



Project Report
March 2024



About Tombs of the Isles

Castle Bloody, Shapinsay. Credit: ORCA

The Tombs of the Isles project celebrated, researched and shared the stories of Neolithic tombs in the North Isles of Orkney.

An activities programme of research, walks, arts workshops, archaeological fieldwork (survey, geophysics) and school visits explored the well- and lesser-known burial monuments, setting them in a wider context. Fieldwork activities shared skills and provided training in archaeology.

The project took a community-focused approach to Neolithic funerary sites in Orkney. The project team worked with islanders to explore burial monuments in the North Isles, conduct new and original research and put this into a regional and national context.

In all, the project has brought together what we know about the tombs in the isles, undertaken new research, and created new ways of sharing their stories.

Tombs were included from most inhabited islands north of the Orkney Mainland: Rousay, Egilsay, Wyre, Shapinsay, Westray, Papa Westray, Eday, Sanday and Stronsay.

Find out more about the project by listening to introductory talks here:

[Introductory videos - Archaeology Orkney](#)



ORCA Outreach archaeologist, Dan Lee, at Tombs of the Isles launch talk in Stronsay. Credit ORCA.



Mid Howe stalled cairn, Rousay. Credit Dan Lee.



What are the tombs and where are they?

Lingro, Rousay. Credit: ORCA

Tombs are part of a broader monument type in Britain and Ireland, the Orkney tombs are among the most common and highly visible traces of the Neolithic (c. 3700BC– 2500BC).

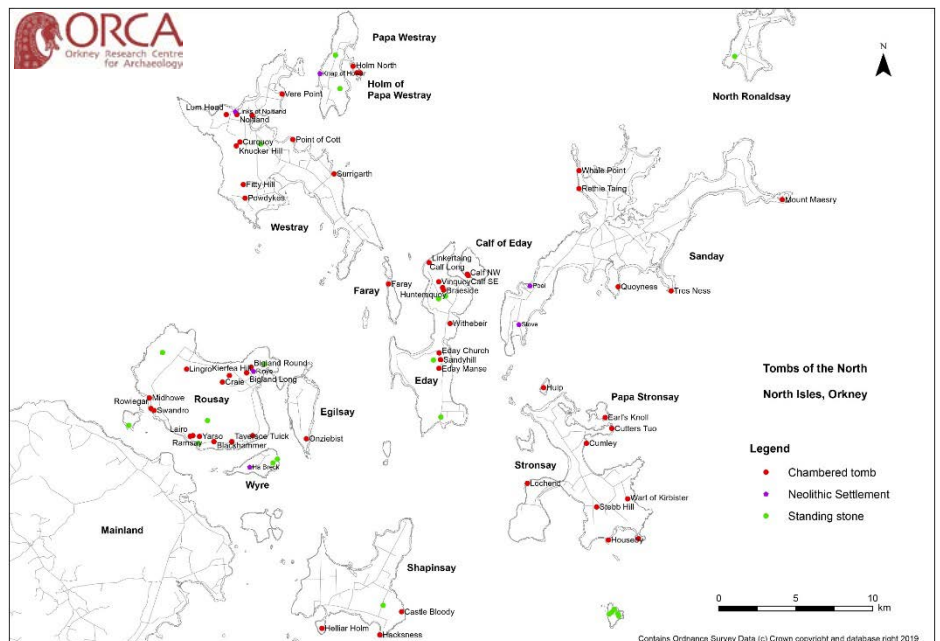
Tombs have been an area of fascination since the 19th century when antiquarians' investigations saw them become connected to the word 'tomb', despite few examples containing human remains. It seems more likely that they served as monuments for events relating to both the living and the dead.

Although varied in their complexity and design, chambered cairns generally followed the same basic layout — a stone-built chamber, enclosed by a cairn. The mound was a clearly visible feature in the landscape and formed a physical barrier between the chamber and its contents and the outside world.

Out of the 81 known tombs in Orkney, 53 are located in the North Isles!

More details about Orkney's chambered cairns can be found on the Tombs of the Isles website:

[The chambered cairns of Orkney - Archaeology Orkney](#)



Location of tombs across the North Isles. Credit: ORCA.



Kierfe Hill tomb, Rousay. Credit: ORCA.



Key questions for the project

Peck motifs in Holm of Papa Westray South tombs. Credit: Dan Lee

- Where are our tombs?
- What are our tombs like, how were they built?
- What was in our tombs? Where is this material now?
- What were they used for?
- Are there any stories about our tombs?
- How could we investigate the tombs?
- How can we celebrate our tombs?



Mount Misery, Start Point, Sanday. Credit: Dan Lee

You can explore more about death and burial in Neolithic Orkney and role of chambered cairns in the islands in a talk by Professor Colin Richards:

[Death and burial in Neolithic Orkney - Archaeology Orkney](#)

[Death and burial in Neolithic Orkney - part two - Archaeology Orkney](#)

The online talks have had over 8000 views!



Holm of Papa Westray South tomb. Credit: Antonia Thomas.



What did we do?

Geophysical survey at Cutters Tooer, Stronsay. Credit: ORCA

Art & Archaeology

Art and Archaeology workshops with Dr Antonia Thomas were held in four islands, with 60 participants and 26 school children.

Following talks about rock art in Neolithic Orkney, the workshops explored the materials, inspiration, methods and pigments used in Orcadian rock art. The workshops used the rock art in the Holm of Papa Westray South, Pierowall Quarry and Quoyness tombs that contain some of the most intriguing motifs in Orkney, including the so called 'eye-brows', as a spring board to explore wider themes.

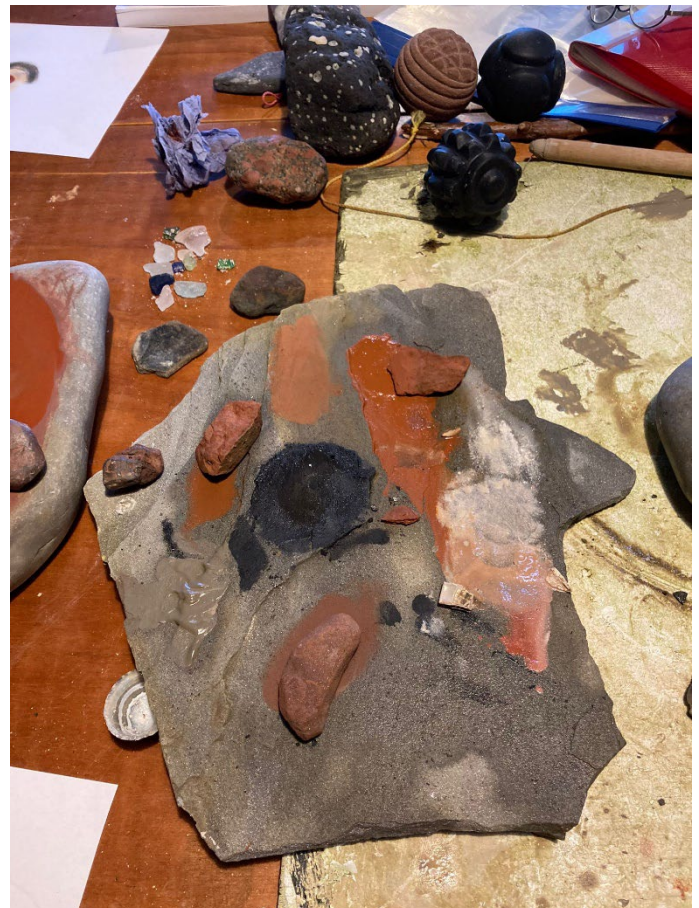


Grinding an axe. Credit: Antonia Thomas

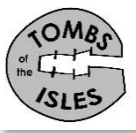
Antonia recently undertook a survey of the rock art in the Holm of Papa Westray South tomb and [more details can be found here](#).

If you are interested in learning more about Neolithic art and architecture, there are three lectures by Dr Antonia Thomas available on the Tombs of the Isles website:

[Introductory videos - Archaeology Orkney](#)



Making up pigments during the workshop. Credit: Antonia Thomas



Geophysics

During our fieldwork, we focused on survey and research, which give us a lot of information about the tombs and their wider landscapes. We didn't undertake any excavation during the project, as excavating human remains can be time-consuming and complex.

A team from ORCA (UHI Archaeology Institute), alongside community members, undertook geophysical surveys at five suspected Neolithic chambered cairn sites in Orkney. The surveys took place in Sanday, Rousay, Shapinsay and Stronsay in 2022 and 2023. The aim was to establish more about the sites' character, form and landscape context. Geophysical survey is non-intrusive. We had consent from Historical Environment Scotland (HES) to work at these important, protected sites.

Two techniques were used, providing contrasting datasets and allowing for better interpretation. Magnetometer survey is good for identifying magnetically enhanced material from burning and settlement activity while earth resistance survey is good for locating walls and structures.

Sanday

The geophysical survey at Rethie Taing and Whale Geo (Point) in Sanday cast doubt on the two possible tombs. At Whale Geo, the survey is dominated by the strong responses from numerous kelp-pits across the headland. Traces of possible pits across the location of the 'tomb' may suggest that the site is actually the denuded remains of a Bronze Age barrow.

The very strong magnetic signature from Rethie Taing suggests that this is more likely to be a settlement (perhaps a broch) than a 'house of the dead'!

For more detail, follow this link:

[Sanday - Archaeology Orkney](#)

What is Magnetometer Survey?

Magnetometer surveys record very small differences in the magnetism of the ground to a depth of around 1m. The instruments measure a range of just a few nano tesla.

The highs (black) and lows (white) are mapped on a grid. Resulting greyscale plots (right) show buried anomalies which might represent archaeological features.

Magnetometers also pick up iron objects in the ground, fences and more magnetic igneous rock. The sandstone bedrock in Orkney is (luckily) fairly low in magnetism, so the faint archaeological responses show up in the survey data.

What is Earth Resistance Survey?

Earth resistance survey involves passing a small electrical current through the earth and measuring the resistance values as it meets different buried features.

Earth resistance survey detects stone features, such as walls and areas of rubble, which show as high resistance features, and 'negative' features, such as ditches and pits, which tend to show as low resistance.

As with magnetometer survey, the highs (black) and lows (white) are mapped on a grid and the plots show possible buried archaeological features.



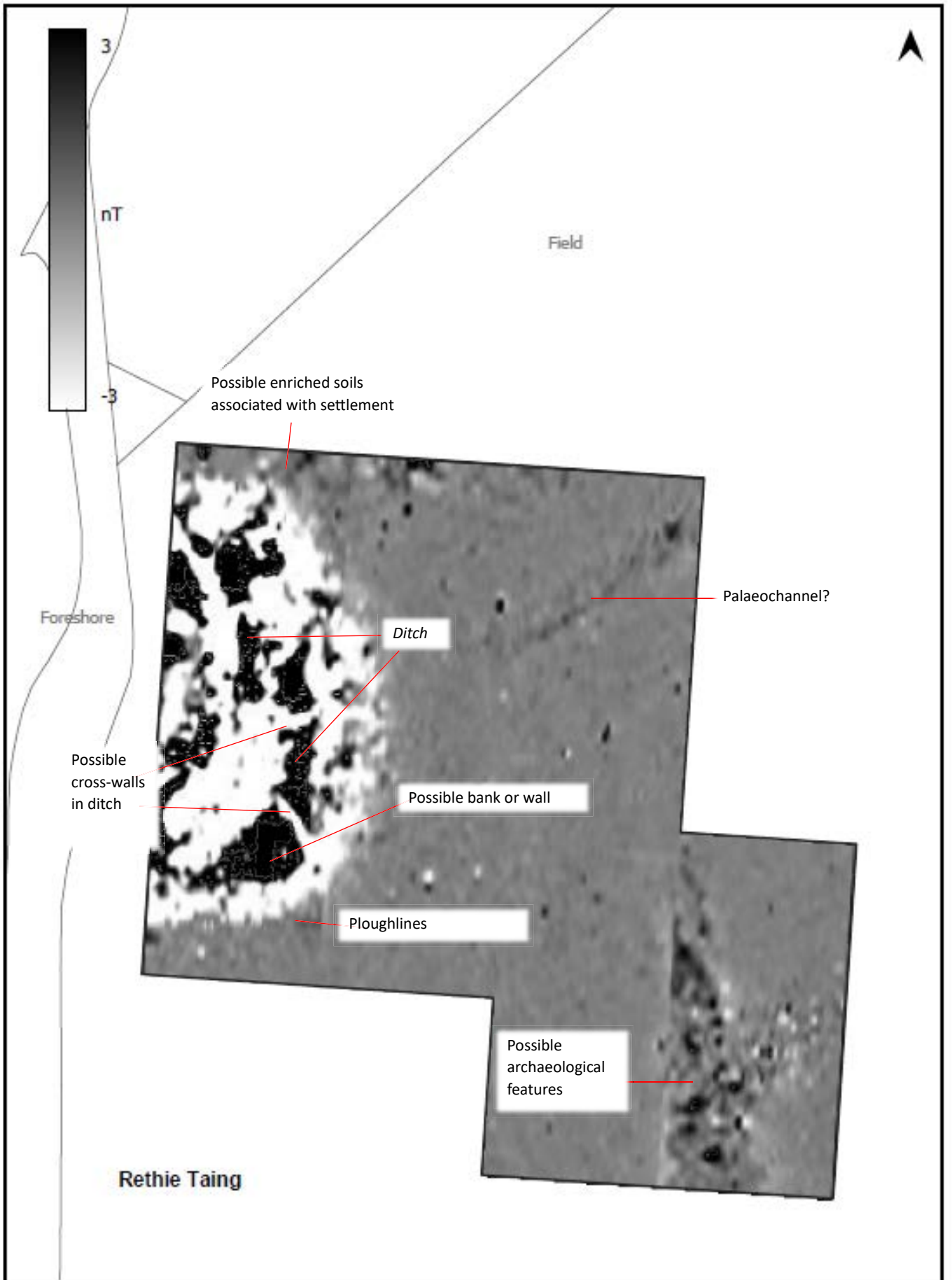
Magnetometer survey at Lingro, Rousay. Credit: ORCA.



Earth resistance survey at Whale Geo, Sanday. Credit: ORCA.



Magnetometer results from Whale Geo (Point), showing kelp pits clustered around the possible tomb. Credit: ORCA.



Magnetometer results from Rethie Taing, showing a settlement, probably an Iron Age broch. Credit: ORCA.

Tomb case study: [Quoyness, Sanday](#)

Early excavations in 1857 by James Farrer explored the tomb: “the skulls were sent to Thurman in London, but the remaining bones were unceremoniously dumped back where they had been found.”

Gordon Childe excavated the tomb more systematically in 1951. He found internal pits and an outer platform. The corbelled walls are made mostly of waterworn stone. Childe made detailed plans and sections. Finds included pottery and some [enigmatic carved stone objects](#).

A survey of the internal walls in the 1990s found some Neolithic rock art – faint parallel incised lines and chevron patterns.

Quoyness is one of the most spectacular tombs to visit!



Rousay, Shapinsay & Stronsay

The geophysical surveys at [The Knowe of Lingro](#) in Rousay, [Castle Bloody](#) in Shapinsay and [Cutter's Tuo](#) in Stronsay, suggest that all three sites are tombs.

At Lingro, the resistivity data shows the stone construction of the tomb. The shape of the tomb is consistent with a stalled cairn, with even some of the orthostatic dividers visible. The interior is lower resistance and could indicate a less stony, more soil-like fill.

At Castle Bloody, the resistance survey revealed a square-shaped structure inside the mound, with higher resistance indicating rubble fills and a possible revetment wall on the west side.

The resistivity data from Cutters Tuo suggests that the tomb mound and platform are encircled by a stone kerb. The mound is high resistance and therefore stony, while a surrounding ring of lower resistance is likely to reflect a soil-rich platform.

Interestingly, the magnetometer data from Cutters Tuo suggests that the mound was reused and modified during the Bronze Age, with the likely insertion of burial cists. The magnetic enhancement across the mound is likely to be caused by the incorporation of cremation material.

For more detail, follow this link:

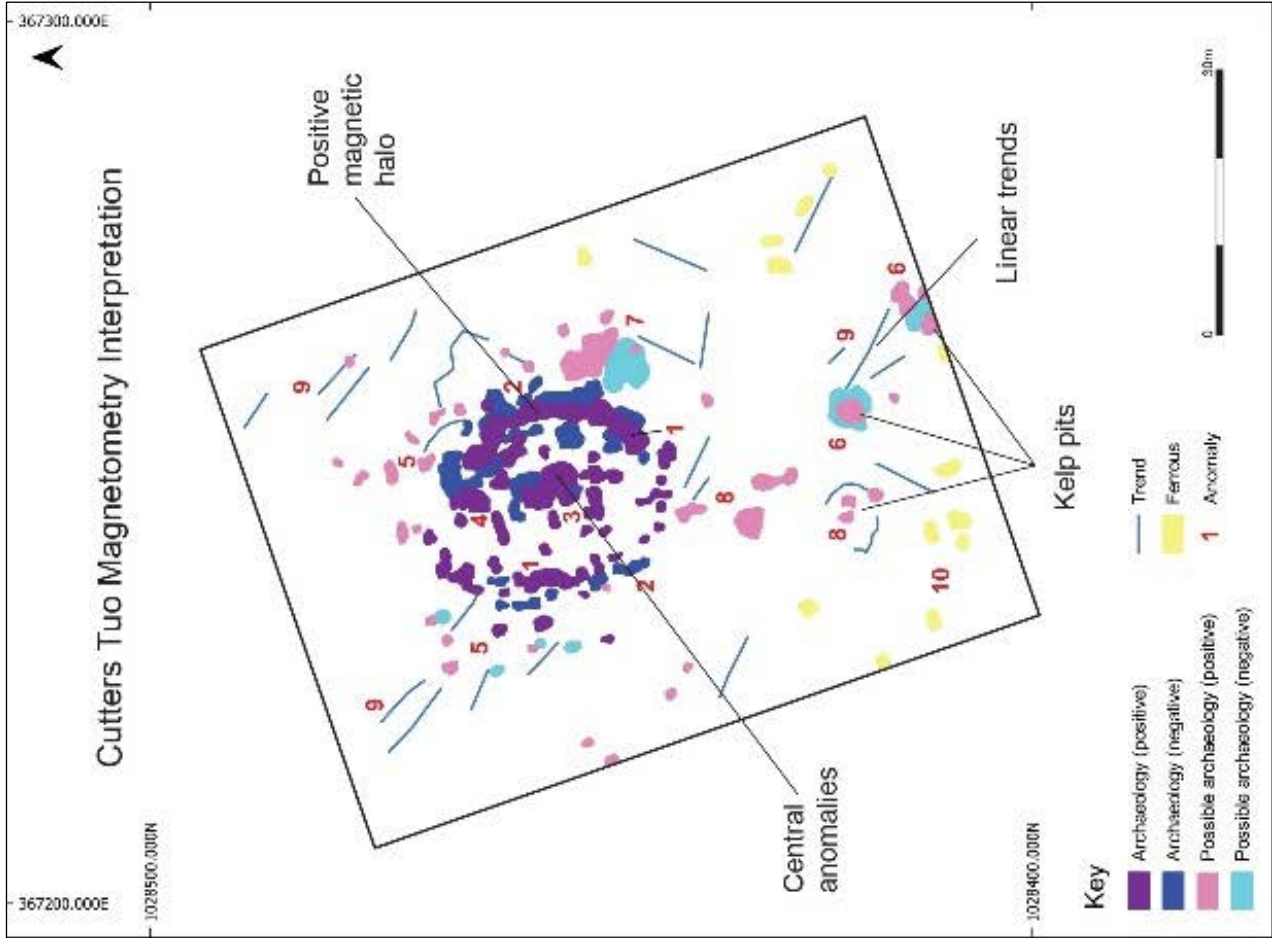
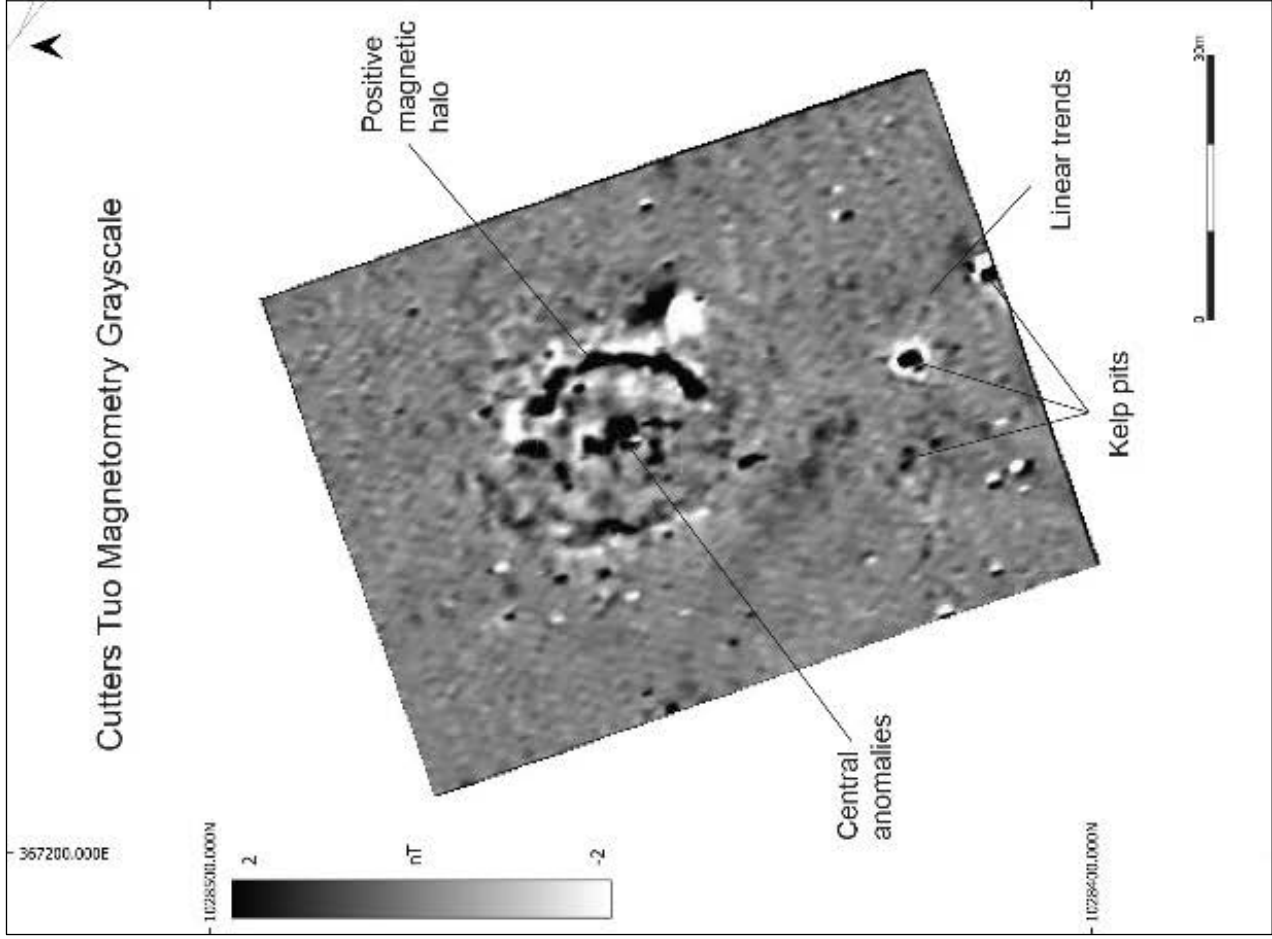
[Rousay, Shapinsay and Stronsay tomb sites - Archaeology Orkney](#)



Geophysical survey at Castle Bloody, Shapinsay. Credit: ORCA.



Geophysical survey at Lingro, Rousay. Credit: ORCA.



Magnetometer results from Cutters Tuo, Stronsay. Credit: ORCA.

Egilsay Walk

A talk and walk was undertaken to explore the Neolithic tomb at Onziebist in Egilsay, with Dan Lee and the RSPB ranger.

The group had an introductory talk in the Egilsay Community Centre and then walked south along the island road to the tomb.

The tomb is located in the [RSPB Onziebist reserve](#). With the ranger we also found out about the birds and other wildlife.

The tomb is located on a prominent natural rise, with a steep rocky slope on the eastern side. Previous investigations are evident in the top of the mound, where there are some exposed wall-lines. The remains of a side cell contained some possible Neolithic rock art of incised parallel lines.

If you visit the tomb, please follow RSPB guidelines and stick to the path.



Everyone on the Egilsay walk. Credit: Sigurd Towrie.



Survey recording at Onziebist during the Egilsay walk. Credit: ORCA.



On the way to Onziebist, Egilsay. Credit: Sigurd Towrie.



Exploring the Onziebist mound during the Egilsay Walk. Credit: Sigurd Towrie.

Orkney Tomb in a box

Replicas of key objects were brought to the community launches to introduce people to the types of artefacts that have been recovered from Orkney's tombs.

Working with the *Boundary Objects* project, the *Tombs of the Isles* project helped develop a 'tomb in a box' for the main islands. This contained replica artefacts, such as a grooved ware pot, flint objects, polished axes, bone points and Neolithic rock art.

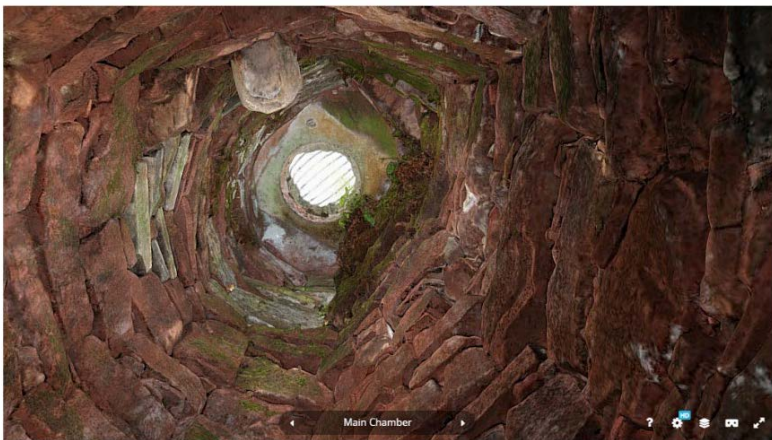


Orkney 'tomb in a box' – replicas of key artefacts found in tombs. Credit: ORCA.

Sketchfab Models

Based on drone images by Bobby Friel, Dr Hugo Anderson-Whymark of National Museums Scotland, produced a series of 3D models of some of the North Isles' tombs, including the interior of Vinguoy Hill on Eday and the carved lintel stone from Pierowall tomb, Westray.

The selection of the models are available to view, [click here](#).



Vinguoy Chambered Cairn, Eday, Orkney

We made a 3D model of Vinguoy Chambered Cairn, Eday.

[Tombs of the North Isles - A 3D model collection by UHI Archaeology Institute \(@archaeologyuhi\) - Sketchfab](#)

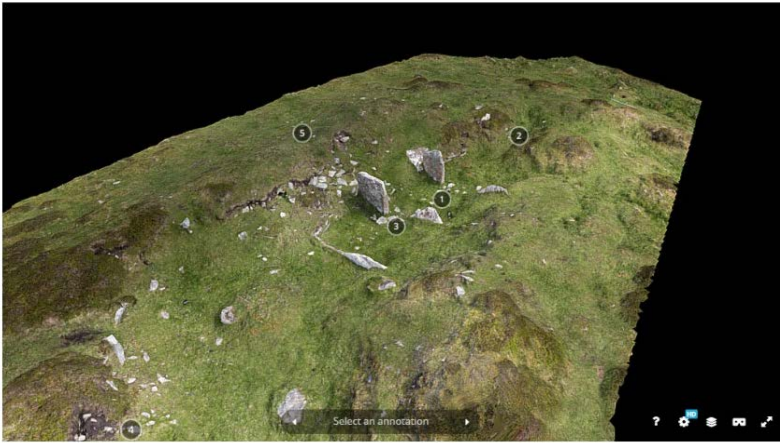
Sketchfab staff pick model with 882 views!



Kierfea Hill cairn, Rousay, Orkney
3D Model

More remote sites, such as the remains of the tomb on Kierfea Hill, Rousay, were recorded using a drone.

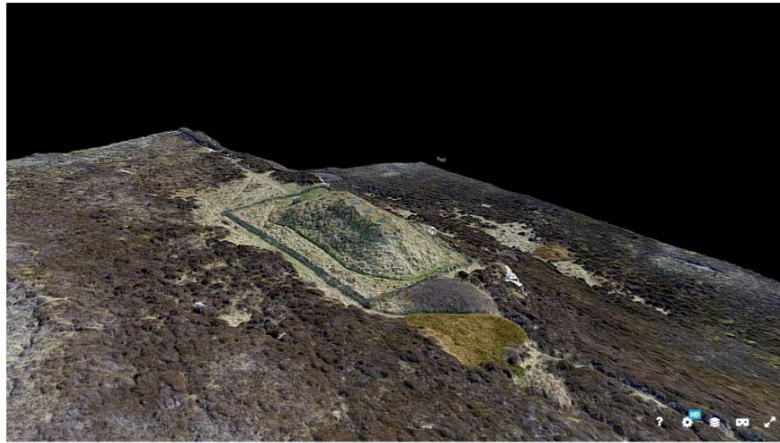
[3D models by UHI Archaeology Institute \(@archaeologyuhi\) - Sketchfab](#)



Braeside Tomb, Eday, Orkney
3D Model

Some tombs have been excavated but not restored and the internal wall heads and orthostats – stones which divide the inside – are clearly visible. This is the case at Braeside, Eday.

[3D models by UHI Archaeology Institute \(@archaeologyuhi\) - Sketchfab](#)



Knowe of Yarso cairn, Rousay, Orkney
3D Model

Tombs like Yarso, Rousay, are located high up on glacial terraces. We used a drone to record them and created a 3D model so you can experience it without walking there!

[3D models by UHI Archaeology Institute \(@archaeologyuhi\) - Sketchfab](#)



Decorated lintel, Pierowall Tomb, Westray
3D Model

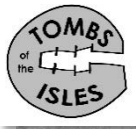
This fabulous, decorated stone was found in the tomb at Pierowall Quarry, Westray, during excavations. It is on display in the Westray Heritage Centre and is well worth a visit!

The design finds close parallels with the rock art in Newgrange in Ireland.

[3D models by UHI Archaeology Institute \(@archaeologyuhi\) - Sketchfab](#)



Excavations at Ramsey, Rousay (Above). Skeletal remains in Midhowe, Rousay (Below). Credit: David Wilson Collection, Orkney SMR.



Tombs of the Isles Archive

Excavations at Midhowe, Rousay. Credit: David Wilson Collection, Orkney SMR

One of the main aims of the project was to create an Island Tomb Archive.

Using a variety of resources, such as the National Monuments Record of Scotland via the CANMORE database website and the Orkney Sites and Monuments Record office and published material, key plans, descriptions and discoveries were added to the project website.

Archive images, archaeological and historical journals, monographs and books were used to create detailed entries for each tomb, with photos from our site visits and fieldwork work results.

Descriptions of the tombs, excavations, plans and photographs by island are all available to view online here:

[Tombs of the Isles - Archaeology Orkney](#)

Lots of tombs have been investigated before, in the late 19th century or early 20th century, but there is usually little record. Sometimes there is a note in the Orcadian Newspaper recording the event, sometimes others like George Petrie made some notes and sketch plans.

Many mounds survive, but some were damaged or completely destroyed. Mounds were believed to contain hogboons or towies, so people often left them alone. But not always.

Midhowe, Rousay

(Davidson & Henshall, 1989, The Chambered Cairns of Orkney)

| | |
|-----------|--|
| Type: | Orkney-Cromarty, Rectangular cairn. Stalled chamber. |
| Location: | Mar |
| Notes: | Prior to its excavation between 1932 and 1934, the Midhowe stalled cairn was a long, grass-covered mound about 20 metres from the southern |

- The Project
- Orkney's chambered cairns
- Introductory videos
- North Isles
- Eday
- Egilsay
- Faray
- Gairsay
- Rousay
- Sanday
- Shapinsay
- Stronsay

[Midhowe tomb archive entry available online.](#)



Unstan ware pot from Taversoe Tuick.

Some tombs were excavated, restored and can be visited today, such as Yarso, Taversoe and Blackhammer in Rousay.



Cubbie Roo's Burden, Rousay. Credit: Dan Lee.

Sometimes the human remains were noted and put back after early investigations. Often they were lost. Some tombs were accessible, but have since been blocked up. Only stories of the contents survive.



Activities and events

A total of 28 events were held across the North Isles of Orkney throughout the project.

A total of 137 people signed up to the project and the launch talks were attended by 119, with 76 islanders coming to the drop-in sessions the next day. The launches were a chance to handle objects and learn about field techniques. They were important to discuss tombs with islanders and develop targets for visits and fieldwork. We also invited some schools to the launch events, with 72 pupils coming along in total.

The Art and Archaeology workshops proved popular, with 33 people attending the talks and 66 the workshops, with an additional 26 school pupils. The main fieldwork activity was geophysical survey at four tombs. There were 18 people who helped with the surveys and gained hands on experience, with 14 others visiting.

School visits: Seven island schools were visited, often more than once, during the project. In-class talks and activities to 21 classes introduced pupils to the Neolithic in Orkney, tombs and burial practice. Pupils took part in geophysical survey in Stronsay. 218 pupils took part in activities!



Bobby Friel with his drone equipment, Sanday launch. Credit: ORCA.



Art and architecture talk, one of several available on the Tombs of the Isles website. Credit: Antonia Thomas.

Participant Feedback

Participants gave the activities 8-10 out of 10. Importantly, all the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they had learnt something new about archaeology!

For those involved, the most memorable experiences were artefact handling, discovering new sites, drone coverage and 3d models of the tombs and hands-on experience with geophysics and land survey.

People felt that the project offered an opportunity to explore their local heritage in an accessible and engaging way.

"What made it for me was just how approachable everyone was and eager to pass on their knowledge in an interesting and engaging way, at a level that was easy for a novice to understand".

"Being taught some of the signs to look out for on old sites was certainly an eye opener for me!"

"Getting involved with the geophysics was great".

"Gained a wider appreciation of the local archaeology".



At Onziebist, Egilsay. Credit: Sigurd Towrie



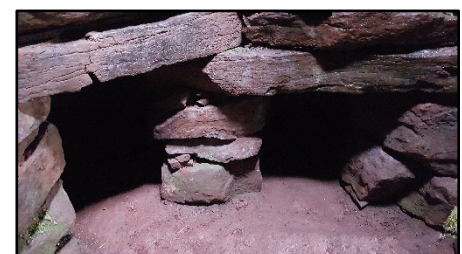
Tomb talk in Egilsay. Credit: Sigurd Towrie.

"...being shown how to view Cutter's Toor through an archaeologist's eyes gave me a completely different perspective on looking at something I've grown up with and never really appreciated".

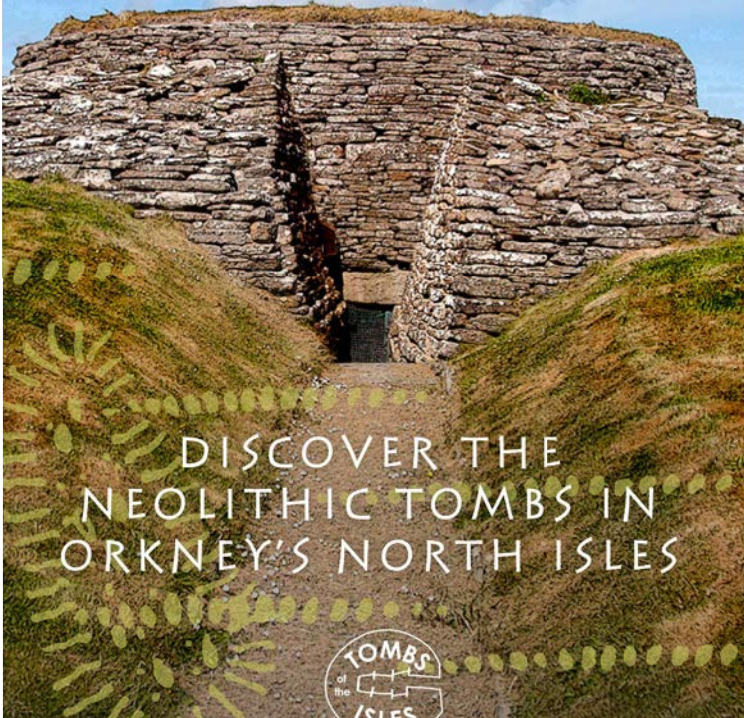
Tomb case study: Vinquoy, Eday

Vinquoy is located on a prominent location with wide panoramic views across the North Isles of Orkney.

Farrer & Hebden first excavated the tomb in 1857, leaving little record. The tomb was left open with no roof. In 1985, a group of archaeologists led by Rousay resident Jacqui Marwick excavated the backfill so the tomb could be accessed safely by the public. She found internal pits and Bronze Age pottery (perhaps relating to the final stages of use). They also found material from the 19th century excavations including some clay pipes. Vinquoy is constructed from large red sandstone blocks giving it a very different feel inside. **Eday has 11 tombs**, including three on the Calf of Eday, excavated by Calder in the 1930s.



TOMBS OF THE ISLES



DISCOVER THE NEOLITHIC TOMBS IN ORKNEY'S NORTH ISLES



THE NEOLITHIC IN ORKNEY

The Neolithic (4000-2500BC) was the period when agriculture and the spread of domesticated animals and pottery reached Britain and Ireland.

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

Recently it was suggested that Neolithic Orkney was a volatile place where 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 Irish passage grave architecture as different groups sought to outdo each other. The result was a highly competitive and unstable society – it is proposed, eventually collapsed.



TOMBS IN ORKNEY

Chambered cairns are Orkney's common Neolithic monument type, with over 80 known examples, which are in the North Isles.

They were built using stone to form a chamber, or chambers, enclosed by a cairn.

Although the term 'tomb' has been attached to these structures, they were almost certainly not tombs. Because only a few have been found to contain human remains, they are likely to have been used in the same way as the living – perhaps as places for passage, ceremonies or to honor deities, ancestors or spirits.

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

What do you think?

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



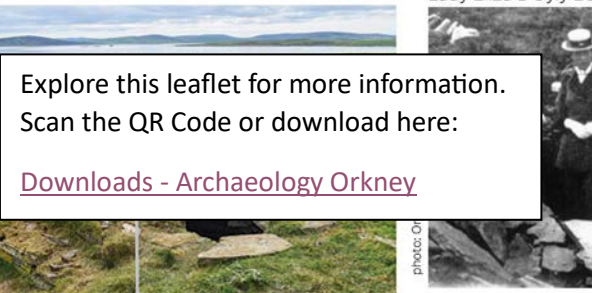
UHI Archaeology Institute, UHI Orkney. This leaflet can be downloaded from: <https://archaeologyorkney.com/tombs-of-the-isles/downloads/>



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



Did they bury their dead in Rousay? Or were they handled differently?



Explore this leaflet for more information. Scan the QR Code or download here: [Downloads - Archaeology Orkney](https://archaeologyorkney.com/tombs-of-the-isles/downloads/)

Credits: Summary report by Dan Lee and Amanda Brend. Geophysical survey by Chris Gee and Kevin Kerr. Geophysical survey illustrations by Amanda Brend. Thanks to all the island residents who took part and helped with the surveys!

The project was funded by the North Isles Landscape Partnership Scheme.

Further reading:

Childe, V., Wells, L., & Zeuner, F. 1954. **Re-Excavation of the Chambered Cairn of Quoyness, Sanday**, on behalf of the Ministry of Works, 1951-2. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 86, 121-139. <https://doi.org/10.9750/PSAS.086.121.139>

Davidson & Henshall 1989. **The Chambered tombs of Orkney**. Edinburgh University Press (out of print but you can get second hand copies / Orkney Library)

Ritchie, A. 2009. **On the Fringe of Neolithic Europe: Excavation of a Chambered Cairn on the Holm of Papa Westray, Orkney**. Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. Open access e-book: <http://books.socantscot.org/digital-books/catalog/book/16>

Other Orkney Tombs:

This project explored the North Isles of Orkney. You can find out about other Neolithic tombs with the resources below. Tombs you can visit are [Maes Howe](#), [Unstan](#), [Cuween](#) and [Wideford Hill](#) on the Orkney Mainland. The [Dwarfie Stone](#), Hoy, is the only rock-cut tomb in the UK.

Other resources:

[Welcome | Working stone \(orkneystonetools.org.uk\)](#)

[The Ness of Brodgar Excavation – Investigating a prehistoric complex in the Heart of Neolithic Orkney](#)

[Archives | Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland \(socantscot.org\)](#)

[Archaeology Orkney - UHI Archaeology Institute](#)

[Welcome to Canmore | Canmore](#)

