the ORKNEY guide book

by

Charles Tait

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The Orkney Guide Book
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This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother,
Allison Leonard Tait (1925-1954)
as well as to my family, Sandra, Magnus, Thorfinn and Kika,
without whose support this book would not have been done

Front Cover: Ring of Brodgar
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WELCOME TO ORKNEY

How to Use this Guide
This book is designed to help the visitor find his or her way around Orkney. The detailed introduction covers many aspects of natural history, archaeology, history and culture of the area and is followed by a gazetteer which travels round describing each island and parish in turn.

Orkney Countryside Code
We are justly proud of our historic sites, wildlife and environment. Please help ensure that future visitors may enjoy them as much as you by observing these guidelines:
1. Always use stiles and gates, and close gates after you.
2. Always ask permission before entering agricultural land.
3. Keep to paths and take care to avoid fields of grass and crops.
4. Do not disturb livestock. Cows with calves are dangerous!
5. Take your litter away with you by observing these guidelines:
6. Do not pollute water courses or endanger others.
7. Never disturb nesting birds.
8. Do not pick wild flowers or dig up plants.
9. Drive and park with due care and attention - do not obstruct or endanger others.
10. Always take care near cliffs - particularly with children and pets.
11. Walkers should take adequate clothes, wear suitable footwear and tell someone of their plans.
12. Above all please respect the life of the countryside - leave only footprints, take only photographs.

Orkney Countryside Code
Maps of Orkney
A good range of maps covering Orkney is available. The most generally useful maps for the visitor are the following:
Orkney and Shetland Islands - (1:128,000) available from the Tourist Board. This map shows the main sites of interest, and has much information of interest to the visitor. It is not really detailed enough for walkers, or for those wishing more detailed information, but it is fine for getting an idea of the lie of the land and where to go.
Ordnance Survey Landranger Series (1:50,000) - sheets 5 Orkney North Isles, 6 Orkney Mainland and 7 Orkney South Isles cover the area, and are essential to the serious visitor.
Ordnance Survey Explorer Series (1:25,000) - sheets 461-465 cover the islands in more detail and apart from being very interesting, are very useful to the walker or those wishing to investigate one particular parish or island in depth.
Ordnance Survey map references are given for many locations mentioned in the text. These are in brackets and are six figures, preceded by HY or ND, of the form (HY123456).
Admiralty Charts covering the area include the following: 2249 Mainland and North Isles (West); 2250 Mainland and North Isles (East); 2162 Pentland Firth. Other more detailed charts are also available, see the Home Waters Catalogue ref NP109 available from the Hydrographic Office, Taunton.

Welcome to Orkney
The Main Monuments
A Tour of the Islands

Natural History
Geology, Climate & Habitats
Birds
Flora
Seashore
Fauna

Archaeology, History & Culture
Orkadian Chronology
Neolithic Age - from 5500BC
Bronze Age - from 2000BC
Iron Age - from 700BC
Picts - until 8th century
Vikings - 8th to 10th centuries
Placenames
Udal Law
Folklore
Scottish Connection - 14th to 16th c.
Modern Times - 17th to 20th c.
Scapa Flow
Highland Park Distillery
Fishermen with Ploughs
Activities
Events & Festivals

Gazetteer - Mainland
Kirkwall & St Ola
St Magnus Cathedral
Kirkwall Ba’ Game
West Mainland
Orphir
Stenness
Stromness
Sandwick
Birsay
Evie
Rendall
Harray
Firth

Gazetteer - South Isles
Graemsay
Birsay
Sandwick
Stenness
Kirkwall & St Ola

Gazetteer - North Isles
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Map of Orkney
This guide is designed to help visitors to our islands, as well as residents, find their way around and enjoy the many places of interest which are to be seen and experienced. Apart from the main sites, many of the less-frequented places and islands are described. It is hoped that folk will find the same pleasure as the author in discovering Orkney, as we have some of the best archaeological sites and bird-watching opportunities in Europe and so much else to see and do that you will certainly want to come back for another visit!

After the rugged Highland scenery of the North of Scotland, first impressions of Orkney are of greenness and fertility, combined with a feeling of space, where undulating, soft countryside merges with sky and sea into a soft confluence of nature. There is an overall feeling of the immensity of time, perhaps due to the proximity of so much history. Indeed, the Orkney Islands were described by our local author, George Mackay Brown, as being "like sleeping whales...beside an ocean of time".

Although people first came here well over 6,000 years ago, leaving a wealth of archaeological sites and remains which allow much insight into the past, Orkney is far from being a museum. Within our islands there is a huge range of things to see and do in all seasons. With its diverse economy it is a busy place, and yet at the same time unspoilt, quiet and relaxing. The old and the new, the natural environment and the geographical location all merge to give the islands their uniquely attractive atmosphere.

As the Orcadian writer Edwin Muir said in his Scottish Journey (1935), "Orkney...has managed, as far as that is humanly possible, to have its cake and eat it. It has been saved by being just outside the circumsphere of the industrial world, near enough to know about it, but too far off to be drawn into it. Now it seems to me that this is the only way in which any community can achieve a partial salvation today and live a desirable life, surrounded by an industrial world."

This is even more true today. Orkney benefits from many of the good things of the early 21st century, whilst at the same time missing out on most of the less desirable aspects. However it is much more affected by the outside world than ever before, and Orcadians are going to have to work hard to maintain all that is special about Orkney.
INTRODUCTION TO ORKNEY

Orkney is a group of over 70 islands and skerries, of which about 19 are presently inhabited. At approximately 59ºN and 3ºW, the islands lie just north of Scotland, the shortest distance being about 10km (6 miles) from Caithness, and cover an area of 974 km² (376 miles²), of which the Mainland comprises about half.

Inhabited by 19,245 people (2001 census), the islands are about 85km (53 miles) from north to south and 37km (23 miles) from east to west. The main island is known as the "Mainland", and has three-quarters of the population, as well as the two main towns, Kirkwall (population 6,206), and Stromness (population 1,850).

Although apparently isolated, Orkney is very well served by transport links with Scotland. The MV Hamnavoe (8,600 tons, 600 passengers) runs daily between Stromness and Scrabster (several times per day), while MV Hjaltland and MV Hrossey (12,000 tons, 600 passengers) run between Orkney, Aberdeen and Shetland. There is a summer passenger ferry between John o'Groats and Burwick, and a year-round vehicle service between Gills Bay and St Margaret's Hope, as well as several freight services. Frequent daily air links with Wick, Aberdeen, Inverness, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Shetland are operated by British Airways and Loganair.

Orkney is referred to in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the Irish Annals and by various writers such as Adomnan, but it is not until the Norse sagas, written in the 12th century, that we find more recent history. These sagas were written some time after the events so colourfully described, and thus may be of dubious historical accuracy in parts, but nevertheless they give a vivid and graphic account of the Norse age. Being so fertile and so near to Norway, Orkney was an obvious base for Viking expansion, particularly in a time when the latest technology was sea transport in Viking longships.

In more recent times the islands have been visited by a large number of eminent people who have written in various terms about them. We also have a number of distinguished local authors, and for those wishing further reading, there is always a good selection of publications available in the local book shops.

For reference the Orkney Library also has an excellent "Orkney Room", which has a very wide range of local literature. Many books which are unfortunately "out of print" are available for consultation here. The Orkney Archives are also available for those researching family roots and original documents.

The purpose of this Guide is to help visitors to our islands appreciate Orkney and enjoy their time here to the full. The idea is that the reader can assimilate information without effort and yet rapidly find out what he or she would most like to see and do, depending on interest, season or weather. There are so many things to see and do in Orkney that a lifetime is not long enough!

Although we have a beautiful landscape, history everywhere, and wildlife to rival anywhere on Earth, there is another aspect of Orkney which is perhaps the most important and rewarding to get to know - the Orcadians themselves. They are a friendly, hospitable people, mindful and respectful of their past, while at the same time very go-ahead and industrious. Do not hesitate to ask the way, or about things - you are sure to get a courteous reply, and if you are lucky you might get a few good stories as well!

George Mackay Brown summed things up very well when he said Orkney is "...a microcosm of the world. Orkney has been continuously inhabited for about 6,000 years and the layers of cultures and races are inescapable and unavoidable wherever you go. There are stories in the air here. If I lived to be 500, there would still be more to write".

Midsummer sunrise over Sanday from Wideford Hill

Kirkwall from the Ayre Road in 1821 by William Daniell
A TOUR OF THE MAIN MONUMENTS

Orkney has a wealth of Neolithic sites to visit, of which Maeshowe, the Standing Stones of Stenness, the Ring of Brodgar and Skara Brae are the most spectacular. The great chambered cairn of Maeshowe is the largest and grandest of its type and dates from about 2750BC, while the Standing Stones and the Ring of Brodgar were erected at about the same time.

All three monuments are situated in the heart of the West Mainland, surrounded by farmland and near the lochs of Stenness and Harlaw, in turn ringed by heather-covered low hills. There is a timeless and spacious feel to this landscape as a result of the dramatic coming together of sky, water and land.

The Neolithic village of Skara Brae lies on the shore of the Bay of Skaiil, and its well-preserved 5,000 year-old houses give a very good impression of life at that time. All four sites together form a World Heritage Site.

There is a Visitor Centre at Skara Brae with a museum, replica house and a shop, while at Tormiston Mill, next to Maeshowe, there is a shop and interpretative display.

There are many other fascinating monuments and sites of interest ranging from the Neolithic to the 20th century which can be visited all over Orkney. Every parish and island has something different and special left by the people who inhabited the countryside during the last six millennia.

FROM THE NEOLITHIC AGE TO THE 20TH CENTURY

The Brough of Birsay is a tidal island off the north-west of the Mainland, and is the site of both Pictish and Viking settlements, with secular and monastic remains. In the nearby village - The Palace - the ruins of the 16th century Earl’s Palace provide a gaunt reminder of the more recent past, while St Magnus Kirk is built on the site of a much older church.

The continuity of settlement in Orkney is well demonstrated by the Broch of Gurness, which is one of the best examples of about 50 such structures in Orkney, and dates from the late Iron Age - the last century BC/first century AD. The site was occupied for hundreds of years, at least until early Norse times.

The imposing 12th century St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall was built by the Norse Earl Rognvald Kolson in honour of his murdered uncle Earl Magnus Erlendson. It dominates the town, and its warm-coloured Old Red Sandstone, unmarked by air pollution, makes the building especially striking. The interior is particularly attractive and well-proportioned.

During World War II several hundred Italian prisoners-of-war worked on the construction of the Churchill Barriers, which were built to defend the eastern approaches of Scapa Flow. They built the Italian Chapel in their camp on Lamb Holm. This unusual and charming artefact of war survives now as a symbol of hope and peace.
A TOUR OF THE ISLANDS

It has been said that “no visit can be considered complete without a visit to at least one of the other islands.” Fortunately this is easy due to extensive and frequent transport links to most of the inhabited islands.

Each island has its own character and attraction, all are subtly different and yet they have much in common. The Inner North Isles are perhaps the most accessible, especially Shapinsay, with its Victorian Castle, RSPB Reserve and fine farms, which is reached from Kirkwall.

Rousay, Egilsay and Wyre are also very easy to get to from Tingwall, and are full of good places to visit. Apart from the many archaeological and historic sites, there are also two RSPB Reserves and dramatic cliff and moorland scenery close by.

The larger Outer North Isles of Westray, Eday, Sanday and Stronsay are all quite distinctly different in character. They are reached by ferry or plane from Kirkwall and while a day visit will whet the appetite, all really need a stay to fully appreciate what they have to offer.

Westray is perhaps the most diverse of all the islands, with its varied coastal scenery, hills and farmland. It is the best place to see Puffins, and breeding seabirds in summer, and has much to offer the visitor.

Papa Westray is much less developed and can be reached by boat from Westray or plane from Kirkwall, as can North Ronaldsay, the most remote of all the islands in Orkney.

Eday is famous for its chambered cairns, but it also offers fine walks and unrivalled panoramic views over the rest of Orkney, while Sanday is best known for its exceptional sandy beaches which attract many species of wading birds. Stronsay, the most fertile island in Orkney, is also well-placed for migrating birds.

The South Isles are dominated by Hoy, which is more like two islands, the northern part with its dramatic cliffs, hills and valleys, and the low-lying southern part. It can be reached from Houton or Stromness. Hoy offers something for every visitor, with its diverse habitats and many sites of interest.

The smaller islands of Graemsay and Flotta should not be ignored. Both offer gentle scenery and dramatic views of the other islands and Scapa Flow. Graemsay is close to Stromness, but a world apart, while Flotta, though home to an Oil Terminal, still echoes with remains of 20th century wars.