

## The Galley's role in Up-Helly-Aa

The significance of the name *Up-Helly-Aa* has been variously interpreted over the years, but most commentators suggest that the expression owes its modern form to the Old Norse for weekend or holiday being the word *Helly*, thus *Up-Helly-Aa* being the end of *helly* or holidays. In its modern form the festival is not all that old with the addition of Galleys and a Viking theme only coming about just over 100 years ago. 'There was a



A galley from the late 1980s with group of boys closely inspecting

strongly romantic Nordic revival towards the end of the nineteenth century, and it was perhaps unavoidable that the festival would somehow become tied with the Vikings. The first galley was burnt in 1889'.<sup>1</sup> Prior to this, festivities included flaming tar-barrels being dragged through the street accompanied by indiscriminate gunfire.

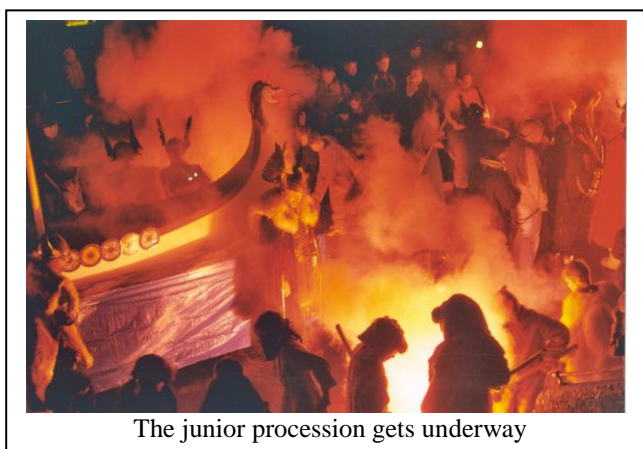


Close-up of galley's head

Regulation of 'end of Yule' celebrations came about in 1874 when the town clerk posted his final warning to the tar-barrellers. Interestingly, an N.B. at the end of the order states that 'the commissioners have no intention of interfering with out-door harmless amusements'.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, *Up-Helly-Aa* evolved into a 'harmless amusement' and a self-policing event. Former tar-barrellers now instigated properly organised routes, rules for conduct and (should the need arise) discipline of participants, and marshals to oversee the procession itself. The prevailing spirit of *Up-Helly-Aa* was and still is one of

comradeship, courtesy, conviviality, music, dancing and above all fun.

The burning of a galley is a ritual that was carried out in ancient times when a chief Viking or Jarl died. He would be laid out upon a pyre within his own ship and after setting it alight the whole would have been set off to sea to ensure that his soul was carried to Valhalla, (or Viking heaven). Here Father Odin would greet him and thus his final journey

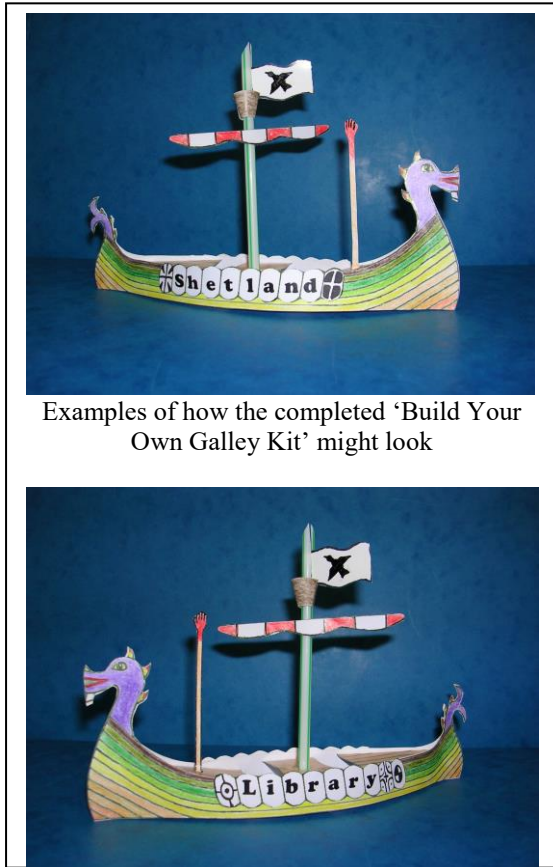


The junior procession gets underway

<sup>1</sup> Liv Kjörsvik Schei and Gunnie Moberg (1988) *The Shetland Story*. B T Batsford Ltd., London p71.

<sup>2</sup> A copy of this document is retained in the Shetland Library, Thesis Collection in Dorothy Nott *Up-Helly-Aa* (1969) University of Leeds.

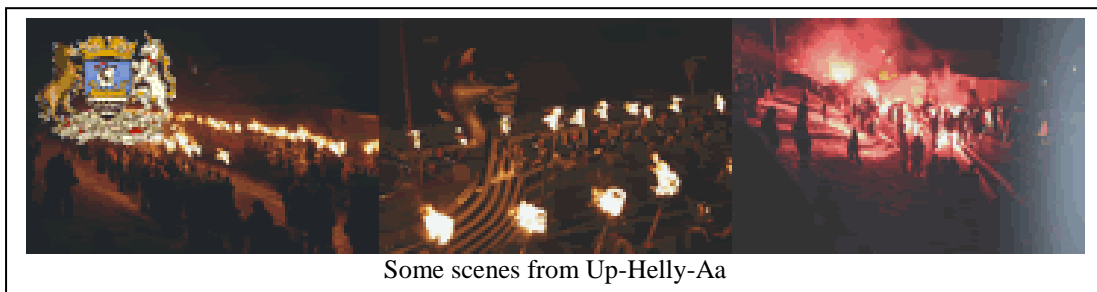
would be complete. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Up-Helly-Aa is always held on a Tuesday, as the Jarl's duties (going on through the night as they do) means that he will only be able to rest on Odinsday (Wednesday).



Examples of how the completed 'Build Your Own Galley Kit' might look

Up-Helly-Aa day sees the unveiling and inevitable demise of that year's galley. It is hauled from the galley shed, where it was lovingly constructed during the previous year, and paraded through the town. It is left on the pier near the centre of town for most of the day, in order that onlookers can get a chance to admire and photograph what will be a truly unique vessel. The same basic pattern is now always followed, but the colours vary from year to year. In the evening it will be towed away to join the torchlit procession on the Town's Hillhead. After that it will meet its end in a fiery climax in the centre of the north King George V playing field. 'From now until 8 pm she will be the focal point of many hundreds of eyes, for the galley, above all else, symbolises the mysticism and mythology which are essential ingredients of Up-Helly-Aa'.<sup>3</sup>

This leaflet has essentially concentrated on the galley, but however central it is to proceedings, there is so much more to Up-Helly-Aa, than the procession and burning. The end of the torchlit procession marks the beginning of an all night party, which sees at least a dozen vibrant entertainment venues remaining open to guests and guisers until Wednesday morning.



Some scenes from Up-Helly-Aa

For more information about Up-Helly-Aa the Shetland Library has several books in stock plus a significant collection of previous Up-Helly-Aa programmes. The Reid Tait and Goudie collections (currently held at the Shetland Library) also contain

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<sup>3</sup> James W Irvine (1982) *Up-Helly-Aa: A Century of Festival*. Shetland Publishing Co Ltd., p48.

interesting references to Up-Helly-Aa, providing insight into how the festival has evolved over the years. Ask staff for access to R18: 54, R18: 23, R18: 27 and R17: 24 for interesting short articles, some of which were written over 100 years ago. Besides the books already listed in the footnotes of these pages, Callum G Brown's *Up-Helly-Aa: Custom, Culture and Community in Shetland* (1998) Manchester University Press, is a truly fascinating read as is Charles E Mitchell's *Up-Helly-Aa: tar-barrels and guising, looking back* (1948) Shetland News. James W Irvine also produced an interesting booklet called *Up-Helly-Aa* (1982) Shetland Publishers. These books and others can be found in the Library's Shetland collection under Dewey number Z394. For visual reference to Up-Helly-Aa, it's worthwhile accessing the Shetland Museum's photographic archive as it contains hundreds of interesting pictures relating to the festival.



Two model galleys 'at sea' just off Hay's, Lerwick

There are also a number of books on Viking history in the Shetland Lending section of the library, mostly between Dewey Numbers Z941 and Z948. For information and pictures relating to Viking longships *Vikings: Raiders from the North* by the editors of Time-Life books, contains excellent illustrations and descriptions of the various longships found and restored in different parts of Scandinavia and is shelved at Z948.022. All Shetland books can be found upstairs on the mezzanine floor of the Shetland Library.

For younger readers, there are several books on Viking history in the junior non-fiction section of the library around Dewey numbers 948.

In order to get a better idea of how a real galley or Viking longship would have looked, the English language website of the Kulturhistorisk Museum in Oslo is well

worth a visit. Just enter the URL given below and on the home page you can click on the Gokstad, Oseberg or Tune ships for further explanations and pictures of these remarkable vessels.

<http://www.khm.uio.no/english/visit-us/viking-ship-museum/>

We at the Shetland Library, hope all participants, spectators (local or visiting) had a very enjoyable Up-Helly-Aa and that your '**Build Your Own Galley Kit**' will have been informative in itself, perhaps encouraged the seeking of further information, but above all that it will be a reminder of what was yet another highly enjoyable Up-Helly-Aa for one and all.

*Trevor Jamieson*