

ROUSAY • EGILSAY • WYRE

STEPPING BACK IN TIME



Skail farmstead, Westness, looking north to Midhowe

Image: Bobby Friel @TakeTheHighView

ARCHAEOLOGY & HISTORY BOOKLET

2023



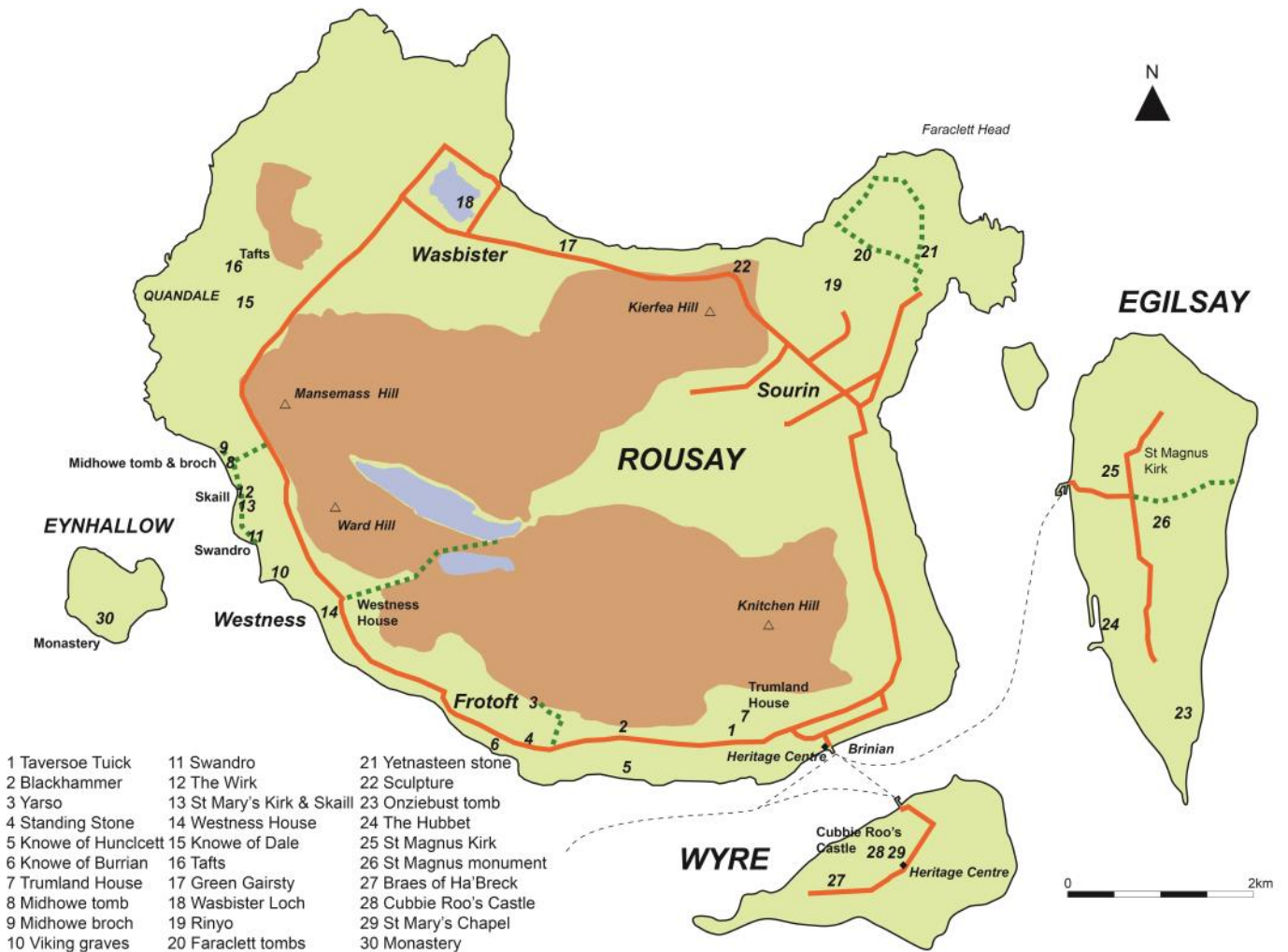
ROUSAY · EGILSAY · WYRE

The three islands of Rousay, Egilsay and Wyre have been shaped by nature and people over the last 6,000 years, creating the isles as we know them today.

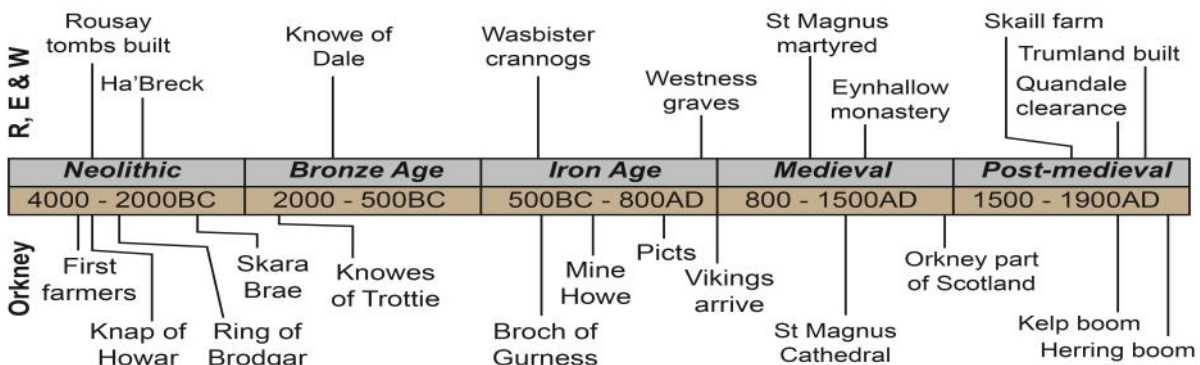
This booklet is a brief summary of the archaeology and history of our islands. It aims to provide information on the most prominent sites, places and events, plus websites and sources where further information can be found.

Sites have been grouped by island and district.

In Rousay, the story moves clockwise around the island, from Frotoft in the south, to Westness, Wasbister and Sourin in the east. Numbers in the text refer to sites marked on the map below.



TIMELINE



ROUSAY

Rousay is a hilly island 3 km north-west of the Orkney Mainland and has been dubbed 'the Egypt of the north' due to its wealth of archaeological sites.

With an area of 48 sq.km (18.8 square miles), it is the fifth largest island in the Orkney archipelago.

The name *Rousay* is of Norse origin and means *Hrolf's island*. It was recorded as *Rollesay* in the 14th century, then *Rolsay* in the 15th, and *Rowsay* in the early 16th century.

For centuries the people of Rousay earned their living mainly from farming and fishing, but this has changed considerably in recent decades. Most of the farming is undertaken around the island's lowland coastal fringe.

The hilly interior contains peat bogs and with freshwater lochs – ideal for more adventurous walking routes.



Nineteenth century records show there were other trades in Rousay, such as blacksmiths and joiners, shoemakers and shopkeepers, dressmakers and straw plaiters.

Rousay's population in the mid-19th century was over 900, but by 1900, after land clearances, this had been reduced to 627. Half a century later it had fallen to 342.

Depopulation accelerated, and in the next 20 years resident numbers fell to 181. From the 1970s, new families began to settle in Rousay, many coming from England, increasing the population to well over 200.

Hundreds of archaeological sites have been identified in Rousay – from Neolithic tombs and houses to croft houses from the last few centuries – but only a small fraction of them have been investigated in any detail. Most are found on the coastal areas, although it is likely that prehistoric sites might be present below the peat in the island's centre.

Many of the more prominent sites, such as the chambered tombs, were excavated in the 1930s and then opened to the public.

Rousay has a long history of archaeological investigation, from early excavations at **Taversoe Tuick** by Lady Burroughs, to the heyday of excavations in the 1920s and 1930s with Walter Grant excavating many tombs and **Midhowe broch**, and Gordon Childe at **Rinyo**.

More recently, excavations and survey have taken place at the coastally eroding site at **Swandro** and at **Skail farmstead** in Westness.

Several parts of Rousay are designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) with notable cliff formations and wildflower colonies and there is an RSPB bird reserve at Trumland.



SOUTH

FROTOFT

Some of the most impressive chambered tombs can be visited along the southern coast of Rousay: **Taversoe Tuick**, **Blackhammer** and **Yarso** are all clearly signposted from the road with nearby parking.

All three date to the Neolithic (around 3,000 BC), a period where Rousay seems to have had more than its fair share of activity. The Neolithic was when communities in Orkney first adopted farming, built stone tombs and houses, made pots and polished stone axes.

The three excavated Rousay tombs have been fitted with modern concrete roofs for their protection and making them easier to explore.

Before the Neolithic, little is known about the hunter-gatherer groups from the Mesolithic period in Rousay.

More Mesolithic evidence is starting to come to light in other parts of Orkney, and hunter-gatherer groups are likely to have inhabited Rousay when sea levels were lower and it was joined to the Orkney Mainland.



LOOKING ALONG THE ROAD AT FROTOFT

TAVERSOE TUICK (1)

This two-storey cairn was discovered in 1898, when Lady Burroughs was having a sheltered seat built into the mound. It is the only 'double-decker' tomb you can visit in Orkney.

The site was fully excavated in 1937, when two entrance passages were found, one in the south-eastern side, leading to a lower chamber, with a second north-facing entrance passage leading to an upper chamber. Visitors can now access the lower chamber via a ladder, but this was not possible when the cairn was in use. A mini chamber was also found slightly downhill of the cairn, containing three pottery bowls but no human remains.

Excavation also uncovered three stone cists with the cremated remains of adults and a child, along with pottery and cattle bones, probably dating to the reuse of the mound in the Bronze Age.

BLACKHAMMER (2)

A typical stalled cairn, with an interior divided into seven compartments by pairs of upright stone slabs. The original entrance to this 13-metre long tomb was sealed up when the cairn was abandoned.

The cairn had a decorative design into its outer wall, with stones laid to form a triangular 'herringbone' pattern. Traces of this decorative stonework can still be seen at either side of the entrance. When the entrance was finally sealed, the cairn's users went to great lengths to ensure the stones used were set flush to the wall and matched the pattern of the stones on either side.

When excavated in 1936, the interior was found to contain pottery sherds, a stone axe, flint debitage and the fragments of two human skeletons – one in the westernmost compartment and the other in the entrance passage. In the eastern chamber, animal remains included at least eight adult sheep, cattle, red deer and gannet.

SOUTH

YARSO (3)



This Neolithic stalled cairn is divided into four compartments by three pairs of upright slabs. Like Blackhammer, the exterior stonework reflects the triangular motifs found on Unstan Ware pottery.

When excavated in 1934, the remains of at least 29 adults were found. The bones were disarticulated and arranged neatly in groups facing inwards. Other finds included flint knives and pottery sherds together with the bones from both domestic and wild animals.

The walls, which showed evidence of burning, stand up to 1.8m high at the end and up to 1.6m high along the sides of the chamber.

Charred wood and ashes were noted on the floor, and many of the finds, including the bones, were scorched.

Further along the road you can see a large standing stone, thought to date to the Neolithic or Bronze Age, next to

the farmhouse at **Langstane** (4).

Also look out for the large Iron Age broch mounds along the coast below the road.

The **Knowe of Hunclett** (5) is just below **Blackhammer**, next to the large steel buildings of the fish hatchery, and the **Knowe of Burrian** (6) is on the shore below **Yarso**. Neither site has been excavated.

Brochs are large stone-built round houses, often with surrounding settlements, built between 300 BC and AD 300. They are common throughout Atlantic Scotland and thought to have been the home of large families or kin groups. Their architecture has led some to suggest a defensive function, however their size may simply represent a display of wealth and power rather than be the result of warfare and conflict.

There are six brochs along the south and west coasts of Rousay (including **Midhowe**, see Westness), with a similar distribution across Eynhallow Sound in Evie. This includes the Broch of Gurness, which has a large outer settlement to explore and is also worth a visit.

TRUMLAND HOUSE (7)

The house was completed in 1873 by General Frederick Traill-Burroughs, laird of Rousay from 1847 until his death in 1905. Before that the laird's residence was at Westness House.

Trumland House is made from local Rousay stone. The gateway to the path leading to the kitchen garden is made of 13th century sculpted stones found near **St Mary's Church** and **The Wirk**.

From 1870-83, there were many improvements made to the estate including the building of Trumland pier, island schools, a public market, the first steamship service, a post office, and the first resident doctor.



TRUMLAND HOUSE

Helen Castle

SOUTH

Trumland House passed from the Traill-Burroughs family in the 1920s. It was later purchased by the Grant family, of Grant's whisky and the Highland Park distillery in Kirkwall, who used the property as a summer residence.

Walter Grant supported many of the excavations in Rousay. He then gifted many of the sites to the State, hence the numerous properties-in-care on the island that can now be visited.

Trumland was later sold again and passed through a series of owners until a fire on April 4, 1985, left the property roofless and the upper floors and principal rooms seriously damaged or destroyed.

After re-roofing in 1985, the house was again sold, and passed un-restored through a series of owners until purchased in 2002 by the present owners, who proceeded with internal restoration.

WEST

WESTNESS

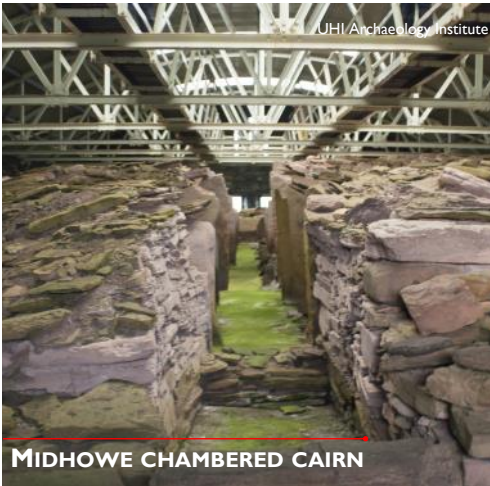


One of the most remarkable landscapes in Scotland is located along the western side of Rousay at Westside. This stretch of coast contains some of the most impressive upstanding archaeological sites you can visit, along with many others that survive as earthworks on the ground surface.

From Neolithic tombs, to Iron Age brochs, Viking graves, a medieval tower, a parish church and farmsteads, all in the space of the few hundred metres.

To visit the Westness coast, please park at the Midhowe cairn and broch car park on the road and walk down the hill to the coastal path. Please do not access the coast from Westness Farm.

MIDHOWE CHAMBERED CAIRN (8)



Excavation in the 1930s uncovered a massive, stalled burial chamber, thought to date from around 3,500BC, measuring 32.5m long and divided by upright flagstones into a series of 12 stalls.

Each of the stalls contained a stone 'bench' upon which bodies were laid. The remains of 25 individuals (17 adults, six youths and two infants) were found on the floor of the cairn. Most had been placed with their backs to the eastern wall, facing the central passage.

Throughout the rubble that filled the cairn, the excavators found the remains of cattle, sheep and red deer (antlers), as well as fish bones and limpet shells.

Like other Orkney cairns, these finds hint at either funerary feasting or perhaps grave goods buried along with the dead. Other artefacts in the rubble included five hammer-stones, a stone pestle and three 'rude stone implements'.

After the tomb had fallen out of use, two bodies were buried within the collapsed rubble.

MIDHOWE BROCH (9)

This impressive broch was constructed during the Iron Age, and continued to be used in the Pictish period.

The broch is in a striking location, standing by the sea with geo to the east and a revetted rampart and ditch on the landward side.

Inside, the broch contains galleries, hearths, water tanks and a well or cellar. The interior of the broch was divided into separate rooms or cells with large, upright slabs introduced during later phases.

There is a large settlement around the broch also thought to date to the later phases of use. These contained workshops, with one building used for iron and bronze working.



Damage has occurred from coastal erosion and the broch is now protected by a large sea wall. Built in the style known as 'cassying' it has resisted the Atlantic gales for decades.

The broch is very well preserved and one of only a few excavated examples you can visit in Orkney. It survives to approximately four metres in height, with most of its outer wall and ground floor layout intact.

Midhowe broch is actually one of three brochs in the area, with North Howe and South Howe either side.

WESTNESS VIKING GRAVES (10)

In 1963, during the burial of a cow, a Viking woman's grave (along with an infant) was found at Westness, close to where two Viking graves were found in 1826.

Also in the grave were two early to mid 9th century tortoise brooches, a zoomorphic Celtic brooch dated c. AD750 and a bronze rectangular plaque (a gilt bronze mount filled with a wolf or lion on a background of interlace).

This very rich grave also contained 40 beads, a long, bone hair-comb, implements for textile preparation, a sickle, a small piece of pumice and a bronze basin.

Nearby, in 1971, a complete male Viking warrior grave was discovered. They had been buried with a shield and a game with 23 dice, dated to the early 10th century AD. The area turned out to be a cemetery with 32 graves, two of which were boat-graves with weapons and tools.

The cemetery dated from the 7th to the 11th century, and included both Pictish and Viking burials, many with grave goods. These varied depending on the status of the individual and included weapons (sword, axe, spear and arrows, shield-bosses), jewellery, tools (including sickles and adzes) and weaving implements.

Evidence for Pictish and Viking people being buried in the same cemetery is important when considering whether the Viking settlement of Orkney was hostile or did they work with the local population? What do you think?

During the Norse period, Rousay was home to the powerful chieftain Sigurd of Westness. He is frequently mentioned in *Orkneyinga Saga*, demonstrating the importance of this part of Orkney at the time.

Important Viking and Norse remains are also found at **Swandro** (11).

THE WIRK (12)

The remains of a medieval stronghold at the edge of **St Mary's Kirk** graveyard. The large, stone keep has evidence for an upper floor, possible toilets and a cellar with a tunnel to the east.

Although partly excavated in the early 1920s, the date of the buildings, their function and the relationship between the tower and range remained open to debate. J. Storer Clouston found that the tower was built on the seaward end of a large building, proving it was not free-standing but part of a large hall/house comparable in size to the Bishop's Palace in Kirkwall. There are strong similarities in construction between the Wirk and **Cubbie Roo's Castle** in Wyre.

In 2020, geophysical survey confirmed that the footings of the hall survive to the east of the tower, accompanied by additional enclosures with possible structural elements to the south and north-west. The extent of the site also appeared to extend into the kirkyard.



CLouston EXCAVATIONS

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THE WIRK: EXCAVATION & SURVEY

In 2021, excavation in two trenches targeted the eastern hall range and located substantial wall footings just below the ground surface (part of an ancillary building in Trench 1 and the southern external wall of the hall in Trench 2).

The conclusion was that the tower and hall range were built at the same time.

Although Clouston had only exposed the hall wall footings, without fully excavating around them, his site plan proved to be very accurate.

The hall may have had raised wooden internal floors, certainly in the lower western part, perhaps supported by an internal scarcement.

A significant assemblage of c. 13th century worked and moulded red sandstone was recovered from Trench 2 nearest the tower. This was interpreted as ecclesiastical in origin and likely to have originated from the former medieval kirk nearby, rather than hall.

The Wirk, however, was unlikely to have been an ecclesiastical building due to the raised floors and association with the tower – though it could have belonged to a bishop.

Radiocarbon dates from charred grain in deposits abutting the southern external wall of the hall returned Late Iron Age dates (Pictish period mid-7th to mid-8th century AD). This material most likely relates to the disturbance of earlier activity during the hall's construction of the hall, hinted at by the surrounding geophysical anomalies, rather than dating the hall itself.



ST MARY'S KIRK (13)

The kirk dates to the late 1500s/early 1600s but there is archaeological evidence of an earlier church on site dating to the 13th century. This probably relates to when the small kirk was extended and took on the role of parish church.

Given the close association with **Skaill**, however, it is thought there has been a church on this site from at least the 12th century, but possibly as early as the 11th.

The present kirk was replaced with a new church at Brinian in 1815, but the graveyard remained in use until 1915.



WEST

WESTNESS HOUSE (14)

This was the principal house on Rousay and the home of the Traill family until Trumland House was built in the late 19th century.

In the 18th century, John Traill was accused of being a Jacobite, and supporting the 1745 rebellion, by Captain Benjamin Moodie, of Longhope. This resulted in a gunboat being sent out from Kirkwall to sack and burn the house.

John Traill fled, and is reputed to have escaped to the Gentleman's Cave on Westray; his wife remained in Rousay.

Not long after, he was re-instated and paid compensation with which he built the present house around 1750. The house was occupied by various members of the Traill family and passed to General Burroughs in 1847, following the death of George Traill, his uncle.

The new absentee laird General Burroughs moved to Rousay in 1863, having returned from serving in the army in India. He lived at Westness House for only a short time after his marriage to Eliza D'Oyley Geddes, and soon began to build Trumland House.

Westness House was then let to various tenants, mainly as a shooting lodge. The house contains original arts and crafts features following refurbishment in the early 20th century.

In 1922, the house and estate were sold to Walter Grant of the Highland Park distillery, who installed plumbing and electric lights. The house and gardens are not open to the public.



FARMSTEADS



Either side of **St Mary's Kirk** are the ruins of **Skaill** and **Brough** farmsteads (13).

Brough is so called as it is located on the top of South Howe broch mound. These farms were cleared in the mid-19th century, as part of the same waves of clearance that included **Quandale**, although some farm workers lived at Skaill until the late 19th century.

The lands of Skaill and Brough, along with Quandale, were consolidated into Westness Farm as part of agricultural improvements instigated by Traill. Documentary evidence shows that Brough and Skaill were inhabited from the 14th century until they were cleared.

Today, at both you can see the farmhouses, byres, barns and circular corn drying kilns once commonplace in traditional farming communities. Skaill has been the focus of recent archaeological excavations, described on pages 12 and 13.

WEST

QUANDALE



Quandale is a remarkable landscape of ruined crofts, enclosures, run rig and prehistoric mounds.

The township was subject to the only large-scale clearance in Orkney during the mid-19th century (1845 and 1855-59) and became sheep grazing for Westness farm. As such, it has escaped modern development and so contains a wealth of sites and features of traditional farming communities and from a more ancient past. It contains, for instance, numerous Bronze Age burial mounds and burnt mounds.

The **Knowe of Dale** (15) is the largest burnt mound on Rousay, and is clearly visible from the road. Burnt mounds are usually crescent-shaped and contain a mass of accumulated burnt stones adjacent to a water trough. They were used for a variety of activities such as cooking, fulling and perhaps even as saunas.

Quandale also contains numerous ruined crofts with the large house of **Tafts** (16) in the centre. Tafts is thought to be the oldest two-storey dwelling house in Orkney (c. 15th century). The name *Tafts* (or *Tofts*) is relatively common in Orkney and derives from the Old Norse *Toft* meaning *abandoned house-site*. In Orkney the name Tafts is usually found associated with prehistoric remains.

Quandale provides a rare opportunity in Orkney to investigate pre-improvement landscapes and has been subject to recent survey and excavation work.

NORTH

WASBISTER

The district of Wasbister stands out archaeologically as a special religious landscape with four medieval church sites and a possible prayer-house located in and around the loch.

Facing northwards to Westray, the ecclesiastical nature of the district is unique in Orkney and the archaeological and historical evidence suggests this was a place of Christian worship from the early medieval period.

Dedications to St Bride or Bridget, St Peter, The Holy Cross, St Colm, indicate that Celtic, Scandinavian and Universal saints were venerated here and the placename *Benyiecot*, meaning *prayer-cot*, suggests there may once have been a religious community living here.

GREEN GAIRSTY (17)

As you drive up towards Kierfea Hill, see if you can spot a large bank which extends from the road, down a steep slope, to the cliff on the eastern side of the township. These large land boundaries are known as treb dykes and are thought to be prehistoric.

Orkney's best examples are found in North Ronaldsay, where the island is divided into three parts by large treb dykes.

WASBISTER LOCH (18)

This shallow loch contains a noticeable mounded peninsula and an islet. Both are traditionally known as chapel sites, of St Bride/Bridget and St Peter respectively.

An exploratory excavation on the Brettaness peninsula in the 1980s confirmed its artificial nature. Structures uncovered provided evidence of a lengthy occupation and use of the site. Iron Age buildings were superseded by Pictish houses and workshops, finds from which included small crucibles (indicating the production of metalwork) and an unusual kiln. A rectangular building, of which the base of only one wall survived, was built over part of the levelled settlement.

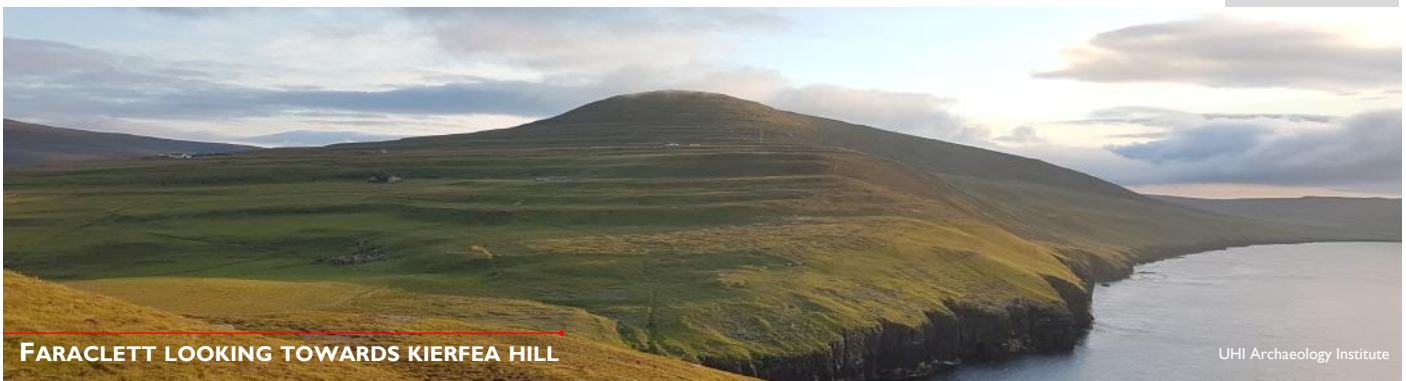
The islet, Burrian, is a crannog — small, artificial islands found in many of Scotland's lochs and inland waters. It has not been excavated, although Iron Age pottery and possible medieval glass have been recovered. A causeway to the crannog is now underwater after the loch levels were raised in the 19th century to power the now derelict mill at Saviskaill farm.

EAST

SOURIN

There is a high concentration of Neolithic sites in the eastern part of Rousay, in the Faraclett area. The settlement at **Rinyo** (19), on Bigland Farm, dates to the later Neolithic. It was discovered in 1837 and excavated in 1938 and 1946 by Vere Gordon Childe (who also excavated at Skara Brae) and by the landowner, Walter Grant.

Stone-built houses, with stone 'beds', alcoves and hearths, were excavated, along with other structures. The houses were similar to those at Skara Brae, but only a few courses of stone survived. Recent geophysical survey has shown that Rinyo is much more extensive than the small area excavated in the 20th century. The site is covered over and little can be seen today.



UHI Archaeology Institute

Parking at **Faraclett** and walking west along the signposted path, you pass two small cairns(20), which are the remains of Neolithic chambered tombs. Upright stones and walling are visible in the centre of one and both appear to have been investigated, although no record survives. Further down the slope are the Bigland Round and Bigland Long cairns.

Continuing around the headland back to Faraclett farm, you will see a large standing stone down to the left. The **Yetnasteen** (21), a seven-foot-high standing stone, is said to have once been a giant who, having been turned to stone by the rising sun, revives every New Year to go down to the Loch of Sockness to drink. Its name comes from the Old Norse *jotunna-steinn*, meaning *Giant Stone*.

A **sculpture** (22) by the 20th century Scottish artist Ian Hamilton Finlay (known as the 'concrete poet') entitled *Gods of the Earth, Gods of the Sea* can be found at the top of the Sourin Brae and the Leean, just off the road. You can park in the layby on the road and walk down a short path to the sculpture. The site has good views to the North Isles and on a clear day North Ronaldsay is visible.

RECENT ROUSAY FIELDWORK

Recent excavation and survey has focused on **Westness** and the **Westness estate**. Two sites have been selected in order to understand the remarkable 5,000 year history of this part of Rousay.

The coastally eroding site of Swandro includes the remains of a later prehistoric and Norse settlement. Skail farmstead consists of a Norse farm mound with a later farmstead built on top, taking the story right up to the clearances and the present day.

SWANDRO (II)

This site, by the Bay of Swandro, has been under investigation since 2010, when the full extent of coastal erosion affecting the archaeology was realised.

As a result, the University of Bradford and Swandro-Orkney Coastal Archaeology Trust have been in a race against time as the sea continues to erode the large mound.

On the eastern flank of the Knowe of Swandro are two Norse houses, investigated in the 1950s/60s and excavated in the 1970s.

The site consists of a large early- to mid-Iron Age roundhouse surrounded by houses dating from the Iron Age, Pictish and possibly Viking periods and enclosed by an early stone-lined ditch. There are strong indications that an even earlier structure, perhaps a Neolithic cairn, underlies the central roundhouse.

The central roundhouse (Structure 6) is monumental in structure, with a series of concentric walls built over several centuries and a once-impressive entrance passage. Radiocarbon dates indicate that this building was first constructed in the Early Iron Age, probably 2,800-2,400 years ago. There are indications that the building may have been constructed on something even earlier.



SWANDRO SMITHY



IRON AGE FLOOR AT SWANDRO

A series of buildings around the central roundhouse, such as Structure I, have been partially investigated and date mostly to the first century BC/ first century AD. A small pendant made from a seal's tooth was found close to this building.

There was also a slightly later stone-lined well associated with fragments of another building. The well, which is still filled by a freshwater spring, was accessed by steps and corbelled on three sides.

Geophysical investigations in 2019 showed that the entire early settlement had been

surrounded by a deep, stone-lined ditch, which was filled in, and built over, by the first century BC.

One of the buildings raised over the ditch was Structure 3, a small, semi-subterranean building which proved to be an Iron Age smithy. It contained a stone anvil set into the floor with the smith's handprints still visible on the surface.

Deposits suggest that both copper alloy working and blacksmithing took place inside and its layout and sophisticated design strongly suggests the smithy was purpose-built. When it went out of use the building was filled in and, eventually, the Norse hall of Westness built over its remains.

Around the time the smithy was in use, the centre of the large roundhouse was partitioned off and the landward side turned into a separate room. This room (Structure 5) has evidence for use through the 1st to 2nd centuries AD and was rich in finds, including Iron Age glass toggle beads, whale bone and antler weaving combs and two fragments of Roman glass bottles. These not only give a sense of the activities carried out here, but the trading connections with a much wider world.

This room also seems to have had walls partially covered with bright yellow clay, making it a much brighter and more colourful space than we perhaps imagine when thinking of the prehistoric period.

Another small building, Structure 2, was a roundhouse which was in use, rebuilt and modified over several centuries. Under a later flagged floor was a large stone tank made of dressed flagstones. A coin (nummus) of the Roman emperor Constans, dating to AD 348-350, was found beneath the flags showing the building was still in use in the 4th century AD or later.

There is more evidence of this late Roman/early medieval settlement inside the central roundhouse. Dates from hearths next to the central passageway suggest the building was still in use in the 6th century AD. At this time, however, its use may have changed as one of the 2022 finds was a small furnace in the west of this building, suggesting a more industrial function. Further investigation will hopefully reveal whether this was for copper alloy or glass production.

In the later phase of the site's life, outside the central roundhouse was what appears to be a Pictish agricultural building. Structure 4 had a stone-flagged floor and a hearth, which produced charred cereal grains. Archaeomagnetic dates suggest the building was in use some time between the 6th and 11th centuries AD.

A fragment of Pictish or Viking comb, a decorated fragment of a possible needle case and a Viking-type bone spindle whorl all come from this area and illustrate the continuity of this settlement into the Pictish and Viking periods.

There is increasing evidence that the end of the original settlement was deliberate. The central roundhouse appears to have been dismantled and perhaps robbed of stone. In the entrance were the bones of two cats and a coin of Eanred, King of Northumbria, dating from AD 810-840, which strongly suggests this demolition occurred in the Viking period and that the site was occupied and restructured at this point, leading eventually to the building of the Westness Norse houses.



SKAILL FARMSTEAD(13)



Investigations at Skail farmstead (13) have been undertaken by the UHI Archaeology Institute since 2015. Geophysical survey has revealed features below the present 18/19th century buildings that correspond to a number of earthworks, such as platforms and enclosures, which are visible on the ground surface. The present farmstead is on a low mound, suggesting that the ground has built up over numerous phases of activity.

In Orkney, the placename *Skail* means *hall* and is usually associated with high-status Norse estates. Westness is mentioned in *Orkneyinga Saga* as the home of Sigurd, a powerful chieftain, so it was always likely that a Norse settlement was located in the area. Test pits and trenches over the Skail settlement mound revealed deep deposits, middens and structures throughout.

On the western side of the site the remains of a Norse hall (c. 11th-12th century AD) were exposed to the west of present farmhouse. Substantial 1m wide stone walls were found, 5.5m apart, with internal features such as stone benches along either side. The building, which is oriented down the slope towards the sea, appears to be in excess of 13m long.



Finds have included steatite (soapstone from Shetland), pottery, a bone spindle whorl and a fragment of a Norse bone comb. Although only partly uncovered at this stage, the Skail hall has parallels with other excavated examples in Orkney and Scotland. You never know, but perhaps Earl Sigurd sat on one of the stone benches inside the Skail hall and drank a flagon of ale!

Recent seasons focused on the post-medieval farmstead beneath the eastern side of the surviving farmhouse, with substantial built remains, showing several construction phases, exposed.

Room 1, at the northern end, had been subdivided with an internal wall containing a vent, with a hearthstone for a square corn-drying kiln. To the south, Room 2 had been extended at least twice, with a series of additions abutting the southern end to create a single long room. The interior saw a significant build-up of floor levels throughout the building's history.



Early phases of the buried farmstead date to the Norse/medieval periods and indicate that there has been occupation since then. Finds included glazed and unglazed pottery (medieval and post-medieval), glass, mammal bone, fish bone, clay pipe, worked red sandstone, iron objects, a whale bone spindle whorl and a pair of spectacles!

In 2022, excavation of an infilled passage recovered a finely moulded, red sandstone fragment (stylistically 13th century), with similar decoration and dimensions to the finial section recovered nearby at **The Wirk** in the 1920s.

The crockets of both are comparable to a choir arcade cap in St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall. The recovery of this high-status architectural fragment from sealed contexts adds weight to the presence of medieval ecclesiastical buildings nearby.



EGILSAY



The island of Egilsay is 5 km by 2 km and is located to the east of Rousay. The island is largely farmland and is one of the few places in the UK where corncrakes still breed.

Egilsay has beautiful beaches and an RSPB reserve. Extremely unusual for the Northern Isles, it has been suggested that Egilsay may have a partly Gaelic name.

While, at first sight, it appears to be *Egil's island* – *Egil* being a Norse personal name – it is possible the first element derives from the Gaelic *eaglais* (Celtic *eccles*) meaning *church*. Along the

same lines, the island of Kili Holm just to the north, may represent *cille*, a *monastic cell*.

Egilsay has several archaeological sites, including a large Neolithic chambered tomb (Maeshowe-type) at the southern end of the island at **Onziebust** (23), burnt mounds, and a possible medieval harbour at The Hubbet. The most famous site is **St Magnus Kirk** (25).

ST MAGNUS KIRK (25)

The roofless remains of St Magnus Kirk stand on the western side of Egilsay and dominate the island.

Built in the second half of the 12th century, the church is made up of a rectangular nave and a square chancel with a round tower on the western end.

Despite the lack of a roof the remains are in good condition. The tower still stands 14.9m high, although it is thought it was once taller, perhaps by as much as 4.5m. The structure lost its roof sometime in the mid to late 19th century, with a sketch from the early 1800s showing a stone roof over the kirk's nave, chancel and tower.

It is thought the kirk was either built on the spot of an earlier church or on the site of Earl Magnus Erlendsson murder around 1117. A **monument to St Magnus** was erected nearby in the 20th century (26).



THE MAGNUS STORY

In the early 12th century, cousins Magnus Erlendsson and Hakon Paulsson ruled the Orkney and Caithness Earldoms. Both earls worked well together at the start of their reign, but this did not last through the interference of chieftains.

The quarrelling earls soon nearly came to blows and a confrontation was planned at Tingwall (Old Norse *thingvollr* – *assembly field*). This was averted and Egilsay was agreed as the place to make peace.

At Easter in 1116 or 1117, each agreed to bring two ships and the same number of men. A large wave struck Magnus's ship en-route to Egilsay – an omen that all was not well.

When Hakon arrived with eight ships, Magnus knew there would be no peace. Hakon found Magnus in hiding on Egilsay and brought him before local chieftains, who insisted that one of the earls had to die as they were tired of their disruptive joint rule.

Magnus stepped forward to accept his fate. Hakon ordered his standard bearer, Ofeig, to execute Magnus, but he refused. So Hakon turned to his cook, Lifolf, asking him to carry out the deed. Lifolf wept, but Magnus comforted him and forgave him for carrying out the order. Magnus requested not to be beheaded like a criminal, so Lifolf struck him hard on the head, splitting his skull in two.

Magnus was buried on the spot he died and was denied a Christian burial. *Orkneyinga Saga* tells that the rocky ground where he was buried turned into a green field.

Magnus' mother persuaded Hakon to allow a Christian burial for Magnus for her son. Magnus' remains were taken to Birsay and buried in Christ Church, built by his grandfather, Thorfinn Sigurdsson. The remains of a c. 11th century church have been found beneath the present St Magnus Kirk in the village of Palace).

Miracles occurred and the grave glowed with a bright light and sweet fragrance. Twenty years later, Magnus was proclaimed a saint and his remains were enshrined above the altar in Christ Church.

His relics were translated to Kirkwall and first housed in St Olaf's Church, before being translated in c. 1145 to St Magnus Cathedral, following its foundation in 1137.

WYRE

The island of Wyre is 3.5 km by 1.5 km and is the smallest inhabited island in Orkney.

Wyre has over 100 archaeological sites including a Neolithic settlement, Bronze Age burnt mounds, the enigmatic enclosures at Skermie Clett, and probably the oldest stone-built castle in Scotland, **Cubbie Roo's Castle**, with a nearby church. Wyre was the early childhood home of the poet **Edwin Muir**.

BRAES OF HA'BRECK NEOLITHIC SETTLEMENT (27)

Near the western end of the island, excavations by UHI Archaeology Institute in 2007-2013 revealed the remains of five early Neolithic rectangular buildings (stone built houses replacing two timber ones), middens, work areas and a domestic stone quarry.

Neolithic timber buildings are rare in Orkney. The site has been dated to c. 3300-3000 BC and the excavations resulted in finds including stone tools, round-based pottery, polished stone axes and one of the largest charred grain assemblages from a Neolithic context in Scotland.

It appears that the quarry provided the materials for building the stone houses. The quarry was deliberately filled after use and eventually capped with midden in the Bronze Age.

CUBBIE ROO'S CASTLE (28)



Mentioned in *Orkneyinga Saga*, this stronghold is one of Scotland's oldest stone-built castles.

It is believed to have been built in c. 1145 and takes its name from the chieftain Kolbein Hruga, who lived there.

In *Hakon's Saga*, it is mentioned that after the last Norse Earl of Orkney, Earl John, was murdered in Thurso in 1231, his killers fled to Wyre. They took refuge in the castle, which was so strong that the besiegers could not breach it.

An almost square stone keep with three walls 7.8m long and one 7.9m, with c 1.7m thick walls is defended on the outside by a series of ramparts, with a ditch, earthworks and stone wall.

In the 1930s, archaeological excavations found that the castle was in use for some time, and had at least five additional external building phases with extensions added to the main tower. The surviving castle walls are 2m high, with only the ground floor remaining.

The entrance to the keep was on the first floor as recorded by Wallace in 1688.

ST MARY'S CHAPEL (29)

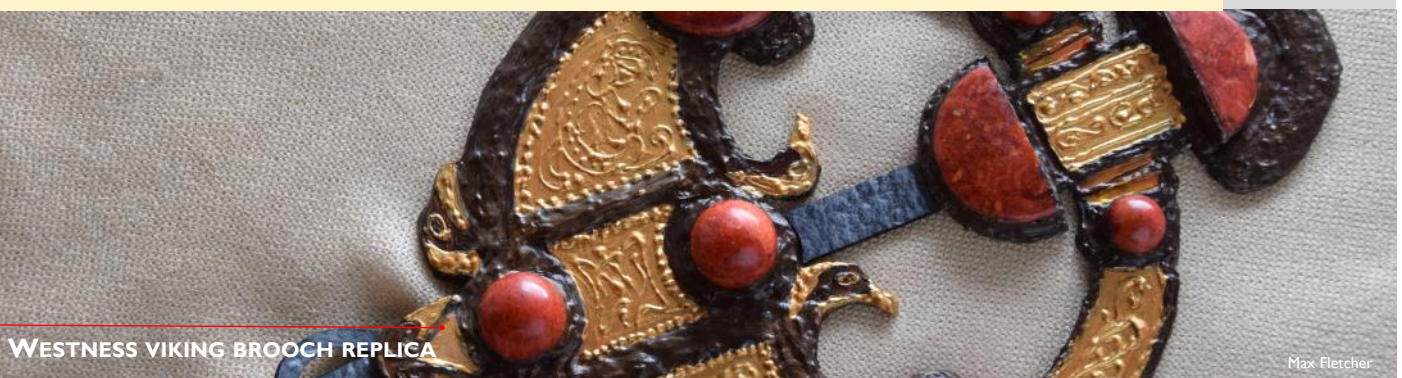
This small 12th century church is located just below the castle in a small valley. It is now roofless, but largely complete with Romanesque architecture.

The chapel was in a state of ruin by 1791, but partly restored in the late 19th century at the instruction of General Burroughs. The site was again cleared of debris in the 1930s. There is a walled burial ground surrounding the chapel.

This is a rare surviving example of a medieval church, the likes of which would have once been found in most Orkney townships. Its survival is probably due to its continued use as a chapel of ease for the people of Wyre, long after the parish churches were designated in the 12th century.

EDWIN MUIR (1887 - 1959)

The famous Orcadian poet, novelist and translator, was born on a farm in the Mainland parish of Deerness, but as a child lived on Wyre at Bu. In later life he looked back on this life in Orkney as 'a kind of idyll, innocent and free, a dream of Eden'



EYNHALLOW

Eynhallow lies between Rousay and the Mainland and is 1 km by 1 km. It is currently uninhabited after being abandoned in the mid-19th century.

The name means *Holy Island*, from the Old Norse *Eyin Helga*. Folklore tells of the island once being inhabited by the dark, shape-shifting sorcerers known as the Finfolk.

CHURCH (30)

At the island's centre are the ruins of a church, which may have formed part of an early Christian monastic settlement.

While we now know it served the spiritual needs of the island's early population, the building's original role was unknown for over 400 years. From the 16th century it was used as a dwelling by a number of the islanders.

Their structural additions, a complex of thatched roof cottages, masked the early structure, until, in 1851, disease and death among four families led to the island's evacuation.

This disease is traditionally said to have been typhoid, ascribed to the well, Kairikelda, which, it is claimed, lay below a midden which polluted the water supply.

Following the outbreak, and to make the buildings uninhabitable, the roofs were torn off. It was only then that it became clear that an ancient church lay beneath.

The church features two ornate Romanesque stone arches, nave and chancel. The west end has a square porch, which could be the remains of a square tower.

It is built from local stone, yet red sandstone pieces, similar to that used in St Magnus Cathedral and found at **The Wirk**, were found built into the arches and worked fragments lie inside of the kirk. It is thought these were uncovered during evacuation in the 19th century but it is possible that some were brought there in the early 20th century.



FURTHER READING

See <https://archaeologyorkney.com/booklet-links/>



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