

## WEST MAINLAND - ORPHIR



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**ORPHIR** (ON *Orffara*, land joined to an island at low water) forms the north shore of Scapa Flow. While the parish may lack the spectacular archaeological sites and scenery of other parts of Orkney, it still has much to offer the visitor, including beaches, wildlife and historical sites.

The A964 runs west from Kirkwall through Orphir, affording many fine views over Scapa Flow along the way. The first viewpoint is from Greenigo (HY405075) from where oil tankers, and sometimes warships, as well as the oil slick from *HMS Royal Oak*, may be seen. During the two World Wars

there were often many ships moored in this great natural harbour.

**Hobbister RSPB Reserve** (HY390065) lies on both sides of the road. There is parking here and a pleasant walk along the track which leads to the Highland Park Distillery's peat cuttings. The Reserve offers fine moorland scenery with expansive views of Scapa Flow. Hen Harriers, Merlin, Peregrine, Short-eared Owls and Red-throated Divers all frequent the area.

The low cliffs facing Scapa Flow are a good vantage point from which to view



*Loch of Kirbister*

*Panoramic view of Scapa Flow from Hobbister*



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wildfowl in winter. Otters may also be seen in this area, especially in the early morning or late evening. The sheltered banks here and at nearby Waulkmill Bay have many interesting plants.

**Waulkmill Bay** is an attractive shallow inlet with very dramatically weathered sandstone rocks and a flat sandy beach. It can be a very pleasant place for a picnic, or a dip in the sea on a fine day. This is one of the warmer places to bathe in Orkney, due to the wide, flat expanse of sand which heats up on a sunny day and thus imparts a few degrees to the sea as the tide comes in.

**Kirbister Loch** is a good trout fishing loch and an excellent place for windsurfers. The landscape here is much more agricultural and there are many houses and farms dotted about. Orphir was important in Norse times and apart from the **St Nicholas Round Kirk** (HY334043) at the Bu, there are the remains of a Norse farm, with hall and watermill, complete with lade.



*St Nicholas Round Kirk was built around 1122 by Earl Haakon Paulson*



Orkney Museum

*The 1757 Kirk, now gone, beside the mostly-demolished Round Kirk*

The Orkney Islands Council maintains the **Orkneyinga Saga Centre** near the Round Kirk. This tells the story of the Norse Earls of Orkney and an audiovisual display. The colourful tales are thus placed in their historical context. The many places with Viking connections in Orkney are highlighted.

**The Earl's Bu** mentioned in the Sagas was probably somewhere in this vicinity. Excavations confirm the existence of substantial ruins, some of which are exposed near the graveyard. Earl Thorfinn the Mighty may have lived here and certainly Earl Paul and his son Haakon both did, at least for part of the year. The build-

ings were probably constructed from wood and turf on stone foundations.

The Round Kirk is thought to be the church built by Earl Haakon Paulson, to the plan of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, on his return from Jerusalem about 1123, in atonement for the murder of Earl Magnus. Previously known as the *Girth House* (ON *Grid*, sanctuary, or peace), the church was

*Round Kirk - window in apse*



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largely demolished in 1757, to build a new church, itself now long gone.

Recently a 10<sup>th</sup> century vertical-axis watermill was discovered next to the church yard here. The lade, wheel chamber and tail-race are all still lined with stones. This type of mill was common in Orkney and Shetland until recent times. The Click Mill (HY326228), near Dounby is a restored 19<sup>th</sup> century example. An extensive midden deposit here contained much domestic refuse, including fish bones from Cod very much larger than those caught locally today and a runic inscription on a cattle rib. Much remains to be discovered at this interesting site.

While Paul Haakonson was still Earl, Sweyn Asleifson made a dramatic escape through a window here, after murdering Sweyn Briosteip. This happened at Yule when the Earls usually invited many people to the hall to join in the celebrations. He

made his escape to Aurrida Firth and then via Damsay to Bishop William in Egilsay.

Another story shows how Iceland and Orkney were in close communication in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Earl Sigurd was hearing the story of the burning of Njal and his family in Iceland from Gunnar Lambison, who when asked how they bore the burning, said that one of them had given way to tears. Kari, a friend of Njal's who had just arrived from Iceland, on hearing this drew his sword and beheaded Gunnar. Blood flew all over the Earl, who ordered Kari killed, but no one would do the deed. It was decided that he had only done what he had the right to do.

**Houton** takes its name from the nearby headland (ON *Hofud*), and is the departure point of the ferry to Hoy and Flotta, as well as for the oil terminal workers at Flotta. The ferry *Hoy Head* does several return trips per day and passengers with cars



German High Seas Fleet in Scapa Flow on 28 May 1919, with the WWI Houton flying boat base in the foreground - from Midland Hill

should make reservations in advance to ensure there is a space for their car. Tel (01856) 811397.

The Vikings called Houton Bay "*Medallandshofn*", and the bay is indeed well sheltered, with a shore very suitable for pulling up ships. In late 1263, King Haakon Haakonson beached his ship *Kristsudin* at Houton, along with the rest of his battered fleet after the disastrous foray to the Clyde. The largest vessel yet built by the Norse, she was said to have been a *37-sesser* (bench) ship, which implies a crew of at least 100 men. The **Holm of Houton** (ON *Orfirisey*, the island which

*Orfjara* refers to, is tidal and makes the Bay of Houton an excellent harbour.

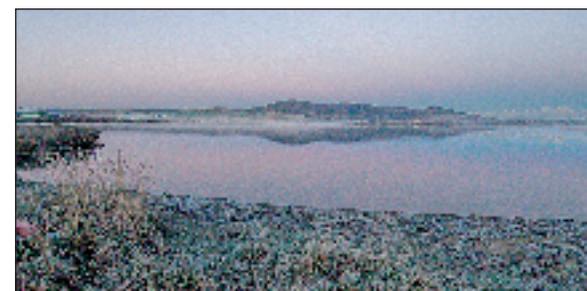
**The Hall of Clestrain** (ON *Klett-strond*, rocky beach) was built about 1769 by Patrick Honeyman of Graemsay. The estate factor was the Stromness merchant, John Rae, who became the local agent for the Hudson's Bay Company. His fourth son, John, the famous Arctic explorer, was born here in 1813.

Rae discovered the last link in the Northwest Passage and established what had happened to the Franklin Expedition (the British Naval Expedition led by Sir John Franklin in 1845), but was condemned by the establishment for reporting that the survivors of this Expedition had resorted to cannibalism.

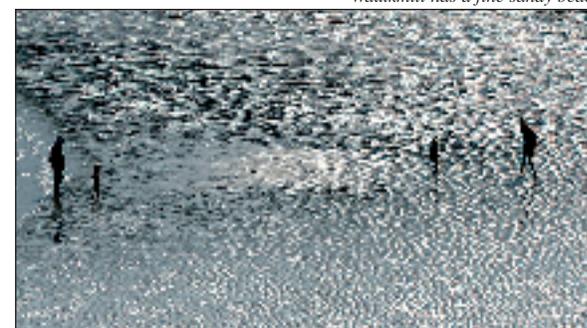
The house is in classical style with pavilions, front steps and has three floors, but is unusual in being square. It is approached by a fine driveway which leads to



Winter dawn over Scapa Flow and Houton



Karbister Loch on an icy winter morning



Waulkmill has a fine sandy beach

Hoy Hills and the Bring Deeps from Scorra Dale



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Searchlight mounting below Houton Head



World War II gun mounting on Houton Head

the building. Inside the Hall today little remains, except the large windows (though many are bricked up), a two-metre length of metal banister and the stone staircase. A fierce gale ripped off the roof in 1952 and after this it was used for keeping live-stock.

Renovation of the Hall of Clestrain is an integral part of the planned **Orkney Boat**

**Museum**, which “will be a venue for the storage, collection, conservation, research and display of boats and associated boat building artefacts relating to Orkney.” Small craft played a very important part in Orkney's economic and social life and it is hoped that a wide variety of boats will be acquired. A boat building workshop is also part of the plan.

The Hall of Clestrain was the birthplace of John Rae



### WALKS AND VIEWPOINTS

From the Round Kirk there is a footpath to the shore which leads along the coast to Breck (HY346038). The Kirk and Viking ruins contrast strongly with the Oil Terminal in the background. There are lovely views across Scapa Flow from the low shore.

Either return via the road or continue along the coast to Swanbister Bay, where there is a pier used in World War I and the Hillock of Breakna (HY353051), which may be a broch. Further east, seals may be hauled up on Smoogro Skerry, while the low cliffs of Waulkmill Bay shelter many wild flowers. There is a bridge over the Mill Burn, which is an excellent place to gather Mussels just so long as there is an “r” in the month.

From **Scorra Dale** (HY322054) there is a fine vista of the Hoy Hills, Graemsay, Hoy Sound and Stromness. A hill track leads south from here to the top of **Midland Hill** (HY321049, 158m) and the scene which

Midsummer sunset from the Ward Hill over Skaill Loch



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Park Cottage - an old croft above Houton

photographer Tom Kent captured in late 1918 of the German Fleet at anchor comes easily to mind.

There is another good panoramic view over Scapa Flow from Houton Head. The **Barrel of Butter** is so named because its owner had to pay the Earl a barrel of butter in skat. It looks remarkably like a submarine from here and was once shelled by the British Navy!

On a good clear day the climb to the top of the **Ward Hill** (ON *Varda*, beacon or cairn, HY335080, 268m) is well worth the effort. The view is complimentary to that from Wideford Hill and takes in the whole of Scapa Flow and Hoy, as well as Stromness and much of the West Mainland. At midsummer the sun sets over the Bay of Skaill from here. From below the Ward Hill peat tracks lead to Bigswell and Ireland in Stenness. In this area many of the moorland species birds and plants may be seen.

**Wild flowers** The roadsides of Hobbister Brae are among the best places in Orkney to see Primroses, or *May Flowers*. The many side roads and tracks with uncut verges are excellent sites to seek out interesting plants and insects in summer. Waulkmill Bay with its sheltered banks and surrounding moorland is an especially good place to look for wild flowers as well as curiously worn rocks and Otters.

### ORPHIR ATTRACTIONS

Greenigoe viewpoint  
Hobbister RSPB Reserve  
Waulkmill Bay  
Loch of Kirbister  
St Nicholas Round Kirk  
Orkneyinga Saga Centre  
Coastal walk Bu to Breck  
Ward Hill of Orphir  
Bay of Houton  
Midland Hill viewpoint  
Military sites, Houton  
Scorabrae viewpoint  
Hall of Clestrain

## HOUTON BAY LODGE

*The ideal choice for your visit to Orkney*



Lynda and Alfred Baird welcome you to the Houton Bay Lodge on the site of a World War I seaplane base at Houton Bay on the edge of Scapa Flow. The Lodge offers an extensive range of high quality facilities and services to suit the discerning visitor - all under one roof.



Houton Bay Lodge, Orphir, Orkney KW17 2RD

Tel/Fax: 01856-811320

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