

The

# ORKNEY

## Guide Book

*by Charles Tait*

FOURTH  
EDITION



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## The Orkney Guide Book

Fourth Edition, 2011

Published by Charles Tait

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The  
ORKNEY  
Guide Book

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FOURTH  
EDITION

*This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother,  
Allison Leonard Tait (1925-1954)  
as well as to my family, Sandra, Magnus, Thorfinn and Kika, with-  
out whose support this book would not have been done*

# WELCOME TO ORKNEY



## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This book is designed to help the visitor find his or her way around Orkney. The detailed introduction covers many aspects of natural history, archaeology, history and culture of the area and is followed a gazetteer which travels round describing each island and parish in turn.

## ORKNEY COUNTRYSIDE CODE

We are justly proud of our historic sites, wildlife and environment. Please help ensure that future visitors may enjoy them as much as you by observing these guidelines:

1. Always use stiles and gates, and close gates after you.
2. Always ask permission before entering agricultural land.
3. Keep to paths and take care to avoid fields of grass and crops.
4. Do not disturb livestock. (Cows with calves are dangerous!).
5. Take your litter away with you and do not light fires.
6. Do not pollute water courses or supplies.
7. Never disturb nesting birds.
8. Do not pick wild flowers or dig up plants.

9. Drive and park with due care and attention - do not obstruct or endanger others.
10. Always take care near cliffs - particularly with children and pets.
11. Walkers should take adequate clothes, wear suitable footwear and tell someone of their plans.
12. Above all please respect the life of the countryside - leave only footprints, take only photographs and pleasant memories.

*Notice: While most of the sites of interest are open to the public and have marked access, many are on private land. No right of access is implied in the description, and if in doubt it is always polite to ask. Also, while many roads and tracks are rights of way, not all are.*

## MAPS OF ORKNEY

A good range of maps covering Orkney is available. The most generally useful maps for the visitor are the following:

**Orkney and Shetland Islands - (1:128,000)** available from the Tourist Board. This map shows the main sites of interest, and has much information of interest to the visitor. It is not really detailed enough for walkers, or for those wishing more detailed information, but it is fine for getting an idea of the lie of the land and where to go.

**Ordnance Survey Land-ranger Series (1:50,000)** - sheets 5 *Orkney North Isles*, 6 *Orkney Mainland* and 7 *Orkney South Isles* cover the area, and are essential to the serious visitor.

**Ordnance Survey Explorer Series (1:25,000)** - sheets 461-465 cover the islands in more detail and apart from being very interesting, are very useful to the walker or those wishing to investigate one particular parish or island in depth.

Ordnance Survey map references are given for many locations mentioned in the text. These are in brackets and are six figures, preceded by HY or ND, of the form (HY123456).

**Admiralty Charts** covering the area include the following: 2249 *Mainland and North Isles (West)*; 2250 *Mainland and North Isles (East)*; 2162 *Pentland Firth*. Other more detailed charts are also available, see the *Home Waters Catalogue* ref NP109 available from the Hydrographic Office, Taunton.

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# Sheila Fleet

ORKNEY DESIGNER JEWELLERY

Sheila graduated from Edinburgh College of Art in 1967 and was awarded a post Diploma and scholarships to travel in Europe.

Throughout her 26 years as a designer she has won many design awards before setting up on her own in 1995.

With a passion for her island environment Sheila creates original designs reflecting Orkney's history and natural beauty of the sea and sky. Her extensive range of jewellery is available in silver, enamel, gold, platinum and diamonds.

Visit the Gallery, Kirkwall or her Workshop in Tankerness where you can see the jewellery being made.

Tel. 01856 861203

**- Workshop & Gallery Opening Times -**

Open 9am - 5pm Monday - Saturday

10am - 4pm Sunday (June - August only)

[www.sheila-fleet.co.uk](http://www.sheila-fleet.co.uk)

## HOXA REFLECTIONS

This latest collection is based on the landscape of Hoxa, South Ronaldsay where Sheila was born and grew up.

THE WORKSHOP, TANKERNESS, ORKNEY, KW17 2QT, SCOTLAND

*Sisters, Sheila and Leila welcome you to their Workshops and Galleries*

## The Hoxa Tapestry Gallery

*Leila Thomson - Tapestry Artist*

Tel / Fax 01856 831 395

Leila graduated from Edinburgh College of Art with BA Hons 1st class in 1980 and has since returned to Orkney to live and work.

Her unique, large, handwoven tapestries evoke a sense of time and space reflecting the rhythm of life and landscape of Orkney.

The tapestries are woven on a large extending, upright loom, each piece taking two to four months to complete.

Visit the Gallery where you can meet Leila and often see work in progress. Cards and prints are also available.

### Studio & Gallery Opening Times

April - September

Mon. - Fri. 10.00am - 5.30pm

Sat. & Sun. 2.00pm - 6.00pm

Studio Free Gallery £2.00

[www.hoxatapestrygallery.co.uk](http://www.hoxatapestrygallery.co.uk)



*'Release'*

LEILA'S GALLERY, HOXA, SOUTH RONALDSAY, ORKNEY, KW17 2TW, SCOTLAND



*Midwinter full moon at the Ring of Brodgar*

## WELCOME TO ORKNEY

This guide is designed to help visitors to our islands, as well as residents, find their way around and enjoy the many places of interest which are to be seen and experienced. Apart from the main sites, many of the less-frequented places and islands are described.

It is hoped that folk will find the same pleasure as the author in discovering Orkney, as we have some of the best archaeological sites and bird-watching opportunities in Europe and so much else to see and do that you will certainly want to come back for another visit!

After the rugged Highland scenery of the North of Scotland, first impressions of Orkney are of greenness and fertility, combined with a feeling of space, where undulating, soft countryside merges with sky and sea into a soft

confluence of nature. There is an overall feeling of the immensity of time, perhaps due to the proximity of so much history. Indeed, the Orkney Islands were described by our local author, George Mackay Brown, as being "like sleeping whales.....beside an ocean of time".

Although people first came here well over 6,000 years ago, leaving a wealth of archaeological sites and remains which allow much insight into the past, Orkney is far from being a museum. Within our islands there is a huge range of things to see and do in all seasons. With its diverse economy it is a busy place, and yet at the same time unspoilt, quiet and relaxing. The old and the new, the natural environment and the geographical location all merge to give the islands their uniquely attractive atmosphere.

As the Orcadian writer Edwin Muir said in his *Scottish Journey* (1935), "Orkney...has managed, as far as that is humanly possible, to have its cake and eat it. It has been saved by being just outside the circumference of the industrial world, near enough to know about it, but too far off to be drawn into it. Now it seems to me that this is the only way in which any community can achieve a partial salvation today and live a desirable life, surrounded by an industrial world."

This is even more true today. Orkney benefits from many of the good things of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, whilst at the same time missing out on most of the less desirable aspects. However it is much more affected by the outside world than ever before, and Orcadians are going to have to work hard to maintain all that is special about Orkney.

# INTRODUCTION TO ORKNEY

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*Midsummer sunrise over Sanday from Wideford Hill*

**ORKNEY** is a group of over 70 islands and skerries, of which about 19 are presently inhabited. At approximately 59°N and 3°W, the islands lie just north of Scotland, the shortest distance being about 10km (6 miles) from Caithness, and cover an area of 974 km<sup>2</sup> (376 miles<sup>2</sup>), of which the Mainland comprises about half.

Inhabited by 19,245 people (2001 census), the islands are about 85km (53mi) from north to south and 37km (23mi) from east to west. The main island is known as the Mainland, and has three-quarters of the population, as well as the two main towns, Kirkwall (population 6,206), and Stromness (population 1,850).

Although apparently isolated, Orkney is very well served by transport links with Scotland. The MV *Hamnavoe* (8,600 tons, 600 passengers) runs sev-

eral times daily between Stromness and Scrabster. MV *Hjalmland* and MV *Hrossey* (12,000 tons, 600 passengers) run between Orkney, Aberdeen and Shetland.

There is a summer passenger ferry between John o'Groats and Burwick in South Ronaldsay. MV *Pentalina* provides a year-round vehicle service between Gills Bay and St Margaret's Hope, crossing several times a day. There are also several freight services.

Frequent daily air links with Aberdeen, Inverness, Edinburgh and Glasgow are operated by Loganair as part of the Flybe network. Codesharing with British Airways makes distant connections much easier.

The earliest written reference to Orkney is by the Greek explorer Pytheas, from Marseille, who may have circumnavigated

Orkney about the year 325BC, and claimed to have sighted the edge of the world, or *Ultima Thule*. He perhaps sighted Shetland to the North, but references to frozen sea suggest that it might have been Iceland.

Claudius' fleet is said to have formed a treaty with the Orcadians in AD43, and Tacitus mentions that a Roman fleet subdued Orkney after the battle of Mons Graupius in AD83. These references are interesting, but probably not very reliable.

Orkney is referred to in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the *Irish Annals* and by various writers such as Adomnan, but it is not until the Norse sagas, written in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, that we find more recent history. These sagas were written some time after the events so colourfully described. They may be of dubious historical accuracy in parts, but never-

theless give a vivid and graphic account of the Norse age. Being so fertile and so near to Norway, Orkney was an obvious base for Viking expansion, particularly in a time when the latest technology was sea transport in Viking longships.

In more recent times the islands have been visited by a large number of eminent people who have written in various terms about them. We also have a number of distinguished local authors, and for those wishing further reading, there is always a good selection of publications available in the local book shops.

For reference the Orkney Library also has an excellent "Orkney Room, which has a very wide range of local literature. Many books which are unfortu-

nately out of print are available for consultation here. The Orkney Archives are also available for those researching family roots and original documents.

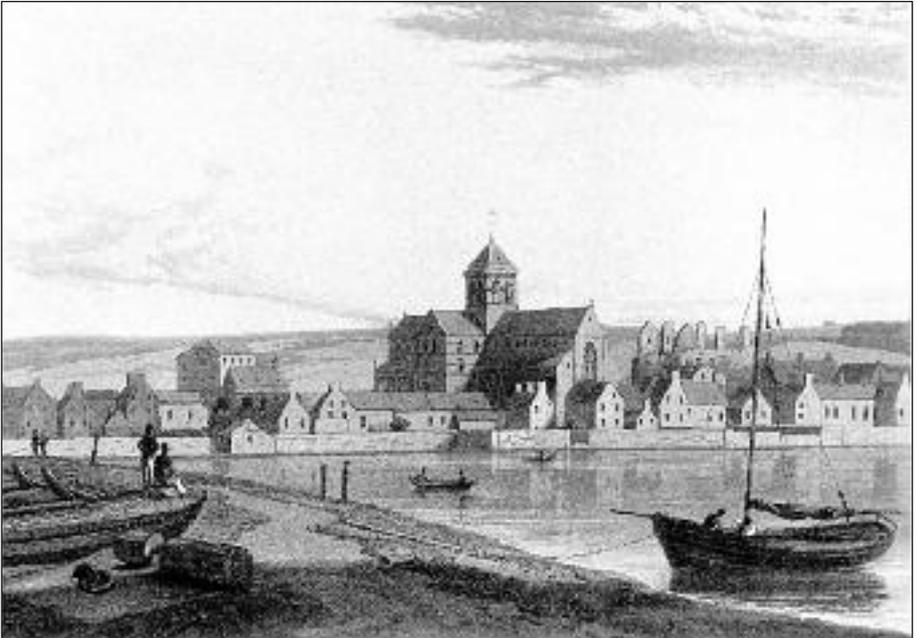
The purpose of this Guide is to help visitors to our islands appreciate Orkney and enjoy their time here to the full. The idea is that the reader can assimilate information without effort and yet rapidly find out what he or she would most like to see and do, depending on interest, season or weather. There are so many things to see and do in Orkney that a lifetime is not long enough!

Although we have a beautiful landscape, history everywhere, and wildlife to rival anywhere on Earth, there is another aspect of Orkney which is perhaps the

most important and rewarding to get to know - the Orcadians themselves. They are a friendly, hospitable people, mindful and respectful of their past, while at the same time very go-ahead and industrious. Do not hesitate to ask the way, or about things. You are sure to get a courteous reply, and if you are lucky you might get a few good stories as well.

George Mackay Brown summed things up very well when he said Orkney is "*...a microcosm of the world. Orkney has been continuously inhabited for about 6,000 years and the layers of cultures and races are inescapable and unavoidable wherever you go. There are stories in the air here. If I lived to be 500, there would still be more to write.*"

*Kirkwall from the Ayre Road in 1815 by William Daniell*



# A TOUR OF THE MAIN MONUMENTS

Orkney has a wealth of Neolithic sites to visit, of which Maeshowe, the Standing Stones of Stenness, the Ring of Brodgar and Skara Brae are the most spectacular. The great chambered cairn of Maeshowe is the largest and grandest of its type and dates from about 2750BC, while the Standing Stones and the Ring of Brodgar were erected at about the same time.



*Winter sunrise at the Ring of Brodgar*

Recent excavations at the Ness of Brodgar have revealed several very large Neolithic buildings and other structures. These monuments are all situated in the heart of the West Mainland, surrounded by farmland and near the lochs of Stenness and Harray, in turn ringed by heather-covered low hills. The timeless, spacious feel to this landscape is a result of a dramatic coming together of sky, water and land.



*Winter sunset over Maeshowe*

The Neolithic village of Skara Brae lies on the shore of the Bay of Skail, and its well-preserved 5,000 year-old houses give a very good impression of life at that time. All four sites together form a World Heritage Site.



*The Standing Stones of Stenness date from about 3000BC*

There is a Visitor Centre at Skara Brae with a museum, replica house and a shop, while at Tormiston Mill, next to Maeshowe, there is a shop and interpretative display.

*Skara Brae is a Neolithic village dating from about 3200BC*

There are many other fascinating monuments and sites of interest ranging from the Neolithic to the 20<sup>th</sup> century which can be visited all over Orkney. Every parish and island has something different and special left by the people who inhabited the countryside during the last six millennia.



The Brough of Birsay is a tidal island off the north-west of the Mainland, and is the site of both Pictish and Viking settlements, with secular and monastic remains. In the nearby village, The Palace, the ruins of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Earl's Palace provide a gaunt reminder of the more recent past. The nearby St Magnus Kirk is built on the site of a much older church.



*The Brough of Birsay has Norse and Pictish ruins*

The continuity of settlement is well demonstrated by the Broch of Gurness, which is one of the best examples of about 50 such structures in Orkney. It dates from the late Iron Age, perhaps as early as 400BC. The site was occupied for hundreds of years, at least until early Norse times.



*The Iron Age Broch of Gurness is surrounded by an extensive settlement*

The imposing 12<sup>th</sup> century St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall was built by the Norse Earl Rognvald Kolson in honour of his murdered uncle Earl Magnus Erlendson. It dominates the town, and its warm coloured Old Red Sandstone, unmarked by air pollution, makes the building especially striking. The interior is particularly attractive and well proportioned.



*The 12<sup>th</sup> century St Magnus Cathedral dominates Kirkwall*

During World War II several hundred Italian prisoners of war worked on the construction of the Churchill Barriers, which were built to defend the eastern approaches of Scapa Flow. They built the Italian Chapel in their camp on Lamb Holm. This unusual and charming artefact of war survives now as a symbol of hope and peace.

*The Italian Chapel dates from the Second World War*



# A TOUR OF THE ISLANDS

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It has been said that “no visit can be considered complete without a visit to at least one of the other islands.” Fortunately this is easy due to extensive and frequent transport links to most of the inhabited islands.

Each island has its own character and attraction, all are subtly different and yet they have much in common. The Inner North Isles are perhaps the most accessible, especially Shapinsay, with its Victorian Castle, RSPB Reserve and fine farms, which is reached from Kirkwall.

Rousay, Egilsay and Wyre are also very easy to get to from Tingwall, and are full of good places to visit. Apart from the many archaeological and historic sites, there are also two RSPB Reserves and dramatic cliff and moorland scenery close by.

The larger Outer North Isles of Westray, Eday, Sanday and Stronsay are all quite distinctly different in character. They are reached by ferry or plane from Kirkwall and while a day visit will whet the appetite, all really need a stay to fully appreciate what they have to offer.

Westray is perhaps the most diverse of all the islands, with its varied coastal scenery, hills and farmland. It is the best place to see Puffins, and other breeding seabirds in summer, and has much to offer the visitor.



Wyre, Gairsay and the ferry “Eynballow” seen from Rousay



Balfour Castle, Shapinsay, was built in the 1800s



St Magnus Church, Egilsay

Noup Head, Westray, is one of the biggest seabird breeding sites in UK



Papa Westray is less developed, but has the oldest stone built house in western Europe, the Knap of Howar. It also is the destination of the shortest scheduled flight in the world. North Ronaldsay is the most remote of all the islands in Orkney. It is a unique place and even has its own breed of sheep, which live on seaweed.



*Dennis Head old lighthouse, North Ronaldsay, was built in 1789*

Eday is famous for its chambered cairns, but it also offers fine walks and unrivalled panoramic views over the rest of Orkney, while Sanday is best known for its exceptional sandy beaches which attract many species of wading birds. Stronsay, the most fertile island in Orkney, is also well-placed for migrating birds.



*The Stone of Setter in Eday*

The South Isles are dominated by Hoy, which is more like two islands, the northern part with its dramatic cliffs, hills and valleys, and the low-lying southern part. It can be reached from Houton or Stromness. Hoy offers something for every visitor, with its diverse habitats and many sites of interest.



*Hoy Sound and Hoy Hills from Outertown, Stromness*

The smaller islands of Graemsay and Flotta should not be ignored. Both offer gentle scenery and dramatic views of the other islands and Scapa Flow. Graemsay is close to Stromness, but a world apart, while Flotta, though home to an Oil Terminal, still echoes with remains of 20<sup>th</sup> century wars.

*Scapa Flow is sheltered by Hoy in the west and South Ronaldsay in the east*



# NATURE AND ENVIRONMENT

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In addition to the huge array of ancient and more recent monuments, Orkney has a rich and interesting natural environment. The combination of fertile farmland with the various other habitats makes it a very good place for wildlife, and especially birds. There are cliffs, marshes, moors and maritime heath as well as sheltered bays, small islands and lochs, all of which attract a variety of different species, depending on the season and weather.

The many superb beaches and dramatic cliffs also provide wonderful opportunities for walking. Whether just a stroll along the Bay of Skaill or Aikerness after visiting Skara Brae or the Broch of Gurness, or one of the many more adventurous walks, Orkney will never fail to please. The islands are great for cycling too, as the hills are not steep, and the roads quiet.

The predominant daytime colours in Orkney are the greens, blues and browns of grass, water and moor. These colours vary with the season and are particularly vibrant in summer, but more muted in other seasons. Orkney is also famous for its sunsets and for its long hours of daylight in summer. The Northern Lights are occasionally seen, usually on a dark, moonless winter night.

The Orkney climate is much influenced by the sea, which varies in temperature by only a few degrees over the year. This ensures that winters are mostly mild, but that summers are never hot. The weather is very variable, and it is possible to have every season in one day! The combination of con-



*Skipi Geo and the Brough of Birsay*



*Marwick Head has dramatic high cliffs*



*Whitemill Bay, Sanday*

*Stoneyhill, Harray*



stantly changing weather and large seasonal variations in day length make for a huge variety of lighting conditions. This makes Orkney a paradise for artists, photographers and lovers of the landscape in all seasons. Thus there is no best time to visit.

There is a wide variety of good locations for observing wildlife, including several RSPB Reserves. During the summer many thousands of birds breed in Orkney, and the cliff colonies of seabirds are especially impressive at Marwick Head in Birsay, and Noup Head on Westray. Both Grey and Common Seals also breed. Otters are not uncommon, but rarely seen.

Maritime Heath, for example, on Papay and on Rousay, is a favourite nesting site for Terns and Arctic Skuas. It also harbours the rare *Primula scotica*. The Heather Moorland on the hills is home to Hen Harrier, Merlin and Short-eared Owl as well as many species of waders, with particularly large numbers of Curlew and Oystercatcher.

Orkney is also well situated for migrants and winter visitors such as the Great Northern Diver, Long-tailed Duck, Goldeneye, Iceland Gull and other species. The harbours at Kirkwall and Stromness are both good places to look for gulls and sea ducks. The lochs of Stenness and Harray in the vicinity of the Standing Stones are excellent places to see wildfowl in all seasons. Huge numbers of Greylag Geese overwinter along with smaller numbers of Barnacle Geese and Whooper Swans.



Hen Harrier (Katabelly)



Baby Grey Seal (Selkie)



Atlantic Puffin (Tammy Norie)

*Primula scotica* - unique to Orkney, Caithness and Sutherland



# NATURE AND ENVIRONMENT



*Garthma Geo and the Stack of Yesnaby, West Mainland*

**ENVIRONMENT** The natural environment of Orkney has been formed by the interaction of land, sea and ice. Each island is different, resulting in a wide variety of scenery and habitat in a small area.

The islands are geologically an extension of northeast Caithness. They are composed of Devonian Middle Old Red Sandstone, except for Hoy which is largely Upper Old Red Sandstone.

About 350 million years ago *Lake Orcadie* covered an area from the Norwegian coast to the Moray Firth. Up to 4,000m of mud and sand sediment, eroded from the surrounding mountains, accumulated on the lake floor. The tropical climate encouraged the proliferation of many species, especially fish.

Fossil beds were laid down in the sediments, which are today most evident in the West Mainland, especially in Sandwick and Birsay. Examples can now be seen at the Fossil and Heritage Centre in Burray as well as in the Stromness Museum. Some species had scales which formed strong armour, while others resemble modern fish.

Fossilised plants and invertebrates also occur. At Yesnaby stromatolites can be seen. These are the fossilised remains of blue-green algae (cyanobacteria). Primitive plants like this are thought to have created the oxygen-rich atmosphere of Earth by fixing large amounts of Carbon Dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>).

*Basalt boulders from an igneous intrusion, Yesnaby*



*Exposed Granite Basement, Yesnaby*





Only at Stromness, Yesnaby and on Graemsay are the basement rocks visible. Similar to those of nearby Sutherland, they date from about 1,000 million years ago. There are also small exposures

of volcanic rocks, lavas and tuffs. These are mostly evident as intrusions, or dykes.

Heavy metals frequently accumulate at the junctions between impermeable meta-

morphic rocks such as granite and later permeable sedimentary beds due to chemical reactions. In Orkney this has resulted in small accumulations of Lead ore, and possibly commercial quantities of

*Fossil fish may be seen at the Fossil & Vintage Centre*



*Horse teeth stromatolite, Yesnaby*



# NATURE AND ENVIRONMENT



*The Kame of Hoy is mostly Upper Old Red Sandstone, underlain by volcanic beds and Middle Old Red Sandstone*

Uranium in the area between Stromness and Yesnaby.

Having been heavily glaciated during the last Ice Age, the

landscape is of smooth rolling hills, shallow sounds and bays.

Since the ice receded about 13,000 years ago, the area has been inundated by rising sea

levels to form the present vista of islands and water. Sea level rose too fast to allow much cliff erosion, and thus in many sheltered parts of Orkney shores slope gently down to a depth of about 70m. On the more exposed western side the spectacular cliffs as well as many other current coastal features are millions of years old.

*The Gloup in Deerness is a partially collapsed cave*



The rock lends itself to the formation of impressive coastal scenery. Rock stacks such as the Old Man of Hoy, large caves which may collapse

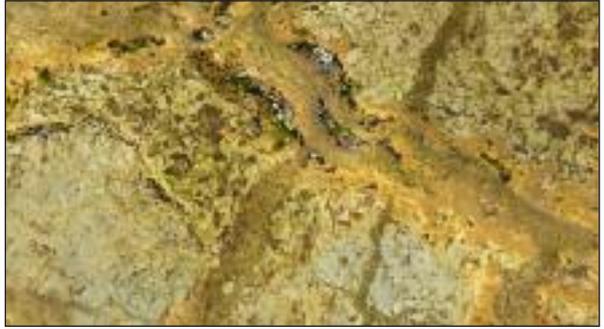
*Horse teeth stromatolite, Yesnaby*



to form *gloups* (ON *Gluppa*, precipitous chasm) as at the Gloop in Deerness, and natural arches such as at the Vat of Kirbuster, on Stronsay. Features like these are the result of erosion by the sea along weak points in the rocks and are continuously evolving.

The sandstone weathers to form good soils, which give the characteristic grassland and heath vegetation. Overlain with a coat of glacially deposited clay, much of the land makes for good agricultural soil, with only the higher areas being covered in blanket peat. The present environment is very much a combination of geology, climate and the effects of man with his crops and animals.

Due to exposure there is considerable stress on vegetation. Combined with the relatively short growing season, this limits the crops which may be grown, and severely stunts the growth of trees. At present about half the area is agricultural pasture and half semi-natural heath with many montane characteristics.



*Crack marks at the Brough of Birsay*



*Geo with igneous dyke, Black Craig, Stromness*



*The Old Red Sandstone rock strata are very obvious*

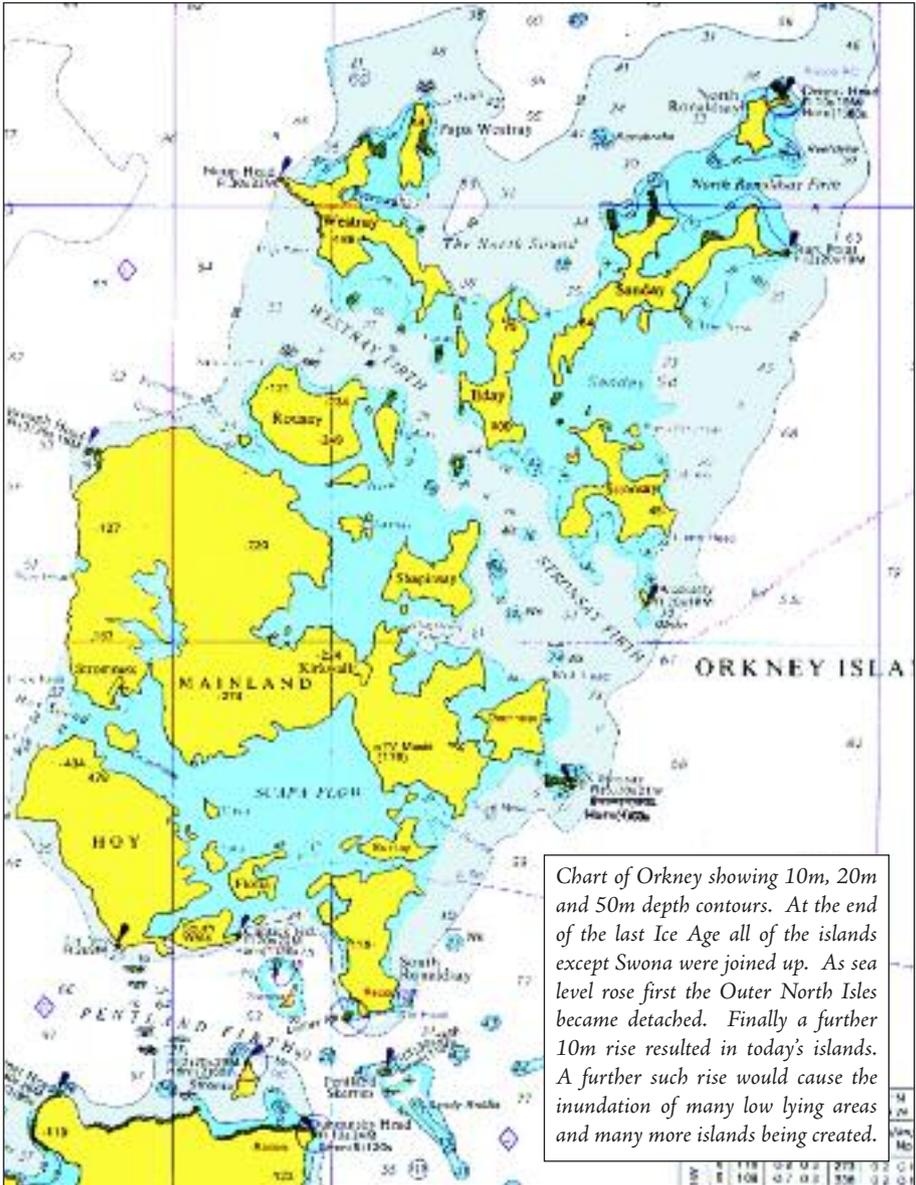
*Ripple marks on rocks, Yesnaby*



*Volcanic trap dyke*



# NATURE AND ENVIRONMENT



Reproduced from Admiralty chart 219 by permission of the Controller of HMSO and the UK Hydrographic Office

The coastline with its many bays, sounds and rounded islands is about 800km (500mi) long, and is made up of cliffs (20%), rocky banks or low cliffs (70%) and sandy

beaches (10%). There are wind blown sand links covered with machair vegetation in some areas, particularly in the North and South Isles and the East Mainland.

The shallow seas around much of the coast abound with islets skerries and submerged reefs. However the Pentland, Westray and Stronsay Firths are much

deeper as are the waters to the east, north and west. recent surveys have discovered extensive offshore sand dunes and underwater valleys.

The dramatic vertical cliffs of Hoy are composed of relative hard Upper Old Red Sandstone, which erodes quite slowly. They run from the Kame in the north to Torness in the south and rise to 351m at St John's Head. This 16km (10mi) coast presents a spectacular view from the ferry, and makes a hard but satisfying walk.

The northwest corner of Hoy has the largest volcanic intrusion in Orkney. Ashy and Basalt layers as well as columnar lava can be seen at the Kame, at the base of the Old Man and at Rackwick, while the Witter is a volcanic plug. Igneous intrusions are also present in Graemsay, in Stromness and at Yesnaby.

Apart from Hoy, where the Ward Hill reaches 479m, Orkney is not very high. The low lying, rounded landscape with rolling hills and gentle valleys has resulted in several large lochs, some connected to the sea. There are numerous bogs and marshy areas. Many of them have been drained, but substantial areas have been preserved as they are important wildlife habitats, or have proved of little agricultural value..

Thus a combination of geology, glaciation, erosion by sea



*The Old Man of Hoy from the south*

and weather combined with the effects of the various species which have established themselves since the Ice Age (including man) has created the current green and blue

welcoming landscape which greets both first-time visitors and returning natives so pleasantly when they get off the boat or aircraft.

*Remains of ancient trees are exposed at low tide in several places*





*Midsummer light over the North Isles from Wideford Hill at 01:00 - The Grimlins or Simmer Dimm*

**CLIMATE** Orkney's climate is remarkably equable for its latitude. The weather is greatly influenced by the sea, and in particular the North Atlantic Drift, which ensures that sea temperatures only vary by about 5 degrees between summer and winter. The most noticeable feature to the visitor is the wind, which is unimpeded by the smooth terrain. While Orcadians might like *having the benefit of the wind*, it also controls or affects all kinds of things including buildings, farming, fishing, gardening and, of course, the natural environment and wildlife.

Orkney is also surprisingly mild, with relatively little variation in mean temperature between winter and summer, under 10 degrees, and normally very little snow or frost. May and June are the sunniest, calmest and driest months

while December and January are the least sunny, windiest and wettest months.

Weather is however very variable, depending as it does on the interaction of the warm Atlantic, cool North Sea and associated weather systems. Electrical storms are rare, as is fog, except in spring and summer when the wind is in the south east.

The weather is greatly influenced by the Scottish Mainland, the Sutherland mountains offering considerable protection from westerly weather and ensuring a relatively low rainfall of about 900mm (36in). At all times of year conditions are very variable, but when high pressure is established over the North Sea and Scandinavia, a good spell can be expected.

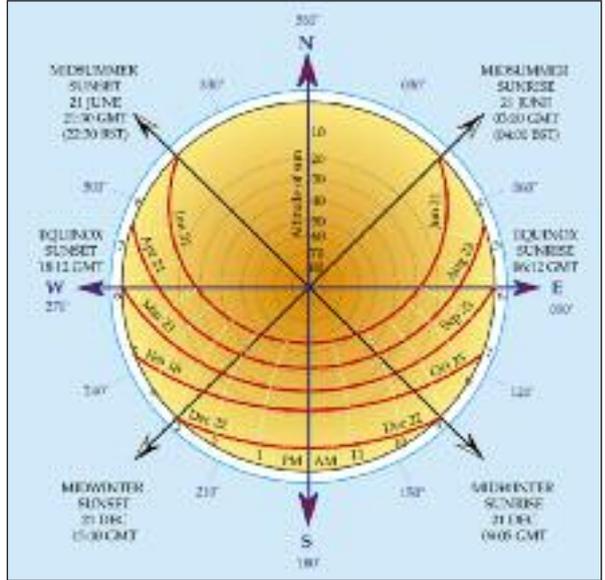
*The Northern Lights or Aurora Borealis are often seen in winter*



The growing season in Orkney extends for only about half of the year, or a month less than in southern Scotland. However, this is greatly compensated by the long hours of daylight in summer, when it never really gets dark, and the sun is above the horizon for over 18 hours. The corollary of course is midwinter, when the sun is very low in the sky, and is only above the horizon for about 6 hours a day.

As for the best time to come to Orkney, it is hard to advise. At any season several types of weather may be had in a day. The following gives an idea of most and least. Bear in mind that there are often spells of very pleasant weather in winter, in between the windy days. These can themselves be very exhilarating. Although it rains on an average of 240 days a year, the rain is usually of short duration.

The combination of variable, maritime weather and the wide changes in day length provide a huge variety of light-



**SOLAR DIAGRAM FOR ORKNEY**

*This diagram illustrates the large seasonal variation in the altitude and azimuth of the sun at Orkney's latitude. Whilst in summer the sun is above the horizon for nearly 18 hours, in winter it is visible for barely 6 hours. The position of the sun can be estimated for any day and time, which is useful for photographers, artists, or just those wishing to see any particular place in the best light.*

ing conditions, making months and at most times of Orkney a Mecca for artists day, indeed all four seasons and photographers in all may occur in one day!

*Snow is usually short-lived in Orkney, but when it comes it can be beautiful*

**WHEN TO COME TO ORKNEY**

Sunniest	April, May, June
Dullest	November to January
Driest	May and June
Wettest	October to January
Calmmest	May, June, July
Windiest	November to March
Warmest	June to September
Coolest	December to March
Best	January to December



# HABITATS



*Aerial view of Loch of Harray and Loch of Stenness with Hoy in the background*



*Heather Moorland at Loomachun, Evie*



*Backskail Bay, Sanday*



## MAIN HABITAT TYPES

- Open Sea
- Sheltered Bays and Estuaries
- Skerries and Islets
- Small Islands (no rats)
- Exposed Cliffs
- Low Cliffs and Banks
- Low Rocky Coasts
- Sandy Beaches & Dunes
- Machair
- Saltmarsh
- Maritime Heath
- Moorland
- Montane
- Marshes and Bogs
- Lochs, Ditches and Burns
- Farmland
- Roadside verges
- Woodland and Gardens
- Buildings and Ruins

**HABITATS** For its size, Orkney has a very wide range of habitats, from exposed sea coasts to sheltered gardens. Much of the non-cultivated land is now protected under a variety of names with somewhat arcane acronyms such as SSSI, NSA SPA or SAC, but in fact all of Orkney is special for its natural history.

Many of these areas are included in the thirteen Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) Reserves, four Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) and two Council Nature Reserves, all of which may be visited or observed

from public roads, paths or hides. They are all described in more detail in the relevant gazetteer sections. Some places are off limits in the breeding season, while those on small uninhabited islands can be hard to access.

Extreme care must be taken at all times to avoid disturbing breeding birds and animals, or

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damaging plants. Despite the *Right to Roam* legislation, permission should be sought before entering ground to which public access is not

obvious. In practice the car can often provide an excellent hide, while most plants can be observed in public areas, especially on verges, waste ground, ditches, burns and banks.

**RSPB RESERVES**

Mainland	Hobbister	Moorland
	Birsay Moors	Moorland
	Marwick Head	Sea Cliffs
	Loons & Loch of Banks	Wetland
	Brodgar	Farmland, Wetland
Islands	Cottascarth & Rendall Moss	Moorland
	Copinsay	Island, Sea cliffs
	Rousay, Trumland	Moorland
	Egilsay, Onziebust	Farmland
	Shapinsay, Mill Dam	Wetland
	Westray, Noup Head	Sea Cliff
	Papay, North Hill	Maritime Heath
	Hoy	Moorland, Sea cliffs

**SCOTTISH WILDLIFE TRUST RESERVES**

Mainland	Harray Road End	Moorland
Islands	Shapinsay, Holm of Burglee	Maritime Heath
	Linga Holm, Stronsay	Island, Seals
	Hill of White Hammars, Hoy	Coastal heath, cliffs

**SPECIAL AREAS OF CONSERVATION (SAC)**

Faray & Holm of Faray, Loch of Stenness, Sanday, Stromness Heaths & Coast, Hoy

**LOCAL NATURE RESERVES (Orkney Islands Council)**

Mull Head, Deerness, (Eynhallow also belongs to the Council)

**NATIONAL SCENIC AREA (NSA)**

Hoy and West Mainland

**SITES OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST (SSSI)**

Total of 36 (details from Scottish Natural Heritage local office)

**SCOTTISH  
 NATURAL  
 HERITAGE**



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 Kirkwall, Orkney  
 KW15 1AW  
*Working with  
 Scotland's people to care  
 for our  
 natural heritage*