

Life in Unst

Unst is home to around 700 people and is a lively, sociable community that welcomes visitors to local events such as the annual show, two Up Helly Aas, Unstfest, fishing competitions, regattas and concerts. The island is known for its entrepreneurship, with jobs in industries that make the most of the island's resources, such as crofting, fish farming, craftwork (fine knitwear, in particular), wildlife tourism and renewable energy.

Other attractions include the Hermaness National Nature Reserve, Shetland Reel distillery, the Unst Heritage Centre and Unst Boat Haven and exploring the island's Viking history. Unsurprisingly, as there is so much to see and do in Unst, it is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Shetland, welcoming thousands of visitors each year.

Britain's most northerly inhabited island is one of the most spectacular, varied and interesting in Europe. Packed into an area just 12 miles long by 5 miles wide are stupendous cliffs, jagged sea stacks, sheltered inlets, golden beaches, heathery hills, freshwater lochs, peat bogs, fertile farmland – and even a unique, sub-Arctic, stony desert.

Welcome to Unst

The most northerly isle



Unst

Unst is home to an exceptionally rare plant: Edmonston's Chickweed, or Shetland mouse-ear (as it's locally known). This delicate flower grows exclusively at the **Keen of Hamar Nature Reserve**, just outside Baltasound. At this rocky yet botanical paradise you may also find Northern Rock Cress, Hoary Whitlow Grass and Norwegian Sandwort.

Flora

Birds are in abundance, too. The cliffside teem with breeding seabirds, including Gannets, Puffins, Gullinots, Razorbills, Kittiwakes and Shags, while look to the moors for nesting rarities such as Great Skuas, Arctic Skuas and Whimbrels. The northerly headland and nature reserve at **Hermaness** is one of Britain's most important seabird colonies.

Wildlife

Unst's intricate landscape supports a rich variety of wildlife, as well as purebred Shetland sheep and ponies which roam the common grazing land. Look to the water and seals abound, porpoises are common, and you may be lucky enough to spot a passing pod of orcas or an otter or two scampering along the coastline.

Walking

Unst is the first island to gain 'Walkers are Welcome' status, a nationwide community-led scheme which promotes walking. There's a huge variety of trails to enjoy, from simple nature walks to dramatic coastal hikes. Look out for the Hermaness boardwalk path and the new Skytrail which focuses on different aspects of the skies, including links to history, dialect and science. See the Wild Skies Shetland website for more details.

The island is also an important part of Shetland UNESCO Global Geopark, with a landscape that dates back 420 million years. The western part of the island is made from rocks from the North American Plate, while the east side is formed of oceanic crust. See the Shetland Amenity Trust website for more information.

Things to see and do



Muckle Flugga Lighthouse
David Gifford

Unst is one of the richest Viking heritage sites in Europe with over 60 longhouses identified by archaeologists. The Viking Unst project has excavated examples at **Hamar, Belmont and Westing** and there are interpretive boards which explain each site's significance. For more on Viking Unst, including self-guided walking trails, visit the Shetland Amenity Trust website.

Discover more about the history of the island at the **Unst Heritage Centre**, which tells the engrossing story of the islanders' lives over the centuries. **Unst Boat Haven** is also worth a visit and is Shetland's only museum dedicated to the history of the islands' distinctive wooden boats and the line fishermen who used them until the early 20th century.

History and culture

Useful information

- Bus services**
See the North Isles timetable on the ZetTrans website zettrans.org.uk
- Ferry booking office**
+44 (0)1595 745804
- Visitor information point**
Unst Heritage Centre | +44 (0)1957 711528
- Public toilets**
Belmont Ferry Terminal | Baltasound
Burrafirth | Uyeasound | Hermaness
- Post office**
Baltasound
- Shops**
Baltasound
- Fuel**
Baltasound
- Leisure centre**
Baltasound | +44 (0)1595 807701
- Health centre**
Baltasound | +44 (0)1957 711318
- Police** 101

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All details believed to be accurate at the time of going to print.



shetland.org/unst



Viking Longhouse at Brookpoint
Euan Myles

Hermaness National Nature Reserve
Sophie Whitehead | David Gifford

Edmonston's Chickweed
David Gifford

Nornnick Beach
David Gifford



Day trip suggestions

As Unst is such a vastly interesting island, we've highlighted some key attractions in different areas for you to explore.

South Unst

As the ferry from Yell crosses Bluemull Sound, on the left is **Hoganess** and the ruins of one of Unst's several brochs – circular fortresses built about 2,000 years ago. The ferry docks below **Belmont House**, an 18th-century landlord's mansion, which is now privately owned and run as a bed and breakfast.

The walk from **Belmont** to **Lund** takes you past the deserted crofting townships of **Snarravoe** and **Snabrough**. Another fine walk is from Belmont around the south-east corner of Unst to the picturesque village of **Uyeasound**, a busy centre for fish farming.

Uyeasound has a hostel, campsite and caravan park as well as the Glansin Glass workshop and visitor centre. Next to the pier is **Greenwell's Booth**, a warehouse once used by German Hanseatic merchants who dominated Shetland's trade until the early 18th century.

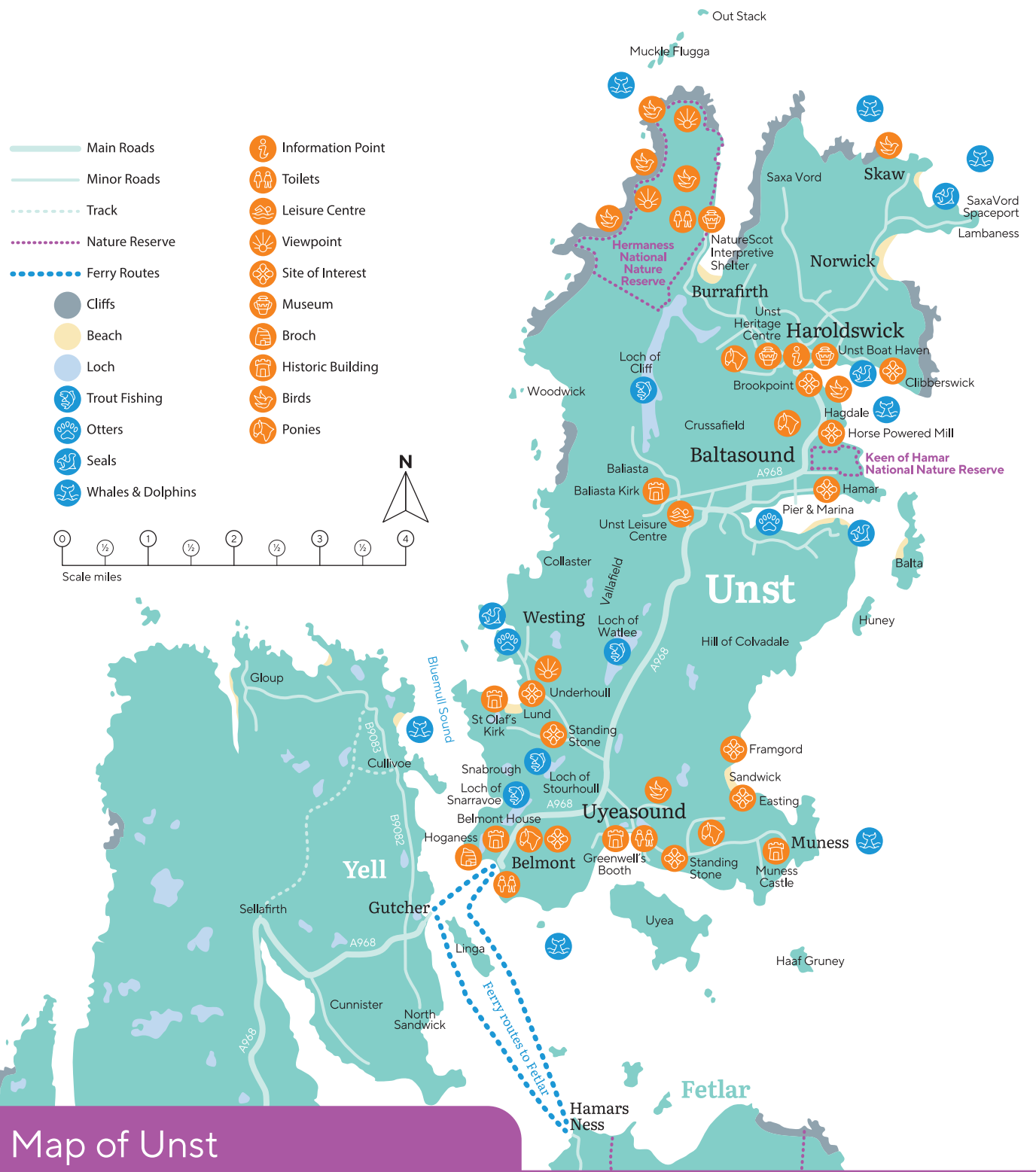
To the east, one of Unst's two prehistoric standing stones is by the road to **Muness Castle**, a 16th century fortified house which is open to visitors.

A walk from **Muness** north to the **Easting** brings you to the beautiful beach of **Sandwick**, where a Viking longhouse was excavated. This area is rich in archaeological remains. Find out more about this by downloading a self-guided walking booklet from the Shetland Amenity Trust website.

Between Uyeasound and **Baltasound**, a detour down the **Westing** side road reveals some of Shetland's prettiest scenery. The standing stone at **Bordastubble** is Shetland's largest.

At **Underhoull** there are the remains of two Viking houses, and a broch overlooking the secluded beach at **Lund**, as well as the decaying 12th-century **kirk of St Olaf**.

Further along the Westing road is one of the many disused watermills, once used to grind oats and barley. **Vallafield**, the ridge dividing the Westing from the trout **loch of Watlee**, has one of Shetland's finest panoramas.



Map of Unst

Central Unst and Baltasound

The historical importance of **Baltasound** as a fishing port can be seen in the remnants of piers and buildings around the voe. During the herring boom years, 1880-1925, Baltasound's population of 500 rose to almost 10,000 during the season. A memorial stone to a fishing fleet from Bohuslan in Sweden stands near the present pier.

Today the village has three shops (one with a bakery, one with a cafe), Britain's most northerly post office (where postcards can be specially franked), a hotel, public bar, marina and **Unst Leisure Centre**, which has a heated swimming pool, gym, squash courts and games hall.

Points of interest in the area include: prehistoric cairns on the hill of **Crussafield**; the ruins of **Baliasta Kirk**, near the side road to the **Loch of Cliff**; the lonely valley and boulder beach of **Woodwick** where semi-precious stones are found and is a very rewarding walk; and the old horse-powered mill at **Hagdale**, a 19th-century iron chromate mine.

On the east side of Baltasound is the unique **Keen of Hamar** botanical site. This desert landscape supports several rare plants, including Edmondston's Chickweed, which is found nowhere else in the world.

At the junction for the Keen of Hamar look out for **Bobby's Bus Shelter**, a novelty bus shelter which is furnished with different themes throughout the year. A great spot for a photo.

North Unst

The village of **Haroldswick** is home to the **Unst Boat Haven** – a unique collection of traditional Shetland fishing craft – and the fascinating **Unst Heritage Centre**, where the permanent displays include geology, genealogy and the island's famous fine lace knitting and spinning. Both centres are open daily, May to September, and open by appointment at other times of the year.

A replica Norse longhouse and **Skidbladner**, a full-sized replica of a ship found buried in Gokstad, Norway, is situated at **Brookpoint**.

Haroldswick is also a good place to watch for seals and otters, particularly at low tide. On the east side of the village, Britain's only working talc mine is at **Clibberswick**, known also for its Viking soapstone quarry.

The RAF station at **Saxa Vord** closed in 2006, though it has recently been recommissioned to operate remotely. The former buildings at Haroldswick are being developed as the nerve centre of SaxaVord Spaceport. Here you will also find Britain's most northerly distillery, creators of Shetland Reel Gin.

North-east of Haroldswick, a single-track road leads to the beach and dunes of **Norwick**, a unique geological site. A side road in the village leads to Britain's northernmost inhabited house, at **Skaw**. On the nearby headland of **Lambaness** are the ruins of a wartime radar station, now the launch site for the spaceport.

Saxa Vord looks out over **Burrafirth**, the stacks of **Muckle Flugga Lighthouse** and the **Out Stack** – the most northerly point of Britain. The lighthouse, now unmanned, was built by Robert Louis Stevenson's father, Thomas, in 1857-58. The map in *Treasure Island* closely resembles a map of Unst which the writer saw on his visit to the island in 1869.

The side road from Haroldswick to Burrafirth opens a panorama of dramatic cliffs which form part of the Scottish Natural Heritage National Nature Reserve at **Hermaness**. The world-famous reserve covers Muckle Flugga and Out Stack as well as the seabird cliffs and moorland of Hermaness. It is home to over 100,000 seabirds in the breeding season and now has greater accessibility due to a new boardwalk, toilet block and interpretive shelter.

Skidbladner, a replica Viking longship at Brookpoint
Euan Myles

Visiting Unst

Travel

Unst is easily accessible at all times of year. Buses run from Lerwick and frequent ferries link the island to the Shetland Mainland via the neighbouring island of Yell. Please note: ferries can get really busy in the summer, so you are advised to book in advance if travelling by car.

From Lerwick, it's a 45-minute drive north on the mainland A970 road to Toft ferry terminal. Follow the signs for the North Isles. The Yell crossing takes 20 minutes. When you reach Ulsta in Yell, follow the main road to the Gutcher ferry terminal (about 30 minutes' drive) for the 10-minute crossing to Unst.

If you bring your own boat, there are fine natural harbours with piers at Baltasound and Uyeasound where visiting craft are welcome. See the Sail pages of shetland.org for more details.

Trout fishing at Loch of Cliff
Euan Myles

