



Orkney Ecomuseum: A contribution to the debate on the future of tourism and archaeology from Orkney Archaeology Society

Orkney Archaeology Society, 23 March 2018

Introduction

OAS is not and cannot be an Orkney Tourist Board, but tourism does provide a vital opportunity to protect and promote the archaeology of our county. Tourism can help provide an income to support archaeological digs and research (e.g. the thousands raised from tourists who visit the Ness) and provides resources that educate the public (e.g. the various museums). Tourism can also be a threat to archaeology with the erosion of sites.

This paper has been prepared by OAS as a contribution to the debate on the future of tourism in Orkney and its relationship with archaeology.

Cruise ships

There is a concern that the increase in visitors from cruise ships means that the main sites, especially the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage sites, are so busy during peak times that it is difficult for other tourists who come to Orkney for longer periods of time to get the most out of their visits. Skara Brae can be very busy, the car parks are full at Stenness and the Ring of Brodgar and the high footfall has damaged the paths around the Ring. Tourism is a major source of income for the county and there is a perception that the mass day tourism could damage the core element; the tourist who comes for a week or more and spends money throughout that time. The day visitors clearly do contribute to the local economy, not least the shops in Kirkwall, the Tourist Guides etc., but the interests of both groups and those who provide services for them, need to be balanced.

The figures for day visitors are set out in the [Orkney Volume Tourism Management Study: Final Report](#):

Estimate of 2016 'volume' visitor numbers in Orkney

Market Visitor Numbers Cruise Passengers	91,000
Cruise Crew	9,900
Coach/Tour-Day Trip	16,500
Coach/Tour-Overnight	7,000
Total	124,400



Most volume visitors came on cruise ships and the number of these visitors has gone up by almost 100% since 2013. In contrast, the report estimates that there were around 129,100 'non-volume' visitors to Orkney in 2016, only 7% higher than in 2013. The Report concludes that the numbers of cruise ship visitors will further increase. Historic Environment Scotland reported that in 2016-17 45% of annual visitors to their sites came in July and August, which can create significant bottle necks in those two months.

Visit Scotland Survey 2015/16

It is important to note the reasons people come to Orkney and the [survey](#) from Visit Scotland is very helpful. There were two key reasons:

- [History and culture](#) Given by 74% of respondents (Edinburgh behind at 61%), and
- [Scenery and landscape](#) Given by 75% of respondents (fifth out of nineteen following Highlands (87%), Outer Hebrides (87%), Argyll and the Isles (84%) and Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park (78%)).

These are very startling results. It would be expected that the main destination for those interested in history and heritage would be Edinburgh, but the city comes a poor second to Orkney, 61% to Orkney's 74%. It should also be noted that the survey was completed in 2015 and 2016, before the three-part TV series, [Britain's Ancient Capital: Secrets of Orkney](#), was broadcast.

Ecomuseum

An Ecomuseum is a dynamic way in which communities preserve, interpret, and manage their heritage for a sustainable development. An Ecomuseum is based on a community agreement.

— *Declaration of Intent of the Long Net Workshop, Trento (Italy), May 2004*

Orkney's archaeological heritage is not limited to one or two main sites, Orkney has dozens of amazing archaeological sites spread right across the archipelago. These are only some of the more obvious examples:

- South Ronaldsay – [Tomb of the Eagles](#)
- Hoy - [Dwarfie Stane](#)
- Sanday – [the Quoyness Cairn](#)
- Papa Westray – [Knap of Howar](#) and [Holm of Papay](#)
- Westray – [Links of Noltland](#)
- Rousay – which has been described as the [Egypt of the North](#) because the tombs are so numerous
- West Mainland – [HMS Tern](#)



In fact, there is probably not an island or district of Orkney that is without a major site.

As noted above, people come to Orkney on holiday for two main reasons: the landscape and the scenery and the heritage. This is not two separate groups of tourists but one group which want to experience both. The archaeology of Orkney is best appreciated when approach on foot and not as part of a flying visit via a tour bus. Day visitors, whether from the cruises or the John O Groats ferry, can only experience a taste of Orkney that will hopefully entice a certain number to come again for longer. If we took more of an Ecomuseum approach, then this would be an opportunity for people to experience the archaeology and the landscape in a more integrated way, as well as spreading out the visitors more thinly across the county.

A good local example is the Tomb of the Eagles where visitors are first given a talk about the Tomb and the Bronze Age round house, then walk to the sites themselves. If the weather is then half-fair, visitors then take the long route back along one of Orkney's most beautiful coastlines. We need to think more about how we can encourage visitors to experience the sites outside the main centres.

To achieve an Ecomuseum approach we would need to develop a plan to make these sites more accessible.

Museums and Heritage centres

In addition to actual sites there are a whole series of small public and community museums and heritage centres. These include:

- Westray Heritage Centre
- Sanday Heritage Centre
- Papay Kelp Store
- Eday Heritage Centre
- South Ronaldsay Heritage Centre
- The two farm museums
- Birsay Mill
- Stromness Museum
- St Magnus Centre
- Tankerness House
- The Wireless Museum
- The Saga Centre

Plus, several private sites such as the Tomb of the Eagles. A map that showed where they all were would encourage people to explore. A group ticket, perhaps combined with the Historic Scotland sites, might be a good idea. For those sites that do not charge (e.g. the farm museums) it might be a good idea to introduce a small charge to provide some funds to support and improve the facilities. Access could be free or reduced for those who hold Orkney Library Cards the same as for other schemes (e.g. the [York Explorer Card](#)).



Internal tourism

An element of this should be about how we encourage internal tourism to help the Northern and Inner Isles be more sustainable. We should also encourage more people who live on Mainland to visit the different islands and stay a few nights. A visit to Shapinsay should be a day trip we all take once or twice a year. However, this only become affordable if we can avoid taking the car on the ferry each time and there are alternative means to get around the islands. One straightforward way would be to hire out electric bikes, based on the islands or from hubs at the Mainland ferry harbours.

World Heritage Site and Orkney's summer

While we can encourage visitors, who are coming for longer periods, to explore more widely, they quite rightly also want to see the main sites. Skara Brae and the Ring of Brodgar are often very busy, especially between about 11.00am and 4.00pm when the tour buses arrive. Last year, visitor numbers for Skara Brae went up 18% (see [here](#)). The tourist industry needs to learn from Orkney's farmers who know that Orkney has a very short growing season but also long summer days which means that crops grow fast. We need to encourage people to visit the busy sites in the early evening, or even the late evening for the Ring of Brodgar and the Stones of Stenness. Historic Environment Scotland could build on the success of their Twilight Tours at Skara Brae to open for an hour or two longer in the peak months. The sites that form part of the World Heritage Site are often very busy but there are literally dozens of amazing sites right across the islands including many on Mainland or that can be reached using the Churchill Barriers.

Repeat visitors

One element that the Visit Scotland survey does not cover is the number of visitors who are coming for a second or a third visit. There is something about Orkney which means that visitors feel at home here and it would be worth exploring how many people who migrate to Orkney first came as tourists. We need to find out why people come back to Orkney and want to establish a permanent relationship with our islands. It is notable that just over half of OAS members live outside Orkney and pay to be kept in touch with ongoing archaeological explorations. It could be something to do with the very human landscape where the marks of over 5000 years of occupation and farming can be seen. It may also be to do with how open the landscape is with no hedges or walls to obscure the view. It certainly has something to do with the people of Orkney.

Any strategy to encourage heritage/archaeological tourism to Orkney must include thinking about how we can maintain an ongoing relationship with repeat visitors.



Suggested Actions OAS and partners could take

These are some of the ideas that OAS are putting forward for consideration.

1. Establish a forum to consider the Ecomuseum concept for Orkney.
2. Promote the accessibility of some of the sites with improved paths, cycle ways, public transport, further promoting the excellent inter-island ferry and plane services and producing guides and maps.
3. Encourage our tour guides to come up with different ways to experience the landscape, e.g. the plan to start Viking Hikes that several guides are planning for 2018, the splendid work by the Birsay Heritage Trust to promote HMS Tern and the excellent initiative around the St Magnus Trail which will include a book and interpretative materials.
4. Encourage HES to extend the opening times for Skara Brae and Maeshowe.
5. Explore if the Ness model of tourism part funding the dig could be used to fund digs at other sites, such as the Ring of Bookan.
6. Lobby OIC to use the income to Harbours from the cruises to set up a separate 'Orkney Fund' to benefit the people of Orkney. Some of this money should be ploughed back into supporting the tourism infra-structure (e.g. an interpretation centre) but some of it could be used to benefit Orkney in other ways (e.g. how the income is currently to invest in the harbour in Pierwall or to invest in the ferries). This would help people to understand that we all have a stake in tourism.
7. Explore how the season could be extended (limited if people want to explore the archaeology in the landscape but this year's Brochtober Fest can be used to begin to explore the possibilities).
8. Establishing an interpretation centre for the county's archaeology where recreation of arts and crafts can be carried out, reconstructions of buildings can be located and visitors encouraged to explore the county.
9. OAS, with others, to publish and write new content that encourages the public to explore the archaeology of Orkney. (Ideas OAS have including republishing information about the Saga Trail, writing materials associated with the Tombs of the North Project, devising a Pictish Trail and materials about Orkney's world war archaeology).



Further reading

Scotland visitor survey:

http://www.visitscotland.org/research_and_statistics/visitor_research/all_markets/scotland_visitor_survey.aspx

Report into mass tourism:

<http://www.orkney.gov.uk/Council/C/development-and-infrastructure-committee-12-september-2017.htm>

Eco-museum on Skye

<http://theskyetimes.co.uk/index.php/1354-skye-ecomuseum-part-of-an-international-project>

<http://staffin-trust.co.uk/skyes-eco-museum-ceumannan-ii-2>

<http://www.skyecomuseum.co.uk/>

Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site Management Plan 2014 – 2019:

<https://www.historicenvironment.scot/archives-and-research/publications/publication/?publicationId=c96546cf-ff4d-409e-9f96-a5c900a4f5f2>

Destination Orkney Tourism Strategy:

<http://scottishtourismalliance.co.uk/uploads/Destinations/Orkney%20Tourism%20Strategy%20Summary%20March%202017.pdf>