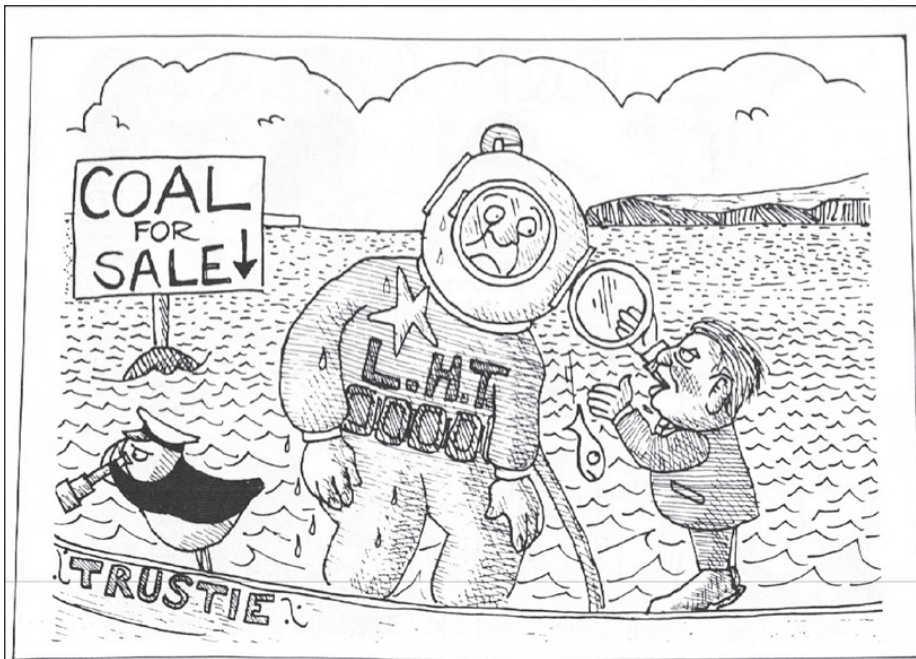


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SMIRK'S 40TH ANNIVERSARY



This cartoon came about after Smirk inadvertently brought to attention certain goings on in the harbour.



This cartoon on the closure of Grantfield Stores left quite an impression on readers.

'It's always been a tightrope to traverse – to poke fun but not to be offensive'

BY STEPHEN GORDON

"Births, Deaths, Marriages and Smirk, but not necessarily in that order", is how someone once told me they read *The Shetland Times* – probably apocryphal – then of course there are the back pages.

A cartoon is a form of expression that nails a snapshot of time. Even here on a few rocks in the north Atlantic, it can sum up a narrative in few words and lines.

The 27th November this year marked 40 years since the first Smirk cartoon was published in *The Shetland Times*. Thousands have followed.

One week I had up to eight cartoons, I can't remember what happened though. Sometimes they were space fillers, not a waste of space as you might think, I liked to joke with editors – I think I've worked with seven so far.

"Are you Smirk?" I have been asked. There's several ways to reply to this. One, "whose Smirk?" glancing back with puzzled ignorance, two, "who he him?", three, "should I know him?" or "no, no that's my brother, I'm continually getting mistaken for him".

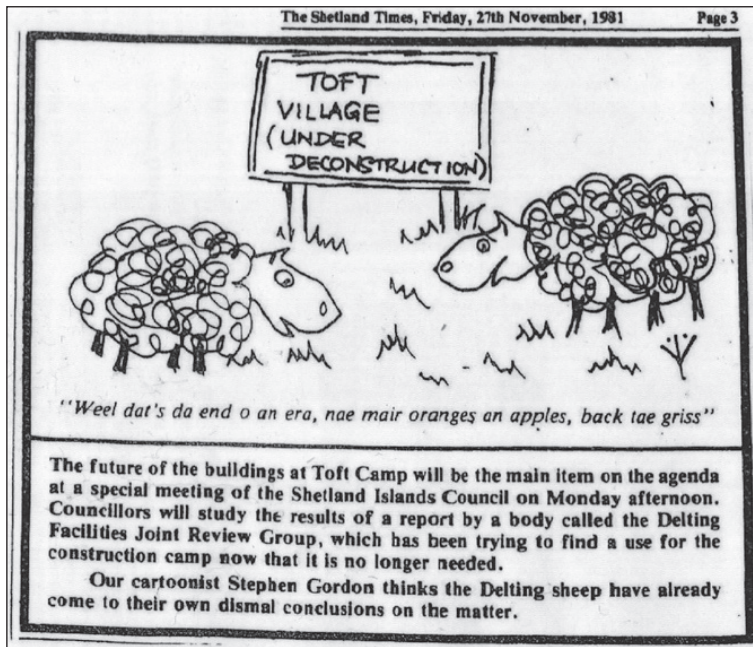
Over the years being asked by strangers I've found it better to be aloof. After all I may have drawn something or someone in a far from flattering way to the interpretation of the questioner, who could "take umbrage". The phrase "let me qualify my statement" has had to be often used in tricky situations.

It's quite an onerous task to condense 40 years of "skrittin' da news".

We'll first look at some pictures from the 80s when the cartoons were in full swing and set them in the context of the times.

Remarkably I have come through it all fairly unscathed physically, but have taken some verbal attack, "noo an' again". The late Slim Jim Irvine assured me that "all publicity was good publicity".

I held him to his word for many years. In one election his friend Bobby Tait also ran for election in another ward, the cartoon read: "Vote Slim and vote often, vote Tait your docker mate."



Smirk's first cartoon, published in November 1981, was on the subject of Toft Camp.

Through the years I have come across basically two types of people who have been portrayed, those who can take a bit of fun and those who are fairly miffed. Former councillor Magnie Flaws, affectionately known as Major Flaws, was an avid collector of the originals. Sadly technology, in the form of photocopier (seems so long ago) put paid to this avenue.

At the other end of the scale, you got people who somehow saw themselves above satire, didn't see the joke, and wanted the originals merely because they didn't want anyone else to have them.

Two SIC chief executives wanted all their pictures at their departure. Job lots were available. It's always been a tightrope to traverse, to poke fun but not to be offensive.

I could of course have been seen by some to have fallen off on occasion.

I recall the "what the stone mason saw" incident, which caused perhaps the big-

gest stooshie. As was often the case, the incident was common knowledge but no "mention" was to be made, but of course the cartoon can be the perfect idiom for suggestion. The story made the national press. Hmm, what did happen to the original cartoon?

How the name Smirk came about is lost to me back in the mists. As they say, perhaps that file is missing. Anyway, Lowrie Simpson was "Smeeg" so that one was out. It may have been a reaction to often carrying a grumpy contenance, and often being told to "cheer up, it might never happen".

It seemed better to project a happy disposition and try and take the pompous local worthies and their often-ridiculous actions down a peg or two for hopefully general amusement.

I do think cartooning is an artistic medium with universal appeal, rather than some of Shetland Arts' presentations which can be interpreted as elitist.

The first cartoon followed years of serial doodling, and a certain "over active imagination". At school I had been encouraged to take the practical route and been advised to study chemistry, rather than the other option art, by my guidance teacher, himself a chemistry teacher.

"There is no money in art," he convinced me. Give him his due he was right about that. Eventually I ended up studying history and politics at Edinburgh University, "history is one god damn thing after another" and other stories. Despite obtaining a degree I felt I was better sorted by a more general experience of life. Jobs that followed included working as a fisherman on Shetland's top whitefish boat and operating an explosives rig at the Staney Hill quarry, to name but a few.

Eventually I ended up as a valuation technician working for the Orkney and Shetland Joint Valuation Committee, which also dealt with the electoral role. I felt this varied work experience kind of gave me grounds to comment on the vagaries of island life. The submitting of cartoons had come about after the encouragement and suggestion of friends and following a visit to Lollie Graham, former teacher and joint editor of *The New Shetlander*, where he produced a huge selection of political cartoons collected from newspapers.

I was a great fan of F.S. Walterson, especially his technical finesse, a much more artistic sensibility and use of perspective. As a cartoonist, half the battle is creating your own style so the drawing is instantly recognisable. I think I have eventually done this, but it has taken time.

One of my favourite Walterson cartoons is one that used to hang downstairs at The Excelsior bar – it portrayed a funeral with a giant barrel of alcohol being carried as a coffin, a bystander is talking to a man of the cloth, the caption goes "weel Meenis-ter, hit's da wye he waanted tae geng!"

As you can see from the first cartoon the application is very basic, even my portrayal of sheep has evolved. Over the years the style has changed, cross hatching gave way to moody ink washes. At first a map-

ping pen was used and the image produced as the actual size seen in the newspaper. Very intricate time consuming work. Eventually water-based fade proof pens were the tool of choice, I had some bad experiences with permanent markers which tended to bleed, could be very stinky and had a habit to fade.

I recall doing a pair of matching caricatures which were unfortunately hung by the recipients in a position which was subject to direct sunlight. About a year after delivery, I received a call with the emotional message, "wir aa but faded awa." Longer lasting pens were sought and the job redone in a more permanent manner, the switch was made.

At times it's been a dip and ink pen with an italic nib – the result a more fluid style, but somehow I always came back to a certain make of pen. As well as caricaturing individuals, various long running characters and types have stayed established, for example the executioner of council cuts, the large bag of bursting cash representing the Charitable Trust, and the two crofters putting the world to rights.

The first cartoon was on the subject of Toft Camp. I had worked there for three consecutive years mainly as a cleaner, though I did have a long hot summer in the laundry. It was during the construction phase of Sullom Voe Oil Terminal which would change Shetland – and many of my generation – forever. Toft Camp was one of the workers' accommodation camps.

The food served there was legendary for its quality and quantity but with a large amount going to waste and to the opportunism of local sheep.

The second cartoon is unusual as it came about after I inadvertently brought to attention certain goings on in the harbour. During the days of the herring it was claimed that the sheer quantities of steam drifters local and from all over Britain meant that you could cross from Lerwick to Bressay over their decks. There were a lot, as photos of the time testify.

These vessels required coal provided by coal hulks anchored in the harbour but the transfer of this coal meant that significant quantities ended up on the seabed by default. Robbie Leask and Gordon Farmer, who I knew, with the *Queen of Hearts* saw an opportunity, the sea coal was very combustible, I kept on seeing them going backwards and forwards, forwards and backwards, they were trawling for the coal.

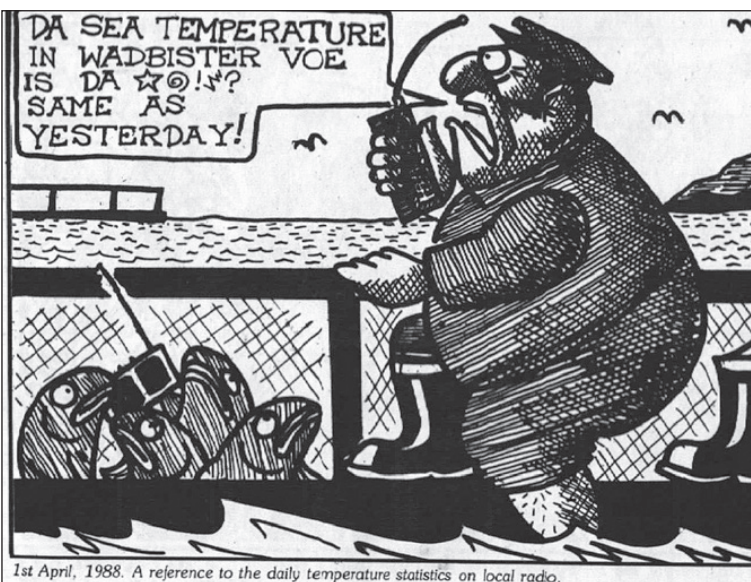
I assumed that the Harbour Trust knew of the activity. I assumed wrong. And the first "Peerie" Ertie, at the tiller of the organisation which he considered he kept in a firm hand, only knew about this venture when he opened the paper to see a cartoon on the subject, by all accounts he was enraged.

The operation of the *Queen of Hearts* in a potential lucrative trade ceased. This cartoon followed imagining Ertie's reaction to coal for sale from the sea floor.

During the years I became wary of getting involved in vendettas. On one occasion I got a call to go south o'er a hen house being refused planning permission mainly at the instigation of the local councillor.



The relationship between the oil industry and the SIC provided a rich source of cartoons.



The daily reporting on the sea temperature at Wadbister Voe sparked this cartoon.

» Continued on next page

SMIRK'S 40TH ANNIVERSARY



«Continued from previous page

“See’s du yon?” said the applicant frantically pointing his finger over the park. “Watch, yuns da net curtains gjaan!”

To say he was upset was an understatement, but I assured him that something could surely be worked out, and that my involvement would only complicate matters, a picture would achieve nothing, though I was chuffed that he thought it might.

In the 1980s the council seemed to be littered with maverick characters just asking to be caricatured, among my favourites were “Slim” Jim Irvine from Lerwick and Henry Stewart from Whalsay who could be very “single minded” in their approach to council matters. How tame it seems today.

It was a time when councillors and officials were on numerous jollies, this one took the biscuit though. On this occasion, the two found themselves at a Euro-conference representing a peripheral region while we were left at home and subject to a local production of the musical *South Pacific*.

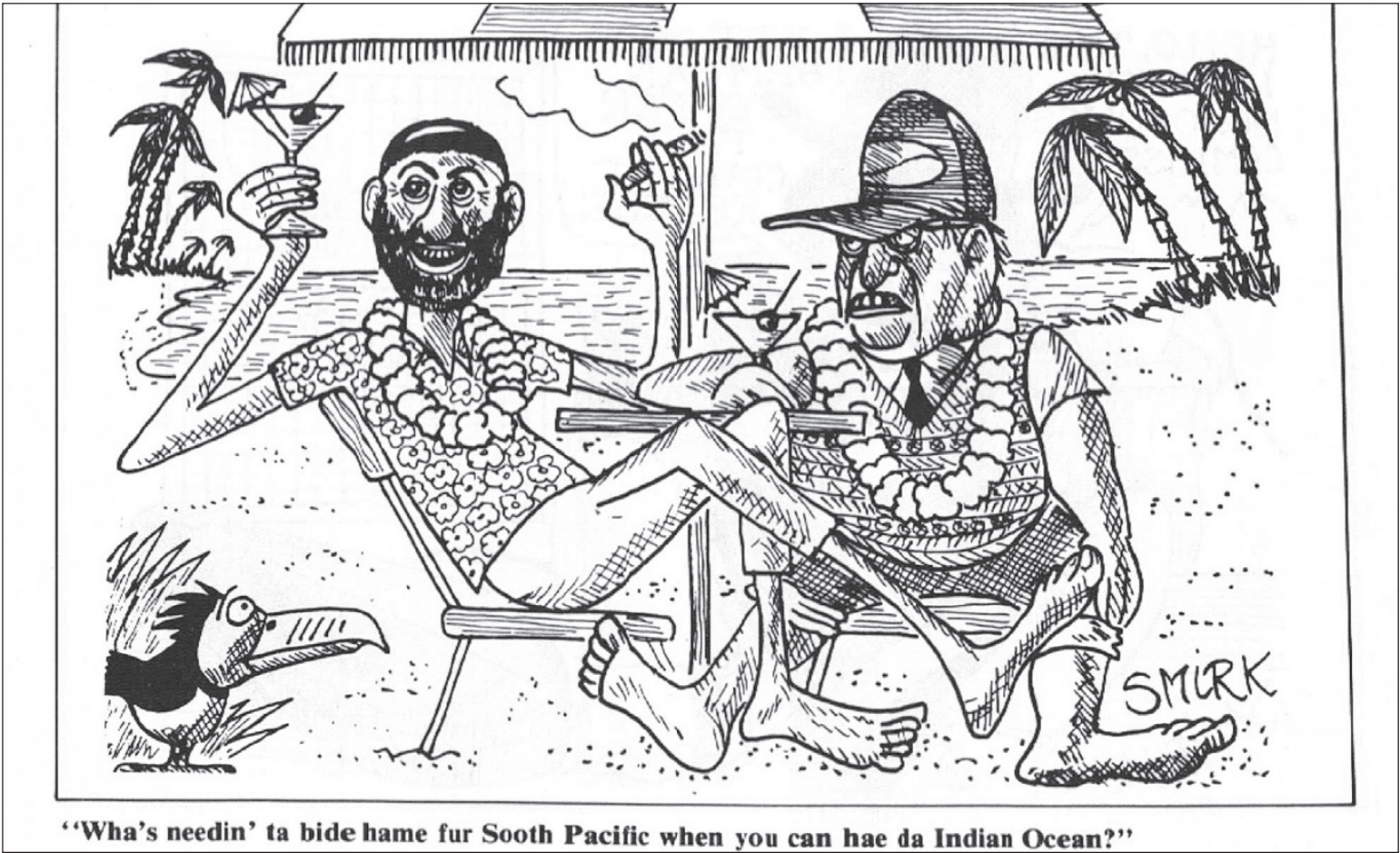
Speaking of vendettas I was informed and realised after regularly depicting Henry that he had been at loggerheads with my grandfather Magnus Shearer over the location of the Whalsay pier, a saga which still continues today.

During this period relations between the oil industry and the council were a constant source of news with the local council in a constant tussle with a multi-national.

It was a David and Goliath situation lending itself to much material for the pen. In this case, rates became a hot topic. BP was always keen to snap up originals but I always felt it was a formality rather than any genuine appreciation, but I guess that just goes with the territory.

The salmon industry had become a major player in the isles’ economy and we were reminded daily of this fact on “Radio Ian” with the sea temperature at Wadbister Voe. As this only fluctuates by three degrees all year round, the constant announcement and its purpose caused considerable annoyance in some quarters.

Another cartoon that seemed to make an impression one way or another, was on the future of the Grantfield Stores premises. Its closure marked a change in shop-



Smirk’s cartoon on a jolly which he thought ‘took the biscuit’.

ping habits and the rise of the supermarket. One part of the premises was to become an Indian restaurant and the other the new homestead of the Country Club.

Well it seemed just a bit of simple fun, but the following week I was accused of being racist in a letter from a Methodist minister in Whiteness or was it Weisdale – believe me I had nothing against Jim “Pirson” and his cowboy pals. In the event it seemed it was just a storm in a teacup.

But the impact of the cartoon was not quite over yet. On the retiral of the proprietress of Grantfield it was decided that she would be presented with the framed origi-

nal. She was a family friend. It was suggested I would wait in the wings and would suddenly appear and kiss her on the cheek and present her with the picture, it would be a “Smirkagram”. I was reluctant to do it.

So, it all went according to plan until after I had handed over the picture, she had a serious “turn”. I found myself looking up and around and asking “Is there a doctor in the house?”

“Min da Gilbert Bain is across da rod!” was the reply I received. Thankfully all was sorted and she recovered but it was the first and only Smirkagram!

A few years ago I found myself in

Bergen which has the unenviable title of the wettest capital in Europe. It was raining and I found myself outside the offices of the newspaper I had been reading during my stay, well looking at the pictures, and had seen they had a cartoonist. So, on the off chance, I went in and asked at the front desk if it would be possible to meet with their cartoonist.

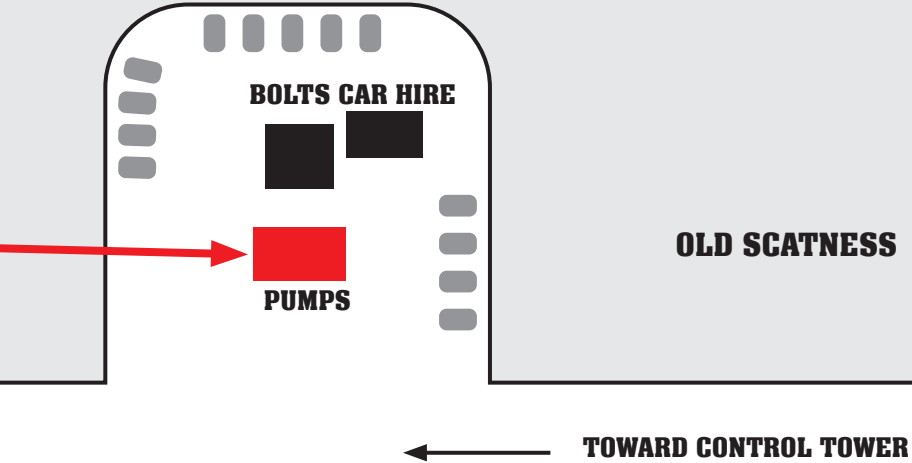
“That would be very difficult,” came the reply from the stony faced youth. “Why is that?” I innocently enquired. “He’s dead, he has been for some time,” he said. “But he has a daily cartoon?” I was to say the least puzzled.

He looked up in the air and said in a very matter of fact way: “They’re mainly about the weather and skiing, so how you say, we have him on a loop.” “I see he’s on a loop is he?” trying to sound as this was perfectly normal. “Yes that’s right.” He was insistent. There was a long pause. “Well that’s interesting,” was all I could say.

Out on the the street it was raining and I saw yet another person on crutches, obviously after a skiing mishap and was thankful that yes on a slow week on the “Friendly Isles” we too had weather cartoons, but we did seem to have a more livelier approach to recording events.



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