



Heart of Neolithic Orkney – Consultation Autumn 2021:

A submission from Orkney Archaeology Society

Orkney Archaeology Society, 10 October 2021

Introduction

The proposed investment in the World Heritage Site (WHS) is very exciting and is needed.

Research and interviews with visitors undertaken by Esther Renwick (Thinking through the Heart of Neolithic Orkney, Orkney Archaeology Review 2019, Orkney) noted that:

Very few visitors were observed moving around the landscape [of the WHS] beyond either of the stone circles; none of the interviewees had walked beyond the immediate sites.

The interviews conducted by Renwick and the reviews she examined on Trip Adviser, especially regarding the Ring of Brodgar:

...revealed a visitor experience that was powerful, [and] emotional...However, the complex, sophisticated and mobile society which created and engaged with the Ring was invisible.

The proposals, especially the proposed interpretative centre, will give visitors (both local and tourists) to the Centre new tools to understand what they are looking at. The suggestion to create a network of paths for walking and cycling that stretched from the Unstan Tomb in the West, Maeshowe in the East, the Brodgar car park in the North and the main road (A965) from the South will transform how we experience the sites all for the better. Five thousand years ago, visitors would have approached the complex and moved through it on foot and would have been very conscious of the landscape surrounding the rings and the Ness. The paths would bring contemporary visitors closer to the experience of the 'pilgrims' from so long ago.

Interpretation and contextualising the World Heritage Site

The proposal reflects the real strengths of the initial partners, Orkney Islands council (the Council), Historic Environment Scotland (HES), and Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE). We agree with the Project Objectives: we favour tourism because it supports the economy



of the island and brings more people here who want to learn about Orkney's Neolithic. However, visitors to the WHS must be managed or they risk damaging the archaeology.

The proposal is yet to reflect the strengths of the very well-developed Orcadian community heritage sector (Orkney Archaeology Society, Orkney Heritage Society, and the myriad of community heritage groups across the parishes and islands of Orkney) and our archaeology sectors (the UHI Archaeology Institute etc.) A firm commitment is needed that these groups will be included as key partners in the further development of the plans, particularly in the design and content of the information being given to visitors whether that be via information boards, electronic bar codes or other media.

As OAS has stated previously (see <https://orkneyarchaeologysociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Orkney-archaeology-and-tourism-version-1.pdf>) we support the approach taken by the international Ecomuseum movement where:

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

We do not want our heritage to interpreted and told by people from the central belt. Although the passage of time is long and those who now live in the county may not be descendants of these people who built the monuments, they are part of our heritage. Orkney is a farming community, the people who built the monuments were our first farmers and their greatest legacy to us is the landscape which they transformed from its natural condition to a managed one, closer to our contemporary landscape.

Although visitors may be here only for a few days, even hours, we want the experience to be one that stays with them and encourages future engagement with our heritage. Orkney Archaeology Society (OAS) do this by building up a membership that is split evenly between those who live here and those who do not. We engage regularly with members, but also with the wider interested public through talks (now increasingly online), our social media and with our annual publication, Orkney Archaeology Review. The UHI Archaeology Institute has an excellent blog and arranges talks people can dial in to. We want to build on this.

The WHS should be set in the wider British and Irish context because the developments here relate to developments across these islands, not least the stone circles. The centre should encourage people to explore across the land, including their local areas – an excellent reason to promote membership of Historic Scotland which gives free access to many other sites in Scotland and, via English Heritage, free or reduced-price access to sites in England

One of the stated aims of the project is to encourage people to explore the rest of Orkney: the other HES sites and the other archaeological and physical heritage across the county. It would need to be clarified that this will be a big part of the role of the Centre, with information provided on places in Orkney where people could travel next. HES plays an unbelievably valuable role, however it rarely promotes visits to sites they do not manage or promote the work of others. It took a real struggle to get them to stock our Orkney Archaeology Review a success. When they did take the Review, it sold very well (over one



hundred copies in 2019) and that was a big part of making the publication a success. It is imperative that the Centre should be managed by representative of the entire Orkney community heritage sector including HES.

The Council, HIE and HES have a core role in driving this project forward but there needs to be a commitment that equal weight will be given to the Archaeology sector in Orkney (UHI Archaeology Institute etc.) and Orkney's Community Heritage sector.

Active Travel Network

We fully back and welcome these proposals, however there is one big gap. The main barrier to people approaching the site other than by motorised transport, is because people (as the consultation document notes) do not feel safe cycling and walking along the A950. Unless there is a solution that allows cyclists to reach the edge of the proposed Active Travel Network from Kirkwall and Stromness, there will be no significant increase in people abandoning their cars to visit the WHS. An optimum solution would be a cycle path between Kirkwall and Stromness, but we understand that there are substantial obstacles to this being achieved any time soon. An alternative would be to provide buses which allow passengers to take their bikes – either the regular scheduled X1 service or the proposed shuttle bus.

The Centre and the Brodgar car park interpretation centre

With the introduction of a new centre would be very welcome but what we are not clear on is how this will work with the interpretation materials to be located at the Brodgar car park. If people start from the new Centre, or any other part of the Active Travel Network, they are unlikely to then travel on to the Brodgar car park – is this something that duplicates what is elsewhere or will visitors be encouraged to travel to this secondary interpretation centre? Clarification is needed.

The Centre location

OAS has not taken a view on where the centre should be located. There are definite advantages to it being located near the WHS or part of the Site, but also challenges to make sure problems are not caused for residents or that it does not too drastically affect the character of the WHS.

Impact of more visitors on the archaeology

The number of people visiting the WHS has increased over the last few years, largely but not entirely caused by the increase in cruise passengers. This has meant a lot of work has had to



be done to maintain the paths and protect the archaeology so that it remains for future generations. We welcome the proposal that coach visits to the Brodgar, Stones of Stenness and (we would assume) the Interpretation Centre car parks will be controlled. We also agree that spreading people through the wider landscape will improve the visitor experience. However, there needs to be a full plan in place to manage visitor number and preserve the archaeological heritage without introducing charges for visiting the sites.

Accessibility

A sizeable number of the people who want to visit the sites have mobility problems. A specific plan needs to be developed so that visitors with mobility problems can get the most out of their visit.

Car Park charges and the business model

OAS cannot take a position on this because there is inadequate information on what the costs will be for the new centre, the proposed level for the car parking fees and what the business model will be. There are already running costs associated with the Maeshowe Visitor Centre so we assume that it is the additional costs that need to be covered, however there is not the slightest indication of how much this will be. Part of the income can come from the café (or even a fancier restaurant) and from the gift shop. Our main concern is that car park charges may encourage people to either park on the roads, in the passing places or in Stenness Village. With the (very welcome) Active Travel Network, the Village becomes a very logical place to start exploring the WHS. A full impact assessment is required before there can be any meaningful public consultation.

One thing we believe should be explored is using a portion of the Harbour Fees from visiting cruise ships to fund the centre and asking the ships to make a separate contribution and to sponsor elements of the work to maintain the sites for future generations. There are concerns about the impact of cruise ships to Orkney, and our main concern is the affect on the environment, but this should be discussed elsewhere. Nevertheless, it looks that they will, to an extent, remain. The operators and the passengers will certainly benefit from the new centre. Using the harbour fees and sponsorship from the cruise companies would be clear and straightforward way for these companies and the passengers to contribute to the cost of our tourist infrastructure.

OAS, 10 October 2021