

Up-Helly-Aa

Information Pack 2025

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1. Up-Helly-Aa Organisation

While visitors are welcome as on-lookers to view the spectacular festival of Up-Helly-Aa, it is very much a local event and participants must have been a resident in Shetland for five 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 invites.

Lerwick Up Helly Aa is always held on the last Tuesday in January with the following day being a Public Holiday throughout Shetland for many.

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. In the lead up to the festival during the final weeks the organizing committee are very busy making arrangements for all parts of the festival, including the Guizer Jarl. For this reason the committee members cannot take on any additional requests.

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 four nights a week to ensure that everything is ready for the big day.

The reveal of the galley and the Jarl Squad is kept a secret until the big day when they step out into public for the first time from 8.15am for the start of the morning parades.

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

A junior festival is organised by the Junior Up-Helly-Aa Committee. A Junior Jarl is elected by secondary one and two pupils who attend school in Lerwick. The elected Jarl then selects their squad of fifteen from secondary two pupils to make up the Junior Jarl Squad who lead a procession of guizers from the age of primary seven to secondary two pupils.

The Junior Jarl Squad will be at various locations throughout the Tuesday including the Fiery Session's concerts. The junior torchlight procession takes place prior to the senior festival, lighting up at 5.30pm on the Lower Hillhead.

2. History of 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 “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-barrelling, 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.

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 appeared in 1877, but it was not until the late 1880s 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 Aa 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 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 – 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.

For the first time in 2023, Up Helly Aa guizers were able to manage their squads in keeping with the spirit of the festival, with no gender restrictions.

The decision to relax the long-standing custom was taken by the Lerwick Up-Helly-Aa Committee after members discussed how to take the event forward following a two-year absence due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2024 the Jarl was joined in his squad by one of his daughters and three nieces. This was the first occasion where there had been female participation in the Jarl Squad in Lerwick.

Despite the changes over time there are numerous threads connecting the Up Helly Aa of today with its predecessors 150 years ago.

3. Press Briefing and Route Walk

On the Monday before Up Helly Aa there will be a press briefing and route walk for all local and visiting journalists, camera crews and photographers. This briefing 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.

The briefing starts at the Town Hall, meeting from 2.00pm with a start of 2.15pm.

The route walk will identify the best vantage points to cover the Evening Procession and the starting location and vantage points of the Morning Procession. During the walk, questions can be answered to ensure you get the best out of your visit.

4. Official photographers and access to images

For the festival the Jarl has appointed official photographers and film crew to follow his squad and to capture the lead up to the festival and also the big day itself. These appointed crews will have agreed access to the squad and some restricted zones on a pre-arranged basis. All other media opportunities will be from a public perspective or under the guidance of event marshals.

As the day progresses you can access images of the various parts of the festival and both the daytime and evening parades via the following media outlets:

Dave Donaldson shetlandphotographer@gmail.com
AFP www.afp.com
Associated Press www.apnews.com

5. Technical notes for film crews

Suitable weather protection for crew and equipment is vital. Shetland weather in January is not forgiving, particularly driving rain as it gets everywhere!

For the Evening Procession the most important factor for video is white balance. The light from the torches is orange, but because they are the only light, automatic white balance sets them to white.

Set camera white balance to '3200⁰k' or 'normal artificial light' if by-passing colour grading.

Some don't like using automatic exposure, but during the light up it really is the only way of coping with it. For video, be ready to adjust neutral density filters. Having ¼ neutral density switched on before light up at 7.30pm is wise. Be prepared for rapid fluctuations in light levels in first five minutes. Both neutral density and gain will need considerable adjustment during the event. Leaving on auto exposure after the initial light up will cause exposure variations, caused by the flame flicker.

The Junior Procession at 5.30pm gives you an opportunity to adjust settings as required. Please note that some of the street lights will still be on during the Junior Procession, the streets will be in complete darkness for the Senior Procession.

No unauthorised drones are allowed during the processions. Police Scotland will manage this in line with legislation of flying drones. Drones have been confiscated by Police Scotland in the past so it is not worth the risk.

It is recommended that you carry personal torches as before light up the streets are in darkness and there are trip hazards in the form of kerbs in unlit areas. The streets where the procession take place will be in complete darkness from about 7.05pm

Please consider the guizers if using any flash photography. The guizers are tasked with looking after the person in front of them to protect from sparks and to march safely with the flaming torch so avoid any flash that may dazzle them temporarily.

6. Health and Safety

As you will understand due to the nature of the festival, the Morning Parades, the Evening Procession and Burning of the Galley is required to be well managed to ensure a safe, enjoyable event for all.

To comply with the H&S plan, access on the road within the ranks is prohibited and anyone found on the route will be removed by marshals or police.

There are two photo opportunities during the Evening Torchlight Procession where a controlled area for photographers is set up to capture images prior to the Procession moving off again. These areas will be detailed during the press walk and we would request that you adhere to instructions of the marshals to ensure everyone gets their opportunity.

Access to the Burning Site is limited to the Jarl Squads official photographers and film crew only. No exceptions are made to this agreement and it is strictly policed by marshals.

Once the throwing of torches and singing of the Norseman's Home is complete the guizers will begin to disperse. At this point the park gates will be locked so access is not possible.

It should be noted that there are many points outside the park that will give you a better vantage for filming or 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.

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 viewing the event from their cars and children and ensure that you are not blocking their view.

The Procession is under control of Police Scotland and the marshals appointed by the Up-Helly-Aa Committee and their instructions should always be followed 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 in black suits during the daytime parades and in Viking dress during the night time procession.

The First Aid Point for the evening procession is the Town Hall. There are also first aiders who walk the route. Should you require first aid please contact one of the marshals in high viz vests who will arrange for someone to assist you.

7. The Morning Parade Route & Map

Following breakfast, the Guizer Jarl and his Squad will first appear in public, accompanied by the Pipe Band, leaving Islesburgh Community Centre at 8.15am to proceed to the Toll Clock Shopping Centre. After a short visit they will march and join the Galley and Lerwick Brass Band at the Lerwick British Legion. The visit to the Legion is a ticketed event for members of the Legion and family only. The Jarl Squad are invited guests of the Legion so Legion Committee members will marshal the door to avoid unauthorised access.

After a brief stop at the British Legion, the Morning Parade will depart the Lerwick Legion at 9.40am and will follow Commercial Road – Esplanade – turn at the Main Post Office and along Commercial Street to the Market Cross where the Jarl Squad will circle the proclamation briefly to sing the Up Helly Aa and Galley Songs. The Squad will be accompanied by the Lerwick Brass Band at the Market Cross. The Galley and Pipe Band will leave the parade at the Alexandra Wharf on route to the Market Cross to get prepared for the official photo.

The Jarl Squad and Brass Band will then depart the Market Cross and continue to parade along Commercial Street and back to Alexandra Wharf to get the official photo taken with the galley.

Initially access to the restricted area at Alexandra Wharf is reserved for the Jarl Squads official photographers who have been working with the Squad throughout the year. Once this shot is taken access will be allowed for others. There are certain areas that are restricted for nursery groups and for Additional Support Needs spectators 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.

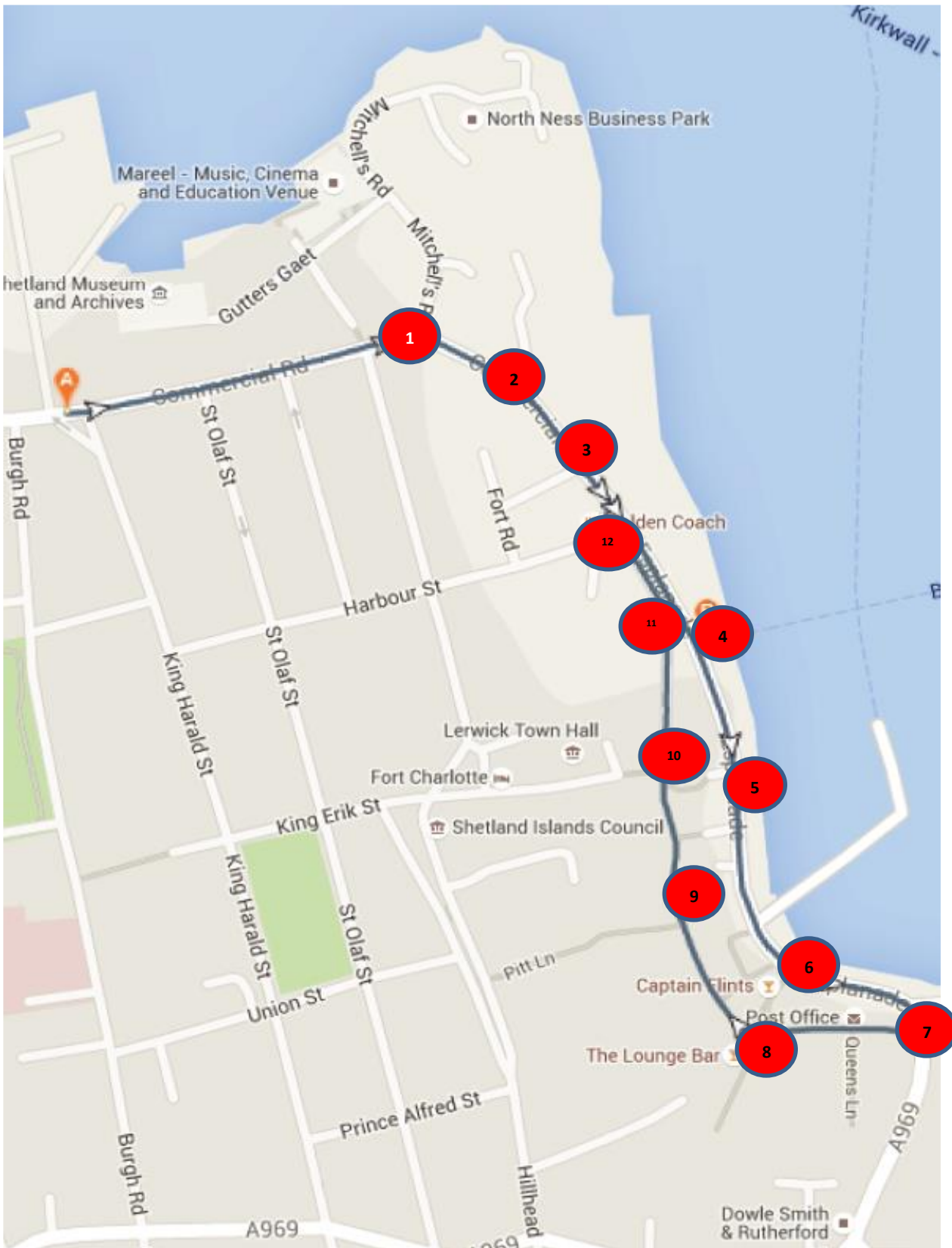
At 10.30am the Jarl Squad will march with the Pipe Band from Alexandra Wharf to the Town Hall for the Civic Reception via Fort Charlotte. This is strictly by invitation only as guests of the Council Convener. For the remainder of the day the Jarl Squad visits the local schools, hospitals and eventide homes.

At about 3.30pm the Jarl and his Squad will visit Shetland Museum. Entry to this visit is via ticket which can be obtained direct from the museum.

During the Morning Parade the marshals operate a rolling road block to ensure the parade keeps moving and timings are kept. For photo opportunities key vantage points have been identified (marked by numbers 1-12 on the route map). These will be set by the marshals identified in high viz vests and photographers should make their way to the vantage point and let the Parade come towards them. This gives everyone a fair opportunity to get the images they require.

Anyone entering the road between the Parade and the identified photo vantage points will be removed by the marshals. To help the Parade run smoothly all photographers should adhere to the instructions from the marshals.

Morning Route Map



8. The Evening Procession and 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 Harald 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.

The areas around the Town Hall Brae and entrance areas to the burning site will have barriers in place. Only the participants of the procession and marshals are allowed access within these areas. These barriers will be in place for the duration of the procession and when the participants are within the burning site, to ensure a clear egress should we require to evacuate the burning site. The barriers will only be removed following the burning of the Galley to allow for participants to exit the burning site to move onto their next destination.

Marshals will control the movement of spectators around these areas and their instructions should be followed at all times to ensure the safety of all participants and spectators.

Squads will start to muster on the Hillhead from 7.00pm. The Pipe Band will play from around 7.05pm, following this the Guizer Jarl and his squad passing up through the ranks at 7.15pm accompanied by the local Brass Band. At 7.30pm a firework will give the signal for lighting up the torches. The Galley, Guizer Jarl's Squad, Pipe Band and the Brass Band will lead off the Procession and will pass down the ranks, the procession of the other forty six squads in fancy dress countermarching behind them.

No vehicles can be parked on the route as there are traffic orders for parking restrictions in place. We would take this opportunity to ask for your assistance in helping keep the route clear and any vehicles will be removed from the route and impounded. A fee to get the vehicle released will be paid direct to the garage who removed the vehicle.

9. The Guizer Jarl

The 2025 Guizer Jarl is Calum Grains from Whiteness in the West of Shetland.

Calum's enthusiasm for Up Helly Aa began in childhood, influenced by his family's involvement in the festival. He first participated as part of the School Squad in 1987 and later was a member of senior Jarl Squads in 2009, 2011, and 2016. Since 1987, Calum has actively participated in every festival he could attend, only missing a few during his time in the merchant navy.

Elected to the Up Helly Aa Committee in October 2008, Calum joined alongside Richard Moar (Guizer Jarl 2024) and Lynden Nicolson (Guizer Jarl 2026). Over the years, during his time on the committee, he was delighted to undertake the Treasurer role for the festival.

Calum's squad, known as the "Whiteness and Weisdale Squad" comprising many locals from the surrounding areas, will lead the festival as the Jarl Squad for the first time in 2025. The squad's guizers have decades of shared history and are eagerly anticipating the honour of fronting this celebrated event.

Calum and his brothers proudly participated in the 2011 Jarl Squad, led by their cousin, Guizer Jarl John Hunter, who portrayed Johan Sanderrevet of Valsgarde. This family connection to the festival underscores Calum's deep ties to Up Helly Aa.

Calum's squad will continue this strong family connections as he will be joined by a number of family members on the day. Joining Calum will be his daughter Colleen, son Ian, his two brothers, four nieces and three nephews.

In addition to his Up Helly Aa commitments, Calum is the Chief Executive of Lerwick Port Authority, Lerwick's main commercial port, and is active in family business ventures, including crofting. An avid enthusiast for travelling, boats, music, football and cars, he also enjoys exploring closer to home by hiking Shetland's hills and coastline. Following the 2025 festival, Calum looks forward to dedicating more time to these pastimes.

We had a chance to catch up with Calum and his daughter Colleen ahead of the big day to capture how preparations were progressing, what Calum's involvement has been with the festival previously and what elements of the festival they are both looking forward the most. You can download the interview [here](#) as they discuss a range of topics on Up Helly Aa in the lead up to the big day.

Additional images of the Jarl and his family in the lead up to the big day can be requested and obtained from shetlandphotographer@gmail.com

Due to commitments of the Committee Members and the Guizer Jarl in the lead up to the festival it is impossible to accommodate all requests. In the few days before the festival the Guizer Jarl has to fulfill a number of appointments and roles so isn't available for any media opportunities other than the ones set up with official photographers. On Up Helly Aa day itself the timetable is very tight, almost military in timing so opportunity for interviews with the Guizer Jarl aren't possible.

If you're lucky you may be able to grab a Jarl Squad member briefly as they go through the day. To do so you need to be quick and ready as they don't stand still for too long!

We hope you find this pack useful to get the most of your experience of Up Helly Aa. Finally, please enjoy the festival and the hospitality of Shetland.