



↑ Aishla Head Colin Nutt



↑ Campions David Gifford

Getting to Papa Stour

Papa Stour can be reached by ferry from West Burrafirth on Shetland's Westside. The ferry takes about 40 minutes to reach Housa Voe on the east side of Papa Stour. Although the ferry to Papa Stour carries cars, there is little need for one as there is only one mile of road on the island and the best way to see the sights is on foot. See the Shetland Island Council website for the latest ferry timetable and up-to-date sailing information. Ferry booking is essential, even if going on foot, as space is limited.

The island doesn't have a shop so you'll need to bring your own provisions. There are excellent facilities at the ferry terminal, including information about the island, a selection of books, toilets and a kettle if you want to make a hot brew. There's also space outside for wild camping.

Useful information

Getting around Shetland

For general travel information, including bus timetables and car and bike hire, visit shetland.org/getting-around

Ferry information

+44 (0)1595 743977

Ferry booking office

+44 (0)1595 745804

Geopark Shetland

Discover geosites across Shetland | shetland.org/geopark

Public toilets

Ferry terminal
Kirk

EV charging points

chargeplacescotland.org

Medical assistance

Walls Health Centre, +44 (0)1595 809352

Police 101



shetland.org/papa-stour

2026 | **Disclaimer** All details believed to be accurate at the time of going to print.

Papa Stour

Sculpted by the sea



Welcome to Papa Stour

This rugged island lies off the west coast of Shetland's mainland and is home to just a handful of people. Some of the most impressive coastlines in Shetland can be seen here, including caves, arches, stacks and skerries. For walkers, wildlife enthusiasts, kayakers and those interested in archaeology, Papa Stour has much to offer.

Things to see and do

History

The name Papa Stour is believed to have been given to the island by the Vikings. Papey Stora in Old Norse means the big island of priests and refers to the community of Celtic missionary priests that lived on Papa Stour, perhaps as early as the 6th century.

Papa Stour became an important area for Norsemen, providing both a strategic base and a safe haven for their boats. By the end of the 13th century, the island had become a Norwegian royal farm, the personal property of King Hakon. Although Shetland was pledged to Scotland in 1469, the Lairds of Norway kept their estates on Papa Stour until well into the 17th century.

Archaeology

Papa Stour is full of prehistoric remains, with evidence of Neolithic and Bronze Age settlements dating back over 5,000 years. Papa Stour was the source of the oldest surviving written document from Shetland. It is known as the 1299 document and contains allegations of corruption made by one of the islanders.

Geology

The west coast of Papa Stour contains some of the most exposed coastline in the British Isles. Exposed to the full force of the Atlantic Ocean the island's Devonian age rocks have been carved into towering vertical cliffs, stacks and arches. Bands of volcanic ash (ignimbrite) and orange solidified lava (rhyolite) can be seen running through the rock faces.

At **Lamar Banks**, at the south side of the entrance to **Housa Voe**, a bed of calcareous mudstone containing broken remains of fossil fish was discovered. Inland, ridges of glacial moraine – huge boulders carried by glaciers – run across the island, marking the edge of an ancient ice sheet.

Flora

The island is divided by a hill dyke that separates the fertile in-by land from the moorland of the scattald or common grazings to the west. In the past, turf and peat from the scattald were removed and used by the islanders to provide fertiliser and fuel. This has produced a unique 'scalped' heathland of short wind-clipped vegetation growing on gravelly sub-soil. Today, the heathland is covered in a variety of plants including Ling, Thyme, Mountain Everlasting, Spring Squill, Plantain, Heath-spotted Orchid and Woolly Hair Moss. In contrast, maritime species such as Sea Pinks and Campions thrive in the salty sea air along the clifftops.

Sea mammals

Seals are regular visitors to the shores of Papa Stour, hauling themselves out on rocks in the geos along the west coast. Common seals come ashore to pup in June and July. They are easily recognisable, lying on the rocks in a characteristic crescent shape with their heads and tails lifted high. The grey seals are much larger and have long distinct noses. In October the furry white coats of the grey seal pups can be seen dotted across the beaches.

Harder to spot are the harbour porpoises and occasional pods of orcas that swim past Papa Stour. Keep a careful look out to sea as you walk around as you never know when one of these animals might appear.

The low rocky shores of the islands and voes provide a home for otters. The kelp forests that grow in shallow waters hide many small fish for them to feed on. Tread softly because otters are very shy creatures.

It's also worth noting that the extensive kelp forests around Papa Stour are recognised as a Special Area of Conservation as the reefs they lie on have a rich algal community at shallow depths. This is because wave action prevents grazing by sea urchins in exposed areas, allowing organisms to thrive.

Birds

The open scattald provides a perfect environment for ground nesting birds such as Ringed Plovers and Arctic Skuas which have become regular visitors. Papa Stour is also recognised as an internationally important area for the large number of Arctic Terns that nest on the island during the summer months.

Other seabird species attracted to Papa Stour's rocky coastline and cliffs include Fulmar, Shag, Guillemot, Razorbill, Great Black-backed Gull and Kittiwake.





↑ Lyra Skerry off Papa Stour Calum Toogood

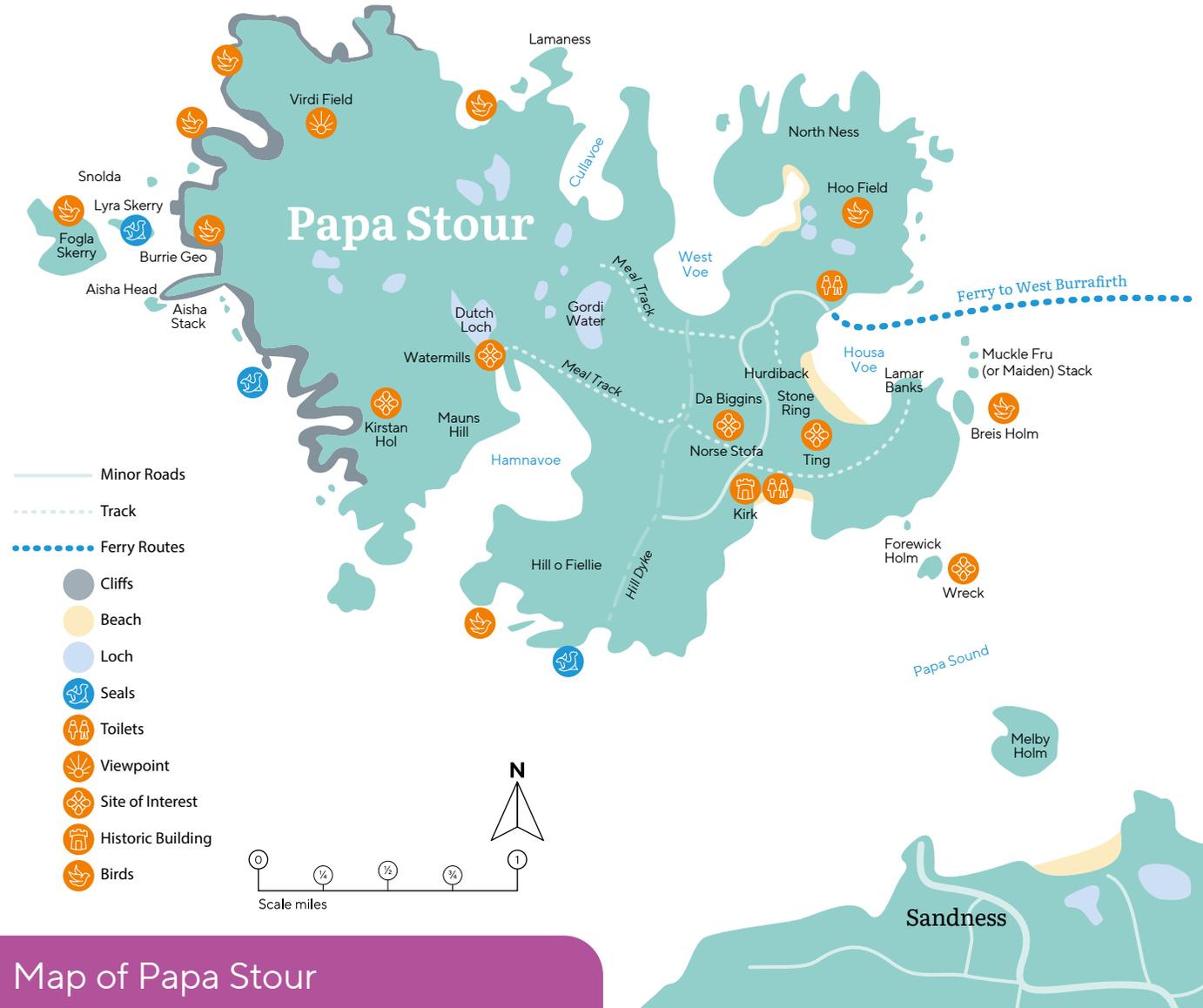


Exploring Papa Stour

On the approach to Papa Stour from West Burrafirth the ferry passes **Breis Holm**, where you will get your first glimpse of the island's impressive sea caves. At the foot of Breis Holm a large tunnel cuts right through the rock. In calm weather, it is possible to travel through the tunnel by boat or kayak.

The tallest of the stacks that cluster around the entrance to **Housa Voe** is known as **Muckle Fru** or **Maiden Stack**. It was here that the only daughter of a Norwegian lord was imprisoned by her father for refusing to agree to an arranged marriage. She had given her heart instead to a humble fisherman who, legend has it, rescued her from her solitary confinement on the stack with the help of his friends.

Behind the beach at Housa Voe are the supposed remains of **Ting**, believed to be a site where Norse assemblies were held. It is reputed that Lord Thorvald Thoresson, the man accused of corruption in the 1299 document, fought and won a duel within this circle.



Map of Papa Stour

Excavations in the 1970s and 1980s at **Da Biggins**, alongside the road just before the kirk, uncovered the foundations of a medieval Norse house. In 2008, the Papa Stour History Group, in partnership with the Norwegian Craft Academy, undertook a partial reconstruction of this **Norse Stofa**. This involved an exchange of students and craftsmen between the two countries. Log timbers were brought over from Norway and assembled on-site in Papa Stour. It was officially opened by the Lady Mayor of Hordaland, Norway. Interpretation at the site gives more details of the findings.

Built in 1806, the beautifully restored **Papa Stour Kirk** is also a community hub and visitor centre, with toilet and refreshment facilities, crafts, internet access and information on the island and its history. On the west wall is a memorial window to the memory of six Papa men who lost their lives in the First World War. This stained glass window is the only surviving work of artist Victor Noble Rainbird. The Kirk is now run by the Papa Stour History and Community Group; see their website for further details about the kirk and the island.

Continuing past the kirk and primary school, the road leads to the airstrip and the open scattald. To the south, you will find the remains of several Neolithic burial chambers known as heel-shaped cairns because of their shape when viewed from above. The remains of more recent buildings can also be seen here.

Suspected leprosy sufferers from the west mainland used to be sent to live in isolation in huts, the remains of which can be seen on **Hill o Fiellie**. To survive, they relied on the islanders to leave food for them by the dyke. However, it is now thought more likely that these people suffered from malnutrition or elephantiasis rather than leprosy.

↓ Norse Stofa Colin Nutt



The small stone buildings around **Dutch Loch** are good examples of horizontal water mills. Originally these were two-storey buildings with turf roofs. They were built into banks to give access to the upper floor where the millstone was sited. Many were still in use on Papa Stour in the early years of the 20th century.

To the west of **Hamnavoe**, the island's spectacular western cliffs come into view, carved with arches and caves and punctuated with stacks and skerries. Please take care when walking near the island's cliffs as the rock is often loose and crumbling or you may come across a deep geo or hole. Two large holes, set back slightly from the cliff edge, drop through the roof of perhaps the most famous of the Papa Stour caves, known as **Kirstan's Hol**. Look down through the hole and you can see waves breaking on the beach at the back of the cave, but take care, it's a long way down.

Nowhere on the island is the power of the sea more evident than in the three-legged **Aisha Stack, Aisha Head** - pierced by the **Hol o Burrie Geo** - and the sea caves that penetrate **Fogla** and **Lyra Skerries** - all of which are excellent to explore by sea kayak when conditions permit.

The waves do not always have their way though and to the north of Lyra Skerry the solitary **Snolda** (whose name comes from the Old Norse word for a pinnacle) reaches precariously out of the sea, with waves crashing around the base and boulders balanced on top.

Virdi Field is the highest point on Papa Stour, providing a panoramic view of the island. To the north-west, the tips of the **Ve Skerries** can be seen just above the sea surface. From this distance they look small, but the shallow baas (submerged reefs) reach out much further and have proved treacherous on many occasions.

This was the scene of a shipwreck, in December 1977, when the *Elinor Viking* was blown into the skerries, the rocks tearing a large hole in her side. Fortunately, the crew were rescued, but the event prompted the building of a lighthouse on Ve Skerries which is clearly visible from Papa Stour.

Norse Watermills Colin Nutt →

In contrast to the rugged coastline of the west, the sheltered voes along the north coast, **West Voe** and **Cullavoe** provided shelter for 19th-century herring fishing stations. Before refrigeration, herring needed to be processed quickly and packed in salt to preserve it for export to Europe. Herring stations were set up close to the fishing grounds to speed the process and herring gutters and packers came to work in the island from all over Shetland and mainland Britain.

