

Chapter 14: Starting online with a bang

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, I'd got into trouble back in 1980 for reporting that wartime bombs were still sitting in the mud on the bottom of Sullom Voe. Unexploded wartime munitions are a staple of local journalism all over Europe, sometimes when a building site excavator digs up a bomb or, more frequently in Shetland, when a fishing boat trawls up something nasty in her nets. The mysterious object that the Lerwick scallop dredger *Planet* caught on 6th November 1995 seemed to be something more recent, possibly a leftover from NATO exercise.

Coastguards buoyed off the light grey, 18-inch-long object in a secluded corner of Lerwick Harbour to await the arrival of the Royal Navy bomb disposal squad from Rosyth. I took my boat out to watch the explosion, keeping at a safe distance. With me on board was my friend Graeme Storey, a local photographer who often worked with Shetland News Agency. He duly snapped the disappointingly small thump and splash. Graeme was an expert on computers¹ and, as we sailed back into town, he enthused about the possibilities of the new Worldly Wide Wobble on the Internettle thingy, of which I had only the foggiest notion at that time. Graeme suggested that, as he and I were selling pictures and stories to national and international media every day, with each item's copyright licensed only for a single use by each customer, there was nothing to stop us publishing the same material online ourselves. He had to explain what 'online' meant; I was that ignorant. And then if we had our own news website it would attract advertising and, in time, earn extra income for us.

I said I had my doubts but was willing to give it a go. Mindful of my 1990 promise to the late Dr Mortimer Manson that I would try, if the opportunity ever arose, to revive his defunct *Shetland News* title, I dug out from my files the old paper's famous masthead illustration of Lerwick's picturesque South End, together with Mortimer's stirring motto, 'Great is the Truth and It Shall Prevail'. Graeme incorporated these into his design for the website, which for its time was technically very advanced. And so was born, on 23rd November 1995, *Shetland News*² online (minus the pro-Tory editorial sentiments of the original print publication). We didn't know it at the time but were later told, by experts at the University of California Riverside and elsewhere, that this was the first local daily internet news service in the world. As with my doubts about the viability of Radio Shetland, when Alistair Hetherington had proposed it 19 years earlier, I proved to be a very bad judge of the potential audience. Within a week *Shetland News* was getting a thousand 'hits' a day and, once Graeme had explained what a 'hit' was, I was amazed. Within a year we had 5,000 hits a day, over 150,000 a month.

They no longer speak about 'hits', I was told recently by a younger and more cyber-savvy friend. The modern expression is 'page views', meaning the number of times viewers have downloaded a page from a website. By 2019 *Shetland News* was averaging about 800,000 page views a month. Then, during the corona virus crisis in March 2020, it reached 1.7m page views and 200,000 'unique viewers' in a single month. The population of Shetland is now

¹ To my astonishment, Graeme could actually build computers. He made one for me at a very reasonable price. After 30 years it still works, when I need to get some data out of an old floppy disc, although it's long since been superseded by a series of bog-standard laptops.

² <https://www.shetnews.co.uk/category/news/>

about 23,000 but, even allowing for the large audience in the Shetland 'diaspora' worldwide, this is saturation coverage.

Unlike a weekly print newspaper, which naturally wants to keep its stories to sell on publication day, we could add our daily news agency copy to the *Shetland News* pages shortly after we'd sent it to our media customers in the south. Soon we were also carrying feature material, longer articles on current affairs, humorous pieces, readers' letters and cartoons. By March 1996 *Shetland News* had over 200 pages. Graeme and I were working crazy hours, most of them unpaid, but the enthusiastic public reception carried us along. The news cycle, which we'd at first imagined would be daily, soon became hourly, and could be even more frequent when there was a fast-developing story. We quickly signed up a handful of local companies as advertising clients but at first the income from this was fairly low, partly because so few potential advertisers yet understood how the Internet worked or who would be looking at our website. Without the continuing sale of our stories and pictures to other outlets the venture would not have made financial sense.

Our initial success had a great deal to do with a far-sighted Lerwick businessman, Ghufar Razaq who, noticing that it didn't seem to matter where your web server was based, had some time earlier started the Zetnet internet service from his premises in the town, with another base in Manchester. We used Zetnet as the platform for *Shetland News*, as did many local businesses and individuals who were now putting into practice a version of BT's 1989 public relations vision about 'geography is history'.

The technical side of the Zetnet operation was run by an extraordinary man, the late Tim Cole, who not only understood computers and the World Wide Web but, like Graeme Storey, could explain it all in plain language to Internet dummies like me. Tim was an enthusiastic genius, wrestling with a technology that in 1995 was not quite ready for all the possibilities it had unleashed. An abiding memory is of watching Tim crouched in his wheelchair, swigging black coffee and munching the occasional sandwich as he stuffed dozens of three-inch floppy discs, one after another, into a computer that had given him much cause for expletive-laced exasperation. It was not a healthy life and he worked insane hours, refusing all entreaties to take it easy. In the end it did him in, poor soul. He was not the first victim of sedentary surfing, and certainly not the last.

Shetland News really took off during the blizzards of Christmas 1995. Snow blocked almost every road in the islands, many country districts were without power and normal life came to a standstill for a week and more. Helicopters flew patients to hospital, tug crews to Sullom Voe and electricity linesmen to restore power in remote communities. Fishing boats and even lifeboats were pressed into service to deliver essential supplies, as the roads to most of the ferry terminals were impassable for many days. The snowploughs couldn't cope. It had been so many years since a really big snowfall that the council didn't have a snow blower machine any more. They had to ship one in to clear the main roads to the airport and the oil terminal.

All this was a huge story locally and it also made national and international headlines. My tiny office overlooking Bressay Sound became very busy indeed. A reporter and photographer from a national daily, who'd managed to get to Shetland on the overnight ferry from Aberdeen, were having coffee with me one morning when a phone call came in from an old couple in an isolated cottage on the east side of Bressay. Their road was blocked, and they had a box of urgently



The Ward of Bressay transmitter in the big snow at Christmas 1995.

needed supplies waiting to be collected from the Bressay shop, just a short walk from my house. Would I mind bringing it round to the other side of Bressay with my boat? So I picked up the box, started the boat's engine and the press corps and I set off from the Bressay pier. It was a sunny day with a light wind and we enjoyed the scenic, five-mile run around the north end of the island. We got ashore without any problem on the beach below the old couple's house but it took a while to fight our way a hundred yards through the drifts up to their front door. There we met a splendid welcome, with soup, coffee and biscuits. While we were warming up by the fire, the man of the house undid the string on the precious cardboard box. The urgent supplies, apart from a pint of milk, a sliced loaf, a small block of cheese and some tea bags, consisted of six pouches of rolling tobacco, six packets of Rizla cigarette papers, a half-bottle of whisky and some matches. A lavishly illustrated article duly appeared in the 'sooth paper' under the headline 'Snowbound pensioners relieved as essential supplies arrive by sea' or something like that. This caused great amusement in the island.

On Christmas Day in the morning I heard the BBC had a problem: it seemed the Bressay TV transmitter had gone on the blink during a power cut. The standby generator had started automatically but the BBC channels were only transmitting on low power. Unless it was fixed by 3pm Shetlanders would have very poor reception for the Queen's Christmas Broadcast. My friend John Waters was still working as a transmitter engineer at that time and rang to ask if I would mind ferrying him and two colleagues across the sound. They were going to walk up the 742-foot-high hill to see what they could do.

I took the boat over to town in a gap between snow showers and then landed the intrepid crew on the Bressay pier, where they donned BBC-issue snowshoes and set off to climb through the drifts, lugging a very heavy spare part that was thought to be the solution to the problem. I went home to help prepare Christmas dinner. Some hours later the three engineers appeared at our front door, beaming with success and looking like something out of 'Scott of the Antarctic'. We brushed the snow off their survival suits, fixed them drams and invited them to

share our festive meal, which I'd bulked up a bit in anticipation of extra guests. It was dark by the time of the Queen's Yuletide homilies, after which I ferried them back to the town.

On my way home the trouble started: a proper blizzard roared down across Bressay Sound from the north-west, cutting visibility to a few metres. I had no radar, just a compass and a chart, so had to steer by dead reckoning and memory. I managed to miss the offlying rocks at the entrance to the Bressay harbour but it was a fairly scary passage through the very narrow channel to the pier. Only at the last minute did I see the pierhead leading lights which, fortunately, had come back on after the power cut earlier in the day. It was some time later that I discovered my journey should not really have been necessary. The reason the TV transmitter was on low power was that, when leaving the building some days before, a new member of staff had omitted to press a certain switch. This was because no-one had told him it was there. On Christmas Day, when John Waters showed him the 'magic red standby button' and pressed it, the transmitter immediately sprang back onto full power. Later, John and I had many a giggle about this but at the time it was not so amusing.