For six hundred years Orkney was dominated by the Norse, initially invaders and then settlers from Western Norway, who rapidly colonised the islands and then went on to build the Earldom which at its peak controlled much of the west coast of Scotland, the Isle of Man, Caithness and Sutherland. Orcadians today remain proud of their Norse heritage and, though British, maintain their historic links with Norway.

The westward expansion of the Vikings started late in the 8th century and, apart from population and other pressures, was made possible by technology. The development of large ocean-going sailing ships, combined with a knowledge of seamanship and navigation, which could reliably transport people, livestock and goods for long distances, allowed them an ascendency over other coastal Europeans for several centuries.

Orkney made an obvious base for these seafaring people, in a time when there was no quick land transport. While there is some evidence that contact may already have been going on for some time before the main influx, it now seems that the Norse takeover was abrupt and complete. The Picts simply disappear. Existing settlements were taken over by the Vikings, who may even have reused some Pictish pots and other household items, but soon the invaders imposed their own farming style and land-holding patterns, which are preserved as farm names and parishes to this day.

Recent excavations have suggested that there may have been a considerable Pictish population in Orkney at the time of the Viking migrations. The Picts had only been Christianised for a hundred years, and were not likely to have made much of an impact on the Norse colonisation. However, there is evidence of a strong Viking presence in Orkney, with many Norse-style burials and artefacts found throughout the islands.

This short but violent period of Viking migration at the end of the 8th century, enabled the seizure of Orkney and Shetland, and then much of the far north of Scotland from the Picts. Once power was established there followed a further influx of settlers such that Norse culture and language totally replaced Pictish.

Most of our knowledge of the Vikings comes from the sagas, which describe the feuds of great families and the deeds of great men, but do not give much detail of more mundane events or conditions. There was a climatic improvement during the Viking era which greatly aided westward expansion, the development of more advanced agriculture and population growth.

It also seems that the Vikings had mastered several other important things such as (slightly) improved domestic...
hygiene and midwifery, as well as being good blacksmiths, joiners, farmers, ship-builders and seamen. Clearly many were also good men-at-arms, but this was probably only one aspect of their power. Above all they were craftsmen and took great pride in their work as is evident by the many high quality weapons, items of jewellery and, perhaps most important, the advanced technology of their ships and navigation skills.

Today nearly all our place-names derive from Old Norse, with only a few possible Pictish remnants. The Orkneyinga Saga and other Norse Sagas, mostly written in the 12th century in Iceland, give a vivid account of Viking times, with many colourful characters.

According to the Saga the Earldom was founded by King Harald Harfargi (Fairhair), who set out “west over sea” to deal with the Orkney Vikings who kept making raids on Norway. During his time Norway was united as one kingdom (in 892AD), and the lands “west over sea” of Orkney, Shetland, the Hebrides and Man came under his rule.

**Earl Rognvald of More** was made Earl of Orkney, but he passed the title to his brother, Sigurd, (The Mighty), the first Earl of Orkney to be recorded by history. Sigurd is best known for his death rather than his life. During one of his forays into Scotland, about AD893, he incurred the wrath of a man called Maelbrigte “Tusk”. A meeting was arranged where each was to bring 40 men and 40 horses. However Sigurd put two men on each horse, with the result that all the Scots were killed and beheaded.

The Vikings tied the heads to their saddles in triumph, but Maelbrigte had the last laugh as one of his protruding buck teeth scratched Sigurd’s leg, causing a fatal infection. He is buried near Oykelbridge.

Sigurd was succeeded by another colourful character, his half-brother **Torf Einar**, who “took the earldom, and was long earl, and was a man of great power”. He was renowned for his eyesight despite being one-eyed, and is said to have shown the people how to use peat as a fuel. The Saga recounts how he found and slew Halfdan Fairhair on North Ronaldsay for killing his father (Rognvald) by burning him alive in his house in Norway. He then carved the blood eagle on Halfdan’s back, “Einar had his ribs cut from the spine with a sword and the lungs pulled out through the slits in his back. He dedicated the victim to Odin as a victory offering”.

**Thorfinn Skull-Splitter**, said to be buried in the Howe of Hoxa (South Ronaldsay), became sole Earl when his brothers were killed at the Battle of Stainmore in 954. He was said to be “a mighty chief and warlike”, but it is not recorded how he came by his nickname.

**Sigurd the Stout** was a powerful Earl, who was known for his prowess in battle, his sorcery and his ability to invoke the old gods. His mother was a sorceress and made him the enchanted Raven Banner, warning “my belief is this: that it will bring victory to the man it’s carried before, but death to the one who carries it”.

Sigurd was forcibly converted to Christianity by King Olav Tryggvesson at Osmondwall (Kirk Hope) in Hoy in 995, on pain of the death of his son. The whole of Orkney was said to have embraced the faith. The son, Hvelp, died soon after, so Sigurd renounced Christianity and refused to recognise King Olaf.

He was killed in 1014 at the Battle of Clontarf when he himself took up the Raven Banner, after many had fallen.
Thorfinn the Mighty, Sigurd’s son and successor, himself, and fell there."

The Broch of Burgar in Evie was the site of a hoard of silver, now lost. By this time Thorfinn was said to control nine Earldoms from his base in Birsay where he presided over a lavish household. He was to rule his earldoms peacefully for another 18 years, during which he made a pilgrimage to Rome in 1049-50, after which the first Bishop of Orkney, Bishop Thorolf, was appointed. Thorfinn established Christ Church and a Bishop’s Palace at Birsay, next to his own.

In the later 10th century Norse power in the west was at its peak, with the conquest of Normandy, the discovery of America by Leif Erikson and Norse migrations to northern and eastern England. Many hoards of valuables were hidden either by locals fearing Viking attack, or by Vikings themselves for safekeeping, some have since been found, such as those at Skaill, Burray, Burgar and Caldale.

The Norse Earls were always in close touch with Scottish rulers as they were with their Norse superiors, frequently marrying the daughters of other noblemen, or of the Scottish or Norwegian King. Their divided loyalties frequently caused problems, which eventually led to the end of the Earldom.

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NORSE ORKNEY - 1100 TO 1468

The 12th century saw the martyrdom of Earl Magnus, followed by a pilgrimage to the Holy Land by his cousin, Earl Haakon Paulson, the instigator of his death. On his return Haakon built the St Nicholas Round Church in Orphir, beside the Earl’s Bu with its famous drinking hall. He was succeeded by his son Paul in 1123, who in turn was succeeded in 1135 by Earl Rognvald Kolson, nephew of Magnus during whose time Orkney continued to flourish.

St Magnus Cathedral, commenced in 1137 by Earl Rognvald, in memory of his martyred uncle Magnus, is much the most spectacular Norse structure in Orkney. There are many other remains, such as parts of the Bishop’s Palace in Kirkwall, and the Norse secular buildings and church at the Brough of Birsay. Of the several other 12th century churches, the ruins at Westness in Rousay and Eynhallow Monastery are particularly evocative.

About 1152 a group of Vikings returning from the Crusades left a spectacular collection of runic graffiti in Maeshowe, thus greatly adding to the interest of the monument for today’s visitor. In addition to runes, they carved a dragon (claimed by some to be a lion, but most people think it is a dragon) and other carvings which have provided much inspiration to 20th century artists.

With the death of the Ultimate Viking, Sweyn Asleifson, at Dublin on a raid in 1171, the independent power of the Earldom of Orkney was coming to a close. In 1193 a fleet manned by the Island Beadies, many of the leading men from Orkney and Shetland, invaded Norway with the support of the Earl. They were roundly defeated at the Battle of Florvag in 1194 near Bergen by King Sverre Sigurdsson.

The estates of those involved were taken by the Norwegian Crown, and a Royal Sysselman appointed to collect taxes and administer the sequestrated estates on behalf of the king. More seriously Shetland was from now administered directly from Norway, while the Earl, Harald Maddadson had to give an oath of fealty to Sverre. Thus Orkney, and even more Shetland, became much more strongly under the control of Norway.

The situation was further complicated when the Scottish King, William the Lion, took advantage of the situation by invading Caithness. The result was that the Earldom lost its Scottish lands but had to submit also to the King of Scots. On the death of Harald Maddadson, himself three-quarters Scottish, in 1206, Norse power was nevertheless on the wane. The first Scottish Earl, albeit with strong Norse connections, was Magnus II, in c.1233.

In 1262 Norway annexed Iceland and Greenland and in late Summer 1263 King Haakon Haakonson arrived in Orkney with a large fleet of over 100 ships intent on reasserting Norse power in the west of Scotland and the Hebrides. The fleet mustered at Elwick Bay in Shapinsay before heading out into the Pentland Firth from St Margaret’s Hope bound for the Clyde.

There was an indecisive skirmish, now called by the Scots the Battle of Largs, but the main culprit was the arrival of a sudden severe gale during which the fleet was scattered and some vessels damaged. Haakon retreated to Orkney to regroup, but took ill and died in the Bishop’s Palace at Yule. He was temporarily buried in St Magnus Cathedral before being returned to Bergen in 1264.

St Magnus Kirk on Egilsay dates from the 11th century

St Magnus cenotaph, Egilsay

The Orphir Round Kirk was built by Earl Hakon about 1122

Crusader’s cross in Maeshowe

The ‘Maeshowe Dragon’ was carved about 1152 by returning Crusaders
Henry was not only expected to defend Orkney from attack, but also Shetland. In addition he was expected to provide ships and men to the Norwegian King on demand.

Increasing Scots influence and a steady influx of lowland Scots during the 15th century gradually eroded the old Orkney Udal Law and the Norn language, the last known official Norse document being dated 1425. With the takeover of Norway by Denmark, the Norse interest in the Northern Isles further reduced, particularly as the connection had always been with Western Norway, rather than with Denmark.

When the daughter of the Danish King was to marry the Scottish King in 1468, the Danes had no compunction about using Orkney, which had been Norway’s closest colony, as a guarantee for the dowry - which has never been paid. Thus ended ignominiously over 600 years of Norse rule of the islands.

Relatively few excavations have been made at Viking sites in Orkney. Sadly so far only a few of the recently excavated artefacts are on display in Orkney and even fewer of these sites are on display to visitors. Worse still, much earlier work was poorly recorded and has never been reported on. Many artefacts found last century simply disappeared, or are of unknown provenance.

Despite this lack of tangible evidence, the wealth of Old Norse language in the place-names and in the words still in current usage by Orcadians is a constant reminder of our Norse heritage. Local bird names are particularly preserved in common usage.

**Norse Orkney - 1100 to 1468**

**History & Archaeology**

**Late Norse Sites to Visit**

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<td>Orphir</td>
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<td>Garvay</td>
<td>langskaill</td>
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A “Tog” is held every year in Kirkwall on Norwegian National Day (17 May) as a reminder of our Norse heritage. Local bird names are particularly preserved in common usage.

**Late Norse Timeline 1100 to 1468**

- 1120: Marriage of Ingibar, a Scottish noblewoman to King Erik of Norway
- 1263: Annexation of Iceland and Greenland by Norway
- 1269: Earl Erik remarries to Isabella sister of Robert the Bruce
- 1272: Loss of sea heirs of some of Orkney’s leading families
- 1288: First Scottish Earl Magnus II
- 1292: King Erik marries Isabella, daughter of Robert the Bruce
- 1321: Murder of John last Norse Earl
- 1349: Plague in Norway & Orkney
- 1356: First Sinclair Earl Malise
- 1398: Expedition to America
- 1425: Last Norse official document
- 1433: Earls Birkenhead
- 1461: Raid by Scottish & Irish on Orkney much damage
- 1468: Impignoration
- 1470: James III buys earldom from Earl William end of Norse Earldom

**Late Norse Sites to Visit**

- Kirkwall: St Magnus Bishop’s Palace
- Firth: Damsay
- Orphir: Round Kirk & Bu
- Stemness: Maeshowe
- Rendall: Tingwall
- Rousay: Westness
- Wyre: Cubbie Roo’s Castle
- Egilsay: St Magnus Church
- Westray: Quoygrew
- Papay: St Boniface Kirk
- Garvay: langskaill

**Christmas tree lighting ceremony, the tree is donated annually by Hordaland**
The choir is the oldest part of St Magnus Cathedral

Papa Names The Papa names may attest to the presence of Christian sites in Orkney when the Norsemen first arrived. Alternatively they may date from the 11th or 12th century, when pre-Norse sites may have been reused. Whichever is true, the many symbol stones and ancient chapel sites suggest that Christianity was well established here during Pictish times.

However the invading Norse had no respect for these institutions and probably took over their farms without paying much heed to the Papa, their religious artefacts or special buildings. Later of course Christianity did reassert itself, perhaps initially by force, but later by the will of the common people.

There are several surviving Norse churches, in varying states of ruin. Some of these are in turn built on top of much more ancient chapels. Other churches have been rebuilt, often several times, and contain the foundations or some of the walls of much more ancient structures.

In many cases churches have been rebuilt several times on the same site, so that little now remains of the Norse or earlier buildings. However a remarkable number of churches remain substantially intact. To date only one (St Boniface on Papay) has been renovated fully.

Kirkwall St Magnus Cathedral, is of course, much the most spectacular of all the Orkney Norse churches. However to get a fuller picture of Late Norse Orkney it is really necessary to visit some of the earlier sites. St Olaf’s was the first Viking church in Kirkwall, and was probably built by Earl Rognvald Brusison about 1035. All that remains today is an archway in St Olaf’s Wynd and an aumbry.

Watergate arch, Bishop’s Palace

Orphir St Nicholas Round Church was built by Earl Hakon Paulson on his return from Jerusalem about 1122, probably next to his skali, or drinking hall, at the Bu in Orphir. The apse is all that now remains of the only surviving round church from this time in Scotland.

Birsay was the main seat of the Earldom and Bishopric, at least during the time of Thorfinn the Mighty (999-1064). Much of the extensive ruins on the Brough of Birsay probably date from this time. They include a charming little chapel and a complex of buildings, some probably secular and others perhaps ecclesiastic.

The Bishop’s Palace and Church were most likely in the vicinity of the present St Magnus Church and later Earl’s Palace. The discovery of very substantial red sandstone foundations under this church, as well as the “Mons Bellus” stone are very suggestive of this.

Deerness A hogback tombstone dating from the 11th or 12th century, which was found in the graveyard is now kept inside the Skaill.
Norwegian Orkney - Churches

Kolbein Hruga, who lived at the Bu nearby and also built Cubbie Roo’s Castle.

Eynhallow The 12th century church on Eynhallow has extensive surrounding buildings. There was probably a monastery here in Norse times and the present ruins may well overly and earlier, Pictish religious site.

Westray has evidence of considerable Norse settlement. There was a large cemetery in the dunes at Pierowall. Lady Kirk, on the shore nearby, was rebuilt in the 1600s on top of a 13th century Norse church. The Cross Kirk, on the shore near Tuquoy, has a largely intact apse and dates from the 12th century.

Papay. St Boniface Church is originally 12th century, but much altered over the years. There is a 12th century hagrback tombstone in the graveyard and two Pictish cross slabs were also found here. The small chapel of St Tredwells is on a small island on the eponymous loch built on top of a broch.

South Ronaldsay St Peter’s and Old St Mary’s Churches are both built on much older foundations, the former including a Pictish symbol stone as a lintel. The latter is on what may be the oldest chapel site in Orkney and has an enigmatic “footprint” stone inside.

Burray St Laurence Kirk has unusual sculpted sandstone door jambs and lintels and may be on the site of a much earlier chapel dedicated to the 7th century cleric known as the “Apostle of the Picts”.

St Mary’s Kirk at Swandro dates from the 12th century and, though much repaired, parts of the now dilapidated structure are very old. It was the main church for the Westside until the 19th century clearances.

Egilsay St Magnus Kirk was built about 1136 on the site of an earlier chapel where Magnus is reputed to have prayed before his murder. Its distinctive type of round tower is the only one remaining in Orkney today, but in the past churches at Deerness and Stenness had similar tall towers.

Wyre St Mary’s Chapel is also from the 12th century and was probably built by Kolbein Hruga, who lived at the Bu nearby and also built Cubbie Roo’s Castle.

Papa Stronsay St Nicholas Chapel dates from the 11th and 12th centuries. It was recently excavated and was shown to be built on top of a small 7th or 8th century Pictish monastery, which consisted of a small chapel with several surrounding cells.

Stronsay There are several chapel sites on Stronsay, but only St Peter’s, west of Whitehall still has substantial ruins visible.

Early Christian Sites to Visit

- Kirkwall Old St Olaf’s
- Kirkwall St Magnus Cathedral
- Kirkwall Bishop’s Palace
- Orphir St Nicholas Round
- Orphir Stenness Stenness Kirk
- Orphir Harray St Michael’s Kirk
- Harray Birsay St Magnus
- Birsay Broch of Birsay
- "Mons Bellus" stones
- Holm St Mary’s
- Tankerness St Andrew’s
- Tankerness Skall - hogback
- Tankerness Brough of Deerness
- Burray St Laurence
- Burray St Peter’s Kirk
- Burray Old St Mary’s Kirk
- Hoy Osmondwall
- Hoy Rousay St Mary’s
- Hoy St Magnus Kirk
- Rousay Wyre St Mary’s Chapel
- Rousay Eynhallow Monastery
- Rousay Westray Cross Kirk, Tuquoy
- Rousay St Mary’s, Pierowall
- Rousay St Peter’s, Rapness
- Papay St Boniface
- Papay St Tredwell’s
- Papa Stronsay St Peter’s, Whitehall
- Papa Stronsay Kildingue
- Papa Stronsay St Nicholas
- Papa Stronsay St Catherine’s, Lyness

Cross Kirk at Tuquoy, Westray was largely demolished in the 18th century.
HENRY ST CLAIR AND THE ZENO NARRATIVE

In 1365 the young Henry St Clair and other knights assembled in Venice to go on a crusade to Egypt, during which Alexandria was occupied. He also went to Jerusalem and was subsequently called "Henry the Holy" on his return to Scotland. He had been left his father's estate at Rosslyn, near Edinburgh and in 1379 became Earl of Orkney. Thus Henry came into wealth, power and contact with Venice. He also had the usual divided loyalties to Norway, Orkney, Scotland and England.

He appears to have been well respected by Norse and Scots, and by 1390 had a small fleet of vessels at his disposal to look after his small fleet of vessels at his Earldom. He is said to have been divided loyalties to Norway, Orkney, Scotland and England. He had been left his father's estate at Rosslyn, near Edinburgh and in 1379 became Earl of Orkney. Thus Henry came into wealth, power and contact with Venice. He also had the usual divided loyalties to Norway, Orkney, Scotland and England.

In 1391 a Venetian ship arrived with Nicolo Zeno, brother of Carlo Zeno (the "Lion" of Venice who had pioneered the use of cannon at the Battle of Chioggia). After a time his brother, Antonio, too joined him. They could supply expertise that Henry lacked, such as how to forge the new cannon for shipboard use, and they were familiar with the latest navigational theories, instruments and cartographic skills. The Zenos were a wealthy Venetian family of seafarers whose motive would have involved trading and the extension of state interests, including perhaps piracy and slave trading.

The story goes that some fishermen from Greenland, fishing on the Grand Banks, were caught in a storm and driven far south, only to be captured by Indians, to whom they taught the use of nets. Eventually one of the fishermen escaped and came in contact with Henry St Clair. He may have offered to act as pilot on an expedition west, but he died before departure.

In May 1398 Henry St Clair left for an expedition west, but after passing the Faeroes, received a frosty reception from the Icelanders who refused to supply water and provisions. Ten days after departure from Iceland on a fair wind land was reached to the west, probably Nova Scotia.

What is clear is that knowledge of the Atlantic and North America was far more widespread among seamen in the 14th century than has previously been realised by historians. Portuguese, Venetian, Basque, Breton and English fishermen, traders and pirates were all interested in anything which could make money. It is not surprising that they did not tell the world much!

Henry St Clair’s son, also Henry, was subsequently captured by the English in 1406, and Antonio Zeno returned home to Venice. When finally released Earl Henry II was far too embroiled in local events to possibly be able to mount another expedition to Nova Scotia, and the small colony was left to its own devices. The foundations of "Sinclair's Castle" are said to still be visible on a headland near Cape Caruso.

OR THE LEGEND OF GLOOSKAP

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He appears to have been well respected by Norse and Scots, and by 1390 had a small fleet of vessels at his disposal to look after his small fleet of vessels at his Earldom. He is said to have had a decked longship for battle, two open galleys perhaps like the Birlinn illustrated here, and up to 10 small decked barks which went to Greenland with the Orkney Bishop, during which time he surveyed much of the southern coast. On returning with the Bishop from Gardar, he died, but his brother stayed on to take part in a remarkable voyage across the Atlantic. This voyage may have been inspired by a previous expedition to Greenland and the Arctic by an English geographer, Nicholas of Lynne about 1360, which resulted in a book (Inventio Fortunatae) and a new map of the Atlantic (Pope Urban’s map), the latter produced in Venice in 1367 by the brothers Pizzigano.

At about this time also trade between England and Iceland was increasing, with much export of dried fish and import of a wide range of goods. English trade with Greenland was also developing. This in turn encouraged pirates, who not only stole goods, but also traded in slaves, to operate in the area.

The story says that most of his fleet returned home and that Henry, Antonio and some of his men returned in 1400, having repaired their ships and built a new ship locally. The Micmac Indians have a legend about "Glooskap", who is said to have sailed away home to the country of the east. There are apparently a large number of "coincidences" in the Micmac tale, which make it possible that Henry did really visit here. The real Henry, however, did not survive to develop his fledgling colony as he was killed during an English raid on Orkney shortly after his return.

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The Zeno Narrative describes a landscape very like that of Louisburg, Cape Breton Island, where an ancient cannon was discovered in 1849. This cannon is virtually identical to a 14th century Venetian cannon now in the Naval Museum at the Arsenale in Venice and the implication is that it could only have been made by Venetians, as no one else made guns like that.

What is clear is that knowledge of the Atlantic and North America was far more widespread among seamen in the 14th century than has previously been realised by historians. Portuguese, Venetian, Basque, Breton and English fishermen, traders and pirates were all interested in anything which could make money. It is not surprising that they did not tell the world much!

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Whether or not the tale has any truth in it, it is quite clear that by 1390s fishermen did know about the Grand Banks and that the Orkney Earldom was quite capable of mounting just such an expedition. Whether Henry ever did so is open to speculation.
The name “Orkney” derives from ON Orkneyjar, Seal Islands, however the “Ork” part is much more ancient. Diodorus Siculus, in about 59BC, referred to Orkney as the “Orcades”, quoting from a much earlier report by Pytheas from about 320BC. Writing in c.70AD, Pliny the Elder referred to the “Orcades” and stated that “Cape Orcas lies across the Pentland Firth from the Orcades...there are 40 Orcades separated by moderate distances.” Cape Orcas is probably Dunnet Head in Caithness.

The Old Irish name for Orkney was Inne Orc, Isles of the Orks. The Vikings also referred to Maeshowe as “Orkahowe”, suggesting that “Orc” was the totemic name of the inhabitants in former times and was recognised as such by the Norse.

In Old Irish Orcan means pig, however in Gaelic Orc also refers to a small whale or dolphin. In fact Pliny himself calls this kind of whale “orca”, and today the Orca or Killer Whale (Orchinus Orca) is still frequently seen around Orkney. It should also be noted that in Old Norse Orkn refers to “a kind of seal”.

The Vikings were nearer the mark and Ork probably means “Sea Pig” which could mean either a small whale or a seal. Wild Boars were never a major feature of Orkney but small cetaceans such as Orcas, Grampus, and other Dolphins, Pilot Whales as well as Grey and Common Seals were probably even more numerous in prehistoric times than now.

Seals or “Selkies”, (ON Sel; Seal), are also traditionally respected and the subject of much folklore in Orkney. Thus the name Orkney or Orcades most likely always meant “Seal Islands” and the people were thus “Orcs” or “Selkies”.

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<td>Mainland</td>
<td>Hrossey</td>
<td>Horse Island (from its shape)</td>
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<td>Rousay</td>
<td>Hrolfsey</td>
<td>Rolf’s Isle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Egilsay</td>
<td>Egilsay</td>
<td>Egil’s Isle or Church Isle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eynhallowow</td>
<td>Einhelga</td>
<td>Holy Isle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wyre</td>
<td>Vgr</td>
<td>Spearhead-shaped Isle</td>
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<td>Gairsay</td>
<td>Gareksey</td>
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<tr>
<td>Westray</td>
<td>Vestrey</td>
<td>West Isle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Papa Westray</td>
<td>Papa Meiri</td>
<td>Big Island of the Papar (priests)</td>
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<tr>
<td>North Ronaldsay</td>
<td>Rinansey</td>
<td>Ringan’s Isle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanday</td>
<td>Sandey</td>
<td>Sandy Isle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eday</td>
<td>Eidby</td>
<td>Isthmus Isle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stromsay</td>
<td>Strjonsey</td>
<td>Gain or Profit Isle, or Beach Isle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papa Stromsay</td>
<td>Papey Minni</td>
<td>Small Island of the Papar (priests)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shapinsay</td>
<td>Hjaldpandisey</td>
<td>Helping Isle or Hjalpandi’s Isle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helliar Holm</td>
<td>Eliarvik Holm</td>
<td>Elwick Bay or Cave (Hella) Holm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damsay</td>
<td>Daminsey</td>
<td>Twin Isle (with Holm of Grimbister)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copinsay</td>
<td>Kolbeinsey</td>
<td>Kolbein’s Isle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoy</td>
<td>Høy</td>
<td>High Isle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walls</td>
<td>Vágaland</td>
<td>Land of Bays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flotta</td>
<td>Flat-ey</td>
<td>Flat Isle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fara</td>
<td>Faer-ey</td>
<td>Sheep isle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cava</td>
<td>Kalf-ey</td>
<td>Calf Isle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graemsay</td>
<td>Grimsey</td>
<td>Grim’s Isle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burray</td>
<td>Borgarey</td>
<td>Broch Isle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Ronaldsay</td>
<td>Rognvaldsay</td>
<td>Rognvald’s Isle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swona</td>
<td>Svíney or Svofnaey</td>
<td>Swine Isle or Sweyn’s Isle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentland Skerries</td>
<td>Pettland-sker</td>
<td>Pictland Firth Skerries</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ORKNEY PLACE NAMES

The vast majority of place names in Orkney are derived from Old Norse, with a very few earlier elements. Orcadian pronunciation is distinctive, and is derived from the “Orkney Norn”. Gaelic influence never reached the islands, and despite the influx of people from other parts of Britain over the years, many of the old words have survived. This glossary includes many of the most common place name elements, but it is not exhaustive, and fuller details can be found by referring to the Further Reading section. References to many placenames is included in the text. The glossary is set out as follows:

Place name, prefix or suffix as in use today; Old Norse derivation, English translation

a, o, or; A, burn
aith; Eid, isthmus
ayre; Eyrr, gravel beach
-back; Bakki, banks
barth; Barth, projecting headland
berry; Berry, -ber; Berg, hill
bigging; Bygging, building
-bister, -bist; Bolstadir, farm, dwelling
brett-; Buster, -bister, -bist
brim; Brim, surf
bring; Bringa, breast
bro-; Bru, bridge
bu, -by; Bu, Baer, farm
-buster, -bister, -bist; Bolstadir, house
-clett, cleat; Klett, low rock, stone-built house
-croo
cumla-, -cuml
Evie
deep-, jub-
dale, -dall
firth, -ford
foul
-fell, -fea, -fiold
furs-
grut-
Grind
grut-
Hau
Haus-
hous-, -house
howe, hox-
hund
Hund-
hov-
hus-
hous-
Hus, house
kame; Kamb, ridge
-keld, kelda; Kelda, spring
kir-, kirk-, -kirk; Kirkja, church
knap; Knapp, knob, hill-top
langa-, -land; Langa, long
-lee; Hith, slope
lev; Leir, clay
ling; Lng, heather
mel-; Mel, sandbank, dunes
moul, mull; Malt, mizzle, lip
mous-, muss-, -moe; Mors, pl.mos, moor
muckle; Mykill, large, great
myre; Myri, wet meadow
-ness; Nes, nose, point
nev; Nef, small headland
noup; Noup, peak
noust; Naust, boat beaching-place
od-; Oddi, sharp point
oyce; Oss, burn-mouth
peerie, peddie; ??, small
quholm; Hvamm, grassy slope
-quo; Kvi, cattle pen
ram-, rann-; Hrafn, raven
-ret; Rey, sheepfold
ro; Raud, red
rudd; Hross, horse
scap-; Skulp, ship
seater, -setter, -ster; Setr, out-pasture
sell-; Sel, settler hut
shun; Tjorn, small loch
-skail; Skali, hall, house
skel-; Skal, soft rock
skerry; Sker, skerry
skip-; Skip, ship
skips-, Skipt, boundary
stack; Stokk, pillar rock
stem-, -stain; Steinn, stone
-ster, -sta; Snor, homestead
stove; Stofa, house
storm-; Stream, tide?stream
swart-; Svart, black
-taing; Tangi, tongue
ting; Thing, assembly
-toft, -taft; Thopt, site of dwelling
-ton, -town; Tavn, enclosure
tou; Thufa, mound
vel-, -wall; Vulfr, valley
voe-, -wall; Vagar, bay
waith; Vi, ford
ward, wart; Vards, beacon
watten; Vatn, water
wheeltha-; Hvitr, white
wick; Vi, bay
**Tapestry by Leila Thomson for J&W Tait’s 125th anniversary**

**What is an Orcadian from the Storm GMB 1954**

First the aborigines
That houked Skara Brae from the sand
Then the Picts,
Thoe small dark cunning men
Who scrolled their history in stone…
And then the tigers from the east over sea,
The blond butchering Vikings,
Whose last worry on sea or land
Was purity of race, as they staggered couchwards
After a fill of ale.

Finally, to make the mixture thick and slab,
The offscorings of Scotland,
The lowliest pimps from Lothian and the Mearns
Fawning on the train of Black Pat,
And robbing and raping ad lib,
But that’s not all.
For many a hundred ships have ripped their flanks
On Rora Head, or the Noup,
And Basque sailor lads and bearded skippers from Brittany
Left off their briny ways to cleave a furrow
Through Orkney crofts and lasses.

**The Bloody Orkneys, Cap H Blair RN.**

This bloody town’s a bloody cess --
No bloody trains, no bloody bus,
And no one cares for bloody us --
In bloody Orkney.

The bloody roads are bloody bad,
The bloody folks are bloody mad,
They’d make the brightest bloody sad,
In bloody Orkney.

All bloody clouds, and bloody rains,
No bloody kerbs, no bloody drains,
The Council’s got no bloody brains,
In bloody Orkney.

Everything’s so bloody dear,
A bloody bob, for bloody beer,
And is it good? No bloody fear,
In bloody Orkney.

The bloody flicks are bloody old,
The bloody seats are bloody cold,
You can’t get in for bloody gold,
In bloody Orkney.

The bloody dances make you smile;
The bloody band is bloody vile;
It only cramps your bloody style
In bloody Orkney.

No bloody sport, no bloody games,
No bloody fun, the bloody dames
Won’t even give their bloody names
In bloody Orkney.

Best bloody place is bloody bed,
With bloody ice on bloody head,
You might as well be bloody dead,
In bloody Orkney.

**SOME VERSE (AND WORSE)**

**What is an Orcadian from the Storm GMB 1954**

First the aborigines
That houked Skara Brae from the sand
Then the Picts,
Thoe small dark cunning men
Who scrolled their history in stone…
And then the tigers from the east over sea,
The blond butchering Vikings,
Whose last worry on sea or land
Was purity of race, as they staggered couchwards
After a fill of ale.
Finally, to make the mixture thick and slab,
The offscorings of Scotland,
The lowliest pimps from Lothian and the Mearns
Fawning on the train of Black Pat,
And robbing and raping ad lib,
But that’s not all.
For many a hundred ships have ripped their flanks
On Rora Head, or the Noup,
And Basque sailor lads and bearded skippers from Brittany
Left off their briny ways to cleave a furrow
Through Orkney crofts and lasses.

Not to speak of two world wars
And hordes of English and Yanks and Italians and Poles
Who took their stations here:
By the day the guns, by night the ancestral box-bed.
Only this morning I delivered a bairn
At Maggie O’Corsland’s
With a subtle silk-selling Krishna smile.
A fine mixter-master!
The people from each parish or island in Orkney have their own nickname or "tou-name". The name probably derives from the township, or some aspect of life there. It has long been the tradition that tou-names come from when St Magnus Cathedral was being built, but they could easily be much older. Generally amusing or mildly derogatory, they were used to refer to individuals or groups who had come to help with the construction work.

Until recently the names were in common use in the North and South Isles, especially at ferry times, when people would shout "Aucks", or "Limpets", etc. as appropriate. In wartime the Isles steamer timetables used tou-names rather than island names to lend confusion to the enemy. Some parishes have two or more tou-names, one of which is often quite rude.

### Orkney Parish Nicknames or Tou-names

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parish</th>
<th>Nicknames</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birsay</td>
<td>Dogs or Hoes, Dogfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burray</td>
<td>Oily Bogies or Bogglers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deerness</td>
<td>Skate Rumples, Skate tails are useless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eday</td>
<td>Scarf, Cormorants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egilsay</td>
<td>Burstin Lumps, Corn dried in a kettle over a fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evie</td>
<td>Cauld Kaal, Perhaps suggesting dull and uninteresting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firth</td>
<td>Oysters, The Bay of Firth was good for Oysters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flotta</td>
<td>Flukes or Greaties, Flounders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gairsay</td>
<td>Buckies or Kiddy Baas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graemsay</td>
<td>Goslings or Limpets, young geese or shellfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harray</td>
<td>Crabs, only land-locked parish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holm</td>
<td>Hobbler, people who walk with a hobble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoy</td>
<td>Hawks or Tammienories, Hawks or Puffins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longhope</td>
<td>Whelks, shellfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirkwall</td>
<td>Starlings or Scootes, Large numbers roost in the town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N Ronaldsay</td>
<td>Selkies, Tangie Wheeler or Hides, Seals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Faray</td>
<td>Spickes, Dogfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orphir</td>
<td>Yirnings or Sheep Grippers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papay</td>
<td>Dundies, thin or spent Cod</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rendall</td>
<td>Sheep Thieves, Rendall folk were said to be such</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rousay</td>
<td>Mares, a Rousay man bought mares but no stallion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanday</td>
<td>Grubie Belkies, fat bellies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandy</td>
<td>Assie Patties, one who sits by the fire poking it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scapa</td>
<td>Luggies, Lug Worm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shapinsay</td>
<td>Sheep, following along like sheep on a path</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Ronaldsay</td>
<td>Herston, Hogs, most probably Dogfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grimness, the land in Grimness is stony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sandwich, Birkies, lively folk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>St Mgs Hope, Scootes, Arctic Skua (Scootie Allan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South Parish, Teeks, Lapwing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Widewall, Witches, There were said to be many</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Walls</td>
<td>Lyres, Manx Shearwater, or muddy people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stenness</td>
<td>Merry Dancers or Skeggs, Aurora Borealis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stromness</td>
<td>Bloody Puddings, Black Puddings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stronsay</td>
<td>Limpets, of sailors who &quot;stuck to the pier like limpets&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tankerness</td>
<td>Skerry Scrapers, Shores are good for shellfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westray</td>
<td>Aucks, many aucks nest on Noup Head, shellfish which live on the shore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyre</td>
<td>Whelks, shellfish</td>
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### Orkney Population

<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birsay &amp; Harray</td>
<td>1861</td>
<td>2593</td>
<td>1390</td>
<td>1168</td>
<td>779</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eday</td>
<td>1851</td>
<td>947</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evie &amp; Rendall</td>
<td>1851</td>
<td>1455</td>
<td>731</td>
<td>564</td>
<td>670</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firth</td>
<td>1871</td>
<td>789</td>
<td>513</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>1088</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Holm</td>
<td>1881</td>
<td>1042</td>
<td>578</td>
<td>553</td>
<td>615</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hoy, Graemsay &amp; Flotta</td>
<td>1851</td>
<td>1841</td>
<td>685</td>
<td>660</td>
<td>605</td>
<td>494</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kirkwall &amp; St Ola</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>6881</td>
<td>5672</td>
<td>6881</td>
<td>7445</td>
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<tr>
<td>North Ronaldsay</td>
<td>1881</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orphir &amp; Stenness</td>
<td>1851</td>
<td>1842</td>
<td>899</td>
<td>787</td>
<td>686</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papay</td>
<td>1861</td>
<td>392</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rousay, Egilsay &amp; Wyre</td>
<td>1841</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>267</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sanday</td>
<td>1881</td>
<td>2075</td>
<td>670</td>
<td>634</td>
<td>533</td>
<td>478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandwick</td>
<td>1861</td>
<td>1225</td>
<td>832</td>
<td>777</td>
<td>779</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Shapinsay</td>
<td>1881</td>
<td>974</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Ronaldsay &amp; Burray</td>
<td>1881</td>
<td>3305</td>
<td>1248</td>
<td>1173</td>
<td>1306</td>
<td>1221</td>
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<tr>
<td>St Andrews &amp; Deerness</td>
<td>1881</td>
<td>1788</td>
<td>859</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stromness</td>
<td>1821</td>
<td>2944</td>
<td>1414</td>
<td>2160</td>
<td>2175</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stronsay</td>
<td>1871</td>
<td>1289</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>419</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westray</td>
<td>1881</td>
<td>2190</td>
<td>871</td>
<td>702</td>
<td>704</td>
<td>563</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Stenness folk are known as Merry Dancers or Skeggs
Udal Law - The Old Norse Legal System

About 1037 King Magnus The Good supervised the codification of the old laws, which of course applied to Orkney and Shetland as part of Norway. Later, in about 1274, King Magnus Lagabote (the Lawmender) was to go even further in revising and amending the law to suit the much changed times.

In essence Udal Law is totally different to Scots Law as applied to property. Udallers have absolute ownership of their land, with no superior, gained by holding the land over a number of generations, normally originally by settlement. This land was held in (unwritten) freehold, with no obligation except a duty to pay tax or skat to the king. The eldest son inherited the father’s main residence, while the rest of the property was shared among siblings, daughters inheriting half as much as sons. Over the years this led to an extreme fragmentation of land ownership and, despite reform, left Orkney wide open to exploitation.

In particular the fact that no written documents were required to substantiate possession greatly confused the Scots. The lack of Title Deeds was much used by Scottish “landlords” and their lawyers, as one of the means of grabbing lands from the real owners.

Considerable amounts of hill land are still held in this ancient manner, which can cause problems for public bodies at times.

There was a policy on the part of the Scottish Crown to acquire the Udal rights to land, because although the Scottish Parliament had “abolished” Norse Law in 1611, this could not be retrospective. Indeed in view of the pawned nature of the islands any Scottish Act over the Norse Law even now may be in doubt. Steadily Scots “landowners” acquired “ownership” of Udal lands by often dubious means, until the Udallers were very much reduced. Ironically this was eventually to lead to the downfall of the incoming laird class themselves.

The fundamental difficulty with Scotland was that the King was nominally the owner of all of the land, which was held by landlords with the Crown as superior, and with services and payments to be made, as well as a written title, whereas the Udal system was virtually the direct opposite. This remains incomprehensible to Edinburgh lawyers, well versed in Feudal Law but not in Udal Law. After the Impignoration the Udallers could no longer appeal to the King of Norway, and were thus exposed to abuse by the incoming Scots. However, now that the Scottish Parliament has abolished Feudal Law, interest has revived in the older laws. Udal Law still exists today, most apparent in the ownership of the coastline.

Whereas in the rest of Britain ownership of land extends only to the High Water mark, in Orkney and Shetland this extends to the lowest Spring ebb, plus variously as far as a stone can be thrown, or a horse can be waded, or a salmon net can be thrown.

This has enormous implications to building work, inshore fisheries and piers. Also anything arriving fortuitously on the shore is technically the property of the landowner. Naturally the lairds used Udal Law to control their lucrative Kelp-making trade.

Since the foreshore belongs to the adjacent landowner and is not Common Land, there is no absolute right of access to the inter-tidal zone in Orkney (or Shetland). However traditionally no one objects to folk going along the shore. If in doubt it is polite to ask. Norse ownership of the sea and seabed is claimed by some to have extended out to the Marebekke - the edge of the Continental Shelf - ownership of fishing, sealing and whaling rights were and
remain important. However this is a hotly debated issue which is denied by many.

Although in 1468 Orkney and in 1469 Shetland were impignorated (mortgaged) to Scotland, and annexed in 1472, there have been many confirmations of the recognition of “Norse Laws” including by the Scottish Parliament in 1567. Further, in 1667, the Treaty and Peace of Breda confirmed the right of redemption was unprescribed and thus unprescribable.

Various cases during the 19th and 20th centuries confirmed the primacy of Udal Law in certain instances, while others did not. Whereas ownership of the foreshore seems to be accepted, the position regarding the sea and seabed is undecided. In all cases to date the Scottish High Court has ruled that the Crown owns these assets, but it is hard to see how the Crown morally can rule in favour of itself in such a case.

When the owner of the Queens Hotel in Lerwick argued that he owned the foreshore, this was upheld in 1903, when Lerwick Harbour Trustees claimed that they held the land under a Crown grant. A similar case in 1953 was won by the Trustees on the basis that the property was feudal, a status which applies to some Shetland property.

One interesting anomaly is the Mute Swan. About 1910 a Kirkwall lawyer was determined to prove that Udal Law still had force, and accompanied by his friend, the Procurator Fiscal, went out to Harray Loch and shot a swan. The case went to the High Court and the Crown lost. Everywhere else in UK the Crown owned the Swans in Orkney they were, and still are, the property of the people as the Norwegian Crown never claimed such ownership. Nowadays we do not shoot swans, but the principles of the old Norse Udal Law still stand.

Udal Law was invoked in a 1965 attempt to keep the St Ninian’s Isle Treasure in Shetland when the Crown claimed it as treasure trove. Not unnaturally the Crown’s courts found in favour of itself, and now the Pictish silver languishes in Edinburgh, while visitors to Shetland can only see pale imitations.

In the mid-1970s when the Occidental Oil Company was building its pipeline to Flotta, it negotiated with the Crown Estate for rights to cross the foreshore at the end of the 4th Churchill Barrier at Cara without realising that the Crown has no authority over the intertidal zone in Orkney. The Company had apparently even paid the Crown Commissioners for a privilege that they had no authority to dispense when the landowner realised that his rights had been infringed. Thus state ignorance of Udal law continues to this day. The Crown had to admit the supremacy of Udal Law in this respect and refund their charges in favour of the actual landowner.

In 1990 the Court of Session ruled against Shetland Salmon Farmers Association and Lerwick Harbour Trust in their claim that the Crown could not own the seabed around the Northern Isles. The blatant farce of the Crown ruling for itself was of course ignored by politicians at the time. Lerwick Harbour Trust in this case argued for Udal Law, a change of position from 1903 and 1953.

More recently Udal Law again was invoked in Kirkwall by the owners of the foreshore below Shore Street when the Council decided to build a road along the foreshore. A similar situation occurred more recently with the construction of an access road and breakwater for the new Kirkwall marina, also by the Council. In both cases the local authority was forced to negotiate with the (udal) owners of the foreshore.

While this may have held up the works, it also confirmed that Udal Law is alive and well, at least in the case of the foreshore.

There has been little change in the attitude of Edinburgh lawyers in the last 600 years. They still treat Udal Law with contempt, at their continued peril! The current debate about Udal Law has been fired by the attempt of the Crown Estate to charge very large sums of "rent" for a new fibre optic cable which was to link Orkney and Shetland with Iceland and Scotland. The main result is that the cable now bypasses our islands.

Along with local concerns about the control of fishing and fish farming, it seems that the Crown is going to have a hard time until a constitutional settlement of Orkney and Shetland’s status is finally achieved - after well over 500 years of impignoration.

Orcadians and Shetlanders like to think that the classless society of today derives from the Udal tradition, where every man is equal, but also every man has an equal duty to society. We may be a mixture of Norse, Scots and others, but we are nevertheless independent by nature whateverway.
Orkney Folklore

Orkney has a rich folklore heritage that has its roots in both the Celtic and Scandinavian worlds. The Norsemen brought many of their own customs to the islands where they were mixed together with local beliefs. A whole assortment of supernatural creatures haunted both land and sea, and many tales concerning them were told during winter nights by the fire.

Fairies in Orkney are called trows, from the Old Norse word troll. They lived in mounds and would steal babies, leaving changelings in their place. They also stole away mothers who had just given birth, leaving an object that magically resembled the dead woman. This method was also used to steal cattle and horses.

They had a great love of music, and there are tales of people who entered their mounds to join a party and never returned for a year or more. There were also sea trows who stole the fish from fishermen’s hooks, sometimes they too were caught and pulled to the surface. Another mound dweller was the hogboon who brought good luck to the farm. His reward was to have offerings of food, milk or ale poured over the mound where he lived.

Attempts at bridge building by giants were pointed out, as were the huge rocks that they threw at each other. A group of dancing giants were turned to stone as they were caught in the rays of the rising sun, and can still be seen as the Ring of Brodgar. The nearby Comet Stone was the fiddler.

The sea was ruled by spirits who could bring calm or cause storms. The evil Nucklavee was the most terrifying of all the supernatural creatures. He was like a large man that had no skin, and he rode on a horse as hideous as himself as he looked for victims along the shore.

Fin Folk lived under the sea in a beautiful city called Finfolkaheem. They also resided on lovely green islands that could be seen floating on the sea. The king of the Fin Folk put a curse on the fishermen of Sandwick until he was killed at the Bay of Skaill. Burnt stones can still be seen where his body was cremated.

The Fin Folk’s women were mermaids. They were said to be the most beautiful creature ever created, though not all stories claim that they had fishes’ tails. They would try to lure a Human man to join them under the sea and become their husband. If they married a Human they would keep their beauty forever, but if they married a Fin man they would grow ugly.

Selkie Legends Seals have always been much liked by Orcadians, and although a certain amount of hunting was always done in the past, it was never judged to be good luck to kill one. There are many variations on the selkie story, where a man may take a seal-wife, by stealing her skin and hiding it while she is ashore.

They make exceptionally fine wives, but always pine for the sea and frequently escape back to it when they find their skins. It is said that when the seals come ashore they remove their skins to reveal a human form. The women are exceptionally beautiful, while the men are also very physically attractive.

The seal-women bear beautiful daughters. Sometimes unsatisfied Human wives may also take seal-men. It is said that the issue of such unions are recognisable by their features, and especially by their skin, which may be scaly. Interestingly there is never any suggestion of evil or bad intent with seal people, and seals have the reputation of saving fishermen in distress, sometimes with a deal being made about the return of their seal-wife to her own kind.

There are many legends about seals or selkies as they are called in Orkney.
**Orkney Folklore**

Thus when listening to the plaintive calls of the Grey Seal always remember that you may be listening to a seal-man or his lovely seal-wife! Selkie folk were said to be the souls of drowned people who had to roam the seas as seals. Others say that they were angels cast from Heaven, but not evil enough to be sent to Hell. They could take off their sealskins at certain times of the tide and dance on the shore in their human form.

**Birth, marriage & death**

Every stage of life was governed by a set of rules that had to be obeyed to ensure a happy life. This was especially true for births, marriages and deaths. When a woman was pregnant she would often avoid going out to ensure that the trows did not find out, as they might change the child.

The baby’s first drink had to be off silver to ensure wealth. If a silver spoon was not available, then a silver coin was placed in the spoon. The drink was normally warm water, sugar and spirits, usually whisky. A child’s fingernails could not be cut with scissors as this would mean that it would grow up to be a thief. They had to be bitten off instead.

Before a woman was married she had her feet washed in a large tub of water by her unmarried friends. A ring was dropped into the tub and the finder would be the next to marry. On the wedding day the party left the bride’s house in pairs and walked to the church. It was good luck if the wedding walk crossed running water on their way to the church, but bad luck if they met a funeral party.

Guns were fired to frighten off the trows, while the person at the end of the line, known as the tail sweeper, dragged a brush behind him to hide their tracks from evil spirits. Feasting and dancing went on all night, the dancers went with the course of the sun (clockwise). Cogs of ale were passed around all night, the last cog contained a mixture of hot ale and spirits, sweetened and spiced, called the bride’s cog. It is still used in Orkney weddings to this day.

When a person died it was bad luck to speak their name before they were buried. Cats and mirrors were removed from the house, and a candle or lamp was left burning in the room that contained the body. An open Bible helped to ward off evil, while a watch, called a “leek-wak”, was carried out night and day by the family and friends of the deceased.

The coffin was carried to the kirkyard, but it could never touch the ground, as this was bad luck. There were low stone walls at regular intervals so the bearers could rest. Daily life, work and festivals had their customs, and if you look closely you can still find many surviving to the present day.

**History & Culture**

Beggars sold prophecies for food

Stromness Distillery suggests that its product might even make the wife like boats!

Standing stone with a hole

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The transfer of the Bishopric from Nidaros in Norway to St Andrews in 1472, and later the Reformation further broke the connection with Norway. The presentation during the Cathedral’s 800th anniversary, by the Bishop of Nidaros, of a Statue of St Olav, shows that connections remain, in spirit at least.

The oldest surviving rental (ON riggarental, the runrig system of land division) records date from Henry Sr Clair’s detailed survey of 1492 and provide a fascinating insight into the pattern of land tenure at the time. At this time the traditional Udal practices were giving way to something more like the rest of Scotland as the majority of the land was now held either by the Scottish Crown or Scottish Church, and thus most farmers were tenants.

Henry St Clair, was killed at Flodden in 1513, and was succeeded by the locally-elected Sir William Sinclair of Warsetter, Sanday. Sinclair family feuding between the Caithness and Orkney family branches resulted in the Battle of Summerdale in Orphir in 1528, where the son of the previous Earl, another William Sinclair, enlisted the help of the Lord of Caithness. The Caithness men were roundly defeated, but the feud was not resolved.

In 1567 the Scottish Parliament ruled that Orkney & Shetland should be subject to and enjoy their ‘own’ Udal Law rather than Scots Law. In 1575-7 the Orkney Lawbook was produced for the Scots Privy Council, its last recorded sighting. From now on Scottish influence gradually eroded the Udal Law, and the Old Norn language as Orkney was steadily assimilated.