

Up-Helly-Aa Information Pack

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1. Up-Helly-Aa Organisation

Whilst visitors are welcome as on-lookers to view the spectacular festival of Up-Helly-Aa, it is very much a local event for local people and participants must have been a resident in Shetland for 5 years before they can take part in a squad and the procession. Visitors are warmly welcome in one of the halls open for festivities after the procession - providing they can get their hands on much sought after tickets.

Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa is always the last Tuesday in January with the following day being a much needed Public Holiday throughout Shetland.

The organisation of Up-Helly-Aa is on a voluntary basis and is run by a committee of 17 members elected by the guizers, with a new member being elected every year. To become Guizer Jarl – Chief Guizer, a member must serve 16 years on the committee. The building of the galley and making of the 1000+ torches are again all done by volunteers. Work commences at the end of October, on at least 4 nights a week to ensure that everything is ready for the big day.

Up-Helly-Aa is a non-profit organisation and in the main is funded by the generous donations from local businesses. These donations are much appreciated and indeed the festival could not survive in its present state without these donations.

Any further donations from visiting journalists or photographers would be much appreciated.

Up-Helly-Aa is encouraged in the younger generations with a Junior Jarl being elected from the local secondary school and a mini-torchlight procession with boys from Primary 7 and Secondary 1 and 2 taking part.

The Junior Jarl Squad will be at various locations throughout the Tuesday with the mini-procession lighting up at 17:30.

2. History of Up-Helly-Aa

UP-HELLY-A' is a relatively modern festival. There is some evidence that people in rural Shetland celebrated the 24th day after Christmas as "Antonmas" 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 olde 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 night – the street was thronged with people as any fair I ever saw in England."

As Lerwick grew in size the celebrations became more elaborate. Sometime around 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 was 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 revellers with only limited success. When the end came for tar-barreling, in the early 1870's 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-A', 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.

At the same time they were toying with the idea of introducing Viking themes to their new festival. The first sign of this new development appearing in 1877, but it was not until the late 1880's that a Viking longship – the "galley" – appeared, and as late as 1906 that "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 Squad", in the procession every year.

Up to the Second World War Up-Helly-A' was overwhelmingly a festival of young working class men 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-A' committee became a self-confident organization which poke fun at the pompous in the by then long-established Up-Helly-A' 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 programme on Up-Helly-A', and from that moment Up-Helly-A' – 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-A' night, men and women now co-operate to open large hall throughout the town to entertain them.

However, despite the changes there are numerous threads connecting the Up-Helly-A' of today with its predecessors 150 years ago.

3. Press Briefing

On the Monday before Up-Helly-Aa there will be a press briefing for all local and visiting journalists, camera crews and photographers. This meeting will allow the committee to emphasise the controls in place to ensure a safe festival for all. It will provide clarity on locations and times of events during the day should you still be uncertain.

This meeting will be held in the Galley Shed in St Sunniva Street at 15:00.

Prior to the press briefing there will be an opportunity for visiting press and photographers to walk the evening procession route accompanied by a committee member and local camera man. This will allow you to get a better understanding on what takes place and identify locations for filming and taking photographs. This walk will leave the galley shed at 14:00.

4. Up-Helly-Aa - During the Day

Following breakfast the Guizer Jarl and his Squad, accompanied by the Lerwick Royal British Legion Pipe Band, will leave Islesburgh Community Centre around 08.30 and proceed to the Toll Clock Shopping Centre. After a short visit they will join the Galley at the Lerwick Royal British Legion. Again after a brief stop at the British Legion they will move off around 09:45 accompanied by the Lerwick Brass Band. They will parade down along the Esplanade and turn up around the Main Post Office building and proceed along Commercial Street to the Market Cross. After a brief stop they will then parade along the length of Commercial Street prior to turning back to Alexandria Wharf to meet with the Galley again for a photo session.

Initially access to the barriered area at the wharf will be limited to the official photographers and film crew. Upon completion, the squad's families and visiting press will have opportunities for pictures. There are certain areas that are restricted to playgroups and for special needs so they can enjoy unobstructed views.

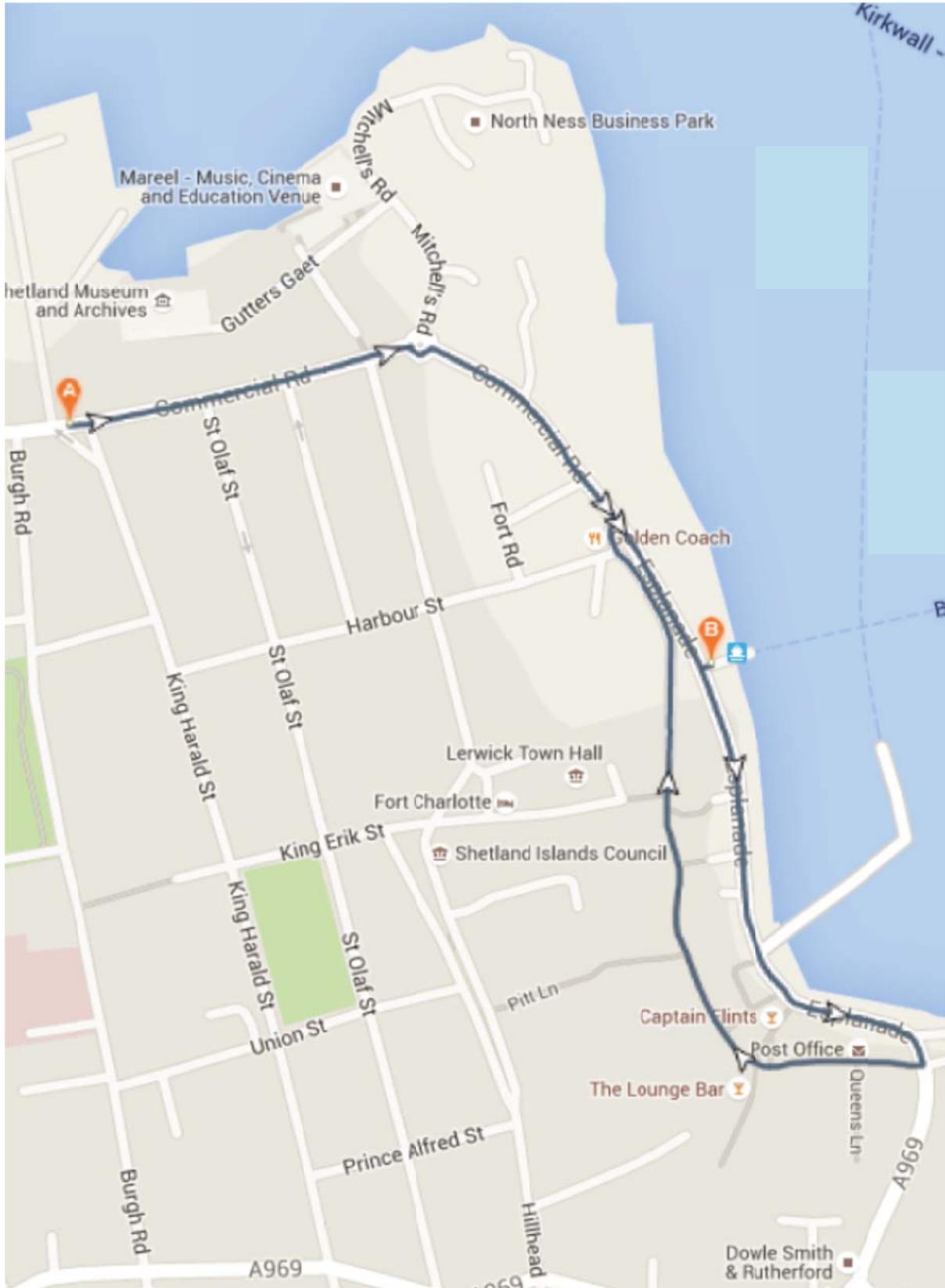
Good photo and filming opportunities can be found from Commercial Street or Fort Charlotte looking down onto Alexandria Wharf.

The Jarl and his Squad will then move off to the Town Hall via Fort Charlotte for an 11:00 reception with the local council convener. This is strictly by invitation only as guests of the Convener.

There then follows visits to several of the local schools, hospitals and eventide homes.

At 15:30 the Jarl and his Squad will visit Shetland Museum, ZE1 0WP.

The Morning Parade Route - Map



5. The Evening Procession Route

The route will be along Lower Hillhead, Town Hall Brae, south along St Olaf Street, down through Union Street for the turning movement in King Harold Street, up Harbour Street, south along St Olaf Street, turning up King Erik Street, around a marker and down into the north King George V Playing Field, circling the perimeter before heading to the burning site.

Squads will start to muster on the Hillhead from 19:00 with the Guizer Jarl and his squad passing up through the ranks at 19:15 accompanied by the local Brass Band. At 19:30 a firework will give the signal for lighting up and the galley, Guizer Jarl's Squad and the Brass Band will pass down the ranks, the procession counter-marching behind them.

In previous year's there have been issues with people parking on the route even though traffic restrictions are in place, and we would take this opportunity to ask for your assistance in helping keep the route clear.

6. Health and Safety

As you will understand due to the nature of the festival, the procession and burning requires to be well managed to ensure a safe, enjoyable evening for all, therefore access to the burning site will be strictly controlled with access being limited prior to the burning.

Once the throwing of torches and singing of the Norseman's Home is complete the guizers will begin to disperse and there then may be an opportunity to get into the site.

It should be noted that there are many points outside the park that will give you a better vantage for filming of taking pictures. (These shall be identified when walking the route on the Monday afternoon).

You are responsible for carrying out your own risk assessment for the work you will undertake during the festival.

It is also important that you do not enter between the two ranks of guizers at any time once they begin to form on the Hillhead for the start of the procession or at any time once they move off.

You should remain on the pavement areas during the events and not stand in front of the procession. You should also refrain from distracting guizers when they are carrying burning torches.

Please be considerate to other spectators particularly the disabled and children and ensure that you are not blocking their view.

The procession is under control of the marshals appointed by the Up-Helly-Aa Committee and their instructions should be obeyed at all times to ensure your safety and the safety of those taking part. If you are unsure of anything then please ask one of them for advice. They will be recognisably dressed as Vikings.

Finally please enjoy the festival and the hospitality of Shetland, and any pictures or footage of the event would be greatly appreciated by the Up-Helly-Aa committee.