

Submission for the Fraternity theme.

Fire Festivals

With records going back as far as 1824, the largest fire festival in Europe, Up Helly AA, in Lerwick, has changed a lot since then, but much of it has stayed the same. From 1840 until the early 1870's tar barrelling was an important part of the festivities. In 1877 the torchlight procession was instituted, and the Viking theme was established in 1880, with the first Viking galley. For each festival since 1906, a Guizer Jarl, an incredibly honourable position as chief Viking, has been nominated by his peers.

On the day of the festival, happening on the last Tuesday of January each year, The Guizer Jarl and his Jarl Squad of Vikings are busy all day, and gladly so. Their commitments include, but are not limited to a morning parade, a reception at the Town Hall, where the Guizer Jarl is given the freedom of the town for 24h, visits to schools, hospitals, and the local museum. They also take part in the famous torchlight parade, which ends with the spectacular burning ceremony of their Viking galley replica, at a local playground.

The galleys, over 9 meters long, and 6 meters high, are made for this very purpose, as are all other visual components of the festival. In a huge labour of love, every year immediately after the festival has passed, the lengthy and detailed preparations for the next year's festival start. A new committee is elected, and an entire new design of costumes, weapons, and galleys are designed and produced. Most of it remaining a secret to the public until the morning of the next year's festival. Up Helly AA is hence truly an ongoing spirit permeating the community.

The young boys who form the Junior Jarl Squad have their very own torchlight parade, and own Viking galley to send to Valhalla in flames, earlier in the evening. Electing their chosen Guizer Jarl after the summer holidays, the boys are involved in similar activities as the main Jarl Squad during Up Helly AA, and the previous year. Involved in the making of torches, and their galley's construction, the boys are being prepared for the festival roles they are to assume in adulthood. Following the Jarl Squad's footsteps first in the morning parade, then in life, their excitement at the honour of doing so is visible.

The Jarl Squad however incredible, composes only a fraction of the much larger number of participants in the main torchlight procession, and night celebrations. In 2016, when these photos were taken, they were joined by another 46 squads of men. In fancy dress, and composed by close friends, each squad has its own theme, and a well rehearsed performance for later in

the evening. The total number of squad members, and hence of torch bearers, approaching a thousand men, renders a spectacular fire display. The torches illuminating the town, whose street lights have been turned off. The flames then licking the galley as they consume it, taking a myriad of shapes as they do so.

The numbers, and proceedings are similar each year, but the 2016 festival may have been extra special. I was confided by a member of one of the squads, that the torches that year carried the ashes of a former Guizer Jarl, and long standing Jarl Squad member. Having recently passed away, he was being honoured by his brothers. Whether true or not, this tale, alongside my trustfulness, made the entire experience, and its resulting photos, much more meaningful to me.

After the main procession, and burning of the galley, a dozen community halls around town receives guests, and individually, each of the squads, and their performances throughout the night. Lasting until the sun has risen the next morning, which brings a specially declared public holiday, the parties burn as bright, and for even longer than the torches.

The Lerwick Up Helly AA is a brotherhood. As such, and for no seemingly good reason, it only allows men to participate in the squads. To this day their organising committee refuses to comment on the matter. Women are involved in the festival, but only in the capacity of hostesses, organising and running the parties at the community halls. And despite the warm praise and gratitude to the hostesses, expressed by each visiting squad, the parties revolve around squad members.

This is not the rule everywhere, however. Although not nearly as big as Lerwick's, Up Helly AA festivals celebrating Shetland's Norse heritage happen yearly in many communities across the islands. Some of these have long accepted women in more prominent roles at their festivities. In 2015 the newcomer South Mainland festival, which orderly rotates between 5 locations, went as far as to have the first ever female Guizer Jarl in Up Helly AA's history.

Opinions have long been divided between considering the Lerwigian festival's male only policy as sexist, versus traditional, and are now rising stronger. The refusal of Lerwick's festival to accept a mix gender squad, despite the fact that a significant proportion of its participants dresses up as women each year, led to media attention, and the formation of the "Shetland for Up Helly AA equalities group".

This is likely to be a long and heated debate, which may or may not result in an alteration of the Lerwick festival rules, as has happened so many times in their past. Meanwhile, the festival shines bright, and sexism issues aside, is an unforgettable, and unique experience to witness and photograph. For men and women alike.