FOAT NEWSLETTER

NUMBER 21 SPRING 2008

Scottish Charity No SC030611

Welcome to the FOAT newsletter for spring 2008. The next 12 to 24 months will be an exciting and challenging time for the Friends. It should provide us the chance to broaden our horizons and to include a wider range of articles and information within the newsletter which will keep our membership informed on all aspects of archaeology in Orkney. In future editions I will be including a free advertising page at the back of the newsletter in order to publicise any events that would be of interest to our membership. Please let me have your comments and input with regards to the newsletter – after all as the members it is your newsletter! The Editor @ P.O. Box 6213, Kirkwall, Orkney, KW15 1YD.

2008 AGM

There is some important information for members to consider prior to the AGM on 5th June 2008. Over the past year significant changes have taken place that will affect the Friends of Orkney Archaeological Trust. In the past the Orkney Archaeological Trust has funded a number of the archaeologists and much of their work. This changed last year when the Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology, ORCA, came into being with Dr Jane Downes as its director. ORCA sits alongside the Department of Archaeology at Orkney College and receives its core funding from the Orkney Island Council and HIE Orkney. The future role of the Orkney Archaeological Trust is currently uncertain now that its role as a main funder has ceased but it is likely to become a Community Planning Forum involving the Council and other public bodies. We feel that it is important that there continues to be an autonomous organisation representing the archaeological interests of Orkney. The committee of the Friends of Orkney Archaeological Trust have maintained constant discussion with the Orkney Archaeological Trust and we have concluded that now is a good time to loosen our connection with the Trust in order to maintain such a robust and independent organisation.

To this end we intend to propose to the Friends at the AGM that the Friends of Orkney Archaeological Trust changes its name to the Orkney Archaeology Society. The Orkney Archaeological Trust is in full agreement with this decision and is happy for this change to go ahead. Our aims will remain broadly the same – *'to support the management and development of Orkney's archaeological and historical resource by charitable means'* and to *'serve the membership of the Society and the general public by providing information on archaeology and archaeological activity in Orkney through publications, meetings, conferences, exhibitions, projects and other activities and events'.* Some minor changes (such as changing 'Friends' to 'Society') will need to be made to the constitution and this will also be discussed at the AGM.

The FOAT committee is currently seeking clarification from the Scottish Charities regulator (OSCR) to see if we can simply make these amendments or whether we need to dissolve the Friends organisation and start again as the Orkney Archaeology Society. Making these changes in practice will have little impact on the current day to day running of the organisation, nor on its aims and objectives. We do hope that you will be able to attend the AGM on 5th June to discuss these important changes.

The FOAT committee:

Hugh Halcro-Johnson: President
Eoin Scott: Chairperson
Jane Downes: Vice Chairperson
Sue Barnard: Secretary
Kat Fryer: Membership Secretary & Treasurer
Andrew Appleby: Fundraising
Chris Read: Newsletter Editor
Nick Card: member

Proposed Changes to the Constitution

The changes to the Constitution require the approval of a two-thirds majority of members present at the AGM (provided it is quorate) and that the changes are notified to all those entitled to vote in advance of the meeting. Whilst working on the changes noted above, we also felt that there were several other things which needed updating. Please find below a full list of all the changes proposed to the Constitution.

Removal of references to OAT and changing "Friends" to "Society" throughout the constitution.

Article 1. – change of name to Orkney Archaeology Society.

Article 2 – Objects – article 2.1 – remove reference to OAT & add historical resource – article 2.2 – add the general public

Article 3 – remove junior membership. Add joint concessionary membership

Article 3.2 – Change to: 'The committee may not refuse to admit any person to membership without good cause or reasons for doing so'

Article 4.1 – delete "becomes of unsound mind"

Article 5.1 & 8.3 – changes to notice periods required for AGM & EGM, & for notice of a proposal for expulsion – changed from 2 & 6 weeks respectively to 6 & 4 weeks.

Article 6.2 –changed so that anyone who joins between 1 Jan & 1 Jun doesn't have to pay again till the next year.

Article 11.4 – composition of the committee –Chair of OAT to be a non-voting member of the committee ex officio.

The full Constitution is available from the website:
http://www.orkneycommunities.co.uk/FOAT/

Making Pots: First Thoughts On An Experiment Into The Making Of Prehistoric Pottery

Archaeologists are used to dealing with small scraps of pottery found during excavations or field walking exercises. For those interested in the Neolithic, these pieces of pot have been in the ground for 4,000 or 5,000 years, and bear little resemblance to the vessels when new and in use. It is usually difficult to gain a true impression of what the pot was like or how it was made.

For the past few years I have been researching the Neolithic pottery of Orkney, which was produced over a fifteen hundred year period between about 3800 and 2100 BC. Despite the mass of pottery that has accumulated in museum stores over the last couple of centuries, archaeologists currently have little clear understanding of this material. This contrasts with the massive amount of information available from contemporary settlements like Knap of Howar and Barnhouse or funerary monuments such as the Tomb of the Eagles or Quanterness. Quite simply, much is known about how Neolithic people lived and died in Orkney, but when it comes to the pottery they used – an essential feature of everyday life, for cooking, storage, brewing and so on – we have little solid information. And so, some eighteen months ago, a chance conversation with Harray potter Andrew Appleby, who has been carrying out his own researches into the making of prehistoric pottery for many years now, sowed the seeds of the present project.

After some discussion we decided on an experiment in the making of Grooved Ware, the type of later Neolithic decorated pottery in use in Orkney between about 2600 and 2100 BC and commonly associated with the villages of that period, such as Skara Brae and Barnhouse on Mainland, Rinyo on Rousay, and Pool on Sanday. As a type of prehistoric pottery, Grooved Ware is generally thought to have been 'invented' in Orkney and was then adopted by

suggested two particularly dense scatters of material in two separate areas of the site and in total over one thousand pieces of flint were collected coming both from the surface collection but also from within the circa 8,700 litres of soil samples that were wet sieved during the two weeks.

Test pitting allowed the location of two in situ, negative features to be discovered, interpreted as possibly the bases of post holes. These were left as scoops into the natural glacial till and were heavily truncated by ploughing, but interestingly they were found in test pits opened in close relation to the densities of surface flint. This form of evidence is indicative of the Mesolithic elsewhere in Scotland and Britain and in relation to Links House, they are important as they show that such remains may still be left preserved, suggesting potential for the discovery of further related features such as possible evidence of fires or pits at the site. So what next?

Conclusions and future work

The first indications of the flint assemblage collected during the excavation suggest a Mesolithic date for the site, this is however a suggestion in advance of dating evidence being available and is based upon lithic typologies. If this is the case, Links House may well represent the earliest and largest in situ evidence for the Mesolithic period in Orkney. The findings of the excavations were positive, but the actual nature and true extents of Mesolithic activity at the site were not able to be totally examined and confirmed by these first stages, and significantly the presence of the tanged points continues to lie in ambiguity.

The archaeological remains found within the assessment area are considered to be capable of supporting a more detailed characterisation through further field walking, survey and excavation and it is intended that further field walking shall take place immediately after this season's ploughing has occurred. In the future it is thought a larger scale excavation will take place, specifically over the two locations of possible post holes, this in order to examine their apparent natures and the relationships they may share with the surface flint concentrations. It is also intended that further test pitting will be undertaken in areas adjacent to the current site in order to address the potential of further archaeological remains in the vicinity. Such a project would work in tandem with a proposed landscape characterisation programme which has initially been begun on a peat deposit, located approximately 200m from the site which can be seen eroding out of the beach cliff at Mill Bay. Professor Ian Simpson of the University of Stirling has begun work on this, obtaining samples for soil micromorphology and Optically Stimulated Luminescence dating on a possible old land surface found beneath the peat deposit. It is hoped that future work shall also begin a coring programme between this peat deposit and the site itself, to examine the extent of the peat deposit inland and its relationship to the site. Could the site be some sort of temporary occupation on the shores of a large loch now drained? It would also be an interesting location for collaboration with the current research being undertaken into sea level changes in Orkney through prehistory (Wickham-Jones and Dawson, 2008). Links House certainly offers many opportunities for future research and not least it shall be the basis of my proposed future PhD research!

The 2008 excavations at Links House were funded by Historic Scotland, Orkney Islands Council and facilitated by the Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology (ORCA) at Orkney College UHI. They occurred over twelve days between March 3rd and 15th and were directed by myself Naomi Woodward. Many thanks are directed to the landowners Mr and Mrs Proudman and the excavation team: Dan Lee, Rebecca Enlander, Jakob Kainz, Dave McNicol and Jim O'brien. Thank you also for the support, advice and consultation to Torben Ballin, Nick Card, Jane Downes, Julie Gibson, Ian Simpson and Caroline Wickham-Jones.

References.

Ashmore, P.J.; Cook, G.T and Harkness, D.D. 2000 'A radiocarbon database for Scottish archaeological samples' *Radiocarbon* 42(1): 41-48.

Ballin, T.B. and Saville, A 2003 'An Ahrensburgian-type tanged point from Shieldaig, Wester Ross, Scotland and its implications' *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 22(2): 115-131.

Card, N, Downes, J, Murray, D and Sharman, P 2004 *Mine Howe and Long Howe, Tankerness, Orkney Excavation 2004*, p64-68, unpublished report for Historic Scotland held in the Orkney SMR.

Clarke, A. 1987. 'Sheildaig and Redpoint' in Ballantyne, C.K. and Sutherland, D.G *Wester Ross: Field Guide*. Cambridge: Quarternary Research association, 142 – 143.

Edwards, K.J. and Mithen, S. 1995. 'The colonization of the Hebridean Island of Western Scotland: evidence from the palynological and archaeological records' *World Archaeology* 26(3): 348 -365.

Livens, R. 1956. 'Three Tanged Flint Points from Scotland.' *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries Scotland* 89:438-443.

Morrison, A and Bonsall, C. 1989. 'The early Post-Glacial settlement in Scotland: a review' in Bonsall, C. (Ed) 1989. *The Mesolithic in Europe. Papers presented at the third international symposium, Edinburgh, 1985* Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers ltd, 134 – 142.

Ritchie, G. and Ritchie, A. 1981. *Scotland: archaeology and early history* Thames and Hudson.

Robertson, J. and Woodward, N. 2007. *Excavations at Long Howe, Tankerness, Orkney 2008.* Data Structure Report for Orkney Islands Council, Society of Antiquarians of London, Society of Antiquarians of Scotland and Orkney College.

Walker, M. 1973. *Archaeological excavation of a microlithic assemblage at Sheildaig, Wester Ross, Scotland.* 24/iii/73-6/iv/73: preliminary report (unpublished typescript held at the NMRS, Edinburgh).

Wickham –Jones, C.R. 1993 'Millfield Stronsay (Stronsay Parish)' *DES* 1993

Wickham-Jones, C.R. and Firth, C.R. 2000 'Mesolithic settlement of northern Scotland: first results of fieldwork in Caithness and Orkney' in Young, R. (Ed) 2000 *Mesolithic Lifeways: Current Research from Britain and Ireland.* Leicester Archaeology Monographs No.7.

Wickham-Jones, C.R. and Dawson, S. 2008 *Submerged Landscape of Orkney Interim Report March 2008.*

Woodward, NL 2007. *Stronsay Archaeological Survey 2007* Data Structure Report for Orkney Islands Council.

FOAT

Walks and Talks Programme Spring/summer 2008

Date	Event	Venue
14th May 7.30pm	The Stone Circles of Orkney & Lewis. Colin Richards	The Hub, King Street Halls
27th May 7.30 pm	The Iron Age Ritual Building at Uppåkra, southern Sweden. Professor Lars Larsson, University of Lund, Sweden	The Hall, St Magnus Centre
31st May 2.30 pm	Guided walk of the Ring of Brodgar. Led by the World Heritage Site Rangers	Meet at Ring of Brodgar car park
5th June 7.30 p.m.	AGM Followed by Hebridean Archaeology through the ages – Niall Sharples	The Friends' Room, St Magnus Centre
July	Visits to excavations will be organised in July – details in local press	
3rd August	Sanday trip with Rod Thorne, Sanday Ranger	Meet Kirkwall harbour 8.40 am
6th or 7th September	Visit to Hoy guided by Nick Card – date & further details to be confirmed – check local press	

communities over the rest of the British Isles. The title 'Grooved Ware' is something of a misnomer, covering as it does pots with incised, impressed and applied decoration – and even pots without any decoration at all! There is one unifying factor, however: all Grooved Ware pots have flat bases, contrasting with the exclusively round-based pottery of the earlier Neolithic (the so-called Unstan-style bowls). Grooved Ware occurs in a range of sizes, from small cups and bowls through medium sized vessels (up to around 30cm in height) to very large pots (up to and sometimes over 50cm in height).

The aim of the project has been to make and fire Orcadian Grooved Ware pottery (as opposed to the variants found elsewhere), and experiment in its use, recording every stage of the work in as much detail as possible. By focusing on their replication and analysing the processes involved we can gain better insight and understanding into how pots were manufactured and, just as importantly, used. Already the project is providing data which will be of use to archaeologists generally, as well as increasing our overall knowledge of Neolithic pottery in Orkney.

From the outset, and in order to make the experiment as authentic as possible, we decided to use local clays. Here, my own work since 2005 in sampling and analysing Orkney's boulder clays for their potting qualities proved to be useful. None of the county's clay deposits are particularly good for potting, but some are better than others. From a potter's perspective, clays found on North Ronaldsay, Stronsay, Shapinsay, Central and East Mainland, the South Isles, and parts of Westray and Eday are much better than those found in the western part of the island group. Generally, those from the west have far too much sand and rock rubble in them. For present purposes we decided to use two very different clays, from Stackle Brae on Eday and the aptly named Clay Loan in Kirkwall. That from Clay Loan proved very good and was easily worked. The Stackle Brae material, a rich chocolate brown colour, was found to contain too much sand, but when mixed with grass – a technique known to have been used by prehistoric potters – the clay immediately became elastic, proving very suitable for potting.

After digging the clay, removing the larger pieces of rock, and soaking it, our team of volunteer (first-time) potters assembled at Fursbreck Pottery in Harray. Over four days, we made pots, lots of them! Andrew's consummate skill as a professional potter, combined with his interest in archaeology, ensured that the project got off to a flying start. As an archaeologist specialising in prehistoric pottery, I have often thought and speculated about its manufacture, but this was the first time I had systematically made vessels and recorded the process in detail. And it was a real eye-opener, raising a whole host of questions and suggesting avenues for further research. We experimented with the building of pots and quickly discovered that there are right and wrong ways, easier and harder ways, to make them. As Andrew never fails to remind me, 'Potters are lazy people; they will always find the easiest way to make their pottery'. A good maxim. An interesting lesson was that the clay was always in

control: it can only be pulled, tugged and squeezed for so long before it fails. When making a pot, particularly a big one, the clay needs to be frequently rested and allowed to firm up before continuing. With a little practice, the potter intuitively knows when the clay is beginning to 'go away' from him or her. And that is the time to stop – otherwise, the vessel will inevitably collapse.

Using a 2 or 3kg ball of clay we found that we could make pots up to 30cm in height and 15-20cm in diameter. No additional clay was needed. These vessels could be produced very quickly, in 15 or 20 minutes from start to finish. For larger vessels we added coils, which were then pinched down and pulled up to give greater height and diameter. How you placed coils on the preceding walls determined the ultimate shape of your pot. If you wanted a 'flower pot' shape, coils were placed vertically, the weight of the clay splaying the walls outwards. Alternatively, if you wanted a vertically sided pot you joined coils more on to the inward side of the vessel and then pulled and stretched the clay into a vertical position. Early comparison of our replica pieces with pots in museum collections has demonstrated a remarkable similarity.

And now to entirely coil-built pots, the sort of thing that many of us remember making in art lessons during our schooldays. I have long suspected, contrary to received wisdom, that coil-building was not particularly widespread in prehistoric pottery, something of a myth based on little more than invalid ethnographic parallels. Our work has shown that coil-building is time consuming and that the finished product is structurally very weak, especially where the walls join the base – and these pots have a tendency to leak at weak points when filled with liquid. They are not suited to the rough-and-tumble of everyday use.
When completed and leather hard some vessels had their surfaces polished with pebbles and sheep wool to give a fine, smooth finish. Others were left rough and coarse.

Some people are better at potting than others. For instance, I am not particularly good – my hands are too warm, rapidly absorbing moisture from the clay and making it unworkable. Hand-eye co-ordination is also important. Some people are better at making certain types of vessels than others – the small, slender hands of adolescents and women are better for making small cups and bowls. And people with a well developed sense of spatial awareness and those with small hands and slender fingers are more adept when it comes to decorating pots. Before long, our own working practices became compartmentalised, with some volunteers, those with a particular flair, concentrating on certain aspects of the pot-making process. This may reflect the beginnings of specialisation in pottery making, something which began to flourish in the succeeding Bronze Age.

And, finally, to the kiln. Here, we were working completely in the dark and entering into the realms of speculation. No Neolithic pottery kiln has so far been recognised in the British archaeological record – with the possible exception of a structure partially excavated at the Knowes of Trotty, Harray, in 2006. Using the very limited evidence from the Knowes of Trotty we built a turf-walled kiln, about 1m in diameter and the same in height. A test firing took place on Saturday 19 May.

After preheating the kiln with a wood fire, it was loaded with around 100 pots, filled with peat mould as fuel, and capped with a layer of cattle dung. It was then left to its own devices, with the wood embers eventually igniting the peat mould. After about 12 hours of slow smouldering, the temperature began to rise quite quickly: 600°C ... 700°C ... 800°C ... 900°C ... finally peaking at 1067°C in the early hours of Sunday morning. After that, the temperature began a slow decline. By 7am the first pots were beginning to show through the ashes of the spent fuel.

A very exciting moment. By early Sunday evening we were able to remove the first batch of pots, Andrew deftly using a deer antler to hook them out of the red hot ashes. The result: a complete success, with a range of very passable Grooved Ware vessels before us. After a long thirty-six hours without sleep, a very satisfying moment. By taking unprepossessing raw materials we had turned them – almost magically – into serviceable pots through the controlled use of water, fire and air. Perhaps this discovery was the first use of alchemy back in Neolithic times.

After the thrill and excitement of the past few weeks, the hard work now begins. The project has produced an enormous amount of data, which will take many months to assimilate and write up. Here, I have given only a flavour of the work to date and details of some of the results it has yielded.

None of this would have been possible without the dedication and enthusiasm of our volunteer potters – Sigrid Appleby, Merryn Dineley, Katherine Fryer, Debbie Jones, and Chris Read – and of the many others who provided much needed logistical support. Altogether, this was a collaborative endeavour. To one and all, Andrew and I send our heartfelt thanks.

Stephen Harrison

Excavations at the Braes of Ha'Breck, Wyre in 2007

The Neolithic of Orkney is world famous for the quality and quantity of its archaeological remains. The extensive use of stone as a building material and the lack of intensive farming until relatively recently have led to an almost unparalleled survival of prehistoric sites. But what is perhaps most amazing

about Orkney's archaeology is that new sites are discovered every year, and in 2006 a new prehistoric settlement was discovered at the Braes of Ha'Breck, Wyre.

This site was initially identified during fieldwalking in 2006, when what first appeared as several patches of darker earth in a ploughed field was found to be littered with archaeological material. Hundreds of fragments of pottery, coarse stone tools, flint, burnt bone, burnt stone and pumice were found and initial assessment of these suggested a Neolithic date. Most exciting of all was the recovery of two polished stone axes and five macehead fragments, all beautiful objects that would have had some special significance for their makers and owners. A geophysical survey focusing upon the highest concentration of fieldwalking finds indicated that there was a significant amount of below-ground remains, ranging from areas of burning and midden material, to possible structural remains. It seemed like there might be a domestic settlement dating to the Neolithic in this field – could it be another Barnhouse? Only through excavation would we really find out what was below the ploughsoil, so in August 2007, a small team of mostly volunteer archaeologists opened up two evaluation trenches and a handful of test pits on the site.

Trench A was positioned over one of the densest concentrations of finds recovered during the fieldwalking. It soon became clear when we were deturfing that we were going to be dealing with a very plough truncated site; we could hardly get a spade's depth of topsoil removed before coming straight down onto 'archaeology'. Large amounts of round-based pottery, including many diagnostic rim sherds, were recovered from this trench with initial analysis suggesting that the assemblage is largely Early Neolithic in date. A significant amount of flint scrapers and blades was also recovered from this trench and a miniature polished stone axe was found during the removal of the topsoil. In the final few days of the excavation, a sondage was excavated through charcoal rich deposits containing worked flint and Early Neolithic pottery. These were found to overlie several large flagstone slabs, oriented on a northwest-southeast axis and consistent with a linear trend suggested by the results of the geophysics. We will have to wait until this summer to find out what these flags relate to, but they are probably part of a building, maybe capping for a drain or paving slabs.

Trench B was positioned some 40m to the east of Trench A. The removal of the topsoil (again only a few inches in depth) revealed several compacted stony layers in a matrix of ashy, clayey silt with evidence of *in situ* burning. These features all appear to be oriented on a northwest-southeast axis, and again correlate well with the results from the geophysics. The incorporation of several coarse stone tools and worked pieces of flint into the stony layers suggests that these are the remains of several phases of working floor deposits, possibly relating to external work surfaces or activity areas. A similar rammed stone floor was found at the Early Neolithic site excavated by Colin Richards at Wideford. Several small stretches of collapsed coursing were also visible in Trench B, although we didn't have time to investigate these. Our prize find from this trench, however, was a collar sherd, decorated with deep stab and drag lines, from a carinated Unstan Ware bowl. This fine example of round-based pottery indicates that, like Trench A, there are also Early Neolithic deposits in Trench B.

Our third main area of excavation, Trench C, originated as a $1m^2$ test pit but was soon extended. The removal of the topsoil revealed features consistent with the interior of a dwelling, including several phases of fire pits and hearth settings. Other features cut into the natural may be slots for internal partitions or furniture within the building. Unfortunately, the archaeological remains had been severely plough truncated, with only these features that had been cut into the natural clay surviving and a complete absence of floor deposits. We did manage to recover further amounts of flint and

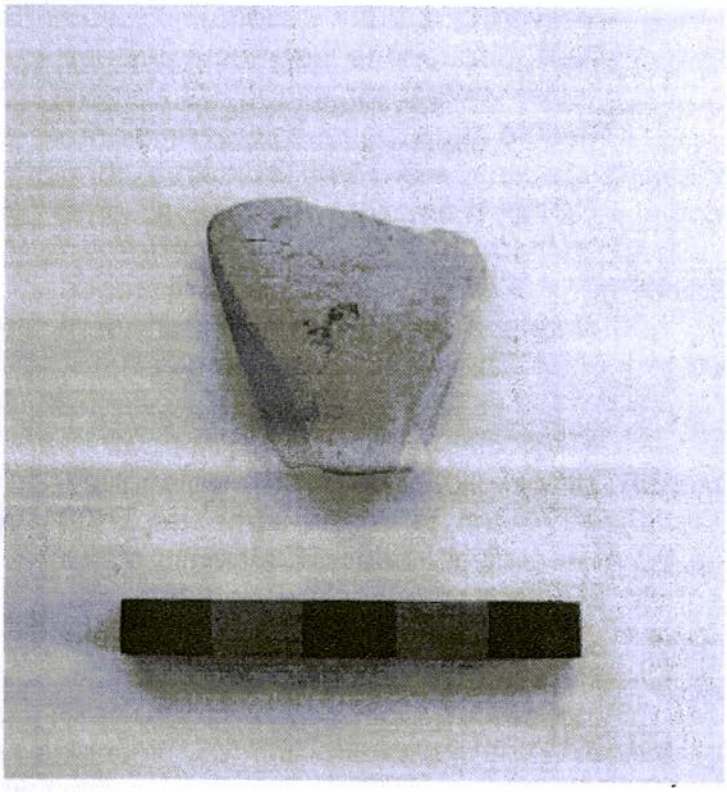
Neolithic pottery from this trench and it seems that this building is largely contemporary with the remains found in the other two trenches. Although there were only limited excavations in 2007, we were able to establish that there are the remains of a sizeable settlement at the Braes of Ha'Breck. Hopefully we will discover more in this year's dig which will probably take place in late August or early September – and we hope that many of you will be able to make it over to visit the excavations!

The fieldwork at the Braes of Ha'Breck was directed by Antonia Thomas and supervised by Daniel Lee and David Reay. The excavation team was Chloe Brown, Rachel Bynoe, Siobhan Cooke, India Darsley, Adam Lee, Nuala Marshall, Jim O'Brien, Owen Raybould and Naomi Woodward. The excavations were funded by Orkney Islands Council and the Society of Antiquaries Scotland, with additional support from Orkney College, Orkney Archaeological Trust, the Flaws family, Wyre Well Boring Services Ltd, Wyre Community Association, the Friends of Orkney Archaeological Trust and Orkney Ferries Ltd.

In memory of Ian M. Flaws, 1938 – 2008

The remains of a hearth and other domestic features in Trench C

The rammed stone floor in Trench B on the open day



The miniature stone axe found during deturfing in Trench A (scale is 5cm)

The World Heritage Site Rangers

The Orkney World Heritage Site's ranger service was established in 2005 with funding from both Historic Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage. Since then Sandra Miller and Elaine Clarke have provided literally scores of opportunities for both visitors and locals to develop their appreciation, enjoyment and knowledge of the cultural and natural history of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney's World Heritage Site along with the wider Orkney landscape.

The Rangers, as their name suggests, spend most of their time out and about delivering a busy events programme which runs throughout the year. This provides a wide variety of walks, talks and family events aimed at all age groups and levels of interest with the objective of bringing Orkney's amazing archaeological heritage to the widest possible audience.

During June, July and August the Rangers offer daily walks at the Ring of Brodgar which have grown in popularity since they started them in 2005 and are now very much established on the visitor trail – in 2007 over 2000 visitors and locals enjoyed this daily event and the trends show that 2008 will greatly exceed that figure.

During the summer months the Rangers spend time with people on holiday from all over the world. For some of these visitors it is a life long ambition to see the Neolithic monuments in the World Heritage site, for others it is to retrace war time memories and for others it's the birds and the open landscape that has attracted them to the islands. For what ever reason people come to Orkney it is important to the Rangers that they have a really positive experience and take home great memories of their visit.

Sandra and Elaine also work very closely with Orkney Islands Council, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Orkney Archaeological Trust, and community groups such as the YAKS and Girl Guides to ensure that the work they do is as complementary as possible.

An example of this was an invitation by Nick Card last year to lead the afternoon talks at the Ness of Brodgar dig which were enjoyed by the large numbers of enthusiastic visitors to the site.

An important part of the Ranger's job, and a part they both particularly enjoy, is working with schools, both in the class room and on site visits and the number of schools and teachers using the Ranger Service is increasing all the time. Sandra and Elaine have specially designed education boxes on the Neolithic and the Viking eras but are happy to provide their services on a wide range of subjects both on the cultural and natural heritage of the islands.

The Ranger Service goes from strength to strength and, in response to a rapidly increasing work load, a Volunteer Ranger Service was established 2007. To date there are 7 volunteers all offering different skills, which gives a good working team to complement the Rangers in their work.

But the most important factor in the development and success of The Heart of Neolithic Orkney's World Heritage Site Ranger Service has been the tremendous support it has been given by Orkney folk since it started in 2005. In a howling gale and driving rain, with boots that are soaked through, it is this more than anything else that has driven the Rangers on.

For further information on the Rangers events or to find out more about the Volunteer service contact the rangers on 01856 841 732 or orkneyrangers@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

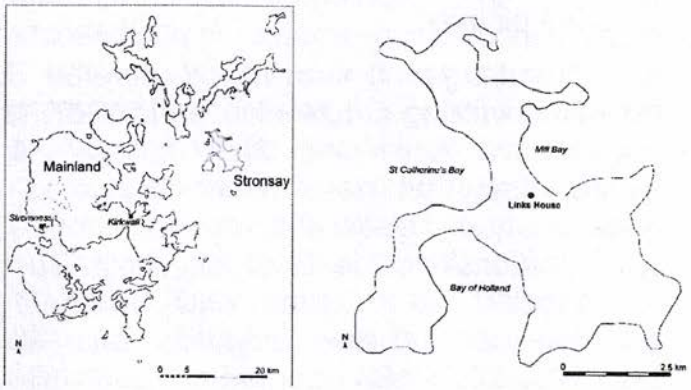
Excavations at Links House, Stronsay March 2008: Some questions, some answers and a lot more thinking to do!

What follows is an initial report of the excavations undertaken at Links House, Stronsay in March 2008 - the site of possible early Mesolithic activity.

First discovered in 2007, during field walking undertaken as part of the Stronsay Archaeological Survey (Woodward, 2007), this project was instigated as a result of dissertation research which I undertook for the MA in Archaeological Practice at Orkney College during 2006/2007, with a bursary from the Orkney Archaeological Trust. Although aware of the scatters existence immediately after field walking, the potential of the site was not fully realised until during the post excavation process. When the flint assemblage was being catalogued, it appeared as something quite different to what had generally been collected elsewhere in Stronsay during the project. The assemblage included two tanged points, a variety of large blades and knapping debitage. Collectively over 60 pieces of worked flint had been collected and it all came from a fairly discrete location within the field. Initial thoughts were that this collection may represent something quite early especially given typological parallels with Late Upper Palaeolithic/Early Mesolithic (10 – 12,000 years BP) material from Scandinavia and NW Germany which the Links House flints seemed to have (Ballin and Saville, 2003). This was a tantalising prospect and has created many captivating questions concerning the nature of the first human inhabitants of Orkney.

The site and archaeological background

Stronsay lies approximately 12 kilometres north of Mull Head, East Mainland. The island is approximately 11 kilometres long by 9 kilometres wide and has a lengthy and complex coastline. The island's coast is deeply cut by large bays which create the impression of three distinctive peninsulas, and gives Stronsay a highly irregular shape. The island itself is fertile and low lying, with its highest point being 76 metres above sea level. The site of Links House is located on the E side of the island, in a field adjacent to Links House farmsteading.



General location map of Stronsay and the site of Links House

There is a paucity of evidence relating to a pre-Neolithic Orkney and no clear evidence in Orkney or within Scotland, to suggest human occupation or activity before the end of the last period of glaciations, circa 8050 BC (Ashmore et al, 2000). For sometime, Orkney had been regarded as having little potential for the study of this period (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1981) and the only evidence for the Mesolithic consisted of a handful of the diagnostic artefacts known as microliths, that had been collected in several different fieldwork projects (Wickham Jones and Firth, 2000). Most recently however, during the excavation of a Bronze Age burial cairn at Long Howe, Tankerness, directed by Dr.Jane Downes, Orkney College and Caroline Wickham Jones (Card et al, 2004; Robertson and Woodward, 2008), examples of microliths and a fragment of a carbonised hazelnut shell were produced from material comprising the cairn and deposits beneath it. The fragments of the hazelnut shell were C14 dated, giving a result of 7900 ± 35 BP (6820-6660 BC, OxCal v.3.10), which has subsequently pushed back the earliest dated evidence for human settlement in Orkney by three thousand years. However, this excavation was unable to produce any in-situ evidence for the period and it was

acknowledged that it was likely the Mesolithic site itself was probably destroyed during the construction of the cairn in the Bronze Age (Robertson & Woodward, 2008). Is this what is all to be expected of the nature of Mesolithic remains in Orkney and what could Links House contribute to the picture?

The tanged flint points discovered during field walking at Links House in 2007, are an addition to several other examples of the artefact that have been discovered in a variety of locations across Scotland. These locations include Sheildaig, Loch Torridon, Wester Ross (Clarke, 1987; Walker 1973); Balevullin, Tiree (Edwards and Mithen, 1995:351); Brodgar, Stenness, Orkney; Millfield, Stronsay, Orkney (Livens, 1956) and Bridgend, Islay (Morrison and Bonsall, 1989). These artefacts are considered relatively rare and as of yet, none have been discovered within a stratified prehistoric context and few have any reliable provenance. They are however continued to be tentatively attributed to the Late Upper Palaeolithic/Early Mesolithic.

The occurrence of the tanged points within the flint scatter collected at Links House, and the suggestion that the other pieces of the assemblage may also be associated or contemporary, offered a unique opportunity to address possibly the earliest prehistoric evidence in Orkney. The significance of this assemblage may also be strengthened by its geographical association to another example discovered in the 1920's at Millfield Farm, Stronsay (Livens, 1956). This example was found within 2.5km of Links House but is now untraceable. Millfield was excavated by Caroline Wickham-Jones (1993) but these excavations did not produce any further diagnostic flint material; it was concluded that Millfield may well have been a more extensive prehistoric site, but that it had been largely destroyed through time. Could the Millfield and Links House examples possibly be connected and would this pattern of site destruction be followed at Links House?

Aims and Results

The Late Upper Palaeolithic and Early Mesolithic periods are discussed as having populations who were highly mobile and transient by nature, this results in the evidence for them being particularly ephemeral and subtle. Taking this into account and coupled with the prospect of continued agricultural practice at the site, the excavation location at Links House was deemed to be at significant risk, especially from further damage by ploughing.

The aims of the project were to record and characterise the nature of the site and undertake further artefact collection prior to the next season of agricultural activity taking place. These aims were fulfilled by the application of a geophysical survey by Dr.Susan Ovenden of Orkney College Geophysics Unit; initial field walking prior to any ground breaking excavation and targeted test pitting. A total area of 60m square was surveyed which was located in the vicinity of the flint scatter discovered in 2007.

The condition of the site prior to work beginning was very challenging not only for the excavation but also the geophysical survey and general on site logistics. The sheer volume of surface water and the heavily silted and waterlogged nature of the site, coupled with extremely poor weather conditions throughout the excavation, made working conditions quite unfeasible and difficult at times – progress was often tailored to practical conditions as a necessity.

The results of the combined methodologies of geophysical survey, field walking and targeted test pitting at Links House has however allowed the identification of two areas of possible Mesolithic activity. The results of the geophysical survey showed several areas of responses which were proven through test pitting to be indicative of modern interference, in the form of either Fe objects lying directly in the upper plough soil or in some circumstances, a series of modern field drains. The initial field walking prior to ground breaking excavation