

EAST MAINLAND - COPINSAY



Aerial view of Copinsay from the north

COPINSAY (ON *Kolbeinsey*, Kolbein's island) is a small wedge-shaped island off the east side of Deerness with a mile-long 70m-high cliff on its east side which is a major breeding ground for sea birds. Copinsay and its holms now form an **RSPB Reserve**. The east-facing cliff is dark and brooding, but with deep water close-to can be visited by boat.

Seabird city is noisy, smelly and very busy in early summer. Although lower than Marwick Head, this cliff is in many ways just as spectacular. About 35,000 pairs of Guillemots, Razorbills and Kittiwakes breed on the convenient ledges of the cliffs, as well as Shags, Rock Doves,

many Fulmars and a few Ravens. In the past, Peregrines also bred here. Corncrakes still may be heard in the long grass below the cliffs. The small loch at the south end is attractive to wildfowl and waders.

Grey Seals come ashore to pup on Copinsay in the autumn and are present here all year. This small colony became established in 1992 and has grown very substantially since then. The seals lie up on the skerries near the jetty.

The islands have good examples of unimproved sub-maritime and coastal inundation grasslands with a number of distinct vegetation zones.

The cultivated area has been reseeded with special mixtures designed to attract birds. For a time Copinsay was ungrazed, but this was not a success as the grass became rank and tussocky. Despite the exposure the island has lush pasture, well-suited to cattle and sheep.

Lighthouse The lighthouse was completed in 1915, but only permanently lit in 1919, after World War I, and completed the lighting on the east side of Orkney for shipping. It was automated in 1991. Originally there was a large foghorn which was operated by compressed air. It was replaced by a much smaller device but this was in turn discontinued.

South Bay and Isle Rough at low tide



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During the 1930s the Commissioners were doing their annual rounds. One of them deigned to speak with some of the natives, who were some of the Groat family. Several peedie boys were at the top of the cliff with a horsehair rope at the end of which one brother was collecting birds' eggs. The visitor was astonished and asked what they would do if the rope broke and the little boy fell. The answer was "*Ah weel there's plenty more o'wis*". Another version is "*there's plenty more rope*".

The island used to support a large family and had its own school in one of the rooms of the house. Below the farmhouse, midden and old walls are exposed on the low bank facing the sea and are eroding away, showing that this fertile island was occupied in ancient times. There used to be excellent Haddock fishing in the South Bay, and the many creel buoys show that the area is still good for crabs and lobsters.

Copinsay is about 5.5km (3.5 miles) from Sandside in Deerness and a delightful



Copinsay from the east

island to visit, especially in early summer when the birds are nesting and the wild flowers are at their best. The lighthouse pier below the farmhouse is a convenient landing, but the approach through the skerries of the North Ebb requires care and knowledge of the leading marks. It also ebbs dry. The Bight of Hamnavo on the west side of Corn Holm is a better anchorage.

The **HORSE OF COPINSAY** has a large colony of Great Black-backed Gulls, and immature Gannets roost. Cormorants have also bred here. Hard to reach because of the strong tides around it, the Horse is a must for all "island-baggers". This large rock, 28m high, has a Blaster Hole at the north end, which is very spectacular in rough weather, if visible in the spray.



Copinsay cliffs and lighthouse from the north

Looking north towards North View and The Horse



Copinsay lighthouse



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December sunrise over Copinsay from Newark Bay

CORN or **KIRK HOLM** is very good for Puffins, and has the remains of an ancient chapel. It can be reached at low tide from Copinsay by **Isle Rough**, a well-named ayre, or storm beach, of large stones, which ebbs dry. There is a colony of Great Black-backed Gulls, as well as many Eiders and Oystercatchers. The Bight of

Hamnavo, on the west side, is an excellent place to observe Puffins, Black Guillemots and seals up close, while the shingle of Scarf Skerry is home to perhaps the largest colony of Oyster Plant in Orkney.

The Belgian trawler *Prince De Liege*, ran aground on the eastern tip of Corn Holm in



Wreck of the "Prince De Liege" on Corn Holm

Oysterplant grows abundantly on the shingle



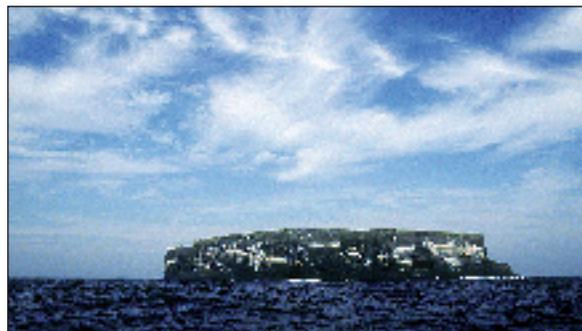
December 1962, having mistaken Copinsay for Auskerry. The bow is now lying high and dry on the east of Corn Holm. Most of the vessel was salvaged.

BLACK HOLM is made of black volcanic rock and is joined to Corn Holm by a shingle storm beach. A Bronze Age cist was discovered here. **WARD HOLM** has two prominent cairns, one of which is probably on top of a Neolithic chambered cairn and is accessible at low tide.. The whole little island group is in a way Orkney in miniature and well worth the effort required to get there. Boat trips are sometimes arranged from Sandside in Deerness.

Puffins breed on Copinsay and the holms



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Horse of Copinsay from the east



Copinsay lighthouse



There is now a substantial colony of Grey Seals on Copinsay

Gannets roosting on the Horse of Copinsay



The Copinsay Brownie

Long ago Copinsay was inhabited by an unmarried farmer. One winter's night he had an unusual visitor who was naked and extremely ugly. It had an odd-shaped bald head, a beard which looked like seaweed and gave off a faint iridescence.

Thinking that the visitor was supernatural, the farmer grabbed his psalm book and made a circle in the air with his steel razor, but this did not scare the visitor, which calmly watched him and made strange noises..

Attempts to scare off the strange creature with the poker and his shepherd's crook had no effect. Eventually the two became friends and the *Brownie* as he became know explained that he was called "*Hughbo*". He had spent his whole life in the sea living off the bones of drowned seamen, but dearly wished to stay ashore.

The *Brownie* agreed to grind corn for the farmer every night in return for a bowl of milk and a handful of *burstin* - toasted barley. All went well until the farmer married and took his new bride to live on Copinsay. The wife took pity on the naked *Brownie* and made him a warm coat with a hood, which she left for him on the quernstone.

When *Hughbo* saw the coat he immediately began crying bitterly and said over and over, "*Hughbo's gotten coat and hood, So Hughbo can do no more good*", whereupon he shot outside, never to reappear.