



Aerial view of Holm and the Churchill Barriers

SCAPA FLOW DEFENCES

The eastern approaches to Scapa Flow were lightly defended during WWI and at the start of WWII.

World War I There was a battery near Tower of Clett at Graemeshall in World War I, originally four 12-pounders mounted on concrete parapets. These were replaced in 1916 with three American 4-inch quick firing guns. Blockships were sunk in all of the sounds now blocked by the Churchill Barriers.

World War II At the start of the war Kirk Sound was neither defended by guns, searchlights or mine. Nor was it properly obstructed by blockships, thus allowing *U47* free access to Scapa Flow in October 1939 to sink *HMS Royal Oak*. Soon after two 12-pounders were mounted on the former WWI site.

Nearby a twin 6-pounder battery (HY495017) was installed by late 1940 in a concrete gun house with associated magazines and search-

lights. A further twin 12-pounder battery was installed on the south side of Lamb Holm (HY487002). With the completion of the Barriers the guns were moved to other sites in October 1943. The Graemeshall battery is typical of many around Orkney shores and is mostly intact.

LAMB HOLM No blockships remain visible at Barrier No.1, which blocks Kirk Sound, the entry route of the German submarine *U47* in 1939. There are however still interesting bits of ships for divers to explore. Barrier No.1 is also popular for sea angling due the deep water of Holm Sound.

Apart from the Italian Chapel, Lamb Holm has a derelict pier and a large quarry used in the construction of the Barriers. The quarry now has a Lobster hatchery, while most of the island is a grass airstrip. The

Kirk Sound from Lamb Holm showing works camp



remains of a World War II coastal defence battery lie east of the quarry.

The engine of the *Lycia* sticks above the surface at low tide at the north end of Barrier No.2 and a few other pieces can be seen at low tide, including the remains of the barge *F/C Pontoon*, which was used in the salvage of the German Fleet, and *Emerald Wings*, whose boiler shows at low water near the Glimps Holm shore. This is the most exposed Barrier.

GLIMPS HOLM has peat cuttings and an excellent sandy beach on the east side, which has increased in size due to the Barriers. There is shelter from the north, west and east with safe paddling or swimming. At low springs this is fine *Spoot* hunting ground. It is also sometimes a good place to find *Groatie Buckies* and other shells.

There is a wonderful panoramic view of Scapa Flow and the Barriers from the top of the island. Beside Barrier No.3, in Weddel Sound, is the



Graemeshall coastal defence battery and Churchill Barrier No.1

most complete and one of the oldest blockships, the *Reginald*, a 930ton iron 3-masted motor schooner, built in 1878, sunk in 1915 and used to store Lobster creels today. Many starlings roost inside her hull in the evenings.

On the west side are the *Empire Seaman* and *Martis*, only visible at low tide. No.3 Barrier is very exposed during southwest gales, but the eastern side of Weddel Sound is a sheltered anchorage.

Wildlife The Churchill Barriers provide many opportunities for birdwatching. Species which overwinter in Scapa Flow including Great Northern Divers, Long-tailed Ducks, Common and Velvet

Scoters are frequently seen. Eider Ducks can be seen here all year and breed in the heathland. Care should be taken to park safely and whilst walking across the Barriers.

Arctic Terns and a few Little Terns nest on Glimps Holm, f The sheltered banks above the shore are full of wild flowers in summer and are frequented by several species of butterflies and bumble bees.

Rough seas break over No.1 Barrier



CHURCHILL BARRIERS

LAMB HOLM

Italian Chapel
Remains of Camp 60
Orkney Wine
Lamb Holm Quarry
Lobster Hatchery
WWII gun battery
Blockship *Lycia*

GLIMPS HOLM

Weddel Sound beaches
Panoramic views
Nesting Terns
Blockship *Reginald*



Aerial view of Kirk Sound in 1944 with Churchill Barriers nearly complete

CHURCHILL BARRIER The possibility of permanently blocking the eastern entrance to Scapa Flow was considered even before the First World War. It took the *HMS Royal Oak* disaster to persuade the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, that blockships alone were inadequate. A survey was carried out and a scale model prepared, with final approval by Churchill in March 1940.

Meanwhile a further thirteen blockships were sunk and more coastal guns mounted to provide temporary protection. Work started with the arrival of the converted 15,500 ton liner *Almanzora*, with supplies and

equipment to start constructing the Churchill Barriers. While camps were built, the liner acted as a dormitory. Balfour Beatty were the contractors and soon the first lorry-loads of rock were being tipped at Holm.

Camps were built at the Rockworks, Holm, Lamb Holm and Warebanks, Burray, to accommodate the eventual 1,700 men involved in the work. In the early stages there were problems due to lack of labour. It was only in early 1942, with the surrender of Italy, that the labour problem was solved by using Italian POWs, who had recently been captured in Libya.

Over 50,000 concrete blocks were cast to clad the Barriers



New piers were built at Lamb Holm, Glimps Holm and Warebanks, and several large quarries were opened to provide stone. Power stations, railways and roads were constructed. Overhead cableways were shipped from Iraq where they had been in use building a bridge over the Tigris.

The first was erected at Weddell Sound in June 1941, while Kirk Sound followed in March 1942 (720m), Skerry Sound in July 1942 (750m) and Water Sound was last in September 1942 (765m). Kirk Sound had two cableways due to the greater depth and in total over 125,000 dumps of bolsters of rock were made. The bolsters were wire netting filled with rocks, each containing about 4 cubic metres of rock. A total of nearly 1 million cubic metres of rock was used.

The Italians first arrived in January 1942, and were none too pleased with the climate. They also complained that they were working on "works of a war-like nature near a naval base". The appointment of an Italian-speaking officer in charge of Lamb Holm (Camp 60) helped greatly and the Barriers were henceforth called *causeways*, for civilian use, but 70 years later we still call them *The Barriers*..

The prisoners were gradually involved more and more in the work and eventually by about the end of 1942 the underwater pile of bolsters was breaking the surface, such that no submarine could pass. By mid-1943 it was



Eventually rock started to appear above the surface

possible to scramble across from Lamb Holm to the Mainland and soon POWs were working at the blockworks in Holm. After the capitulation of Italy in September 1943 their status changed, so they were allowed a radio and bicycles, and were paid properly.

By summer 1943, Barrier No3 was complete, being clad entirely with five ton concrete blocks cast by the POWs on Burray at Warebanks (Camp 34) and in mid-1944 it was possible to drive from Holm to South Ronaldsay.

The barriers were clad with about 36,500 five-ton and 15,000 ten-ton concrete blocks, and over 6km (3.75 miles) of new roads were built by the time

Skerry Sound before Barrier No3



There was a very strong tide in Kirk Sound

they were officially opened on 12th May 1945 by the First Lord of the Admiralty, AV Alexander. The Churchill Barrier had taken over four years and £2.5m to build. As is usual with these sorts of things, the threat was long over, but the long term local

benefits were immense. In Spring 1945 the Italians left Orkney, going first to Skipton in Yorkshire, before being repatriated. A small group stayed behind for a few days, including Domenico Chiocchetti, to finish work on the Italian Chapel.



Opening of the Churchill Barrier on 12th May 1945 by AV Alexander

Barrier No3 starting to show





The interior of the Italian Chapel today

ITALIAN CHAPEL This chapel, "The Miracle of Camp 60", together with the statue of St George and the Dragon is all that now remains of Camp 60, or indeed any of the other construction sites of the Churchill Barriers, which were built between 1940 and 1945. The Italian Prisoners of War of Camp 60, who arrived in January 1942 to help build the Churchill Barriers, left behind an unusual memorial to the

war, the Italian Chapel on Lamb Holm.

To brighten up the cheerless camp of Nissen huts the Italians made paths with the one thing they had in abundance, concrete, and planted flowerbeds.

Domenico Chiocchetti made the statue from barbed wire and cement, to preside over the camp square. According to Bruno Volpi, "It depicts the patron saint

of soldiers, St George, about to kill the dragon, which represents evil. It symbolises a will to "kill" all misunderstandings among people of different cultures."

The prisoners soon had a theatre and a recreational hut complete with a concrete billiard table, but they lacked a chapel. In late 1943 the new commandant, Major Buckley, with the encouragement of the padre Father Giacobazzi and

Domenico Chiocchetti, had two Nissen huts joined end to end and the latter set to work, aided by a small number of other POWs. One end was to be the Chapel, the other a school.

One end of the corrugated iron hut was lined with plasterboard and an altar with altar-rail cast in concrete. Chiocchetti painted the Madonna and Child behind the altar which is based on a 19th century painting by Nicolo Barabino inspired by a card his mother had given to him when he left home in Moena for the war.

He also frescoed a White Dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit, at the centre of the vault and included the symbols of the four Evangelists around it, as well as two Cherubim and two Seraphim lower down, all from the card, which he kept throughout the war.

This was so successful that more plasterboard and artistic help was procured and the



The Italian Chapel and Churchill Barrier No.1 across Kirk Sound

whole of the hut was lined and then decorated. The upper parts appear like brick with vaulting, while the lower walls are painted to look like carved marble. The "vaults" in the ceiling are especially well executed, and the visual effect is quite stunning.

Palumbo, a metalworker, made candelabra and the rood screen and gates. After all this work the outside seemed mean and so a concrete façade was erected with the help of Bruttapasta, with an archway and pillars. A belfry was mounted on top and

a moulded head of Christ in red clay was placed on the front of the arch. The whole exterior of the hut was then covered with a thick coat of cement, never in short supply at Lambholm in 1944!

Chiocchetti had remained behind for several weeks in 1945 to finish the font, and returned to Orkney in 1960 after being sought out by the BBC, when he did much to restore the internal paintwork of the chapel. In 1961 his hometown, Moena, near Bolzano in the Dolomites, gift-

St George and the Dragon in 1944



Chiocchetti and Palumbo



Proud Italians pose outside their Chapel



The Chapel was in use from 1944

The Chapel in 1945





Visiting Italian ex-POWs in 1992

ed a wayside shrine, a carved figure of Christ erected outside the Chapel, to the people of Orkney. More recently much exterior work has been done to restore and preserve the Chapel and the memorial statue for the future.

The Italian Chapel is now one of the most-visited monuments in Orkney and is a fitting memorial to those lost in

St George and the Dragon today



wartime. Orkney's sites span at least 6,000 years from the Neolithic to the present and the Chapel provides a sharp contrast to the older ones. Chiocchetti, in addressing the Orcadian people, said, "The chapel is yours - for you to love and preserve. I take with me to Italy the remembrance of your kindness and wonderful hospitality. I shall remember you always, and my children shall learn from

me to love you. I thank (you)...for having given me the joy of seeing again the little chapel of Lambholm where I, in leaving, leave a part of my heart."

In recent years several of the ex-prisoners and their families have returned to visit their chapel. In 1992 a small group came on the 50th anniversary of their arrival on Lamb Holm. Sandra Tait spoke in Italian, "We welcome you on your return to the chapel which we all love and admire - this little bit of Italy and of the Catholic Church implanted in our hearts in Orkney".

Bruno Volpi, explained "What is it that made POWs work so feverishly with partially or totally inadequate means at their disposal? It was the wish to show to oneself first, and to the world then, that in spite of being trapped in a barbed wire camp, down in spirit,



The Chiocchetti family at the Italian Chapel in 1999

Sandra with visiting ex-POWs in 1995 at Water Sound



The exterior of the Italian Chapel today

physically and morally deprived of many things, one could still find something inside which could be set free."

"People cannot be judged by their precarious situations. Their culture, spirit and will to express themselves in creative thoughts and deeds are stronger than any limitation to freedom. This is the spirit that gave birth to the works of art on Lamb Holm."

In 1995, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the opening of

the Barriers, a further group returned and a reception was held in their honour by Orkney Islands Council. Hopefully this connection between Italy and Orkney will endure long after memories of World War II have faded. Cultural links such as school exchanges and visits by individuals and families as well as musicians are contributing to this.

Domenico Chiocchetti died in Moena in May 1999. A memo-

rial service was conducted at the chapel by the then Bishop Mario Conti which was attended by many Orcadians as well as his wife, Maria, their son and two daughters. It is somewhat ironic that most of the many visitors to Orkney cross the Churchill Barriers. They come not to remember the English war leader, or to marvel at military engineering, but to visit our little Italian shrine, which is a monument to hope and faith in exile.

Domenico Chiocchetti at work in 1960



Domenico Chiocchetti at work in 1960





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BURRAY (ON Borgarey, Brochs Isle) is not mentioned in the *Orkneyinga saga*, but the presence of a *Bu* farm suggests that it was farmed in Viking times. Evidence of much older settlements has come to light during industrial sand extraction at the Bu Links on the east side.

Weddel Sound (ON *Vadill*, ford) is very shallow. Before the Barrier was built rocks and seaweed were exposed nearly all the way across at low tide. Even without blockships this channel was not navigable except at high tide by small vessels.

Echnaloch (ND475965), separated from the sea by an ayre, is particularly good for wildfowl at all times of year. Mute Swans and ducks can be

observed from the car with their young from only a few feet away at the edge of the loch. Echnaloch Bay is also good for seaduck and Great Northern Divers in winter.

Chambered Cairns There was a stalled chambered cairn below the farm of Northfield (ND488988) until 1863 when the tenant farmer took a dislike to it and had it destroyed. Over twenty human and seven dog skeletons were found. There was apparently a side cell, which may have had slab-sided walls.

As is usual in such cases of wanton destruction, the farmer gained little, but science lost a lot. On the south-east coast the Hillock of Fea (ND493956) is possibly a chambered cairn, but has been

Echna Loch and Echnaloch Bay



largely lost to erosion by the sea. The most likely place for prehistoric settlement would have been the Bu Links.

Brochs The two brochs on the northeast of Burray are still prominent and were investigated in the 19th century in the manner of the time. All that remains today is two grassy mounds of debris, the larger of which is being slowly removed by easterly gales. The West Broch is smaller with an interior diameter of about 9m and walls about 3.5m thick, while the East Broch is much more substantial with an internal diameter of about 13m and massive 5.5m thick walls.

The West Broch may well pre-date its larger neighbour by analogy with the Bu of Navershaw and Howe Broch in Stromness. No doubt Holm Sound was important for shipping in the Iron Age, just as it was until the Barriers were built. It is interesting to note that both sides of the sound are guarded by brochs. In the 1860s both were cleared out to reveal internal stairways. The impressive East Broch has corbelled cells at its entrance, an internal scarcement ledge and survives to over 2m in height.

Old St Lawrence Kirk (ND482964) is at the south end of the Bu Sands, which were formerly backed by very extensive links and dunes. The church has interesting carved sandstone door jambs

and lintels and has presumably been rebuilt several times, most likely on the site of a very ancient chapel, which may date to 1172 or earlier. The kirkyard has many interesting old graveslabs, while there is clear evidence of ruined buildings on the seaward side. The whole area is a blaze of colour in summer with wild flowers and butterflies.

World War II A coastal defence battery was installed at Northfield in April 1940 with a 12-pounder gun on a temporary emplacement. Later a twin 6-pounder replaced this. It was backed up by three searchlights, but was removed to Graemsay in 1943 when the Barriers had blocked the sounds. Burray saw much activity during the war due to the building of the Barriers. A second camp for Italian POWs, camp 34, also had a chapel, but this was destroyed in 1945.

Boat Building Until recently Burray had a boat yard, which has been in the same family for seven generations building traditional clinker-built workboats. In about 1700 John Duncan of the South Parish

East Broch of Burray



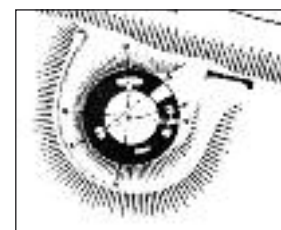
Barrier No.3 with blockships



Old St Lawrence Kirk

in South Ronaldsay set up a boatyard with a Mr Horne to build small yoles for the fishermen of the Pentland Firth

and to transport goods from Orkney to Caithness. With the growth of the Herring



East Broch 19th century drawing

OVER THE BARRIERS ATTRactions

BURRAY

Weddel Bay
Brough Geo
West and East Brochs
WWII gunsite
Echnaloch
Echnaloch Bay
Fossil & Vintage Centre
Art Gallery
Old St Lawrence's Kirk
Beach below Old Kirk
Bu Sands
Hunda
Beach at no.4 Barrier
Burray Ness
Water Sound beach, east



WWII battery at Northfield

Fishery in the 1800s, the yard moved to Burray.

By 1914 there were about 20 *Zulus*, sailing vessels of about 20m in length, based in Burray. Most were built in northeast Scotland and followed the shoals as they moved south. Stronsay was the principal station, but a considerable amount of

Herring was processed at Burray and at St Margaret's Hope. By the 1930s the Herring Boom was over and the Churchill Barriers finished Burray as a port.

The Fossil and Heritage Centre at Viewforth overlooks Echnaloch and Scapa Flow. There is a fascinating display of fossils, some of

which are over 350 million years old, as well as relics of bye-gone days, trade antiquities and artefacts from Orkney Vintage Club. Based on collections of fossils and minerals by Leslie Firth of Orkney Builders and of old joiner's tools by his father, the Centre tells the story of Orkney geology in a lively way.

A gift shop sells interesting items, including fossils and minerals. This is a good place to stop for a cup of tea or coffee and some home bakes. There is an admission charge to the Exhibition Rooms.

Walks, north coast Start from the south end of Barrier No.3 and follow the coast of Weddell Sound to Burray Haas (ND490988). The need for defence in different eras is emphasised by the 2,000-year old brochs beside a WWII gun battery. Return via the track near the gun battery and the public road.

Walks, east coast Park at the Old Kirk (ND493964) on the southeast of the island at the south end of the magnificent Bu Sands. The beach stretches for most of the east coast of Burray. The South Links near the Old Kirk are especially good for wild flowers and bumblebees in summer.

Walks, south coast The shore east of the car park at No.4 Barrier has fine sand with low cliffs and interesting rock formations. The south-facing banks along this shore



Thursius pholidotus, found in Rousay Flagstone

Fossil fish at the Fossil Museum



are a haven for wild flowers in summer. Hillock of Skea may be a chambered cairn, but has been mostly destroyed by the sea. Return via shore or continue round Burray Ness to the Old Kirk and return via the public road.

Walks, Cara Sands Barrier No.4 has caused the build up of huge quantities of sand to the east. The blockships *Carron*, *Collindoc* and *Pontos* are now largely buried, but the wide curve of new beach makes a delightful place to stroll. Many Long-tailed Ducks gather here before migrating north in spring, and the new dunes are slowly being colonised by plants, including the rare Oyster Plant.



Blockship "Reginald" is the oldest

View from new OIC viewpoint



Herring Fishery at Burray

HUNDA (ON *Hundey*, Dog Island, ND440970) on the west side of Burray is joined by its own barrier, built during the war to form part of the boom-defences against small surface craft. The island has many Grey and Common Seals, and is one of the best places in Orkney to see Otters.

Arctic Terns breed here as well as several other species characteristic of undisturbed islands. Hunda can be accessed via the side road that runs west from above Echna Loch. There are fine views of Scapa Flow from its summit as well as a small sandy beach sheltered by the barrier.

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SOUTH RONALDSAY (ON *Rognvalds-ey*, Rognvald's Isle) is one of the most beautiful of all the Orkney Islands and it has a charm of its own. The island is divided into six parishes, the inhabitants of which each have their own nicknames. It is now joined to Burray by the Ayre of Cara (ND478949) on the east side of Barrier No.4, which is the only man-made ayre in Orkney. Ayre (ON *Eyrr*, a

gravelly beach) in Orkney means a sandy or gravelly spit of land enclosing a lagoon, which is open to the sea. Udal Law raises interesting questions about the ownership of this new land.

St Margaret's Hope (ON *Hjop*, bay) The picturesque village of St Margaret's Hope lies in its sheltered bay, with houses built round the shore very much as in Stromness.

The older buildings mostly date from the 17th and 18th centuries and the character has not been spoilt by new building. The pier, built in the 18th century for Lobster fishing, was busy before the Barriers were built with ferries and cargo, and is now used mainly by the car ferry which runs to Gills Bay in Caithness as well small fishing boats and vessels which take divers to see the wrecks of Scapa Flow.

The Bay is not thought to be named after the ill-fated Maid of Norway, Margaret, who died in September 1290, either at sea or shortly after arriving in Kirkwall from Bergen. Aged only seven, she was on her way to marry Prince Edward, later Edward II, of England. On the death of her grandfather, Alexander

Ayre of Cara where the sand has built up greatly since 1945



St Margaret's Hope from the Pier Road

III of Scotland, Margaret had been proclaimed Queen of Scotland and her early death was a large factor in the Wars of Independence between Scotland and England. She was not interred in St Magnus Cathedral, but her body was shipped straight back to Norway. Margaret was regarded as a

saint in Norway afterwards, but never officially, so it is unlikely that the name refers to her. Apparently in 1329 a Norwegian called Thore Haakonson, whose daughter had been married to the Regent of Norway at the time of the Maid's death, sold lands in South Ronaldsay. It is also known that Thore and his



St Margaret's Hope Pier around 1900

Pentalina at St Margaret's Hope



OVER THE BARRIERS ATTRACTIONS

SOUTH RONALDSAY

Ayre of Cara
Honeysgeo
Marine-Life Aquarium
Grimness
St Margaret's Hope
Old Smiddy
Creel Restaurant
Pottery
Craft Workshop
Sand O'Wright
Howe of Hoxa
Hoxa Tapestry Gallery
Hoxa Head
Widewall Bay
Herston
Harraborough Head
Sand Wick
St Peter's Kirk
Pool of Cletts
Windwick
Tomison's Academy
Mowatt's Smiddy
Tomb of the Eagles
Liddle burnt mound
Banks Chambered Cairn
Skerries Bistro
St Mary's Kirk
Castle of Burwick
Burwick
Pettlandssker Boat Trips



Octopus at the Marine-Life Aquarium



The Old Smiddy, St Margaret's Hope

*"Irene" at Grimness in 1969 - the cause of the Longhope lifeboat disaster*

Remnants of "Irene" at Grimness in 2011



wife had accompanied the unfortunate Margaret on her voyage. The connection is tenuous at best. The word "Hope" is Norse, and has nothing to do with the English word "hope".

The village was once known as *Rognvaldsvoe*, and the St Margaret of the present name relates to an ancient chapel so dedicated. Which Rognvald owned the land around here is not known.

Grimness & Honeysgeo The road immediately south of the Ayre of Cara leads to the attractive little bay of Honeysgeo with its sandy beach and slipway. The headland of Grimness makes a pleasant walk in summer with its wild flowers and fine views to Copinsay in the north and the Pentland Skerries in the south. Skipi Geo has a fine small sandy beach.

To the south the grim remains of the *Irene* still litter the rocks. It was this ship whose distress calls launched the Longhope and Kirkwall lifeboats on the fateful night of 17th March 1969. The "TGB" was capsized of South Ronaldsay with the loss of all hands, while the *Irene* drifted ashore below Grimness. Its crew were rescued without incident by breeches buoy from the shore.

The Marine-Life Aquarium at Pool Farmhouse "offers a unique opportunity to see and understand some aspects of the

marine environment". Live specimens of many of the species of fish and shellfish found locally are included in the aquarium.

Old Smiddy The Old Smiddy in St Margaret's Hope is now a museum, with many artefacts from the time when every area had its own blacksmith. It was built in 1880 and was run for two generations by the Hourston family from Quoybanks in Herston, after William Hourston bought it in 1905. Making and repairing agricultural implements and shoeing horses were the principal functions of the blacksmith. The village also has one of the best eating places in Orkney,

Howe of Hoxa To the north of this bay, is the Howe of Hoxa (ON *Haugs-eyd*, Mound Isthmus), a ruined broch (ND425940), where Earl Thorfinn *Skull-splitter* was buried about AD 963, according to the *Orkneyinga saga*. A fine circular walk runs around the Dam of Hoxa to St Margaret's Hope and back via the road past the school. The Wart on top of Hoxa Hill (ND433935, 60m) is the site of a ruined chambered cairn and a modern "look out".

Boys' Ploughing Match In August the Boys' Ploughing Match is held. Traditionally this was held in spring, but it was shifted to suit visitors and weather. The peedie boys (and now girls as well) dress up as horses and parade with

*The Howe of Hoxa - Earl Thorfinn Skull-splitter's grave**The girls are the "horses" at the Boys' Ploughing Match**The Boys' Ploughing Match takes place at the Sand o'Wright*



Balfour Battery at Hoxa Head mounted two twin 6-pounders

their ploughmen to be judged. After the parade, the boys and their fathers or grandfathers proceed to the Sand O'Wright (ND425935) and have a ploughing match.

This is an exact replica of the ploughing matches still popular among farmers today. The miniature ploughs are often handed down for many generations and while the tradition only survives in South Ronaldsay now, there are records of similar events on other islands in the past.

Hoxa Head The road continues up the steep hill to the west of the Sand o'Wright until it peters out at a small car park (ND408933) about 0.5km after the Hoxa

Tapestry Gallery. Here Leila Thomson, weaves wonderful tapestries inspired by the rhythm of life and landscape of Orkney. There is a display of some of her tapestries and prints of her work can be purchased. Hoxa Head is then a short walk from the car park.

The small lighthouse above Scarf Skerry was first established in 1901 as a gas-powered automatic. In 1996 the fine old cast-iron tower was dismantled and shipped to the Lighthouse Museum at Kinnaird Head. It was replaced by a more efficient, but rather utilitarian affair. Hoxa Head was the site of major fortifications in both 20th century wars and is strewn with military remains.

Hoxa in WWI Four 4-inch quick-firing guns were mounted here in 1915, facing west over Hoxa Sound. The mountings and magazines with their protective trenches can still be seen today. The following year 2 6-inch guns were placed on the south tip of the headland to cover Switha Sound. Four 24in searchlights and an observation post completed the battery. The Hoxa Sound boom defence also ended here in both wars.

Hoxa in WWII In 1939 the WWI battery was upgraded and rebuilt. The 6-inch mountings were re-used with the addition of observation towers, and more searchlight enclosures were built, as well as a large camp. The battery was operational in September 1939, but working continued until 1942. The 6-in Mark VII BL guns here fired a 45kg shell over 12.5km.

In May 1940 two 12-pounders were emplaced near the lighthouse to defend the boom. They were replaced by two twin 6-pounders at which time the battery was named

Hoxa Head lighthouse was replaced in 1996



4-inch gun mounting from WWI at Hoxa Head



Balfour after Thomas Balfour, the first commander of the Orkney & Shetland Fencibles in 1793. The twin 6-pounder had a rate of fire of 120 rounds per minute and a range of 4,700m and was designed to defend against motor torpedo boats.

Although the Hoxa guns never saw action, a similar battery destroyed five Italian MTBs at Valetta in 1941 in two minutes, suggesting that they would indeed have been effective if the Germans had attempted such a raid on Scapa Flow.

There are panoramic views from the Pentland Firth to Scapa Flow from here. Good fishing can be had off the rocks, as the shore is steep-to and a strong tide runs past. Perhaps for this reason a small pod of Harbour Porpoises often frequents the area. Other cetaceans are occasionally also seen from here.

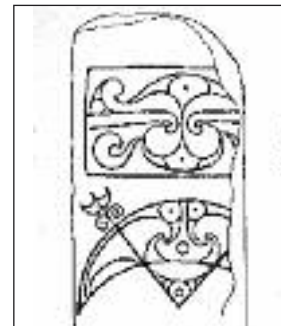
East Side Overlooking the Pool of Cletts, St Peter's Kirk (ND470909), is an interesting old church with pews which



St Peter's Kirk, above the Pool of Cletts

run the length of the building with the pulpit on the east wall. This arrangement was formerly common, but there are very few churches like this in Orkney now. The area of Paplay is likely to be another place where there was an early Christian settlement.

During 19th century renovations a Pictish symbol stone



Pictish symbol stone from St Peter's



St Peter's Kirk retains the old layout with the pulpit on the south wall

The beach at the Pool of Cletts is very attractive



"Joanna Thorden" memorial





"The Altar" at Harraborough Head is a curious rock formation

was found built into one of the windows as a lintel. It can be

There is the stone stump of an old windmill over the graveyard wall. The nearby beach at Pool of Cletts and further south, Newark Bay, is very fine on a good summer's day and can be spectacular when there is a big easterly sea running. Above the beach modern

standing stone was put up to celebrate the Millennium, while further up the hill the Sorquoy Stone may be 5,000 years older. It is one of Orkney's tallest at over 4m high. It is also known as the Papley Stone, after the old name for this part of South Ronaldsay. There are fine coastal walks in both directions from St Peter's Kirk.



Standing Stone above Sand Wick on the west side

Possible broch mound at Harraborough Head



Herston The village of Herston (ND420920), built for the Herring fishing about 1830, is a delightful spot, on the south side of Widewall Bay. The Oyce of Herston is a good spot for waders and wildfowl. A good example of a Bronze Age burnt mound stands in a field just past an old chapel (ND421907).

Harraborough Head is a short walk from here (ND415905). It has a peculiar "altar" feature, with three natural arches and is an excellent place to see Puffins in summer. There are fine views across the Pentland Firth from here. A coastal path runs north to Herston Head on to the village.

Sand Wick is an attractive sheltered cove to the south which can be reached either by road or the coastal path. A fine standing stone overlooks the bay. To the northwest a chambered cairn is perched on The Nev, while a ruined broch, Weems Castle (ND434888), guards the south side.

Sand o'Wright



South Parish Further south on the island there are panoramic views from the car park at the top of Olad Brae (ON A-flot, flat ground beside a burn ND445879, 87m), beside an indicator panel. The view from the top of the Ward Hill (ND455887, 118m) is even better. A coastal defence radar site in WWII, this remains an important communications site.

From the top of the Ward Hill a track runs down to the cliffs of Hesta Head which reach nearly 90m in height. This wild coast continues for about 1,500m north to Stews, from where the public road goes back to Olad Brae. Alternatively a shorter walk southwards soon reaches Wind Wick.

Wind Wick is a bay southeast of Olad Brae with a ruined chapel dedicated to St Andrew. The Brough may be an ancient fortified site or perhaps an early Christian retreat. Grey Seals come ashore to pup in autumn near here below the cliffs. This is also a good place for finding migrant birds when the conditions are right. It was here in January 1918 that two British destroyers ran into the cliffs at full tilt during a snowstorm, with only one survivor.

Halcro Head The coastal walk southwards to the Tomb of the Eagles passes dramatic cliff scenery. At Halcro Head (ND474856, 64m) there is a Gloop, a partially collapsed



Hesta Head and Wind Wick on the southeast coast



Tomison's Academy

cave, while there are a series of large geos in the cliffs to the south.

Tomison's Academy (ND857445), an imposing disused school at the south end of the island, was built on the bequest of William Tomison (1739-1829), who made a fortune working for the Hudson's Bay Company in Northern Canada, eventually being made one of the Company's Governors, having started as a lowly "Bay Boy". Tomison was buried in his own garden at Dundas House, across the road.

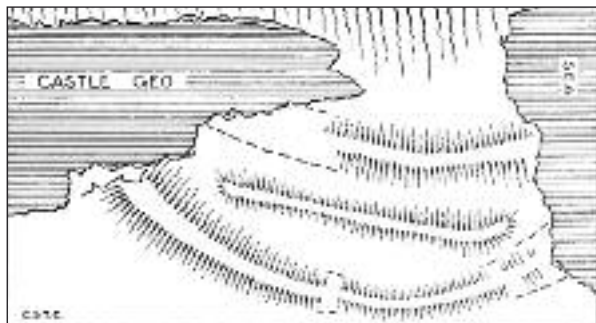
Mowatt's Smiddy was built in 1862, and has now been renovated, having been run by the same family for four genera-

tions. Apart from a fascinating collection of tools and blacksmith's artefacts, it is also licensed for weddings. WS Mowatt is a fund of stories about the *Sooth Parish*.

St Mary's Church, the site of one of the earliest chapels in Orkney, has an interesting old graveyard. Inside there is a curious stone with a pair of footprints carved in it, which is said to have come from Caithness. Several interesting old tombstones add to the atmosphere of this interesting old kirk, the key to which is available nearby. In 1627 a report to Bishop Graham mentions a St Colmis Chapel at the Loch of Burwick, but this has now disappeared.



The Brough of Burwick is a coastal defensive structure



19th century plan of the Brough of Burwick

Burwick takes its name from the ruined broch near Brough Ness where there is a disused coastguard station. The pier on the east side of the bay was built by John o'Groats Ferries, but they now use the link span installed by Orkney Islands Council.

Castle of Burwick (ND435842) is a short walk

from the ferry terminal. There are remains of ramparts and ditches on the narrow piece of land connecting the headland to South Ronaldsay. Traces of structures dating from the 1st millennium BC may be a ruined broch. A coastal path continues northwards from here to Barswick and an interesting feature called The Kist.

St Mary's Kirk, Burwick is on one of the oldest Christian sites in Orkney



Burwick Walk A circular walk from Burwick past the old Coastguard lookout and returning via Liddel Farm can take in the Tomb of the Eagles and the nearby Burnt Mound, returning to Burwick via the road. There are good views across the Pentland Firth to the Pentland Skerries and Caithness. Off Old Head, where two tides meet, the seas can be spectacularly rough.

Bistro At Banks the Skerries Bistro offers snacks and meals. A Neolithic chambered tomb was discovered in the car park in 2010. It has 5 cells opening off a central passage. Human remains and pottery have so far been discovered.

Boat Tours are operated from Burwick during the summer with an ex RNLI Lifeboat. She is a Watson 42 built in 1963 and runs trips to Swona and the Pentland Skerries.

Pentland Skerries The boat serving the Pentland Skerries lighthouse was based in the tarred shed near St Mary's Kirk for many years. A very strong tide rips past the

Stone with incised "feet"



Lother Rock at the mouth of this bay and spectacular seas break here in a storm. A light beacon on top of a 12m tower was installed on it in 1910.

John o'Groats Ferry The passenger ferry, *Pentland Venture*, which runs in the summertime to John o'Groats, departs from the Ferry Terminal at Burwick, taking about 45 minutes to cross. Buses meet all crossings. In addition the Orkney Bus connects directly to Inverness.

Cetaceans such as Killer Whales, other species of dolphins and Harbour Porpoises may sometimes be seen from the ferry. The summer months are best. Basking Sharks or Minke Whales are also occasionally present. This route is also good for birdwatchers as it follows the shortest crossing for birds as well as people.



Blacksmith WS Mowatt at his smiddy



Banks Chambered Cairn interior before excavation



The Lother Rock and the Pentland Firth

Ferry to John o'Groats



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The cairn from the south - it overlooks a rugged and rocky coast

The Tomb of the Eagles (ND469843) is a Neolithic chambered cairn, one the few to have been excavated in recent times. This impressive cairn resembles Unstan in Stenness. Both have stalled main chambers like the Orkney-Cromarty type, but also with side-cells of the Maeshowe type.

The tomb was discovered by the farmer, Ronald Simison, in 1958. While looking for a suitable rock from which to quarry a stone strainer post, he became curious about some stones which were sticking out of a mound overlooking the coast. After a little digging he found the courses of a wall.

Nearby were several finely made artefacts including a small mace head, a stone knife, three polished stone axes, a broken cannon coal ring and a polished albertite button. The nearest source of these minerals in the Moray coast, or perhaps Brora, where coal was mined until recently.

The cairn had been deliberately infilled with rocks in antiquity and the roof destroyed. The doorways to the side-cells and the entrance passage had stones placed across them to stop ingress of rubble. One male burial was found in this in-fill along with 15 talons and bones of a Sea Eagle.

Eventually he fully excavated the tomb. The archaeologist, John Hedge, later undertook the study of the many artefacts. Apart from the north-east cell, which had been broken into previously, the contents were mostly intact. The main chamber is about 8m long and divided into 3 stalls by 2 pairs of orthostats. The backs of the end compartments are formed from large upright flagstones. Another, smaller upright stone set into the floor separates the spaces.



Interior of the tomb

R Simison points out where he discovered the tomb



Skulls in one of the side-cells before removal

The southern compartment had a floor made from a similar large stone with heaped bones but no skulls. The space below it which was filled with human and eagle bones. There is also a shelf, about 1.2m above the floor. The west wall survives to a height of over 2m without corbelling, and is bowed slightly outwards between the orthostats.

It seems that the tomb may have been built in stages over several centuries. Work may have started here about 3150 BC and the tomb was in use for at least 800 years.

Skull & Bones Skulls and piles of bones line the sides of the main chamber, and there



One of the many skulls



The exterior from the northeast before being roofed over

was a large pile of broken pottery facing the entrance passage. The two western side cells had many skulls inside but little else. Analysis of over 16,000 human bones suggested that at least 338 people were buried here. Few had lived to more than 28, and only 5% reached 40. The breakdown was 185 adults, 62



Sea Eagle talons



Sea Eagle bones and talons recovered from the tomb

The first artefacts found on the north side of the mound



White-tailed Sea Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*)





Interior of the tomb from the south end, the entrance is in the centre

teenagers, 70 children and 24 babies. Men averaged 1.7m and women 1.6m and while their muscles were well developed, nearly half suffered from osteoarthritis.

Sea Eagles Particularly interesting was the discovery of the carcasses and about 70 talons of at least 10 White-tailed Sea Eagles (ON *Erne*, *Haliaeetus albicilla*), in association with the human bones. The birds may well have been of special



Button and broken ring

Unstan Ware pottery



importance to these people, and perhaps symbolised the group, as dogs seem to have done at Cuween in Firth. They may also have been part of the excarnation rites. Most of the human bones were weathered, suggesting that they were placed in the cairn only after the flesh had gone.

Large numbers of sheep and cattle bones from joints of meat rather than whole animals as well as many fish bones were also present. Plant remains included seeds of Emmer Wheat, both hulled and naked 6-row Barley and many weeds of cultivation.

Pottery The 26kg of pottery remains included at least 46 broken Unstan Ware pots. They seem to have been bro-

ken outside and burnt before being deposited inside. Tools including a stone ploughshare, or ard, and hammerstones were found as well as parts of limpet shells which may have been a necklace.

The entrance passage runs at a slight angle to the main chamber and survives to a length of 4m. It is about 70cm wide and 80cm high with a huge lintel at the inner end, which is 1.5m long. At sunrise in late April and mid-August the sun shines directly down the passage and lights up the area where the pottery was found. At this period it shines in at around 05:30. Sunrise is visible throughout the year here.

The outside of the cairn is D-shaped, and has a diameter of about 31m, the west side being built into the side of a natural mound. It is encased in rubble supported by stone walls. Much of the east side has been lost to the sea.

The museum at Liddle is fascinating. Not only can skulls, tools and other artefacts be examined in a way not possible anywhere else, but the original excavator and his family tell the story.

Unstan Ware pottery



Liddel Burnt Mound On the way to the Tomb of the Eagles is Liddel Burnt Mound (ND465841). This consists of an oval building, within which is a big hearth, and a large central watertight trough. The burnt mound was built up by the dumping of many cracked, fired stones and ash. There were very few artefacts besides a few pieces of poor pottery.



The burnt mound near Liddel

The trough was used for boiling joints of meat, the water being heated using stones from the fire. Lacking strong cooking pots, but with plenty of peat for fuel, the same method was used to cook meat in the Hebrides up to the 18th century.

Dating from the late Bronze Age, the early 1st millennium BC, this site has thrown light on the probable function of the several hundred such burnt mounds in the Northern Isles. They are nearly always sited close to water sources.

They may also have been used as saunas or bath houses, as well as for cooking. This one is unusual in having the remains of a building around the trough and hearth. Many burnt mounds are marked on the OS map, but this is the only excavated one in Orkney.



Composite plan of the Tomb of the Eagles

South end compartment



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SWONA (ON *Swefney*, Sweyn's Island), now uninhabited except for a small herd of feral cattle, is a delightful island to the west of Burwick. Very strong tides made this island a graveyard to shipping. Until the advent of radar vessels regularly went ashore in fog and usually became total losses on the jagged rocks.

Being grazed by cattle, Swona has completely different vegetation to sheep-grazed islands. The luscious green sward is carpeted with wild flowers in the summer, including Primroses, Ragged Robin, Buttercups and Eyebright. The banks have carpets of Thrift and Cocks & Hens, while Oysterplant thrives in the shingle beaches.

Puffins abound on the grassy slopes on the east side, while

there are many Black Guillemots and Storm Petrels which nest in the drystone walls. There is normally a large colony of Arctic Terns as well as a few Arctic and Great Skuas.

Neolithic Evidence of prehistoric settlement includes a chambered cairn (ND384837) on the southeast side. This stalled cairn has an unusually long chamber, but is being steadily eroded by the sea. Swona is an obvious island for early habitation, with its fertile soil, nearby fishing and strong tidal defences.

Vikings In Norse times, a man called Grim lived here, whose sons Asbjorn and Margad were followers of Sweyn Asleifson. Just before Yule in about 1133 Sweyn's father Olaf was killed by Olvir Rosta and his men,

who burnt his house at Duncansby. Sweyn and the Grimsons escaped to Swona and thence to Earl Paul's Hall in Orphir for the Earl's Yuletide feast.

Meanwhile Sweyn's brother, Valthiof and the crew of his 10-oared boat were lost at sea on their way to the same Yule feast from Stronsay. Sweyn thus lost his father and brother within days. During the feast much drinking was done and Sweyn "Breastrope" insulted Sweyn Asleifson, saying that "he was a sluggard at his drink" and commented, "Sweyn will be the death of Sweyn." Sweyn Asleifson waited in the shadows and struck down his namesake. He then escaped through a window to a waiting horse to Bishop William at Egilsay and thence to safety in Tiree.

Chapel There is a small chapel dedicated to St Peter near the north end the island and many ruined walls in the area of the modern houses. Despite being evacuated in 1974 they mostly remain in good condition. The Swona people were essentially seamen, fishing especially in The Wells, the eddy which forms on the ebb tide west of the island. Small stone *skeos*, huts like the

The Haven is a superbly sheltered harbour, except from the east



The Brook from Clump o'the Ness, west side

cleits on St Kilda were used to dry the fish. They also grew good barley and vegetables in the *planticrues*, which were fertilised by seaweed.

The Haven Swona has an amazingly good harbour, The Haven, a large geo on the east side within which a boat can lie as long as the wind is not in the east. Care must be taken to approach at the right time of the tide. There are automatic light beacons at each end of the island.

Near the mouth of the Haven there is a dangerous rock called *Grimsally*, no doubt after the former Viking owner. It is said that knowledge of this skerry allowed one longship to escape while being chased by another by steering between this rock and the shore. The following

vessel's skipper was unaware of the Grimsally and struck it, causing his ship to sink.

Swona cattle When the last inhabitants left in 1974 they left behind their cattle. Some were removed and sold in 1977 but since then they have had to fend for themselves. They form one of the very few feral herds of *Bos taurus* in the world, which is of considerable interest to scientists.



Gloup on the east side



Chambered cairn at the south end

Swona and the Pentland Firth from South Ronaldsay





View north from Warbister Hill

The cattle mostly graze on the richer grass near the houses, however they do also forage for seaweed, but not in the intertidal zone. At present the herd seems to be stable at less than 20 animals, with more cows than bulls. They mostly derive from Aberdeen Angus and Shorthorn stock. The cows survive longer than the bulls and calving is in Spring, as with other Orkney cattle.

The Swona cattle tend to stay together as a group rather than foraging individually, and there seems to be no system of territories for the bulls. Since they are derived from stock which was bred to cope with the harsh climate and yet be placid, they seem to survive well and not to be overtly aggressive to each other.

Visitors should take great care to give the herd a wide berth. The cows may appear more

timid than the bulls, but none are to be trusted. They tolerate humans, but they should be treated as dangerous wild animals.

Shipwrecks of the 1930s Swona was notorious for shipwrecks due to its position on the edge of the Pentland Firth. During the 1930s there were several dramatic groundings, the last of which led to a serious loss of life.

In 1930 *Lord Percy*, a Grimsby trawler homeward bound, struck the rocks on the west side of Swona. The skipper drowned while they were trying to lay out a kedge anchor with their own boat. The crew were afterwards rescued by Swona fishermen. The trawler slid off the rocks and sank in deep water.

In 1931 *Pennsylvania*, 3,759GRT, of Copenhagen struck a reef on the west side of Swona in fog. The crew were rescued and some of the cargo was salvaged by the Danish tug *Gorm*. The vessel was bought by Stromamen and much of the extensive cargo salvaged before the wreck broke up.

In 1935 *Gunnaren*, a 3,229GRT Swedish ship bound for Stockholm with general cargo, ran ashore in

dense fog on the west side of Swona. The Longhope lifeboat landed the crew and mails from the vessel. Swedish and German salvage ships tried to save part of the vessel by cutting her in two but, because of heavy sea, this had to be abandoned.

Later the after part floated off but grounded again half a mile away. Most of the cargo was salvaged by tugs assisted by Stromen and Swona men. One of the lifeboats is still in use as a pleasure boat named *Aurora* and may be seen in Kirkwall Harbour in summer.

In 1937 *Johanna Thorden*, a 3,223GRT Finnish ship homeward bound with a general cargo on her maiden voyage, ran ashore on the Tarf Tail, Swona, in a haze and south-east gale, having mistaken the new Tor Ness light on the southwest of Hoy for the South Swona light. Her distress signals were not seen and her master thought they were on Little Skerry. The lifeboats were launched and 25 people left in the first one.

Soon after the ship broke in two and the remaining 12 crew left in the second boat. The gale had increased with a very heavy sea and the flood tide swept the boats eastward past the Pentland Skerries.

The second lifeboat was driven into Newark Bay, South Ronaldsay, where she capsized with the loss of 4 of the survivors. The remaining 8 were rescued from the shore. The following day the other lifeboat was washed ashore at Deerness with no one in it, its occupants having been lost overboard. This was the worst Pentland Firth disaster of the 20th century, with a loss of 29 men out of a crew of 37. The next day the Swona



Early Fordson tractor ploughing on Swona in about 1924

folk awoke to find the bow and foremost of the ship, the stern section having sunk soon after being abandoned. In the 1960s large quantities

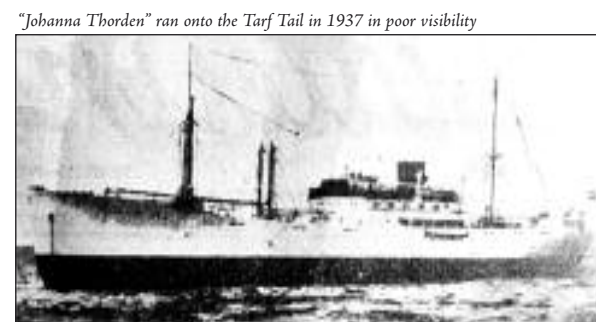
of coiled copper were salvaged from the remains of the wreck and landed at Scapa Pier for trans shipment.



"Pennsylvania" went ashore in fog in 1931



"Gunnaren" also went ashore in the fog on the west side of Swona in 1935



"Johanna Thorden" ran onto the Tarf Tail in 1937 in poor visibility



Part of the feral herd of cattle on Swona

Old winch and the "Hood" (built on Swona) at The Haven





Chart of the Pentland Firth

THE PENTLAND FIRTH (ON *Pettaland Fjordur*, Pictland Firth), together with the islands and parishes on both sides, is frequently mentioned in the *Orkneying Saga*. This *Wild and Open Sea* separates Orkney from Caithness.

The distance from Burwick to John o'Groats is about 10km (6mi). At the meeting point of the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, the strong tides of 10 knots or more are impeded by islands, skerries, the sea bed and weather, all of which combine to create com-

plex teddies and sometimes dangerous seas.

The *North Coast of Scotland Pilot* rather blandly states that "because of the very strong tidal streams, the eddies and races to which these give rise and the extraordinarily violent and confused seas which occur at times...navigation in Pentland Firth is attended by special problems."

Ever since people arrived in Orkney they have exploited the sea for transport, food and materials. We know that the

UKHO Vikings were especially good seamen, but so were their forebears, as shown by the presence of Neolithic and Iron Age remains on some of the small islands as well as much evidence of fishing activity.

For centuries the Firth has been used by cargo and naval ships and apart from fishing, pilotage was a major source of income for Swona, Stroma and Canisbay men. A dangerous occupation, they sometimes ended up coming home via America!

Traditionally the ferry ran from John o'Groats to Burwick, but there was also a ferry from Scarfskerry to Brims on Hoy and on to the Mainland. The first recorded ferryman was a man called John o'Groats, appointed by James IV about 1496, to ensure communications with his recently acquired islands.



Claymore passing Hoxa Head



Pentalina on the way from St Margaret's Hope to Gills Bay

Pentalina B arriving at St Margaret's Hope



Pentland Venture leaving Burwick for John o'Groats



Presumably there had been a ferry for thousands of years before this, but unrecorded.

The first regular Scrabster to Stromness steamship was the *Royal Mail*, starting in 1855. The railway finally arrived in Thurso in 1874 and several other vessels operated the route, until the first *St Ola* commenced its long period of service in 1892. Thus started the long association with what eventually became P&O Scottish Ferries.

St Ola I ran for 59 years until replaced in 1951 by *St Ola II*. She could carry 26 cars and hardly ever missed a crossing. Roro services started in 1974 with *St Ola III*, which was in turn replaced with the much larger *St Ola IV* in 1992. In 2002 *Hamnavoe*, a completely new and still larger ship operated by NorthLink took over the route. Operating at 21 knots she completes the run in about 90 minutes.

The short sea crossing from John o'Groats to Burwick is run in the summer months by the *Pentland Venture* which carries up to 250 passengers.

Pentland Ferries introduced the *Pentalina* catamaran in 2009. She operates between St Margaret's Hope and Gills Bay all year and takes about 1 hour to cross. From 2001 the company operated the *Pentalina B* and later, the *Claymore* on the route.



St Ola I was a familiar sight on the Firth for 59 years



St Ola II was the first to carry cars and ran for 23 years



St Ola III operated the first ro-ro service for 18 years



St Ola IV leaving Stromness for the last time in 2002

MV *Hamnavoe* entering the Pentland Firth





Muckle Skerry from the northwest with Clettack Skerry, Louther Skerry and Little Skerry behind

THE PENTLAND SKERRIES, 6km (4mi) southeast of Burwick are another dangerous place for shipping, with very strong tides, dangerous eddies and many unmarked hazards. The Skerries consist of Muckle Skerry and a long shoal running northeast from Little Skerry to Clettack Skerry. Many ships have foundered here in the past, especially in foggy weather.

Lighthouse The first lighthouses were erected here in 1794, with two towers to distinguish them from North Ronaldsay lighthouse. The work was supervised by Robert Stevenson and was his first work for the Northern Lighthouse Board. One tower

was 24m high, the other 18m, and a total of 66 catoptric reflectors were used in the two sets of optics which showed continuous lights.

In the 1820s it was decided to heighten the towers and stone was taken from Herston, where a shed, which still stands today, was specially built to cut the freestone blocks. The higher lighthouse was increased to 35m and alterations were completed in 1833. The catoptric reflecting lamps were replaced in 1848 with dioptric refracting lamps of higher efficiency.

In 1895 the lower light was discontinued and a much more powerful group flashing

system installed on the taller tower. In 1939 generators were installed to power the light. A German aircraft strafed the site in February 1941 but nobody was hurt.

A foghorn was mounted on the lower tower in 1909 but "due to the diminished value of audible aids to navigation" this was discontinued in 2005. The lighthouse became automatic in 1994, nearly 200 years after first being lit.

The keepers kept cattle and hens. Originally they had their families with them, but after several tragic deaths, the dependants were moved to Caithness. The Skerries keepers on several occasions rescued seamen in difficulty. In 1871 a boy was rescued from the "boiling tideway" after the crew of the Wick boat *Good Design* abandoned ship. Twelve crew were also rescued by the keepers from the barque *Vicksburg* of Leith in 1884 in a risky operation.

When the 8,003GRT ship *Kathe Neiderkirchner* ran

Pentland Skerries Lighthouse with its twin towers and accommodation block



ashore on the northwest side of Muckle Skerry in thick fog in 1965 the keepers guided the ship's lifeboat to the East Landing and thus ensured the safety of the 50 passengers and crew. The ship was carrying a cargo of Cuban sugar. She slipped off the reef and sank within 9 hours of going ashore.

Wildlife Today Muckle Skerry is inhabited only by many breeding seabirds in summer. The Skerries have a similar bird population to Swona, the difficult and often dangerous access ensuring that the wildlife is mostly undisturbed. There is a substantial Arctic Tern colony and many Puffins breed here. Large numbers of Grey Seals come ashore to pup in autumn.



Remains of the Aberdeen trawler Ben Barvas which went on Little Skerry in 1964

Landings There are two landings, the main one at Scartan Bay (ON Scarf Tang, Shag Point) on the east side and another at Hunigeo on the northwest corner. The island has low cliffs, except on the west side, with several geos and small caves.

Archaeology Until the lighthouses were built the Skerries had no permanent inhabi-

tants, although cattle and sheep were pastured in summer. There are remains of at least two stalled chambered cairns which have been dug into as well as several other small mounds. Neolithic people from South Ronaldsay may have buried their dead here in a similar way to those from Papay used the Holm of Papay.



Rami Geo on the south side of Muckle Skerry



Possible chambered cairn above Rami Geo



Neolithic chambered cairn with orthostats showing



Puffins abound on the Skerries



Interior of Sule Skerry lighthouse

OUTLIERS The remote offshore islands of Sule Skerry and Sule Stack are part of Orkney and trips are occasionally organised to visit them during the summer. Both are best known for their huge bird populations.

SULE SKERRY (ON *Sula Sker*, Gannet Skerry), lies 60km (37mi) west of the Brough of Birsay at 59°05'N, 4°24'W. This isolated small island owes its attraction to two things, its remote situation and its huge Puffin colony. This is by far the best place in Orkney to study the *Tammy Norie*. The skerry is flat and only 15m high. Scentless Mayweed covers most of the peaty surface, which is riddled with Puffin burrows.

The Puffins keep flying nearly all night



Lighthouse The main landing is on the east side below the lighthouse, which was first lit in 1895. The two isolated islands had previously been a considerable hazard to shipping. Sule Skerry was the most isolated manned lighthouse in UK until it was automated in 1982. The tower is 27m high and though the nominal range is 21mi, the light can be seen from the Mainland, 56km (35mi) away.

The station was attacked on 5th February 1942 by a German bomber, which dropped three bombs about 60m north of the lighthouse. No one was injured and damage was minimal. On 18th November 1944 a mine drifted ashore and exploded.

Wildlife Besides the Puffins, which fly around in two circles, the north clockwise and the south anticlockwise, there are Guillemots, Razorbills, Shags, Kittiwakes, Eiders, Arctic Terns, Fulmars and Stormy Petrels. Leach's Petrels have been caught and heard calling. Gannets also now nest on the island also, having formerly been confined to Sule Stack.

During the migration seasons many species rest here, with large falls of Fieldfare, Redwing and smaller birds in October. The Puffins disappear to sea in August, some returning in early April, but most in early May.

Grey Seals are present all year, and many come ashore in the autumn to have their pups. The oceanic location is also good for whale watching.



This one hit me on the forehead!

A group of Puffins at dawn



SULE STACK (ON *Sula Stakkur*, Gannet Rock), is about 8km (5mi) southwest of Sule Skerry. A steep-to granite rock 37m high, the Stack has a colony of about 4,000 pairs of Gannets, as well as a few Guillemots and Kittiwakes. Landing is only possible in fine weather.

On a recent visit a large unexploded shell was found on the top of the rock, showing that the Navy used it for target practice. It was also used as a target for aircraft in the past. There seem to be a large number of immature gannets present, perhaps because no culling has taken place for many years.

In the past both islands were important sources of food, and as recently as 1890, 100 dozen eggs from Sule Skerry were said to have been on sale



Gannets on Sule Skerry

Guillemots with young



Sule Stack from the east in the early morning

in Stromness. The Vikings are known to have hunted Seals and collected eggs and young Gannets there and no doubt so did earlier Orcadians. Today's visitors take only photographs and memories. That is if they are lucky enough to reach the remotest part of Orkney.

Shipwreck On 8th April 1968 the 1,333GRT Greek ship *Marina* ran into the east side

of Sule Stack at about 5am. The 14 crew abandoned ship but 9 of them were lost. The ship broke up and sank soon after the collision. Stromness and Kirkwall lifeboats, RAF Shackletons and several ships took part in the search and rescue operation.

Helen Waters & Sule Skerry

In the 1800s an Orphir girl was about to get married. Shortly before the wedding her fiancé with some friends decided to go shooting in Hoy. When they did not return for the wedding they held the reception anyway as the guests were gathered and the food prepared.

After hearing bad omens from a local daft wife called Annie Fae it was then heard that the men may have gone to Sule Skerry to shoot seals. A boat was sent and the men were found dead. They had somehow failed to secure their boat and died of starvation. When the bride saw that her fiancé was dead, she was so shocked that she was dead the next morning. Thus a bridal feast turned into a burial and the young lovers sleep in the same Orphir grave.

Leach's Petrel

