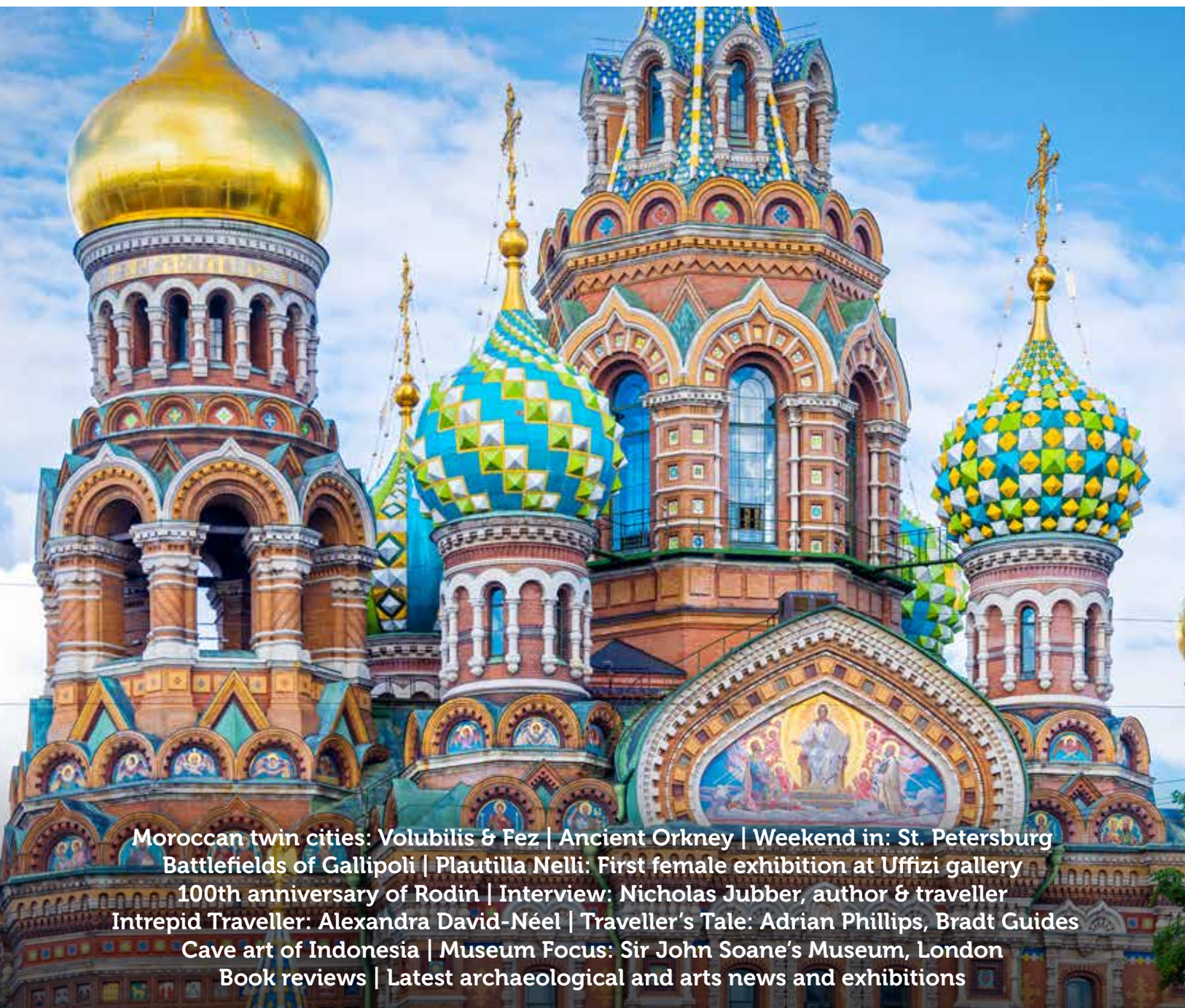


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ANCIENT ORKNEY

CENTRE OF THE NEOLITHIC WORLD

Ancient standing stones, mysterious burial mounds, and a visit to a well-preserved Stone Age village. **Garry Shaw** explores daily life, ritual, and death at the Neolithic sites of Orkney

At first there's darkness. Then, the sound of crumbling. Now a ray of light shines down from above. Ah, we're looking at the ceiling, but what's going on? The hole widens. There's more light. Snowflakes fall towards the floor. Then, in drops a Viking, followed by a group of his companions. Shivering from the snowstorm raging outside, they use their flaming torches to investigate their new surroundings: an ancient tomb. With shadows shimmering, they discover that the chamber is square, formed of layers of carefully placed stones. As the walls rise, just above head-height, the space between them begins to narrow until only a small gap separates them, like looking up inside a hollow pyramid. Three smaller chambers lead off to the sides, and a long squat corridor disappears ahead, still blocked at its entrance. Outside, in the snow, a grass-covered earthen mound covers the tomb. Footprints lead to its peak. The storm rages on. The Vikings resign themselves to being here for some time.

This tomb is today known as Maeshowe. It was built in around 2800 BC and is one of many Neolithic monuments on the Orkney Islands, just off the northern coast of Scotland. Indeed, this collection of around seventy islands has one of the highest concentrations of well-preserved Neolithic monuments anywhere in Europe; tombs, settlements, and ceremonial sites that have intrigued people for thousands of years, from the Neolithic population's Bronze Age successors, through to the Norse Vikings who ruled the islands from the 9th to the 14th century, and into the modern day. The escapades of the Vikings that broke into Maeshowe (known to them as Orkahaugr) in January 1153 was even recorded in the Orkneyinga Saga, written in the thirteenth century. According to the saga, among the group was Earl Harald Maddadarson, co-ruler of Orkney from 1139, and two men that went insane within Maeshowe (though we don't know why).

With time to kill, Harald's warriors (and those that visited the tomb afterwards, including Viking crusaders) all felt the urge to carve graffiti into Maeshowe's walls, recording their presence for eternity. These runes provide snapshots into

the men's minds – many are about women and sex. A number simply record who carved the runes, sometimes with a bit of extra detail: one Thorhallr Asgrimsson, from Iceland, for example, mentions that he carved his runes with an axe once owned by Gaukr Trandillsson, a man killed by Thorhall's ancestor Asgrim Ellida-Grimsson 200 years earlier (an event mentioned in the Njals Saga). Intriguingly, other runes mention that treasure once filled the tomb, though it probably belonged to an earlier Viking, rather than its original Neolithic inhabitants, who remain almost completely unknown to us. Still, although we know next to nothing about those once buried at Maeshowe, their Neolithic contemporaries have left plenty of evidence of their existence elsewhere on the islands.

Ceremonial Life: The Standing Stones of Stenness and the Ring of Brodgar

My first stop after arriving on Orkney's Mainland (the main island) was the Standing Stones of Stenness. Just as elsewhere in Europe, stone circles were a key ceremonial feature of Orkney's Neolithic society; and just as elsewhere, myths and legends have grown up around them. Though now destroyed, the Odin Stone, near Stenness, was believed to cure illnesses, while on certain days, some of Orkney's standing stones were thought to visit nearby lochs for a drink of water. On the day of my visit, even a lumbering ancient stone might have found it difficult to go for a quick drink: the famous Orkney wind was whipping around, rattling my ears and causing the grass to shift, as if thousands of invisible snakes were slithering along. The waters of the nearby lochs of Stenness and Harray flowed fast. Despite the weather, white and brown sheep grazed unfazed in the distance; they'd seen it all before.

The standing stones are part of the UNESCO inscribed 'Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site' – four ancient sites that together form one of the best preserved Neolithic environments in the world. As I approached, the stones grew larger in the middle of the field, like jagged, thin shards of glass dropped from the sky. Erected sometime between 3100 and 2900 BC,

Previous pages: The Ring of Brodgar. (Image: © Garry Shaw)

Right, top: Kirkwall, Orkney's largest town and capital (Image: John Braid)

Right, bottom: The Standing Stones of Stenness

Inset: Maeshowe Chambered Cairn (Images: © Garry Shaw)



“The Ring of Brodgar was more ominous than the Stones of Stenness. For one, the circle is larger – one of the largest in the UK – with thirty-six of the once sixty stones still surviving – quite astonishing given that they were dragged here from across Orkney around 4,000 years ago”

originally twelve stones stood in an oval, but today only four remain (the location of each missing stone is marked on the ground). Pebbles filled the stone outline of a hearth at the centre of the oval – as hearths also stood at the centre of contemporary houses, it was perhaps a place where communities once gathered to eat (food remains have been found archaeologically) and perform rituals. A large ditch once surrounded the stones too; though this can no longer be seen, it originally had a single entrance point, controlling access to the sacred area.

A couple of minutes’ drive away from the Stones of Stenness was the Ring of Brodgar, a later stone circle that sounds like something from Lord of the Rings. From the car park, a wooden deck snaked its way through a marsh to the ring itself. A yellow sign, flapping backwards and forwards in the

wind, warned ‘Caution: Electric Fence’ and bore an image of a hand and ‘zaps.’ The fence followed the path, adding an unnecessary sense of danger to proceedings. Unlike at Stenness, the ditch surrounding the Ring of Brodgar was still present, making it appear as if the stones were standing on a platform with two access points. I entered the sacred zone, and walked among the stones.

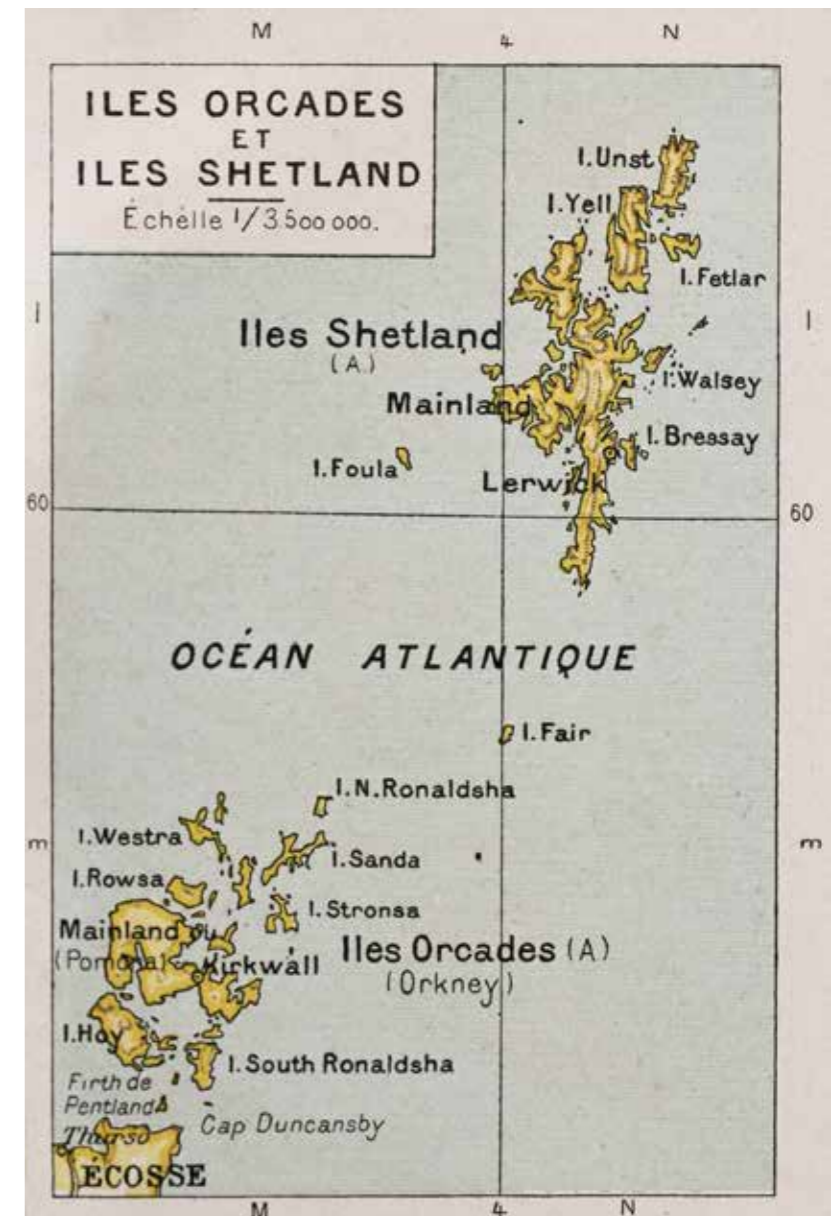
In its natural theatre surrounded by water and hills, the Ring of Brodgar was more ominous than the Stones of Stenness. For one, the circle is larger – one of the largest in the UK – with thirty-six of the once sixty stones still surviving – quite astonishing given that they were dragged here from across Orkney around 4,000 years ago. Because of their number, it feels as if they’re holding a meeting or an investigation, silently staring towards the centre, waiting for some invisible

interrogee to crack under the weight of their glares. Some stones were split, like planks of wood, and most had patches of bright green moss. One stone lay on its side, beside a sign explaining that it had been struck by lightning in 1980 – an act of Thor, 1,000 years too late to impress Orkney’s Norse settlers. Just like the Stones of Stenness, no one can say for sure how the circle was originally used, but it must have had a ritual purpose.

Meeting the Dead: Unstan Cairn and the Tomb of the Eagles

After gaining a sense of Orkney’s ancient ritual environment, I wanted to understand a bit more about the Neolithic attitude towards death. Among the many tombs that dot the Orkney Islands is Unstan Cairn on Mainland, built around 4,500 years ago. Rather than being a major tourist attraction, with its own visitor centre and glossy guide book – as you’d expect from such a site anywhere else in the UK – this small grassy mound lies behind a cottage, effectively making it the backdrop to someone’s house. As I approached, rather than being observed by a site attendant, I was welcomed by horses (who didn’t even attempt to get me to sign up as a member of their heritage organisation).

To enter Unstan Cairn, I almost had to crawl along its low entrance passage. Within, I found myself in a long, rectangular chamber, with a modern roof and pebble floor. Many of the stones inside were covered with green moss, adding some colour to the grey. There was also a great deal of graffiti, some of it Victorian, some more recent (clearly, the Vikings had started a trend). Compared to Maeshowe – the most elaborate of Orkney’s tombs – Unstan Cairn is much smaller in scale, and has a different interior arrangement: in the long space within, it has been divided into five ‘stalls.’ When excavated, as well as containing a great many pottery vessels (of a type now referred to as ‘Unstan ware’), human bones were found in each of the stalls, and two full skeletons were crouched in a small side chamber. According to a panel outside, it is thought that bodies were first deposited in the side chamber, and then at a later stage, their bones were moved to the other



stalls. I stood in one of the stalls and stared ahead, picturing it still filled with human remains. To the ancient people, it was probably seen as a place of transition: the low entrance separated the living from the dead, and the stalls and side chamber within separated the flesh-covered body from the bones of the ancestors. At each stage, the deceased slowly transformed from a living member of the community to a relic among the ancestors.

Another of Orkney’s famous tombs is the Tomb of the Eagles, built around 3150 BC, also known as Isbister Chambered Cairn; this is on South Ronaldsay, one of the Orkney Islands now connected to Mainland by bridge via the island of Burray. A farmer discovered the ancient tomb on his land in 1958, and later decided to excavate the site. A friendly, energetic visitor centre (still family-run) now houses items excavated from the

Below: Ring of Brodgar in dramatic evening light and cloudscape (Image: John Wood)



Above: Orkney and Shetland islands old map. By Paul Vidal de Lablache, Atlas Classique, Librairie Colin, Paris, 1894 (first edition)



tomb and from a nearby Iron Age Burnt Mound, also discovered on the farmer's land. Among the artefacts on display are skeletal remains, selected from the bones of around 340 people found scattered throughout the tomb. During a tour, I was shown the skull of one woman, who died sometime between the age of 35 and 45, by which time she'd developed abscesses in her mouth and worn teeth; the label gave her name as 'Granny' (with the average age of death at the time being 28, she was old for her time). There was also the skull of a girl – labelled 'Charlie Girl' – who had a depression in her skull, and one of a man, given the name 'Jock Tamson,' who died around age 27. The tomb became known as 'The Tomb of the Eagles' because 70 talons of white-tailed sea eagles were found among the human bones; it's possible that the sea eagle represented a form of local totem. It makes you wonder, did each of the island communities have their own totem?

After leaving the visitor centre, I followed a cliff top path, overlooking the sea, towards the Tomb of the Eagles, passing at one point an ominous signpost warning, 'Danger Rabbit Holes'. I imagined myself falling to my doom – the undermined ground collapsing beneath my feet, a slow motion plunge towards the rocks and sea below, a cute and startled bunny falling at my side. Or perhaps I'd misunderstood, and the local bunnies are armed, popping up unexpectedly to take pot shots at unsuspecting tourists. Whatever the case, I made sure to stay away from the cliff edge. A short distance later, I arrived at the tomb itself. It overlooked the cliff and the water beyond – a dramatic setting – and unlike at Unstan, here there was an attempt to make the visit as comfortable as possible. For a start, there's a red trolley to help you scoot along the cramped entrance passage, saving you from having to crawl.

And so, like many before me (and no doubt in a similar posture to how many of the Neolithic bodies entered the cairn), I lay on my back on the tomb trolley, and pulled myself inside using a rope attached to the passage's ceiling. Within, the interior was similar to Unstan: a long chamber, subdivided, where the bones of the deceased were once placed; again, it was probably the case that

full skeletons were put in one part, and bones scattered in others. Unlike at Unstan, however, here you can borrow kneepads, so you don't get dirty when exploring, and torches let you peer into the side chambers – it is these nice touches, along with the lovely visitor centre and the tomb's dramatic setting, that make visiting the site definitely worth the risk of becoming that one person on the government's mortality statistics under 'Cause of Death: Rabbit.'

The Village of Skara Brae

But what about the living? How did the Neolithic communities of Orkney spend their days? To learn more, it was time for me to visit one of Orkney's most famous sites: Skara Brae – 'Europe's best preserved Stone Age village,' a sign in the car park cheerfully told me (another car park sign said that it was the best preserved Neolithic village in northern Europe – the car park signs need to get their facts straight!). The site was revealed to the world during a storm in 1850, when the top of some grassy sand dunes was blown away (though it wasn't excavated until 1928). This was an amazing (and lucky) find, for not only were the houses themselves in a great state of preservation, the stone furniture inside was also still standing.

Given Skara Brae's worldwide fame, it's no surprise that the site boasts a modern visitor centre, featuring a short video about the village's history and a room filled with artefacts uncovered during excavations, including pins, pendants, beads, pots, stones, and knives. Providing context, panels explain that the village was in use for about 600 years, from roughly 3100 to 2500 BC, and was occupied by early farmers, who had perhaps travelled to Orkney from Caithness, on the northern tip of the Scottish mainland, based on the similarity of their burial customs. Among information about the villagers' work, leisure, diet, trade, and the materials and technology available to them, there are also mysterious stone objects on display, each carefully carved, which might reflect an aspect of religious life. Intriguingly, the exhibition also presents information in two separate ways: facts are presented in normal type and guesses in italics – a novel approach. There's



also information on why life at the village ended (the short answer: we don't know).

After leaving the visitor centre, my first experience of life in the Neolithic age was a reconstruction of one of the village's houses – a particularly helpful immersive experience, as, on site, visitors are no longer allowed to wander through the ancient houses, but can only peer down into them from above. While Orkney's strong winds whistled outside, I entered a reconstructed covered 'street' – Skara Brae's houses were linked by such streets, protecting the population from the elements – and was immediately struck by the height and narrowness of the door that led into the house's single room, a door that could be 'locked' from the inside with a bar of whalebone or wood. The room was surprisingly compact, with a hearth at its centre and the surrounding space, along the walls, occupied by stone beds lined with furs. There was also a 'dresser' – basically a display cabinet. (Yes, even in Neolithic times people liked to display random objects, just like those porcelain thingamajigs gathering dust on the shelves at your parents' house). A fish, a crab, a lobster, and assorted shells and stones took pride of place on

Left, top: The Tomb of the Eagles

Left, middle: The tomb trolley that helps people enter the Tomb of the Eagles

Left, bottom: Inside the Tomb of the Eagles.

Above: Staring out of Unstan Cairn (All images: © Garry Shaw)



“Walking above Skara Brae, and looking into the ancient homes, I was astounded by how well preserved each one appeared – if the roofs had still been intact, it would have felt like the villagers had just nipped out and could be back at any minute, probably angry that I was snooping around”



Left, top: The Neolithic houses at Skara Brae (Image: © Garry Shaw)

Left: Looking down into one of the Neolithic houses at Skara Brae (Image: © Garry Shaw)

Above: A Neolithic home complete with stone dresser (Image: ABB photo)



top. Next to the dresser was a water-filled pit, for keeping lobsters and crabs fresh. The space seemed so small, I wondered if most of Skara Brae's population spent their lives outside.

Next, I followed a path towards the coast and the site itself. It was lined with signs, laid on the floor, each presenting a key moment in history as the years rolled backwards from the present to the Neolithic. Slowly the village neared, rising as a series of low hills; they were bright green, like the natural environment of the Teletubbies before they went extinct. Each house had been built within a mound of 'midden' – a nice word that basically means a pile of domestic waste, brought to the site by the Neolithic settlers specifically to create the village. Such waste, once de-stinked with time, provided good insulation and support for the houses' stone walls.

Walking above Skara Brae, and looking into the ancient homes, I was astounded by how well preserved each one appeared – if the roofs had still been intact, it would have felt like the villagers had just nipped out and could be back at any minute, probably angry that I was snooping around. The beds, hearths, water pits, and 'dressers' could have been abandoned yesterday. Intriguingly, due to the similarity between the houses, there seems to be little evidence for social stratification; the only unusual house in the village, lacking the standard features of the others (beds, hearth, dresser etc.), is

thought to have been a workshop.

As I peered down, I started chatting with a member of the Historic Scotland staff, who was there to provide information to visitors. Skara Brae is one of the busiest Historic Scotland sites, he told me, adding that this was impressive, given that 'getting here is somewhat less easy than the others.' He's right, Orkney does have the reputation of being difficult to reach. Of being a remote place. But is this really true? As well as regular ferry and plane connections throughout the year, the islands are becoming increasingly popular in the summer months with cruise ships, which bring thousands of people to view the islands' beautiful environment and historic sites. And as we've already seen, Orkney has attracted people from all directions for millennia: from the Neolithic settlers of Skara Brae to the Norse Vikings who visited Maeshowe thousands of years later, people who are now themselves woven into the islands' long history. Indeed, if you place Orkney at the centre of your map, it's the perfect meeting point for people travelling from Iceland, Norway, and Scotland – a melting pot, where, across time, different cultures thrived and traditions fused, leaving their mark on its population and landscape to this day. ●

Garry Shaw travelled as a guest of the Orkney Marketing Scheme. For more information about Orkney, visit: www.visitorkney.com

Getting there

Flying

Orkney's Kirkwall airport is connected to Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Inverness, and Sumburgh, with flights operated by Flybe/ Loganair. By sea, ferries travel from Aberdeen, Scrabster, Gills Bay, and John O'Groats to Orkney.

Getting around

Buses and ferries make it easy to get around Orkney. Car hire is also available. Loganair offers flights between Kirkwall and the islands of Westray, Papa Westray, North Ronaldsay, Sanday, Stronsay, and Eday.

Money

Currency: The currency in the UK is the English pound where £1 is made up of 100 pence. Notes include 5, 10, 20, 50 and 100.

Credit Cards: Are accepted in almost all hotels, restaurants and shops.

Traveller's cheques: Are exchangeable in all UK banks.

Short History

Orkney has a long history, starting in the Mesolithic Age, when hunter-gatherers lived on the islands. The Neolithic settlers, who arrived later (seemingly from Caithness), remain mysterious, but are well known archaeologically due to their stone circles, villages, and tombs. During the Iron Age, the people of Orkney constructed stone roundhouses, and then larger round dwellings known as *brochs*, which can still be visited today, and later, around the fourth century AD, Orkney became part of Pictish territory, a Celtic culture that had arisen in northern Scotland.

From the ninth century, Orkney increasingly fell under the control of Norse Vikings, who built settlements

The Essentials

Time difference: GMT + 0

Language: English

Electrical current/ plugs: Electrical current is 230 volts; 50Hz. Three-pin plugs are used in the UK.

Water: Tap water is safe to drink in the UK.

Politics: The UK is a democracy governed within a framework of a constitutional monarchy, in which the Queen is the head of state and the Prime Minister is head of government.

Religion: According to the 2011 UK census, Christianity is the major religion, followed by Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism and Buddhism. This, and the relatively large number of individuals with nominal or no religious affiliations, has led commentators to variously describe the United Kingdom as a multi-faith, secularised, or post-Christian society.

Weather

Temperatures in Kirkwall range from around 16°C during the summer to around 2°C in winter. The famous Orkney wind is present throughout the year, and November is the wettest month.

and used the islands as launch pads for raids further south. Perhaps the most impressive monument from the Norse period of rule is St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall, built in 1137 under Earl Rognvald. The remains of a Norse settlement can still be seen on the Brough of Birsay, an island off Mainland that can only be visited at low tide, when a walkway becomes accessible.

By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Orkney's ties with Scotland had strengthened – in the fourteenth century, for example, though still technically owned by the King of Norway, Orkney was ruled by the Sinclairs of Roslin. Orkney officially became a Scottish earldom in the fifteenth century. Artefacts from across Orkney's long history can today be viewed in The Orkney Museum, Kirkwall.

Must-see sites

The UNESCO listed 'Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site' consists of four well-preserved Neolithic sites on Mainland, each in use roughly 5,000 years ago and now protected by Historic Scotland.

- **Skara Brae** – Opening times vary across the year: from 1st April to 30th September, the site is open Monday to Sunday, 9.30am to 5.30pm. Then, from 1st October to 31st March, it is open Monday to Sunday, 10am to 4pm. An adult ticket to see Skara Brae (not including Skaill House) costs £6.10.
- **Maeshowe Chambered Cairn** – At the time of writing, Maeshowe can only be visited by guided tour; these depart from Skara Brae at 10am, 12pm, and 2pm. Adult tickets cost £5.50 and can only be bought at Skara Brae on the day of the tour.
- **The Standing Stones of Stenness** – Open all year, free entry.
- **The Ring of Brodgar** – Open all year, free entry. Unstan Chambered Cairn, on Mainland, is also maintained by Historic Scotland. It is open all year, and entry is free.

The Tomb of the Eagles can be found on the island of South Ronaldsay. Opening times vary across the year: in March, it is open from 10am to 12pm; from April to September, 9.30am to 5.30pm; in October, 9.30am to 12.30pm; and it is only open by arrangement from November to February. In 2016, an adult ticket cost £7.50.

Shopping

Of the many high-quality craft goods that can be purchased on Orkney, perhaps the most unique are Orkney chairs, which have woven straw hoods and are still handmade. There's also a good selection of locally produced beers, including those brewed at The Orkney Brewery, set within an old school house (try their taster selection for an overview of the beers on offer). For those who like harder stuff, Orkney also has two Scotch whisky distilleries – Highland Park Distillery and Scapa.

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