

Christmas in Orkney

Orkney has strong links with Norway. Orkney was part of Norway until around 500 years ago when it became part of Scotland but the people of Orkney are very proud of their Norwegian roots. Kirkwall, the main town in Orkney is twinned with Hordaland in Norway. Each year Orkney is gifted a Christmas tree from Norway for St Magnus Cathedral and Dignitaries from Norway join the people of Orkney in a tree lighting ceremony.

This year Knut Ove Lia, a member of the Fjaere Historical Society, standing in for the mayor Hans Antonsen who was ill, chopped down the tree in Bringsverd forest near Grimstad, assisted by Tor Liene, also from the Society.

Before the cutting of the tree took place, Kjellaug Skofteland set the historical scene, explaining the reasons why Fjaere Historical Society keeps this pre-christmas tradition alive, and continues the historical ties to Orkney and St. Magnus Cathedral.

The forest is near the area where St Rognvald, the Cathedral's founder was born. This year it is the 21st Christmas tree to be sent to Orkney and it was transported to Stavanger for the onward journey to Kirkwall.

Director of parks in Grimstad, Ove Bach, travelled to Kirkwall for the tree lighting ceremony on 1st December along with mayor Hans Antonsen.

This year's tree lighting ceremony consisted of the mayor Hans Antonsen and Orkney local Councilor giving speeches about the importance of Orkney and Norway's connection and Traditional music played by Orcadian and Norwegian musicians. The lights on the tree were then switched on.



The Ba

The Ba (Orkadian word for ball) is a game played on the streets of Kirkwall on Christmas day and New Years day in Orkney.





Every Christmas and New Year's Day the "Ba'" is contested in the streets of Kirkwall. The game has been played in its present form since about 1850, but is in fact much older. A looser form of football had occurred for a long time before 1850 on the "Ba' Lea". Undoubtedly, ball games have been played for a very long time. There are records from Greek and Roman times of ball games being played, and mass football seems to have been played in Roman- occupied Britain. The French game of "soule" was very like the Kirkwall Ba', according to contemporary descriptions, but died out about the turn of the century, partly due to official suppression.

Street football was popular in the past in Britain and France and was mostly played on Shrove Tuesday. However it only now survives in a few towns in Scotland and England, such as Jedburgh, Ashbourne and Workington. Where it has survived the game has become like the Kirkwall one in most cases, with fixed goals and more hand than foot play.

In Kirkwall, the two sides are the Uppies and the Doonies, or more correctly, "Up-the-Gates" and "Doon-the-Gates" from Old Norse gata (path or road). Originally the side any individual played on was decided by whether he (or she) was born up or doon the gate, but with recent housing developments, this tends to be decided by family loyalties nowadays. Which side ferrylopers (incomers) and people from the isles or rural areas take is either determined by the route taken on their first arrival in Kirkwall, by family influence, or by the side their friends play on.

The Men's Ba' is thrown up at 13:00 at the Mercat Cross on the Kirk Green opposite the Cathedral, usually by an older Ba' stalwart, but occasionally by some public figure, with up to 200 players eagerly awaiting the chime of the bells. The Ba' disappears into the scrum, which may spend some considerable time on Broad Street. Much exciting surging and turning play often occurs on this wider part of the street, which can frequently determine the final outcome.

The Doonies goal is the sea, normally within the Basin of the Harbour, but so long as it is immersed in the salt water of Kirkwall Bay, the Ba' has gone doon. The Uppies must round the Long, or Mackinson's corner at the junction of Main Street with New Scapa Road, opposite the Catholic Church. Once Up or Doon, lengthy argument often ensues before a popular winner is acclaimed. When the winner is finally decided, many players repair to the his house, where much needed refreshment rapidly appears. To Ba' enthusiasts the ultimate honour is to have the trophy of the game, the Ba itself, hanging in the living room window.

The boys' Ba' is thrown up at 10.30 and is open to boys under 16. It can last for a few minutes, or several hours and often has not been resolved when the men's Ba' is thrown up. The boys too elect the winner after each game. Many boys gain their apprenticeship to the adult game and go on to become men's Ba' winners in the future.

Christmas in our school

Currently at the school we are getting ready for Christmas, the Christmas decorations and trees were put up on the 1st December and we have our school Christmas dinner on 6th December consisting of Roast Turkey, potatoes, gravy, oatmeal stuffing and vegetables. The younger classes are currently practising for their Christmas concert, it is a traditional nativity play which parents can come and see.

In our classroom we have an advent calendar which each of the children are taking turns in opening the doors each day leading up to Christmas. Our school closes for the Christmas holidays on 21st December and the staff at the school are going to a local restaurant on 20th for a Christmas meal.

On the 21st December we take the children to the local church for a Christmas service in the morning and then in the afternoon my class and the Primary 7 class have a Christmas party at which they do Scottish dancing and play games. The children have been practising Scottish dancing during their physical education for the past few weeks in preparation for their party.

