THE ORAL HISTORY OF THE NORTH ISLES

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Summary Report
Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................................... 3
Project Background, Aims and Objectives ...................................................................................... 3
Outputs ........................................................................................................................................... 4
The Interviews ................................................................................................................................ 5
   Interviewers ................................................................................................................................ 5
   Selection of Informants ............................................................................................................... 5
   The Fieldwork .............................................................................................................................. 5
   The Challenges ............................................................................................................................ 6
The Responses ................................................................................................................................ 6
   Overarching Themes ................................................................................................................... 7
      Changing Quality of Life ........................................................................................................... 7
      Farming .................................................................................................................................... 7
      The Orkney Dialect .................................................................................................................. 7
      Interest in the Culture and Heritage of the islands ................................................................. 7
      Issues affecting the islands ...................................................................................................... 7
      Integration and Community Life .............................................................................................. 8
Project Evaluation ........................................................................................................................... 8
Summary and Conclusion ............................................................................................................... 9
   A personal viewpoint from the report’s author .......................................................................... 9
Excerpts from Interviews .............................................................................................................. 10
Appendix 1 - Interview Guidelines ................................................................................................ 25
Introduction

The *Oral History of the North Isles* project was created to document and capture the social, economic and cultural history of the North Isles of Orkney *(Figure 1)* through their oral history. The project was one of a number of projects delivered by and funded through the North Isles Landscape Partnership Scheme (NILPS).

The North Isles have a varied and unique history. Their inhabitants have many stories to tell about their experiences and their past – their ancestors, the local landscape, the industries they have witnessed and worked in, and the changes they have seen in their communities over the years. Through a series of face-to-face interviews, the project set out to gather some of these narratives of past events and recollections across generations of the North Isles of Orkney. It was hoped that this would help those living in the Isles understand what has shaped the island they now live in, and how the memories, experiences and reminiscences from bygone times can inform the present.

Using both existing archives and new material gathered by interviewing island residents across a wide age range, the project has produced an archive of material, available for future researchers, as well as both digital and conventional reports.

Project Background, Aims and Objectives

The current project is one of a number of projects delivered by the North Isles Landscape Partnership Scheme (NILPS). NILPS was created to support life in Orkney’s North Isles, while ‘conserving and raising awareness of their distinctive identities, heritage and culture’ *(About NILPS | North Isles Landscape Partnership Scheme)*.

The aims and outcomes of the Oral History project are encapsulated in NILPS’s four key themes: celebration of island life and culture, exploring island landscapes, conserving islander knowledge and supporting island communities. The main aims of the Oral History of the North Isles project, then, were:

- To document the social, economic, and cultural history of the North Isles through their oral history.
- To discover what values are placed on the heritage and culture of the islands.
- To explore what the residents of the islands perceive about the stories from past generations of islanders.
• To identify past and present connections between the different islands.
• To investigate the importance of the use of Orkney dialect and to explore the various dialects within each community.

The aims were met through the following objectives:

• Capturing the oral history of the North Isles and disseminating the results through audio recordings or digital downloads.
• Exploring and consolidating the existing information held in the Orkney Sound Archive, recorded from 1960-1990, along with other material held by local organisations on the islands.
• Identifying and documenting crucial links that have developed between the North Isles during the past 100 years and the inter-dependency of the North Isles and their relationship with the Orkney mainland.
• Exploring how heritage and culture has shaped the island dialects.
• Investigating external influences such as movement of people, greater mobility within Orkney and beyond and the impact of modern communications on a rural way of life.
• Increasing the inter-generational activity on the islands and encouraging young people living in the Isles to participate.

Outputs

The main outputs of the *Oral History of the North Isles* project are the North Isles Sound Archive and an accompanying project report, digital copies of the interviews, the summary transcriptions and consent forms. These materials have been deposited with the Orkney Library and Archive at and will be held in a single collection. All materials authorised for public view will be freely available in the Orkney Library and Archive so that North Isles’ heritage centres and communities can make use of the materials generated to suit their own requirements. Orkney Library and Archive are responsible for the dissemination and administration of this material and currently offer free copies of digital recordings to heritage centres throughout Orkney.

This report provides a summary of the project and is intended to accompany and provide context for the archive. It also acts as an evaluation of the project itself. Hard copies of this report will be held in each island’s community or heritage centre and a digital version hosted on the UHI Archaeology Institute website ([https://archaeologyorkney.com/gaan-nort/](https://archaeologyorkney.com/gaan-nort/)) so that it is made widely available to a range of audiences.
The Interviews

INTERVIEWERS
Interviewers were chosen after a selection process although the original team changed during the period of postponement. The interviews were based on the guidelines outlined in Appendix 1. Due to Covid restrictions, staff training for the interviews took place virtually. The team were able to develop their own style due to local knowledge and familiarity with the islanders. Dr Tom Rendall was the Project Leader and was responsible for all the planning and collation of interviews and transcriptions. He interviewed 48 informants from different islands. Ailsa Seatter carried out 20 interviews in Westray while Arran Macdonald interviewed 12 people in total from Sanday, Eday and Stronsay. Jonathan Ford undertook 7 interviews in his home island of Papa Westray while Sarah Jane Gibbon and Olly Gibb did one interview each – in Rousay and North Ronaldsay respectively.

SELECTION OF INFORMANTS
During the autumn of 2019, I visited heritage centres in Sanday, Westray, Rousay and Eday and had meetings with Development Groups in Stronsay and Papa Westray. In addition, I contacted people in North Ronaldsay and Shapinsay to outline the project. In October 2019, the North Isles Landscape Partnership Scheme held a seminar in Sanday where there were representatives for several of the North Isles.

The contacts established at all of the above visits led to further discussions with islanders and, subsequently, lists were compiled for potential interviewees. Although the pandemic and the restrictions resulted in a long delay in starting the interviews, in the spring of 2021, I was able to plan a programme of interviews throughout the North Isles. People were selected from different age groups and backgrounds, including folk who had lived in Orkney all their lives and people who have moved to the islands over the years.

Former residents of the islands were included to investigate how moving away has influenced their views and ideas of island life. People who have moved into Orkney were also interviewed to provide yet another perspective.

THE FIELDWORK
Overall, the fieldwork was extremely successful, and the interviews provide valuable information on a variety of aspects of life in the North Isles. All of the respondents were co-operative and spoke freely and eloquently on a wide variety of topics. The average interview duration was 35 minutes, although some interviews were slightly longer, lasting more than 40 minutes.
All the interviewers enjoyed speaking to the folk in the islands. The informants were all willing to give up their time and share the wide range of experiences which have shaped their lives. Some of the younger respondents were a little reticent and did not provide lengthy responses, but their contributions were relevant and useful.

THE CHALLENGES

The main challenge for the project was the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020 and the ensuing pandemic. After the preparatory work carried out in 2019, candidates for the interviewers’ posts were appointed in early March 2020 but by the end of that month, the country was in lockdown. The project was put on hold as it was not possible to travel to interview people in the islands or meet people face-to-face. When work on the project restarted in the summer of 2021, three of the original interviewers were not able to carry out any work and replacements had to be recruited in a short space of time. The majority of interviews were carried out by Ailsa Seatter from Westray, Arran Macdonald and myself, Tom Rendall.

Although 89 interviews were carried out, a further challenge was the completion of full transcriptions. At the conclusion of the project, 87 interviews have been fully transcribed with the other two summarily transcribed.

The Responses

A broad range of topics were discussed across the 87 interviews. Discussion focused on the different stages of everyday lives, for example, school days and childhood experiences were a starting point to establish a basis from which the interviews could continue. Following on from this, and in chronological order, employment and education were covered to create opportunities to explore sub-themes linked to experiences within working and academic life.

Six overarching themes emerged during the interviews and as the fieldwork developed: Changing Quality of Life, Farming, Orkney dialect, Interest in the Culture and Heritage of the islands, Issues affecting the islands and Integration and Community Life. These themes are highlighted in the ‘Excerpts from Interviews’ section below.

It is important to highlight that this was a project with a wide diversity of possible pathways, and other themes emerged during discussions with stakeholders. encompassing several branches of culture, including folklore, dialect, attitudes to the past, archaeology, social history, and geographical factors. Other subjects included memories of small industries in the isles, the impact of tourism, changes in farming, marine activities around the islands and the demographic changes which have taken place over the last 100 years or so. Inter-dependency and inter-island
relationships were explored as well as the islands’ relationships with the mainland of Orkney, and how both sets of relationships have been impacted by the introduction of the roll-on/roll-off ferry service to most of the islands.

Reflective reminiscences revealed undiscovered material on life in the islands, including personal viewpoints and unique experiences. These offered valuable insights into the diversity of island life and, indeed, how one island differs from the other in terms of community, and cohesion between parishes and districts.

**OVERARCHING THEMES**

**Changing Quality of Life**

This theme deals with the ways in which the quality of life has changed over the years, for example, people recalling some of the hardships of living in the isles.

**Farming**

Farming was a recurrent theme, focusing on the significant developments over the years, such as moving from working “wae horse” to the peedie Fergie to the large expensive machines of the present day.

**The Orkney Dialect**

The ways in which the Orkney dialect is used and how it is understood along with its potential demise was a prominent theme, and also touched on how people felt about the use of the vernacular within the framework of the modern age.

**Interest in the Culture and Heritage of the islands**

A significant theme that emerged was people’s interest in the culture and heritage of the islands, and how they have been involved in promoting this within their own island. Assessing this interest was one of the main aims of the project.

**Issues affecting the islands**

Issues affecting the North Isles were covered with the future of the ferry service and what could or should be done a key feature of the responses. Employment opportunities was also spoken about especially in the smaller islands where the economy relies on folk having sufficient income.

Despite the challenges it created for the project, the impact of Covid-19 and how this affected the North Isles in terms of travel provided an interesting area of discussion. The importance of community support was a key feature of how the pandemic affected the islands. Since 2020, the
islanders have generally worked together for the good of the whole community and it seems that the pandemic has cemented relationships within the North Isles.

**Integration and Community Life**

The theme of integration and community life was explored through discussion of demographic issues and the impact of people moving to the isles from other parts of the UK and the world. The future of the North Isles was mentioned with a lot of positivity and hope for the continuation of viable communities throughout the isles.

Whether the informants had spent their lives in the islands or have moved to Orkney and settled here, they all had a similar attitude towards the quality of life in the North Isles. The islanders all had a sense of belonging – a feeling that the islands were and are an integral part of their lives.

**Project Evaluation**

Overall, the project was extremely successful. Despite the difficult circumstances due to Covid-19 measures, 89 interviews were carried out across all of the North Isles, covering a broad range of Isles’ residents and a wide range of topics.

In assessing the challenges, with hindsight, perhaps more time could have been spent on planning interviews and achieving a more balanced age range of people interviewed.

The decision to undertake full transcriptions for each of the interviews has provided a great resource for the islands, although the logistics of getting the transcriptions typed up proved challenging, which led to a delay in distributing the recordings to the Orkney Library and Archive and to Heritage Centres in the islands.

In terms of the number of people interviewed, the decision was taken that it was better to use the available resources to have lower numbers of interviews which were of good quality rather than higher numbers of less in-depth interviews.

Brief statistical analyses show that:

- Number of males interviewed: 40
- Number of females interviewed: 53
- Total number of individuals: 93

Actual number of interviews carried out was 89 because 4 of those were married couples.

Age background:
Group A 16 – 24 7
Group B 25 – 44 15
Group C 45 – 64 35
Group D 65 and over 36

Ideally, we would have interviewed more people in groups A and B, but the availability of informants and willingness to participate were key factors in the final selection of informants interviewed and recorded.

Summary and Conclusion

The *Oral History of the North Isles* project produced an invaluable wealth of material that documents the lives and experiences of people in the North Isles of Orkney. The interviews explored several key themes, such as farming, heritage, and the Orkney dialect, which highlight and celebrate different island identities as well as the sense of community, co-operation and cohesion throughout the Isles.

It is hoped that the archive will be a resource that will be accessed and enjoyed by people in Orkney and farther afield for many years to come.

A PERSONAL VIEWPOINT FROM THE REPORT’S AUTHOR

As a native of Sanday, I feel privileged to have completed this project on the North Isles – islands which have been part of my life since the day I was born. When I first floated the ideas behind the project then embarked on the fieldwork, it became clear that this would be a personal journey and not just another project. Speaking to folk from all over the North Isles and hearing their accounts of life and sharing their memories gave me a greater appreciation of my own life in Sanday even though I left there over thirty years ago.

I hope that this project – the recordings and transcriptions – however they are accessed – will provide a comprehensive corpus of knowledge of this part of Orkney.
Excerpts from Interviews

A selection of the overall interviews (approximately 475,000 words) is provided here. The excerpts have been grouped into each of the six main themes outlined above and provide valuable insights into what it is like to live in the isles. The interviewers are identified by their initials: Jonathan Ford (JF), Arran MacDonald (AM). Tom Rendall (TR) and Ailsa Seatter (AS).

Changing quality of life

Donald and Marlene Mainland

Donald and Marlene Mainland lived in Shapinsay when they were young. Although they both qualified as teachers and moved to other parts of Orkney, those were some of the comments about their time spent in Shapinsay:

DONALD: Yeah, that was the North School. And that was the school me father went to. And I started in that school, and I think it was probably less than a year I was there, and we were transferred to the big school. I mind me father saying that once in a year the north-enders went down to the South School, and the folk in the South School laughed at the way they spoke. Y’ken, the folk in the south end of the island spoke with a different dialect than the north did.

I mind when we started in the North End it was slate. And I mind we were told to get up something like an aspirin bottle and put a hole in the lid of it, and that was the way you cleaned your slate. And there was a different slate for doing arithmetic and for writing. One would have straight lines and the other with squares on it. And I can barely mind anything else, because it was so short before we changed, and that was the end of the slate, there was no slates then in the South School. But of course, they’d had that as well. But it was changed days because, well, I mind me father saying in the summertime they all went to the school with bare feet……..

MARLENE: Well, I suppose your basic comforts were not great sometimes. We lived in damp houses. You can remember your clothes had been hanging up overnight having to be put in front of the fire and they would steam. So you actually were suffering quite a lot of discomfort, although at the time we were not really aware of it. It’s just now when I think on that, that your clothes were damp. You didn’t have the comfort with fabrics and so on that we have nowadays. You know, it was scratchy blankets, and, in some cases, chaffy bed sacks were still on the go. And so your sleeping conditions weren’t really so comfortable, I guess. But as bairns you are no really that aware of it. It’s only with hindsight that I realise that, that it’s so much more comfortable nowadays.
TR: And for the benefit of people who are listening to this, that might be confused at what chaffy bed sacks is, you could maybe tell them what that was in terms of nowadays.

MARLENE: Yes, well it was the equivalent of a memory foam mattress (laughs). Your chaff is what’s left after the process of separating your oats, your grain. And nothing – that’s the other thing too – nothing was wasted. Nothing was wasted, and chaff, lovely soft material, bliss to be filled in a bed sack, a mattress case you would call that, and for the first day or two just felt wonderful. It seemed thick and soft and comfortable. But of course, it just bedded down to have very little volume at all. And probably, I mean they talk about dust mites and so on, I think it’s a good job the houses were well ventilated as they were, otherwise we would all have been asthmatic and itching. But, yes, the chaffy bed sack was common in most households until horsehair mattresses and spring mattresses and so on replaced them gradually.

Caroline Bird

Caroline Bird moved to Shapinsay about 10 years ago and here are her comments on the way of life on that island:

“I think my point of view from it is that if you go to Shapinsay and you show that you want to be part of that community and you want to be in the heart of it all and you sort of join in with things then you get paid back tenfold........you know so we were lucky that when we moved we had a child of four and a child of two so I met people at the school door.. I met people at playgroup. So you start that sort of, that friends and word of mouth and what have you and when I said oh yes, I’ll go to the kirk, then people see you’re willing to be part of things and I mean, I’m a member of the community association, a member of the parent council, I’m an elder at the Kirk, um.. you know all sorts of things. I was at playgroup but obviously now my children have got too much older. I mean the main thing was I had another baby... which I would not have done if I lived anywhere else because I’d heard what it was like to have a baby at the matty I had my third child so.. I mean she wouldn’t be here if we weren’t living here, that’s absolutely certain. So yeah, I mean I’m, I’m a bit I’m a bit evangelical about Shapinsay but I am, I’m at home there. Without a doubt.”

Sandra Towrie

Sandra Towrie – originally from Shetland – has been in Sanday since she married David about 50 years ago. She gave an interesting account of the knitwear company which was an important part of the economy of the North Isles from 1969 – 1999.
By the time I came here in 1972, a lot of people had knitting machines, so they were doing the
kind of knitwear that was done in Shetland, the machine knitted bodice and sleeves and then Fair
Isle yokes, and that sort of thing. And that’s what I started doing to begin with, was the hand
finishing of the machine knitted stuff, because I had been doing that in Shetland. And I’m not
sure, I think I got into the hand knitting because somebody discovered that I could knit garments
without a pattern, so I could make up patterns for people, which is something you just do if you’re
brought up in Shetland. You don’t rely on knitting patterns. And so I think I just started designing
garments and so on, and I ended up doing a huge amount of designing and pattern writing and
all that kind of thing. And because I’m bold beyond my ability, I used to go to trade fairs.

TR: Yes, I remember, indeed, about the trade fairs that we used to go to. And I think I might
have been at one in Harrogate.

SANDRA: That’s the one that we went to, we went to Harrogate, yes. But Aviemore many a,
many a time. And Paris once, Munich once. New York, which wasn’t actually a trade fair, it was
just a kind of exhibition affair. And, yeah, so lots of travel here, there and everywhere, it was
quite good.

TR: And I suppose we developed this Isle of Sanday Knitters, because it was, arguably in the
late seventies and eighties, part of the whole culture of Sanday?

SANDRA: Oh yes, it was very important. And lots and lots of – it was the first time that a lot of
women actually earned some money for themselves. Because before that, they’d worked on the
farms, they would have kept hens and sold eggs and sold cheese and that kind of thing, but I
suspect that most of that would have been, if they were selling it, it would have been handed in
to the shop and the money deducted off their bag of groceries. I suspect it was a barter system
more than anything else. So suddenly when this knitting came, they actually got an envelope
with real money in it, which they could have for themselves. And, well, I believe that somebody
saved it up and installed a bathroom in their house. And, you know, there was just all kinds of
things that suddenly they had this bit of money. So it was really important. And it was a social
event as well, because every fortnight we met at the Wool Hall, and it was a very busy evening,
folk came in with their completed garments and they got the packs of wool and patterns out to
knit their next lot. And those of us who were assigned the task had to check all the garments to
make sure that they were the right measurements. Because by this time we were actually taking
orders for hundreds of garments from places. For a long while it was America, Saks Fifth Avenue,
Bergdorf Goodman, all these places we sold to. And obviously they ordered garments in a range
of sizes, and they had to be right, and the knitter had to have put the right colours in. There were
some garments from a particular island that used to come back with colours that had never
belonged to Isle of Sanday Knitters, because they thought these would look better. But
unfortunately, they weren’t right for the order. Yeah, and we made all kinds of things. And we had a short spell of notoriety when we did the crochet bikinis

Farming

Retired Sanday farmer – Jimmy Lennie – recalls his early memories of working in Sanday. TR asked him if farming had been part of his life:

“Well, I would say so, yeah. Well, I worked the horse. When my father died I was just 17 and I was drilling with the horse and just working the land with the horse. And my brother, he was more into tractors, he didn’t like working the horse at all. It just got then, y’ken, that especially with Loganair, you couldn’t really work the horse, they had to go. I had the last pair of working horses in Sanday.

I think it was very good for young chaps, y’ken, if you were working a difficult horse, it kind of gave you a bit of character, because you couldn’t afford to be bad to him or he would not work with you.”

Irvine Miller who is in his eighties spoke about his farming days and the introduction of mechanisation on his farm in Stronsay:

“........ we got a binder then and in 1948 we got wir first tractor.

TR asked: Whit kind o tractor was it?

A grey Ferguson and I still hiv it.

It was the biggest boon that ever was in farming when the tractor cam in and hid made life so much easier. It also allowed folk tae keep more cattle wae no hivin the horses tae feed. It actually made the farm more profitable as you wad say.

Well the pair o horses we had, the food they ate fed aboot 6 cattle efter they wereno there and I remember me grandfather sayin that the tractor was much cheaper tae keep or the horses.
Steven Drever, from Westray is a modern farmer and highlights the ways farming had changed since the olden days:

AS: does thoo like that thoo’re a fermer and there’s been generations o fermers?

Oh definitely. The ferm, me grandfaithir bowt hid, hid wid been 80, no a hunder acre. He was browt up on the ferm next door and his brithirs hed nee family so when they passed away he got a share o that ferm. So that’s a peedie bit o the story o the ferm and hoo it grew a peedie bit. He rented ground fae his neeighbours for a lot o years and ended ip buyan that bit o grund as weel. It’s the field neems and stuff like that, that that comes wae it. There’s a field at Berriedale called the Aist Pairks, (East Parks) which are west o Berriedale bit they wad been aist o the piece they belonged tae originally. I jeust find peedie things like that interestan. Why we still speak aboot the Aist Pairks about 40 years after they’d been west o us. Of coorse we’ve got rented grund at Vere, which is whar me grandmithir wis browt ip. So that’s anithir peedie kindo story there which is...I think Berriedale will be aboot 5 ferms in total bit hid’s jeust wan ferm noo, bit because things is deun on that economy o scale noo...well, it’s jeust muc easier tae deu. You don’t need that much manpower. I wad say hid’s aboot the right size for wan buddy tae work it noo. I wadno want tae see it get muckle bigger

AS: Or you’d be too busy?

No so much that side o it, I think there jeust needs tae be a peedie...I think the more ferms there is in Westray, the better, so if you can regulate your size a peedie bit hid wad be better, for you lose folk in the NFU then and it maks your voice a bit quieter, so you hiv tae shout harder but if thir’s more o you...more medium sized fermers...ya, more medium sized fermers and there’s more o you, it gaes you a stronger voice, there’s more fok dependan on you, there’s more money coman in tae the rural economy than as weel. There’s more folk benefits, rather or just great big ferms wae GPS driven tractors and stuff like that.

AS: Hoo many acres is the whole o Berriedale?

124 acre at Berriedale and then Vere’s jeust shy o 40 and wae rent anithir 120 acre o Cleat as weel.

AS: So you own aboot 164 and rent 120 for bye. That’ll keep you busy indeed. Farming has changed. Of course, ah’m no THAT owld, but in the time I can mind it, ferming has changed, let alone owir the history o the last decade (should have been century), and thoo kindo alluded tae it there, there’s a lot more...weel, going back tae whit yeused tae be, there yesued tae be
one or two big estates on Westray, and eventually there was lots o peedier crofts and noo it seems like hid’s headan back tae the bigger estates.

Oh definitely. But that, kindo hoo we got tae whar wir at, that goes back tae luckan back and stuff. I think it’s good for youngeens tae see tied byres and bits that wad hen tae be cleaned oot wae a shovel and a burro…AS This is makin me feel owld for wae hed tied byres teu! I wadno wish it on them, so it’s important they see that kind o traditions but they don’t actually hiv tae…experience them?...Ya, so that they can see it and understand it hoo hard hid must have been and hoo hard folk’s worked for you tae hiv whit you’ve got.

AS: I was jeust thinkin there when thoo were spekan aboot tied byres teu, and we’ll move on tae that in a peedie blinky in wir dialect section, b it there’s a whole raft o words there that’s gan tae disappear, like bizzy, and hake, and wak, and beulsteen, and oddler, and they’ll just disappear becase that things are no more.

It jesut goes oot o disuse. Hid’s a peety in some ways bit if it’s no a tied byre that’s fine!

AS: Ya, tied byres are nice luckan back!

Ya exactly. Very quaint.

AS: Ya, bit not so much noo. Very time consuming.

Yas definitely. Hid maks you sweat in the morning!

AS: You certainly don’t need tae go tae the gym if you’re doin that anyway!

The Orkney Dialect

Jack Holland – a 17-year old from Stronsay - was born in Orkney and his father was an incomer to the island. His mother is an Orcadian and he was asked about the how he used the Orkney dialect:

“A peedie but yeah. If I’m speaking to, like, wer family down south. I kinda, I kinda speak a peedie bit more English because it’s harder to understand, you know, a lot of English don't understand the Orcadian accent, you know, it's, but if I'm, eh, If I'm just home aboot – you know, I am kind of Orcadiany-fied – is what I call it.”

AM: So have you ever been told not to use it or not to speak like that?

“No. No, if anything, I was encouraged. Because if anything I think it's a dialect that as Orkney folk are growing up, it's becoming less and less, ken old Orcadian. Know what I mean? It’s getting more English, in the Orcadian dialect”
He was then asked what was special about his home island:

“Well I think it's the best just because I've, I've lived lived here all me life, but it's a really beautiful island and it's a very friendly community and just a lovely place to be. And as we call it, it's the King of the Isles, Stronsay is. Yes. It's better than any other of the Isles here”

Graham Sinclair – originally from Stronsay – had this to say about the use of Orkney dialect throughout his life:

TR: ……………… noo, a very general question on dialect. Would you say you’re still a speaker o the Orkney dialect, and if so, hoo often do you think you speak it?

GS: I think I speak it. The only times I think I speak it is when I'm trying very hard to make sure I'm understood um in non-Orcadian company like, like in me present role and you ken if you're, I do occasionally have the... you ken the real privilege o meeting maybe like government ministers. Whether that's folk like that, whether it's Scottish or UK government, and you ken you want to make sure that you're understood so that I'm conscious that I probably, it slips in.

The annoying thing for me is that probably even sitting here, and the longer that I would be here sitting speakin to you, the more I would drift off because I can be as broad as anybody, but I've got into a habit o likely trying to soften it off a bit because, uh because of that very thing o wanting to be understood. But uh, when I get a a dram in me hand and a, and a blether, there’s nothing I enjoy more than just being, just being able to blether away in the in, if you like the mother tongue and no, no having to think and when I'm like that I just drift back into the... But not the language that I, not the language that I use, that I remember the older folk use either.

TR: You see we could have conducted this interview in a very much Orkney dialect way, I could have asked you beuy whit like you thought of Stronsay noo.  And you would have probably replied in dialect as...

GS: weel, I would say, look it's fine what like it wis living in the isles

TR: But it's very changed in a way is it no?

GS: It's fairly changed. It's changed, it's changed completely.

TR: And that a peedie example of what a Sanday man and a Stronsay man when we're speaking privately we doo, but for the benefit of this recordings folk has to understand this.

GS: Well, a really strong point and you'll remember this just the same, I should say, don't mind this on the same as I will. When we were young and came into the county show. When you heard somebody speakin, you kent what island they were fae. You kent fine if they were Westray
or Papay, or Sanday or Stronsay or Eday. You could just tell no bother at all. The minute on the mouth you kent exactly whar they came fae. You couldna do that noo.

TR: No and on that very point as well, some of the younger ones with islands that comes intae the Grammar school, I have posed the question to one or two o them, and it appears that they don't seem to be taking up other dialect noo, whereas some of me other folk fae Westray and that, that came into the Grammar school when they were young, a few years ago, was chastised for a speakin in a funny way.

GS: aye

TR: So I don't know what's happened to the dialect but there's certainly been changes in it as weel. Is it still part of our heritage then, this dialect?

GS: Oh I think yeah, yeah I would... I would really like to, I would like to see it more actively fostered, ye ken. Just, I would really, really like to see it more... It's no, like I don't...I hardly think you can teach it. You probably can, but just that that's not the point. I'll be very controversial and say noo, ye ken, why would you want, why would you want to treat Orcadian like like the Gaelic for instance. Ye ken, why would you want it... And this is where I'll be really, really controversial and say why would you want to teach dead language that that that maybe doesna hae much relevance in the, in the wider world. But Orcadian does speak, it's still spoken naturally.

TR: Yes, and I mean, I suppose dialect is, Orkney dialect is a branch o the Scots language as opposed to Gaelic, which is a recognised standalone language. Wi’ different, actual I suppose... lexicon as weel, different words in other words. But I think, what you said there is indeed that it's tae encourage folk to use in a natural form

GS: yeah

TR: because as somebody else pointed oot to me, I'm sure a few months ago, that it's difficult to teach a dialect because it's, it's an inflection rather than the language, so you know it's different to teach it. But...

GS: See folk don't watch the weather in the way they used to and there was an awful lot o the, there was an awful lot o the Orkney dialect that eh, revolved around, around weather, you ken if you, probably if you, if you start speaking to young folk about being a bit concerned about the broch around the moon last night or or, the sun dogs... or or not a lift in the sky.... Would, ye ken, they probably kind a look at you “what are you speaking aboot”, but, there's no ... ye ken... I think that o thing is important to try and keep.
Ailsa Seatter – on dialect as part of the heritage in Westray:

I think it’s very important if you’re lukkan at an island’s identity. There’s lots o things that make up an island’s identity and wan o it is the language wae spek. Wae hiv hen a strong dialect – and some fok don’t make the distinction between dialect and accent. Your accent is hoo you ken whether you’re fae Westray or Newcastle or Aberdeen, irrespective o the words you yeuse, whereas the dialect is the special words you wad hiv in it – peedie and trang wad jeust be two that come tae mind that wae’ve spokken aboot the day already. Yes, wir dialect is being diluted immensely. There’s a mixture o reasons for that. I would say, thinkan o me granddowters, a lot o it is just tae deu wae whit you watch on TV or on the iPad, becase a lot o it’s American and they pick ip a lot o American words. That’s jeust the wiy it is. Also at home in Westray noo, wae don’t hiv any local teachers left in the school, which might make a small difference. A lot o your classes noo will be a 50-50 split atween local bairns and bairns that hiv moved in. Also, I don’t think there’s many fok in Westray under the age o 35 tae 40 that yeuse thee and thoo any more, so they’re jeust no hearan it at home the sam. And I mind a good twathree year ago I did jeust a kweek heid coont o the bairns at the school, and I kent whar wad yeuse dialect and there was only 3 or 4 that wad yeus thee or thoo, and that’s gone. I yeused tae think it was fine when you hed tae conjugate French verbs becase the ‘tu,’ the single ‘you’ was the sam as thoo, and that’s all gone. I wad say if you coont a generation as bein 25 or 30 years, I wad say in aboot a generation, or a generation and a half, the use o thee and thoo will be gone, and wir wan o the few bits in Orkney that still use thee and thoo. Papay wad use it some.

Interest in the Culture and Heritage of the islands

Ingrid Mainland – now a Professor of Archaeology at Orkney College UHI – had this to say about her home island of Rousay:

“I always had a strong interest in the past and the kind of local history because my granny was really interested in family trees and stories about the family. So I was always brought up with this........To some extent my dad was the same, a bit like we were always hearing stories about our ancestors and about the folk in the islands and where folk lived and wherever they went to and so a lots o lots of different stories about the different farms and where, who used to live there and that was tied in with food. folklore as well, not just kind of stories about folk in the past. That was, you know, the kind of folk stories too. But there was a lot of genealogy there and that I think kindled an interest in the past for me. And then obviously, Rousay's just full of archaeological remains. We've got, up on the farm that was brought up on we've got a big, huge broch, the Knowe of Hunclett, we also had Blackhammer, chambered cairns. So both of those were like my
playground, me and my brother used to go and pour over them and send them and granny used to take us up to the Knowe of Yarso. So we kind of, our daily activities were embedded in that heritage. So I had this kind of background understanding of how my own past was related to the island, in different places and then also how that kind of more distant past was present too.”

Kayleigh Tipper – in her thirties – has been in Rousay all her life as her family moved to Orkney about forty years ago. She speaks about her days at school and also her interest in heritage:

“Yeah, growing up in the nineties, it was a great childhood, really, really lovely community feel. There was, there was.. maybe the population wasn't so much higher but there was a bigger school role. This was about 45 when when I first started and by the time I left primary school, there was just twenty five of us. So it's sort of fallen. But yeah, just a really great feel. And even in the district of Sourin, lots of young children and just I just remember, you know, playing outside, going on my bike in the local area. Just a very safe, happy childhood really and really enjoyable. I look back on it fondly. And, you know, great school. You know i stayed with the same school for for all my primary years. And then of course traveling to the mainland daily to go to secondary school, which is quite different. Of course, these.. all these children that haven't been used to such a big school roll. But yeah, wonderful childhood really...

Certainly at Rousay Primary School I do remember the history lessons. I can remember might be primary three, primary four, you know, doing a project on Vikings and that sort of thing. Going out on school trips to Midhowe and that sort of places, to the cairns on Rousay. Maybe less so at Stromness Academy, thinking specifically about Orkney history. I don't really remember anything. I studied history for four years at Stromness Academy and I've a huge interest in history in general. Probably, if I'm being honest, less so maybe for the history that's on Rousay, the sort of Stone Age sort of things. But still you know I really appreciate the importance of preserving history and having records and things like that, you know that that's really important to me. So while I was at secondary school, I did develop a website on Rousay. And, you know, I did a lot of research at that time into the history on Rousay and it was just a sort of community website that locals and visitors could view. And I've kept that going and still keep that going today, along with one or two other websites on Rousay as well. And so that the interest is certainly there. And that was back in probably about 2007 I think that I set that website up. So I was still at secondary school at the time. So yes, I can certainly remember did a lot of research into Rousay and Orkney history in general. And of course, Egilsay and Wyre as well”.
Issues affecting the islands (including living through the pandemic)

Jacqueline Seatter – from Sanday

TR: ........ as you said wae the COVID situation ........ it’s been handled as well as it could be in the isles would you say?

JS: Yes it was very good. We got, the Community Council go together wae the surgery juist right away, it was the doctor on the island at the time, aboot a week afore we were locked doon or the real lock doon happened, called us in and said ‘look this is getting serious and we are goin tae hiv tae do something and we made a leaflet right awey and pat oot and everything juist closed doon within the week so we were closed doon afore the actual lockdoon started. And everybody just took notice right awey and said ‘oh weil that’s whit’s happenin’ so and everyone was keen. We got groups they all, wan s got together and the Community Council funded the masks to be made for every resident on the island tae mak sure they had a mask because the doctor foresaw to see that was goin tae happen so that was all made right before it came mandatory. There was juist lots happened you ken the afternoon club got meals and stuff for the older ones.

TR: I was goin tae ask that as I know in Eday every household got a meal delivered on a Monday I think or a sort of basically some variety o food to get delivered on a Monday.

JS: That’s right yea.

TR: Was that the same in Sanday?

JS: The afternoon club did yea, they got funding and I had to cook it of coorse. I made a meal for them every 2 weeks, they got a meal delivered every 2 weeks tae the wans that usually attended the club and anybody else they thowt might need it.

Jennifer Foley from Papa Westray, interviewed by Jonathan Ford (JF)

JF: I was just thinking, I wonder if there are any positives to take out of the pandemic is it that strength in the working relationship between the three or four main organisations on the island, do you think that bodes well for the future?

Jen: Yeah, it really does. I think the way that the trust acted, they were put in a position of being an anchor organization by a lot of the funding bodies; the Co-op and other organisations were able to do their own thing but the cooperation really helped. Everyone talking to each other, making sure that if there was a fund or an opportunity, that you made sure everybody knew about it, helped each other with the paperwork on doing it, and actually just talking about what was needed, what was important, what does the community need to support it so things like
making sure that the shop kept going, that people could get supplies. And that, actually, was very
difficult because a lot of the funding wasn’t aimed at things like that, there was an assumption
made that we would all still be able to go to the supermarket and get things whereas here we’re
not in a position to do that. It wasn’t really aimed at very small places like this so the Development
Trust and the Coop had to really work together to get the support that the Co-op needed because
that was without doubt one of the most important things to keep the rest of the community
going. And it’s one of the things I’m very proud of is how well they worked together and how
hard the Co-op and the Trust worked on that.

JF: Yes, it’s one thing I definitely think back to that time that it was pretty amazing how the Co-
op did turn it around very quickly, reacted to the situation very well and very seamlessly from
the outside.

Jen: Which in the circumstances was incredible.

JF: And just thinking about islands in general more widely based, as much as we can do anyway,
I think that islands are quite well placed or well able to deal with things like this.

Jen: I think you’re right, we’re quite resourceful and we’re quite resilient and used to making the
best of whatever the situation is, whether it’s if the steamer doesn’t come for a couple of weeks,
you adapt and get on with it. And people are used to working together. They don’t do it every
day but if you need to you can rely on other people - there’s no question of that – and I think
that’s a really big positive that’s come out of all of this.

One of the other nice things that came out of it all was just the nice ordinary things that were
suggested that really worked to get everybody though - so some of the funding that we had was
used to do the coffee morning deliveries. The coffee morning is a great stalwart of the island and
it was a real miss, but just having people going out dropping something by, a cheerful voice, a
piece of cake, somebody checking in with you once a week. And then the occasional island wide
deliveries that we did, those helped reconnect people that hadn’t really been... maybe had been
a bit isolated anyway. And one of the other positives that has come out of the pandemic is that
drawing people back together again and a lot of that has just been done through the power of
cheerfulness and cake.

Melissa Thomson

Melissa talks about some of the issues facing the island of Eday

AM 16:37: What, what do you see the biggest issues being for life and Eday?
Mellissa Thomson 16:52: Transport is a huge issue. We have an aging population, what's here to get young folk here? Like I said earlier, there's no... they don't feel like they belong here. And do they belong then if they don't feel like that? And how do you encourage that? How would you encourage folk to come and stay here? House prices are going up, young folk can't afford it. Because like I said there's plenty of work. It's, it's just making, making that future. I mean, the people who were brought, sort of brought up here and the folk that have got farms, or they've got lives here, they're keen to stay. And it's making, making that work. But at the same point you've got a very small pool of people to mix with. And then you've got sort of that, where do people meet each other and when... it's, you have to be able to sort of embrace all of it, do all of it. But the minute that these kids head off to the grammar school, Island loses them because what's to come back for? And that's that's a big problem.

AM 17:56: Yeah. What do you think maybe the solution for that could be?

Mellissa Thomson 17:59: Oh, I knew that I would be a millionaire. I don't know what the answer is. I really don't know. I mean they can throw millions of pounds at it in ferries and subsidies and stuff. I don't think, I don't know if that's the answer. I really, I don't know. I don't know where to go with it.

Integration and Community Life

Alison Barclay – originally from North Ronaldsay – had those memories from living there and also plans for the future:

“........... you did a lot of visiting. Like, you used to visit all your relatives or you would visit folk north on. We always went to visit Willie Nevan, and he would sit and tell you the most fantastic stories. We just used to love visiting him. And at the end of the visit, beside his little table, he would come and go in the peedie cupboard and he would take out a bar of chocolate to give you as a sort of token for coming to visit him. And I love listening to Ann Marwick’s recordings of Willie and the clock, because it just brings you back in time to sitting and speaking to him. I just loved it. And similarly, I used to spend a lot of time with my grandparents at Scotsha, and my great-uncle Willie Scotsha, and Johnny Burnha always used to take Willie Scotsha to visit Tony Burnha. So we used to sit and listen to their stories.

I can foresee a lot being back there to retire and probably doing what we've done (laughs) for a long time. Because it's just in us, we just want to do it. It's your sort of place to go to be happy and to feel quite relaxed in yourself, I think. It's where I go to recharge my batteries anyway.
There’s nothing better than to be working with the sheep or walking along the beach or in the tractor doing silage”.

Kenny Meason – now retired – was asked what he liked most about living in his native Shapinsay. The island way of life and the outdoor activity suited him:

“me favourite activity was speaking to folk, the Island folk. That was one of me favourite things and I suppose noo I'll be wan o the older eens on the island and folks start tae ask me things that they should have, they should know or should ken but they don't. I just love, I was an outdoor boy and I love the wildlife. I grew up fishing and wildfowling among cousins and that. And me favourite is in the rubber boots on the fermland, in the ditches, in the ebb, catchin spoots, catching lobster, fishing.. Doing all the island things and it's just me wan feet on the land and wan feet in the sea. And that's that's very much an islander viewpoint I think and that's maybe disappearing. But that's me”.

Fiona Mitchell who lived on the small island of Wyre when she was a child speaks about the simplicity of life and the lack of the modern services of the present day:

“It's amazing the changes in me lifetime. Didn't have electric till I was eight so mind that being putten in. Up until then it was a generator so we had no daytime electric at all. You waited until it was grimlins before father would go oot and start the generator and then you get your flickering lights and limited to what you could actually use at wan time. We could no put everything on in one go. But we didn't have TV and we did have a fridge that we could use at night if necessary. But we didna really do without anything at all”.

Over to Westray now, Sheila Shearer (nee Tulloch) gave some interesting insights into her youth and how the island still fulfils an important role in her life:

“It was actively a super time to grow up in Westray the 1980s was quite buoyant I would say probably the mid to late 70s was a bit quieter economically in Westray but you had quite a few entrepreneurial folk around at the time. Looking back on it obviously a big thing in the 80s was a white fish industry as well as quite a few keen creel fishermen and inshore fishermen as well but the white fish industry really took off in the 80s and I think that helped to sustain Westray’s population in the 1980s.I was also fortunate to be part of one of the biggest classes in Pierowall school at the time there were 21 of us in me year one.... I think that was the biggest one in Pierowall school for the whole time of me school career going to Pierowall there was also you asked about the village Lastigar quite a lot of families at Lastigar so a lot of bairns close at hand
to play wae and of course they had the freedom to go up to Lastigar and play at the sand slides that was where Kalisgarth and the council housing there at the moment, That used to be just a sandpit place for the kids to play and in addition to that I was lucky enough to have three sets of aunties and uncles living in the island and 11 cousins that I kinda grew up with as well and they all lived in a kinda three mile radius of wir hoose and because Granny Tulloch - that's my dad's mum - also lived with us at the shop in the hoose we put on the granny wing - there wis always cousins coming back and forward an aunties coming to visit quite a close family - and of course we had the shop as well. lot of folk aboot also coming in and out of the hoose and was just a really lovely place to be brought up to be honest. I have very fond memories of Westray and still very attached to it I would say”.

Finally, an excerpt from my interview – interviewed by Ailsa Seatter

Tom Rendall – on why recording heritage and culture is important:

“Absolutely vital becase if we don’t – and lots o folk has said this tae me when I’ve been interviewan – if we don’t record it noo and get it on some form o media, and also written doon, hid’s going tae disappear. One o me regrets, I hiv tae say Ailsa, is I couldno hiv done this wae, say, me grandfaithir when he was alive in Sanday becase he hed so many memories even o the First World War, wartime in Orkney, wartime in the North Isles. I jeust wish that could have been recorded. Noo, wae hiv the opportunity, wae hiv the ability tae record very easily on small disks, then that can be loaded on tae computers in such a short time and it can be saved – for eternity. People that’s no interested in culture and heritage if they’re no caring aboot the owld days becase it’s the owld days, that can affect the young folk o the present day and the future.

You must realise that the North Isles o Orkney is an integral part o the rest o the Orkney Islands, as long as they can work taegithir ...... that’ll keep fok goin, and let’s hope this project, which both mesell and yoursell, and others, have been involved wae, at least gae fok some information and, I hope, resources that they can luk at ........ this is wir islands and wae are prood o them”.
Appendix 1 - Interview Guidelines

North Isles Landscape Partnership Project
The Oral History of the North Isles

General
What is your name? Where were you born and brought up?
If from Orkney – have you always lived in the same area?
If not from Orkney – how long have you lived in Orkney?

Heritage and Culture
What is your level of interest in the heritage of the island?
How do you feel about the culture, traditions, and folklore of Orkney?
Are you actively involved in any aspects of heritage?
How important is heritage and culture to the island?

Life on the island
What qualities do you think the island has in terms of community values and integration of people?
What experiences have you had – whether through work or free time – that you can share with us?
What are the main issues affecting the island at present?
How do you think life at the present day compares with the past?

Dialect and language
Are you a speaker of the Orkney dialect? If the answer is yes – how often do you speak it? How important is the dialect as part of the heritage of the island?
At any time have you ever been discouraged from using the dialect
Will the dialect continue to be spoken on the island and what are the factors that will influence its future?

Other possible topics
Impact of tourism in the North Isles, social life on the island, ferry services
THE TEAM

**Project Leader**  Dr Tom Rendall

**Interviewers**  Tom Rendall  
Sarah Jane Gibbon  
Olly Gibb  
Arran Macdonald  
Ailsa Seatter  
Jonathan Ford

**Transcribers**  Catharine Elliott  
Margaret Hutchison  
Arran Macdonald  
Julie Cassidy  
Sarah de Rees  
Annie Thuesen  
Ailsa Seatter

**ORCA**  Project Directors: Pete Higgins (at the start of the Project)  
Amanda Brend (from September 2021)  
Paul Clark (from September 2022)

Administration: Kat Fryer
### Informants /Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>SANDAY</strong></th>
<th><strong>STRONSAy</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Mary Brown</td>
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<td>Sandra Towrie</td>
<td>Ian Cooper</td>
<td>Sheila Shearer</td>
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<td>Jacqueline Seatter</td>
<td>Elsie Dennison</td>
<td>Graham Maben</td>
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<td>Kieron Brogan</td>
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<td>Mike Holland</td>
<td>Edith Costie</td>
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<td>Stewart Rendall</td>
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<td>Jamie Rendall</td>
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<td>George and Norma Brown</td>
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<td>Sarah Sinclair</td>
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EDAY
Ena Hewison
Alister Scott
Sarah Powell
John Burr
Ernest Miller
Hamish Thomson
Melissa Thomson
Jean Byers
Robbie Thomson

SHAPINSAY
Annette Kirkpatrick
Sheila Garson
Glynis Leslie
Jean Leslie
Caroline Bird
Kenny Meason
Julia Meason
Donald and Marlene Mainland

PAPA WESTRAY
Anne Rendall
A Hourston
Ian Cursiter
Marina Cursiter
Tim Dodman
Jim Hewitson
Tim Ross
Jennifer Foley

ROUSAY
Ingrid Mainland
Alice Mainland
Bruce Mainland
Rolf Soames
Bryan Milner
Kayleigh Tipper
Jean Gibbon

NORTH RONALDSAY
Sinclair Scott
Alison Barclay
Beatrice Thomson
Hayley Budge
Alex Wright

EGILSAY
Brian Alexander

WYRE
Fiona Mitchell

Interview summary

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Total: 89 interviews but 93 people interviewed (four couples)
Figure 1. Location Map

Project Name: Oral History of the North Isles
Project No: 820
Date: 02/2023
ID: OR01CB
Rev. 1.00

Scale @A4
CRS: OSGB36 / British National Grid/ EPSG:27700

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