

Orkney Seafarers' Gathering, March 2014

The Serco NorthLink ferry 'Hamnavoe' was the venue for the latest Orkney Seafarers' Gathering which took place in Stromness at the end of March 2014. The successful event was organised by Voluntary Action Orkney and the Fishermen's Mission Port Officer in Orkney, Superintendent Willie Buchan and Craig Taylor, an associate member of the Fishermen's Mission. There were over 65 people in attendance, from a good cross section of the Orkney seafaring community including retired folk, as well as those who work at sea at the present time.

The organisers who were delighted that they had got such a good turnout with those coming along enjoying the opportunity to catch up with friends, added that they were very grateful to Serco NorthLink Ferries for allowing the event to be held on board their ship. As a result of NorthLink's generosity in providing lunches free of charge, and for providing travel vouchers to the value of £150 for a main raffle prize, £500 was raised for the Fishermen's Mission. Tesco staff was also praised for helping to fundraise over £500 on the day

It was announced at the event that Orkney College had kindly made itself available as a safe haven in Stromness for shipwrecked sailors or fishermen, if the occasion should occur. Crew members who may be brought ashore in Stromness after an incident at sea can now get warm and dry at the 'Nav School' in Stromness, while they await further assistance, thanks to a joint initiative by the Fishermen's Mission and Orkney College UHI's Maritime Studies Department. In an incident stranded crew will be able to take refuge at Orkney College's Maritime Studies Department's headquarters in Stromness, using the kitchen and showers there to get themselves fed, warm and dry, while short term emergency accommodation is arranged for them - usually by the Fishermen's Mission.

The 'Casualty Reception Centre', or CRC, will be accessible through the RNLI where 24 hour staff cover is available, or through Maritime Studies Department key holders. The Kirkwall Tesco store yet again supported the Mission, having provided six 'survivor packs' containing dry clothes and a towel. Willie Buchan, port officer for the Fishermen's Mission in Orkney, said: "The Mission is very appreciative of the Orkney College UHI Maritime Studies Department for putting forward their facilities in Stromness for this important purpose, and to the RNLI in Stromness for their support as 24 hour key holders. Tesco has long been associated with the Fishermen's Mission, gifting resources nationally and locally for our work, and we're grateful of their kind support for this latest initiative." Mandy Kirkness, Personnel Manager at the Kirkwall Tesco Store said that they were only too happy to continue to help the Mission, as they have done previously. She added: "We are an island community and it's only right that we look after seafarers when we can.

Also at the gathering, Mark Shiner, head of the Maritime Studies Department at Orkney College UHI, was appointed as an Honorary Agent for the Mission. Mark said: "The Maritime Studies Department and Orkney College UHI are pleased to be a part of introducing a formal arrangement for shipwrecked sailors brought ashore in Stromness. Both Willie and I had become aware of a need to have somewhere for traumatised, cold, wet sailors brought in by the RNLI and landed at Stromness to get warm, and to make contact with their families. Up until now arrangements have been ad hoc. What we're aiming to do is make that process a bit smoother and more reassuring for seafarers unfortunate enough to be involved in a rescue. It's just one way that the Maritime Studies Department can contribute to the town's seafaring community. We of course sincerely hope that the facility is never needed. It's both a personal honour to become an honorary agent of the Fishermen's Mission, and a logical step for the Department. What it means for Stromness is an additional set of eyes and ears, to help ensure that the welfare and training needs of mariners is being met. What it means for the RNLI, the Mission and the Department is even better communication links in a crisis.

Chairman Jill Henderson said she was grateful to all involved in the Orkney Community in supporting the Mission, and praised Mr Buchan for all his good work for the charity. She highlighted to the gathering that nationally the Mission had been able to give out emergency payments totalling £150,000 directly and immediately to fishermen, many of whom hadn't been able to make a living due to the prolonged period of winter gales which had swept across the country.

The next gathering, which is due to be held on May 23rd 2014 in the Kirkwall Royal British Legion, will include a buffet with seafood kindly donated by OFS in Stromness and a cookery demonstration by those involved in the

Connect Project and local chef Derek Walker who worked at sea for many years, as well as in hotels in Orkney during his career.