



The Guizer Jarl on his splendid galley

**Up Helly Aa** is held on the last Tuesday of January (*Old Yule*) in Lerwick. There are also similar events in several other parts of Shetland between January and March. This dramatic fire festival developed from an earlier

Shetland tradition of "guizing", or dressing up. Originally straw was used, and the "skekklers" traditionally went around the local houses in the countryside at Yule. During the 1800s the young men of Lerwick started to celebrate New Year by burning tar barrels, firing guns and spreading tar on doors and windows. Eventually the authorities stepped in to calm things down.

The phrase *Up Helly Aa* was first used in Lerwick of the festivities of the early 1870s, and the event soon grew in size. The first galley appeared in 1889 and the festival has continued to increase in size and popularity ever since.

*Up Helly Aa* is run by an organising committee, which is the source of the **Guizer Jarls**. Up

Council reception in the Town Hall in the morning



The Up Helly Aa "Bill"



to 1,000 guizers and 49 squads take part in the procession through the street, the burning of the galley and doing their turns in each of 13 halls in the town. Only the Jarl's squad has a Viking theme, and the other squads may choose from politics, local scandal, pop groups, famous people or TV shows.

The event is the culmination of work building the galley and on the costumes and content of each squad's guizing. Although the squads in Lerwick are all-male, the ladies are very much involved in running the halls, and of course in dancing with the guizers in each hall.

The day starts when "**The Bill**" is placed at the Market Cross. The Guizer Jarl proclaims "*Up Helly Aa*" and then follows a series of amusing and often highly satirical anecdotes based on people and events in the last year. Woe betide any local official, politician or other worthy who has appeared in the news. The Bill is signed by the Guizer Jarl with the comment "**We axe for what we want**" - Shetlanders pronounce "axe" as "axe".

At 10:00 the Jarl's Squad assemble at the British Legion and after a dram, proceed through the streets with the galley, eventually ending up at the harbour front. Throughout the day the "*Up Helly Aa Song*" is sung, and a red raven banner flies from the Town Hall. After a reception and speeches there the squad then spends the day visiting schools, the hospital and old folks' homes.



The Jarl's Squad pose beside their galley at the pier

Shortly before 19:00 guizers arrive at the muster and form up in four lines, the Guizer Jarl and his squad marches through the ranks to the waiting galley and at 19:00 the lights are extinguished. A maroon goes up, flares are used to light all 1,000 torches, the brass band strikes up with the "*Up Helly Aa Song*" and the Guizer Jarl leads off the procession through the streets of Lerwick.



Young Jarl's Squad member

maroon is fired and they march around the galley, singing the "*Galley Song*". The Guizer Jarl then calls for three cheers, a bugle sounds and the torches are thrown into the galley. When the last has been thrown, they all sing "*The Norseman's Home*".

Thousands of spectators line the streets to watch and after about an hour the galley reaches the burning park, and is surrounded by the torch-bearing guizers. A

The Guizer Jarl leads his squad past the Market Cross





After the light-up, guizers, torches and the galley



Guizers marching in procession



Two members of the Jarl's Squad

Boys' light-up



After the burning some spectators go home, but for many more the night is just beginning as they head for the halls, where festivities last until about 08:00 the next day. Each hall has a host and hostess, who invite the guests and welcome the guizers. Each squad visits every hall in turn, and does a small sketch, which may be amusing, satirical, rude or all three. Public figures are frequently lampooned, or there may be a whole squad dressed as Elvis, as pink fairies, or Maggie Thatcher.

*Up Helly Aa* grew out of Christmas and New Year celebrations which had developed after the Napoleonic Wars, and which by the 1870s had become somewhat rowdy, and were judged not to be in keeping with Lerwick's new refined Victorian image. The new festival of "*Up Helly Aa*" was developed, and gradually took on a Viking theme, which was very much in tune with the times.

By 1906 there was a Guizer Jarl and the festival has gone from strength to strength ever since. Women have never taken part in the Lerwick guizing, however similar events which take place in many other parts of Shetland often do involve the ladies. In Lerwick they are also a very important part of the event.

The **Lerwick Galley Shed** has a full-sized replica galley, as well as much memorabilia from previous years' events and is well worth a visit, especially for those who have not been able to attend the real thing.



Hundreds of guizers circling the galley with their torches



The Raven Banner flying



The guizers throwing their torches into the galley

*Up Helly Aa* involves a large proportion of the population of Lerwick, and is a genuine community event which lightens up the long dark winter and allows much steam to be vented. The Jarl's Squad is called upon to participate in events in Shetland and elsewhere all year, and presents a "*Viking Shetlander*" image

Children are encouraged to participate early, and there is a junior version, with its own small galley, which is held earlier in the evening. The boys and girls are every bit as keen as their parents, and the junior event is strongly recommended as a prelude to the main procession and burning.

The Guizer Jarl raises his axe with the burning galley behind him



### *Up Helly Aa Song*

Words by J. J. Haldane Burgess  
Music by Thomas Manson

From grand old Viking centuries Up Helly Aa has come,  
Then light the torch and form the march, and sound the rolling drum:  
And wake the mighty memories of heroes that are dumb;  
The waves are rolling on.

#### Chorus

Grand old Vikings ruled upon the ocean vast,  
Their brave battle-songs still thunder on the blast;  
Their wild war-cry comes a-ripping from the past;  
We answer it "A-oi!"  
Roll their glory down the ages,  
Sons of warriors and sages,  
When the fight for Freedom rages,  
Be bold and strong as they!

Of yore, our fiery fathers sped upon the Viking Path;  
Of yore, their dreaded dragons braved the ocean in its wrath;  
And we, their sons, are reaping now their glory's aftermath;  
The waves are rolling on.

In distant lands, their raven-flag flew like a blazing star;  
And foreign foemen, trembling, heard their battle-cry afar;  
And they thundered o'er the quaking earth, those mighty men of war;  
The waves are rolling on.

On distant seas, their dragon-prows went gleaming outward bound,  
The storm-clouds were their banners, and their music ocean's sound;  
And we, their sons, go sailing still the wide earth round and round;  
The waves are rolling on.

No more Thor's lurid Hammer flames against the northern sky;  
No more from Odin's shining halls the dark valkyrior fly;  
Before the Light the heathen Night went slowly rolling by;  
The waves are rolling on.

We are the sons of mighty sires, whose souls were staunch and strong;  
We sweep upon our serried foes, the hosts of Hate and Wrong;  
The glory of a grander Age has fired our battle-song;  
The waves are rolling on.

Our galley is the People's Right, the dragon of the free;  
The Right that rising in its might, brings tyrants to their knee;  
The flag that flies above us is the Love of Liberty;  
The waves are rolling on.

### *The Galley Song*

Words by John Nicolson  
Norwegian Folk Tune

Floats the raven banner o'er us,  
Round our Dragon Ship we stand,  
Voices joined in glad some chorus,  
Raised aloft the flaming band.

Every guizer has a duty  
When he joins the festive throng  
Honour, freedom, love and beauty  
In the feast, the dance, the song.

Worthy sons of Vikings make us,  
Truth be our encircling fire  
Shadowy visions backward take us  
To the Sea-King's fun'ral pyre.

Bonds of Brotherhood inherit,  
O'er strife the curtain draw;  
Let our actions breathe the spirit  
Of our grand Up Helly Aa'.

### *The Norseman's Home*

("The Hardy Norseman")  
Words of unknown origin  
Traditional Norwegian Tune

The Norseman's home in days gone by  
Was on the rolling sea,  
And there his pennon did defy  
The foe of Normandy.  
Then let us ne'er forget the race,  
Who bravely fought and died,  
Who never filled a craven's grave,  
But ruled the foaming tide.

The noble spirits, bold and free  
Too narrow was their land,  
They roved the wide expansive sea,  
And quelled the Norman band.  
Then let us all in harmony,  
Give honour to the brave  
The noble, hardy, northern men,  
Who ruled the stormy wave.