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## Aims of the Options Appraisal Report Halligarth, Baltasound,

The National Trust for Scotland was gifted Halligarth House, including the garden and half acre walled woodland, in 1998 by Miss J Sandison a direct descendant of Laurence Edmondston, who established the property in the 1830s. The gift was one of 9 parcels of land/property given by Miss Sandison (and her late brother Dr Louis Sandison) on Shetland, which included the small uninhabited island of Calf of Daaey, a parcel of land on Yell and 7 parcels of land on Unst. The property was declared inalienable by the Trust in 2000.

Right: Halligarth 1878 OS map and contemporary satellite photograph, showing the twin buildings of the house, the formal front garden and walled wood.



Above: Halligarth in the late 19C



Above: The walled wood

While the gift includes a number of buildings and monuments (some in use, some uninhabitable) the most significant features of the land managed by the Trust on Unst are of natural heritage. Unst is a major European breeding ground for seabirds and moorland-nesting rarities such as Great Skuas, Arctic Skuas and Whimbrels. Three of the Trust sites are of national importance, being Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). These are important breeding areas for Red-throated Divers and Great Skuas in Unst and Yell. Also of note are Red-necked Phalarope sites. Halligarth includes the most northerly woodland in the UK, a walled, mature (mainly) sycamore wood of half an acre which attracts a diversity of wildlife and is particularly popular for bird watching.

### Aim of the study

- The aim of the study is to bring together the various interest and community groups to collaborate in identifying a viable option for Halligarth that protects, enhances and promotes access to the building, garden and walled wood.



Above: Two-barred crossbill at Halligarth © Brydon Thomason

Halligarth House was uninhabitable prior to being gifted to the Trust. It is currently the subject of a listing application with Historic Scotland. The garden is not promoted or managed as a visitor site, but is a major draw for wildlife and bird watchers. With limited resources to repair the property and bring it back into use as residential, and aware of very strong community interest in the property, the Trust is working with the local community and other stakeholders to identify the most viable use. The property has a rich social history, inexorably linked to ornithology

and nature conservation, alongside built and natural resources that could be utilised for community benefit. Halligarth has the potential to further encourage and promote the natural and social heritage of the island. The woodland is a rich natural resource, attracting wildlife and bird watchers to the area, but the whole site needs to be better understood, protected and utilised for community and educational benefit.

Right: Halligarth House from the east and (far right) from the north east



Above: Halligarth House 2012

Options currently under consideration for inclusion in the study include community management of the woodland to protect the bird habitat and promote access to this unique resource, accommodation and/or research facilities for bird watchers attracted to the woodland and nearby national nature reserves, and a centre to celebrate the natural heritage of the area and the legacy of the Edmondston and Saxby families to ornithology. In parallel with the study, the potential for two neighbouring vacant dwellings to aid the viability of a community led project at Halligarth will be explored.



Above: The approach to the wood from the house

The outcome of the study will be a preferred option, including a vision for how that option will be funded, delivered and managed in the long term. While the property is held inalienably by the Trust this does not preclude working in partnership with other organisations to develop the project and/or manage the property in the long-term.

Partnering the Trust in the study is the Shetland Amenity Trust. Other local interest groups and stakeholder organisations, including the Unst Partnership, RSPB and SNH, will be invited to participate in the study.



Above: Entrance to the walled wood



Above: View from Halligarth to the south, across Balta Sound



## Brief history of the Edmondston and Saxby families at Halligarth

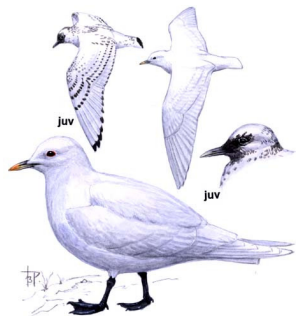
### Dr Laurence Edmondston (1795-1879)

The development of Halligarth House and garden owes much to the ornithological interests of four generations of notable naturalists of the Edmondston and Saxby families. The house was built, and in short succession extended, in the early 1830s by Dr Laurence Edmondsdston, younger brother of Thomas Edmondston, laird of Buness (a neighbouring property). Laurence, and another brother Arthur, were talented amateur naturalists. Arthur published several ornithological papers and while still in his teens Laurence identified several new species of birds. He also recognised that several birds currently known as unique species were in fact either juveniles or adults in winter plumage of commonly identified birds. While completing his medical studies in Edinburgh he continued his ornithological interest publishing several papers in Edinburgh's "Wernarian Natural History Journal" adding more species to the British List of known birds and providing the first comprehensive survey of Shetland birds.

The walled garden and woodland at Halligarth was established in the 1840s to assist Laurence in the study of birds, encouraging biodiversity and attracting species to what was otherwise a somewhat barren landscape. It was, and remains, the UK's most northerly woodland. Laurence was averse to shooting, the standard method of the time for close observation and preferred to lure birds for study by providing an attractive environment and baiting with food. These sentiments were also evident in his pioneering conservation works on the island where he instructed his brother on enclosure methods which would ensure the preservation of breeding sites for Great Skuas, which were increasingly threatened by encroaching quarrying for chromate.



Above: Dr Arthur Edmondston, brother of Laurence and a talented naturalist



Above: Ivory Gull *Pagophila eburnea*, one of the species added to the British List by Laurence Edmondston

Halligarth House became a beacon for visiting scientists and intellectuals. Some of the notable people to spend time at Halligarth were Dr. William Hawson Hooker (celebrated botanist on expedition to Norway), Sir Edward Forbes (described as the father of oceanography and an eminent botanist) and Sir W. J. Hooker (naturalist and associate of Charles Darwin). Not limited to scientific luminaries, Halligarth also hosted artists such as John Lucas Tupper (poet, sculptor), Sir George Webbe Dasent (scholar, author, editor of the Times), Sir Henry Dryden (architect, artist), and Prince Louis-Lucien Bonaparte (linguist and nephew of Napoleon) who arrived in Unst to study the old Scandinavian-Shetland dialect. These visitors would become formative figures in two of Laurence's children's lives, with his son Thomas pursuing an illustrious career in botany and his daughter Jessie Margaret becoming a celebrated author and folklorist.

Laurence Edmondston died in 1879 having made significant and pioneering contributions to the ornithology and natural history of Shetland. While his medical duties increasingly curtailed his ability to publish his findings Laurence continued to catalogue species throughout his life and corresponded with some of the greatest scientists of the day including Charles Darwin. Many of Laurence's findings were forwarded to William MacGillivray for inclusion in his "A History of British Birds",

but his greatest contribution to ornithology would be found in his son-in-law's work "The Birds of Shetland" which was published in 1874 and relied heavily on his lifetime of careful observation.

### **Thomas Edmondston (1825-1846)**

Laurence's eldest son, Thomas Edmondston, was a precocious talent with an enquiring mind and prodigious memory. He began to collect and identify plants at a young age and at the age of 11 compiled the first catalogue of plant species on Unst, discovering four extremely rare arctic-alpine plants at the neighbouring Keen of Hamar (its significance now recognised with National Nature Reserve status). While still in his pre-teens he compiled the first list of Shetland plants, published in Dr W.D. Hooker's "Notes on Norway". This work identified several rare plants including a new species of Chickweed found only on Unst which was subsequently named after its young discoverer.

In his early teens, while a student at Edinburgh University, he presented papers to the Botanical Society of Edinburgh and published a larger botanical list of Shetland in its entirety in the "Annals and Magazine of Natural History." This was then developed into the first full Shetland flora compendium, "The Flora of Shetland", which was published in 1844. This work would not be surpassed until 1987 amply illustrating how exceptional this young botanist was. His rising reputation as Britain's most promising young botanist secured Thomas took a post as assistant secretary to the Botanical Society of Edinburgh and in 1844, at the age of 19, he was elected to a professorship of botany and natural history at Anderson's College, Glasgow. Before taking this post Thomas accepted an offer to serve as naturalist on the frigate HMS Herald which was to survey the pacific coast of South and North America. While disembarking at Sua Bay in Peru, an accidental musket discharge killed young Thomas and the loss to the botanical world was mourned internationally. His mother Elizabeth commemorated the short life of her son in "The Young Shetlander...being life and letters of Thomas Edmondson" published in 1868.



Above: Thomas Edmondston © Shetland Museum & Archives



Above: Edmondston's Chickweed, Keen of Hamar

### **Jessie Margaret Edmondston Saxby (1842-1940)**

Younger sister of Thomas, Jessie Margaret developed a keen interest in writing and in Shetland life and folklore. Her first publication in 1859 at the age of seventeen was a poem in the "Scottish Annual" commemorating an expedition by Vikings in Scotland. Her first book was published in 1868, "Lichens from the Old Rock" a collection of poems on the Shetlands. Over her career Jessie Margaret Saxby published nearly 150 works, 47 of them books. Much of her work was based on Shetland themes: folklore, language, antiquities, knitting, and importantly, the island's Viking. Both Jessie Margaret and her mother Elisabeth were key figures in Shetland's developing identity of itself as a unique blend of Norse and Scottish culture. In her later life Jessie Margaret developed a passion for Unst folklore and antiquities and was a founding contributor to Shetland's "Old-Lore Miscellany". A collection of papers submitted to this journal was published in 1932 at the age of 90 as her best known work "Shetland Traditional Lore". Two years later she published much of her verse in "Threads from a Tangled Skein". One of these works was dedicated to her childhood home, Halligarth.

### **Henry Linckmeyer Saxby (1836-1873)**

Henry Saxby was born in London to a distinguished naval family. His elder brother Stephen Henry Saxby was an avid bird collector and Henry first accompanied him to Unst in 1854 to help collect specimens. The Saxby brothers inevitably ended up enjoying the hospitality and erudition of Dr Laurence Edmondston at Halligarth and it is here that he first met Jessie Margaret. They were married in 1859, and from 1863 Henry worked as Laurence Edmondston's assistant. Through this period and under the tutelage of Laurence, Henry Saxby continued his passion for ornithology contributing seven papers to "The Zoologist" between 1859 and 1871. He was also a talented artist, and in addition to illustrations of birds his watercolours catalogue scenes of Halligarth and Unst. Henry took over his father-in-law's practice following Laurence's retirement, but was forced to move back to mainland Scotland due to ill health settling in Inveraray with his young family in 1872.

This new home was also the seat of the Duke of Argyll, a keen ornithologist, and it was not long before Henry and the Duke were acquainted. Henry was working on his major contribution to zoology "The Birds of Shetland" at the time of his death in 1873. Jessie Margaret kept all of Henry's notes and called on his brother Stephen to help compile and edit them into a book. With the Duke of Argyll's support, Jessie Margaret was able to publish Henry's work, which encompassed both his and his father-in-law's research in 1874. This publication was a notable contribution to ornithology adding sixty new birds to the Shetland list.

### **Dr Thomas Edmondston Saxby (1869-1952)**

Thomas Edmondston Saxby was born at Halligarth in 1869 the third son of Henry Linckmeyer Saxby and his wife Jessie Margaret Saxby. He studied medicine at Edinburgh University and St Mary's Hospital in London, where he practiced for a short time. In 1898, Thomas Saxby returned to the family seat at Halligarth where for the next 51 years he served as medical officer for Unst. An active herring fishery at Baltasound meant that Dr Saxby was responsible for the health care needs of a sizable population of fishermen from Scandinavia and saved many lives often risking his own in the process. For his services to Swedish fishermen, Dr Saxby was awarded Sweden's highest honour, Knight, First Class, of the Royal Order of Vasa by King Gustaf of Sweden in 1911. During the world wars Thomas served as medical officer for the Admiralty (1914 - 1918) and the Air Force (1939 - 1945). In recognition of his efforts he was awarded an O B E by King George VI in 1948.

In keeping with family tradition, Henry was a keen ornithologist and between 1900-1929 he contributed 21 papers to the "Zoologist, the Annals of Scottish Natural History", "Scottish Naturalist", and added to subsequent reprints of his father Henry's book "The Birds of Shetland". In addition to these contributions Dr Saxby manned a meteorological station at Halligarth compiling detailed daily records for an unbroken period of 46 years.



Above: Halligarth c1910 © Shetland Museum & Archives



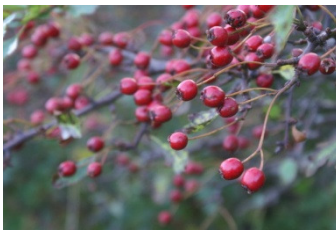
Above: Saxby family in the garden of Halligarth, c1905 © Shetland Museum & Archives



## Halligarth: Understanding the nature conservation significance



Paddyfield warbler, Halligarth © Robbie Brookes



Hawthorn berries at Halligarth. This and following images © Mike Pennington



Waxwing at Halligarth



Sweet Cicely at Halligarth

As Shetland's oldest woodland, and the UK's most northerly, Halligarth is a site of immense ecology and nature conservation importance.

While the flora and fauna of the walled wood has been recorded in family and public documents from the time of its planting in the 1840s onwards, the significance of the site is not fully understood or widely appreciated. Referenced in written records for nearly 170 years, Halligarth may prove a rich source of research material of national interest. Not only will this bring greater understanding of the diversity and significance of the site, but it will help in assessing how the habitat has evolved over the past 170 years, and how any changes might reflect, or predict, wider climate patterns.

The garden and walled wood are a valuable natural resource and tourism asset. It is a key birding site for local and visiting birders and is also visited by nature tour operators. Opportunities exist for safeguarding this in the future, through active management, in partnership with local organisations and groups.

A survey of the walled woodland in 1986 (as part of the BBC Domesday project) recorded 243 trees, mostly sycamores. Bluebells, buttercups, wild orchids, sweet cicely and cocksfoot have been recorded under the trees. Bird species recorded in the wood and wider garden over the last few decades include: Blackcap, Black redstart, Brambling, Rough-legged Buzzard, Cuckoo, Collared Doves, Chaffinch, Common Chiffchaff, Siberian Chiffchaff, Iberian Chiffchaff, Two-barred Crossbill, Curlew, Fieldfare, Pied Flycatcher, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Goldcrest, Golden Oriole, Goshawk, Hen Harrier, Hornemann's Arctic Redpoll, Meadow Pipit, Merlin, Mistle Thrush, Short-eared Owl, Barn Owl, Tengmalm's Owl, Wood Warbler, Water Rail, Common Redpoll, Redwing, Red-backed Shrike, Starling, Garden Warbler, Dusky Warbler, Arctic Warbler, Paddyfield Warbler, Willow Warbler, Yellow Browed Warbler, Blyths Reed Warbler, Scaup, Sykes's Warbler, Barred Warbler, Waxwing, Lesser Whitethroat, Woodcock and Wren.

Right: Winter mist over Halligarth wood, with Keen of Hamar National Nature Reserve in the background © Mike Pennington

