



↑ Spring Squill David Gifford



↑ Brown Trout Promote Shetland / Euan Myles
↑ Hanseatic Booth VisirScotland / Paul Tomkins



↑ Otter Louise Polson

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 743973

Ferry booking office

+44 (0)1595 745804

Geopark Shetland

Discover geosites across Shetland | shetland.org/geopark

Museums and visitor information point

Whalsay Heritage and Community Centre

+44 (0)1806 566523

Hanseatic Booth

Public toilets

Symbister

Post office

Harlsdale

Shops

Symbister | Harlsdale | Shoard

Fuel

Symbister

EV charging points

chargeplacescotland.org

Leisure centre and swimming pool

Symbister | +44 (0)1595 807707

Golf course

Skaw | +44 (0)1806 566705

Doctor

Symbister | +44 (0)1806 566219

Police 101



shetland.org/whalsay

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

Whalsay

A thriving fishing community



Welcome to Whalsay

Whalsay, with its heritage rooted in fishing, is a centre of the industry in Shetland. Just five miles long and two miles wide, Whalsay, nicknamed Da Boanie Isle, has easy and attractive coastal scenery. From the highest point, the Wart of Clate, there's a panorama of the east coast of Shetland. Important archaeological sites and a wealth of birds, seals and wild flowers make it a fascinating destination for a day trip or a longer stay.

Places to visit

Symbister Harbour

The harbour at **Symbister**, where the ferry arrives, is the hub of this successful fishing community of around 1,000 people – and a constant source of interest to islanders and visitors alike.

Vessels owned and crewed by local families through the sheltered dock, from the smallest creel boats to huge pelagic trawlers. Next to the Whalsay Boating Club, which is a licensed clubhouse with toilets and showers, are the remains of a former herring curing station.

The inner harbour is crowded with colourful dinghies and the distinctive "Shetland Model" boats which compete in local sailing and rowing races. The lines of these double-ended skiffs reveal their Viking origins.

The beach below the road around the head of the bay is partly man-made and was used to dry salt cod and ling during the heyday of the line fishery from sixareens – open, six-oared boats – in the 18th and 19th centuries.



↑ Ferry arriving at Symbister Harbour [VisitScotland / Paul Tomkins](#)

Hanseatic Booth

For hundreds of years the salt fish trade was in the hands of merchants from North Germany. The fascinating museum in the **Hanseatic Booth** tells how ships from Hamburg, Bremen and Lübeck sailed to Shetland every summer, bringing seeds, cloth, iron tools, salt, spirits, luxury goods and hard currency, to exchange for the Shetlanders' fish. The Germans were forced out by import duties after the 1707 Treaty of Union between England and Scotland.

The picturesque old building, restored with its dock and cargo hoist, was one of two böds, or warehouses, in Whalsay. The key for the Booth is available from the shop.

Symbister House

The Bruce family acquired most of Whalsay and oppressed islanders for over 300 years, but virtually bankrupted themselves building **Symbister House**, or the New Haa. Now part of Whalsay Junior High School, this is the finest Georgian mansion in Shetland. It's built of granite blocks, quarried in North Nesting, and taken by rafts across the sound. The New Haa had courtyards, stables, byres, a farmhouse, a mill, a dovecot and even a "high-rise" three-seater outdoor toilet.

The local history group has converted part of the outbuildings into the **Whalsay Heritage and Community Centre**, which is open during the summer months. The centre has two permanent exhibitions – 'Whalsay's fishing heritage from the 13th century to modern times' and 'The Lairds of Whalsay' – and also offers seasonal exhibitions.

Grieve House

For most of the 1930s the Scots Communist poet Christopher Grieve ("Hugh MacDiarmid") lived in Whalsay in the croft house of Sodom (from the Old Norse suðr-heimr – the southerly homestead). This often tormented genius wrote much of his finest poetry here (including *On a Raised Beach*) and, via the Whalsay post office, conducted a long correspondence with the leading writers and thinkers of his generation. Grieve was called up for war work in 1942 and never returned to Whalsay.

Whalsay Kirk

The Kirk is currently being redeveloped into a community centre, with e-bikes available to rent. Check the website for further details.

Symbister House ↓
Robert Harding / Alamy Stock Photo





↑ Red-throated Divers Kevin Hazelgrove / Alamy Stock Photo

Geology

The rocks of Whalsay are schist and gneiss, formed at high temperature and pressure beneath mountains which were eroded away hundreds of millions of years ago. In places you can see large fragments of the original rocks – known as xenoliths – mixed up with the formerly-fluid mass of granitic gneiss.

On the north-east coast are outcrops of crystalline limestone and contorted calcium silicate bands. The landscape of Whalsay has been carved and smoothed by successive ice ages and the coastline etched by incessant battering of the sea.

Getting to Whalsay

Whalsay is accessible by car ferry from Laxo, 30 miles north of Lerwick. However, sometimes in poor weather conditions it leaves from Vidlin. The crossing to Symbister takes 25 minutes and it's advisable to book during peak season. For timetables and booking information, see the Shetland Islands Council website.

Wildlife and flora

For thousands of years beachcombing has been a favourite Whalsay pastime, as is evidenced by the astonishing profusion of shoreline placenames.

As well as flotsam, the coastal walker will encounter most of Shetland's seabirds, including Puffins (April to August). Ducks and waders gather at the shallows behind the beach at Symbister and at the houb (lagoon) on **Kirk Ness**. Inland lochs harbour several pairs of breeding Red-throated Divers. In spring and autumn there are often good "falls" of migrating birds from Scandinavia and further afield.

The shore pastures are carpeted in summer by the pink flowers of Thrift and Campion, and the blue of Spring Squill, while at the **Geos of Yoxie** on the east side one of Shetland's rarest plants grows – Sea Aster – but be careful when viewing from the cliff!

Below the tideline, there is a profusion of sea life in the rockpools. Otters are common but shy, except around **Symbister** where they've become used to harbour traffic and are sometimes seen at close quarters.

The tidal sounds and off-lying rocks around the isle are among the best places to see porpoises and occasional dolphins, minke whales and orcas. Keep a lookout during the ferry crossing and you may see why the Vikings called it Hvals-øy – the island of whales.

Loch fishing

Whalsay is a popular island for anglers with some fine trout inhabiting the lochs; the record being a 9lb 4oz brown trout from the **Loch of Huxter**. See the Shetland Anglers Association website for information on fishing permits.

Golf

Whalsay has a cracking 18-hole **golf course at Skaw**, which is the most northerly course in Britain. Non-members are welcome and you can find out more about green fees and tee times on the Whalsay Golf Club Facebook page.

