

TOMBS OF THE ISLES



DISCOVER THE NEOLITHIC TOMBS IN ORKNEY'S NORTH ISLES



Take an island trip to explore the place where you live and discover well, and lesser-known, Neolithic burial monuments.

Celebrate, research and share the stories of our Neolithic tombs

Tomb of the Isles project area - see large map overleaf



Tombs of the Isles was undertaken by the Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology (ORCA) and UHI Archaeology Institute, UHI Orkney. This leaflet can be downloaded from: <https://archaeologyorkney.com/tombs-of-the-isles/downloads/>



Visit the tombs atlas at www.archaeologyorkney.com/tombs-of-the-isles/



Cover: Quoyness, Sanday. Quoyness plan: Childe et al. 1954, PSAS Vol 86, Fig 1. Leaflet content: Dan Lee & Sigurd Towrie. Design: iainashman.com

THE NEOLITHIC IN ORKNEY

The Neolithic (4000-2500BC) was the period when agriculture arrived in, and spread through, Britain and Ireland.

Farming and the Neolithic way of life reached Orkney around 3700BC. The new settlers brought more than just domesticated animals and crops but also pottery, new stone tools, and monument building.

Recently it was suggested that Neolithic Orkney was a volatile place, with people caught up in a quest for prestige, status and influence. This scramble for social standing was manifested through the construction of monuments.

This led to increasingly large and elaborate stalled tombs and the import of Irish passage grave architecture as different groups sought to outdo each other. The result was a highly competitive and unstable society – one that, it is proposed, eventually collapsed.



Quoyness Tomb, Sanday photo: Dan Lee

TOMBS IN ORKNEY

Chambered cairns are Orkney's most common Neolithic monuments. There are over 80 known examples, 53 of which are in the North Isles.

They were built using stone to create a chamber, or chambers, enclosed within a cairn.

Although the term 'tomb' has become attached to these structures, burial was almost certainly not their only role. Because only a few have been found to contain human remains, they may not all have been used in the same way. It is likely they served the living as well as the dead – perhaps as places for rites of passage, ceremonies or to interact with deities, ancestors or spirits.

It may be that it was building a cairn that was significant and not its subsequent use – the structure itself being more important than its contents.

What do you think?

ROUSAY, EGILSAY & WYRE TOMBS

Rousay is renowned for its chambered cairns, several of which can be visited. The majority are the stalled type, but some of these, such as **Midhowe** and the **Knowe of Ramsay**, stand out because of their size.

Perhaps the most intriguing is the two-storeyed **Taversoe Tuick**, which is architecturally very different and features a third 'miniature chamber' outside and downslope.

In 1936, investigations at the **Knowe of Laird** revealed a structure with a 4.1-metre-high roof that appeared to have been remodelled before construction was completed. This tomb is not open to the public.

Egilsay's sole example sits in a prominent position within the RSPB Onziebust reserve. Although unexcavated, the structure has clearly been explored in the past. <https://www.rspb.org.uk/days-out/reserves/onziebust>

Although Wyre has no known Neolithic tombs, there is an Early Neolithic settlement at the **Braes o' Habreck**. Did they bury their dead in Rousay? Or were they handled differently?



photo: Dan Lee



'The Broch Boys', early excavators Callander and Grant.

Did you know: The 19th century exploration of the **Taversoe Tuick** was documented by Lady Burroughs of the Trumland Estate. In 1937, the **Knowe of Rowiegar** excavation was filmed and can be viewed on the National Library of Scotland website. <https://movingimage.nls.uk/film/2360>

Lady Eliza D'Oyly Burroughs



Onziebust Tomb, Egilsay

WESTRAY & PAPAY TOMBS

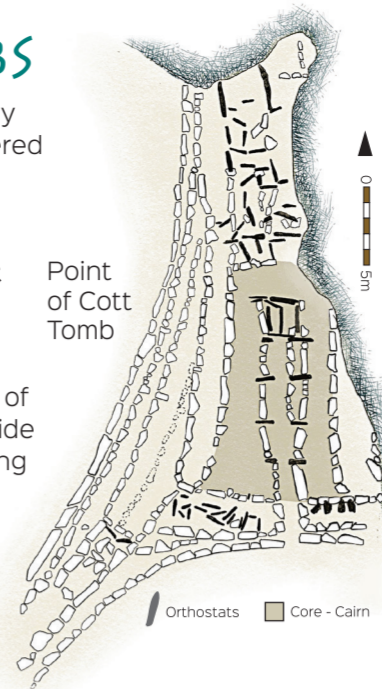
Because most were investigated in the 19th or early 20th centuries, details of Westray's known chambered cairns are scant. Two exceptions are the rescue excavations at **Pierowall Quarry**, which produced the stunning spiral decorated stone now housed in the heritage centre. Excavation at **Point of Cott** revealed the story of an eroding long horned cairn.

The southernmost of the three tombs on the Holm of Papa Westray has a long central chamber with 12 side cells. Examples of rock art are visible inside, including pecked zig zags and the 'eyebrow' motifs also on the 'Westray Wife' figurine from Westray's **Links of Noltland** settlement.

The Pierowall stone



3D model, visit Westray Heritage Centre to see the stone.



Point of Cott Tomb

Did you know: The Pierowall stone's carved spiral designs are almost identical to examples found in Ireland's Boyne Valley. This, and other evidence, suggests there were links between Neolithic Orkney and Ireland.

NORTH RONALDSAY

There are no known Neolithic tombs in North Ronaldsay, but the island has a large standing stone. **Where do you think people lived and buried their dead?**

SANDAY TOMBS

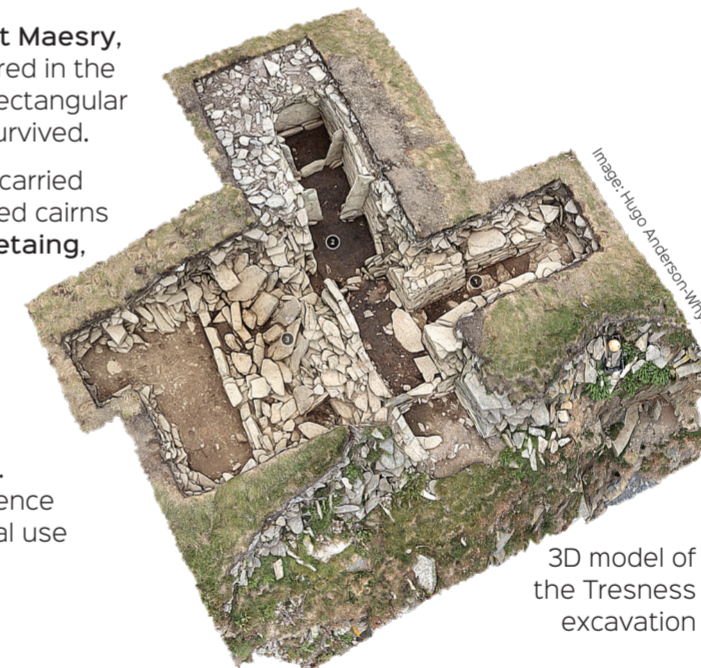
One of the North Isles' finest Neolithic cairns, **Quoyness** was 'cleared out' in 1867. It was re-excavated and consolidated in 1951, when it was noted that a platform had been added to its exterior.

More recently, excavation took place at **Tresness**, where coastal erosion was destroying the remains of a stalled cairn. Although the only evidence of human remains was a single, later, cremation, the structure contained two polished stone balls and 130 Skaill knives – a stone tool usually associated with butchery. **Tresness** was significantly modified in the Bronze Age.

We know little about **Mount Maesry**, other than it was last entered in the 1960s, at which point the rectangular chamber's corbelled roof survived.

Geophysical surveys were carried out at suspected chambered cairns at **Whale Point** and **Ruthietaing**, the results suggesting the latter was a late, possibly Iron Age, settlement.

Did you know: Quoyness tomb is built largely of waterworn stone. Was this a deliberate reference to the sea or just a practical use of nearby material?



3D model of the Tresness excavation

EDAY TOMBS

Many of Eday's 13 tombs were excavated in the 1930s including those on the Calf of Eday.

Built from blocks of red sandstone, **Vinquoy** has a different 'feel' to other Orcadian chambered cairns. Although excavated in 1857, we know little about its contents. The same applies to the nearby **Braeside** and two-storeyed **Huntersquoy** tombs, where information on their excavation is lacking.

Did you know: **Vinquoy** was re-excavated in 1985, when the backfill was cleared out, the interior recorded and opened to the public.

An early Neolithic settlement has been excavated at **Green**, in the south of Eday.



Vinquoy Tomb, Eday

A spiral decorated stone was found at the Eday Manse, but the structure was destroyed.



photo: NMS



Houseby Tomb, Stronsay

photo: Sigurd Towrie

STRONSAY TOMBS

Although Stronsay has several suspected tomb sites, none have been formally excavated.

Hints of their internal layout is evident at some, with a chamber and upright stones visible at **Kelsburgh** (Lochend) and Lambness, for example.

Others have been entered over the years, with some accounts surviving.

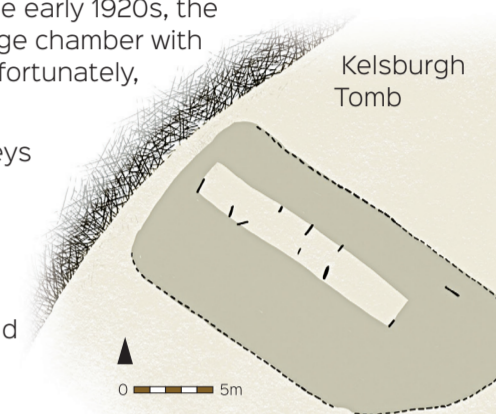
Papa Stronsay's **Earl's Knoll** is a long horned cairn that was explored in 1792, revealing numerous human bones. While some were said to be normal sized, parts of a skull and thigh bone were declared to be enormous!

The **Wart of Kirbuster** was entered in the early 1920s, the account confirming the presence of a large chamber with possible passages in two of its sides. Unfortunately, little survives today.

At **Cutter's Toor**, our geophysical surveys indicate that the mound is likely to be a Bronze Age burial, rather than a Neolithic tomb.

Did you know:

A Neolithic settlement was recently found near Midgarth during fieldwalking.



Kelsburgh Tomb

0 5m

SHAPINSAY TOMBS

Of Shapinsay's three chambered tombs **Castle Bloody** is the most enigmatic. Suggested to be a chambered cairn in 1928, by 1984 it was either an Iron Age souterrain or Maeshowe-type cairn. In 1989, it was considered to be neither!

However, our recent geophysical surveys indicate that it is not a settlement but more likely to be a tomb. Hints of internal walls and capstones are visible in hollows in the mound surface.

Although **Hacksness** is badly damaged and disturbed, the surviving evidence points to it being a stalled cairn.

In 1928, it was recorded that *'a skull was found here some years ago'* with another account stating that *'a burial'* was said *'to have been found here or whereabouts'*.

Did you know: **Castle Bloody** is a placename found elsewhere in Orkney, but its origin is not clear, often explained away as the site of a battle or violence.



Geophysical survey, Castle Bloody, Shapinsay

photo: Kevin Kerr

GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

Non-intrusive techniques can be used with good effect to find out more about Neolithic tombs. Five so-called tomb sites were investigated with two methods: magnetometry (good for finding settlement, burning and midden) and earth resistance (good for finding buried structures).

Five geophysical surveys were carried out during the Tombs of the Isles project adding to our knowledge of the sites: **Rethie Taing**, **Whale Point**, **Lingro**, **Cutter's Tuo** and **Castle Bloody**.



Holm of Papay rock art

ROCK ART

Rock art is found in a variety of forms and contexts in Orkney. Some is similar to the passage grave art found in Ireland and across NW Europe, such as the spiral designs on the Pierowall Stone in Westray and Holm of Papa Westray South tomb 'eyebrow' or horned spiral motifs. Other tombs contain incised decoration on the chamber walls, such as **Quoyness**, Sanday. The majority of rock art examples in Orkney are from settlement sites, like the **Ness of Brodgar** with over 1000 examples, mostly incised decorations (linear geometric designs - chevrons, lozenges, triangles, lattice - so called 'scratch art') but with some cup-marked and cup and ring marked stones.

Why do you think people decorated the walls of some tombs?

Pierowall, Westray

Decorated lintel from Pierowall tomb

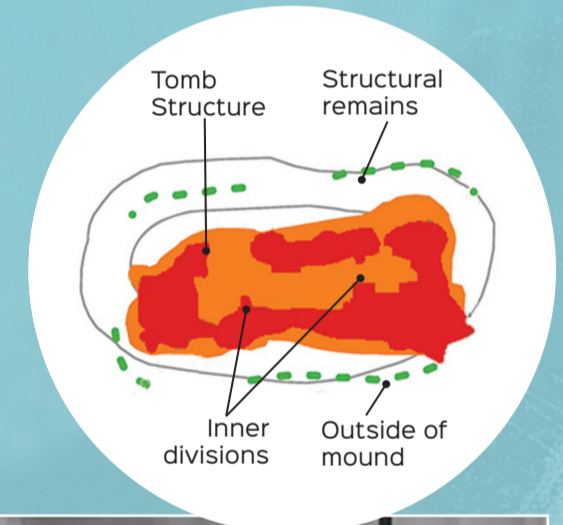


Pierowall Stone, Westray

Rousay



Kierfea Hill Chambered Cairn



Knowe of Lingro geophysical survey earth resistance (LEFT) and magnetometry (below left)

TOMBS OF THE ISLES

Orkney has over 80 chambered cairns, or tombs, with 53 in the North Isles, several of which you can visit.

This leaflet shares the results of recent surveys and research.

During 2021-23, Tombs of the Isles focused on the North Isles in Orkney, taking a community-centred approach to experiencing, recording and researching Neolithic funerary monuments.

An activities programme undertook geophysical survey, site visits, drop-ins, talks, walks, art/archaeology workshops, school activities and made new 3D models.

Papay rock art



photos: Dan Lee
Rock art, Holm of Papay

Visiting tombs:
Many tombs are accessible to the public and maintained by Historic Environment Scotland.

Please bear in mind that many tombs are located on private land. Whilst there is the right to access in Scotland, please follow the **Scottish Outdoor Access Code**:

- leave gates as you find them,
- avoid livestock,
- keep dogs on a lead,
- stick to paths where you can
- and be prepared.

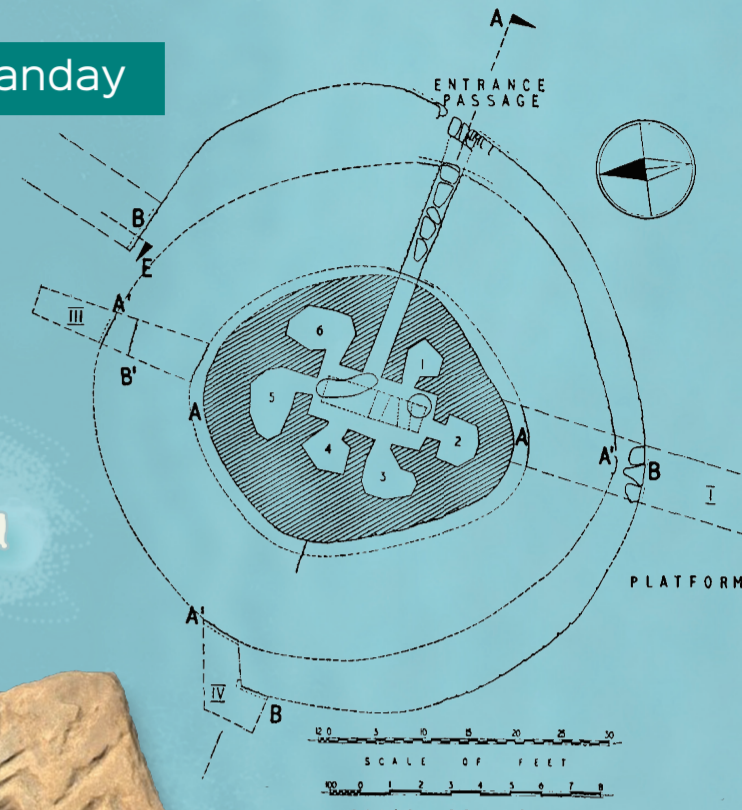
PAPA WESTRAY
Top tomb to visit:
Holm of Papa Westray South

PAPA WESTRAY

HOLM OF PAPA WESTRAY

NORTH RONALDSAY

Sanday



1951 Plan of Quoyness Tomb Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Vol 86 (1951-52).



Decorated Neolithic stone from Pool, Sanday.

Eday 3D modelling



Viquoy Tomb, Eday

SANDAY

Tofts Ness
Toftsness

Whale Point
Rethie Taing

Mount Maesry

Cata Sands

Augmund Howe
Quoyness
Tres Ness

SANDAY
Top tomb to visit:
Quoyness

'Top Tombs' to visit:
Midhowe, Rousay
Taversoe Tuick, Rousay
Quoyness, Sanday
Viquoy, Eday
Holm of Papa Westray South

FARAY

Linkertaing
Viquoy
Huntersquoy
Braeside

Calf Long
Calf NW
Calf SE

Pool

Withebeir

Stove
Hacksness

Eday Church
Sandyhill
Eday Manse

Green

Huip

PAPA STRONSAY

Earl's Knoll
Cutters Tuo

Cumley

STRONSAY

Kelsbrugh

Stebb Hill

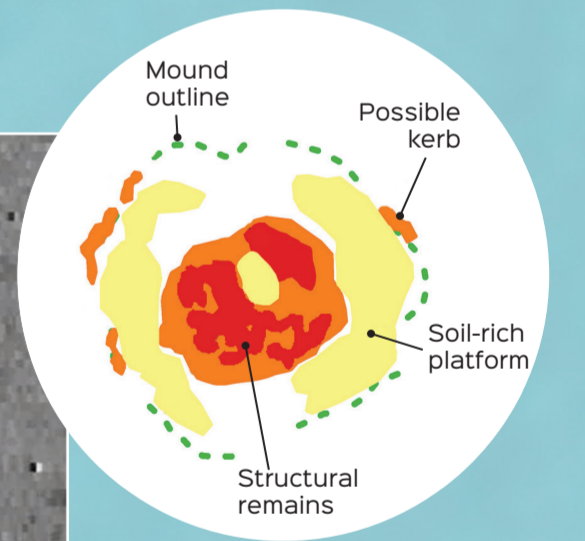
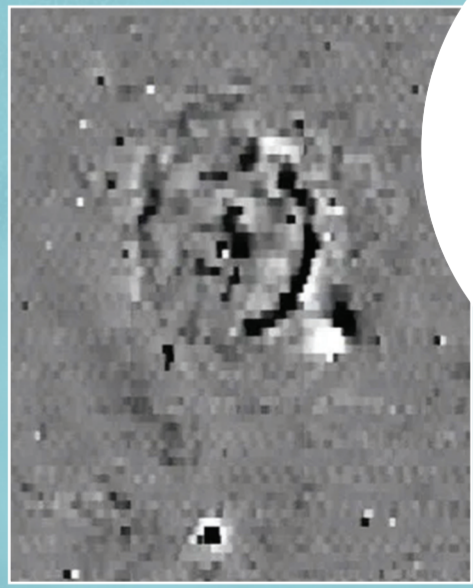
Wart of Kirbister

Houseby

Lamb Ness

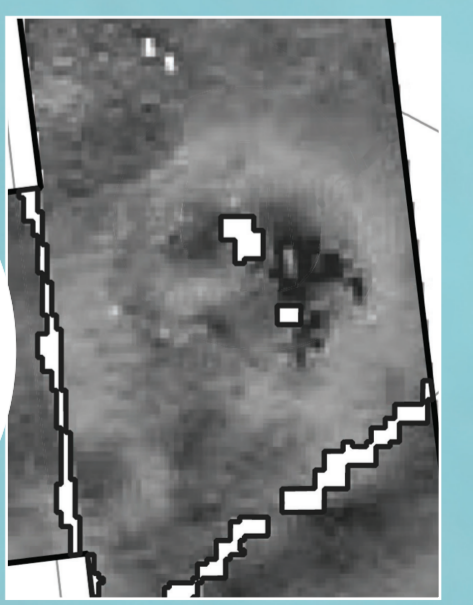
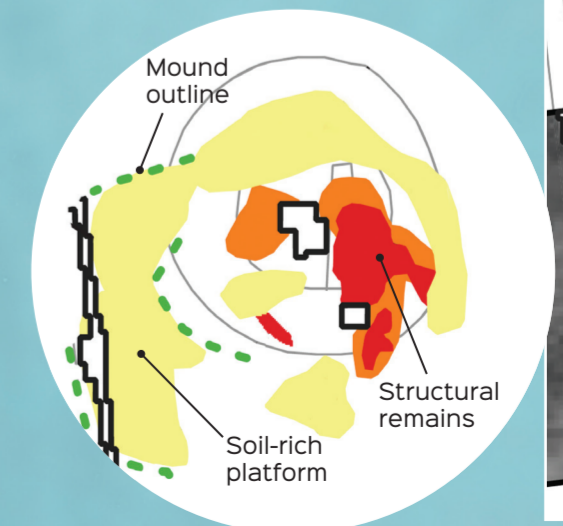
STRONSAY
Tombs to visit: walk around the core path and shore to **Kelsburgh** (Lochend), **Lamb Head**. Please note, most tombs are on private land.

Stronsay



Cutters Toor Tomb geophysical survey magnetometry (left) and earth resistance interpretation (above)

Shapinsay



Castle Bloody Tomb geophysical survey earth resistance interpretation (above left) and magnetometry right

SHAPINSAY
Top tomb to visit:
Castle Bloody, walk down the farm track from the north to the site. Visit the **Mor Stein** standing stone.

Castle Bloody

Skelbust

SHAPINSAY

WYRE

Lairo
Ramsay

Yarso
Blackhammer

Taversoe Tuick

Onziebist

Cubbie Roo Burden

Midhowe
Rowiegar
Swandrow

Lingro

Kierfea Hill
Craie

Bigland Long

Rinyo

Bigland Round

ROUSAY
Top tombs to visit:
Taversoe Tuick
and **Midhowe**

EDAY

EDAY
Top tomb to visit:
Viquoy

EGILSAY

- Chambered Tomb
- ◆ Neolithic Settlement
- Standing Stone

