

WEST MAINLAND - FIRTH



FINSTOWN, on the main Kirkwall to Stromness road, is Orkney's third largest settlement. It was formerly called "Toon o'Firth", but the became "Phinstown" after an Irish soldier named David Phin, who arrived in Orkney in 1811 when he was transferred to the 9th Royal Veteran Battalion. Phin married a Kirkwall girl in 1813 and in 1820 he made an agreement with John Miller of Millquoy to open an ale house which was called the "Toddy Hole", now the Pomona Inn. In

1824 the two fell out and Phin went to Aberdeen but the name stuck despite the short time the Phins stayed in Finstown.

There is a very fine panoramic view over Finstown and the Bay of Firth from the Heddle Road (HY359133), before it passes a large quarry. The islands of **Holm of Grimbister** and **Damsay** (ON *Daminsey*) lie in the Bay of Firth. The latter takes its name from a Celtic word, *Dímun*, which refers

Finstown and the Bay of Firth from Wideford Hill



to twin islands. There are ruins on Damsay of a chapel, which was reputed to have healing powers. The *Orkneyinga Saga* describes church buildings and a castle there in Viking times.

Binscarth plantations were created in the 19th century and this remains one of the few areas of woodland in Orkney. A good place for finding migrant birds, the woods are very colourful in springtime when the blue-bells come into flower. Below the wood, is the picturesque Old Mill, which is still complete, though it no longer grinds corn.

The Ouse (ON *Oss*, tidal estuary) is open to the sea at the east end, where the bridge is a popular place to fish for Sea Trout. Nearby there is a large broch mound with a somewhat incongruous World War II pillbox on top. There is a pleasant walk around the Ouse, which is a good place to observe wading birds, waterfowl and swans. Otters are also sometimes seen here.

Longer walks A public right of way leads from Finstown, through the woods, to the Refuge Corner in Harray. The Loch of Wasdale has an ancient ruin on a small islet on the south-east side, and is another good place to see wildfowl.

A fairly strenuous walk takes the road up past Cruan

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Aerial view of Finstown from the west with Binscarth foreground, the Ouse centre and the Bay of Firth background

and along the track to the top of Keelylang (HY378102, 221m) with its TV and radio masts. There are excellent views along the way of the Bay of Firth and a wonderful panorama of Scapa Flow, the Mainland and the North Isles from the top. The name means long keel. In early summer many species of moorland birds can be seen from this track.



Tinkers camping on the site of the present community hall in the 1920s

On the Redland Road is a well-preserved 19th century farmstead, Langalour (HY369168), now done-up. This longhouse is typical of old Orkney farms, where the people slept in neuk beds in the walls, and shared the

premises with their animals. In 1920 John Firth of Finstown published a book "*Reminiscences of an Orkney Parish*". This book, reprinted in 1974, gives a good insight into the life of

the 18th and 19th centuries in Orkney. The Farm Museums at Kirbuster in Birsay and Corrigan in Harray allow visitors to experience some of this old farm and folk life.

Aerial view of Damsay with its ruined buildings



Iron Age broch mound at the entrance to the Ouse

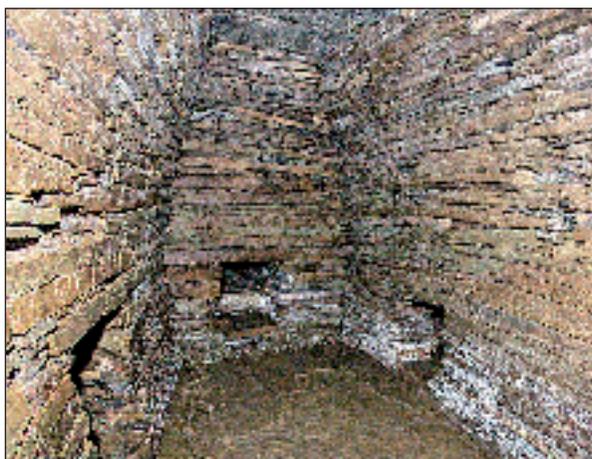


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Archaeology Firth has several prehistoric sites. **Cuween chambered cairn** (HY363127) dates from the third millennium BC. The tomb is similar to Maeshowe, with a long entry passage, a large rectangular main chamber and four small cells. When opened in 1901 the remains of at least eight burials were found as well as 24 dog skulls and many other animal bones.

The entry passage, cells and chamber were entirely filled with material. The top layer was stony debris and animal bones, while the bottom 0.3m was filled with a "fatty unctuous substance" and human bones. The entry passage faces due east, directly towards Quanterness cairn and the rising Autumn Equinox sunrise.

Two Neolithic domestic sites have been excavated recently, one at Stonehall, and the other at Rennibister. Iron Age Stonehall lies down the hill from Cuween



Cuween chambered cairn is superbly built with a rock floor



The entrance passage is roofed by large slabs set on end

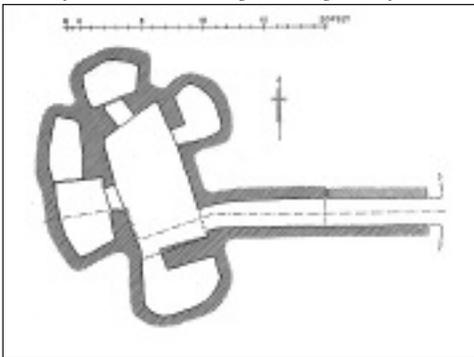
and seems to have consisted of a loose cluster of houses, the earliest of which dates to 3800BC. Of greatest interest were a number of structures which did not have fireplaces, and thus were probably not houses.

Excavation work below Wideford Hill



Sigurd Towrie

Plan of Cuween cairn showing the arrangement of chambers

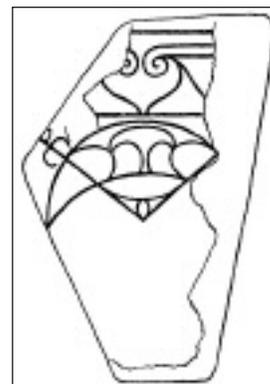


RCAHMS

MAINLAND - FIRTH

FIRTH ATTRACTIONS

Finstown
Binscarth plantations
The Ouse
Hedde viewpoint
Loch of Wasdale
Keelylang
Redland Road
Finstown broch
Redland broch
Burness broch
Chapel Knowe
Ingashowe broch
Cuween chambered cairn
Stonehall settlement
Rennibister earth house
Rennibister Neolithic site
Holm of Grimbister
Damsay



Redland Pictish symbol stone



Sigurd Towrie

Post holes in Neolithic building

Perhaps these buildings had some "ritual" function.

The Rennibister site below Wideford Hill revealed the foundations of a Neolithic house similar to the Knap of Howar on Papay. Unstan Ware pottery shards, stone axes and tools as well as flint were all found. The remains of another building nearby consisted of a number of large post-holes but no stone foundations. This was probably the site of a substantial early wooden building, the first of its kind so far found in Orkney. The houses were dated to about 3900BC.

Iron Age At Rennibister (HY397127) there is also an Iron Age souterrain, or earth house, in the middle of the farmyard, (please park in space provided and do not obstruct farmer), which was found to be full of black earth, shells and human bones. Earth houses were common from about 600 BC and were used as storage cellars for Iron Age Round Houses. Unfortunately nothing now remains of the associated house.

Brochs Firth has a number of broch mounds which continue the series in Evie and Rendall. They run from Burness to the Oyce and on to Ingashowe. There is also an inland broch below Redland. None have been examined in recent times, but a Pictish symbol was found at Redland in the 19th century. The Burness Broch is called Chapel Knowe, yet another instance of a medieval chapel being built beside a broch.

Ingashowe Broch



Rennibister Earth House

