

SMALL SOUTH ISLES - CAVA, FARA & SWITHA



Laurie Campbell

Greenland Barnacle Geese roost on Switha in the winter

CAVA (ON *Kalf-ey*, Calf Isle). This small island has a lighthouse on the north end and it was around it that the capital ships of the German High Seas Fleet were moored and scuttled.

There is a record of a murder taking place in 1774, when William Mallich killed Hugh Inksetter after a fight. Pirate Gow is said to have left two Stromness girls on the island after leaving Stromness in 1725. They were said to be "well treated" and to have been put ashore with a pile of presents. Whether they had "unwanted gifts" nine months later is unrecorded.

The lighthouse was installed

in 1898. Originally it was a 9.5m cast-iron tower, but this was replaced by a modern fibreglass structure in 1988. Materials and men were transported in by helicopter.

FARA (ON *Faer-ey*, Sheep Island). is situated between Hoy and Flotta was once inhabited by several families, but was deserted in 1947. It is well named as sheep are its only inhabitants today. The island is quite lightly grazed and in summer the grassy heath is full of wild flowers. Waders, Red Grouse and a few Arctic Terns nest here.

A large detachment of troops looked after six barrage balloon sites and an anti-aircraft

gun position on Fara in World War II. A narrow gauge railway partially encircled the island. It was used to move ammunition for the guns and hydrogen bottles for the balloons.

Small flat cars were towed by a 20hp Ruston Hornsby locomotive. Although it and all of the track were scrapped in the late 1970s, the route of the track can still be made out. The hydrogen was shipped across from Rinnigill on Hoy. A large gas-production plant was built there, and was ready for operation in 1944, just in time for the barrage balloons to be relocated to London.

Aerial view of Fara from the south



Ruined farmstead, Fara



SMALL SOUTH ISLES - CAVA, FARA & SWITHA



"Hoy Head" passing Cava Lighthouse on its way to Lyness

SWITHA (ON *Swein-ey*, Sweyn's or Sow Isle) is small island to the east of Cantick Head. It is the winter roost for a large flock of Greenland Barnacle Geese (*Branta leucopsis*), which feed on neighbouring South Walls. About 1,000 of these geese winter here, or about 4% of the UK population. Switha is designated as an SPA to protect them.

There is an Arctic Tern colony and Leach's Petrel have been seen here in the summer. The coastline is mostly rocky with low cliffs but there is a shingle beach at the southeast end, The Pool, where seals haul out. A few Grey Seals come ashore on Switha to pup and mate in autumn.

Two standing stones and a possible chambered cairn suggest that Switha may possibly have been used in Neolithic times for burials. The Noust of Switha is less than 2km from Kirk Bay on Flotta, while The Pool is the same distance from Kirk Hope, making the island easily accessible by small boat.



Lifeboat helicopter installing a new minor light on Cava



Aerial view of Cava, Fara and Longhope from the northeast

Aerial view of Switha and Cantick Head from the northeast



SOUTH ISLES - GRAEMSAY



Hoy High lighthouse with Stromness in the background

GRAEMSAY (ON *Grimsey*, Grimr's Isle) lies between Hoy and Stromness and remains completely unspoilt. It is separated from the Mainland by Hoy Sound and from Hoy by Burra Sound, both of which have strong tides, and thus it guards the western entrance to Scapa Flow. The ferry which serves Moaness in the north of Hoy also serves Graemsay.

Geology Outcrops of basement rocks occur rarely in Orkney, but these very old granite schist rocks, often with lumps of whitish quartz are prominent on the north coast of Graemsay, between the Point of Oxan and the Bay of Sandside. The same

rocks form Brinkie's Brae in Stromness and also appear at Yesnaby. The rest of the island is composed of Lower Stromness flags, as is much of the western part of Stromness parish. This does not weather to very fertile soil and as a result much of Graemsay is grassy heath.

Lighthouses In the late 1840s two lighthouses, Hoy High and Hoy Low, were built to act as leading lights to the western approaches of Hoy Sound to clear the submerged Bow Rock of Hoy and Kirk Rocks off Warebeth. At that time there was no pier on the island, so a slipway was built at the Bay of Sandside. Stone from the North Isles was cut

at the Point of Ness in Stromness and by 1851 the lights were operational.

Hoy Low was automated in 1966, while Hoy High waited until 1978. Graemsay is quite different to any other island in Orkney and has a charm all to itself. Covered in wild flowers in summer, it makes a very pleasant stroll on a fine day. The Bay of Sandside is particularly attractive for a picnic lunch, and never crowded!

In the past many of the Graemsay men went to sea, but with the demise of the Hudson's Bay connection, Arctic Whaling and the Iceland Fishery, the population has now dwindled from over 200 to under 30.

Shipwreck The full-rigged ship *Albion* became a total loss on the Point of Oxan, with the loss of 11 people on 1st January 1866. Graemsay man Joseph Mowat was drowned during the rescue in the bay. He is buried in the Graemsay kirkyard. Broken pottery from the ship's cargo can still be found along the

The ferry "Graemsay" serves Hoy and Graemsay



Hoy High Lighthouse from the Point of Ness, Stromness



SOUTH ISLES - GRAEMSAY



Aerial view of Graemsay from the west with Hoy Low Lighthouse, Bay of Sandside and Hoy High Lighthouse

shore at Oxan. The event led to the basing of a lifeboat at Stromness the following year.

Coastal Defence Hoy Low must be the only lighthouse anywhere with its own gun battery! The twin 6-pounder battery, with watch tower and magazine was installed at the Point of Oxan in 1943, as they were no longer needed in Burray once the Barriers had reached sufficient height.

Four searchlights mounted

on twin mountings were also positioned there, but the gun emplacement had no overhead cover. The whole complex makes an interesting visit and there are good views of the Hoy Hills, Stromness and Hoy Sound from the director tower.



Hoy Low Lighthouse and Coastal Defence Battery, Point of Oxan

WWII twin 6-pounder mounting, Point of Oxan, Graemsay

