

A SHETLAND ADVENTURE

Junella McKay

Wishing to enjoy a holiday visiting beautiful gardens, I cannot imagine that many of us would cite the isles of Shetland as our first choice. Yet, in their advert, Brightwater Holidays assured us that they could take us to at least eight beautiful sites, and printed pictures to convince. So a sunny Saturday in July 2014 saw three of us boarding a coach in Glasgow on our way to a truly eye-opening adventure.

En route to Aberdeen, where we were to pick up the overnight ferry, we stopped at Glenbervie House where, incidentally, we encountered the only rain we were to see during our entire trip; indeed, approaching this private garden it came down in the proverbial stair rods. Anticipating this sort of weather to be our lot throughout the next few days, we clambered stoically from the coach and, in the course of an hour, enjoyed flawless perennials, vividly colourful greenhouses, lush woodlands - and very wet feet. After an excellent dinner on board our ship, I procured the obligatory sunset photograph across calm water, and our holiday had begun in earnest.

First impressions of Lerwick, and indeed of mainland Shetland throughout, were of immaculate streets, pristine water both within and outside the harbour; not even a tiny piece of paper blowing around (eat your heart out Glasgow!). Even the single-track side roads were smooth enough to play bowls upon, and many villages had new halls with wonderful facilities. The oil has certainly changed lives. Indeed, we understand that the population has more than doubled over recent years. and the locals are all extremely friendly and welcoming. As we drove around, we also became aware of a well-established mussel industry thriving in the more sheltered waters.



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The Small Boat Harbour at Lerwick

However, we came to look at gardens, Keldaberg being the first. Here the bar was set high and we were totally gob-smacked to see on a very steep wide slope a riotous colour mix of tightly packed perennials and annuals; every-thing from giant mauve alliums, white lilies, blue delphiniums and salvias, to foxgloves, campanulas and brilliant red lupins. At the bottom of this slope was a tiny but immaculately kept lawn with, behind it, various hardy shrubs providing shelter for yet more perennials. Ligularias grew well on what appeared to be a very dry site and there was a delightfully varied selection of heucheras, including one which had been placed to set off perfectly an excellent *Cerinth major* 'Purpurascens', a fairly new annual, which we discovered growing in several of our Shetland gardens. They are definitely up with the times when it comes to plant selection! Did they buy plug plants in quantity or grow them all from seed, we wondered.

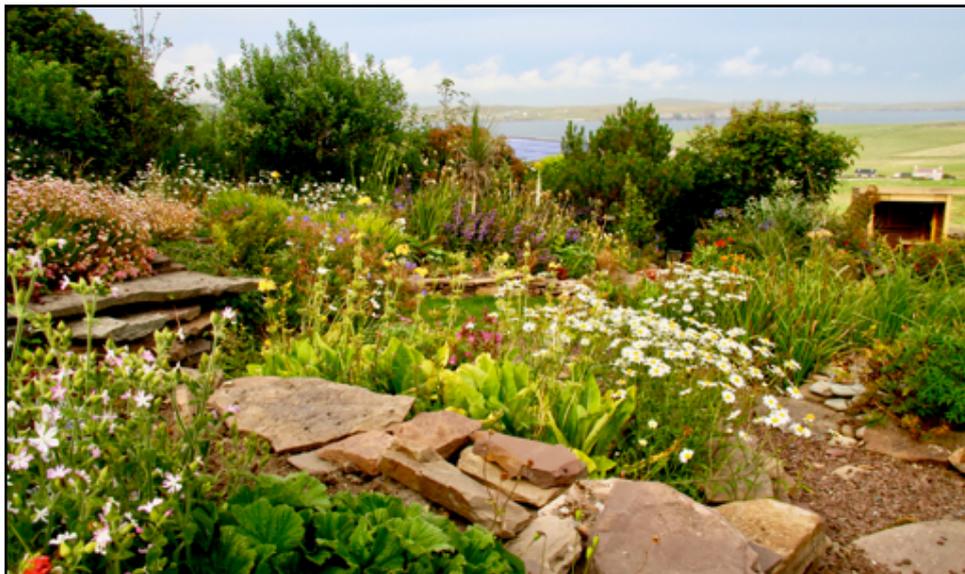
And this was just the first of eight varied and delightful treasures. I would love to write pages about them all. I must tell you about Norby, described as a 'small but perfectly formed' garden. Blue-painted wooden pallets provided internal wind breaks for such treasures as *Chionocloa rubra* (a colourful New Zealand grass), *Pieris forestii*, Chinese tree peonies and old fashioned shrub roses. The owner, a delightful Austrian lady, told us she only learnt that she was the possessor of the most exposed cottage in the islands after she had made her purchase. She had worked wonders with it; even the blue pallets melded. It was a sheer delight, as was the beautiful but totally exposed outlook.

© Scotland's Garden Scheme



Keldaberg's colour-packed border

© Barbara Dinnage



Nonavaar, with its sweeping coastal views

Moving on to Nonavaar, we stood beside well-grown olearias - both *O. haastii* and *O. macrodonta* - whilst the owner, James Thomason, described how waves several hundred feet away and below could funnel up into his garden. He had many potted treasures for which it must be difficult to achieve winter protection. All the gardens benefit from the local abundance of slate and stone, though it must take some carting from the shore or cliff. Drystone dykes certainly add to the charm of most sites, and the winding paths up and down through their lush growth enable visitors to inspect the plants at close range.

I have not so far mentioned wild flowers, which are difficult to spot from a moving coach. Our excellent and hard-working leader, Julia Corden, persuaded the driver to stop at salient points whilst we admired, amongst many others, northern marsh and heath-spotted orchids, ragged robin, yellow rattle, marsh ragwort, wonderfully lush dandelions and red campion. Many of the fields were liberally scattered with marsh thistles and Julia told us that they are now having to take preventative measures to try and clear them.



Heath spotted-orchid
(Dactylorhiza maculata)

Before I went to Shetland I had imagined a landscape devoid of trees. Admittedly some of the newer gardens were extremely open to the elements, but even they were growing sycamore and willow as well as the occasional conifer. However, most gardens had some large shrub or small tree cover, such as potentilla or hypericum and hawthorn, all helping to provide a variety of sheltered habitats.

I cannot finish without describing a garden which started in the early 1980s and now covers almost two acres: Lea Gardens. This amazing and varied plant collection, which is the largest north of Inverewe, consists of 1,500 different species and cultivars from all over the world including, we were told, phytogeographic elements of plant collections from New Zealand, South Africa and South America. The enthusiastic owner was just back from another plant-hunting expedition, and showed us around the gardens, which won a

Shetland Environmental Award in 2011. They have been divided into a variety of habitats: woodland and shade borders, wetland, raised beds, and areas for both acid- and lime-loving plants.

After enjoying the huge diversity of plants that this colourful estate had to offer, most of us enjoyed our last afternoon on Shetland resting beside the pool in the hot afternoon sun, watching the dabbling ducks, and we all agreed this was far from our anticipated view of what Shetland could, and did, provide.