

Up-Helly-Aa

Up-Helly-Aa is a relatively modern festival. There is some evidence that people in rural Shetland celebrated the 24th day after Christmas as "Antonsmas" or "Up Helly Night", but there is no evidence that their cousins in Lerwick did the same. The emergence of Yuletide and New Year festivities in the town seems to post-date the Napoleonic Wars, when soldiers and sailors came home with rowdy habits and a taste for firearms.

On old Christmas eve in 1824 a visiting Methodist missionary wrote in his diary that "the whole town was in an uproar: from twelve o'clock last night until late this night blowing of horns, beating of drums, tinkling of old tin kettles, firing of guns, shouting, bawling, fiddling, fifeing, drinking, fighting. This was the state of the town all the night - the street was as thronged with people as any fair I ever saw in England."

As Lerwick grew in size the celebrations became more elaborate. Sometime about 1840 the participants introduced burning tar barrels into the proceedings. "Sometimes", as one observer wrote, *"...there were two tubs fastened to a great raft-like frame knocked together at the Docks, whence the combustibles were generally obtained. Two chains were fastened to the bogie supporting the capacious tub or tar-barrel . . . eked to these were two strong ropes on which a motley mob, wearing masks for the most part, fastened. A party of about a dozen were told off to stir up the molten contents."*

The main street of Lerwick in the mid-19th century was extremely narrow, and rival groups of tar-barrelers frequently clashed in the middle. The proceedings were thus dangerous and dirty, and Lerwick's middle classes often complained about them. The Town Council began to appoint special constables every Christmas to control the revelers, with only limited success. When the end came for tar-barreling, in the early 1870s, it seems to have been because the young Lerwegians themselves had decided it was time for a change.

Around 1870 a group of young men in the town with intellectual interests injected a series of new ideas into the proceedings. First, they improvised the name Up-Helly-Aa, and gradually postponed the celebrations until the end of January. Secondly, they introduced a far more elaborate element of disguise - "guizing" - into the new festival. Thirdly, they inaugurated a torchlight procession.

The photo shows what is possibly the earliest document associated with the festival. Note the spelling.....

Festival of Uphelly 'a, 1877.

AN EARNEST APPEAL

For the Restoration of the Ancient Norse
Faith of Shetland.

PRICE THREEPENCE.

DEAR BROTHER and still more dearly
BELOVED SISTER,

It is commonly said, and we believe it is now more and more clearly felt that the restoration of the Ancient Simplicity of Faith is the great want of the age. A return to Apostolic simplicity it is said would be a boon beyond price. Could this generation but ascertain whether St. Paul drank his whisky neat, whether St. Peter went to the Haaf, whether the apostolic fishermen wore oilskins, and whether they fished for themselves or for the laird, its happiness would be complete. Alas! what frivolity! We, the Reverend but Humble and Lowly Missionaries before you agree with the principle, but think the change should not be on those trivial points, but on the grand essentials. Hence in our Humble and Lowly but decided opinion the time has come when the Ancient Norse Faith of Shetland in all its sublime and rugged simplicity should be revived with as little delay as the obtusacy of the human mind will admit. What an increase of straightforwardness of character would thereby result? For instance, in these degenerate days when we laudably desire to swindle an unsuspecting fellow-mortal, we ask him to buy and sell with us, in the course of which we clandestinely

At the same time they were toying with the idea of introducing Viking themes to their new festival. The first signs of this new development appeared in 1877, but it was not until the late 1880s that a Viking longship - the "galley" - appeared, and as late as 1906 that a "Guizer Jarl", the chief guizer, arrived on the scene. It was not until after the First World War that there was a squad of Vikings, the "Guizer Jarl's Squad", in the procession every year.



The First Guizer Jarl, J.W. Robertson with his squad in 1906

Up to the Second World War Up-Helly-Aa was overwhelmingly a festival of young working class men - women have never taken part in the procession - and during the depression years the operation was run on a shoestring. In the winter of 1931-32 there was an unsuccessful move to cancel the festival because of the dire economic situation in the town. At the same time, the Up-Helly-Aa committee became a self-confident organization which poked fun at the pompous in the by then long-established Up-Helly-Aa "bill" - sometimes driving their victims to fury.

Since 1949, when the festival resumed after the war, much has changed and much has remained the same. That year the BBC recorded a major radio program on Up-Helly-Aa, and from that moment Up-Helly-Aa - not noted for its split-second timing before the war - became a model of efficient organization. The numbers participating in the festival have become much greater, and the resources required correspondingly larger. Whereas in the 19th century individuals kept open house to welcome the guizers on Up-Helly-Aa night, men and women now co-operate to open large halls throughout the town to entertain them.