

Up Helly Aa

What is Up Helly Aa

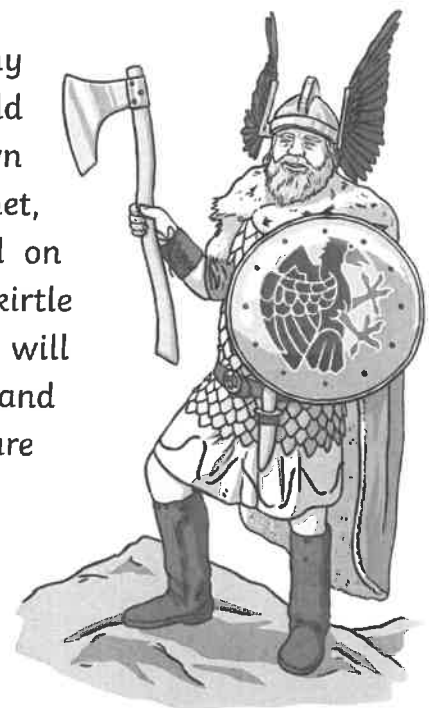
Up Helly Aa is a fire festival that takes place in Lerwick, Shetland, every January. The festival is over 100 years old. Some of the traditions in the festival go back to a time when the Vikings ruled parts of Scotland. The torch lit procession and the burning of a Viking long ship or galley are similar to old Viking ceremonies.



The festival began when a group of men came up with the name Up Helly Aa and introduced guizing (or dressing up – like we do for Halloween) into Lerwick's New Year celebrations. The men also began holding a torch lit parade. It was years later before the Viking galley, Guizer Jarl, and the Jarl Squad, became part of the festival.

Guizer Jarl and the Jarl's Squad

The first leader of Up Helly Aa was called Worthy Chief Guizer. It was decided that Viking armour would be bought for him to wear and he should be known as Guizer Jarl. Each year, the suit of armour (helmet, breastplate, shield, axe, dagger and belt) is passed on to the next Jarl. He chooses his own design for his kirtle (or tunic), his cloak and for the costumes his squad will wear. These costumes are different every year. Shields and weapons such as axes, swords, spears or daggers are made to match the costumes.



Around 45 squads take part in Up Helly Aa. Squads can consist of up to 25 men but the Jarl Squad can have as many as 70 men.

How Do People Get Ready for Up Helly Aa?

The Up Helly Aa committee is made up of volunteers, including a marshall and Guizer Jarl. The committee plans and arranges the festival. On the day of Up Helly Aa, the marshall is in charge and it is his responsibility to make sure everything goes well for Guizer Jarl.

Every year at Up Helly Aa, over 1000 torches are needed. A group of volunteers meet during the winter, twice a week, to make the torches. The torches are made

from fence posts topped with concrete and sack cloth. The day before Up Helly Aa, the torches are soaked in paraffin so that they burn well.

Up Helly Aa Day

On the morning of Up Helly Aa, Guizer Jarl and his Jarl squad march through Lerwick. This is the first time people see the costumes that the Jarl Squad have designed. The Jarl Squad stop at the Market Cross to view a 'Bill' that has been posted there.

Over the years, the Bill has changed from being orders to something funny, with jokes about local people and events. The content of the Bill each year is secret. It is painted the day before Up Helly Aa then the Jarl signs it. At 6 a.m. on Up Helly Aa day, the Bill is put up at the Market Cross for everyone to read. After seeing the Bill, the squad continue on their way to the shore for photos. The Guizer and his squad usually go to the Town Hall, then visit primary schools, the hospital and homes for the elderly.

The March

At 7.15 p.m., the Jarl and his squad take their place at the front of the procession. At 7.30 p.m., a maroon (or rocket) is fired and the streetlights are turned off. The Jarl Squad lead the march with Guizer Jarl standing at the helm (front) of his Galley. Almost one thousand guizers carry their torches through the town, following the Galley along the route to where it will be burned. The route is lined with thousands of people, cheering the guizers as they pass by.

At the burning site, the guizers circle the Galley and another rocket explodes in the sky. This is the signal for the Jarl to leave his ship and then the burning torches are thrown into the galley as the squads march past, singing a song.

The day after Up Helly Aa is a public holiday in Shetland and then the preparations begin all over again, for next year's celebrations!



Questions

1. What is Up Helly Aa and which group from history is it connected with?

2. When and where does Up Helly Aa take place?

3. How many squads of men take part in Up Helly Aa?

4. When do people first get to see the Jarl Squad's costumes?

5. What is the other word for 'dressing up' for the festival?

6. Where is Guizer Jarl during the procession?

7. What is the 'Bill' and how has it changed over time?

8. How do people make sure the festival runs smoothly?

9. Why do you think people volunteer to be on the Up Helly Aa committee?

10. What do you think the procession might look like?

Answers

1. What is Up Helly Aa and what historic group of people is it connected with?
Up Helly Aa is a fire festival connected to the Vikings.
2. When and where does Up Helly Aa take place?
Up Helly Aa takes place in Lerwick, Shetland on the last Tuesday of January.
3. How many squads of men take part in Up Helly Aa?
Around 45 squads of men take part in Up Helly Aa.
4. When do people first get to see the Jarl Squad's costumes?
People first see the Jarl Squad's costumes on the morning of the festival.
5. What word is used for 'dressing up' for the festival?
The word used for 'dressing up' for the festival is 'guizing'.
6. Where is Guizer Jarl during the procession?
Guizer Jarl Stands at the helm of his galley(boat) during the procession.
7. What is the 'Bill' and how has it changed over time?
Over the years, the Bill has changed from being orders to something funny, with jokes about local people and events.
8. How do people make sure the festival runs smoothly?
People make sure the festival runs smoothly by preparing months in advance and setting up a committee to organise it.
9. Why do you think people volunteer to be on the Up Helly Aa committee?
Children's own answers, such as: Perhaps people volunteer to be on the Up Helly Aa committee because it's fun, interesting, historic, traditional, cultural etc.
10. What do you think the procession might look like?
Children's own responses, such as: Perhaps the procession looks magical/bright/spooky/old/historic etc.