

Sacred spaces of Orkney

Spații sacre din Orkney

Hugh Busher

A holiday visit we had been planning for several years –
2021 gave us the chance to see the Neolithic stones and artefacts of
Orkney

O vizită de vacanță pe care o plănuim de câțiva ani -
2021 ne-a oferit șansa de a vedea pietrele și artefactele neolitice din
Orkney

The British Isles,
showing the **Orkney
islands** top right, just
North East of
Scotland - nearly
under the cloud -,
France bottom right
and **Ireland**, the large
island to the West



The location of Orkney in the British Isles

- The Orkney archipelago is made up of about 70 islands. 20 of these are inhabited, the largest of which is called 'Mainland', where we stayed. This island has an area of 523 square kilometres (202 sq mi), making it the sixth-largest Scottish island and the tenth-largest island in the British Isles.
- It is over 985 kms (600 miles) North from where we live in Nottingham, England, but we have a convenient staging post near Edinburgh, Scotland where some of our family live
- Orkney's largest settlement, and its administrative centre, is Kirkwall. We stayed in Stromness, another main ferry port to the West of Kirkwall.

Orkney — just North East of Scotland



Arriving in Orkney

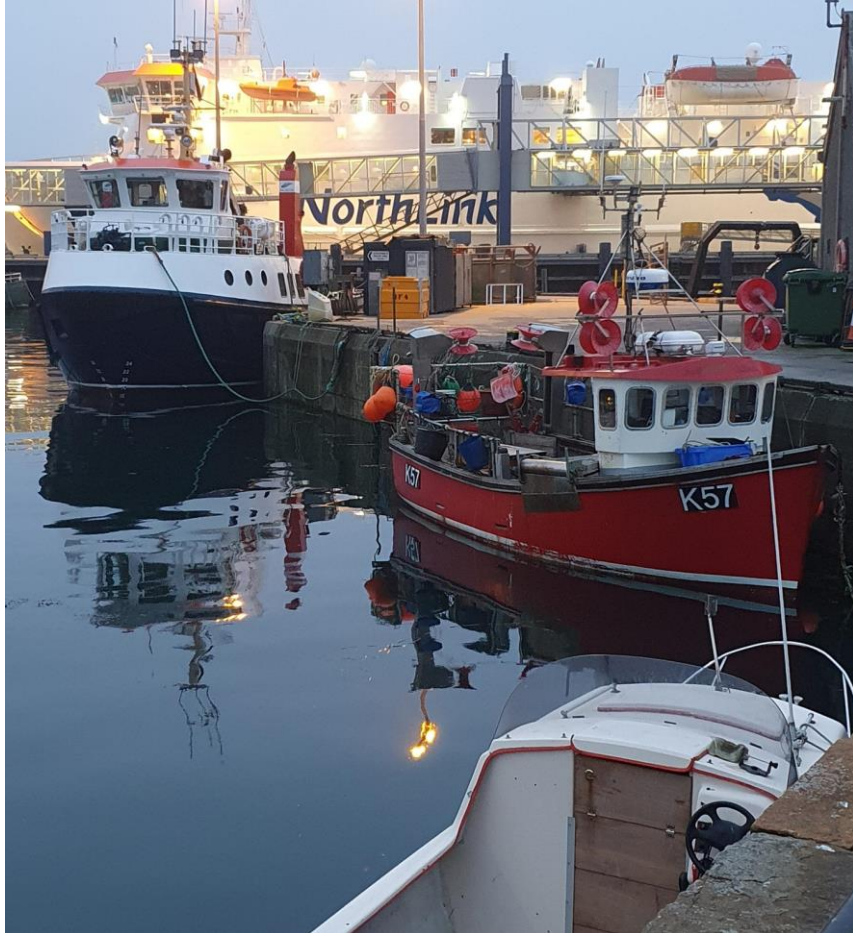
After crossing the Pentland Firth from Scrabster, on the northern most tip of mainland Scotland, near Thurso and John O' Groats, we passed a huge rock, known as the Old Man of Hoy, among the cliffs of the isle of Hoy, one of the islands of the Orkney archipelago, which protects the port of Stromness from the Atlantic storms. From here we explored the largest isle of the Orkneys known as the 'mainland'.





Old Man of Hoy

Stromness harbour





Stromness

The Stones of Stenness

- The stones of Stenness are on a neck of land between Loch Harray and Loch Stenness, near the main road from Stromness to Kirkwall, the capital of Orkney. These enormous standing stones are around 5,500 years old and include a hearth stone where it is thought sacrifices were made. Near to them is the remains of a village where the stones' builders, who are thought to have come from Europe may have lived, bringing with them the flourishing Orkney vole. Its nearest genetic relative lives in the Netherlands. Like the houses at Skara Brae, another nearby Neolithic village, people lived communally rather than in single families. Near the Stones of Stenness is an impressive burial mound, now known as Maeshow, but nobody knows who was buried there.



Stenness monoliths



Scale of stone

Hearth Stone





Neolithic house



Houses at Skara Brae

Epicentre of a sacred landscape

Not far from Stenness, on a hillock overlooking the Lochs, is the Ring of Brodgar, a circle of 36 stones built around 2,500 BCE. They are thought to have been the centre of a religious cult for centuries. They pre-date Stonehenge in England and are thought to have led to its construction. The Ring of Brodgar is a popular stop for tourists, whether family travellers, or coach parties that come over for the day by ferry from John O' Groats to South Ronaldsay, an island that is tied to the 'mainland' of Orkney by a barrage that was built to protect naval ships during the Second World War or from the cruise liners that stop in Kirkwall.



A sacred landscape



Part of the
Ring of
Brodgar



Ring of
Brodgar
standing
stones





Tourists Ring of Brodgar/ Loch Harray



St Magnus Cathedral

St Magnus Cathedral, in Kirkwall, was founded in 1137 by Earl Rognvald, in honour of his uncle, the martyred St Magnus. There is still a strong Viking/ Norwegian influence in Orkney, as the Orkney flag shows that hangs in the North Transept. The Cathedral is built of rich, red-coloured sandstone, with narrow beautifully decorated windows high up to help it defend itself. The West front is currently under repair.





St Magnus Cathedral Choir



St Magnus
Cathedral
North Transept



West Front
currently
under repair

Highland Park Distillery

- On the south side of Kirkwall is another 'sacred' site, at least for those who like drinking whisky!: the Highland Park distillery. The first two photographs show the entrance to the distillery and the old drying room for the barley. The barley comes from the Black Isle, not from Orkney. The second two photographs show the outside of the Still room – we were not allowed to photograph inside - where the barley and water is distilled and turned into whisky before being placed in the Barrel Store where it is laid down in barrels to mature for several years.

Highland Park Distillery





The Still room and the whisky
store



Farewell to Stromness*

A few days later, we packed our bags and headed to the harbour in Stromness to catch the ferry back to Scrabster, Scotland. We had had an excellent week exploring the fascinating main island of Orkney, and enjoying its food and hospitality.

* Title of a piece of music by Peter Maxwell-Davies