SWONA (ON Swefney, Swyn’s Island), now uninhabited except for a small herd of feral cattle, is a delightful island to the west of Burwick. Very strong tides made this island a graveyard to shipping. Until the advent of radar vessels regularly went ashore in fog and usually became total losses on the jagged rocks.

Being grazed by cattle, Swona has completely different vegetation to sheep-grazed islands. The luscious green sward is carpeted with wild flowers in the summer, including Primroses, Ragged Robin, Buttercups and Eyebright. The banks have carpets of Thrift and Cocks & Hens, while Oysterplant thrives in the shingle beaches.

Puffins abound on the grassy slopes on the east side, while there are many Black Guillemots and Storm Petrels which nest in the drystone walls. There is normally a large colony of Arctic Terns as well as a few Arctic and Great Skuas.

Evidence of prehistoric settlement includes a chambered cairn (ND384837) on the southeast side. This stalled cairn has an unusually long chamber, but is being steadily eroded by the sea. Swona is an obvious island for early habitation, with its fertile soil, nearby fishing and strong tidal defences.

In Norse times, a man called Grim lived here, whose sons Asbjorn and Margad were followers of Sweyn Asleifson. Just before Yule in about 1133 Sweyn’s father Olaf was killed by Olvir Rosta and his men, who burnt his house at Duncansby. Sweyn and the Grimsons escaped to Swona and thence to Earl Paul’s Hall in Orphir for the Earl’s Yuletide feast.

Meanwhile Sweyn’s brother, Valthiof and the crew of his 10-oared boat were lost at sea on their way to the same Yule feast from Stronsay. Sweyn thus lost his father and brother within days. During the feast much drinking was done and Sweyn “Breastrope” insulted Sweyn Asleifson, saying that “he was a sluggard at his drink” and commented, “Sweyn will be the death of Sweyn.” Sweyn Asleifson waited in the shadows and struck down his namesake. He then escaped through a window to a waiting horse to Bishop William at Egilsay and thence to safety in Tiree.

Swona has an amazingly good harbour, The Haven, a large geo on the east side within which a boat can lie as long as the wind is not in the east. Care must be taken to approach at the right time of the tide. There are automatic light beacons at each end of the island.

Near the mouth of the Haven there is a dangerous rock called “Grimsally”, no doubt after the former Viking owner. It is said that knowledge of this skerry allowed one Viking ship to escape while being chased by another ship by steering between this rock and the shore. The following vessel’s skipper was unaware of the Grimsally and struck it, causing his ship to sink.

Swona cattle When the last inhabitants left in 1974 they left behind their cattle. Some were removed and sold in 1977 but since then they have not been fed in winter and husbandry has been limited. They now form one of the very few feral herds of Bos taurus in the world, which is of considerable interest to scientists.
THE PENTLAND FIRTH - SWONA

however they do also forage for seaweed, but not in the intertidal zone. At present the herd seems to be stable at about 20 animals, with more cows than bulls. They mostly derive from Aberdeen Angus and Shorthorn stock. The cows survive longer than the bulls and calving is in Spring, as with other Orkney cattle.

The Swona cattle tend to stay together as a group rather than foraging individually, and there seems to be no system of territories for the bulls. Since they are derived from stock which was bred to cope with the harsh climate and yet be placid, they seem to survive well and not to be overtly aggressive to each other.

Visitors should take great care to give the herd a wide berth. The cows may appear more timid than the bulls, but none are to be trusted. They tolerate humans, but they should be treated as dangerous wild animals.

Shipwrecks of the 1930s

Swona was notorious for shipwrecks due to its position on the edge of the Pentland Firth. During the 1930s there were several dramatic groundings, the last of which led to a serious loss of life.

In 1930 "Lord Percy", a Grimsby trawler homeward bound, struck the rocks on the west side of Swona. The skipper drowned while they were trying to lay out a kedge anchor with their own boat. The crew were afterwards rescued by Swona fishermen. The trawler slid off the rocks and sank in deep water.

In 1931 "Pennsylvania", a 3,759grt, of Copenhagen struck a reef on the west side of Swona in fog. The crew were rescued and some of the cargo was salvaged by the Danish tug "Gorm". The vessel was bought by Stromamen and much of the extensive cargo salvaged before the wreck broke up.

In 1935 "Gunnaren", a 3,229grt Swedish ship bound for Stockholm with general cargo, ran ashore in dense fog on the west side of Swona. The Longhope lifeboat landed the crew and mails from the vessel. Swedish and German salvage ships tried to save part of the vessel by cutting her in two but, because of heavy sea, this had to be abandoned.

Later the after part floated off but grounded again half a mile away. Most of the cargo was salvaged by tugs assisted by Stroma and Swona men. One of the lifeboats is still in use as a pleasure boat named "Aurora" and may be seen in Kirkwall Harbour.

In 1937 "Johanna Thorden", a 3,223grt Finnish ship homeward bound with a general cargo on her maiden voyage, ran ashore on the Tarf Tail, Swona, in a haze and south-east gale, having mistaken the new Tor Ness light for the South Swona light. Her distress signals were not seen and her master thought they were on Little Skerry. The lifeboats were launched and 25 people left in the first one. Soon after the ship broke in two and the remaining 12 crew left in the second boat. The gale had increased with a very heavy sea and the flood tide swept the boats eastward past the Pentland Skerries.

The second lifeboat was driven into Newark Bay, South Ronaldsay, where she capsized with the loss of 4 of the survivors. The remaining 8 were rescued from the shore. The following day the other lifeboat was washed ashore at Deerness with no one in it, its occupants having been lost overboard. This was the worst Pentland Firth disaster of the 20th century - a loss of 29 men out of a crew of 37. The next day the Swona folk awoke to find the bow and foremast of the ship, the stern section having sunk soon after being abandoned.

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**THE PENTLAND FIRTH**

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(ON Pettaland Fjordur, Pictland Firth), together with the islands and parishes on both sides, is frequently mentioned in the Orkneyinga Saga. This “Wild and Open Sea” separates Orkney from Caithness.

The distance from Burwick to John o’Groats is about 10km (6 miles). At the meeting point of the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, the strong tides of 10 knots or more are impeded by Stroma Lighthouse on Swilkie Point islands, skerries, the sea bed and weather, all of which combine to create complex teddies and sometimes dangerous seas.

The “North Coast of Scotland Pilot” rather blandly states that “because of the very strong tidal streams, the eddies and races to which these give rise and the extraordinarily violent and confused seas which occur at times...navigation in Pentland Firth is attended by special problems.”

For centuries the Firth has been used by cargo and naval ships and apart from fishing, pilotage was a major source of income for Swona, Stroma and Canisbay men. A dangerous occupation, they sometimes ended up coming home via America!

Traditionally the ferry ran from John o’Groats to Burwick, but there was also a ferry from Scarfskerry to Brims on Hoy and on to the Mainland. The first record-ed ferryman was a man called John o’Groats, appointed by James IV about 1496, to ensure communications with his recently acquired islands. Presumably there had been a ferry for thousands of years before this, but unrecorded.

The first regular Scrabster to Stromness steamship was the Royal Mail, starting in 1855. The railway finally arrived in Thurso in 1874 and several other vessels operated the route, until the first St Ola commenced its long period of service in 1892. Thus started the long association with what was P&O Scottish Ferries.

**St Ola I** ran for 59 years until replaced in 1951 by **St Ola II**. She could carry 26 cars and hardly ever missed a crossing. Roro services started in 1974 with **St Ola III**, which was in turn replaced with the much larger **St Ola IV** in 1992. In 2002 Hamnavoe, a completely new and still larger ship operated by NorthLink took over the route. Operating at 21 knots she completes the run in about 90 minutes.

The short sea crossing from John o’Groats to Burwick is run in the summer months by the Pentland Venture which carries up to 250 passengers, while Pentland Ferries operate the Pentalina B between St Margaret’s Hope and Gills Bay all year.
THE PENTLAND SKERRIES

THE PENTLAND SKERRIES
6km (4 miles) southeast of Burwick are another dangerous place for shipping, with very strong tides, dangerous eddies and many unmarked hazards. The Skerries consist of Muckle Skerry and a long shoal running northeast from Little Skerry to Clettack Skerry. Many ships have foundered here in the past, especially in foggy weather.

Lighthouse
The first light-houses were erected here in 1794, with two towers to distinguish them from North Ronaldsay lighthouse. The work was supervised by Robert Stevenson and was his first work for the Northern Lighthouse Board. One tower was 24m high, the other 18m, and a total of 66 catoptric reflectors were used in the two sets of optics which showed continuous lights.

In the 1820s it was decided to heighten the towers and stone was taken from Herston, where a shed, which still stands today, was specially built to cut the freestone blocks. The higher lighthouse was increased to 35m and alterations were completed in 1833. The catoptric (reflecting) lamps were replaced in 1848 with dioptric (refracting) lamps of higher efficiency.

In 1895 the lower light was discontinued and a much more powerful group flashing system installed on the taller tower. In 1939 generators were installed to power the light. A German aircraft strafed the site in February 1941 but nobody was hurt.

A foghorn was mounted on the lower tower in 1909 but “due to the diminished value of audible aids to navigation” this was discontinued in 2005. The lighthouse became automatic in 1994, nearly 200 years after first being lit.

The keepers kept cattle and hens. Originally they had their families with them, but after several tragic deaths, the families were moved to Caithness. The Skerries keepers on several occasions rescued seamen in difficulty. In 1871 a boy was rescued from the “boiling tideway” after the crew of the Wick boat Good Design abandoned ship. Twelve crew were also rescued by the keepers from the barque Vicksburg of Leith in 1884 in a risky operation.

When the 8,003grt ship Kathe Neiderkirchner ran ashore on the northwest side of Muckle Skerry in thick fog in 1965 the keepers guided the ship’s lifeboat to the East Landing and thus ensured the safety of the 50 passengers and crew. The ship was carrying a cargo of Cuban sugar. She slipped off the reef and sank within 9 hours of going ashore.

Wildlife
Today Muckle Skerry is inhabited only by many breeding seabirds in summer. The Skerries have a similar bird population to Swona, the difficult and often dangerous access ensuring that the wildlife is mostly undisturbed. There is a huge Arctic Tern colony and many Puffins breed here. Large numbers of Grey Seals come ashore to pup in autumn.

Landings
There are two landings, the main one at Scartan Bay (ON Scarf Tang, Shag Point) on the east side and another at Hunigeo on the northwest corner. The island has low cliffs, except on the west side, with several geos and small caves.

Archaeology
Until the lighthouses were built the Skerries had no permanent inhabitants, although cattle and sheep were pastured in summer. There are remains of at least two stalled chambered cairns which have been dug into as well as several other small mounds. Neolithic people from South Ronaldsay may have buried their dead here in a similar way to those from Papay used the Holm of Papay.