

Deep Genealogy of the Stouts of Orkney and Shetland

Gregor Lamb in his "Orkney Family Names"¹ says of the surname Stout

Stout: Henry Stout, Dritness, Stronsay, 1633; pronounced 'Stoot'; from the nickname 'stout' with its original meaning 'firm' or 'bold'; the place-name Stout Farthing in Holm recorded in 1500 suggests that this family name had been long established in Orkney; a common family name in Orkney but with a limited distribution; Westray and Stronsay account for almost half the Stout families in Orkney; Stouts of Orkney origin are found in Canada; Stout is also an English family name.

In the above entry Lamb omits some of the more speculative content of the Stout entry in his earlier book "Orkney Surnames"²:

Stout: Henry Stout, Dritness, Stronsay, 1633: almost certainly a nickname: the OE word 'stot' meaning a young ox has been suggested but it is likely to stem from ON 'stóth', a stallion since horse nicknames were common but cattle nicknames were rare: this surname appears very late but we know from placename evidence that it is much older e.g. Stoddisyord in Sandwick in 1500 and Stout Farthing in Holm the same year: a common Orkney surname with a limited distribution: Westray and Stronsay account for almost half the Stout surnames in Orkney: many of the Westray Stouts came originally from the Fair Isle at the beginning of the 19th century: Stout is certainly a native Orkney surname too however, possibly in the case of the Stronsay Stouts and very likely in the case of the Stouts of South Walls: Stout is also found as surname in Cumberland.

In 1841, with a count of twenty-two heads, there were more Stouts living on the tiny island of Fara in the parish of Walls and Flotta than on any other Orkney island. Taking Shetland into account, only the Shetland Mainland, with sixty-four Stouts and Fair Isle, with twenty-three each had a larger Stout population. Of the Shetland Mainland Stouts, twenty-seven were clustered in the Quendale area of Dunrossness at the southern end of the isle. Twenty-two were living in Lerwick.

To complete the distribution picture of 1841, Westray, Stronsay and Sanday also had Stout populations, all recently established by migration from Fair Isle at the behest of the laird, who wanted to transfer fishing skills to his estates in the North Isles of Orkney. In the South Isles, in addition to Fara, there were also Stouts on Walls and Hoy. Kirkwall and Stromness as yet had no Stouts. In Scotland as a whole, outside of Orkney and Shetland, there were only thirty-five Stouts, many of whom were migrants from the isles.

Note that although there were Stouts on Stronsay in 1633 when the poor crofter, Henry Stout died at Dritness, the population there had disappeared by the mid-eighteenth century, when proper records began to be kept. The current Stronsay Stout population all has a nineteenth century Fair Isle origin, some of it via Westray.

One of the frustrations of researching family history is the closeness of the historical horizon. We are seldom able to see back beyond the mid-eighteenth century. Very few earlier documents survive and the paper trail comes to a sudden stop.

¹ "Orkney Family Names" Gregor Lamb; published Bellavista Publications 2003

² "Orkney Surnames" Gregor Lamb; published Paul Harris Publishing 1981

There are now, however, ways of doing family history by other means. We may not be able to put names to individuals or places to names, but we are nevertheless able to ask and to answer interesting questions about the group history of our family. Genetics and population studies are a means to this end.

For example, how did the distribution of Stouts reach the point it did in Orkney and Shetland in 1841? How long have Stouts lived on the islands? As suggested by Lamb, "Stout" probably belongs to the class of surnames derived from nicknames. Was it coined independently in Orkney and Shetland (as well as elsewhere), or was the name brought to Orkney by an incomer – or were there elements of both? If coined in Orkney was the name invented once or many times?

In the case of the Stouts, the end point of the paper chase and the start point for using the methods of deep genealogy lies in the finding that the ancestry of all of the Stouts born in Orkney and Shetland between 1855 and 1900 (and hence that of their descendants) can be traced to one of thirteen couples living in the isles in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. They are as follows:

John Stout and Margaret Aiken living in Corston, Dunrossness (son James b. 1791)
Robert Stout and Christina Burgher or Burgess in Hillwell, Dunrossness (son George b. 1775)
Malcolm Stout and Catherine Humphrey in Garth, Scatsa, Delting (son Thomas b. 1792)
Gilbert Stout and Phillis Hughson in Greenha, Nesting/Lunnasting (m. 1844)
John Stout and Isabella Georgeson in Lerwick (m. 1816)
Thomas Stout and Barbara Smith living in Lerwick (grandson Thomas b.1806)
Thomas Stout and Girsy Smith living on Fair Isle (son George b. 1794)
Laurence Stout and Margery Williamson on Fair Isle (son Magnus m. Mary Brown 1809)
George Stout and Anne Wilson living on Fair Isle (m. 1798)
James Stout and Isabella Mowat on Fara (son Harry b. about 1790)
James Stout and Elizabeth Bain, probably in North Walls (son William b. about 1802)
James Stout and Isabella Bremner in Brims, North Walls (daughter Mary b. 1815)
William Stout and Elspeth Cromarty probably in Misbister, Walls (son James b. 1791)

Those who had moved away from the isles before 1855 include:

William Stout and Grace Irvine (son Oliver m. Louisa Williamson in 1850 in Lerwick then moved to Aberdeen)
William Stout of Fair Isle moved to Glasgow, m. Mary Russell (son William b. about 1804)
William Stout and Marjory Leask of Lerwick, whose sons, Thomas (b. 1815) and John moved to Glasgow

There have been speculative attempts to construct a relationship between the three Fair Isle couples listed above based on oral tradition, land tenure papers and pre-1841 census documents. However, it cannot be reliably concluded from these sources that there was indeed such a relationship. Of course it would not be any surprise if there were. But was there?

The Dunrossness Stouts were part of a community in relatively close contact with Fair Isle, probably providing marriage partners and new blood from time to time. There was a large number of Stout families in the Quendale area of Dunrossness in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Due presumably to the impact of emigration and possibly high mortality, only the John Stout and Margaret Aiken line survived in the isles into the latter half of the nineteenth century. Prima facie it

would not be surprising to discover that the Fair Isle and Dunrossness Stouts were related. But were they?

The case of the Lerwick Stouts is not so clear. Even in the eighteenth century they were well established among the merchant class of the town, socially fairly far removed from the fishermen and crofters of Dunrossness and Fair Isle. It was one of their number, a great-grandson of Thomas Stout and Barbara Smith, who was eventually to become Prime Minister and later Chief Justice of New Zealand. Were these folks, including a grocer & spirit merchant, a postmaster and a building contractor related to the Dunrossness families?

To cut a long story short, the answers to the above questions are unequivocally “yes”, “yes” and “yes”. All five of the Shetland patriarchs have been shown by genetic testing to share a nearest common ancestor in the recent past. How recent is not yet clear, but the fifteenth or sixteenth century seems plausible. A more precise estimate will become possible as the interpretation of genetic test results becomes more sophisticated.

Genetic testing of only one representative descendant of each patriarch was required in order to confirm the relationships. I found a descendant of John Stout and Margaret Aiken living in China (Brian Stout); a descendant of Thomas Stout and Barbara Smith living in New Zealand (Ron Stout); a descendant of Laurence Stout and Margery Williamson living in Dundee (the late Prof. George Stout); and a descendant of Thomas Stout and Girsy Smith in Kirkwall (the late Tom Stout of Whitehall, Stronsay).

The implication of this is that all of the Stouts of Shetland, Fair Isle and the North Isles of Orkney are not only related to each other, but are all descended from the same man, bearing the name Stout, who probably lived in Shetland about five hundred years ago.

But what of the Stouts in the South Isles of Orkney? Are they part of the same family or do they constitute their own family group? On the basis of available records it would appear that most of the living Stouts originating from the South Isles are descendants of James Stout and Isabella Bremner. Genetic testing of descendants of three of their sons has confirmed that there is no close relationship to the Shetland Stouts. The conclusion is that there are in fact two quite separate Stout groups.

There are still unanswered questions about how the surname originated or how often it was separately coined or whether it was brought to the isles from elsewhere. Family tradition in Fair Isle has it that the first Stouts in Shetland came from Yorkshire. It should be possible to use genetic testing to show whether that is true.