



## Orkney Archaeology Society

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### **Editorial**

*Chris Read*

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Welcome to your Autumn 2010 newsletter. We have had another exciting summer of excavations here in Orkney, and we include articles on the work done on Hoy, at Ness of Brodgar and on Wyre, as well as the Rising Tide project examining sea level change around the islands.

In recent weeks a previously unrecognised Neolithic tomb has been discovered on South Ronaldsay, not far from Tomb of the Eagles. A team from ORCA has been undertaking excavation and work continues on understanding this new site – we hope to bring more news in the Spring newsletter.

Our summer programme of Walks & Talks was well attended and well received, and details of upcoming events can be found at the end of this newsletter. Please let us know if there's anything particular you would like us to try and arrange or include in future programmes.

We were delighted in September to welcome to Society's Patron, Professor Lord Colin Renfrew, to the islands. Prof Renfrew visited

the Wyre dig which was underway during his visit, and spent a great deal of time with the local archaeologists catching up on all the many current developments in Orkney's archaeology. The 2010 Lottery draw event also gave the opportunity for Prof Renfrew to give a very interesting talk on First Monuments: From Orkney to Peru in which he discussed early monumentality in relation to developing social structure & hierarchy.

The 2010 Lottery itself was a great success, raising over £3,000 towards the Daphne Lorimer Bursary Fund, which provides a fees bursary for a deserving student on the MA in Archaeological Practice course offered by Orkney College UHI. This year's Daphne Lorimer Bursary student is Owain Mason – more from him later.

Our fundraising efforts have enabled us to provide support during the last year to the excavations at Ness of Brodgar and Braes of Ha'breck, as well as providing funding for David Griffiths (University of Oxford) to undertake aerial photography of his site at Snusgar, Skail Bay, and to Caroline Wickham-Jones (University of Aberdeen) for the Rising Tide project.

We would like to wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

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If you have anything you would like us to put into the next Newsletter, or any comments, please contact The Newsletter Editor, PO Box 6213, Kirkwall, Orkney, KW15 1YD

## **Excavations on Wyre 2010**

Antonia Thomas, Archaeological Project Officer, ORCA, Orkney College UHI

Always one of the last research-led digs of the year, in September a small team of volunteers from across Orkney, Scotland, England and even the USA, headed out to Wyre for the fourth season of excavation with myself and Daniel Lee, Archaeological Projects Officer for ORCA. We were very grateful this year to receive funding from, amongst other sources, OAS. We were able to use the OAS money to help cover not only the travel expenses of getting to Wyre and back every week, but also the food for the volunteer excavation team. The hearty stews, chillis, baked tatties, soups, and most importantly, chocolate biscuits that the Society helped to fund were very much appreciated by the hungry diggers, especially after a hard day's work in sleet, gales and whatever else the weather threw at us! And in despite of the decidedly autumnal weather, this year has exceeded all of our expectations.



*Aaron contemplating having to bail out Trench A again! (photograph © ORCA)*

### **Trench A**

Trench A was one of the first areas we opened back in 2007, revealing an extensive area of dark midden. There are now three Neolithic houses in this trench alone; we excavated the large external working area and midden outside of House 3 last year which was full of Skaill knives, Early Neolithic round-based pottery and flint working waste.

### **House 3**

Underneath the thick black midden which had covered most of Trench A was a line of paving slabs, some of which were over a metre in length, which led directly into a beautiful house entrance, complete with a worn threshold stone. This threshold is in the eastern wall of a northwest-southeast oriented rectangular structure with slightly rounded internal corners, of which only one or two courses of stonework survive at best. Inside, the central stone-lined hearth and orthostatic divisions projecting from the side walls reveal a rectangular layout similar to that at other Early Neolithic Orcadian dwellings such as at the Knap of Howar, Stonehall and Green. The floor is covered with ashy occupation layers and part of a saddle quern was discovered on the house floor. In the centre of the building were two post-holes, both of which had been reworked several times, and which would have held roof-supporting timbers. The depth of floor deposits and the level of re-working seen in these post-holes indicate a considerable longevity of use in this house, perhaps over several generations.



*The entrance into House 3 (photograph © ORCA)*

Interestingly, cut into the natural glacial till to the north and west of House 3 were further post-holes. These are within the line of the robbed-out wall of House 3 so would have been below the present structure. Although we only investigated two of these post-settings, they are associated with further, as

yet unexcavated, features which also lie below the position of House 3. These early features probably relate to an earlier – timber – building underneath House 3 and mirror the sequence seen in Trench C last year, where we revealed at least one phase of post-built rectangular house, superseded by a stone-built 'Knap of Howar' style house on the same footprint.

#### **House 4**

In the last days of the dig in 2009, in the area to the west of House 3 which had been covered by midden and paving, we revealed a scoop hearth surrounded by post-holes, and associated with round-based pottery – evidence of a further Early Neolithic timber structure on the site! We were keen to get this building fully excavated this year and we started removing the paving slabs and deposits relating to the later structures which overlay the post-holes of House 4. This building originally appeared to be circular, but we were able to reveal enough of the footprint this year to show that it is actually rectangular, similar in shape and layout to the stone buildings on the site.



*The scoop hearth and structural post-holes of House 4 (photograph © ORCA)*

The discovery of post-built houses of any date in Orkney is extremely rare and only the site of Wideford Hill (dug by Colin Richards) provides a direct comparison for the existence of these structures in the Early Neolithic. To find buildings constructed from both timber and stone on the same site – and across such a large area - is therefore very significant and has the potential of greatly contributing to our

knowledge of the Early Neolithic in Northern Scotland.

#### **House 5**

One of the aspects of House 3's layout that had puzzled us in 2009 was its southernmost wall, which seemed much thinner than the walls on the other sides of the structure. This wall seemed to be an internal division rather than an external wall, and along with a further possible threshold revealed to the south of the entrance into House 3, seemed to indicate an additional house appended to the south. With this in mind we extended the trench to the south of House 3 to reveal the footprint of this structure. Almost immediately a stone-lined rectangular hearth was exposed in the centre of the trench extension and it was clear that there was actually another house!

Interestingly, although this house seems to be later than House 3, it seems that the two buildings were inhabited at least partly at the same time. One of the best finds of this year came from this house – a beautiful polished stone axe, bringing the axe tally for the site to a phenomenal thirteen!



*Houses 3 (towards the top of the picture) and 5 (foreground) in Trench A (photograph © ORCA)*

#### **Trench B**

Trench B was initially opened up as a 10m x 2m trench in 2007, but we had not been able to fully excavate it that year and had to wait until this season to go back to it! In 2007 we had exposed an extensive, metallised surface comprised of rammed stones and apparently dating to the Early Neolithic. This rammed stone surface was associated with hammer stones, grinders, burnt stones and pieces of

flint tools and waste, which had been thrown down and incorporated into the floor. Another beautiful piece of Early Neolithic Unstan Ware and a fine flint knife came out of this trench this year, in addition to flint debitage and coarse stone tools.

### Trench E

We had always hoped that the rammed stone yard in Trench B was just outside of another house and an area to the west associated with a large magnetic anomaly in the geophysics results looked like it might be a good house candidate. With this in mind we laid out a small (5m x 2m) trench, hoping to reveal wall-lines and floor deposits. When we started to deturf and clean back the north-western end of the trench, we peeled back the topsoil straight onto stone - but our initial excitement was quashed when we realised that this was bedrock!



*The exposed bedrock and midden deposits in Trench E (photograph © ORCA)*

We were very relieved to discover that this bedrock only extended for a metre or so into the trench and that our deturfing efforts weren't going to be in vain. Across the rest of the trench were thick orangey brown midden deposits, which immediately looked very different from the soils in the other trenches. The artefacts that came out of this midden were very different too - flaked stone bars and mattocks, the sort of finds that are more likely on a Later Neolithic site, not an *Earlier* one. And then the definitive evidence - sherds from large flat-bottomed Grooved Ware pots, some of which were decorated with applied bands, and some with an elaborate incised motif (see

below). This Later Neolithic material was completely unexpected and Trench E has given us the time-depth on the site that we never thought was possible.

We actually had to stop excavation of these midden deposits at a depth of 1.2m - which is incredible considering that the archaeology runs out onto solid geology just inches below the ground surface in the other trenches. So what is going on here? It is clearly a substantial rock-cut feature of some sorts, but does not seem to extend very much in either direction. It is not like a ditch and is too large for a rock-cut pit. The 'natural' in Trench B, just 3 metres away to the southeast, has glacial till overlying the bedrock and is very high up in the trench. The bedrock in Trench E however, is weathered and scalped, like an exposed rock outcrop and has a vertical face. Could this be a small, domestic quarry? At the moment, that seems like a strong possibility. Until we 'bottom' this trench however, the jury's still out. All the midden material dumped against the rock face seems to date from the Later Neolithic thus far, but it is not clear at this stage whether the quarry dates from that time or earlier. I had always assumed that the stone for building the Early Neolithic houses had come from the shore, but perhaps it was from much closer by altogether.



*Some of the Later Neolithic decorated pottery from the midden deposits in Trench E (photograph © Dan Lee)*

### Artist-in-Residence

Another exciting aspect of this year's fieldwork was being joined by Rachael Harris as our artist-in-residence. Wyre-based

sculptor Rachael has been experimenting with both scientific and artistic approaches to recording environmental conditions on the site and her work at Ha'breck included constructing a *camera obscura* and creating wind-assisted drawings. It was really interesting having Rachael on site and the *camera obscura* was just amazing; an exhibition is planned for next year to show some of Rachael's work alongside the archaeological records from the dig. On a related art and archaeology note, we were also visited this year by Professor Lord Colin Renfrew, who was filming a programme for Greek television about the links between archaeological process and artistic practice, based partly upon his recent book *Figuring it out: the parallel visions of artists and archaeologists*. The relationship between art and archaeology is a subject quite close to my heart too, and it was great to meet him and show him the site.



Some of Rachael's work-in-progress in the Wyre Heritage Centre during the Open Day (photograph © Dan Lee)

### So, what next?

Having said repeatedly that this year's excavation would be the last, I am having to eat my words and say that, perhaps, maybe, actually probably (*hopefully*) we will be back again in 2011. A combination of deeper stratigraphy than expected and appalling

weather meant that we did not achieve what we had hoped to. We need to go back and fully excavate the floors in Houses 3 and 5, and that will involve gridding out the floor in order to take a whole series of samples for geochemical analysis. Hopefully this should allow us the opportunity to discover what different activities went on in different parts of the house, and compare the different buildings. One thing, though, if we do go back in 2011, then we are thinking that we might try for earlier on in the year when the weather's better, perhaps May!

Another priority is getting radiocarbon dates for the site. The environmental samples are being analysed by Rosie Bishop of Durham University as part of her doctoral research and she has found that nearly all the different deposits and features across the site - including from the five hearths - contain carbonised grain (mainly barley), which is ideal for accurate c14 dating. And who knows? The buildings might be much older than we initially thought, or even much younger - meaning that timber buildings continued much longer than they have ever been given credit for. Either way the results will be exciting, so watch this space!

*The 2010 excavation team comprised Anastasia Akerman, Andy Baier, Natalia Bain, Eileen Beech, Rosie Bishop, Peter Brigham, Cat Browne, Stacey Carter, Ellie Charm, Tom Lightbown, Owain Mason, Heather Olsen, Mic Page, Melissa Sasse, Audrey Singleton, Aaron Wheatley and Lizzy Young. The excavations on Wyre this year were funded by Orkney Islands Council, Orkney Archaeology Society, Andrew Appleby and LEADER European funding with additional resources and support provided by the Flaws family, Wyre Community Association, ORCA and Orkney College Archaeology Department.*

**Transition Zone Prehistory: studying Early Holocene sea-level change in Orkney**

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Work on Holocene sea-level change in Orkney indicates that relative sea-levels only reached their present position some 4,000 years ago, substantially later than the arrival of the Mesolithic population of Orkney c.9,000 years ago, and nearly two millennia after the development of farming in the islands c.6,000 years ago. Significant sites may survive below present sea-level, thus meaning that our current understanding of the past settlement of Orkney is incomplete.

The Rising Tide project was set up in 2005 with two aims:

1. To build a sea-level curve to provide detail of past changes in relative sea-level around Orkney;
2. To investigate the possibility that remains of past human settlement might be preserved on the seabed.

To this end the project is using eight different strands of work:

1. Sediment coring to date the rising relative sea-levels and construct a sea-level curve;
2. Remote sensing to record submerged palaeo-shorelines, landscape features and possible archaeological sites;
3. Diving to ground-truth the results of remote sensing;
4. Inter-tidal survey to record surviving stone structures and the processes of decay;
5. Palaeo-environmental analysis on land and in the inter-tidal zone to provide information on the changing landscape and environment;
6. Aerial photography to investigate the visibility of material on the seabed;
7. Archive searches to provide information on past uses of the seabed;

8. Ethno-archaeology to combine information from both recent and older myths and stories that relate to sea-level change.

Much of the work of the project has focused on the Bay of Firth in order to provide detail of a contained, but promising area. The bay was selected as a case study due to its position at the heart of the archipelago which offers classic sheltered conditions that might be conducive to site survival after submergence; the geographical conditions of the bay offer the potential for the survival of pockets of sediment as well as generally sheltered waters to facilitate survey; and finally there is a strong ethno-archaeological record relating to the bay indicative of the possibility of submerged remains. It is hoped that the Bay of Firth will act as a test case and provide an indication of the potential of other areas of Orkney.

Sediment coring has taken place at several sites around Orkney and it has resulted in a suite of dates and information relating to past sea-level change. When people first arrived in Orkney some 9,000 years ago relative sea-level was around 30m lower than today, and the islands comprised a single landmass with Scapa Flow comprising a large land-locked bay. Given that Mesolithic activity was often focused around the coast, much of the evidence relating to Mesolithic Orkney is likely to be submerged. The precise rate of submergence is unknown but extrapolation from the other side of the Pentland Firth suggests that by the time of the arrival of farming c.6,000 years ago relative sea-level lay about 5m below that of today. It is salutary to consider just how much the landscape has changed since people started to farm at the Bay of Skail or work started at

the Ness of Brodgar. In fact the islands did not take on their present shape until about 4,000 years ago, by which time Orkney was well established as a prosperous farming community with a sophisticated range of monuments. The work of sampling the sediments around Orkney continues in order to add more detail to the picture.

Remote sensing has involved the use of side scan sonar as well as multibeam scanning across the Bay of Firth. This has yielded a number of anomalies potentially relating to features of the submerged landscape as well as possibly humanly built structures. Sophisticated analysis of the more comprehensive scans means that it is possible to build up detailed images of some anomalies but further work is necessary in order to clarify the nature of these features and whether or not they are humanly built.

Three blocks of diving have been undertaken with the aim of visiting as many potential anomalies as possible in order to check the accuracy of locational information and provide preliminary data regarding the possible human origin of remains. In practice the slab-like nature of local bedrock and abundance of kelp growth mean that it is difficult to provide instant information regarding the anthropogenic nature of sites from a single dive. The naturally squared-off Orkney flagstone means that many natural piles of stone can take on anthropogenic characteristics, while collapsed stonework may appear natural. Dense weed growth obscures visibility so that context is hard to see. In many places the seabed comprises bed rock or stone, while in other areas thick spreads of sediment obscure remains; meanwhile the preservation of sediment from the Early Holocene has still to be tested.

In order to complete the seamless record of archaeology from shore to seabed detailed recordings have been made of surviving structures in the inter-tidal zone. Most comprise decaying stonework so that they also provide useful analogy for the potentially collapsed structures on the seabed. So far a variety of structures including circular

platforms, linear walling and ruined slipways, has been found.

Coring around the bay has included examination of local peat bogs in order to provide information on past environmental change. Detailed analysis of this has still to be completed.

One field that the project has pioneered is the use of aerial photography to provide information on remains in shallow water. Photographs taken by RCAHMS in October 2009 suggest that in the right conditions a variety of material may show up, and this is confirmed by earlier images held in the RCAHMS archives. Other archive material that is of use includes documents held in the Orkney Library and Archive – it is amazing what you can learn from the old accounts of the oyster fisheries or the Kirk Sessions in Kirkwall.

Finally, considerable information has been gained from the rich oral history of Orkney. This includes recent stories and memories as well as detail in earlier accounts. While some of the older stories have in the past been dismissed as invention, it now seems likely that information relating to the possibility of brief passage by dry land to Damsay for an hour a day, or of travelers being drowned when trying to cross a causeway may well relate to the existence of a tidal crossing that has now disappeared.

Given the on-going nature of work, current conclusions are preliminary. It is clear that a submerged landscape exists and is a real issue around Orkney: we have the first indications that submerged structures of varying date may survive on the seabed, yet we still know very little about them. In addition to filling out detail of the sea-level curve for Orkney we are beginning to shape a methodology by which to study and assess these sites. This is important for the management of the seabed, especially in an area of likely future development like Orkney. In the long run this should be of use elsewhere in Scotland.

Unlike many submerged archaeology projects The Rising Tide is not diver led. This means that work to provide a geographical context for past sea-level change and potential areas of archaeological survival is undertaken before diving work is started. This is perhaps a more realistic approach in areas of high energy, rocky seabed and stone built heritage like Orkney. Diving, for The Rising Tide, is but one of a suite of techniques which go together to make up the project. This is doubtless a reflection of the multidisciplinary nature of the project and has more in common with the geographical approach of projects like the Submerged Landscapes Network (SLAN). It provides an interesting comparison with other, diver-led work such as that of the Hants and Wight Trust for Maritime Archaeology. Marine archaeology is a growing field and with this work, coupled with likely future developments in the field at

Orkney College, it is nice to see that Orkney is able to maintain its position as a test bed with a part to play in the development of wider theory and method.

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### **Ness of Brodgar 2010**

Nick Card, Senior Project Manager, ORCA, Orkney College UHI

The weekend before starting excavation this summer I took a walk down to the Ness to enjoy the tranquillity of the site before all the hustle and bustle of the forthcoming 6 weeks commenced. The site looked almost melancholic as it still lay like some piece of modern landscape art under its polythene and stone shroud. What wonders and excitement would we reveal this year? I always try and picture what may be discovered based on previous seasons' experience and evidence from other sites – however as always these expectations are usually wrong – archaeology being archaeology, and especially with a site like the Ness, always expect the unexpected! How right that adage once again proved to be.

At the start of this season we decided to expand our major trench even more in order to explore another large geophysical anomaly. One reason for this was that this feature was on roughly the same alignment as Structure 8 and it was wondered whether in fact it was the south end of Structure 8. This idea was



Structure 12 (photograph © ORCA)

quickly quashed soon after this extension was stripped of topsoil and cleaned as it became apparent that this feature represented a wholly new building, Structure 12. There was a very very slight twinge of disappointment that Structure 8 wasn't over 35 metres long, but only for a millisecond, as Structure 12 started to reveal its own secrets. At over 16 metres long and 10 metres wide, the similarities with Structures 1 and 8 were soon obvious with superlative stonework and

internal space created by opposed, slightly tapered, internal piers. Despite the fact that the east wall had been severely robbed out at least in its upper courses (with robbing debris roughly defining where wall lines should be, like much of Structure 10) it would seem again that much of Structure 12 will be preserved to almost a metre in height.

The similarities in design and orientation, and the fact that Structures 1, 8 and 12 spatially respect each other indicates that all 3 structures at least (plus no doubt others defined by the geophysics) are probably contemporary. Did they therefore have the same function or did each fulfil the needs of a particular activity that fed into the overall function of the site. Perhaps as Dr Colin Richards proposed that each represented a central 'cult-house' for different communities across Orkney (see <http://www.orkneyjar.com/archaeology/crnessofbrodgar.htm>).

This is perhaps supported by the vast myriad of pottery decoration represented at the Ness that I suggested had similarities to styles of pottery decoration found on disparate sites across the archipelago. As ever time will tell as we have to get down to floor deposits across all 3 buildings and have the pottery fully scrutinised by specialists.

Already in Structure 8 floor deposits have been encountered in some of the side recesses. Sitting on these deposits were a host of 'special' finds that will perhaps give an inkling of what these structures were used for - a macehead, a polished stone axe, a whale tooth, a whalebone macehead, an polished shale object and several large polished stone cobbles. Was Structure 8 a place where 'special' objects were manufactured as was envisaged for Structure 2 at Barnhouse? More has to be revealed to test this theory but at the Ness we have the levels of preservation, unlike Barnhouse that was so truncated by ploughing, where we should be able to retrieve a more complete picture. Will Structure 12 and the primary levels of Structure 1 (we are still removing evidence of later remodelling and reuse within Structure 1)

reveal similar activity and finds – ask me again next year!

At the start of 2010 Structure 8 appeared like Structure 1 to be beautifully preserved and with a well defined sequence of construction and alteration but as we excavated more the less clear it seemed to become. This is partially due to the amount of subsidence that has occurred. Walls that were no doubt once straight and vertical have developed a slanted and/or wave-like appearance as they have gradually slumped, while a section of the central floor area has become a large hollow as it has subsided into earlier structures that underlie Structure 8. The presence of earlier structures (as always presumed) is also evident from the curving walls that defined Structure 8's northern end. These were considered a later addition (as with the large curving wall inserted across Structure 1) but now seem to represent an earlier oval structure that has been partially incorporated into Structure 8. Life is never simple when dealing with the Neolithic!

Despite these 'problems' Structure 8 also produced two of the undoubted highlights this year with the unique and totally unexpected discoveries of Neolithic wall paint and a slated roof system.

At first the discovery of painted stones was met with a sense of disbelief but as more archaeologists saw the evidence this turned to a sense of amazement. The initial discovery of 'bands' of reds, yellows and browns was soon followed by a chevron design, and then a stone that appeared to have been completely covered in 'paint' as if to compliment the naturally coloured yellow and black stone around it.

The use of colour in the Neolithic has always been suspected but mainly as personal adornment as evidenced by discoveries such as the small paint pots at Skara Brae. Professor Richard Bradley had considered the application of colour to walls and thought that there were hints of it at Maeshowe but the Ness painted stones are the first real evidence in the UK of the extensive use of

colour to decorate walls. Suddenly the monochrome world that the archaeological record presents to us is transformed into the technicolor that our ancestors created and would have experienced. This however was by no means floor to ceiling decoration but probably individual stones in particularly important places within the buildings such as doorways. This use of colour may help to explain the many very lightly incised and ephemeral designs discovered at the Ness and elsewhere. If these designs were incised through a layer of colour the contrast between the design and the parent rock would have been dramatically enhanced. Apparent multi layered engravings could also be clarified if each set of engravings was 'separated' by a layer of paint.

Just above the floor deposits in the side recesses of Structure 8 a horizon of thin stone slabs was encountered. Although mostly broken these slabs had all been carefully trimmed into rectangular shapes to form slates. So in essence this deposit represented a collapsed slated roof. Similar flagged roofs can still be seen in Orkney today. Although the regular and symmetrical architecture of these buildings was already impressive, imagine what they would have looked like capped by a regular stone roof! To a population who were probably used to seeing structures roofed in the way present day reconstructions usually depict them, a slated roof must have added to the sense of awe and wonder of these buildings.



Structure 8 with some of the stone slates visible (photograph © ORCA)

At the end of last season we left Structure 10 just as we had started to define the central chamber. Since many of the walls had been robbed out we basically tackled the excavation in reverse sequence to how we would normally approach excavation. Usually we would excavate the last activity first, but this would mean removing all the fill of the robbing trenches before tackling the interior. So here we left the robbing trench and allowed this to partially define the shape of the chamber. In so doing we managed to refine the shape of the chamber and the internal 'fixtures and fittings'. Although roughly following the cruciform shape we envisaged last year there are now indications that the original chamber was more complex with perhaps side chambers in the NW and SE corners. Excavation (ably assisted by Professor Mike Parker Pearson of Stonehenge fame) around the altar (Skara Brae style 'dresser') revealed it as freestanding and not built into the back wall but with a narrow space or passage behind it. More of its stonework was revealed and a large prone dressed (surfaces that had extensive areas of pecking) slab on its right hand side interpreted as the collapsed pillar that would have supported its slab shelf on this side.

At the chamber's centre a large square stone hearth was partially revealed. Although with the so called dresser these might seem to reflect domestic attributes, remember the overall scale and nature of Structure 10 – this was no ordinary 'house' – perhaps the abode of something more 'spiritual'!!

Although the actual floor deposits still have to be revealed that may give a more accurate picture of its use, other attributes already again emphasise the special nature of Structure 10. In particular several more splendid examples of large 'display art' – a large multi-cupped stone deposited in the centre of the hearth; and forming one side of the potential entrance one of the most impressive multi-cupped stones any of us has ever seen. Associated with the stone in the hearth was an upturned cattle skull – was this the remnants of the last feast before the

building was decommissioned? If so could this be related to the massive deposit of animal bone that filled the upper layers of the infill of the outer surrounding passage/paved walkway discovered last year? Further analysis and detailed excavation of this bone layer by Dr Ingrid Mainland has further emphasised its peculiar nature – over 85% cattle tibia representing perhaps hundreds of cattle.



Structure 10 (photograph © ORCA)

In Structure 1 the internal phasing and alterations were further refined. As suspected last year a third entrance to this building to add to the two at either end was revealed on its eastern side. This entrance leads into what appears to be a passage between Structure 1 and Structure 7, but not the later horse-shoe shaped Structure 7 we have been investigating (this building represents some of the very late Neolithic ephemeral activity on site after all the major structures has been abandoned). This is an earlier structure that underlies it and that Structure 7 has been built upon, partially utilising its earlier walls. Will this discovery be the first of a series of interconnecting passages between all the structures, and thus changing our view that all the buildings would have appeared freestanding – watch this space next year!?

In the neighbouring field to the SE of the main excavations the trench where the so called 'Lesser Wall of Brodgar' was discovered was opened up again in 2010. Revealed as surviving to 1.2 metres in height last year, work was resumed to see what its full

surviving height was and also to try and establish if we could get absolute dating evidence to definitely link it to the 'Great Wall of Brodgar' (as I envisage both walls forming part of the same enclosing construction that would have enveloped the site). As excavation recommenced and the surviving height continued to grow the sides of the trench had to be stepped back for safety concerns. Eventually at a depth of circa 1.5m a flagged surface was revealed on the outside of the wall. This however proved to be the first of several layers of 'paving'. The bottom of the wall was eventually revealed at 1.7m but unlike to the 'Great Wall' that was built on the natural boulder clay the 'Lesser Wall' was built on evidence of earlier structures. In the limitations of our small trench the nature of these earlier structures could not be ascertained but hopefully dating evidence obtained will shed light on how they fit in to the overall sequence/phasing of the site.



Overview of the site looking towards Stones of Stenness (photograph © ORCA)

So with these new discoveries how is our interpretation of the site evolving? In many ways the discoveries of 2010 just seem to add to our existing view of the site as a site of extraordinary importance within the Neolithic landscape - a site that was an integral part of the ritual monuments that surround it. Due to its unique nature it is tempting to seek parallels for the Ness from beyond the normal geographic and chronological boundaries - an 'Acropolis' perhaps, or the Neolithic equivalent of Delphi, which also had a striking geographical

character, and was considered by the Greeks as their world-navel - a pilgrimage site where groups from far-flung regions established cult buildings to house goods and votive offerings. However in order to understand the nature of the Ness we must consider it in the context of its contemporary setting and not just the immediate monumental landscape. It is therefore very fitting that excavations of complimentary domestic sites such as the Links of Noltland and Wyre are happening at this time.

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College, Sigurd Towrie, the Historic Scotland Ranger Service, Orkney Builders, European Leader funding, the BBC, volunteers from every corner of the globe, and the Orkney Archaeology Society for support, and also of course Arnie and Ola Tait, and Carol Hoey for their help, support, hospitality and again allowing us to excavate on their land. As ever we are already looking into continuing the excavations next year and are busy seeking potential funders, sponsors and volunteers. Please send all enquiries to [nick.card@uhi.ac.uk](mailto:nick.card@uhi.ac.uk).

### **Cantick excavations reveal deeper past**

Dan Lee, Archaeological Project Officer, ORCA, Orkney College UHI

Another season of excavations at Cantick, South Walls was undertaken in June to continue investigation of a prehistoric burial mound. A team from ORCA (Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology) based at Orkney College were joined by students from Aberdeen and Durham Universities. Local volunteers also received field training in Hoy funded by the Scapa Flow Landscape Partnership Scheme.

The excavation at Cantick continued the work of last year that aimed to investigate part of the Bronze Age funerary landscape on the peninsula. A large burial mound that is situated on the southern cliff top was excavated and was found to contain a complex of central cists set within a circular stone constructed mound. Excavations last year revealed that this mound had a considerable history of burials along with refurbishment and maintenance of the mound structure. The most striking phase of this occurred when straight retaining walls were constructed around the outside, turning a round mound into a square. The central cists, or stone burial boxes, contained cremation burials, however there was evidence for inhumation burials as well in the form of unburnt human bone. This was found within the upper disturbed layers, but analysis has revealed that they probably represent the

remains of two adults and two perinatal (around birth) burials. Not only did the burial mound display a remarkable change in architecture, from round to square, but also contained evidence for different burial rites; cremation and inhumation.



Decorated Bronze Age pot rim (photograph © ORCA)

Last seasons excavations, then, posed a series of questions. The cist complex and cremation burials appeared to be Bronze Age but did they find origins in the Neolithic? The square outer revetment wall was certainly a secondary addition but did it date to the Iron Age following the square barrow tradition

such as that in East Yorkshire, or the Pictish period with parallels found in Caithness and Shetland? Could it be that the square mound was unique to Cantick? This season's excavations aimed to address these questions and untangle the complex history of the mound.

The two quadrants excavated last season were reopened. They were extended in the corners with the aim of examining more of the external area of the mound and in the centre to investigate the central cists. The mound had been investigated by antiquarians and the central area consisted of loose stony material with some large bounding slabs. Excavation continued here throughout the two weeks to try and define this important area.



Central cists (photograph © ORCA)

A large rectangular box cist was exposed last season in the south west part of the mound. The bulk of the perinatal bones were found within the upper disturbed fill. The contents of the cist were excavated this season and more perinatal bones were found in the same area. Whilst these did not represent an undisturbed burial, the concentration of small delicate bones in one location suggests that they had not been moved far. It seems that very young babies were buried in the top of the mound, perhaps during the Iron Age or later periods. In some societies young children were not considered truly human until they reached a certain age and were buried in peripheral places such as within old mounds or ditches.

The contents of the cist had been previously disturbed – first by otters and then

antiquarians. The loose fill of the cist was removed revealing the disturbed remains of a cremation burial. But amongst the burnt bone fragments were thousands of tiny broken fish bones that could only derive from otter spraint. This suggests that the cist was used as a holt by otters in the past. The top of the cist must have been accessible from the surface at that time implying a lower height of the mound. The cist was then disturbed by treasure hunters and filled with spoil.

The different phases of the mound were established in the main trench sections. These have provided important insights into the construction and modification of the external walls and significant clues as to their date. The original mound was constructed onto a slight platform of scalped glacial till. A preparation layer of grey clay was laid on the platform before the main mound core and revetment wall was constructed. A second revetment wall was then constructed outside. The primary mound was probably constructed around a central cist or chamber, but this could not be established this season. The practice of preparing areas for construction in this manner and the presence of multiple revetment walls of this scale certainly finds parallels in the Orcadian Neolithic rather than Bronze Age.



Wall sequence (photograph © ORCA)

The secondary square wall was constructed above the outer primary revetment wall. The lower part of the mound appeared to have been levelled prior to this. A decorated fragment of Bronze Age pottery, typical in funerary contexts, was recovered from the

layer below the later wall, suggesting a prehistoric date for this activity. The pottery, however, could have been caught up in later material and this phase could still belong to later periods.

A small pit cut into the glacial till to the north west of the mound held the promise of an undisturbed buried cremation urn. However, the initial excitement of such a find was dampened as the fill of the pit contained nothing more than a flat slab.



Excavation of central area (photograph © ORCA)

Excavation in the central area continued in earnest with the hope of locating any central burials. The loose backfill was removed revealing that the large central slabs that had been assumed to form part of a large central cist were set onto a lower layer of fill. A large broken back slab was also found. This suggests that all the cist slabs visible in the

top of the mound are later additions to a more ancient mound. It seems that the burial mound was constructed in the Neolithic and dramatically rebuilt and reused throughout the Bronze Age. The fill of the central area contained the odd unburnt adult human bone suggesting that inhumation burials may have been disturbed in this area. Undisturbed deposits were encountered in the base of the central area, but these will have to be returned to next year.

The burial mound at Cantick certainly has a complex history of use that spans several hundred or even thousand years. It seems that a small Neolithic tomb was extensively refurbished during the Bronze Age with the insertion of several box cists. The construction of the square outer mound probably occurred at this time, perhaps corresponding with a change in burial rite. It is still possible, however, that this occurred during the Iron Age or Pictish periods. Perhaps the perinatal burials were inserted into the mound at this time by the community living at Hesti Geo broch when the mound was starting to weather. Whatever the date of the square wall it is certainly unique to Cantick within Orkney. The true sequence may only be established by radiocarbon dating the burials. The secrets of the primary Neolithic tomb await excavation next year.

Project funded by OIC, SFLP and HLF  
Many thanks to Eddie Doherty the landowner

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### **A Note from Owain Mason, 2010 Daphne Lorimer Bursary student**

I recall my first taste of Orcadian archaeology, it was a grey wet day, and cold, but I remember seeing the mighty stones of the Ring of Brodgar emerging from the gloom and then the whole of the isthmus unfolding before me. Surveying the landscape from the Ring is an experience; the density of archaeology within just this one spot is mind-boggling. Working your way past the many burial mounds one's eye is drawn down the landscape towards Barnhouse, the Stones Of Stenness and on a good day the majestic

mound of Maes Howe. It's not hard to see why the Brodgar isthmus was and is a 'special' place. The trip had many other treats in store, including the mysterious labyrinthine village of Skara Brae, and the stunning Iron Age architecture of Gurness, with the broch and then the later Pictish house. These are the things, to misquote popular culture, that archaeological dreams are made of. I remember my days as an undergraduate at Newcastle Upon Tyne, any reference to prehistory either involved Stonehenge or

Orkney; I didn't get much chance to do Prehistory, although I have worked on hill-fort sites, and done some researches into the Iron Age. But having a chance to further develop my knowledge of Prehistory by seeing the Orcadian monuments is a fantastic opportunity. After all reading about it is one thing, to experience it is another.

But not only have I had a chance to see Orcadian archaeology, I have also had an opportunity to actively contribute to and dig it. We may be digging history, but we are also making and forming it through our discoveries. Certainly in the case of the Ness, with the discoveries this year, including the painted stones we have done that. Pulling out the painted stone with Dave and seeing something as vivid as that from 5,000 years ago, is a once in a lifetime experience. When I look back at the things I found at the Ness, I realise that no other site will quite compare, it's not everyday on your first Neolithic dig that you get to pull out more pottery than you could ever want (that'll teach me to complain), decorated stones and even roof slates. It made that first term of 'theory' and other academic work worthwhile, as much as I enjoy reading and writing, there is nothing finer than grabbing one's trowel and diving into the trenches. Although not literally, as this is something health and safety would most likely frown upon. But through the process of excavation you learn so much from those around you and from the archaeology, that often you don't realise it.

Working at the enigmatic site of the Cairns was a stimulating and illuminating experience in Iron Age archaeology. Clearing out the bowels of a substantial Atlantic roundhouse (or broch if you want to be more direct) is hard work, but seeing the internal structure slowly revealed before one's eyes made the back breaking effort of shifting rubble all the more worthwhile. Particularly when you get the odd artefact, trust me I was more than happy with my large chunk of pot, but then I do like pot, but more on that later. Some artefacts though quite literally defied the term small find, a notched slab that requires four people to lift it is not by any means small. Across the site seeing the tapestry of structures emerging, including a few surprises along the way, revealed a complex site, rich in human experience. An experience in part shaped by the association of new structures with older ones. This is one thing I have come to notice about Orcadian archaeology – its continuous reuse of older monuments, but with some degree of respect for that which has gone before. This conscious memory becomes apparent again when studying the complex multiperiod site of the Ness Of Brodgar. The Ness is certainly a special place both today and probably was in the past. The grandeur of its architecture outshines any other Neolithic site, one or two large buildings is the norm, but to have several defies all expectation, but then the Ness seems to specialise in defying expectations.

The Braes o' Ha'Breck on Wyre is an entirely different type of site, but in no way any less exciting. The Braes o' Ha'Breck brings something different to the table, first of all the evidence for timber built structures, a relatively new discovery in Orkney. The site with its lengthy span across the Early Neolithic to the Late Neolithic probably represents one of the oldest houses in the Orcades. The later stone built house is a fascinating building, reflecting like the buildings at the Ness, a complex sequence of occupation by different generations, each one making their own subtle modifications. With the impressive hills of Rousay in the background the site is an evocative place, eerie and remote, perhaps the opposite of



Owain giving a guided tour to visitors at the Ness of Brodgar (photograph ©R Monteith)

how it would have been in the Neolithic, when it may have been home to a thriving community. Mind you after the umpteenth flood on site, one can begin to understand why the Neolithic folk invested in drains, bailing freezing cold water out of a trench first thing in the morning I'm sure does not rank high on everyone's to do list. But the rewards for our efforts made it all worthwhile, with finds ranging from axes to highly decorated Unstan ware, as well as a host of architectural features including post holes and hearths. Personally getting the chance to work on a Neolithic hearth was a fantastic experience, more so than realising that in the latest deluge one had mistakenly drawn onto the plan a puddle, in my defence it looked archaeological at the time, honest.



Owain excavating at Braes of Ha'breck (photograph © ORCA)

With excavation now over I am embarking on my MA dissertation, looking at issues of Later Neolithic and Early Bronze Age ceramics. I have for a few years now been cultivating an interest in pottery, and hopefully through this project I will be able to illustrate a variety of aspects to do with this exciting 'transitional' period. Pottery is very exciting, well it is to me, it's what gets me most excited on excavation, so this research will give me a chance to further develop this interest. The good or bad news, depending on your view of pottery, is you may at some near point in the future end up hearing me going on about this subject. I have been informed to keep it brief, so fear not.



More hard work at Braes of Ha'breck, this time with rare sunshine! (photograph © ORCA)

It's not just been good for me to see and dig the archaeology but also to give something back, mainly through giving site tours at the Cairns, the Ness and at Wyre, or in the form of my dissertation. The chance to 'hand the archaeology back' is such an important thing, after all we don't have exclusive rights to it. Plus as I said in my Ness blog entry, the archaeology can only be dug as long as people continue to be interested in it. Organisations like the OAS are important to the continued success of archaeology within Orkney, and the Daphne Lorimer bursary gives people, like myself, a chance to share in something unique. But it's not just about the bursary but it's also about the people I have met who have made undertaking this MA both possible and all the more worthwhile. I would like to extend a personal thanks to everyone at Orkney College and ORCA, particularly for putting up with my more idiosyncratic moments, everybody at the OAS for their support, support given in the form of cake, pottery and conversation, to all those I have had a chance to work alongside, for their good humour and camaraderie, and finally to everyone who visited the excavations for their continued interest. Come January I will unfortunately have to embark on the next stage of my archaeological career, and who knows where that shall lead, but my year in Orkney will always hold a fond place in my heart and memories...who knows I may be back....

## **Orkney Pupils Attend UNESCO Youth Summit**

Orkney World Heritage Site ranger service

On the 1<sup>st</sup> October 2010 six secondary pupils from Orkney joined over 45 young people for the first UK UNESCO Youth Summit in Scotland to discuss World Heritage in the 21st century.

The delegation from Kirkwall Grammar School and Stromness Academy represented the Heart of Neolithic Orkney at the event held at New Lanark World Heritage Site in South Lanarkshire. Also attending were delegations representing the World Heritage Sites of the Antonine Wall, New Lanark, Old and New Towns of Edinburgh and St Kilda. They were joined by a delegation representing the Historic Town of St. George World Heritage Site in Bermuda, a British overseas territory.

The aim of the summit, which was sponsored by Historic Scotland, was to explore what World Heritage means to young people and how they can help to preserve and protect internationally important sites on their doorstep. As part of UNESCO's World Heritage in Young Hands Programme, the Summit provided an opportunity for the participants to put forward their views and visions for World Heritage Sites. Feedback from the day will now be sent to all Scottish World Heritage sites, Historic Scotland and Minister for Culture and External Affairs, Fiona Hyslop MSP. Fiona Hyslop said; "Scotland's unique and diverse built and natural heritage is celebrated on a global scale, and is a large part of our identity. It is important therefore that young people are encouraged to develop an appreciation and understanding of their built environment from an early age, and have a voice. This event provides a fantastic forum to bring together representatives from our five world heritage sites to share their ideas, views and experiences with their contemporaries from

the other side of the world. I very much look forward to receiving their feedback."

Throughout the day the young participants worked on a series of workshops to explore global challenges to World Heritage, questioned World Heritage experts and took part in a 'Dragon's Den' exercise. Each youth delegation also gave a presentation introducing their World Heritage Site to the other delegates. The Orkney group, led by teachers Graham Shearer and Jenny Devlin, included Eilidh Baikie, Iona Spence and Louis Wright from Kirkwall Grammar School and Shannon Flett, Daniel Johnston and Abbie Lyall from Stromness Academy. They were also accompanied by the Sandra Miller and Elaine Clarke from the Orkney WHS ranger service. Sandra said; "The young people were excellent delegates and held the audience's attention extremely well. One senior delegate commented on how well they spoke and about their great enthusiasm and obvious pride in their site. They really are to be congratulated not only on the presentation but on the work that they did throughout the day as they led group discussions and participated in the workshops with enthusiasm. They are a credit to their schools and to Orkney, if this is the future for World Heritage we are in safe hands."



Elaine & Sandra with the Orkney delegates to the UK UNESCO Youth Summit

**Book Review - 'Fear of Farming' by Caroline Wickham-Jones**

Published by Windgather Press, Oxbow Books 2010 £16.95 <http://www.oxbowbooks.com>  
Also available at <http://www.newsfromnowhere.org.uk>

Caroline Wickham-Jones is best known in Orkney as an archaeologist who specialises in the Neolithic and Mesolithic periods. I have to confess that I was expecting this book to be a popular archaeology text exploring the mysterious Mesolithic / Neolithic cusp characterised by the societal change from hunter gatherer (Mesolithic) to farmer (Neolithic). But this book is so much more. Caroline draws on her expertise in this field to explore a very current and pertinent debate, that of sustainability and the environment. It is a modern day debate on the world's current environmental crisis seen in the context of early human prehistory.

Starting in the earliest period of human existence, the Palaeolithic, this book explores the changes that would have occurred as the ancient hunter gatherer lifestyle was superseded by the new Neolithic farming culture and the world changed forever. New methods of food production and storage brought population increase and the novel experience of more settled communities. The new life style associated with permanence, acquisition of possessions and their protection brought with it the need for recognition of authority and property rights and changes in priorities. The old characteristics of leadership, that were doubtless vital to the old hunter gatherer existence, became hierarchies of power realised in the massive monumental Neolithic structures, such as those we are so familiar with in Orkney,

exhibiting visible displays of wealth and status. In this brave new world the old hunter gatherer ways became sidelined, the remaining groups excluded and even feared for their 'otherness', something that remains today.

Within this argument Caroline explores the concept of over extraction of resources from land and sea and illustrates this with examples ranging from modern day over fishing to the overuse problems faced by early farmers in Mesopotamia in the third millennium BC.

This book urges us to learn for our hunter gatherer past not so much to return to the lifestyle of the itinerant traveller living off the land as this is clearly not an option in this highly populated world, but rather to revisit the philosophy of taking only what is needed, creating minimal waste and living sustainably. 'Fear of Farming' is written for a wide audience particularly anyone who is interested in the sustainability debate and the lessons that may be learned from prehistory.

I can certainly recommend this book as a stimulating and engaging read. You may not agree with everything it says but it will make you think.

Dr Sue Barnard  
Secretary, Orkney Archaeology Society

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**THE GRIMESTON VENUS FIGURINE**

Andrew Appleby, OAS Vice Chair

It was in 1976 that I was wandering in fields in Grimeston in Harray, when I found eroded from a low bank the stone item pictured here.

At first I thought it to be a small Neolithic stone ball. I did take it to the Tankerness House Museum and also showed it to several

other authorities then and after. The piece of carved steatite was not recognized by anyone at the time as being a manufactured object, except for the late Mr. Jock Firth of Nettlebar, Harray. He remarked, "This was indeed from the hand of man." Apparently that was a favourite saying of his.



Photo by Andrew Hollinrake

Some years later, Caroline Wickham-Jones did take it to The National Museum of Scotland for identification for me. The view came back that it was in fact 'artifactual' but they were unable to identify as an actual object, although it was considered that it might be of some antiquity.

The item remained in my guardianship, wrapped up in my diminutive '*ceramic treasure sarcophagus*' along with other pieces of personal interest until the autumn of 2007. We were moving house, and I came across the terracotta box. I unwrapped the contents and out rolled the cottage loaf-like object.



The figurine fresh from storage

My wife, Sigrid immediately said, "That is a Venus Figurine!" From that moment on, I have looked at it differently. I sent a photograph to The British Museum at that time, but there was no response. We had to pack up our things, so she got incarcerated yet again

The 'Westray Wifey' was discovered at The Links of Noltland in 2009. We naturally

thought about our own Venus, which was found over 30 years before. It was most inconvenient to search our belongings at that time, however in late July 2010 the opportunity arose. As it happened, Owain Mason, our Bursary Student for 2010 was present. His recognition of the item was instant and fulsome.

I took 'The Grimeston Girlie' to the excavations at The Ness of Brodgar for further opinions. She was greeted like a wee heroine! Sigrid and I took her to Westray to visit the excavations there. Those excavating the site declared her to be a Venus figurine of great antiquity, as did Professor Lord Colin Renfrew and Lady Renfrew during their recent visit to Orkney.



The figurine visiting the Westray Wife on display at Westray Heritage Centre

The small portable artwork is still in my care. I am awaiting a decision from The Treasure Trove Trust in Edinburgh as to the future of this important Orkney antiquity.

My opinion is that there are others to be found. There may even be unrecognized pieces of early 'enigmatic' stonework, bone and ceramic that represent human forms within Orkney's museum collections. These need to be looked for in the light of recent discoveries. I believe that there was a bone item discovered at Skara Brae, which represented a female form. This is now missing at the moment. If it resurfaces, which is entirely possible, then this would be wonderful indeed.

Cheers, Andrew Appleby.

## *Orkney Archaeology Society Upcoming Events*

Date	Event	Venue	Time
Wednesday 8 <sup>th</sup> December 2010	Archaeological round-up of 2010 part 1 and Christmas Celebration	St Magnus Centre Kirkwall	7.30pm
Wednesday 26 <sup>th</sup> January 2011	Archaeological round-up of 2010 part 2	Stenness Hall, Stenness	7.30pm
Wednesday 9 <sup>th</sup> February 2011	"Art and Archaeology" Antonia Thomas	Pier Arts Centre Stromness	7.30pm
Sunday 13 <sup>th</sup> March 2011	Fieldwalking – learn how to look for artefacts	Redland Farm – weather permitting Numbers limited – book through Nan Tel 01856 850889	

OAS website – [www.orkneycommunities.co.uk/OAS](http://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](mailto:oas@orkneycommunities.co.uk) and we will add you to the list.

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