





I first came to Orkney at the age of ten and have a particularly vivid memory of visiting Skara Brae – an incredibly intact Stone Age village overlooking the Bay of Skail on West Mainland. The winding passages, low doorways and open fireplaces sparked my imagination and marked the beginning of a life-long fascination with archaeology.

Having moved to Orkney more than 20 years ago, I now have the privilege of guiding visitors round a village that, together with the nearby tomb of Maeshowe and the two stone circles of the Ring of Brodgar and the Stones of Stenness, was designated as a World Heritage Site in 1999. Between them, the sites reveal aspects of domestic and ceremonial life of Neolithic people who lived here some 5,000 years ago. Even today, after so many visits, just standing among the original houses of Skara Brae or beside the stone circle megaliths of Brodgar and Stenness can be a humbling experience.

VILLAGE LIFE

Many people, even those with only a passing interest or knowledge of archaeology, have heard of Skara Brae. And it is for good reason. The best-preserved Stone Age village in northern Europe, Skara Brae was discovered when it was released from the dunes following a particularly violent storm in 1850.

The village consists of several houses, all still standing to their original height and containing stone furniture. There are beds, a dresser, fireplaces, quern stones for grinding corn and stone tanks sunk into the floor to provide an indoor water source.

The fireplaces, marked out with long stones, are huge by modern standards, but experimental archaeology has demonstrated

IN AN ARCHIPELAGO RENOWNED FOR ITS RICH ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE, THE COLLECTION OF STONE AGE SITES ON WEST MAINLAND ARE PERHAPS THE MOST REMARKABLE OF ALL, EXPLAINS LOCAL GUIDE LOUISE HOLLINRAKE

that the fire itself was probably quite small, with the whole enclosure serving more like an open plan kitchen. It is here that pebbles from the fire would have been used to heat up pots of milk and water to make curd cheese or cook eggs.

Skara Brae was occupied from 3100 BC to around 2500 BC, and saw two distinct periods of building. Running below each house is a system of well-made drains, which rather scotch the myth that it was the Romans – who arrived 3,000 years later – who first brought drainage to Britain. In each of the second phase houses there is a cell in the wall placed over the drains – a kind of Neolithic en-suite.

A replica house built alongside the village helps provide a feel for what it might have been like to live at Skara Brae. Like all the houses in the village, it has a three-pillared 'dresser' opposite the door. We don't know for sure what the dresser was used for but, in the replica, the dresser has food items laid on it, as well as hollowed-out stone lamps that used seal oil for fuel. The walls themselves have recessed 'cupboards' where the lamps may have been placed.

Much of the food available to villagers included items we consider delicacies today, such as oysters and lobster. They also ate various fresh and saltwater fish, beef, lamb, wild birds and their eggs, plus milk from their cows. There were deer in the sparse woodland nearby, while the surrounding coast was home to plenty of seals that were hunted for their meat, skins and oil for lamps. Hazelnuts and a few berries added variety to the diet, while various seaweeds also had their uses: one species, *laminaria saccharina*, provided sweetness.

Items found within the houses suggest **D**

Living landscape

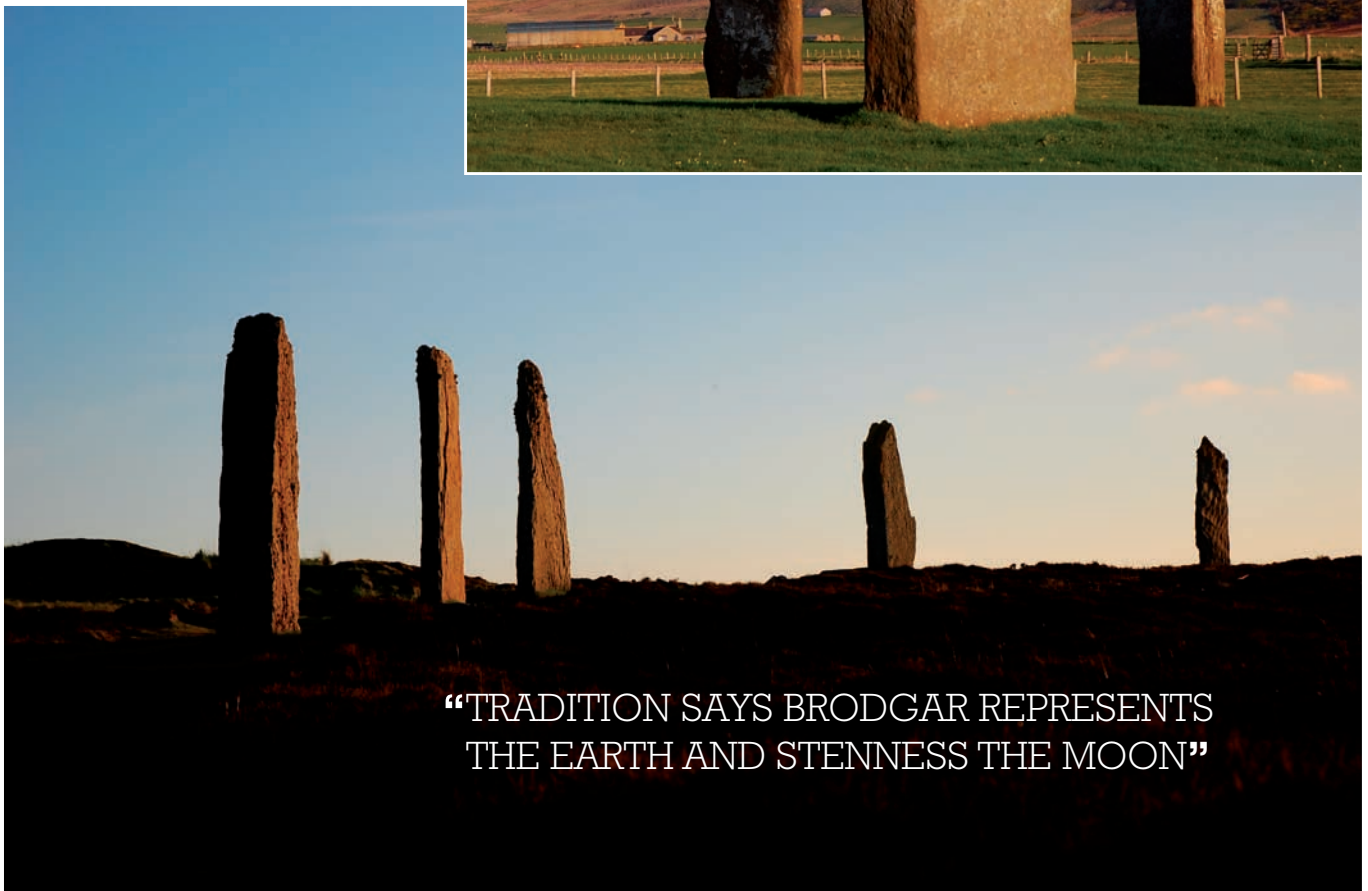


Time travelling: the chambered cairn of Maeshowe (opposite); exploring Skara Brae (above)

Da diverse and civilised life. In addition to tools such as stone scrapers and hammers, bone pins and needles, there are gaming dice, a bone whistle and polished beads and pendants. There are also some intricately carved stone balls, although their purpose remains unknown. What is clear is that these were people who had time and energy for leisure activities, rather than having to spend every waking hour scratching a living.

SET IN STONE

Near the centre of West Mainland, just a mile apart, are the Stones of Stenness and the Ring of Brodgar. The setting is almost as impressive as the circles themselves, with the sites sitting either end of a strip of land between two lochs and with views over to distant Hoy. There was once a third stone circle nearby, the Ring of Bookan, but that has long disappeared, with the useful stones probably



“TRADITION SAYS BRODGAR REPRESENTS THE EARTH AND STENNESS THE MOON”

being used in nearby farm buildings and the land ploughed over.

We still don't know what purpose the circles served despite generations of studies and great advances in diagnostic techniques. There have, of course, been plenty of theories down the ages: tradition says Brodgar represents the Earth and Stenness the Moon. Some say Brodgar is life and Stenness is death.

What we do know is that Stenness has five stones standing from an original 12, while Brodgar has 27 out of 60 originals. However, not all the stones have stood the test of time, with several being reinstated in 1906. Some of the original stones were cast down in the Reformation by clergy who worried that their parishioners still believed in pagan gods and

Standing tall: the Stones of Stenness (above, top); the Ring of Brodgar at dusk

worshipped at the circles. Brodgar suffered further violence in the Second World War when the ditch and bank of the henge was used for tank practice.

Stenness has a central hearth with a large post-hole for a totem pole, and possibly some sort of structure within the circle, so it is thought that ceremonies took place here.

At Brodgar, meanwhile, it is amazing how little excavation has been carried out. In the 1970s, archaeologists dug two small trenches across the surrounding ditch which demonstrated that it had been cut into bedrock – no mean feat with just stone and bone

tools. However, the ditch itself was remarkably empty of artefacts, with no tools, unnatural debris or much datable material. Although they couldn't agree entirely, the archaeologists dated the site back to between the early and late third millennium BC.

In 2008, the Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology (ORCA) re-opened the trenches and widened them slightly. The work revealed something beautiful: shining bedrock that had been expertly chiselled into a narrow but deep ditch. It became obvious that none of the megaliths in the circle could have been cut out of this ditch, a previous theory.

Meanwhile, World Heritage status has led to excavation being carried out each summer on the Ness of Brodgar, the area of land **D**

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D between the Ring and Stenness. This work has unearthed the remains of a grand rectangular Neolithic building, which the lead archaeologist from ORCA believes may be the true focus of the area, with the stone circles merely side shows.

PRECISION ENGINEERING

Just a few minutes' walk from the Stones of Stenness is Maeshowe – a chambered cairn that is perhaps the most impressive monument of all. From the outside, it looks simple enough: just a grassy hillock, surrounded by farmland. But there is something extraordinary inside. A low doorway provides access to a 15-metre long passage that leads to a central chamber that is generally considered to be a tomb. However, with few bones having been found, the thinking that it was a tomb may be only part of the story.

What makes Maeshowe so famous is the sheer precision of its masonry – qualities that see it regarded as one of the finest pieces of Neolithic architecture in Western Europe. The entrance faces the sunset at the Winter Solstice, so when the sun shines down the passage, the interior lights up with a golden glow.

The original stonework also speaks of incredible skill and endeavour. The sides of the passage are lined by two pieces of one enormous stone – estimated to have weighed thirty tonnes – while a recess houses a pivoting one-tonne block that closes the entrance. Once closed it leaves a 'light box' – a small space above it similar to that found at Newgrange, another superb Neolithic tomb in Ireland. Inside, the walls hold three further chambers, each with a roof formed by a single huge slab of sandstone.

The monument's fame and importance extends to events that took place here much closer to the present day. During the 12th



Hidden depths: Maeshowe looks non-descript from the outside (above), but a long entrance passageway leads to an incredible inner chamber (below left)

century, Norsemen broke in through the roof of the main chamber, leaving runic inscriptions, or Norse graffiti, all over the walls. Some

of the inscriptions hint at great treasure having been found within, although it was unlikely to have been gold or silver – what would have been considered true treasure to Vikings. Instead, it could just have been a tantalising joke for others to read.

The runes are considered among the very best outside Scandinavia with one modest scribe writing: "This was made by the best rune-carver in the western ocean". Another tells us: "Ingeborg is the fairest of women".

Superlatives abound for these Neolithic sites, though they often present more questions than answers. Collectively they demonstrate that the people living in Skara Brae belonged to a society that was both organised and cohesive.

The houses all have the same lay-out, displaying a conformity that suggests the Neolithic equivalent of surveyors, planners and project managers as well as builders.

They certainly knew how to do things with stone – and megalithic stone at that. Circles could only have been built by many people working together; if resources were being drained by war such work would not have been feasible, so the implication is that theirs was a peaceful time.

What is perhaps most obvious is that these were a people who were a lot more civilised than we might have imagined, with their story adding further colour to an island landscape that is rarely short of extraordinary. ■

Louise Hollinrake and her husband Paul run Orkney Island Holidays, offering small group holidays and tours with a particular focus on the wildlife, ecology, archaeology and cultural history of Orkney and Shetland. www.orkneyislandholidays.com



Ancient treasures

Literally hundreds of archaeological sites have been identified in Orkney, with many open to the public. A trip to some of the outer isles will reveal sites that would also be given World Heritage status had they been on Mainland Orkney. Here are three that are well worth a visit:

MIDHOWE CAIRN, ROUSAY (TOP)
A large-scale stalled or gallery cairn, with the atmosphere of a cathedral.

KNAP OF HOWAR, PAPAY (MIDDLE)
At 5,800 years old, this is the oldest standing dwellinghouse in Western Europe.

QUOYNESS, SANDAY (BOTTOM)
A Maeshowe-type chambered cairn that provides a more intimate experience without the crowds.

FURTHER READING
Between the Wind and the Water: World Heritage Orkney, Caroline Wickham-Jones

Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology www.orca.uhi.ac.uk

