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STRONSAY (ON *Strjonsey*, Gain or Profit Island, most likely in the sense of good farming and fishing, but perhaps from ON *Strondsey*, Beach Island.) The island is mostly formed from Rousay flagstones, with Lower Eday Sandstone at Rothiesholm. There is a thick overlying layer of boulder clay, which has weathered to produce the

heavy but fertile soils of today. Agriculture has long been regarded as progressive in Stronsay, which was one of the first parishes to rationalise land-holdings and the island has some of the most fertile farms and best stock in Orkney.

Like Sanday, Stronsay has a very long coastline, with many

Whitehall Village and the Fishmarket



fine beaches. Indeed there is a suitable beach no matter from what *airt* the wind is blowing. There are good sandy beaches at Ayre of Myres near Whitehall (HY656280), Mill Bay on the east side (HY660260) where the sands stretch for 2.5km (1.5mi), Rothiesholm (HY635245) in the southwest and another 2km (1.25mi) of golden sands at St Catherine's Bay (HY645260) on the west side. The last two are backed by dunes and associated dune-slacks with an interesting variety of plants and birds.

On the southeast side, between Odin Ness (HY690263) and Lamb Head (HY693213) there are low cliffs with several dramatic caves, ghoups and castles. These include Orkney's best natural arch at the Vat of Kurbuster (HY687239) and several interesting caves which can be entered by a small boat in calm weather. On the west side of Lamb Head is the *Danes' Pier* (HY688214), a naturally occurring spit of stones, which is traditionally said to be a Norse harbour.

Most of the island is cultivated and the visitor will notice that Stronsay is one of the tidiest islands in Orkney with very well tended fields. The only real moorland is on Rothiesholm (HY620220, pronounced *Rousum*), the large headland to the southwest, which now hosts aerogenerators. At Burgh Head in the southeast there is



Aerial view of Stronsay from the south

Maritime Heath. The island has a very wide range of habitats which, together with its easterly position, makes it one of best places in Orkney for birdwatching.

Archaeology Stronsay's fertile soils must have attracted the first settlers, but extensive cultivation on the island over thousands of years has ensured that only traces remain, mostly in the few

areas of uncultivated ground. There are several chambered cairns, the best preserved being the long mound of Kelsburgh (HY617248) above the shore near Bu. The tops of several orthostats can be seen, suggesting that there were at least seven compartments.

At Lamb Head (HY689213) there are remains of two chambered tombs, one of

The Vat of Kurbuster is the best natural arch in Orkney



**STRONSAY
ATTRICTIONS**
"by the sun"

- Whitehall Village
- Old Fishmarket
- Lower Whitehall and Grice Ness
- Ayre of Myres
- Well of Kildinguie
- Mill Sands and Mill Bay
- Moncur Memorial Church
- The Castle Bird Reserve
- Meikle Water
- Odness
- Vat of Kurbuster
- Burgh Head
- Lamb Head
- Benni Cuml, Houseby
- Sand of Rotheisholm
- Rothiesholm aerogenerators
- Hillock of Baywest
- Kelsburgh chambered cairn
- St Catherine's Bay
- Linga Holm
- Sands of Odie
- Greenhill, Huip
- Holm of Huip
- Oyce of Huip
- St Peter's Chapel
- Papa Stronsay
- Earl's Knowe
- Golgotha monastery
- St Nicholas Chapel site



The Hillock of Baywest is an Iron Age broch and settlement site

which is tripartite, while at Grice Ness (HY672284) the prominently situated *Cutter's Toor* sits on a well-defined platform about 21m in diameter.

Of the numerous burnt mounds recorded, the only good remaining example is at Kirbuster (HY686235),

south of the Vat of Kirbuster. At its north end, where it is over 2m high, burnt stones are exposed, while the mound is nearly 30m long by 20m wide. All of the rest have been ploughed out or otherwise destroyed.

There are several well-preserved settlement sites includ-



Lambness broch

Moncur Memorial Church was completed in 1955



ing a large prehistoric mound behind a shingle ayre at Greenhill, Huip (HY629297), a broch with associated settlement at Benni Cuml, Houseby (HY672214), another broch at Hillock of Baywest, Rothiesholm (HY619243), where there is a substantial mound and ruins of an Iron Age village.

At Lamb Head (HY690215), two side-chambers of a partially-excavated broch can be entered through holes in the roof. Below Clestrain (HY635273) the remains of a settlement can be seen, having been exposed by erosion of the shore. Ruins of buildings and of a boat noust are visible.

Early Christians had several hermitage sites along the southeast coast, including Tam's Castle (HY668237) where there is the ruin of a cell. Broch of Burgh Head (HY700230), originally joined to the cliff by a rock bridge, has a stone wall on the landward side of the stack - perhaps the *Vallum* *monasterii*

The interior is austere yet welcoming



Whitehall Village from the East Pier,

which might have separated the secular and the religious ground. Stronsay also has ten or more chapel sites, most of which were probably associated with Norse farms, but the only evidence for them is in place-names.

Nothing remains of the former parish church of Lady Kirk, except a mound in the cemetery, which is on the shore near The Bay (HY641247). West of Whitehall, St Peter's Kirk (HY660282), is now an overgrown confusion of stones in the graveyard. It is built on a substantial earlier settlement site from which traces of buildings protrude.

The Chapel of Kildinguie (HY654272) is marked by a grassy bank above the shore of Mill Bay, near the Well of Kildinguie (HY654272), whose waters are said to have curative powers. When taken with dulse from further along the shore at Guiyidn, or perhaps Geo Odin, whose exact location is now uncertain, the effects were said to be especially potent. Pilgrims came

here from Norway and Denmark to partake of the waters from the Well and of the dulse which together were believed to be able to cure everything except the plague.

Moncur Memorial Church Stronsay is unusual in having a large 20th century church, the Moncur Memorial Church, built between 1950 and 1955 on the site of the former United Presbyterian Church and designed by Edinburgh architect Leslie Graham MacDougall. Alexander Moncur died in 1944 and left £20,000 to build a new church in memory of his grandfather, James Moodie, who was minister on the island from 1822 to 1860.

The tall cruciform, grey-harled building is unique, but reflects Orkney building style. It is tall and narrow inside with bare white walls and chairs rather than pews. At the east end the unusual sanctuary with its communion table is dramatically lit by a stained glass window depicting the Good Shepherd by Marjorie Kemp of Edinburgh.

The south transept features a bellcote in Dutch style, reflecting the longstanding Herring fishing connection. The original plan included a tall circular tower based on the St Magnus Church on Egilsay as well as a hall and a manse, making an enclosed square with the church.

Whitehall Village owes its name to a house built in 1671 at the Pier Head by Patrick Fea, who had recently acquired North Strynie, as the area was previously called. Although Dutch and Fife Herring boats had used the village as a base every year, perhaps since as early as Norse times, there was no real local fishing industry apart from

Herring boat heading to sea





Up to 300 steam drifters crammed Whitehall of a Sunday during the season in the early 1900s

Lobsters and some Cod fishing until local people started to invest in boats around 1814. Until then the main export was of grain to the Continent, with pre-fabricated boats and timber from Norway on the return trip.

The Steamer Pier and Lower Whitehall were built by Malcolm Laing of Kirkwall about 1830 and by this time, not only was the Herring station thriving, but Stronsay itself had about 170 small boats, no doubt partly financed as a result of the Kelp Boom. Today Whitehall has two piers, and the renovated Fishmarket at the head of the ferry pier. There is another old pier to the east as well as a slipway. Though Lobster fishing, is still practised, the economy has mostly reverted to farming.

Herring fishing Stronsay was used as a seasonal base for Herring boats and this association with the *Silver Darling* was to continue until 1937. By the early 20th century, Whitehall Village had become

one of the Herring Capitals of Europe and in 1913 about 300 steam drifters were working out of Stronsay, employing nearly 4,000 crew and shore workers.

In the peak year of 1924 over 12,000 tons of herring were landed at Whitehall, to be salted and packed in casks for export to Russia, Germany and Eastern Europe. Changes in vessels and, in particular, the use of "Klondyker" factory ships after World War II, meant that the industry did not revive in Stronsay.

During the boom years, Whitehall developed considerably and the Stronsay Hotel was said to have the longest

bar in Scotland until it burnt down in 1937. There were so many boats tied up on Sundays in July and August that it was possible to walk across them to Papa Stronsay! Exploitation of stocks on this scale could not last and the fishery effectively ended by 1937.

Fishmarket The Fishmarket is now an interpretation centre, café and hostel. It tells the story of Herring fishing on the island with many artefacts and interesting displays. On the west side of the harbour there is an unusual stone-built public toilet dating from the 1930s, which is reached by a narrow gangway, and is flushed clear by seawater.

Lifeboat from "SS Athenia", sunk by U-30 in 1939



Boathouse Nearby an upturned boathouse is one of the lifeboats from the passenger ship *S.S. Athenia*. The first incident of the U-boat war occurred just hours after the declaration of hostilities between Britain and Germany on September 3rd, 1939, when Oberleutnant Fritz-Julius Lemp, commanding *U-30*, attacked and sank what he took to be an armoured cruiser off Ireland.

His target was in fact a 13,500-ton passenger liner carrying 1,103 civilians, including more than 300 Americans hurrying home ahead of the clouds of war. This case of mistaken identity set in motion a large-scale cover-up on the part of the Reich, and had far-reaching consequences both for the subsequent conduct of the U-boat war, and for some of the key players in the affair, Lemp, Dönitz, and Raeder.

The pretence that U-boats had nothing to do with *Athenia's* demise was maintained for the duration of the war. Lemp was not court-



The Old Fishmarket is now an interpretation centre, café and hostel

martialled for his error, but neither was he promoted from the field, as were many of his contemporaries. Of the *Athenia's* passengers and crew, 112 were killed (93 of them passengers) in the initial explosion or died later as a result of the sinking.

He met his death in an incident that had far worse consequences for the *U-Bootwaffe* and the Reich than the sinking of the *Athenia*, the capture of *U-110* and its *Enigma* machine

Kelp-making Burning of seaweed to make kelp was introduced to Orkney by James Fea of Whitehall about 1721, perhaps after visiting Paris. The

shallow coastal waters, with gently sloping beaches and the long coastlines make Stronsay and Sanday, good places for shore weeds, which can be cut from the rocks at low tide (*tang*) and deeper weeds (*ware*) which get washed ashore after storms

The Boom lasted for fifty years from 1780 to 1830, ending when cheaper sources of potash and soda became available. The industry made fortunes for a few landowners, but also supported a large number of people and aided the rapid changes in agriculture which happened first in Stronsay and Sanday. Kelp-pits can be seen around the shores in many places in

Burning kelp was a smoky, messy business



Sea-washed toilet at the west side of the village





Aerial view of Stronsay from the south with Sand of Rothiesholm and St Catherine's Bay

Orkney. Stronsay has excellent examples at Grice Ness (HY670281) where well-preserved pits, drying areas and a ruined cottage can be seen and at Latan (HY631222) where there are more clearly defined pits.

Wildlife The several small lochs and marshy areas on Stronsay hold Redshanks, Snipe, Shovellers, Teal and Pintail, and a few Corncrakes still nest here. Although the island is mostly cultivated, the headland of Rothiesholm is moorland and is a delight for the birdwatcher with several species of Gull as well as

Aerogenerator on Rothiesholm



Shags, Auks, Fulmars, Ravens and Arctic Skuas. The low cliffs near Burgh Head are also good places to see birds. Puffins nest in this area.

Migrants Stronsay is an excellent island for birdwatching, being well situated to attract migrants in spring and autumn. Its diverse range of habitats provide both cover and food for tired and hungry birds, making it one of the best islands to visit at migration times. The bays and wet areas are good for waders and waterfowl while the gardens of Whitehall and the several small areas of shrubbery are attractive to passerines. Migrants can turn up anywhere but the east coast tends to be best. The Bird Reserve at *The Castle*, run by John Holloway turns up several national rarities each year along with a good selection of scarce migrants.

During spring and early summer, the bays are worth a look for migrant and resident

waders. Wheatears nest along the shores and Meadow Pipits on the field margins, while Redshanks and Lapwings like wetter places. Oystercatchers prefer the drier fields and shore. Fulmars are plentiful along the cliffs. There is a large Great Black-backed Gull colony on Rothiesholm Head as well as Bonxies and Arctic Skuas. Auks and Kittiwakes nest in small numbers on the cliffs while Mallard and Teal breed around the Meikle Water.

In autumn and winter migrants are the main attraction. The usual autumn migrants are Song Thrush, Redwing, Fieldfare, Ring Ouzel, Whitethroat, Lesser Whitethroat, Black Redstart, Garden Warbler, Blackcap, Goldcrest, Ring Ouzel, Yellow-browed Warbler, Red-backed Shrike and Barred Warbler. In the past few years several rare pipits and buntings have turned up. The best sea-watching locations Lamb Head.

Seals Both Grey and Common Seals frequent the Stronsay coasts and bays. Many Grey Seals (2003 pup numbers) are born on Linga Holm (3,240), Little Linga (648) and the Holm of Huip (1,123). Sty Taing (1,283) on the west side of Links Ness (HY615296) is perhaps the most accessible large Grey Seal colony in Orkney.

There are a number of major Grey Seal haulout sites around Stronsay. The best places in summer are Jacks Reef, Grice Ness, Odness, Lamb Head, Tor Ness and Greenli Ness. Well over 1,000 adults haulout at these sites around Stronsay.

In June Common Seals pup in considerable numbers around the island, especially at St Catherine's Bay, Baywest, Lamb Head, Odness and Grice Ness. Adults may be seen at these and other sites throughout the year.

Walks Stronsay offers much

for the walker. Here are some suggestions, some of which are waymarked "official" trails.

Odin Bay to Houseby From the car park near Kirbuster the Vat of Kirbuster is a short stroll. The low cliffs of Odin Bay lead to Burgh Head. The path follows low, but spectacular cliffs, with many caves and geos, to Lamb Head and the Bay of Houseby. Return via the Houseby farm road to the main road and thence to the car park at Kirbuster

Sand of Rothiesholm and Baywest From the car park (HY633247) near the kirk-yard walk along the beach and cross the road to the Loch of Rothiesholm. Visit the broch at Hillock of Baywest, and then follow the shore from Bight of Baywest, passing the chambered cairn of Kelsburgh on the way. Return to the road near Blan Loch.

St Catherine's Bay There is an access road and car park (HY645262) near the school. The beach and links offer pleasant walking, especially of a fine

evening. There are wonderful wildflowers here in summer.

Grice Ness The peninsula east of Whitehall makes a fine stroll in early morning or late evening with its relics of the Herring Fishing, kelp burning and a chambered cairn. There are fine views to Papa Stronsay and over Mill Bay.

Holland Farm to Tor Ness Park at Holland and take the path to the shore at Mells Kirk where there is a hide to observe seals. A bird hide on Shea Loch can give good views of wildfowl and waders and perhaps an Otter. The path continues to Tor Ness and the Sand of the Crook. A small colony of Grey Seals became established here in 1994. There is a chambered cairn at Ward of Houseby and Benni Cuml is a large broch mound.

STRONSAY SERVICES

Getting To Stronsay Orkney Ferries, Tel 01856 872044 and Loganair (not Sundays) Tel 01856 872494 operate daily services to the island from Kirkwall. Depending on the schedule it is possible to travel between Eday, Sanday and Stronsay. Please refer to their latest timetables for details.

Where to Stay and Eat on Stronsay Stronsay Hotel in Whitehall Village, bedrooms all en-suite, bar and restaurant Tel 01857 616213, Fish Market Cafe (open daily), B&B and self-catering is available on Stronsay. Please check the latest *Islands of Orkney* and *VisitOrkney* brochures. Stronsay Car Hire and Taxi DS Peace Tel 01857 616335 **Shops and fuel** Whitehall PO, Ebenezer Stores, Olivebank General Merchant, Stronsay Arts and Crafts.



To make a booking call, Allen and Carol Cooke
01857 616473
01857 616213

STRONSAY HOTEL

"The Stronsay Hotel the island's Hotel, Restaurant and Pub, giving the place a unique quality of warmth and friendliness. Good quality, home cooked food is the house speciality."



Aerial view of Papa Stronsay and Whitehall

PAPA STRONSAY (ON *Papa in Litla*, Little Isle of the Papae), or Papay, was where Earl Thorfinn had Earl Rognvald Brusison killed in 1046 while the latter was fetching malt, perhaps from the monks, for Yule. The *Orkneyinga Saga* relates that Rognvald was in a house on the island and leapt out through the door disguised as a monk, after being found by Thorfinn and his men. He

was revealed hiding on the shore by the barking of his pet dog and killed. Thus ended the rivalry between the two Earls and Thorfinn ruled on as sole Earl for nearly another 20 years.

The island has extensive remains of the Herring days with a stone quay and parts of several iron piers, as well as a tramway and curing sheds. There were five curing sta-

tions lining the southern shore during the peak of the fishery. In the season at least 1,000 people were employed on Papay alone.

The very large mound known as the **Earl's Knowe** (or Knoll, HY668292), on the southwest of the island is probably a chambered cairn, while there is a burnt mound, Easterhouse Knowe (HY665300) beside Mill

Golgotha Monastery from Whitehall Pier



Loch.

The remains of the small chapel of **St Nicholas** (HY670292) were recently excavated. It was originally built in the 11th century and in the 12th a chancel was added. Eventually it was used as a shed before being mostly demolished in 1792 to build a barn.

A cross-slab was discovered around this time with the inscription "d(omi)ne d(ei)" which dates from the 8th century, but is now lost. The excavations have revealed an earlier building which may be an 8th century Pictish church. The discovery of a piece of green porphyry, which comes from Greece and seems usually to be associated with ecclesiastic buildings in Scotland, as well as possible cells suggest the probable presence of a monastery here in Pictish times.

In 1999 the Transalpine Redemptorists bought the island and re-established the monastery, naming it **Golgotha Monastery**. "The island provides a home base for the contemplative part of their lives, but the other half of their vocation is to give missions all over the world, preaching God's Word and providing the sacraments. The apostolic aim of the Congregation is to draw sinners from their life of vice and set them on the road of virtue. They spread devotion to Our Lady of Succour, whose image the Redemptorist congregation was



St Nicholas Chapel under excavation



Sunrise over Papa Sound

entrusted with by Pope Pius IX."

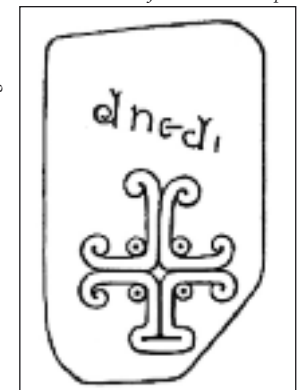
The monks have built 24 new cells, renovated the Big House, now renamed St Michael's House for use as the refectory, kitchen and tool shed, while the former

MacIver's fish curing shed is now the Holy Face Building and includes the chapel. Traditional cheesemaking, using milk from a small herd of Jersey cattle is now a part of the life of the monastery. Highland cattle and sheep are also kept.

St Nicholas chancel



Cross-slab found near the chapel





Aerial view of Linga Holm from the southwest

LINGA HOLM or **THE HOLM OF MIDGARTH** (ON *Lingsey*, Ling's or Heather Island), lies to the east of Stronsay, and is now a wildlife reserve under the Scottish Wildlife Trust. It is grazed from August to December to remove rank vegetation and encourage wild flowers and other interesting plants. The island is a major breeding site for Grey Seals, accounting for about 7% of UK pups, over 3000 per annum.

Archaeology There are several remains of settlements, including Bronze Age houses (HY612277) on Gimmis Skerry Point and south of the sheepfold (HY617275). An Iron Age roundhouse

St Catherine's Bay - looking towards Linga Holm from Stronsay



(HY612277) exists east of Oxná Geo and a probable Pictish House on the southern shore (HY616271). Several interconnected chambers and an entrance passage facing the sea can be seen. Traditionally, there was a small chapel on the island but it can no longer be found.

Stronsay Fairies The island's main claim to fame, is that it is the home of the Stronsay Fairies, whose names are Alex and Dolax, Gimp and Cork, Keelbrown and Horny. At clipping time the men would sit around a fire at meal times and throw morsels of potato over their left shoulders, saying "Here's to thee, Alex, then over the right shoulder Here's to thee

Dolax", and so on.

The potatoes had always disappeared when the men got up, but it was bad luck to turn around and see who took them. The author's grandfather used to practise the ritual on family outings to the island and he always insisted that the potatoes really did disappear!

Linga Sound is a very sheltered anchorage and was marked as such on old charts. Although secure for ships once at anchor in St Catherine's Bay, negotiating the entry without local knowledge is hazardous due to reefs and shallows which extend from the North Taing.

The Swarf, a large drying skerry to the southwest is especially dangerous and remains unmarked today. There is a shallow channel between it and Linga Holm, and the main entrance is to the south side of the Swarf. Many sailing ships fell foul of the seemingly straightforward entrance.

AUSKERRY (ON *Austrsker*, East Skerry) is a small island 3 miles southeast of Stronsay with a remarkable number of archaeological remains. There are several Standing Stones (HY672164), the largest of which is 2.5m high, and evidence of several broken stones, an excellent Burnt Mound (HY673163) and a number of house sites, including a Prehistoric House (HY872169), Bronze Age Houses (HY677164) with remains of field dykes and possible Iron Age houses (HY674164). The ruins of a small Chapel are also present, with walls still standing (HY679160).

Lighthouse The 34m-high lighthouse was first lit in 1866 and went automatic in 1961. It was built to help guide ships into places of shelter and to warn of the dangerous tidal waters of the Stronsay Firth. The jetty at South Geo was constructed to land all the materials.

On 13th June 1926, the 4,178-ton ship *SS Hastings County* went ashore below the lighthouse in thick fog. She was Norwegian-owned and bound from Hamburg to Montreal with general cargo. Two-thirds of this was saved, including two large motor yachts, but a fire broke out in the after hold on September 26th and an easterly gale on 25th October broke up the ship. Wreckage is still strewn along the shore.



Aerial view of Auskerry from the southwest



"SS Hastings County" went ashore at Hunters Geo in 1926 in thick fog



South Geo has a small jetty but is exposed to the west

Nature The island is designated as an SPA on account of its Arctic Tern (780 pairs) and Storm Petrel (3,600 pairs) breeding colonies. The shores are rocky with low cliffs and shingle beaches and boulders, while the land is low-lying and relatively flat with marshy areas and some peat.

Inhabitants One family now live part of the year on Auskerry and keep nearly 300 North Ronaldsay sheep there. They have a small wind turbine to provide power and have renovated an old building to make a modern house. The

keepers' house at the lighthouse is also used in summer.

There are several standing stones

