



Crown copyright

and stands above low cliffs on the seaward side. Puffins breed in rabbit burrows along the top of these cliffs, one of the very few places on the Mainland where they can be seen. Brough Head is a good place for sea watching during bird migration times. Killer, Minke and Pilot Whales are occasionally seen from here, possibly attracted by the rich feeding where tides meet.

The island is only accessible when the tide is out via a concrete path which leads across the rocks of Brough Sounds. This path can be slidy and should not be crossed if it is covered, as the strong tide can be dangerous. There is also frequently a big surge when the seas are high. In early summer the turf takes on a pink and then a blue tinge as it in turn becomes covered in a sea of flowering Thrift and then Spring Squill.

Neolithic No chambered cairns have so far been excavated in Birsay, although there are numerous *tumuli* which could contain one. The

BIRSAY The Vikings called the whole area of Birsay and Harray "Byrgisherad" (ON *Byrgisey*, island of the enclosure or rampart and *Herad*, district). Birsay was important in Viking times and was a favourite residence of the Earls as well as the first seat of the Bishop, who only moved to Kirkwall during the building of St Magnus Cathedral.

Saga, he built Orkney's first cathedral, Christchurch, at Birsay for his new Bishop, in about 1057. Most of the north of Birsay became known as The Barony and was Bishopric land from about 1060 until 1595.

The Brough of Birsay (HY235285), is a very attractive grassy island off the northwest corner of the Mainland. This tidal island has a lighthouse, which was built in 1925, as a gas-powered automatic. It was converted to solar power in 2001

Earl Thorfinn the Mighty (ruled 1014-1064) lived here and in the latter part of his colourful time as Earl (as described in the *Orkneyinga*

Aerial view of the Brough of Birsay from the west



Carpets of Thrift cover the Brough of Birsay in late May and early June

Standing Stone of Quoynbune stands in a field near the Community Hall, and is said to go down to the Loch of Boardhouse for a drink every Hogmanay. One local worthy who went to investigate the treasure said to lie under the stone was crushed when it returned with him still in the hole, and is said to still be there.

mal bones, but it has not been fully excavated. It may well be a small stalled chambered cairn.



Standing Stone of Quoynbune

The Knowe of Buckquoy (HY245283) is a low mound in a field on the road to the Brough.. It contains wall-faces, peat-ash and burnt ani-

Aerial view of the Brough of Birsay from the west



- BIRSAY ATTRACTIONS**
- Brough of Birsay
 - Point of Buckquoy
 - Skipi Geo
 - Earl's Palace
 - St Magnus Kirk
 - Birsay Bay
 - Birsay Links
 - Barony Mills
 - Oxtro Broch
 - Standing Stone of Quoynbune
 - Loch of Boardhouse
 - Northside
 - Yellow Bird Gallery
 - Burnmouth
 - Loch of Swannay
 - Costa Head & Hill
 - Loch of Hundland
 - RSPB Birsay Moors
 - Marwick Head
 - Kitchener Memorial
 - RSPB Marwick Head
 - RSPB The Loons
 - Sandgeo
 - Outshore Point
 - Cruaday Quarry
 - Vestrafield
 - Twatt Airfield
 - Loch of Banks
 - Kirbuster Farm Museum

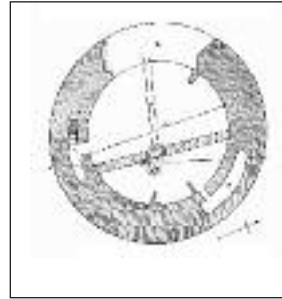


The Knowe of Buckquoy may possibly be a chambered cairn

Brochs Compared to most of Orkney, Birsay seems to have very few brochs. The Broch of Oxtro is the only such visible site in the parish. It was cleared out in 1863 to reveal a complex site, where the disused broch was reused as a burial site, probably Pictish. Several short cists, one of which contained a stone with a Pictish Eagle symbol, were found. Sadly today all there is left to see is a circular pile of stones in a field.

Picts The Brough was inhabited long before the Vikings arrived, the earliest evidence being from the late 6th century of Celtic people who may have been Christians. A broken symbol stone with the figures of three warriors and other Pictish symbols was found here, as well as a smaller stone with an incised cross.

A replica of the large stone is on the site and it seems that the Brough was the home of



Oxtro Broch excavator's plan

an important Pictish leader in the 7th or 8th century. A Pictish cross slab found here is in the site museum which is open in summer.

The only Pictish structure visible is the small well east of the church wall. However, excavations have revealed many Pictish artefacts. Bronze casting was an important activity and many moulds, crucibles, pieces of bronze and fragments of glass were found

RCAHMS



Bone spoon from Buckquoy

Orkney Museum



Carved pin from Buckquoy

Orkney Museum



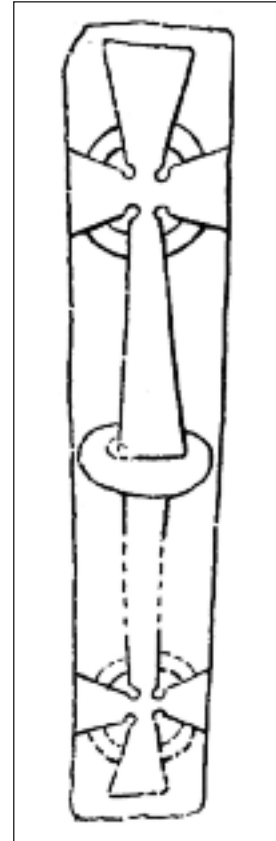
Pictish-style comb from Buckquoy

Orkney Museum



Spindle whorl with Ogam inscription

Orkney Museum



Pictish cross slab from the Brough

around the well, suggesting that it may have been used to quench work. On some moulds the design of the piece to be cast could be seen, confirming that the designs were Pictish. Bone pins and combs of Pictish type were found, as well as a possibly 5th century penannular broch and a lead disc with an inscribed trumpet-pattern spiral. Together with the impressive symbol stone, the artefacts suggest that skilled Pictish craftsmen were at work on the Brough for several centuries before the Vikings arrived.



Rock strata on Point of Buckquoy

Point of Buckquoy (ON *Bygg-kvi*, Bere Field, HY247284) This headland was formerly joined to the Brough of Birsay. Rock strata exposed below the road show the effects of variation in the level of Lake Orcadie in Devonian times. It is being steadily eroded by the sea to reveal stonework and midden along the tops of the banks on the west side. Several Pictish and Norse houses have been excavated here, which date from the 7th century onwards.

Artefacts Both Pictish and Norse artefacts were found in these houses, which has been taken as evidence that the Norse take-over was a continuum rather than a sudden event. The finds included a

spindle whorl with an Ogam inscription, a white stone with brown spots, which may originally have been red (a magic stone?), pins and combs.

The inscription was originally assumed to be in Irish and to read, anticlockwise, "BEND-DACTANIML, a Blessing on the soul of L", but an alternative reading, clockwise, yields "AVSALAQETMIQ, Asa made me" in Old Norse.

The houses were revealed in the face of the banks by a storm and the earlier ones resembled the figure of 8 Pictish house at Gurness, while the later, more rectangular ones were early Norse. Excavations at Beachview, Saevar Howe (HY247270) and near St Magnus Church

Pictish well on the Brough of Birsay





Aerial view of the Norse settlement and church on the Brough of Birsay

have revealed more Pictish and Norse burials, buildings and artefacts as well as evidence of Neolithic habitation, further emphasising the importance of the area over a long period.

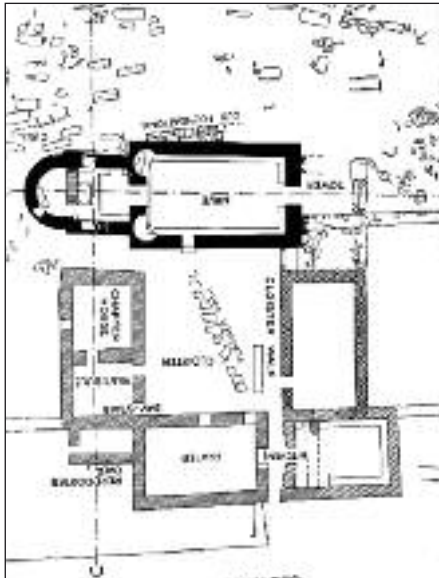
Vikings Most of the structures visible on the Brough today are Norse and date from 9th to the 13th centuries when

this was the site of an important settlement. Considerable coastal erosion has taken place and thus many structures may have been destroyed. In addition several excavations have been done over the years and not published, further confusing interpretation of the site. The small Romanesque church dates from the early 12th century and is surrounded

by the remains of other buildings, which have been interpreted as being monastic. Foundations and walling beneath this church may be of Pictish origin, perhaps of an earlier chapel.

Farther up the slope are the foundations of several Norse longhouses, which are up to 20m long as well as smaller

Plan of St Peter's Kirk and the "monastery"



RCA/HMS



Mould for casting a pin

Moulds for casting jewellery pieces



Orkney Museum

Orkney Museum

outhouses and various other walls. Some of these may well have been byres, but presumably most cattle would have been kept on the Mainland. These buildings date from the 9th to the 11th centuries, but some were constructed on top of earlier houses.

There are further ruins of Norse houses near the cliffs to the northeast of the main site which mostly date from the 10th century. On the east side of the church lie extensive domestic buildings, part of which may be *Earl Thorfinn's Palace*, complete with a bath-house or sauna with an under-floor central heating system.

Some think it more likely that his residence was on the Mainland side, perhaps under the site of the present Palace. However without other evidence of a substantial Norse settlement this seems unlikely.

The earlier levels contained both Norse and Pictish artefacts and lie beneath the later structures now seen. The first Norse buildings also seem to be better built than the later ones, but since no detailed report exists, it is hard to



St Peter's Kirk and surrounding structures from the entrance to the site

understand the sequence of the site. To the north of the church are ruins which are very similar to the ruins of the Bishop's Palace at Gardar in Greenland.

By analogy they may thus be the Bishop's residence in Birsay. The top part of what

may be a Viking slipway for hauling boats lies at the edge of the cliff. This has been considerably eroded in the 20th century, clearly showing how quickly this process can occur. This structure has also been interpreted as a grand entrance to the monastic site.



Large Norse house on the slope above the kirkyard

Paved area with drains leading to Norse slipway



The sauna or bath-house with underfloor heating





Aerial view of the Earl's Palace, built in the 1500s for Robert Stewart

Earls' Palace The Earl's Palace (HY247278), was built by the notorious Earl Robert Stewart in the late 16th century, though now a gaunt ruin, was described in 1633 as "a sumptuous and stately dwelling". Consisting of four wings around a courtyard, with three towers, the building was of two storeys, except for one lower tower. Many gun-loops are evident and there is a well in the courtyard.

A 17th century drawing shows an armorial panel with the date 1574 and "REO" for Robert Earl of Orkney.

Christchurch Controversy exists over the site of Earl Thorfinn's Christchurch. While it may be the church on the Brough, which is dedicated to St Peter, local tradition says that it was in Birsay Village, possibly on the same site as St Magnus Church.

This church was built in 1760, but replaced a cruciform church built in 1664. In turn the latter most probably was a replacement or refurbishment of an earlier church. During recent repairs, evidence of a previous structure was found in the foundations and the suggestion is that the 11th century church where St Magnus' was first interred may have been in this area.

A stone built into the wall of a house adjoining the graveyard fits with one of the lintels of the church to read *Mons Bellus*, the name of the Bishop's residence. This lintel forms the bottom part of a 13th century lancet window from an older church. This tantalising piece of evidence suggests that the original Bishop's Palace built by Thorfinn might have been somewhere in the vicinity.

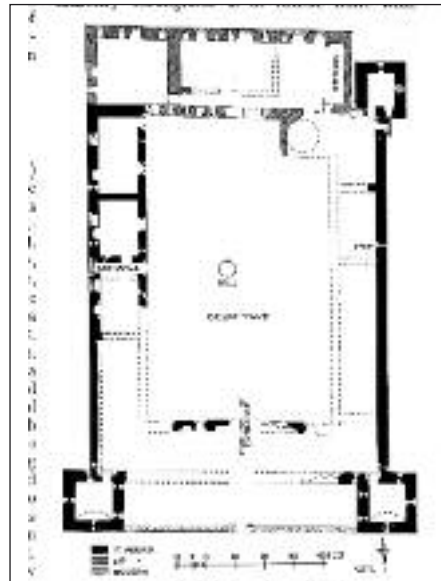
Plan of the Earl's Palace, Birsay



The Palace Village in about 1900



The Earl's Palace was very ruinous by 1900



The church is maintained by the St Magnus Church Birsay Trust and the key can be obtained from the shop.

Birsay Links South from The Palace the Birsay Links become a carpet of colourful wildflowers in summer. At the Point of Snusan (HY245274) there are remains of a 19th century Volunteers' battery. Mount Misery has never been properly investigated, but some *crude stone implements* were found. While the mound may well be natural, its name suggests otherwise as all other *Maesry* names in Orkney refer to chambered cairns.

Saevar Howe (ON *Saevar-haugr*, Sea Mound) is a large mound near the shore and appears to be a multi-period site with Pictish buildings overlain by early Norse ones and on top a later Christian Norse long-cist cemetery. In 1862 a fine small bell was found in what is now thought to be a late Norse context. Other finds may have been Neolithic.



Birsay links with Saevar Howe on the right

Shells & Rocks The shore around Birsay Bay is very interesting. The rock pools at low tide are full of marine life, with many invertebrates and species of seaweed. *Groatie Buckies* (Cowrie shells, so-called because they are common at John o'Groats) may be

found by the sharp-sighted in the rough shell sand, along with many other types of shell deposited by the rough seas of winter. Those interested in fossil plants should examine some of the large boulders on the Brough side.



Groatie Buckie



Bell found at Saevar Howe

St Magnus Kirk and graveyard



St Magnus Kirk interior





Boardhouse Mill showing lade and waterwheel



Boardhouse Mill interior



Kirbuster Farm Museum neuk bed

Kirbuster is an interesting jumble of buildings



Beremeal continues to be made here from the traditional four-rowed barley, which is still grown in Orkney and was previously used to make malt for Highland Park whisky.

The waterwheel is 4m in diameter and turns at 12rpm. It uses about 25,000 litres of water per hour at full load. Milling is done in winter, when water supplies are plentiful. The mill is open to visitors from May to September and is run by Birsay Heritage Trust. Tours include demonstrations of the machinery in operation and beremeal can be purchased from the shop.

Kirbuster Farm Museum
The old farm at Kirbuster (HY283255) is part of the Orkney Museum Service, and is well worth a visit to see the last surviving Orkney version of a "firehouse", lived in from 1732 until the early 1960s. This type of house had no chimney. Instead there was a fire-back in the middle of the room, and a hole in the roof, or *liora* (ON *ljós*, light), to let the smoke out, and the light in, while a *skylin board* (ON

Barony Mills (HY255274)
Birsay is often described as the *Garden of Orkney*, and has long been famous for its oats and barley. Boardhouse Mill is the only large watermill still in working order in Orkney. The last in a long series of mills on this site was built in 1873, the power source is the outflow of Boardhouse Loch.



Skipi Geo from the whalebone, which was erected about 1876 from a large beached cetacean

skyla, shelter) helped to remove the smoke.

Neuk beds built into the walls were a common feature on old Orkney houses. There is an interesting collection of farm machinery, domestic artefacts, a restored Victorian garden, sheep and poultry.

Skipi Geo There is a fine walk from the Point of Buckquoy (HY243283), to the whalebone at Skipi Geo (HY248284). This was erected about 1876 with a rib and vertebra from a large whale that came ashore here. Pupils from Dounby School restored the fishermen's hut at the head of the geo. Skipi Geo is dramatic on a rough day, while in

clear weather there is a panoramic view to the Brough, Westray and Rousay. Further east along the shore Whitaloo Point has a dramatic monoclinal fold in the rocks and overlooks the long narrow Langalebe Geo. There are many caves in this exposed coast.

Point of Garson There is a good view of the Brough and Birsay Bay from the Point of Garson (HY243268). The path continues along the cliffs all the way to Marwick Head and beyond to the Bay of Skaill. The walk from Birsay to Stromness is a marvellous experience for the fit.



The Brough of Birsay from Skipi Geo

Birsay Bay and the Brough from the Point of on a rough day from the Point of Garson





Aerial view of Marwick Head from the southeast

Marwick Head (HY225252, 87m) is one of three Orkney bird-cliffs which are RSPB reserves. A visit here in early summer is unforgettable. Many thousands of Guillemots, Razorbills, Kittiwakes and Fulmars, as well as a few Rock Doves, Puffins, and if you are lucky, a Peregrine, rear their young on Fishermen's sheds at Sand Geo, a short walk south of Marwick



the ledges. The senses of smell and hearing will be well stimulated! The cliff-tops are carpeted with Thrift, Sea Campion, Sea Plantain and other wild flowers. Many of the rocks have spectacular lichen growths.

Kitchener Memorial The Marwick cliffs are topped by

the imposing Kitchener Memorial, erected after the First World War to commemorate Lord Kitchener and the crew of *HMS Hampshire* (11,000tons), which was sunk off here on 5 June 1916 with the loss of all but 12 of her company. Kitchener, the Minister of War, was on his way to Russia to confer with the Czar's government.

A few years ago a salvage ship lifted some artefacts from the sunken cruiser. After some dispute most have ended up at the Scapa Flow Visitor Centre, Lyness. A small signalling gun is mounted at the carpark below Marwick Head. The divers confirmed that damage to the ship was consis-

tent with her being sunk by mines, which had been laid by the German submarine, U75.

The Memorial was unveiled in July 1926 by General Lord Horne with a salute by *HMS Royal Sovereign*. It was paid for by money raised by the people of Orkney and has the inscription, "This tower was raised by the people of Orkney in memory of Field Marshall Earl Kitchener of Khartoum on that corner of his country which he had served so faithfully nearest to the place where he died on duty. He and his staff perished along with the officers and nearly all the men of *HMS Hampshire* on 5th June, 1916"

WWII Radar was a key part of the defences and there was a Chain Home Low radar station on the North Side



"HMS Hampshire"

(HY274290) of Birsay, the remains of which can still be seen on the hill to the east of the Brough of Birsay. This was one of several remote stations serving the main site at Netherbutton in Holm. It supplied reports on low-flying aircraft and on shipping. Apparently for most of the war the radar equipment was much better housed than its operators.

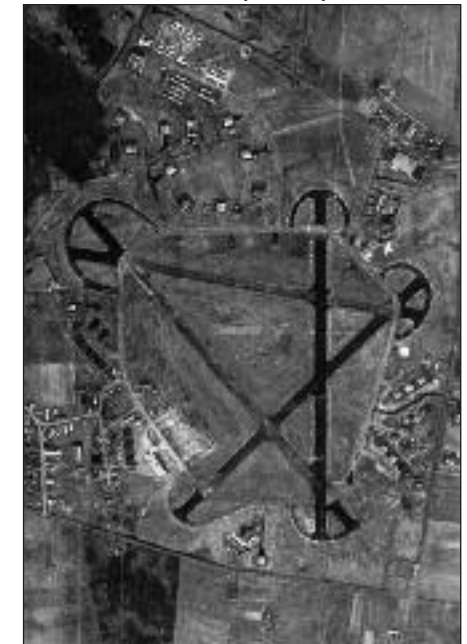
Twatt Airfield is between the Loch of Isbister and the Loch of Banks. The four 90ft wide runways, and four dispersal areas around the perimeter can still be seen as can revetments for the hangars. Today a number of buildings remain, including the control tower and operations block, the cinema foyer and squash court.

Two decoy airfields were also



Boiler from wrecked ship at Marwick

Kitchener and staff leaving "HMS Iron Duke"



Wartime aerial view of Twatt Airfield - "HMS Tern"



Aerial view of Birsay with Twatt Airfield, the Loch of Isbister and the Loons

built in Birsay, at Deasbreck and at the Burn o'Grid. In the event none of these were attacked by the enemy, but in December 1942 the Army shelled and destroyed the Deasbreck buildings during exercises. Twatt continued in

care and maintenance until 1957. During the 1970s the military considered a major base here, and in the 1980s there was talk of the oil industry using the former base, but both came to nothing.



The Loons from the hide

Marwick Head and the Choin from the south side of the bay



Marwick Bay (ON *Tjorn-vik*, Tarn Bay) has a large tidal lagoon, or *choin*, at low tide. There are restored fishermen's huts and boat nousts at Sand Geo (HY228235) The walk south to the Bay of Skail along low grassy cliffs is easy going. In summer, this is good place for Puffins, while the coastal wild flowers and lichens form a carpet of colour. A boiler is all that remains of a 19th century ship.

Nature Reserves The major RSPB Birsay Moors Reserve covers large parts of the Birsay and Evie Hill. There is good pedestrian access by peat-roads and keen birdwatchers will, in particular, be likely to see Hen Harriers, Merlin, Short-eared Owls and other moorland species. Great care should be taken to avoid disturbance during the breeding season. A good viewing point is from the layby near the farm of Howally (HY308245). A path runs into the Durkadale part of the Reserve from a car park (HY295252) near the south end of the Loch of Hundland.

Another RSPB Reserve is at the Loons and Loch of Banks (ON *Lon*, meadow flat near water HY245241), where a hide offers excellent opportunities to see a variety of species. The Loons is a large expanse of marsh with areas of water and much cover for breeding and visiting wildfowl and waders. Access is not allowed, but good views can be had from the hide and several

vantage points on the public road. This is one of the few places where the rare Pintail is regularly seen close-up.

Breeding waterfowl and waders may be observed on all three Birsay lochs, as well as migrants and wintering species. Boardhouse is host to many Pochard in winter, while Goldeneye seem to prefer Swannay. There are several good car viewpoints, perhaps the best during the breeding season being at the southwest end of the Loch of Hundland (HY293252), where Pintail can sometimes be seen.

Costa Head Also for the more energetic are the dramatic cliffs at Costa Head (HY310302, 125m). A track leads to the top of Costa Hill (151m) from where there is an excellent view to the North Isles and Evie. The remains of a 1950s experimental aero-generator lie near the top of the hill.

The cliff features here are on a grand scale. Ramna Geo is a great steep-sided cleft in the cliffs, while the rock stack nearby, the Standard (HY300303), stands sentinel ti Eynhallow Sound. Quaintly-named Inyama Hellia is another large geo further west. Puffins may be seen in the breeding season. Ravens and perhaps a Peregrine or two frequent the cliffs. On the northeast slope a broch overlooks Eynhallow Sound. It is sheltered by the cliff and is in a very isolated



Aerial view of Costa Head and the Loch of Swannay

position, but it is hidden from vessels approaching from the west.

Trout Fishing Birsay is well known for its excellent Brown Trout, which may be fished in

the Lochs of Boardhouse, Hundland and Swannay. All three lochs offer good angling, Swannay being a favourite of many local fishermen and noted for its large fish. Boats are available for hire.



Costa Head looking west towards Inyama Hellia, a large geo

Dinghies on the Loch of Swannay

