present in Shetland only in the oil industry's interests and in the national interest. The Council have argued, and Government has accepted, that this "infrastructure" should therefore be fully grant-aided or funded by normal capital borrowing. Shetland's capital is intended to serve her own interests when, as is inevitable, gross distortions in the Islands' economy need to be corrected and Shetland's traditional industries need support. In the meantime, a proportion of the interest each year is being used to offset current social, economic and environmental deprivations and difficulties. Increasingly, and almost certainly within two or three years, the need will arise to counterbalance the effects of oil-related activities as traditional industries run unto stormier weather and the full effects of the run-down in the construction boom begin to be felt.

All of which leads to the first major problem package: the economic.

Shetland's economy is now dominated by oil and oil, like most other resources, is finite. Towards the end of this century, or early in the next, Shetland, if she is not to face another depopulation, will have need of alternative employment opportunities. As always, she will be basically reliant upon her own natural resources and upon the industries which have been tried and proven over generations. But she will also need to look elsewhere: for industries which somehow relate to those resources and for which the transport problems are not too great. Here at least, oil revenues will help.

More immediately, Shetland's economy is dominated by oil exploration and development activities and by the construction

phase of major developments. This is a fact of life which, no matter what controls the Shetland Islands Council or any similar local authority might achieve, could not have been avoided. The local labour market is small and the economy rural: the building of a massive crude oil terminal and port, service bases, airfields, schools and houses requires a large industrial workforce.

The first head of this Hydra is that today, more than 1,000 people are directly engaged in oil-related construction activities and by the end of 1978 the figure is likely to be 3,000. The great majority of these people will come and go, many of them engaged in projects of short duration. Some will stay to try to find other work in this, one of the few really active areas of Britain. They may be successful until 1982, when the construction workforce (failing another pipeline and associated facilities) is expected to drop to a few hundreds and unskilled labour is no longer needed. They may be unsuccessful and serve to swell the Shetland unemployment roll which even now, ironically and principally for this reason, is as high as it was before the economic revival in the traditional industries in the late 1960's.

The second head is that Shetlanders are themselves becoming involved in direct construction work. Young people are leaving school to earn high wages in unskilled jobs and sooner rather than later steady alternative jobs will need to be found for them. Many of the opportunities which will be available once the oil terminal is operational, like the jobs in service bases now, will demand skills — professional, engineering or sea-faring skills. Skills spell training, and training opportunities in Shetland are limited.

The third head is that for each direct construction job there is another job riding on its back. Quarrying firms, haulage firms, plant hire firms, wholesalers, suppliers, maintenance firms — the council themselves — have expanded their activities and their workforce. Some firms have ridden in entirely astride the construction camel. This category of jobs are missing from official Government estimates of oil-related employment and, at different times and to varying degrees, they will also disappear.

The fourth head is that essential industries and services are suffering because they are unable to compete with the level of wages available in construction firms. Knitwear and fish processing shops and hotels are finding they cannot employ or keep office staff; and the Council's own direct labour force fluctuates periodically, conditioned by opportunities elsewhere. As population has increased and the demand for services has broadened

and intensified, service industries have sometimes found it harder to survive than to make profits. In remote rural areas, national and local inflation forces (the latter often in the shape of transport costs) have made it difficult for local shops to do either. Property values and house prices generally have gone through the roof and many people are shackled with mortgages which, in leaner times, they will find hard to redeem. Other small local businesses, including those in the construction sector, are unable to compete for the larger or more specialized contracts. Some — perhaps an unhealthy omen for the future — are being taken over by "south" firms who may not maintain their current level of interest in Shetland.

The fifth head is that of imbalance between different areas of the Islands in respect of employment opportunities. It may reasonably be argued that some areas are fortunate to suffer little or no disruption: also, that Council policy has been, and will be to avoid proliferation and concentrate major developments only in the Sullom Voe area. Nevertheless, the Council's policy has also been to spread the employment benefits of smaller developments in specific places throughout Shetland — Sandwick, Scalloway, Baltasound (Unst) and Basta Voe (Yell). So far, there has been little success in this — with the result that in Unst and Yell, and also Northmavine, unemployment has increased and/or Shetlanders have been attracted to commute away from their home communities to find work at Sullom Voe. In addition, the work they find is conditioned by employer and union regulations, the nature of which is unfamiliar and which can conflict with the traditional style of work.

These heads, properly and objectively assessed, can easily be made to demolish the trite arguments which are often used in support of oil-related developments in Shetland: that they will offer more jobs, that they will broaden the economic base; that they will provide employment opportunities for the young people of Shetland. These arguments deny Shetland's traditional economy, and they ignore the limited life-span of the oil industry and the phases through which it must pass. As the former Chief Executive of Council has remarked, no-one has yet invented a stable one-legged stool and, without care, that is precisely what the Shetland economy could become if traditional industries are dwarfed and narrowed to the point of slim survival.

This Hydra is a child of North Sea oil and it is growing up in an economic environment already problematic in other

respects — an environment which is affected amongst other things by international and central government apathy on subjects such as the conservation of fish stocks, or fishing limits or freight costs, all of which make life uneasy for the fisherman or crofter. The same fisherman or crofter is watching an industrialized society mushroom its way out of his community.

Which lead to the second and third problem packages: the social and environmental.

About as many Shetlanders dislike the phrase “the Shetland way of life” as use it. Those who have tried to define it have found the concept elusive. The preamble to the Council’s Interim Development Plan attempted to “identify the qualities of Shetland life of which many Shetlanders are only intuitively aware.” It cited the integration and homogeneity imposed by the sea boundary; the high proportion of people born and bred in Shetland and their strong family ties; the small population broken into smaller communities; the sense of belonging which individuals feel; the social and religious tolerance; the distinctive dialect and the absence of serious crime. That this attempt was made at all illustrates the Council’s philosophy towards oil-related developments and the controls necessary over those developments: that when all is said and done, the well-being of people and the society in which they live is paramount.

The Shetland way of life, like any other, does not remain static: changes have inevitably occurred. Until 1973, these changes formed a relatively natural progression as external influences and internal developments played upon the life-style. Electric power; radio and television; the shift from boat to car transport; improvements to communications; the development of community facilities and services; greater Local Authority involvement — these factors and many others influenced the social system. Oil-related activities have accelerated the pace of change and have transformed the nature of the change itself.

Social change in Shetland today has at its roots the fertile soils of increased population and increased wealth. One result is the evolution of a more materialistic society. Shetlanders can make good money and build good homes, and compare their opportunities today very favourably with their situation before 1970, but here and there the remark will be passed that the community in adversity seemed better than the community in

wealth. Then, by force of circumstance, it pulled together.

The rate, size and type of population increase causes concern in several ways. There is the fact that the construction workforce will be large, transitory and resident in Shetland on a single-man basis. The men concerned will have limited opportunities for their normal spending patterns of life-style, they may suffer from separation from their families and they may be more vulnerable to problems of boredom, gambling, drug and alcohol abuse. There is the fact that many incoming “operational” workers and their families — the more permanent immigrants — will come from urban or suburban areas, and that the remote rural character of Shetland will (with the exception of Lerwick) be new to their experience as a home environment. Some have arrived, and will arrive “on spec,” without the immediate prospect of a home or a job. They have not had, nor will they have, a local family network to support them in times of stress. Conflicts between these incoming families and Shetlanders may arise if the provision of community facilities is imbalanced or inadequate to meet the needs of a growing population, or if job opportunities or recruitment are seen to be inequitable. The problems of “integration” were given an airing during the preparation of the Sullom Voe District Plan, when one of the main factors in choosing the expansion of existing communities was the feeling that the alternative New Town strategy would create and perpetuate two communities and would attract most of the available funds to the detriment of those existing communities. Comparing the situation now and in future to the characteristics cited in the Council’s Interim Development Plan, the conclusion must be reached that whilst some are constant, others cannot remain so: that the proportion of indigenous Shetlanders will fall; that, for the incoming population, family ties will be non-existent or weak; that a more urban population will develop, and develop in greater concentrations than hitherto; that the “sense of belonging” will be diluted; that crime has increased and will increase further; that, inevitably, Shetland characteristics will rub-off on incomers and vice versa.

Given the fundamental decision to locate major oil-related developments in one semi-derelict and barely populated area, together with policies to reinstate that area subsequently, the Council’s attitude has generally been that economic and social problems would always outweigh physical/environmental prob-

lems. There are, however, certain major exceptions — usually to be found where the three categories merge. The threat of pollution is one such cross-roads.

Already, fishing grounds have been destroyed or severely restricted by pipelaying and by the indiscriminate scattering on the sea-bed of debris from pipelaying and other oil-related activities. Already, one pipeline has discarded its concrete coat and floated to the surface. Already, the integrity of these pipelines and of the technology of North Sea operations — epitomized in the Ekofisk blow-out — has been called into question. In such circumstances, to begin persuading Shetlanders, let alone fishermen, that a respectable degree of competence and capability exists is foolhardy.

During the life of the Sullom Voe Crude Oil Terminal, the probability is that at least one major spillage will occur close to, if not within, Shetland. Among the “environmental” consequences might be the destruction of birds and marine life and the blackening of beaches: among the “economic” consequences, the costs of the clean-up and the loss of fishing grounds; among the “social” consequences, the debilitation of a fishing community. The Council’s, and the community’s, main defences will be to ensure that within Shetland there is as much capability to cope — in terms of equipment, expertise and planning — as possible and that the responsibilities of both oil industry and government are clearly drawn.

Set against the spectre of pollution and the present or possible future loss of fishing grounds, other environmental problems are individually of lesser consequence, yet they combine to create change on a bewildering scale. There is the disruption to landscape and ecology caused by construction activities and the stripping and disposal of massive quantities of peat; there is the increase in heavy traffic on a local road system which was never designed to take it; there are the works to improve those roads; there are the problems of parking in Lerwick and the pressures for office accommodation; there are the housing requirements, the quarrying activities, the infrastructure improvements and the ubiquitous caravan. For many of these things, careful planning can reduce the disruption and the time will heal the scars. Nevertheless, overall, the Shetland Islands Council, even given the controls it has achieved, can be forgiven for thinking that it is labouring at the margins of change.

Epilogue

In early 1976, the author of this paper was asked to participate in a debate at the “Alting,” a name previously given to Shetland’s Parliament and now to a local debating society and social group. He was asked to propose the motion “that North Sea oil ensures a bright future for Shetland.” It being a debate, and therefore allowing for some artistic licence, the invitation was accepted. Mustered against the motion were many of the problems outlined above. For the motion, there was increased prosperity, funds with which to face and mould the future, better communications, new (if not wider) job opportunities, and strategic importance — perhaps, therefore, greater influence. In short, with one or two embellishments, there was money. The motion was duly lost. On learning the result, the then Chief Executive of the Council remarked that Shetlanders had good sense. He added (somewhat belatedly) that his Director of Planning, debate or no, artistic licence or no, should have had better sense!

Many, many people within and outwith Shetland are due thanks for the help they have given in meeting the Challenge of Oil. They include that maligned body of men and women, the “civil servants;” they include politicians, and in particular the member for Orkney and Shetland; they include the firm of Rothschild’s, for their advice on financial matters; the firm of Dundas and Wilson, for their advice on legal matters; the firm of Rees and Freres, for their advice on parliamentary matters; the firm of Scrimgeour and Hardcastle, for their advice on development matters; and they include the senior and middle management of some of the oil companies themselves, whose appreciation of Shetland’s aspirations and special problems has increased with the knowledge they have gained through the Sullom Voe Association Ltd. and other channels.

However, no paper on the Shetland of the 1970’s could be complete without specific tribute to the work of that former Chief Executive, Ian Clark, or to the successive Councils for whom and with whom he worked, their officials and their Conveners — Edward Thomason, the late George W. Blance and Alexander I. Tulloch. For these public servants there have been few if any illusions and no artistic licence. They have seen at once a more prosperous and a more problematic Shetland.

And they should be in no doubt that without their efforts the scales would have fallen heavier and more resoundingly in favour of the latter.

REFERENCES

1. See map.
2. Royal Commission on Local Government in Scotland 1966-69. (Chairman: Lord Wheatley).