

# YCCCCART

Yatton Congresbury Claverham and Cleeve Archaeological Research Team

Newsletter October 2018

## Chairman's chat

This issue is mainly about the archaeology of Orkney, so different from the archaeology and landscape around Congresbury, Yatton and the nearby villages. Janet, Philippa and Dave visited Orkney this year and Arthur and Liz have visited in recent years. The reports in this issue look at the different sites visited, especially the major excavation on the Ness of Brodgar, which YCCCCART have decided to sponsor - a full 5 square metres. So look out for reports in future issues of the artifacts found in 'our' 5 square metres.

Peter English

## Orkney

Orkney is one of the few places in the UK which has archaeological evidence of continuous human habitation for 5,000 years although even older archaeological remains, dating to the last Ice Age, hint at even earlier seasonal visitors.

The exceptional preservation of the commonly used local stone means that Orkney can boast some of the finest archaeological sites found anywhere in Western Europe. These chart all of the major periods of settlement; from the prehistoric up to more recent 20th century history. Orkney has a wealth of history and archaeology including the

renowned Neolithic domestic and ceremonial sites at Skara Brae, the Ring of Brodgar and Maeshowe, Iron Age brochs and 9th century Pictish and Norse farmsteads.

Whilst the rise of the powerful Scottish earls in the 14th century and their later 16th century links to the Stewart kings ensured Orkney's political and economic importance. Orkney also has a rich maritime history and its strategic naval importance in both World Wars can still be seen today at Scapa Flow and the Churchill Barriers.



Interior wall of a 5,000 year old cairn named the Tomb of the Eagles. This is a privately owned site in South Ronaldsay which, when excavated, revealed the remains of 340 people along with carcasses and the talons of sea eagles, hence the name.

An aerial view of the Broch of Gurness.

The central tower would have reached about 10m in height. The site is protected by three ditches with stone ramparts; in between are the remains of many small stone houses. The settlement at Gurness continued into the 5th century AD, time of the Picts where more dwellings were built on top of the earlier ones using robbed out stone from the broch.



Maeshowe is the most significant burial chamber on Orkney and is part of a World UNESCO Heritage Landscape site. Access to this unique archaeological site is strictly controlled. The interior is rightly famous for its impressive construction and its astrological alignment to the Winter Solstice. (Watch one of the many YouTube videos to experience this phenomenon.) It also houses some wonderful runic Viking graffiti including the following.



“these runes were carved by the man most skilled in runes on the Western Ocean with the axe that killed Gaukr Trandkill's son in the South of Iceland”

“Ingigerth is the most beautiful of all women” (*carved beside a rough drawing of a slaving dog*)



The Ring of Brodgar is a classic henge site of 27 surviving stones, some of which stand over 15 ft high. Nearby are the Stones of Stenness, another circle of standing stones dating from 3,000 BC.



Like Maeshowe and the Ness of Brodgar these stone circles are all part of UNESCO's World heritage landscape.

Janet Dickson

## Ness of Brodgar

At the heart of Orkney's prehistoric ceremonial landscape lies the Ness of Brodgar a place of pivotal importance to Neolithic Orkadians. The archaeological remains indicate that the site was used from the Mesolithic through to the Iron Age although the most significant period was about 3,100 BC when huge free standing buildings were enclosed by a massive stone wall. These structures are unique, there's nothing like them anywhere in Europe. They were in use for



Structure 10 above

at least a thousand years, maybe even longer although their purpose is still uncertain. Recent excavations indicate that the Ness must have been a meeting place of some importance but whether that was for ritual or ceremonial purposes, for trade or gossip has yet to be firmly established. One thing which is certain however is that important political and celestial events would have been celebrated here and in some style. When Structure 10 was unearthed the remains of 400 head of cattle were discovered along with a carefully positioned human arm bone and many incised and decorated stones. Current thinking is that an enormous feast was held to commemorate the closing down of this distinctive building so perhaps it was a Neolithic 'temple'.



The first finds were uncovered in the 1920's but proper excavation did not begin until 2004, every summer since archaeologists and volunteers have spent July and August on the site, the rest of the year the excavations are shrouded in plastic and black car tyres. Each year new and exciting discoveries are being made, most recently trench T, the midden, which is the biggest Neolithic midden heap ever found.



The Midden



However things became even more complex when an enormous recumbent standing stone over 4m long, which had been incorporated into a building, was discovered further down the slope raising the question, are there more stones to be found and could they be part of another as yet unknown major stone circle?



These monumental structures, spread over a large area, have been excavated for a short period each summer since 2004.

As new finds are made, new theories are put forward about the age of the site and its ceremonial and political purpose. If you watched the Neil Oliver TV programme Britain's Ancient Capital earlier this year you will know that it is being suggested that Orkney was not a remote outpost at the edge of the Neolithic world but rather the cultural centre, its beating heart from which ideas flowed out to the rest of the British Isles. An interesting hypothesis which has supportive dating evidence making the Ness of Brodgar older than Stonehenge by 500 years!

As supporters of the Ness of Brodgar, YCCCART will in future be kept up to date with the progress of the dig when it begins again in 2019 and with the analysis of this year's finds. However if you would like to read more I have a copy of Current Archaeology which has an extensive article about the Ness excavation.

Janet Dickson

## Philippa's Orkney Photographs

**The Italian chapel** is the only building that remains of camp 60, a prisoner of war camp constructed in the latter half of 1941. From January 1942 until the spring of 1945 the camp housed Italian prisoners of war of the 6th Anti-aircraft regiment of the Mantova Division and men from the Italian Tank Corp.

Most of these prisoners, renamed the 5th Italian Labour Battalion, were captured at Tobruk and Benghazi following the North African campaign during World War II. The men were distributed to three POW camps in Orkney; 500 at Lambholm and a further 700 into camps in Burray. They were brought in to assist the contractors with the construction of causeways, later known as the Churchill Barriers, to block off the eastern approaches to Scapa Flow where the British fleet often lay at anchor.



Detail of the painted ceiling, Italian Chapel, Orkney



Painted detail behind altar Italian Chapel, Orkney

The camp commandant was Major T P Buckland assisted by Major G Formasier of the Italian Tank Corps. The prisoners worked in the block casting yard, filling gabions with quarried stone and finally laying of the asphalt road across the completed causeways.



The prisoners' civilian occupations covered a wide range of skills, from artists, sculptors to electricians and ironworkers.

To make the camp more homely the prisoners laid concrete paths and planted flowerbeds outside the huts, the men constructed concrete tables and benches so that they could eat outside when the Orkney weather allowed. To entertain themselves lavish productions such as "The Baker of Venice" were held in a make shift theatre. They published a newspaper called 'Il Corriere della Domenica' (Sunday Courier), played



Another interior view of the Italian Chapel. (Arthur Langley)

billiards, on a home-made concrete table and played bowls.

During the summer the prisoners organised sports competitions against other POW camps. In their spare time they crafted small trinkets which were sold to local people.

One thing the camp lacked was a chapel so eventually one was built as can be seen in the photograph opposite.

**Skara Brae** was built in two main phases. Little is known about the first, since further investigation would require the demolition of the later houses.

Radiocarbon dating in the early 1970s confirmed that the settlement dated from the late Neolithic — inhabited for around 600 years, between 3200BC and 2200BC.



The furniture was made from local flag stones which were readily available and easy to shape.

Skara Brae was inhabited for several centuries. Archaeologists think that the settlement did not grow larger than eight structures housing 50 to 100 people.

The typical rectangular plan of a Skara Brae house. Facing the entrance is the dresser where prized objects were perhaps stored and displayed. The hearth is in the centre and on either side are box beds. The small tanks set into the floor were for preparing fishbait. The central hearth was used for cooking and providing heat and light.



Skara Brae survives as eight dwellings, linked together by a series of low, covered passages. The village remains under constant threat by coastal erosion and the onslaught of the sand and sea.

Philippa Cormack



The following photographs were taken in the museum at Stromness and are artifacts from the German Fleet that was scuttled in Scapa flow at the end of the WWI.



Philippa Cormack

## Arthur's Orkney Journey - a quest for the Tomisons'

I visited Orkney in 2015 to find where my great grandmother was born and her ancestors, (named Tomison), had lived for many generations. This side of my family tree can be traced back to about 1720, but unfortunately a fire destroyed any records earlier than that date. The Records Library staff in Kirkwall were most helpful in helping me research beyond this 1720 date. We did find some notes that suggested the family arrived from Scandinavia some centuries previously.



This is the farm at Halcro where my great grandmother was born and raised as a child. This area of South Ronaldsay is quite open and windswept. One can imagine what a hard life it would have been crofting on this land trying support an extended family. Consequently, many siblings, such as my great grandmother, left Orkney. In her case for a life of service in Whitby. The Tomb of the Eagles is in the distance.



*Above is the free school, Tomison's Academy, built with William Tomison's bequest to build a school.*

William Tomison joined Hudson Bay Company aged 20, in 1760, as a labourer. He sailed from Stromness and it is believed that he first learned to read and write on the long voyage to York House on Hudson Bay. Seven years later he became one of the Company's first inland travellers. From 1786 to 1803 he led the competition against the North West Company along the Saskatchewan river. He rose to become Chief, Inland, a post of some eminence. He is credited with founding the trading post that became Edmonton in 1795 when he established a fort there, named after the then Deputy Governor's birthplace in England. On retirement Tomison returned to his native South Ronaldsay where a school, Tomison's Academy, was built using money he left for that purpose in his will. Channel 4 produced a documentary about his life some years ago.





*These are the The Stones of Stenness and today consist of four upright stones up to 6m in height in a circle that originally held 12 stones. Note how thin the stones are compared to their height.*



*This is the brooding Ness of Brodgar with the Ring of Brodgar in the foreground. On one side of the Ness the water is fresh water and on the other it is salt water. The Stones of Stenness lie just beyond the Ness.*



*Getting in and out of the Tomb of the Eagles is tricky.*

#### DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Review In Day - Thursday December 6th 2018  
10.00am coffee & Christmas treats.

10.30am How to read fieldwork results and a review of 2018.

In February a trip to Stanton Drew followed by a pub lunch. Date and time tba in January.

After getting in and out of the Tomb of the Eagles you deserve a good lunch! Turn left on the way out up the hill and the lane leads you to this wonderful restaurant overlooking the Pentland Firth, near another tomb, Tomb of the Otters. On a clear day you may possibly spot orcas or dolphins if you are lucky. Great food, all freshly baked or made on the premises. This contemporary building makes a great contrast to all the ancient stone you have seen or crawled over.



#### Vince's Corner - Stanton Drew

The Saturday evening wedding dance in the Big Field had been going well.. perhaps too well, for the cider was disappearing rapidly, and the faces of the dancers were flushed. As midnight approached, some remembered that dancing was banned on Sunday, and left. Others wanted to carry on, and as they leapt and capered, the musicians also left.



The parson, groom and bride were having a little talk outside the Druids Arms, and the groom realised the music had stopped.

He swore he would find music if he had to invite the Devil himself. He should have not been surprised when a fiddler turned up to play. The dancers danced on, with the fiddler playing ever more wildly. The good people in the village, shaking terrified in their beds, heard the shouts and singing turn to screams and then to silence.

In the morning, they looked out and saw all the party turned to stone, even the parson, bride and groom: a punishment for dancing on the Sabbath Day. And that's how the stones at Stanton Drew were formed. The alternative explanation in the next Newsletter.

Vince Russett