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The Stan Steen



The Stan Steen has a hole in it

NORTH RONALDSAY (ON *Rinanse*y, Ringan's Isle or Ninian's Isle) is Orkney's most northerly island, and with its larger neighbour, Sanday, is distinctly different. It is low-lying, reaching only 23m at Holland, its highest point and is about 5km (3mi) long by 3km (2mi) wide. The rocks are Rousay flags, which form flattish beaches and several dangerous skerries off-shore. Considerable accumulations of windblown sand have built up in many places.

North Ronaldsay is separated from Sanday by the North Ronaldsay Firth, with its very strong tides and until the introduction of the air service was the most isolated inhabited island in Orkney. It has a character all of its own and it is here that the Orkney Norn language survived in use the longest. Many old words are still used locally.

Its relative isolation from the rest of Orkney, due to the lack of a daily ferry service, has meant that old traditions and ways of doing things have not



Aerial view of North Ronaldsay from northwest - clockwise from left - Dennis Head Linklet Bay, South Bay, Twinyness, Tor Ness

yet been forgotten. As in Sanday, many of the older farms are built on top of raised mounds which contain the remains of previous buildings, often going back to pre-historic times.

A good example is the abandoned farm on a large mound at Cruesbreck near Bustatoun (HY763525). A unique feature of North Ronaldsay is its Sheep Dyke, a 19km (12mi) long drystone wall which keeps the sheep on the fore-shore and off the good land.

Archaeology The Stan Steen (HY752529), a monolith with a hole through, stands not far from the pier near the south end. The hole may have been a sighting hole for some other

standing stone. No tradition similar to the Stone of Odin seems to exist. According to folklore, the hole was made by a giant woman who found the stone on the beach, stuck her finger through it and went onto the land and planted it into the ground.

The stone is the centre of an ancient North Ronaldsay New Year tradition where the islanders gather, according to Rev William Clouston in 1795, "*The writer of this has seen fifty of the inhabitants assembled there on the first day of the year, and dancing with moonlight, with no other music than their own singing.*" There may have been a stone circle at Tor Ness (HY755555) on the west side.

NORTH RONALDSAY ATTRACTIONS

- Bird Observatory - south end
- South Bay - seals, birds & sheep
- Sheep Dyke - 19km long
- Holland House - 18th century
- The Stan Steen - with the hole
- Treb Dykes
- New Kirk - built 1843
- Airfield - established 1968
- Old Kirk - built in early 1800s
- Community Hall - new and old
- Ancum Loch - waders & waterfowl
- Loch of Garso
- New Lighthouse - built 1854
- Old Beacon - built 1789
- Dennis Head - birds & whales
- Dennis Loch
- Seal Skerry - Seals
- Golf Course - nine holes
- Hooking Loch - waders & waterfowl
- Knowe o'Samilands - burnt mound
- Brae o'Stennabreck - settlement
- Bride's Ness - old chapel site
- Broch of Burrian - Iron Age
- Howmae Brae - Iron Age site



Interior of Broch of Burrian showing well and scarcement



Aerial view of broch showing Sheep Dyke and ramparts

Bronze Age There are several burnt mounds on the island, all near a supply of fresh water. No houses or burials from this period have yet been found. However ancient boundaries are very evident.

Treb Dykes The Muckle Gairsty (HY751535 to HY768521) and Matches Dyke are treb dykes which

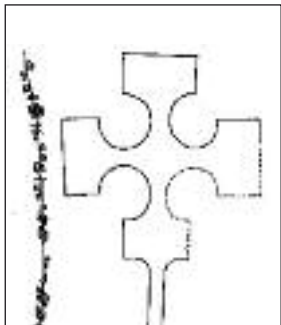
divide the island into three parts - Northyard, Linklet and Southyard. These dykes are thought to be ancient, and probably date from before 1000BC. Legend has it that three brothers shared the island between themselves. Near Newbigging the Muckle Gairsty is 10m wide and nearly 2m high.

Broch of Burrian Iron Age sites include the very impressive Broch of Burrian (HY763514), part of an extensive Iron Age and possibly Norse settlement on the point of Strom Ness at the southern tip of the island. This broch and its associated earthworks occupy a good defensive position, and was inhabited until at least the 9th century.

During excavation in the 1880s the much-copied Pictish Burrian Cross was found. This stone has an ogam inscription which may read, "This cross is raised in memory of Armi", in Old Norse. Other evidence of a Pictish presence included an inscribed Ox phalangeal bone, 2 beach stones also with Pictish symbols, a small Celtic bell and various fine bone combs and tools.

The large mound nearby (HY761513) is thought to be a Norse settlement, underlain by earlier occupation layers. Both this and the broch are being seriously eroded by the sea.

The "Burrian Cross"



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Phalangeal Ox bone with mirror symbol



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Pebble with Pictish inscriptions



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Howmae Brae is a large sand dune at the west end of Linklet Bay. It was dug into in the late 19th century in the manner of the time. Two roundhouses with outbuildings and a paved courtyard were discovered.

The nearby farm of Kirbist (ON Kirkju Bolstadir, Church Farm) confirms the presence of a chapel here in Norse times, or earlier. This may have been the property of Ragna and her son, Thorstein the Strong, who feature in the *Orkneyinga Saga*.

Vikings Rinansey features again the late 10th century when Earl Torf-Einar caught up with and killed Halfdan Longlegs. This was revenge for the killing of Rognvald Eysteinnsson, the Earl's father. Halfdan was taken prisoner and sacrificed to Odin as a blood eagle, before being buried under a large mound on the island.

The *Orkneyinga Saga* says, "Next morning when it was light they went to look for runagate men among the isles if any had



Stora Hammar stone from Gotland showing a sacrifice to Odin

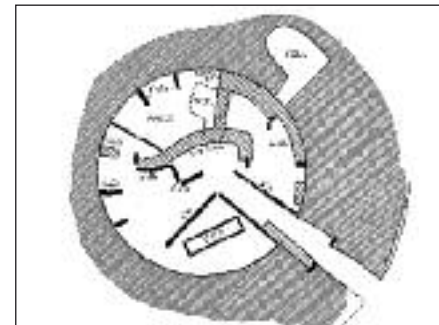
got away; and each was slain on the spot as he stood. Then earl Torf-Einarr took to saying these words: 'I know not what I see in Rinansey, sometimes it lifts itself up, but sometimes it lays itself down, that is either a bird or a man, and we will go to it. There they found Halfdan Long-leg, and Einar made them carve an eagle on his back with a sword, and cut the ribs all from the backbone, and draw the lungs there out, and gave him to Odin for the victory he had won.'

Chapel Sites on the island include Bride's Ness (*St Bride's*, HY772522), Howmae Brae (HY758523), and Senness (*Holy Cross*, HY776555), where a platform indicates the chapel site. The Old Kirk (HY755532) is early 19th cen-

tury, but may be on the site of an older church, while the name Kirk Taing, the site of the Old Beacon at Dennis Head, suggests another old chapel.

Lighthouses North Ronaldsay was notorious for shipwrecks, and with the growth of shipping traffic in the 17th and 18th centuries, they became ever more frequent. The first recorded wreck is of the Spanish galleon from which the supposed Westray Dons survived, which was probably lost in the Dennis Röst. The Swedish East Indiaman, *Svecia* went ashore on the Reef Dyke, east of Strom Ness in November 1740, only thirteen survivors making it to the shore. Much

Burrian Broch excavator's plan



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Howmae Brae excavator's plan



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The Old Beacon was first lit in 1789

of the valuable cargo of silk and other goods was salvaged. Underwater archaeology work in 1976 brought up many interesting finds.

In 1744 the Danish East Indiaman, the *Crown Prince*, went ashore at Savie Geo but this time her crew and cargo were saved. Three of her cannon still guard the lawn at Holland House (HY756532), which has been in the Traill family since 1727. The gar-

dens here, with their *Sycamore* and *Fuchsia*, attract many migrant birds and are much used for ringing studies by the Bird Observatory.

In 1786, an Act of Parliament was passed to erect four lighthouses in Scotland, including one on North Ronaldsay. The others were Kinnaird Head, Mull of Kintyre and Eilean Glas on Scalpay. Thomas Smith, an Edinburgh lampmaker was the engineer with Ezekiel Walker, an

English lighthouse designer, to advise in the initial stages. Smith was assisted by his step-son Robert Stevenson, founder of the famous family of lighthouse engineers, and grandfather of Robert Louis Stevenson.

Smith chose to build the first North Ronaldsay tower at Kirk Taing, the most easterly point of Dennis Head. By the autumn of 1789 the masons, John White and James Sinclair, had built the 21m tower of local undressed

stone, along with the lightkeepers' dwellings. The mason's work came to £199/12/6. The beacon was first lit on 10 October 1789 along with Eilean Glas lighthouse. The stone-built jetty used to land materials still stands below a small store at Bewan.

The most advanced lighting system of the time was the "atadioptric, or reflecting system, which consisted of a cluster of lamps burning oil, with copper reflectors, which were cleaned with a soft linen rag and Spanish white (finely powdered chalk) until they were perfectly bright. These instructions "were to be strictly adhered to, or a great part of the effect of the light was lost".

This remained the only light in the North Isles until the Start Point light was built in 1806 on Sanday. North Ronaldsay lighthouse was then considered redundant, and extinguished in 1809, its lantern being replaced by the *great ball of masonry* removed from the now redundant Start Point beacon in 1806. By 1852 the need for a proper lighthouse was clear, and the present 42m tower at Dennis Head was first lit in 1854.

"The necessity for giving an extensive range to the light at North Ronaldsay, which is to warn the mariner of his approach to the North Foreland of Orkney, combines with the lower level of land, to render a high tower unavoidable", (Lighthouse Commissioners report).

At 42m it is still the highest land-based lighthouse in the British Isles. The slightly



Holland House gardens attract many birds during migration time



The New Lighthouse was built in 1854, the tower is 42m high and has 176 steps

incongruous red brick tower was added in 1932, and dominates the island, its revolving beam sweeping over the land as well as the sea, to the benefit of night visitors and attracting migrating birds. In 1889, the tower was painted with two white bands to distinguish it from Start Point lighthouse. The light was changed to incandescent in 1907, while a radio beacon

was added in 1932, and in 1971 further improvements were made. The lighthouse was finally automated on 30 March 1998, one of the last to be manned.

North Ronaldsay Sheep The island is unique in being surrounded by a drystone Sheep Dyke, about 1.5m high, and 19km (12 miles) long, built

William Muir shows the electronics which control lighthouses nowadays



The lamphouse with its lenses



Oil lamp and decorated vent



The light is now electric





North Ronaldsay Sheep live on a diet of seaweed, plenty of which is available on the 19km of low coastline

about 1832 at the end of the kelp boom to keep the sheep off the agricultural land. The hardy North Ronaldsay sheep live on a diet of seaweed and some grass from the links outside the dyke. During the lambing time the ewes are allowed onto grass for three or four months, while special sheep puns around the shore

are used for clipping and dipping, which is a communal activity.

The North Ronaldsay is a fine boned, small sheep with a slightly dished face belonging to the Northern short-tailed group which includes the Romanov and Finnish Landrace. Adult ewes weigh

around 25kg, and colour is variable, including white, grey, black and *moorit* (brown), but various combinations are seen.

Rams are horned but the ewes are usually polled. Because they are adapted to a diet of seaweed, which is low in minerals, the breed can be susceptible to copper poisoning when fed exclusively on grass. The coloured fleeces are coarse but the white and *moorit* wool is almost as fine as that of Shetland sheep and is thus suitable for knitwear. The meat is lean and the unique diet gives it a distinctive flavour, but the slow growth rate means that they must be kept for up to four years before slaughter.



North Ronaldsay Sheep on South Bay beach with the Sheep Dyke in the background

Mini-woolmill at the New Lighthouse



Processed North Ronaldsay wool



Seaweed was also carted onto the land as fertiliser in large quantities, improving the already fertile land. Alginate is especially useful on sandy soils, helping water retention in dry spells. During the kelp boom in the 18th and early 19th centuries, North Ronaldsay benefited from having plenty of seaweed washed ashore on its exposed beaches from the large kelp beds beneath its shallow surrounding seas. Kelp-burning pits can still be seen at several places round the shore.

Longhouses Many of the farmhouses are improved longhouses with local flagstone roofs. In common with other parts of Orkney, North Ronaldsay steadings often had a kiln, but of an unusual square pattern as seen at Ancum, (HY764549), Cruesbreck (HY763525) and Stennabreck (HY771526). The agricultural land is mostly grassland, with hay and silage for fodder, but some oats and bere are still grown. In more modern times there was an undershot watermill at Haskie Taing (HY768533) which used water from Hooking Loch. This was

Harvest time at Peckhole



Typical North Ronaldsay croft with a flagstone roof

replaced by a new mill in 1907 (HY763529), near Nesstoun. The base of a windmill stands nearby.

Birds At the northeastern extremity of Orkney, with open sea beyond towards Shetland and Norway, North Ronaldsay, like nearby Fair Isle, is one of the prime bird-watching sites in the Britain, especially during migration periods, when the numbers and variety of birds passing through can be quite spectacular. It is the site of Orkney's only Bird Observatory, established in 1987, the main purpose of which is to monitor the migrations through, and populations on, the island, by census complemented by a migration crossroads for birds

on passage to and from their breeding grounds in Iceland, Greenland and Scandinavia - northwards from late March to early June, and southwards from mid-August to early November. Several rarities appear every year, particularly with east winds and in foggy weather.

In addition to visitors the island has many breeding species. There are breeding Arctic and Sandwich Tern, Great and Lesser Black-backed Gull, as well as a few Bonxie and a colony of Cormorant on Seal Skerry. Teal, Gadwall, Mallard and Pochard breed on the lochs, and waders favour the marshy areas. Eider, Tystie and Rock Pipit nest along the shore, while Fulmar favour the bot-

The New Mill at Nesstoun and the stump of a windmill





North Ronaldsay Bird Observatory

tom of the Sheep Dyke. Meadow Pipit, House Sparrow and Twite mingle around the small crofts. A few Corncrake also continue to breed here.

The main spring migration is towards the end of April to mid-May when Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff, Pied Flycatcher, Robin, Redstart, Wheatear, Whitethroat and Red-backed Shrike may all be seen. Late September and early October is the peak of the autumn migration period, the latter part sometimes producing large falls of thrushes. Rarities often turn up if the prevailing conditions are right.

Robins, Bluethroats, Whinchats, Wheatears, Barred, Garden, Willow, and

Yellow-browed Warblers and Chiffchaffs, are just a few of the species that are recorded in most years. Sea-watching from the Old Beacon at Dennis Head can be quite spectacular with very large numbers of Fulmars, Guillemots, Kittiwakes and Gannets passing. Shearwaters (Manx and Sooty) are regularly seen in good numbers and all four species of Skua are recorded in most years. Rarities such as Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler, Yellow-browed Bunting and Little Bustard have all passed through recently.

The variety of habitat and agricultural practice encourage a diversity of plants and the wild flowers are particularly beautiful on the island.

North Ronaldsay is low and flat - the highest point is just 2.3m above sea level



Both Grey and Common Seal are common round the coast.

Walks The island's lack of hills makes for easy walking. For the energetic the 19km (12 miles) circuit of the shore outside the dyke presents an interesting variety of shingle, sand, geos and structures old and new. The walk can be started anywhere on the circumference, but will inevitably head for the lighthouse! Shorter walks can take in parts of the shore and then cut across one of the many roads that come down to the gates in the dyke. Though flat the island has many good views and walking allows plenty of time to savour them.

Golf Course There is a nine-hole golf course on the links facing Linklet Bay which was created by the Traills in the 1890s. Clubs and balls may be borrowed from the "club hut" near South Gravity.

North Ronaldsay Trust was set up in 2000 with the stated objectives "to preserve and restore the built and natural heritage of the island; to promote industry and commerce; to provide or promote the provision of housing; to generally help to improve the quality of life on the island by creating job opportunities and attracting people to the island either to live and work or as tourists."

The Trust has purchased the lighthouse buildings which became vacant when the lighthouse was automated, some of which have been converted

into a mini-mill to process the local wool. The lighthouse is the only one in Orkney with guided tours for visitors. Tours are available by arrangement with W. Muir, the lighthouse keeper Tel (01857) 633257. A shop and cafe for visitors to the lighthouse is open in the summer.

The Trust publishes *The Foghorn* which is sent out to members. It also bought and renovated the New Kirk from the Church of Scotland when the latter decided that it was no longer needed for worship. It has already been the venue for weddings and other events.

Genealogy Story One day North Ronaldsay man happened to be in to the office to



The groceries come by plane!

see the author's grandfather, Charlie Tait. This Selkie was very proud of his genealogical research. He claimed his ancestry went back to King Haco himself. Meanwhile another customer from Sandwick had been quietly listening and was heard to say, "Aye min, he's likk him indeed."



Satisfied golfers from USA



MV Earl Sigurd at the pier

Linklet Bay with Dennis Head in the background



NORTH RONALDSAY SERVICES

Getting to North Ronaldsay Loganair by air from Kirkwall. The island has special subsidised air fares for journeys which include an overnight stay due to the lack of a daily car ferry Tel 01856 872494.

Orkney Ferries Access by sea is normally weekly, but there is also several Sunday trips in the summer Tel 01856 872044.

Where to Stay on North Ronaldsay Observatory Guest House, solar and wind powered accommodation with bird watching and natural history activities. ***GUEST HOUSE Tel 01857 633200; Fax 01857 633207 See the latest VisitOrkney or Islands of Orkney brochures for further accommodation available.

Shop Airfield Good & Services, Mrs H Swanney Tel 01857 633220
Car Hire, Bike Hire, Taxi T&C Muir, Garsi No1 also minibus tours 01857 633244

Lighthouse Tours W Muir Tel 01857 633257

Off Licence & Tea Room, Yarn Company at the Lighthouse Tel 01857 633221

Burrian Inn & Restaurant, S Mawson Tel 01857 633221