



Newsletter No 05 Spring 2011

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Editorial

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Welcome once again to the Orkney Archaeology Society newsletter. We have had another busy winter planning the summer events, a list of which can be found at the back of the newsletter. We will be holding a lottery again this year in order to raise the necessary funds for the Daphne Lorimer Bursary student for 2012/2013 and I have included lottery tickets for sale or return. These will form the major part of our fund-raising effort for this year so please sell as many as you can.

Although Orkney's climate does not usually permit excavations during the winter months there was the discovery and emergency excavation of yet another Neolithic chambered tomb at Banks on South Ronaldsay during the latter part of 2010, a report of which appears later in the newsletter.

This edition also contains details of the unique artworks donated to the society as a

fund-raising opportunity by a visiting American art professor following his visit to the Ness of Brodgar excavations over the summer. Professor Thompson returned to Orkney during the autumn and gave a fascinating lecture about his techniques and inspirations at the Tankerness House Museum.

Orkney Islands Council is releasing a consultation document on 15th April 2011 entitled "Houses in the Countryside: Listed Buildings and the Orkney Local List". They will be looking for assistance in identifying buildings of cultural or historical interest that may be unknown or unrecognised as such in the Orkney countryside.

It is, finally, with great sadness that the society marks the passing of Anne Brundle, curator of archaeology at the Orkney Museum, but so much more than that to Orkney, it's archaeology and heritage and to the society, its membership and the wider population. She will be greatly missed.

Obituary: Anne Brundle, 1958 – 2011

Tom Muir, Exhibitions Officer, The Orkney Museum.

How can you sum up the life of a friend and colleague in a few short paragraphs? It is not easy; especially since so many beautiful tributes have already been paid over two pages of *The Orcadian* dated 3rd February. So I have decided to focus on what the people of Orkney owe Anne Brundle in terms of her work within the museum. Both the museum and Anne had different names when, as Anne Leith, she went to work at the Tankerness House Museum on a government scheme in

1980. She had just graduated in history at Edinburgh University and was looking for a job relating to the heritage of her native Orkney. Another scheme at the museum saw her working with artists to create schools loans boxes and posters relating to periods in Orkney's prehistory and history. At this time the small museum was expanding under the directorship of Bryce Wilson, the Museums Officer for Orkney. With professional staff, rather than a part-time honorary curator, the

museum had gained a significant victory in being awarded the assemblage from the excavation of the Pictish and Norse site at Buckquoy, Birsay. Before that all finds from Orkney went to the National Museums Scotland in Edinburgh. With the assemblage from the excavation at Howe, Stromness, up for allocation Bryce applied to have Anne employed as museum assistant, which was granted in October 1982. At that time Howe was the largest excavation in Scotland (where Anne had worked briefly in 1979). With more staff to look after the collection the Howe finds were awarded to Tankerness House Museum. Without Anne in post this would have been unlikely to have happened.

This turned out to be a turning point in the history of Orkney's archaeology. Finds were now almost routinely returned to Orkney, and Anne fought ferociously to ensure that this remained the case. Despite her stance she got along very well with the staff at the NMS; there was nothing personal in the battle for the finds, and she even found herself supported by them (despite what the public might think). More and more excavations were taking place in Orkney, which led to some fabulous finds joining the museum's collection. The beautiful carved stone from the Neolithic tomb at Pierowall, Westray was a star item until it was returned to its native land and into the care of the Westray Heritage Centre as part of Anne's loans policy. The excitement in the museum on the day when the beautifully carved Viking plaque from the Scar Boat Burial in Sanday made an appearance en-route to the conservation labs in Edinburgh was one of the most memorable days in the museum's short history. Anne was determined that Orkney would not lose this priceless treasure, and succeeded in having it returned to Orkney. The success was tempered by the loss of the Viking grave goods from the Westness Cemetery to the NMS on the grounds that they already had the

finds from the first burial which was discovered in 1963; five years before Tankerness House Museum opened. To the best of my knowledge these were the only finds to leave Orkney during the years that Anne worked at the museum.

Anne took a course at Leicester University, graduating with an MA in museums studied in 1995. After that qualification she was made Assistant Curator (Archaeology), then Archaeology Curator after Bryce Wilson's retirement in 2003. Her frustration at the inadequacies of some archaeologists to adequately label boxes and bags led to the Scottish Museum Archaeologists (of which she was a member) creating a minimum standards code for the transfer of finds to museums. She also organised archaeological conferences, gave lectures, sat on numerous committees and acted as an ambassador for Orkney, both in the UK and abroad. She kept an open house at the museum for archaeologists and researchers who would find themselves made welcome and offered tea before they had even said why they had come. Under Anne's direction the Orkney Museum's archaeology collection found itself at the centre of research projects both in the UK and abroad. When diplomatic relations between the UK and China improved in the 1990s Anne played host to several senior Chinese Professors of Archaeology who had specifically requested to visit Orkney.

There is no room to go into detail about her charity work on behalf of the Save the Children's Fund, her numerous TV appearances and her regular contributions to local and national radio. For many, Anne was the human face of archaeology in Orkney and a walking encyclopaedia on finds from these islands. Anne's passing has left a huge hole in the Orkney Museum and in Orkney's heritage in general. Anne can never be replaced, but her life's work must carry on.

Membership Matters

Andre Artymiuk. Membership Secretary.

One of my prime responsibilities as Membership Secretary is to maintain an accurate membership database. To this end

you will find enclosed with this newsletter a 'Membership Statement' detailing the

information the Society holds about you. The statement shows:

- Your Membership number.
- Your Name(s) and Address.
- Your Email address (if you chose to provide one).
- Your membership category.
- Whether you have renewed your membership for the current year (2010/11) ending 31st May 2011. If you have not renewed your membership will automatically lapse on 31st May 2011.
- The correct subscription amount for your Membership category.
- The subscription you actually paid, and how you paid (std order, or cash/cheque).
- Whether your subscription is registered for Gift Aid allowing the society to reclaim tax on your subscription if you are a UK tax payer.

Note the OAS deliberately does NOT hold any details of your bank account.

Please check your statement carefully, and notify me of any inaccuracies or of any corrections you wish me to make to your membership record. For example you may be paying an 'Ordinary' member subscription, but may now be eligible for the reduced 'Concessionary' rate (I have come across a few such cases during the year). Maybe you are no longer a UK taxpayer and wish to cancel your Gift Aid registration.

If you pay your subscription by standing order and are still paying the old 2008/9 subscription rate you can correct this for your next year's subscription by sending a new OAS Standing Order form direct to your bank.

Enclosed with this newsletter you will find a 2011/12 membership renewal form which you can use if you pay your subscription by cash or cheque, or which you can use to notify me of any changes you wish to make to your record. There is also a copy of the OAS standing order form to send directly to your bank in case you wish to start paying your subscription by standing order, or if you wish to amend an existing standing order. Cash/Cheque annual renewals are due on 1st June 2011. Subscription rates (unchanged since last year) are shown on the renewal form. Existing Life members and members who pay by annual standing order are renewed automatically.

Please feel free to contact me at any time through the Society's P.O. Box or email addresses shown on this newsletter. Don't forget you are welcome to use me as conduit for passing comments or suggestions to the OAS committee as well as for any matters relating to your membership.

Finally may I offer a big 'thank you' to those members who have assisted the work of the society through volunteering during the past year. You will find calls for volunteers for the coming year in various articles in this newsletter. In particular the Society is looking for a new Treasurer, for volunteers to assist with the running of the OAS shop during the 2011 Ness of Brodgar excavation (one of the Societies most significant fund raising activities), and for assistance with finds processing and cataloguing in the archaeology lab at Orkney college. If you can spare a little of your time please let me know.

Lottery for 2011

Andrew Appleby – Vice Chair

Last year's lottery to raise funds for The Daphne Lorimer bursary was again a great success. We raised well over three thousand pounds. Our volunteers worked hard to achieve this. We sold books of tickets at our lectures and walks, we distributed them at The Dounby Agricultural Show, they were placed in shops and public venues and of course had brilliant exposure at The Ness of Brodgar Excavations!

Like last year we are enclosing tickets for you to buy or sell for us if you can. There is no obligation though, but we would be so grateful should you be able to. If you feel that you would like further books of tickets, then please ask and we will be sure to send them.

The prizes will have a definite Orkney flair, there will be an excellent hamper of local, high quality products, a silver penannular brooch from Andre Artymiuk, an Orkney

painting, a piece of pottery from myself and other local potters as well. The draw will take place in September at a public event in Kirkwall. This is always a special occasion and this year will be no exception.

Another fund raising project we have embarked upon is to gather money in to re-publish 'Rising Tides' by Julie Gibson, our County Archaeologist and Frank Bradford the notable photographer. The volume has been updated to include some recent developments and should be a popular edition.

The cost of doing this is around £5,500, but this will give us a book that we can sell to museums and historic visitor sites throughout Scotland. Again, the revenue from sales will assist the bursary funds, but we will be retaining monies for publishing other books as well.

Our initial strategy for encouraging donations has been to contact local businesses and organizations that we feel may support our initiatives. We are now looking to identify a wider spectrum of 'targets' further afield. This

is where you can assist. If you know of individuals, companies or possible funding bodies that we could approach, then please do let us know. All donors will be recorded in the publication, unless they wish to remain anonymous.

Again on the funding front, plans are afoot for our Ness of Brodgar Shop. Over the past two years this has brought in money, which we have been able to give as grants to various archaeological projects. In 2011 Mr Willie Beedies lent us one of the wonderful shed that he makes. We used this as our shop. This year his generosity continues, only he is creating for us a much grander affair! We would greatly appreciate volunteers to help in the shop as well. So, if you feel that you would like to be involved, then please do contact us. It is a great experience being at the dig as the discoveries come to light!

So this is only some of the efforts we are making to improve the funding of Orkney's Archaeology. I do sincerely believe it is having an effect.

The past stares back! Rescue excavations at Banks Chambered Tomb, South Ronaldsay, Orkney

Dan Lee (ORCA)

A team of archaeologists from the Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology (ORCA) recently undertook a rescue excavation on a newly discovered Neolithic chambered tomb at Banks, on the island of South Ronaldsay, Orkney.

The tomb is located on the southern tip of the island overlooking the Pentland Firth and approximately 1.8km from the Tomb of the Eagles, at Isbister. Whilst this new monument sits well within the rich archaeological heritage of the islands, the very fact that new examples are still being discovered upholds the remarkable prominence of this type of Neolithic burial monument.

The site is important as it offers a rare opportunity to investigate the life history of a tomb, from construction to decommissioning, using modern archaeological techniques. Antiquarian investigations have usually got there before modern day archaeologists in Orkney, so their apparent absence at Banks

was promising. This new exciting discovery once again puts the Neolithic spotlight on the islands.



It is a surprise to many that *any* large mound in Orkney is not suspected to represent some form of prehistoric monument, but this was the case at Banks. The former elongated mound situated to the south of the farmhouse is clearly visible on old aerial photographs. However, it was unusually shaped, being long and ridge-like (c.80m long and about 2m high), and was never suspected to contain any structural archaeology. The tomb was only discovered recently during development works around the farmhouse. The large slabs that started to emerge in the top of the mound soon raised suspicions. Initial explorations revealed a revetment wall to the north and the presence of internal chambers. The body of the mound had unfortunately been destroyed; however the structural heart of the monument had survived. The cells were flooded with water and the eastern cell clearly contained a human skull. A rescue excavation was organised, funded by Orkney Islands Council and Historic Scotland.

The mound was originally elongated, and the builders appear to have utilised a natural feature evidenced by a sharp rise in the bedrock below. This feature may have formed a significant place in the Neolithic landscape perhaps already imbued with stories and meaning. The use of natural places for monumental architecture and other activities is well attested, although evidence for this practice is less well known in Orkney. Perhaps the most famous example is the Dwarfie Stane in Hoy, the only rock-cut tomb in the UK, where the cells were carved inside a glacial boulder.



The Banks tomb is unusual in that it is partly subterranean. The central chamber, cells and entrance passage were constructed within a

quarry. Rather than just stripping the area prior to construction, the Neolithic builders commenced with the task of quarrying. The central chamber (c.4m long, 0.75m wide) is aligned east to west with an entranceway leading off to the north.

There are two larger cells at either end, a single cell to the north and two cells to the south. The sides of the cells are formed from a series of piers extending out from the bedrock face that forms the rear walls. The southwest cell, opposite the entrance passage, has an upper shelf similar to those above the end stalls in the Tomb of the Eagles. The west cell has unfortunately been severely disturbed.

The cells are capped with large waterworn slabs that rest on the upper level of the bedrock with the sides are supported by the stone built piers and walls. The walls are constructed from various quarried stones, apparently from different sources, that do not appear to derive from the construction quarry itself. The rounded slabs and blocks, often used as corner stones, and the water worn capstones probably come from the nearby beach to the west. The use of waterworn material seems to go beyond simple practical requirements.

Although the excavations are not complete, it seems that waterworn material was used at key stages in the life of the tomb: in construction and closing off. It is interesting that Chris Fowler and Vicky Cummings have suggested an association between water, death and change in the Neolithic. In this manner water may have been referenced in certain places of transformation.

The main burial deposits were not reached during the excavation; however, a glimpse of the closing-off process was afforded by investigation of the entrance passage, central chamber, and north and east cells. The cells and chamber were filled with placed slabs to a level c.0.6m below the roof. There was then a pause in the closing process, evidenced by the presence of otter spraint above the slabs, perhaps for a final closing ceremony or act. This closing ceremony consisted of the placement of predominantly skull fragments, but also pelvis and femur, within the north and

east cells. The initial assessment of the assemblage has indicated that the bones are in good condition with a minimum number of 7 individuals from the cells. These bones were certainly curated outside the tomb while the slabs were put in, but where and for how long remains a puzzle. It is tempting to suggest that the whole skull placed just inside the entrance of the east cell was the final closing act. As an archaeologist this discovery was certainly an emotional experience: to be literally faced with that moment in time, staring back at you.



The central chamber and cell doors were then sealed with silty clay material and stony clay was used to block the entrance. A smooth waterworn stone was placed just inside in the entrance passage before it was finally sealed off. Water quickly filled the tomb to around the level of the bone assemblage. Remarkably, the tomb lay undisturbed until the recent development at Banks.

The monument could be classified as a Maes Howe type chambered tomb. These, according to Davidson and Henshall, typically have a narrow entrance passage which leads to a central chamber with side cells constructed into the walls. This contrasts with the tripartite and stalled cairns of the Orkney-Cromarty Group that have a broad and often long central chamber that is subdivided into compartments with upright slabs that protrude into the chamber. The more varied Bookan type, some with squared internal cells, complicates matters further. Interestingly, most of the Bookan type tombs are semi- or completely subterranean. In a recent review of Orcadian chambered tombs, Nick Card suggests that while such classifications can be a useful tool, the wide variety of

monuments demonstrates that sites should be assessed on their own basis before attempting to construct typological and/or evolutionary models. Clearly, the Neolithic community at Banks were drawing on a broad architectural and spiritual repertoire that was brought into focus at certain places and reworked over time.

It is not possible to comment on the use of the Banks tomb at this stage as the main burial deposits, if they exist, were not reached. The nearest comparison is the Tomb of the Eagles where hundreds of individuals were communally buried. Here, John Hedges noted that the bones were arranged in distinct piles in the central chamber and cells as if they had been frequently moved or sorted. Some archaeologists, such as John Barrett, have argued that it was the construction of tombs and the subsequent manipulation of the remains of the dead by a select few that created social relations and power structures in the Neolithic. Perhaps the burial deposits at Banks will help us add to these interesting debates.

The research potential for further work is high. The opportunity to investigate the backfill and closing off sequence of an undisturbed Neolithic tomb is very rare. Indeed, the waterlogged conditions within the tomb, which appear to have remained stable until recently, provide the potential for rich organic remains to survive and good preservation conditions for the human bone assemblage. ORCA aims to return to the tomb this year to continue the excavation. Investigations at Banks chambered tomb offer a rare opportunity to get a step closer to understanding Neolithic funerary practice in Orkney at an internationally important site.

The involvement of 360 Production in the project from the outset, who were filming the new Digging for Britain series, also offered us the opportunity to try and present the site in a different way to the public. It was decided to film a daily site diary and post this on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAfeP9nJcX8>).

Whilst the initial intention was to promote the site for the upcoming series, it provides an

interesting insight into the process of archaeology with the decisions and experience of working onsite, even the numerous gales! We hope this innovative contribution to the presentation and accessibility of archaeology will provide a new challenge to archaeological fieldwork practice.

Watch this space...

ORCA wishes to thank Carole Fletcher and Hamish Mowatt of Banks; 360 Production for editing and supporting the video diaries. The project was funded by Historic Scotland and Orkney Islands Council.

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Gifted artwork to benefit Orkney's archaeology

Last year Professor James B. Thompson, of Willamette University, Oregon, donated a set of 15 intaglio prints to the Orkney Archaeology Society after Nick Card's American lecture tour last February. The prints were given to help raise funds for the continuing support of archaeological research in the county.

Prof Thompson's prints were displayed in the Orkney Museum last September in an exhibition entitled *The Visual Language Ancient of Scotland*. Sigurd Towrie of the Orcadian caught up with Prof Thompson during the exhibition, where he explained the story behind his generous gift.

He said: "Though I am not an historian, anthropologist or an archaeologist, I am a visual artist exploring mark-making, visual images, symbols, shapes, lines and patterns, so this emphasis on ancient landscape, culture and process in the creation of images and structures intrigues me personally, professionally and artistically. "In the summer of 2009, I came over to Scotland to research Pictish symbol stones. On that trip, one of the things my wife and I decided to do was take a two-and-a-half day trip to Orkney to see some of the sites found here. "So we came up in July for a couple of days and were driving around to see some of the sites such as Maeshowe, Skara Brae, Gurness and the

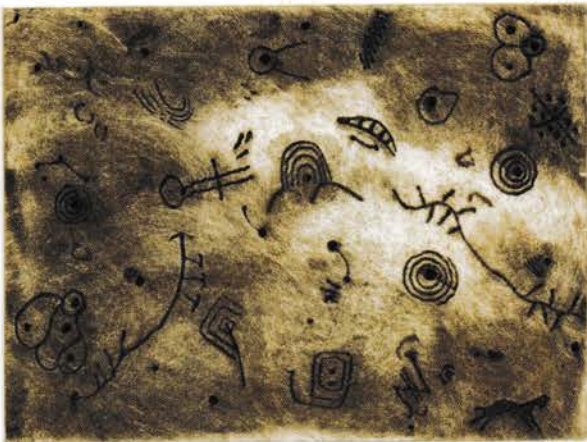
Brough of Birsay and I got more and more intrigued by the landscape and how these sites were situated.



"As we were going to the Ring of Brodgar, we saw these people working on a site from the side of the road. Someone had told us there was a dig we might want to go see "We stopped and had a tour of the site and what was going on. Having seen some of the other sites it dawned on me this was fairly impressive — not just the archaeology but where it was situated, between the two rings, on this thin strip of land with lochs on both sides. "My wife suggested we could get somebody over to Willamette to talk about the excavation, so we introduced ourselves to Nick Card [chairman of the Orkney Archaeology Society and site director at the Ness of Brodgar excavation] and invited him

over to the States to give some talks.” “It was then that I became aware of all the work that goes on behind the scenes of archaeological research, in particular the funding. It’s not just this beautiful, wonderful world of practising. So I decided let’s give them some sort of gift — my prints — and I hope that people will be intrigued and perhaps want one on their wall.”

He added: “People here are so interested in archaeology, but it’s outside the islands that it’s really having an impact. Here, in Orkney, it’s right there, right in front of you. The prehistory, the Neolithic, the Iron Age, signs of people living here for thousands of years. And it’s fascinating.” Regarding his prints, Prof Thompson explained: “In my travels around Scotland, and up into Orkney, I noticed the visually arresting use of stone in the construction of walls, architectural structures, dwellings for the living and cairns, or burial chambers, for the dead, as well as the exquisitely dry stacked stone that has somehow remained watertight, intact and level through the ages. Stone was utilised to demarcate the landscape, emphasize seasonal and celestial events, create sacred spaces, designate areas for ritual, and signify other places of importance



“Some of the stones were elaborately carved to depict battles, reflect objects or wildlife common to a given set of people in their time while others had been incised with images, patterns, messages or symbols that were understood visually as information in the time of prehistory. I realised that there were parallels between the way in which these ancient people from the Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age and Pictish periods — of what is now known as Scotland — incised stone and the way in which I incised my metal

plates in the process of making marks that would become my intaglio prints. “The more I noticed the treatment of these stones, and their inherent spatial relationships to the surrounding landscape, the more I realised that a kind of visual language was at work among the ancient people of prehistory who quarried, carved, dressed and decorated these stones seemingly as part of a larger process through time. “The connection that these prehistoric peoples shared with their surrounding landscape and cyclical seasonal shifts seemed to me to be interrelated with the process of constructing and reconstructing with stone as well as the surface treatment or decoration of the stones. It appeared that, like me, these ancient peoples also had a relationship with each other in a larger cultural context through time as they overlapped, progressed and still engaged in rituals that revealed their connection to a kind of continuum.”



He added: “I hope to honour the significance of mark-making in both, the ancient world and my present, by creating contemporary works that engage in this ongoing visual dialogue and share the same emphasis on process, spatial relationships, landscape, patterning, symbol and line that visually connect us all as a culture through time.” Nick Card said: “On behalf of the Orkney Archaeology Society,

and Orcadian archaeology in general, I would like to thank James for his exceptionally generous donation. It couldn't happen at a more opportune time with the recent Art and Archaeology initiative. "To be associated with such a prominent artist as James raises not only the profile of Orkney's archaeology but also Orkney as a whole to a new audience. This friendship with James has also been instrumental in the development of ties between Orkney College and the archaeology dept at James's university in Oregon. James and his wife, Martha, should be hugely thanked for the time and effort they have put into their trip to Orkney and I'm sure that this

will not be their last!" The exhibition was supported by the Orkney Islands Council's Education and Leisure Services.

There are several of these prints still available and as a special, unrepeatable offer to members of OAS they are being offered at the special price of £1,000 each including frames (they normally retail for \$2,000 each). If you are interested in obtaining one of these unique prints by a world renowned artist please contact Nick Card (nick.card@uhi.ac.uk) for more details.

Article reprinted from the Orcadian by kind permission of Sigurd Towrie.

Excavations at The Cairns: A Monumental Atlantic Roundhouse and Iron Age Settlement

Martin Carruthers (Orkney College UHI)

Introduction

Excavations at the site known locally as 'The Cairns' near to Windwick Bay, South Ronaldsay have been on-going since the first season in 2006. The roots of our fieldwork, however, lie back in 2003 when I conducted some geophysical survey in parts of southeast South Ronaldsay and across Orkney Mainland to prospect for souterrains, or earthhouses. Earthhouses, of course, are those characteristic and enigmatic underground buildings, well known, but poorly understood, and found in numbers across the Northern and Western Isles and in eastern parts of Mainland Scotland more generally. At that time I was looking to establish some good souterrain targets for excavation by re-establishing the positions of several sites that were known from anecdotal and early documentary accounts but which had since slipped into relative obscurity and for which there was now only a hazy idea of where they had been located. While we were undertaking the survey in South Ronaldsay a local farmer, Mr Charlie Nicholson, who had been very helpful in our work, showing us interesting locations in the landscape, and informing us of land ownership etc., suggested we might be interested in a low mound on his own land known as 'The Cairns'. The Cairns overlooks the eastern end of the broad, fairly low-sided valley that runs from Windwick Bay on the east to Scapa

Flow in the west across the southern midriff of South Ronaldsay. Charlie told us the dramatic story of how, some decades before, his father had come across what appeared to be a voided chamber while gathering stone at the mound for building. We had a little time left in our schedule of survey work so we did some geophysics (resistivity) over the mound to find that it did indeed appear to contain some very substantial archaeological remains. Basically, the survey appeared to show that within the mound there were concentric rings of solid stone features alternating with soily areas. Unsurprisingly, this seemed to hint at a very substantial set of archaeological features that probably included big structural stonework together with probably ditched elements.

This was very interesting but, at the time, our targets were set on the souterrain site at Windwick bay itself which we were to go on to spend three, very rewarding and enjoyable, years excavating between 2003 and 2005. The geophysical anomalies apparent at The Cairns seemed to represent an archaeological site of such a substantial order of magnitude that we felt unready to deal with at that time in terms of the resources we had - but I always thought of the site as a potential 'banker', a great prospect for the future! In the meantime we had three great seasons of excavation at the Windwick souterrain.

In the intervening period, however, I didn't entirely lose interest in The Cairns and we learned quite a bit about the sites background, including that it had apparently been the scene of brief investigative work in 1901 when a local Minister and antiquarian excavator, Rev Alexander Goodfellow had purportedly found and partly excavated a souterrain (he used the term 'Weem'). He reported very briefly on his findings in 'The Saga Book of the Viking Club' for 1903. This made The Cairns even more interesting! It seemed possible that whatever feature Rev Goodfellow had encountered might well be the same one that Mr Nicholson, Charlie's Father, had discovered, or re-discovered. Since the time of Goodfellow the site had yielded a small trickle of finds from time-to-time during ploughing and other farming operations, including a long handled comb of characteristic Iron Age type (which might be significant given some of our later finds! see below). It was at this point that Mr Robert Ward, of Quoyorally, Windwick, drew my attention to a piece of correspondence dating from the time of Goodfellow's excavations that was lodged in the Orkney Archives. This document gave a nice description of the nature of what Rev Goodfellow was finding and even presented a schematic of the excavation trench (though no representation of any archaeological detail!) seen in profile in relation to the mound of The Cairns, and a sketch map of the approximate location of the site within its district.

Some Archaeological Background

What we were to uncover at The Cairns when we began to excavate in 2006 was quite a lot more than I could have expected or hoped. Our initial aims were to try to test for the existence of Rev Goodfellow's 'subterranean structure' or 'weem', and also we hoped that we might be able to locate the hole down into the chamber that had subsequently been encountered and described by Mr Nicholson senior. Where they in fact one and the same feature encountered several decades apart? What we in fact found was a very complex situation of a myriad walls and feature areas, defined by upright slabs, or orthostats, within our initial 15 metre by 15 metre 'open area' trench. In fact, almost the first removal of turf and topsoil revealed the top of a finely built

curving line of masonry and we jokingly referred to this as the roundhouse wall. The joke was on us; however, as within a few days we were able to prove that we were indeed dealing with an enormous roundhouse of broch-like proportions (see discussion below). The entire mound at The Cairns is in fact a riot of archaeological remains. The chief building, certainly in terms of its sheer bulk, is what we call Structure A: the big roundhouse or potential broch. But as well as this there are several discrete later Iron Age buildings, (Structures C, D, E and F) post-dating, and variously built over and into the remains of Structure A and an entire Late Iron Age settlement area lying to the northwest of the big roundhouse/broch (the Structure B area). Later this year we will be embarking on a major stage of evaluation and analysis of all of the materials we have thus far excavated and at that point we will have an even more vivid picture of life in southern South Ronaldsay in the Iron Age and beyond. For now, the account given below, provides a little of the flavour of the various prehistoric buildings, in highly summarised form, as we currently understand them.

Structure A: The Monumental 'Atlantic Roundhouse' or 'broch'

This massive building appears to make up a very considerable part of the bulk of the mound at The Cairns and the upper remains of the structure appear intermittently across the main excavation trench wherever it is not covered and obscured by later Iron Age buildings. The massive circular building is c.22 metres in overall diameter, with very thick walls c.5 metres wide, and a large internal area with a diameter of c.11 metres. Essentially this building is broch-like in its size and overall morphology, however, there are aspects that hold me back from completely acceding to the popular idea that it is in fact a fully-fledged broch.

Modern excavations show that such solid circular buildings (comprisable within the family of Iron Age roundhouses large and small, and both thick-walled and thin-walled) were constructed in the Early and Middle Iron Age from around 800BC to about AD200 and a little after. Within that period the so-called 'true' broch buildings have traditionally been

thought of as being constructed between about 100BC-AD100, although this has been thrown into question by new dates from Old Scatness broch in Shetland, which show that at this site, at any rate, the broch was constructed between the third and second centuries BC.

Both the scale and overall shape of Structure A are certainly commensurate with a broch; however, there are other aspects to the building that would make it seem less like the archetypal broch. Since the wall of Structure A has been partly compromised in places by later Iron Age activities we've been lucky enough to have been able to make an examination of its wall construction in one sector. This has allowed us to inspect the wall-core, which is the substance of the wall between the two sandwich slices of the outer and inner wall faces. This has revealed that the innards of the wall are made up of rubble, midden and large dumps of the local natural glacial clay. Normally, the basal internal structure of broch walls would be built in neat coursed masonry; indeed it is this orderly, well-built wall-core that is held to be partly responsible for the stability of very tall buildings of the 'broch-tower' type. The nature of the wall-core of Structure A is one more piece of evidence for the character of the Structure A monumental roundhouse, and it hints at the possibility that it is not a fully-fledged broch-tower in conventional terms.

Another factor involved is what students of brochs call the 'PWB' or *Percentage Wall Base*. The PWB is held to be a measure of the architectural suitability of a building to achieve a prodigious towering height. At The Cairns, Structure A has a very large overall diameter, as discussed above, and it has the very thick wall of over 5 metres at its base. These are both to be expected amongst brochs, but Structure A also has a very large internal diameter of over 11 metres. This means that the PWB, the ratio of the external to internal diameter is of a lower proportion than in most brochs. From this we can say that it may not have been structurally capable of reaching the giddy heights of a towering broch building.



An elevated shot of the main trench looking south, with elements of the Structure A roundhouse/broch-like building dominating the view. Structure C is the large bite that has been taken out of the Structure A walls on the left hand side.

In respect of both the character of the wall-core material and the PWB ratio of structure A at The Cairns, the massive roundhouse building most closely resembles a site from Caithness called Crosskirk, which was excavated in the 1960's and 1970's. This building was of almost identical proportions in terms of its ratio of wall thickness to interior and its walls were composed of clay and rubble just as with our Structure A. The Crosskirk building, which was considered to have been a broch by its excavator, has more recently been seen as a representative of a slightly earlier type of structure and the building may well have been constructed in the earlier Iron Age. In fact, in the Crosskirk report, a radiocarbon date from a stratigraphically early context within the site sequence was originally dismissed by the excavator as having nothing to do with the 'broch' construction, but now this date might be seen as more reliable given a general trend to date big Scottish monumental roundhouses a little earlier than was once thought acceptable.

Stairway to livin' well!

As we were excavating on the top of the wall of Structure A in 2009 we started to encounter a void in the masonry of the wall that turned out to be a very well-built gallery that would have originally opened off of the interior of Structure A. Careful excavation of the infilling deposits of this feature revealed the

remains of three stone-built stairs. This vestigial staircase occurs on the west of the building's circuit, and at exactly the same position as many other big Atlantic roundhouses excavated in Orkney and beyond, including the brochs at The Howe, near Stromness, excavated in the late 1970's and early 1980's, and Gurness. Many people automatically assume that the presence of a staircase must mean we are dealing with a broch, however, many of the more simply constructed non-broch, dry-stone built roundhouses and other structures of the Iron Age in the north of Scotland also possess staircases within their walls.

What *is* significant about the staircase that we've found at The Cairns is that the foot of the stair is some 1.8 metres above the floor level of the central area within Structure A and to that extent clearly the staircase must have accessed quite elevated upper levels within the walls of the building and probably gave on to an upper floor within the interior. We're therefore dealing with a really quite sophisticated building with lots of complexity and regulated access to superimposed floor spaces and activity areas. Structure A was consequently a building of quite some architectural pretension and probably a very powerful statement on the part of the contemporary local community, or sections of it. This statement would have carried a message about the community's prowess, their building skills and their genuine awareness of quite specialised ways of living that were becoming current across the North of Scotland, and further afield, at this time during the Middle Iron Age. Indeed, the builders and inhabitants of Structure A were demonstrating that they were switched-on to an Iron Age world of virtuoso building projects, showing off their knowledge of architectural style and domestic form. This was a world in which the ability to partake in particular kinds of grandiose domestic life, *au-fait* with a wider network of accepted etiquettes, protocols, and ways of sharing hospitality was probably paramount to the acquisition of esteem and prestige. It is likely that the construction and use of Structure A would have marked out the community at The Cairns as very able to keep up with, and indeed contribute to, the development of

these social, political and material trends, through Structure A, their very own 'grand design'.



Excavation underway on the Staircase within the walls of the Structure A broch/roundhouse.

When a broch is not a broch!

The archaeological arguments surrounding the appropriate classification and definition of brochs are manifold, highly detailed and unfortunately often quite dry! It may seem common-sensical to adhere to the idea that if a building is demonstrably of the Iron Age and it is big and round and prodigiously thick-walled it must have been a broch. However, the exact point in time, and the specific architectural features held to define, when a very substantial 'Complex Atlantic Roundhouse' (CAR) may be said to properly constitute a broch or a 'broch-tower' are not universally agreed by scholars. Some archaeologists favour a larger check-list of criteria, which excavated sites must pass muster to qualify for true 'brochness', than some others do. Alternatively, some archaeologists would argue that we should not get caught up with the exact and detailed terminology of the various kinds of very big circular Iron Age buildings and instead get on with investigating how these astonishing, impressive built places were actually used and perceived. Indeed, how did they operate within their landscape settings? This is an attitude that I have a great deal of sympathy with. What we intend to do in forthcoming seasons of excavation at The Cairns, then, is to move ever further into the heart of this impressive monumental house to begin to see if we might just gain some further hints as to what role the building played in the social and domestic lives of the generations of

households who inhabited it well over 2000 years ago.

Structures B, C, E: A later Iron Age settlement flourishing in the afterglow of the big roundhouse

All across the remains of Structure A we have found a plethora of buildings and activities that clearly relate to a period after the end of the use of the big roundhouse/broch building. In many places individual buildings intrude into the physical fabric of Structure A in the manner of bites taken out of an apple. While this appears to be very unusual in Orcadian terms, a similar relationship of later Iron Age settlement in relation to brochs and other substantial roundhouses is attested in Caithness.

At least three major structural groups radiate around the Atlantic roundhouse ruins. On the north and northwest there is a substantial complex of buildings and features grouped as Structure B area, which lie across the rubble infill and over the wall head of Structure A, while in the northeast Structure C is a large building that intrudes into the wall of the Atlantic roundhouse itself. Structure E in the southwest is again embedded in the remains of A. Below is a summary of the character and findings from each of these areas.

The 'Structure B Area'

The Structure B area probably represents the remains of several later Iron Age buildings that cover large parts of the remains of the Structure A Atlantic roundhouse/broch building on its northern and north-western zones. Sometime in the later Iron Age Structure A was clearly reduced in height in preparation for the establishment of the Structure B suite of buildings, which form an entire post-roundhouse settlement.

The 'B area' is a very complicated suite of remains, itself probably representative of several generations of inhabitants adding to and modifying the layout of the buildings and features. A myriad of walls and cellular features were identified, as well as hearths, wall-piers and orthostatic partitions.

Especially noteworthy was the presence of a large pit that had been dug into the northern floor space of Structure B late in its life. The pit contained decorated spindle whorls, antler

mounts and an extensive assemblage of animal bone, including many cattle mandibles and red deer antler. The pit was sealed with a large rotary quern. Most remarkable of all, the pit contained a small anthropomorphic head with clearly carved eyes, nose and mouth!

Essentially, a large rectangular building, or two such buildings, seem to have been succeeded by a less regularly laid out series of structures with curving or cellular architectural arrangements. This is of interest as archaeologists of the period have often identified a major shift that occurs from the dominance of circular to rectangular domestic architecture in the later Iron Age. This architectural change has been presumed to equate to an equally significant social transformation at this time. Here in the Structure B area of The Cairns we have a resource with which to explore in detail these significant societal shifts in the future. In the latest, 2010 season, we largely concentrated our efforts on areas out-with the B area of the site so that the Structure B complex awaits further investigation in future years.

Structure C: A Late Iron Age workshop and the origins of Viking Orkney?

So far only the later fills and floors within this building have been investigated but it seems that these later activities relate to craft or 'industrial' activities. A small stone-lined bowl shaped feature set firmly into the ground with a flue-like feature leading off from it may represent the remains of a metalworking facility if other finds from the building are anything to go by. These include crucible fragments, a mould fragment for making some sort of metal ring (perhaps the head of a particular type of Iron Age pin called a ring-headed pin), pieces of slag, and little strips of copper ally that have often be found in association with metalworkers activities from other Iron Age sites. A curious aspect of the objects from the later levels in this building is the occurrence of items that are potentially out of step with the Iron Age itself. These have included a large fragment of a handled (or lugged) steatite vessel that appears to be potentially Viking or Norse and the occurrence of quite a lot of organic tempered pottery, which, so far, we have found almost

exclusively from this building on site. Organic or 'grass-tempered' pottery was at one time thought to be exclusively a feature of the Scandinavian settlers in the Northern Isles.

But lest we get too carried away with the notion that this proves that there is a definite Scandinavian influence/presence at The Cairns it is now clear from several excavations that the organic-rich pottery was something that late Iron Age Orcadians were making as well. Indeed, this pottery style, (some of which may actually have been made from pre-digested animal dung!), may have had a specialised role assisting in the metalworking processes that were obviously underway in Structure C. It is possible that the steatite vessel fragment is evidence of Late Iron Age contact with Scandinavia prior to the so-called 'landnam', (land-taking) the conventional Viking 'event horizon' as we might style it. We should also remember that it was in this building in 2006 that a remarkable deposit of 12 long-handled combs were found, some of them beautifully decorated and contained in a near complete pottery vessel of an undoubted Iron Age style, and that these combs are themselves very definitely an indigenous Iron Age item. During the most recent 2010 season of excavations we uncovered fragments of a small hemispherical copper alloy bowl from this building. There were distinctive perforations present just below the rim of the bronze vessel and these appear to show that the thing was suspended as a hanging-bowl, probably from fine chains, and the shape and overall size of the bowl are quite similar to that of a class of such items known from Viking period graves in Scotland. This is a highly intriguing find. First of all, it may originally have been part of a set of balancing scales with two such bowls suspended from a balance arm. Secondly, if the Viking cultural connections of this item are ultimately proven then the scientific date that we have for the end of the Structure C workshop (sometime around AD565-600) makes the bowl a very early appearance for such vessels in this part of the world, again long before the historically recognised appearance of the Northmen! All of the layers excavated in the Structure C workshop so far reveal this ambiguous sense of a mixture of 'indigenous' Iron Age objects

and the possibility of Scandinavian-derived materials and we may well be dealing with an opportunity to peer through a window on the intimate circumstances of cultural interaction. We really are potentially pushing on a period of interface here, and the more contexts that archaeologists can examine from this vitally important, but difficult to understand, period the more realistically we will be able to assess what form those early contacts took. Its to be hoped that the work at The Cairns may ultimately, in its own small way, be able to contribute to debates about the relationship of the 'indigenous' Iron Age Picts and the Scandinavian incomers. Was there near genocidal violence or did a largely peaceful accommodation characterize this relationship? Or were events and relations, in fact, much more complicated and protracted over a longer period of episodic interaction even pre-dating the landnam? I feel certain that further careful excavation of this 'workshop' building will bring many more surprises and interesting implications for the reappraisal of our conventional historical narratives of the Northern Isles!

Structure E

As with Structure C the builders of Structure E formed it by digging directly into the side of the ruins of Structure A. This building is located on the south side of Structure A and was first discovered in the 2008 season when we were investigating the wall-head of Structure A. It is also constructed in a similar manner to Structure C with small courses of horizontal masonry placed atop stout uprights. There are other similarities between the two in terms of the possible activities that are so far attested inside Structure E. The findings include a large heavily used hearth setting in the centre of the building, and a sandstone mould with a carefully carved bar shape in it, that would have been used for casting metal ingots. There are also things like a copper-alloy pin-like object but which may in fact be a metal scribe, lumps of slag and other items potentially related to metalworking. This latest season, in 2010, we have been able to obtain scientific dates for the end of the use of the central hearth which indicate that the hearth was last heated sometime between the years AD645 and AD795, which could take

the life of this building right up to the eve of the Viking arrivals!

Structure F, the Souterrain: A passageway into the past?

Finally, with the discovery of a souterrain (Structure F) during last season's excavations we have returned to the theme that drew us to the Windwick Bay area and Southeast South Ronaldsay in the first place, back in 2003. Orkney's later prehistoric subterranean built places are a personal academic fascination of mine and to come full-circle back round to confront them again as we now have in the 2010 season is a very interesting position to be in. There's now an opportunity to compare and contrast what we found out about souterrains during our three-year stint of digging at the Windwick souterrain site with what we learn about this newly discovered example up the hill at The Cairns.



Looking down the remarkable still-roofed passage of Structure F: the souterrain built to connect to the reused entrance passage of Structure A, the broch-like building, which at the time of the souterrain was already a ruin.

It was during our excavation of a recent (modern) pit that had been dug into the site close to the entrance of our broch or 'broch-like' building, Structure A that we chanced across the opening into a remarkable still-roofed underground passage. There was much excitement amongst the diggers as might be imagined! Lying towards the base of the modern pit we could look down into the well-built dry-stone passage about 3 metres long disappearing off into the distance, gently curving as it went. The passage seems to have been constructed into the material built-up against the outside wall of the broch-like

roundhouse around its entrance and therefore post-dates the 'broch'. The passage also interacts with the old 'broch' entrance seemingly reusing the old entrance passage for its chamber.

So from this, one of the most interesting things about this souterrain is that it has a relationship with an older part of the site: the Structure A broch-like building. This is interesting because there is a track record of Orcadian souterrains respecting, indeed, embedding their way into much older sites, monuments and landscapes, especially of the Neolithic period. It's possible, then, that the Structure F souterrain at The Cairns shows this same interest in literally burrowing down into the past, but in this case it is the immediate past of the Iron Age itself, perhaps a genealogically recent past. This together with the general reuse of the earlier Iron Age structures and features at The Cairns I feel makes quite an evocative demonstration of how the late Iron Age community at The Cairns placed a lot of importance on the past. That is a strong sense of the past that is inevitably shared between the generations of Orcadians separated by millennia.



In the centre right of the image is the opening into the souterrain 'structure F'. The wall in the background seems to be a façade wall bounding off whatever activities were going on the surface above the souterrain.

With the discovery of this subterranean feature we are left with the question: have we finally located the subterranean structure that the father of landowner Charlie Nicholson stumbled across several decades ago and which we were first told about by Charlie back in 2003. This was one major factor that

contributed to sustaining our interest in the possibility of doing some work at The Cairns until we actually began to explore it in earnest in 2006. It would be easy to assume that this hole leading down into a subterranean structure must be that very same one but there remains doubt and it's not the first 'informal' unrecorded intervention that we've

observed as we have investigated the mound at The Cairns. So perhaps there yet remains another dramatically well-preserved underground chamber at The Cairns still awaiting discovery. Some of these big Orcadian Iron Age sites have each yielded three or four such subterranean buildings so it is an exciting possibility for the future.

Summer 2011 Excavations Calendar

Ness of Brodgar 18th July-26th August – open to public 20th July-24th August

Braes of Ha'Breck, Wyre 2nd May – 20th May

Roeberry, Cantick, Hoy in conjunction with SFLP

Banks Chambered Cairn, South Ronaldsay 21st March – 1st April

SFLP Windwick, the Cairns, South Ronaldsay – post excavation processing

SFLP in house training in post excavation at Orkney College

Links of Noltland, Westray EASE Archaeology

Brough of Deerness James Barrett University of Cambridge

NABO on Rousay with Bradford University and Orkney College 21st June -21st July

Events Calendar for Summer 2011:

Date	Talk and presenter	Venue	Time
April Friday 8th	Rebecca Boyde "Reconstructing Ancient Diet"	St Magnus Centre Friends Room	7.30pm
May	M.A. Students talk	tbc	
June Thursday 9th	AGM and Talk by Paul Sharman on excavations in Jordan	St Magnus Centre Hall	7.30pm
July Sunday 3rd	Day trip to Auskerry weather permitting. Sun 10 th in reserve	Numbers limited – book with Nan 850889 or antrai@aol.com	
August Thursday 11th	Look out for us at the Dounby Show		
August	Members Visit to Ness of Brodgar excavations Open Day to be confirmed		
September Saturday 10th	Scottish Archaeology month Walk to Brough of Birsay with late lunch Birsay Tearooms	Meet at point ready to cross to Brough Book lunch ahead with Nan 850889 or antrai@aol.com	
September Saturday 10th	Anne Brundle Memorial lecture 2011 Lottery Draw	Kirkwall Town Hall	7.30pm

OAS website – www.orkneycommunities.co.uk/OAS

Usual admission prices for regular walks & talks are:

£2 for OAS members £3 for non-members

Everyone is welcome at all our events. After talks, we usually have tea & coffee and a chance to chat. We look forward to seeing you soon.

All events will be advertised in local press and on the website – look out for further details.

We email details of events to those of you for whom we have email addresses. If you do not currently receive email notification of events and would like to, please email oas@orkneycommunities.co.uk and we will add you to the list.