

The Given Days

Jonathan Lennie discovers that there's more to Fair Isle than a mention on the Shipping Forecast.

Almighty Breath in the vanes of our cycles

Held in Thy harness these 4,000 years

Yoaled at first light in the cold fusion of oceans

Flown from the noosts to the heart of the storm.

And so it was on a late-August morning in the Year of Our Lord 2002 that I set forth from the civilisation of Her Majesty's home city to traverse the 800 miles to those bleak northern isles, battered by winds, full of mist and populated by savages and missionaries.

My destination was Fair Isle, famous for its "gale force eight and rising" status on the BBC Radio 4's Shipping Forecast and for its brightly patterned fishing jumpers. The reason for the trip: I had been invited to narrate in a performance of *Given Days: the Sounds of Fair Isle*, a piece of music commissioned by the 70 islanders to celebrate their homeland. The title of the work refers to the God-given days of good weather, of which the islanders make the most. The composer, Alastair Stout, had written the piece. His father was a Fair Islander and Alastair had lived for most of his life on Shetland before heading down to London to gather a plethora of composing accolades, not least his recent PhD.

For my own background I am Ulster Scots, or more specifically, a Nipple (Northern Irish Professional Person Living in England). In fact, I shouldn't really have been so apprehensive about the journey north, given that according to my family heritage wall-chart, there is a strain of Lennies that comes from North Ronaldsay, the closest island to Fair Isle. Thus, I may well have some Orkney in me, a trait that I have regularly topped up with the finest ale from those islands, the Red MacGregor. I hoped this fact might save me if there was to

be a ritual burning – I had watched *The Wicker Man*, and had no intention of suffering the fate meted out to Edward Woodward.

The taxi left at 4.45a.m. I hadn't slept properly due to the stifflingly humid night and the pall of pollution that hung over London, not to mention the constant sirens of emergency vehicles.

Until that morning, I had never been awake, let alone outside, at that hour, and was surprised to find the roads modestly filled with frantic early birds en route to their desks for 7a.m. starts.

As the sun struggled through the Heathrow haze, we took off, destined for the distant reaches of the kingdom, out into the heart of darkness.... well, granite.

Aberdeen came and went in a blur of tinned haggis and tartan tea cosies, and I was soon aloft again and crossing the hostile seas to Shetland. Then, in a heart-stopping moment, I saw it: Fair Isle, gleaming green in the morning light, poised like some great advancing reptile. There was my destination, so remote and untarnished that it would be several hours yet before I would set foot there.

Setting down in Sumburgh, we

emerged into the sea-fresh breeze of Shetland, where Mary Blance, who was to be my co-narrator for *Given Days*, met me. Mary is a broadcasting legend in her own lifetime; she recognised me immediately. I don't know what made me so conspicuous; perhaps it was the cravat and waistcoat and absence of a woollen jumper. When I had spoken to her on the phone the previous day and told her how I would be dressed, she dryly inquired as to what pattern the waistcoat would be.

After a beautiful morning spent on a guided tour of the southern end of the Shetland mainland, I mentioned lightheartedly to Mary that after Fair Isle I was sure to think that Shetland was a dangerous metropolis. She nodded - "you think that you're joking," she smiled before she dropped me off at the Market Cross, where I was to meet Sir Peter Maxwell Davies and continue my journey with him by taxi.

Sir Peter, or Max as he prefers to be known, was the patron of the Classic Fair Isle festival - a prestigious honour given that he is not only one of Britain's most distinguished composers but has been the patron of Orkney's St Magnus

Photo: Dave Wheeler



The view from the 'Islander', as descending towards Fair Isle, we appear to be about to land on what appears to be little more than a field.



*My host for the week, Brian Wilson, baling silage.
In the background lies Malcolm's Head and the western coastline of the island which simply stops at dizzyingly high cliffs.*

festival for the past 25 years. I soon spotted him as he paced anonymously about the bustle of Lerwick harbour. With a twitcher's instinct, I waited until he settled before shouting "Max!" and striding towards him with my arm outstretched. His initial horror turned to cautious anxiety when I introduced myself.

Sitting in the back of that car with him, I had an irrepressible urge to make conversation. "Don't mention classical music," the little voice in my head insisted. "So, Max, are you going to write another symphony?" I ventured. "No, just chamber music," he replied politely. Having written eight symphonies, wasn't he going to attempt to break the 'ten barrier' that has eluded so many great composers before him? "That's just superstition," he said dismissively. The little voice cautioned me to just let it drop. "Yes, you're right," I continued, "just leave all the numerology to Shoenberg." He turned and fixed me with an expression that lay somewhere between pity and contempt. But I could also see the fear in his eyes that he was going to be trapped with me for three days on an island measuring only three miles by one. He, too, had obviously seen *The Wicker Man*.

He looked much relieved when we arrived at Tingwall airport. I say "airport" because it certainly has plenty of air and a glass of port is advisable to steady the nerves after the initial shock of seeing the size of the plane. Our Loganair 8-seater had clearly seen action in the Battle of Britain and still sported a row of swastika "kills" at the side of the cockpit. I just prayed that Lufthansa would not be diverted into our airspace as, in the absence of a co-pilot, I was sitting right behind the pilot and my only experience of aerial combat was eating with a plastic fork.

Max looked more nervous about sitting next to me than he did about flying. Fair Isle appeared again 25 minutes later, a veritable jade stone set in the confluence of shifting blue oceans. It was an incredibly noisy and seemingly static flight, and like everything in that part of the world, the experience was one of reality stripped to its basics – something that I would come to appreciate, far from the surreal metropolitan world I'd left behind.

As we approached, I could see a great white chevron on the island's northern cliffs – no doubt the equivalent of the huge chalk horses of Wiltshire. We landed in what looked like a field,

which had the same curious white lines and a trail of lights. Obviously we had arrived in the middle of some totemic holy ground. The door swung open and a stocky, bespectacled, bearded man leaned in and motioned that we might leave the relative safety of the craft, before proceeding to unload our luggage and carry it to where the natives were waiting. Whether they intended to eat us and then rifle our belongings before riding off in their pony and traps, only time would tell.

Max spoke first. He had lived on neighbouring Orkney for 30 years and could speak their language. The bearded man, whom they called Wheeler, responded. "How do you do, Sir Peter; did you have a good flight? Welcome to Fair Isle. Let me take your bags, then I can take you to where you will be staying." Somehow they had mastered English.

My hostess for the next few days, Mary Wilson, introduced herself and indicated that she would drive me in her car to her house – but what sort of rude huts did they dwell in?

Mary and Brian live in a modern, three-bedroomed, detached house with two bathrooms, and a fitted kitchen giving on to a conservatory with

south-facing aspect and spectacular sea views, so my two-bedroomed cupboard in the rapidly receding London could comfortably await my return for a few days.

I had arrived at the end of harvesting so Brian was busy ferrying bales of silage up and down one of the two narrow roads that run the length of the island. Two other fellow guests, Alistair and Sheila Brown, then appeared and we enjoyed a little light refreshment in the late afternoon sun. Behind us and on the south-eastern hill, the blades of the two wind turbines stood idle, and the gentle air was alive with the sound of tractors and birds calling from their roosts.

After a splendid dinner of mutton washed down with wine everyone assembled at the Presbyterian kirk where the Classic Fair Isle festival kicked off with a piano recital by the Shetland pianist Neil Georgeson, playing a programme of Chopin, Schubert and Beethoven. Local piper, Iain Morrison, followed with a pibroch to which our ears rang and the church windows rattled. The concert was then rounded off by the Fair Isle choir's brave attempt at Vivaldi's *Gloria*.

As the audience spilled out of the west door of that gleaming white building into the oncoming twilight, we were treated to a spectacular sunset. Out between the granite window of two towering cliffs, the boiling orange

star hung on the horizon for several minutes before slipping silently into the deep water in a green flash. Darkness followed the drowning of the light and we repaired to the community hall for tea and sandwiches and the première of *A Day in Fair Isle*, a work by the island children depicting the sounds of their homeland. The four members of Chroma, a professional ensemble who had come up to perform in the Friday evening concert, had helped them.

Some strange tribal dancing known as 'eightsome reels' followed, no doubt intended to appease the gods of the harvest. Outside, I chatted with a few of the locals. All of them, it seemed, had sailed around the world at least twice and had lived abroad before returning to settle on the island. I also met up with the bearded man known as Wheeler. Dave Wheeler, it transpired, is a meteorologist who sends Fair Isle's weather report to the Met Office every four hours. I made the joke that he must never sleep. He laughed. "Of course, I do. The last reading is at 1a.m. and I don't have to take another until 5a.m." I rested my case. If that wasn't enough to do, Dave is also part of the fire service at the runway; and that's when he is not updating his marvellous Fair Isle website.

Having now been awake for more than my permitted maximum of 16 hours, I realised that I needed my bed. The sounds of continuing revelry receded as

my room mate Andy, a baritone soloist, led the way across the dark fields which glowed with a faint, indeterminable light source.

Initially, it was difficult to sleep; it was too quiet! Fortunately the fresh air had precipitated tiredness. Tomorrow, I determined, I would stand behind a revving car and inhale the fumes – I was surely suffering serious carbon monoxide deficiency.

The next day I was required to attend a rehearsal, but after breakfast I just had time to visit Betty Best who had been the instigator of the festival. She had arrived from Kent 28 years ago to be employed as the district nurse for a year, and has lived on Fair Isle ever since with her husband John, the Methodist minister and a landscape artist. In their beautifully apportioned home, I met some friends of theirs who were sailing around Britain. David and Judy Lomax were limbering up to navigate the dangerous waters around the lighthouse of Muckle Flugga - try saying that after a few Red MacGregors!

At the Community Hall I met up again with Mary Blance who had flown in on the Tingwall red-eye. As I strayed into the hall, Max eyed me nervously. Alastair Stout was now on to his third day of conducting rehearsals and seemed to have the measure of the forces under his command; the professional quartet was being professional and the choir

Photo: Dave Wheeler



It never seemed to go completely dark on Fair Isle. Here the Kirk stands bathed in the glow of a summer sunset.

Photo: Dave Wheeler



The performers prior to the performance of 'The Given Days'.

The choir carry copies of the Fair Isle patterned music, the musicians 'Chroma' can be identified by their brightly-hued attire, Alastair the composer stands on the extreme right, second row back. I'm lurking at the back but the cravat is perhaps a give-away.

was primed with well rehearsed voices. Initially I sat next to the choir mistress Lise Sinclair, attempting to turn the pages of the score as she and six others made strange noises with sockets, but as I turned the pages at all the wrong times, it wasn't long before my musical dyslexia drove her to despair. It was fortunate that my role as one of the narrators required no musical ability whatever.

Later Alastair and I visited the North Lighthouse which is a sturdy, white Victorian building set on the precipitous northern cliffs appealing caution to the vessels that ply the threshing ocean below. George Stevenson (grandson of Robert Louis) apparently built it in 1891 at the same time as the complementary South Light at the antipodes of the island. Alastair spent many of his summer holidays on Fair Isle and is an expert on such things.

After a visit to the island's only shop/post office I was waylaid by Alastair's mother, Lindsey, who insisted that I come in and meet his grandfather, Jimmy. It soon became clear that Jimmy - who is 91 going on 18 - considers that any form of beverage, hot or cold, that

does not contain brandy is a woman's drink. This maxim, I discovered, also includes wine. On entering his small kitchen, I found Jimmy entertaining about ten people. He was sitting in his favourite chair, next to a mysterious cupboard which he would sporadically investigate, returning with some new drink and, of course, brandy.

Brian, who arrived with news of my dinner, rescued me from total inebriation. He proceeded to talk with Jimmy in Fair Isle-ese, a language so foreign to my ear that I had no idea what they were talking

about.

On returning for our meal we found that my fellow guest, Alistair Brown, was convinced that he had just seen some rare, possibly believed extinct, avian creature and would not be disabused of the notion, despite Brian's strenuous cross-examination and colourful bird reference book. Meanwhile, twitchers were quietly surrounding the house. Now, however much you admire our feathered friends, one has to accept that these people are a bit odd. I put their behaviour down to the absence of

Photo: Dave Wheeler



Some areas of grassland were densely covered in flowers. Cottongrass and Ragged Robin formed an

The sun dipping below the vastness of the ocean, flashes with an incredible incandescent green light.

trains that far north. It was like a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* - these unsettling characters armed with binoculars and mobile phones gathered silently and in increasing numbers outside the window, their attention focused on some unseen, presumably feathered, object in the long grass.

That evening we dared to venture into their nerve-centre: Max was giving an illustrated lecture on 'Festivals in Island Communities' at the Bird Observatory. The title of his talk didn't promise to be the most enthralling of entertainment, but it was hot ticket that night, given that in conjunction with the Community Hall, the Bird Observatory is effectively Fair Isle's West End. Max's talk turned out to be very interesting, and indeed moving, as he played various recordings of his music - particularly his *Farewell to Stromness*, an elegy to the threatened way of life on his beloved Orkney.

Prior to the talk, however, bar proceedings were interrupted as we were bidden silence to observe the nightly 'bird log'. The names of birds were called out alphabetically and the young men (and they were all male) competed for the accolade of having seen the most greater, lesser-spotted, crested throat warblers that day. When it came to "Shags?" replies from among the non-birding clientèle of "not yet" were definitely not appreciated.

There may be only one official bar on Fair Isle, but unlike London, the party doesn't stop at 11p.m. Lindsey gave me a lift to Springfield, the rentable cottage to the south-east where her Vidlin neighbour Alan Jamieson was holding court. As a succession of fiddlers took their turn, I spent most of the night boring Neil Georgeson with my ill-educated thoughts on modern composers. He politely made his escape by offering to play the fiddle. By this time I had stopped being impressed by this particular talent - he was a Shetlander after all, and it was surely in the genes.

The day of the concert began with the plaintive blasts of the foghorn, and I woke to find a blanket of fog had settled over the landscape. Our spirits, though, were soon lifted when, just before 9a.m., Radio 4's Today programme



was patched through to the local school for an interview with Betty Best, thanks to something called a "hot box", several bits of wire and the expertise of Mary Blance. Betty made short work of Edward Stourton who was only used to interviewing mere politicians, and once she had said everything that she felt the British public ought to know about the festival, she allowed him to end the programme just in time for the pips.

The fog soon lifted, allowing the area's SMPs to arrive, and 7.30p.m. came all too quickly. The Community Hall was filled to capacity and the concert began with Chroma performing a variety of works, including an arrangement of Purcell's *Fairest Isle*.

Then it was time for the world première of *Given Days*. It was a unique event. Here in their community hall, the entire population of Fair Isle had turned out to celebrate their very existence. They were the audience, they were the choir and some of the soloists. They had raised the money to make it possible. Most impressive was the front row of children to whom the third section of the work was dedicated. They are the springtime of Fair Isle and, in the final movement of the piece, the composer had arranged lists of Fair Isle-related words that they had contributed. It was a unique privilege for me to sit at the front of the performers and face the handful of children in the audience, who really are the next generation - all of it. This was a rare instance of the assembled community and the general society being one and the same.

Following the after-show party, Andy and I once again negotiated the empty, misty road. I searched eagerly for the Mirry Dancers (the Aurora Borealis) but any perceived celestial activity was more likely due to the Red MacGregor than electromagnetism.

On the last morning, I spruced myself up and made for Malcolm's Head. In the absence of a funicular railway, I was forced to climb the promontory on foot. The view was spectacular; gulls wheeled and cried as they described arcs at the granite face of the bird-infested heights, and far below the sea boiled and foamed. I was transfixed and would still be sitting there now had there not been an aeroplane waiting to whisk me away from this small paradise.

After vainly waving my ticket around in the naïve assumption that someone would examine it, I boarded the small plane again, this time with Alastair Stout and Chroma. Max had made good his escape on an earlier flight. It was hard to leave and I honestly feel a part of me is still there.

Now that I have returned south, to the city where there are no stars, where the sky sports a permanent orange glow and the birdsong is drowned by the thunder of continuous traffic, I think often of that remarkable place. Fair Isle now seems distant only geographically as I settle down to listen to the Shipping Forecast and its promise of increasing gale force winds. Reflecting on that idyllic week of glorious given days, I'm still convinced that Dave Wheeler just makes it up to keep away the tourists.