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# "Roond About Birsay"

*News for and by the people in Birsay*

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September 2004



Issue 25

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## Editorial

Hi there. Here we are again with the Autumn Edition of your favourite newsletter. It is a bit later this year but it is very difficult to get people to do a contribution in mid-summer. It is also difficult to get them to do it in December to get a New Year edition out so in future we will probably try for Spring and Autumn - probably March and September. Once again, many thanks to all who sent us their contributions.

Johnny Johnston

- Co- Editors -

Morag Spence

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## St Magnus Church Birsay Trust

### Recent Events

You may have read fairly full accounts of our commemorative events in June in both *The Orcadian* and *Orkney Today*, though they did not pick up on some of the links with the past which most people find fascinating.

A hundred years on, the services and concert in the church were obviously made more meaningful for one local family through learning that their grandfather had been one of the men who helped install the stained-glass window.

The speaker at our two services, Rev. Tom Robertson, had his own direct link with the events of 100 years ago, as he clearly remembers his grandmother speaking about the McPhersons, and the friendship she and Rev. Alexander Parker had with them. Having been brought up here, Tom had many memories of his own, and was delighted to renew acquaintance with Birsay friends.

It was good to be there and share in these living links with June 1904; it gave special meaning to everything, since nobody reading this will be around to take part in the bi-centenary.

The floral arrangements by members of the Birsay Church Flower Club were greatly admired by visitors. 'Flowers are wonderful' is one

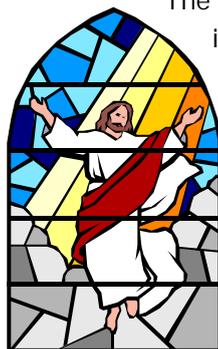
comment, and there are several others in a similar vein.

We are very grateful to the Flower Club, and also to the Dounby Girl Guides, the Stromness Church choir and the Birsay Bairns for their involvement and support. We were also delighted to have Fionn Macarthur and Gavin Firth taking part in the Scottish Music Concert, and playing for us the beautiful tune which Fionn has composed for us, "The Kirk on the Shore".

### Visitors

The number of signatures in the visitors' book is similar to last year, and as usual, many of them comment on the peacefulness and serenity of the church, as well as its simplicity. Another comment is "Wonderful to find the door open" - something that we take for granted, but a sad reflection on life elsewhere, where it mightn't be safe.

Though we are glad to see so many visitors around, the volume of traffic is in itself a problem: there are times when drivers are so busy looking out for other vehicles, moving or stationary, that they don't even notice the church, let alone the fact that it is a building with a very long history. The custodian at the Earl's Palace and the Brough has been very helpful in drawing people's attention to it, but that is part of his job, and I have been doing my 'sheepdog act' throughout the summer. New



signs of some kind are becoming a pressing need.

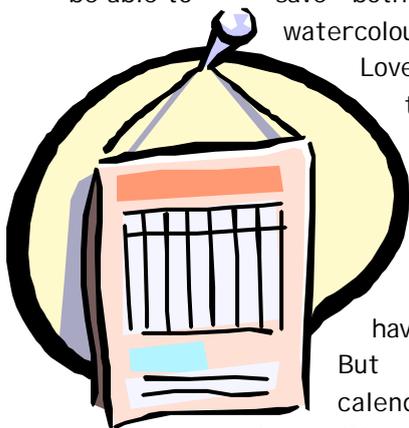
### Coming Events

Looking ahead, we are planning a "celebration of Birsay" at the time of the Orkney Science Festival in September. This will include selections from the work of the Rev. George Low (minister of St Magnus from 1774 to 1795), Robert Rendall and George Mackay Brown, with some traditional music.

About the same time, you might see details appearing about "Plants at the Place", or something similar. When I came back in June, I found that most of the plants in my garden had put on so much growth that I thought it would be a good idea to sell plants and bulbs for the Trust, as the Flower Club did last year at our "More if You Care Fayre". I've mentioned it to one or two people, who have shown themselves very enthusiastic, so it may assume slightly bigger proportions. So don't throw out plants or cuttings: it's a good way of getting more variety into your garden.

### Calendars

At all our events in September, our calendars will be on sale. Every home should have one! By then, you should be thinking of those friends abroad (i.e. outside Birsay) to whom you like to send a special greeting card or a small 'minding' at Christmas: this year you could send them one of our calendars instead. They are designed in such a way that, at the end of the year, you will be able to save both the print of the



watercolour of St Magnus by Loveday McPherson, and the photo of the stained glass window designed by her, and put them in a photo or postcard album, or have them framed.

But why wait? The calendars are on sale at Palace Stores, and it would help us greatly if you bought them now, rather than waiting till December - or even September. At £2 each they are surely 'Birsay's Biggest Bargain'.

Bertie Harvey

## BIRSAY COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Time for another update on what we have been doing lately.

As I mentioned last time, we were hoping to get our new storage shed erected in the kirkyard. This has now been done and it is just what we were needing. We can now store all the grass cutting equipment as well as our two bench seats. We are still waiting for the kerbing to be done at St. Magnus Church although the edge of the road has been repaired.

There has been some movement on the subject of an amenity site for our area. It seems that finance could be available for the setting up of the site but there is still a problem over where to site it. However, discussions are taking place and we hope we will eventually get a suitable location.

Some discussion has also been taking place on the provision of new toilet facilities in Dounby.

The present toilets are badly in need of improvement and modernisation and Orkney Islands Council, in consultation with the West Mainland Community Councils, are considering whether to upgrade the present toilets or look for a suitable site to build new ones.



Passing places on our roads is another subject we have been looking at lately. The OIC has asked us to identify some sites in our area which would benefit from the provision of passing places so we have had a look around and identified a few places we feel are suitable.

Finally, our Community Council held its elections for Chairman and Vice-Chairman at the last meeting but this resulted in no changes. Therefore, the Chairman is still Johnny Johnston, the Vice-Chairman is Kenny Ross and the other members are Jean Harvey, Susan Norquay, Sandy Scarth, Maxwell Tait and Duncan Tullock. As ever, please do not hesitate to contact any of us if you have anything to say.

Johnny Johnston - Chairman.

## BIRSAY HERITAGE TRUST

Well, once more our good secretary, Frank Zabriskie, has departed to America to avoid having to write this article, so once more you are going to have to put up with me. I fear, however, that you will have to do without the usual contribution from Mrs Levi Furblack C.A.T., since she has point blank refused to be interviewed by me.

As far as the Mill is concerned, all is going well. Our visitor numbers are good and our meal sales are increasing. We have markets for our meal in several new areas and we will need to increase our production of oatmeal for next year.

We have been having talks recently about using our bere in the production of beer and whisky but we are still waiting for more information on that. Still, we are hopeful. Every good Orcadian (and some probably not so good!) knows what delicious home brew you get from the good old 'corn malt' so there is no reason why whisky would not be the same. We will be continuing our discussions on this.

Another thing we establish for some content of our thing nowadays but know it is virtually been able to get an says that. However, getting a full This can be rather looking at ways and

One other thing we about is getting a us are getting near our best before have someone to it is difficult to find a pay is rubbish! So, if anyone out there could be persuaded, please let us know.



have been trying to time is the gluten bere. This is a big so far, although we gluten free, we haven't analysis that actually we are now considering analysis done ourselves. expensive but we are means.

have been thinking trainee miller. Most of (or in some cases even past!!) dates and it would be nice to carry on the tradition. However, suitable candidate, especially since the fancies being a miller or knows of someone who

That covers most of what we have been up to since last time. We hope you will all keep buying our meal and please feel free to come down to the Mill and see how it is made. Free is the word, incidentally, since once more we are not charging admission. We do, of course, hope you will buy lots of meal while you are at the Mill and we do have a large box for donations! Come along anytime.

Johnny Johnston - Chairman.

## BIRSAY CHURCH FLOWER CLUB

The Flower Club year ended a full and busy year in June . At the AGM, Bertha Mainland completed her three years as President, during which time she has worked tirelessly on the Club's behalf and members showed their appreciation with (what else?) a bouquet! Cindy Miller is our new President, and is already well known for her creative flair with flowers and in other media, so interesting times are no doubt ahead.

The celebrations in St Magnus Church, Birsay to commemorate the one hundred year anniversary of the installation of our lovely stained glass window lasted all week with three main events taking place within the church. The club provided floral



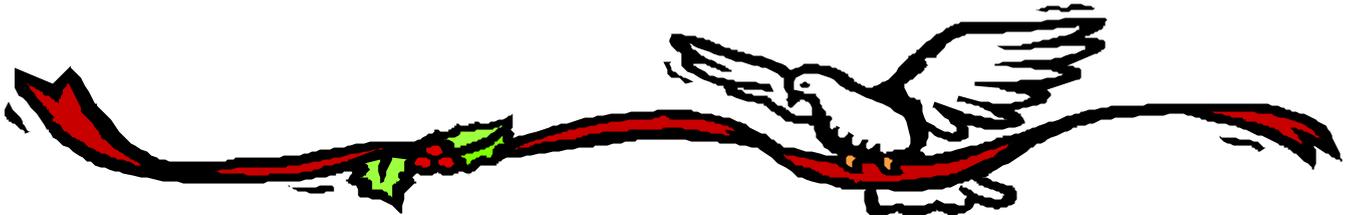
arrangements for each of the windows and with regular watering and some tweaking all the flowers lasted well.

Our schedule of workshops and activities for the new season is now available and all are welcome at our meetings regardless of skill or experience of flower arrangement.

In November everyone is invited to our Open Night when a guest demonstrator will be on

hand to inspire us with seasonal ideas for flower decorations. There will also be a sales table, with lots of opportunities to purchase reasonably priced extras for Christmas. No evening in Orkney is complete without time for supper and a chat so we hope to see old and new friends on the night - 16<sup>th</sup> November in the Twatt Church Hall.

Barbara Nieto



### A CALENDAR OF TREES

I am writing this on 22 July 2004, according to the Gregorian calendar, the one which is now understood and used worldwide. There have been many other forms of calendar used over the years including a rather picturesque one favoured by our Celtic Druid ancestors. By their calculations today would be the thirteenth day in the month of the holly tree .

The Druid calendar divided the year into thirteen lunar months punctuated by the solstices and equinoxes. This calendar governed all main activities and dictated the appropriate times for specific events especially the planting and harvesting of crops . Echoes of this tradition linger as a few farmers and herbalists still sow and reap in harmony with the waxing and waning of the moon.

The calendar was the basis of a lunar zodiac with each month dedicated to a particular plant or tree. As the Druids treated astrology as an exact and important science, the symbolism of each month was of great significance.

By comparing the list below you can find which month your birthday falls in.

Birch (Beth)	24 December- 20 January
Rowan (Luis)	21 January - 17 February
Ash (Nion)	18 February - 17 March
Alder (Fearn)	18 March - 14 April
Willow (Saille)	15 April - 12 May
Hawthorn (Ucith)	13 May - 9 June
Oak (Duir)	10 June - 7 July
Holly (Tinne)	8 July - 4 August
Hazel (Coil)	5 August - 1 September
Vine (Muin)	2 September - 29 September
Ivy (Gort)	30 September - 20 October
Reed (Ngetal)	28 October - 24 November
Elder (Ruis)	25 November - 23 December



## COUNCILLOR CHAT

There are a number of issues in the melting pot at the moment which will have an affect on the people in the parish. One of these is the Council policy with regards to the building of houses in the countryside. You will remember that the Community Council and myself waged an unsuccessful campaign to persuade the Council to allow the siting rules to be relaxed in Birsay. All the arguments we made when we contested the Council policy seem now to be accepted by a number of councillors because they have



realised that the present policy restricts the ability of people, especially young first time buyers,

to build a home for themselves in the countryside. I would suggest that scarcity of building land is one of the factors which has helped to increase the price of property. The whole issue will be examined again but unfortunately, a resolution of the problem will not be quick. I know of several people who have wanted to build houses in Birsay but planning permission has been a stumbling block. Would anyone who wants to build a house in Birsay please let me know as this will enhance our case to get the restrictions eased.

With the ferry service to Orkney and Shetland up for tender the question of the transportation of livestock needs to be resolved before the contract is awarded. There is much activity at the

moment to try and find a resolution this will not be easy as the European on "state aid" appear to restrict number of solutions which would address the issue. There seems to be a contradiction in the EU where impose the "state aid" rules but also that that are charged with nurturing encouraging the viability of remote rural areas on the periphery of Euro

There will be a big drive to improve reduction in Orkney in the coming. The Council has been granted considerable sum of money to enhance the waste management in Orkney. Consider the projects which will be paid for with this money will be the creation of an amenity site for the remote Mainland parishes. This issue has been pursued all the time I have been on Council so it is gratifying to see it to fruition at last. The successful running of the site will depend on responsible

use of the facility by everybody with no fly tipping. There will also be a big drive for people to compost a lot more of their



waste. You will no doubt be inundated with literature related to this initiative

Work on the new care home in Dounby I understand, on schedule recruitment of staff for the home will be starting later this year. It will add a new dimension to life in Dounby and the Mainland and I hope it will encourage

more business into the village and more people to come and live in and around the village. An excellent school and activity centre plus the care home with a comprehensive medical centre and service will be attractive to people looking for a place to settle.

I hope you have all had a good summer –

not brilliant compared to last year better than experienced throughout UK. If I can help anybody with a problem related to the Council or any organisation phone me on 771328 along Hundasaeter or drop me a line e-mail to ak.johnson@btopenworld.co.uk

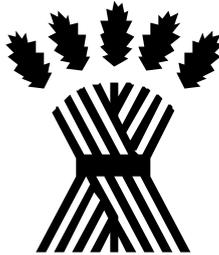
Keith Johnson

August

### FARMING A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

(from the diary of John Johnston, Houseby, Beaquouside)

I should have perhaps previously have told you that John Johnston was born in 1867 was only 19 years old when he took over the farm on the death of his father in 1888 early 1904, he was 36 years of age.



The weather in March, 1904, was on the cold side and much wind came from a south-easterly direction. On the 1<sup>st</sup>, 18 bushels of oats were winnowed and, on the 9<sup>th</sup>, 23 bushels of corn were hummed and then winnowed.

The Dounby Market was on Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> and John went down with two cows, but they weren't sold. 'Hannah Flett came to see me the next day and this would likely have been an agreement made at the previous day's Market.

A tragedy took place at the end of March when John Margaret's son, John Robert took ill on the 27<sup>th</sup> and died four days later. He was four and a half years old. I have been told that a fall in the byre resulted in internal injuries which caused peritonitis. Dr Suttie, the Dounby doctor, attended twice each day and Dr Sinclair from Stromness also visited.

A strange coincidence is the fact that one of the cows at Houseby had a dead calf at the time, and on the morning of my own father's funeral, in May 1957, I found a 'bucke' calf dead in our cornyard. I managed to load it onto the trailer by myself and put it in a turnip-shed out of sight of those who would be attending the funeral later on. I was telling-off from the vet who came along to test the calf as I had only phoned on my way home from the funeral. If it had been something like anthrax or foot and mouth disease it could have been spread all over Orkney, due to my muddled thinking at the time. However, I digress.

The weather in April was still not very suitable for spring-work - it was 'Storn Breezy' at the beginning of the month and there were never any settled spells of more than a few days at a time. However, the first oats were sown at Midhouse on the 18<sup>th</sup> and was over-sown with 10½ bushels of grass seed a week later. At this same time Spence, Farafeld, received 2 qrs oats, r'c'd £1.'

The last of the turnips were carted in early May, and this allowed the ploughing to be completed.

There were several very cold days at this same time with snow showers on the 7<sup>th</sup>.

At the Dounby Market in May, a cow was sold to Mr Walker, Aberdeen, for £11-10/- (£710 today). Alex Brass from Beaquoy delivered the cow to Stromness a week later and, in return, John did some land work for him. The potatoes were planted around the middle of the month, and the peat-cutting also took place around this time. On 15<sup>th</sup> May, the Sabbath, is written, '*At Moan, Harray, about cow of Cloke, Milk Fever.*' Two days later he helped Cloke to bury the animal. James Flett of Moan was a well-known veterinarian and his help was often sought when animals were ailing.



Over a period of a year, in the mid-1950's, we lost three young beasts at Cloke. (In days we called them 'piners', as they just pined away and died). I recently asked A Spence what would have been wrong with these animals, and he said it would more likely have been worms in the lining of the stomach, something that present-day worms would control quite easily.

The turnips were sown during the first ten days of June, when the weather was recorded for the most part as '*Very Warm*'. The end-rigs were then sown with '*green oats*' and a start was made to carting the first peats about five weeks after cutting. There was on the odd day during this period when rain was mentioned. For the most part the weather was recorded as '*Very Warm*' or '*Dry & Breezy*', although the 16<sup>th</sup> was an exception, it was '*Very Stormy*'.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> July, a fat cow was sold to Mr Whitelaw for £13 (£802). At the Dounby Market, a ewe and lamb were sold to Mr Mason of Birstane for £2-17/6d (£177). The cutting and carting of the rye hay (24 loads), and the singling of the turnips, was carried out during the latter part of the month.



At the Dounby Market in August, a quey in calf was sold to Mr Geo. Gunn for £10/10/- (£648). The following day a start was made to '*Taking out peats found for enlarging barn.*'

The most important event in August isn't given any extra prominence when, on 2<sup>nd</sup> August, it is written, '*Daughter born. John Hourston building at barn.*' My mother was born '*Maggie Lizzie*' on 13<sup>th</sup> November.

Submitted by Harold

#### NEWS FROM ORKNEY VINTAGE CLUB

By the time you read this, the Shows will be over, the Vintage Rally will be past, and the nights will be drawing in as autumn approaches. As far as the Vintage Club is concerned, the year's outdoor events will also be drawing to an end, with just



Science Festival Rally and a Road Run to Willie Mowatt's Smithy, combined with a visit to the Tomb of the Eagles, still to take place.

It seems no time since the first outdoor event of 2004 took place - the Tractor Working Day, which was held in a field belonging to Binscarth Farm at the back of the Firth of Forth. We had the largest turnout ever at a Working Day, with twenty tractors in total. An interesting fact was the fact that three enthusiasts from Aberdeenshire had travelled north to take part. They were delighted with the welcome they received and promised to be back next year "with reinforcements!"

I still think that the Tractor Working Days based around the Kirbuster Museum would be a special, and it would be nice to return to this area in the future if there was a suitable field in the vicinity.

The annual Orkney Cavalcade took place in May and had a big turnout. This all day event is now firmly established and gives motorists a chance to test their vehicles over a long distance.

Stromness was the venue for the Isles Trip this year, the event being timed to coincide with their Annual Gala Day on Saturday 12th June. It hardly seems possible that eleven years had gone past since the Club's first visit to Stromness in 1993.

A trip to North Ronaldsay has been spoken about since the Club started, so history was made when a large contingent spent a few very pleasant hours exploring the island on the first Sunday in July.

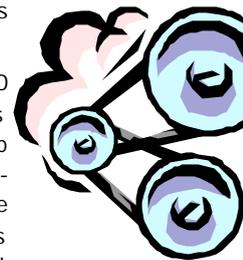
On Sunday 25th July, six cars, three tractors and a number of engines went across to the Shapinsay Machinery and Restoration Club's Annual Rally. They don't advertise this event very well, but I can assure you it makes a grand day out. The Smithy Restaurant and Museum is now open after its refurbishment, and adds an extra dimension to any trip to Shapinsay. Those involved should be congratulated on their enterprise and hard work in bringing the project to fruition.



The highlight of the trip to Shapinsay was, for me at least, the chance to meet George Smith again and see the progress on his project for the last twelve years - the manufacture of a 5" gauge, 2-6-0, U Class, Southern Railway Engine. Prior to that, George took eleven years to build an 0-6-0, Great Western Railway Pannier Tank Engine. I can't actually describe the craftsmanship that has gone into making both engines. In a meeting some years ago, George told us all about his hobby and, now that the second engine is nearing completion, he will return with the finished article to let us see. I look forward to that.

This is being written before our Rally and I know it won't reach you till the event is over so I hope you will excuse the tense I am using. Visitors will have seen that many exhibits now have log sheets giving details about the item on display. I have been busy producing these and things were a bit hectic as the big day approached. Two men, Stevie Ross and his son Raymond needed 'quite a few' log sheets. Stevie is one of our unsung heroes in the Club. Visitors will not realise the amount of work that he does

bringing tractors and engines to the Rally each year. In 2000, we had 106 tractor display, of which Stevie brought more than a quarter, sixteen of his own and the re behalf of other people. This doesn't include the number of people he persuaded to their tractors along so that the magic total of 100 was surpassed.

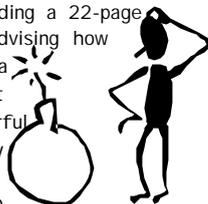


One of our main themes this year will be a celebration of 100 years of car registrations, and the bringing together of as many BS numbers as possible. William McLennan's 8hp Peugeot was the first car with BS-1 (15/03/1904 - 28/03/1908). At that time the number was issued to the owner, not the vehicle. It passed through a number of hands until the 1960s, when Billy Smart (of Circus fame) obtained the number, which he transferred to his striking new purple Rolls Royce Cor Convertible in the early 1970s. Bill Spence of Kirkwall obtained the number in August and it was placed on his Jaguar XK8 on 15<sup>th</sup> March, 2002, the number's 98th birthday.

Submitted by Harold

### Birsay, Harray and Sandwick Churches

The government is sending a 22-page booklet to everyone advising how to prepare for a disaster or terrorist attack. What a fearful notion for a country which has now enjoyed peace for nearly 60 years at least on this soil.



It is said to be the wish of the public to be better informed what to do in such extreme situations. If this is true, the level of fear among us is high. September 11 and the ensuing War on Terror is leaving us in a situation where no one can assume to be safe from madmen/women or fanatics.

How to keep peace, and how to make peace, is the question. One way of dealing with this is to pull up the drawbridge around our own little castle, to withdraw from each other behind the imagined safety of our private lives. However, would it not be better if we found ways of practising living together in peace: ways of making peace by supporting justice amongst ourselves and abroad? Would

it not be better to learn and together t heart stories, images and concepts guide us and affirm us in this endeavour?

This, I believe, is the role of the chu this century. Jesus announced Good Ne a kingdom of peace, where everyone wil a place. His friends are to try to ove evil with goodness; should try to tur other cheek - which does not mean to b a doormat but to stand up for what i and right - and we should love God an our neighbour as ourselves.

Hard? Yes, and we make often a mess But still let's try and not give way to th way of aggression, anger and hatred. try together to give each other courag support. For this we meet on Sundays a this we organise the work of the Church.



So, let me invite you come as often as yo to our services in 1 Harray or Sandwick. me invite you to with your children t you teach such val them. Sunday Club starts ag

22 August. Some of our teenagers would love to look after your toddler during the service. Come to the Guild meetings, which are often very informative and great places of friendship. Join the Church choir and swell the singing. Come to the Amnesty Group we

are hoping to start ... There is lots to do. God bless you all, Andrea.

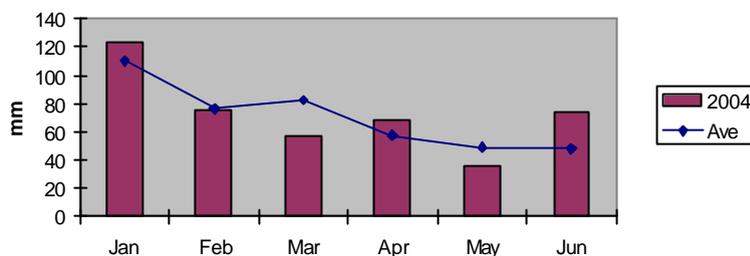
Rev Andre:  
Minister of Birsay, Harray, Sai  
Tel: 7

### Hundasaeter Weather Station

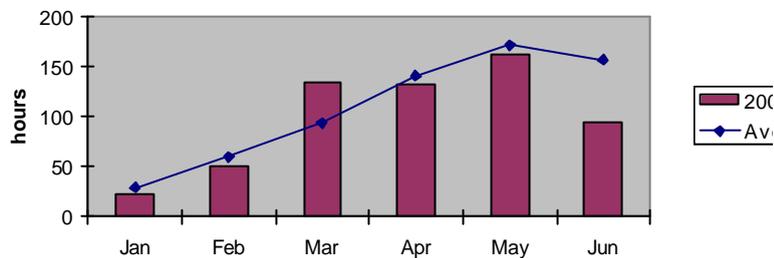
The first 6 months of 2004 have been fairly kind to us with no long periods of frost, lasting and only 7 gale days. The rainfall was very close to the 50 year averages for Grimsette sunshine was about 8.5% down on the average.

MONTH	Max TEMP	Min TEMP	mm RAIN (Ave)	hours SUN (Ave)	knots MAX W		
January	9.4	-4.5	123.0	110.5	23.3	29.3	5
February	13.9	-5.0	74.8	76.6	51.9	60.3	6
March	13.0	-1.4	56.6	82.4	134.1	94.3	5
April	16.9	0.5	68.6	57.3	133.0	141.7	4
May	18.0	1.0	35.3	49.3	162.3	172.4	3
June	19.5	3.0	74.3	48.5	95.3	157.5	3

### Rainfall 2004



### Sunshine 2004



Keith Johnson Au