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ORPHIR (ON *Orfjara*, land joined to an island at low water) forms the north shore of Scapa Flow. The parish may lack the spectacular archaeological sites of other parts of Orkney, but it has much to offer the visitor, including beaches, wildlife and historical sites.

The A964 runs west from Kirkwall through Orphir, affording many fine views over Scapa Flow along the way. The first viewpoint is from Greenigoe (HY405075) from where oil tankers, and sometimes warships, as well as the oil slick from *HMS Royal Oak*, may be seen. During the

two World Wars there were often many ships moored in this great natural harbour.

Hobbister RSPB Reserve (HY390065) lies on both sides of the road. There is parking here and a pleasant walk along the track which leads to the Highland Park Distillery's peat cuttings. The Reserve offers fine moorland scenery with expansive views of Scapa Flow. Hen Harriers, Merlin, Peregrine, Short-eared Owls and Red-throated Divers all frequent the area.

The low cliffs facing Scapa Flow are a good vantage point from which to view wildfowl



Loch of Kirbister

Panoramic view of Scapa Flow from Hobbister



in winter. Otters may also be seen in this area, especially in the early morning or late evening. The sheltered banks here and at nearby Waulkmill Bay have many interesting plants.

Waulkmill Bay is an attractive shallow inlet with very dramatically weathered sandstone rocks and a flat sandy beach. It can be a very pleasant place for a picnic, or a dip in the sea on a fine day. This is one of the warmer places to bathe in Orkney, due to the wide, flat expanse of sand which heats up on a sunny day and thus imparts a few degrees to the sea as the tide comes in.

Kirbister Loch is a good trout fishing loch. It is connected to the sea by the short Mill Burn, up which Sea Trout migrate to spawn. Orkney Trout Fishing Association have their hatchery in the old pump-house here. The loch is also a popular place for windsurfers. carrying on westwards, the landscape becomes much more agricultural on the fertile coastal plain. Orphir Village is centred around the school and church with many new houses.



St Nicholas Round Kirk was built around 1122 by Earl Haakon Paulson



The 1757 Kirk, now gone, beside the mostly-demolished Round Kirk

Round Kirk That Orphir was important in Norse times is clear from mentions in the Sagas and ruins such as the St Nicholas Kirk (HY334043) at the Bu. The Round Kirk is thought to be the church built by Earl Haakon Paulson, in atonement for the murder of Earl Magnus. The plan reflects the circular Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It was built after his return from Jerusalem about 1123, Previously known as the *Girth House* (ON *Grid*, sanctuary, or peace), the church was largely demolished in 1757, to build a new church, itself now long gone.



Round Kirk - window in apse

Orkney Islands Council maintains the Orkneyinga Saga Centre near the Round Kirk. This tells the story of the

**ORPHIR
ATTRICTIONS**

- Greenigoe viewpoint
- Hobbister RSPB Reserve
- Waulkmill Bay
- Loch of Kirbister
- St Nicholas Round Kirk
- Orkneyinga Saga Centre
- Coastal walk Bu to Breck Ward Hill of Orphir
- Bay of Houton
- Midland Hill viewpoint
- Military sites, Houton Centre near the Round Kirk.
- Scorrabrae viewpoint
- Hall of Clestrain

Orkney Museum

Norse Earls of Orkney using the *Orkneyinga Saga* and an audiovisual display. The colourful tales are placed in their historical context, and many places with Viking connections in Orkney are highlighted.

The Earl's Bu mentioned in the Sagas was probably somewhere in this vicinity. Excavations confirm the existence of substantial ruins, some of which are exposed near the graveyard. Earl Thorfinn the Mighty may have lived here and certainly Earl Paul and his son Haakon both did, at least for part of the year. The buildings were probably constructed from wood and turf on stone foundations.

Norse Watermill Recently a 10th century vertical-axis watermill was discovered next to the church yard here. The lade, wheel chamber and tail-race are all still lined with stones. This type of mill was common in Orkney and Shetland until recent times. The Click Mill (HY326228), near Dounby is a restored 19th

century example. An extensive midden deposit here contained much domestic refuse, including fish bones from Cod very much larger than those caught locally today and a runic inscription on a cattle rib. Much remains to be discovered at this interesting site.

While Paul Haakonson was still Earl, Sweyn Asleifson made a dramatic escape through a window here, after murdering Sweyn Briosteip. This happened at Yule when the Earls usually invited many people to the hall to join in the celebrations. He made his escape to Aurrida Firth and then via Damsay to Bishop William in Egilsay.

Another story shows how Iceland and Orkney were in close communication in the 11th century. Earl Sigurd was hearing the story of the burning of Njal and his family in Iceland from Gunnar Lambison, who when asked how they bore the burning, said that one of them had given way to tears. Kari, a friend of Njal's who had just arrived from Iceland, on hear-



German High Seas Fleet in Scapa Flow on 28 May 1919, with the WWI Houton flying boat base in the foreground - from Midland Hill

ing this drew his sword and beheaded Gunnar. Blood flew all over the Earl, who ordered Kari killed, but no one would do the deed. It was decided that he had only done what he had the right to do.

Houton takes its name from the nearby headland (ON *Hofud*), and is the departure point of the ferry to Hoy and Flotta, as well as for the oil terminal workers at Flotta. The ferries *Hoy Head* and *Thorsvoe* do several return trips per day and passengers with cars should make reservations in advance to ensure there is a space for their car. Tel (01856) 811397.

The Vikings called Houton Bay *Medallandshofn*, and the bay is indeed well sheltered,

with a shore very suitable for pulling up ships. In late 1263, King Haakon Haakonson beached his ship *Kristsudin* at Houton, along with the rest of his battered fleet after the disastrous foray to the Clyde. The largest vessel yet built by the Norse, she was said to have been a 37-sesser (bench) ship, which implies a crew of at least 100 men.

Holm of Houton (ON *Orfirisey*, the island which *Orffjara* refers to, is tidal and makes the Bay of Houton an excellent harbour. It can be reached on foot at low tide and offers interesting views over the Bay of Houton and the hills beyond.

The Hall of Clestrain (ON *Klett-strond*, rocky beach) was built about 1769 by Patrick Honeyman of Graemsay. The estate factor was the Stromness merchant, John Rae, who became the local agent for the Hudson's Bay Company. The family lived in this house for a time. His fourth son, John, the famous Arctic explorer, was born here in 1813.



Winter dawn over Scapa Flow and Houton



Korbister Loch on an icy winter morning

Hoy Hills and the Bring Deeps from Scorra Dale



Norse type mill at the Bu



Waulkmill has a fine sandy beach





Searchlight mounting below Houton Head



World War II gun mounting on Houton Head

The house is in classical style with pavilions, front steps and has three floors, but is unusual in being square. It is approached by a fine driveway. Inside the Hall today little remains, except the large windows (though many are bricked up), a two-metre length of metal banister and the stone staircase. A fierce gale ripped off the roof in 1952 and after this it was used for keeping livestock.

Renovation of the Hall of Clestrain is an integral part of the planned Orkney Boat Museum, which "will be a venue for the storage, collection, conservation, research and display of boats and associated boat building artefacts relating to Orkney." Small craft played a very important part in Orkney's economic and social life and it is hoped that a wide variety of boats will be acquired.

The Hall of Clestrain was the birthplace of John Rae



Midsummer sunset from the Ward Hill over Skaill Loch



Ward Hill summit in winter, view over Scapa Flow and Hoy Hills

WALKS AND VIEWPOINTS

From the Round Kirk there is a footpath to the shore which leads along the coast to Breck (HY346038). The Kirk and Viking ruins contrast strongly with the Oil Terminal in the background. There are lovely views across Scapa Flow from the low shore.

Either return via the road or continue along the coast to Swanbister Bay, where there is a pier used in World War I and the Hillock of Breakna (HY353051), which may be a broch. Further east, seals may be hauled up on Smoogro Skerry, while the low cliffs of Waulkmill Bay shelter many wild flowers. There is a bridge over the Mill Burn, which is

an excellent place to gather Mussels just so long as there is an "r" in the month.

Viewpoints From Scorra Dale (HY322054) there is a fine vista of the Hoy Hills, Graemsay, Hoy Sound and Stromness. A hill track leads south from here to the top of Midland Hill (HY321049, 158m) and the scene which photographer Tom Kent captured in late 1918 of the German Fleet at anchor comes easily to mind.

There is another good panoramic view over Scapa Flow from Houton Head. The Barrel of Butter is so named because its owner had to pay the Earl a barrel of butter in skat. It looks remarkably like a submarine from here and was once shelled by the British Navy!

Ward Hill On a good clear day the climb to the top of the Ward Hill (ON *Varda*, beacon or cairn, HY335080, 268m) is well worth the effort. The summit is accessed by a track to the west of Orphir

Village. The view is complementary to that from Wideford Hill and takes in the whole of Scapa Flow and Hoy, as well as Stromness and much of the West Mainland. At midsummer the sun sets over the Bay of Skaill from here. From below the Ward Hill peat tracks lead to Bigswell and Ireland in Stenness. In this area many of the moorland species birds and plants may be seen.

Wild flowers The roadsides of Hobbister Brae are among the best places in Orkney to see Primroses, or *May Flowers*. The many side roads and tracks with uncut verges are excellent sites to seek out interesting plants and insects in summer. Waulkmill Bay with its sheltered banks and surrounding moorland is an especially good place to look for wild flowers as well as curiously worn rocks and Otters.

HOUTON BAY LODGE

The ideal choice for your visit to Orkney



Lynda and Alfred Baird welcome you to the Houton Bay Lodge on the site of a World War I seaplane base at Houton Bay on the edge of Scapa Flow. The Lodge offers an extensive range of high quality facilities and services to suit the discerning visitor - all under one roof.



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