



One of the many sessions at the Stromness Hotel

ORKNEY FOLK FESTIVAL

Long loved by historians and nature lovers, Orkney also boasts an excellent annual folk festival. **Jo Frost** dives in and discovers it's all about the sessions

It's brilliant,' proclaims the Discover Orkney website – a bold statement about this northerly archipelago of over 70 islands. 'Brilliant for history... the taste buds... being outdoors... for art and music.' Having spent three days on the Mainland – the largest of the islands – visiting its annual folk jamboree, it's very hard to dispute this claim. Although only a fleeting visit, I experienced firsthand the awe-inspiring Neolithic standing stones at Stenness, plenty of stark weather, stunning landscapes, delicious locally smoked fish, whisky and the specially brewed festival ale. Plus of course, more music than you could shake a fiddle's bow at.

Now in its 33rd year, the Orkney Folk Festival is a firm favourite on the Scottish music calendar. The festival director is Bob Gibbon, a genial, unflappable sort of guy. When he's not

working on the festival or doing his nine-to-five job as an agricultural officer, Gibbon is also the accordionist in the local band, The Chair.

There's a lot of multi-tasking that goes on here – besides the 12-strong festival committee, they have 60-odd volunteers across the four days. "Once you take part, it's difficult to go back to merely a spectating role," admits Gibbon. The press officer Craig Corse is a case in point. He's been attending the festival since the age of six, got involved with the Orkney Traditional Music Project playing the fiddle and started working at the festival proper since 2007. As Corse says, there's a renewed enthusiasm and pride among the younger locals for the event: "it's cool to carry round a fiddle case." He attributes this largely to the success of Orcadian bands beyond the islands, such as Saltfishforty and

The Chair. Another local star is Kris Drever of Lau. A proud Orcadian, Drever has become "the roving ambassador for the Orkney Folk Festival," says Gibbon. It turns out Drever was also instrumental in persuading BBC Radio 2's *Folk Show* presenter Mark Radcliffe to visit and sample the rich mine of Orcadian folk music.

Although the majority of concerts do take place in Stromness, it's not just the Stromness Folk Festival – "we do try and include as much of the outer isles as well," Gibbon confirms.

"Basically the town turns into the festival site for the weekend. It's quite fortunate that Stromness lends itself so well to that – it's got the main square with three or four pubs not too far from it and the main hotel." As Gibbon says, "every festival needs a hub so that you know what's going on. But in Orkney, it's so in your face, it's dripping out onto the streets with music everywhere."

That certainly rings true as you wander through the streets, past a constant stream of musicians shuttling back and forth on their way to another session somewhere. And here's the key to this festival – it's all about the sessions. "You have to break up the sessions to go and do your gig," Ewan MacPherson from Shooglenifty says. Besides all the 'official' sessions listed in the programme, there are plenty of impromptu ones, and simply ones

Besides all the 'official' sessions, there are plenty of impromptu ones, and ones that just go on and on...



John Kelleher



Clockwise from this image: The Chair's rowdy gig; Stromness at dusk; Nordic fiddling from Sver; session overflow outside the Ferry Inn; the Standing Stones of Stenness



Sharon Pearson

that just go on and on... "I booked Shooglenifty in the Stromness session at 12pm," says Gibbon, "the *ceilidh* band were due on at 3pm but Shooglenifty were just getting into their stride, so the *ceilidh* band just joined in. By the evening it was all three acts playing – with Shooglenifty playing an eight hour session!"

The festival was launched back in 1982 to boost tourism during a quiet period in the calendar. "In terms of the tourism impact, it's been tremendous," confirms Gibbon. "It's more of a 'destination' festival," says Corse, and it certainly attracts visitors from far beyond the islands – Alaska, New Zealand and so on. "It's a 50-50 split between locals and people outside of Orkney – they come from all over," Corse says, with close to 6,000 tickets sold across the weekend.

The 2014 event was one of the most international in the festival's 32-year history, with 70 visiting musicians and around 200 local ones. Gibbon explains that he starts the programme by choosing the "15 or so visiting acts first, then you try and fit all the local artists around them; sessions, school visits, workshops etc – it's like a massive game of Sudoku."

"There's no real headliner," says Corse. "Because of the logistics of getting the band to Orkney, we need to have them there for at least two or three nights to make it financially viable." So there's a refreshing lack of big artist egos.



Jo Frost

One big programming hit has been The Gathering, an idea loosely based around the Transatlantic Sessions format. "The initial concept was to pull together all the best aspects of Orkney music and all the different generations and styles within Orkney folk and put them altogether on stage," Gibbon says.

The first Gathering was in 2011 and the concert was released as a live CD. "It just goes from strength to strength," says Gibbon. Last year the Orkney contingent paired up with artists from the US and Canada and this year there will be The Fiddle Gathering, highlighting the rich local tradition of fiddle playing on the islands.

Among the international artists announced for this year are Seth Lakeman and Sharon Shannon – both making their Orcadian debuts. Local acts include Fara, a young, all-female quintet of four fiddlers and a pianist who performed their first gig at last year's event, then festival stalwarts

Saltfishforty and Gibbon's own band The Chair, who first formed 11 years ago when there was a gap in the programme that needed filling. Their tenth anniversary gig was a riotous party and one of the highlights of the weekend.

If you can drag yourself away from the sessions in the Ferry Inn or the Royal Hotel, there are plenty of other sites worth exploring, such as the Neolithic Ring of Brodgar, the Standing Stones of Stenness or Skara Brae, one of Europe's best examples of a Neolithic village. If you're going for the full-on, hardcore musical experience, then you can flit between the family concerts, workshops, Fiddlers' Rally and endless *ceilidhs* – just bear in mind that Orcadians, especially the musicians, have extraordinary levels of stamina. ♦

➤ **DATES** This year's festival will be May 21-24
➤ **ONLINE** www.orkneyfolkfestival.com