

Up-Helly-Aa

Information Pack 2026

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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
Getty Images	https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/

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 for the evening torchlight parade is strictly 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 on the road 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 public pavement areas** during the evening torchlight parade 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.

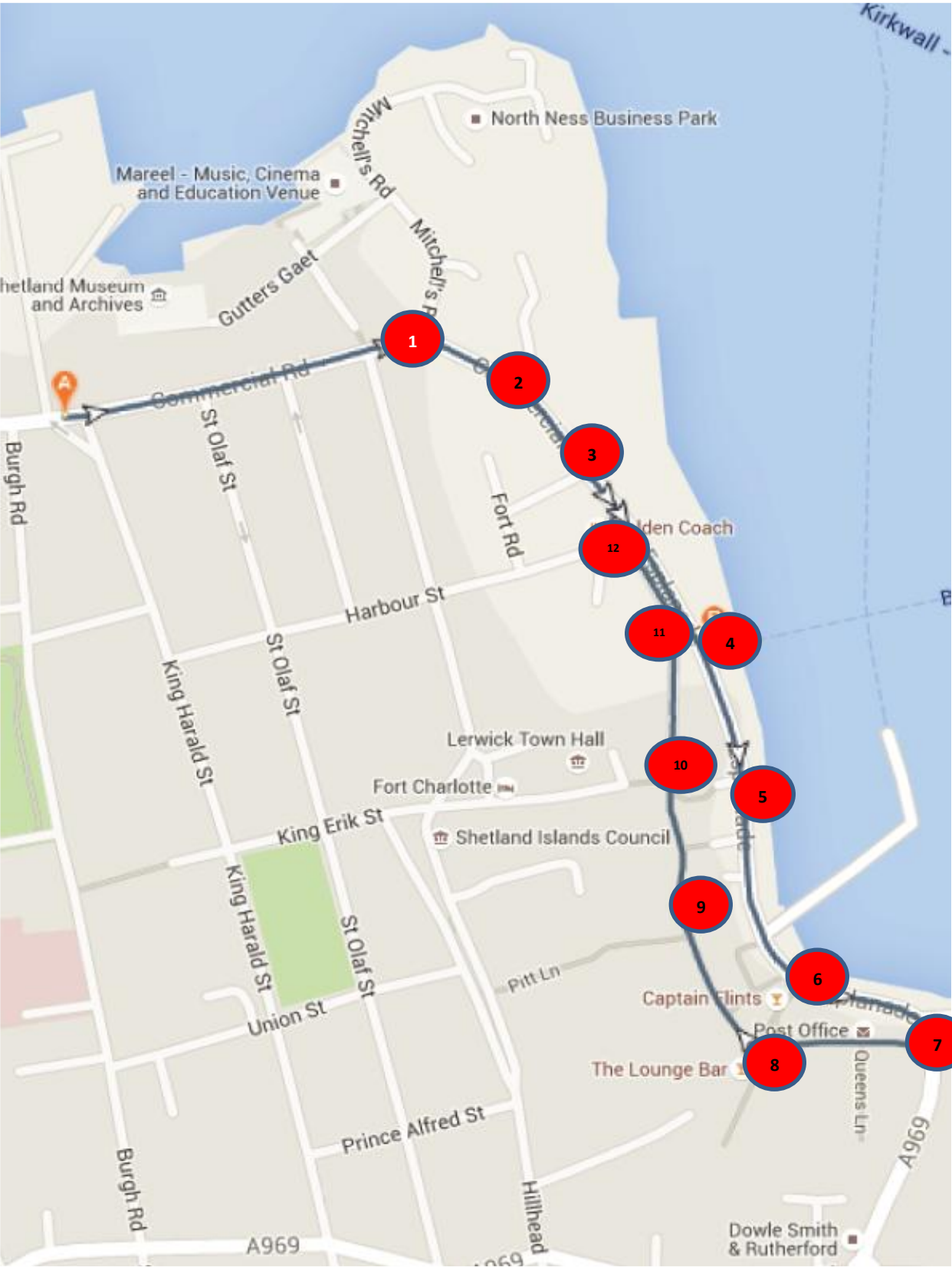
At 10.30am the Jarl Squad will march with the Pipe Band from Alexandra Wharf to the Town Hall for the Civic Reception via Fort Charlotte. This is strictly by invitation only as guests of the Council Convener. For the remainder of the day the Jarl Squad visits the local schools, hospitals and eventide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

Please note that no spectators or media should be on the road of the procession route. All members of the public and media should remain on pavements or behind barriers where these are present.

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.

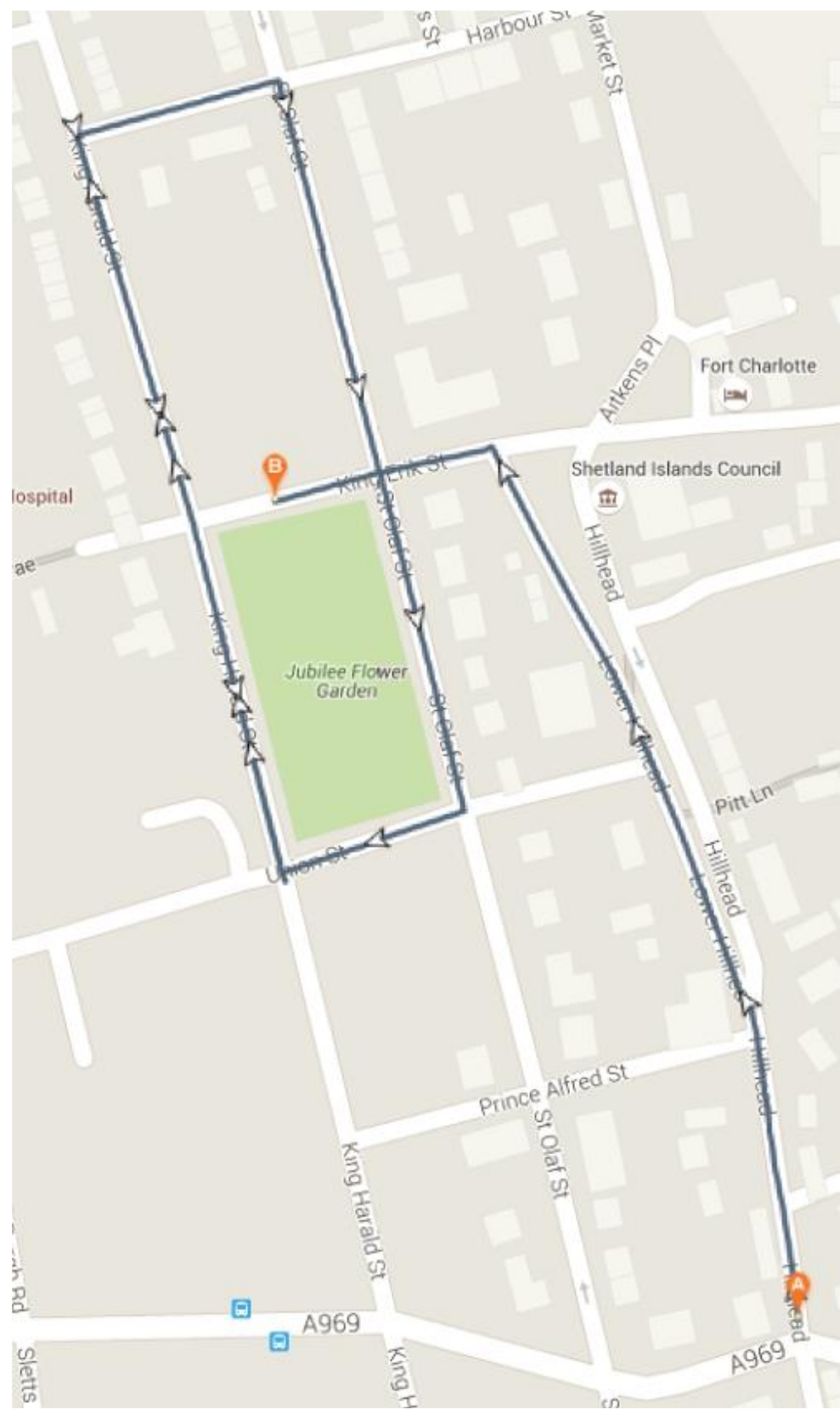
Squads will start to muster on the Hillhead from 7.00pm. The Pipe Band will play from around 7.05pm, following this the Guizer Jarl and his squad passing up through the ranks at 7.15pm accompanied by the local Brass Band. At 7.30pm a firework will give the signal for lighting up the torches. The Galley, 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.

Please note:

The morning and evening parades attract a lot of spectators, many of these are children who come out every year in all weathers to see the festival. We try to ensure that children are in front of crowds so they can get a view of the parades. Please do not ruin their experience by standing in front of these groups. Marshals and Committee members will move anyone standing in front of these groups. The youngsters are the future of the festival, so we try to ensure they get a memorable experience and not one where they are stuck behind adults with limited view.

The Evening Procession Route - Map



9. The Guizer Jarl

The 2026 Guizer Jarl is Lynden Nicolson from Lerwick. By day, Lynden works for Scottish Water, and this year he leads the festival.

Lynden's involvement in Up Helly Aa dates back to 1979, when he first attended the TA Hall as an 11-year-old. His mother, Doreen, and his granny were hostesses at the venue. The following year, Lynden joined his dad, Sydney, in the squad as a fiddle box carrier, and he has guized with the squad ever since.

The squad is known as the Malakoff Squad, named after their meeting location and the number of members who worked within the company. They are well known as a strong singing squad, so plenty of noise can be expected around the festival this year. While this is the first time the Malakoff Squad has been the Jarl Squad, they were invited by Jarl Alan Anderson in 1971 to make up numbers. Lynden missed out on that occasion, being only three years old, and none of the current squad members were part of the 1971 squad.

Lynden joined the Up Helly Aa Committee in 2008 and has served for 18 years to date, with two additional years added due to the postponement of the festival during Covid lockdown restrictions. During his time on the Committee, Lynden served as Painter Foreman, with responsibility for leading the painting team. The painters deliver the finished galley to the Jarls, supporting them with design and colour choices to ensure each galley is unique.

Reflecting on his Committee service, Lynden says he particularly enjoyed visiting local businesses with the collection sheet during November. It provided a valuable opportunity to meet and thank the businesses that support the festival year after year.

Looking ahead to this year's festival, Lynden has found it difficult to single out one moment he is most looking forward to. The morning procession is always special for any Jarl, marking the first public reveal of the suit. It has a strong impact on both squad members and the public, as the squad walks through the town together for the first time, showcasing the result of many months of hard work on the design.

The evening procession is another expected highlight for the 2026 Jarl. This is when Lynden will walk up through the ranks of the guizers before taking his place in the galley, leading the procession and finally watching the galley meet its fiery end. The celebrations continue long into the night, with Lynden leading the squad through the eleven halls, something he is very much looking forward to.

As the 2026 Jarl Squad, the Malakoff Squad will be leading the festival for the first time, making this a particularly special year. Lynden reflects on how proud he is to be part of the squad and notes that the suit to be revealed on the last Tuesday of January is the result of many working nights over the year, with everyone contributing.

Although this is the Malakoff Squad's first time as Jarl Squad, Lynden has previously been part of Jarl Squads in 2007, 2012 and 2019. He was involved in the design committees for each of those years and gained valuable skills and experience. However, anyone looking for clues to the 2026 design from those years will be disappointed, as the character and design for this year have no connection to previous squads.

As is often the case with Up Helly Aa, Lynden has strong family support within his squad. He is joined by his sons, Ryan and Logan, along with his brother-in-law, three nephews, two grand-nephews and two grand-nieces. Several cousins and his wife Paula's cousin from Orkney will also take part, ensuring it is very much a family affair.

When the festival draws to a close, Lynden looks forward to reflecting on a memorable year before taking on his next designated role as Chief Marshal for 2027. The Chief Marshal is responsible for overseeing the festival each year, supporting the Jarl and his squad behind the scenes, and is the only Committee Member who fully understands the demands placed on the Jarl. Once this role is complete, Lynden will retire from the Committee after 19 years' service.

As an avid Glasgow Celtic supporter, there may—or may not—be subtle nods to the East End of Glasgow within Lynden's squad or the 45 other squads taking part this year. With the demands of the build-up to the festival, Lynden admits football has taken a back seat, but he will no doubt be hoping the Bhoys' form improves once the festivities are over.

Images of the Jarl and his family in the lead up to the big day can be requested and obtained from malcolm@tollock.com

Please note that due to the commitments of Committee members and the Guizer Jarl in the lead-up to the festival, media requests will not be able to be accommodated. In the days immediately before the festival, the Guizer Jarl must fulfil several appointments and roles and is therefore unavailable for media opportunities beyond those arranged with official photographers. On Up Helly Aa Day itself, the timetable is extremely tight, almost military in its precision, and interviews with the Guizer Jarl are not possible.

You may be able to briefly speak with a Jarl Squad member during the day, but you will need to be quick—they rarely stand still for long!

We hope this pack helps you make the most of your experience of Up Helly Aa. Above all, please enjoy the festival and the hospitality of Shetland.