

Solving the mysteries of the megaliths?

A review of Orkney's 2002 archaeological season

While the archaeological attention over recent years has been firmly on Tankerness and the underground chamber of Minehowe, the emphasis in 2002 shifted firmly back to the "Neolithic Heart of Orkney".

There, for the first time in almost 30 years, the area around two of Orkney's best-known ancient monuments - the Ring of Brodgar and Standing Stones of Stenness - came under close scrutiny.

Not only was a large section of the Ness of Brodgar painstakingly surveyed, but the chance discovery of two stones by the Stenness loch could shed light on the construction of the stone circles, in particular how the megaliths were transported from their quarry site.

Nick Card of Orkney Archaeological Trust (OAT) came across the two prone stones while walking the eastern shore of the Stenness Loch.

Lying by the water, just to the north of the Wasbister disc barrow, the find could indicate that the megaliths took to the water for their final leg of their journey. Although Nick is only certain that one of the stones was destined to be a megalith, the discovery has intriguing parallels with a local tradition that other stones lie within the loch itself.

"It could be that these stones may once have been erected but were knocked or fell down in more recent history," suggested Nick, "but this seems unlikely. If they had been standing, they would surely have been recorded somewhere. It seems more probable that they were actually on the way somewhere. And if you were moving something that size it makes sense to use the water rather than drag them across the land."



The Comet Stone, an outlier to the Ring of Brodgar. Geophysics surveys this summer revealed the presence of a fourth "object" in the ground by this monolith

That the Neolithic people of Scotland were capable seamen is a known fact. Not only did the earliest Orcadian settlers navigate the Pentland Firth but they maintained contact the British mainland, something confirmed by certain artefacts found in the county and the obvious exchange of ideas evident throughout the period. Bearing this in mind, it is no great stretch of the imagination to suggest that the monument builders called on their boat-handling skills to transport the megaliths needed for their ambitious construction.

Staying with the stone circles, work at Vestrafiold in Sandwick over the summer seems to have confirmed that megaliths were indeed quarried there - the location long held to be the source of the Stenness stones.

The project, led by Dr Colin Richards of Manchester University, hopes to reveal more about the people who hewed the great stones from the quarry and moved them more than seven miles to

the Ness of Brodgar.

Previous investigations concentrated on the stone circles themselves, but Dr Richards' project could provide an intriguing glimpse behind the scenes of the construction of Orkney's grandest prehistoric relics.

The Vestrafiold work is ongoing and Dr Richards hopes to return in 2003.

The designation of the area surrounding Maeshowe, Brodgar, the Standing Stones and Skara Brae as a World Heritage Site in 1999 resulted in a number of projects to better understand the archaeology - visible and invisible - within the landscape. One of these was an extensive geophysics survey of the Brodgar peninsula - the thin neck of land bordered by the Harray and Stenness lochs.

Funded by Historic Scotland, Orkney Islands Council (OIC), OAT and Orkney College, the 30-hectare survey took around five months to complete and revealed much about the landscape surrounding the stone circles. It not only clarified the extent of the known archaeological features but also revealed several new ones.

Of particular interest was Bighowe, the remains of a larger mound levelled in the early 20th century. Visible from the south as a low flat mound, Bighowe lies to the south-east of the Standing Stones, about half way between the stones and the Stenness Kirk. Early antiquarians labelled the structure a broch, something now confirmed by the detailed scan results.



Summer 2002's first excavation - investigating the Bookan chambered cairn. The photograph shows the remains of the entrance passage and what is left of the side chambers

Among the many other features revealed by the scans is the existence of a fourth "object" in the ground by the Comet Stone - the megalith that lies about 140 metres from the Ring of Brodgar - as well as a number of features within the Brodgar ring itself.

It is hoped that another 30 hectares will be surveyed in 2003.

Starting this season's archaeological digs was the Bookan chambered cairn, a little known structure to the north-west of the Ring of Brodgar. Originally excavated in 1861, the cairn is close to the Ring of Bookan - a ditch and bank "henge" monument of a type found across Britain.

Although the Bookan Cairn lies in what is arguably one of the richest archaeological landscapes in the county, very little was actually known about it. After the 19th century investigation it was assumed that because of the structure's unfamiliar design, it had to be a very early example of a chambered tomb. It was given a classification of its own and more or less forgotten about.

But this year's two-week excavation revealed much about the cairn - in particular that the previ-

ous excavation had merely covered the earliest phase of its history.

Nick Card explained: "After the original tomb had fallen into disrepair, it was incorporated into a larger cairn around 16 metres in diameter and bounded by three concentric stone revetments.

"Various aspects of the tomb's layout, like the arrangement of the side compartments around a central chamber and the removable side-chamber 'doors', seem more akin to the Orkney's Maeshowe type of tombs rather than the stalled Orkney-Cromarty tombs like Unstan."

But despite its similarities to Maeshowe, Bookan's size and architectural aspects remain noticeably different to other chambered cairns found so far in Orkney.

In mid July, work at the Knowes of Trotty in Harray resumed with Nick Card joining Jane Downes of Orkney College to continue on from last year's surveying work.

Lying at the foot of the Ward of Redland, the Knowes of Trotty are the source of one of the most famous Orcadian archaeological discoveries so far - the four gold discs found in 1858 by local antiquarian George Petrie.

This year, although the archaeologists were interested in studying the anomalies revealed by last year's survey, the real goal of the excavation was to identify ways to protect the site from the erosion damage threatening it.



The main mound at the Knowes of Trotty Bronze Age funerary complex

"Seven small trenches were opened over a variety of (survey) anomalies to test some of the geophysics results and preliminary interpretations," said Jane Downes. "In each trench archaeological features relating to the site's function as a cemetery were encountered - ranging from an early Bronze Age building at the north end, to pyre sites, pits and a very truncated kerbed cairn."

The discovery of a building was unusual, as structures - particularly domestic ones - are not commonly found at cemetery sites. Investigations at the base of the main funeral mound also revealed that it had been built into a natural hillock, which had been sculpted and revetted to suit the builders.

Nick Card added: "Although the Knowes of Trotty is one of the most quoted Bronze Age cemetery sites in Britain, not much is actually known about it.

"Work over the last two seasons has shown that the area is certainly a lot more extensive than was previously thought. It's now hoped that we are now going to get a lot of dating evidence that will help us understand how the cemetery developed. This season's work also allows us to put the findings from earlier investigations into context."

At the foot of Wideford Hill, just outside Kirkwall, an attempt to find a "lost" Neolithic village a great success, with a team finally locating the ancient settlement in the shadow of the nearby chambered cairn.

Earlier searches, using reports by Orcadian antiquarian Robert Rendall, had revealed nothing, so it was assumed that any remains had been ploughed away. However, a re-evaluation of Rendall's account finally located the settlement, in a field right by the main Kirkwall-Stromness road. With Dr Colin Richards at the helm, the site turned up numerous finds, including stone axes and Unstan pottery. The only evidence of a building, however, was a drain. Despite this, the finds seem to indicate that this could be a very early settlement - perhaps even earlier than the Knap of Howar on Papa Westray which dates from around 3,600BC.

Dr Richards hopes to return around Easter 2003.

A previous contender for Orkney's earliest village, at Stonehall in Firth, now looks like being somewhat later than first thought. Newly published radio-carbon dates from Dr Richard's previous excavations seem to indicate that Stonehall actually dates from around 3,300BC. Certainly not the very early settlement it was once thought.

These new dates cause some problems when it comes to current ideas regarding the development of Neolithic settlements. It has generally been thought that each development stage of a village had its own distinct architectural style. Stonehall, therefore, was thought to be an early settlement because of the early style of architecture found there.



One of the Neolithic houses uncovered previously at Stonehall in Firth. The latest radiocarbon dates have revealed that the Stonehall Settlement is not as old as previously thought.

But these radio-carbon dates now indicate that the village was not actually showing a range of building styles that had developed slowly over a period of time. Instead, it appears that all these different styles could have been in use at the same time.

Finally on the subject of Neolithic villages, a book on one of Colin Richard's best-known excavations, the Barnhouse Settlement in Stenness, is to be published early next year. Those interested can expect to see the book in the shops by spring 2003.

Westray saw more excavations this year, with the continuation of work at the Knowe of Skea and Quoynegrew, as well preliminary investigations of a "new" earth-house.

The second full season of excavation on the Knowe of Skea continued to reveal interesting, but puzzling finds. Originally thought to be a chambered cairn when it was first excavated in 2000, the latest discoveries have archaeologists turning again to this idea.

Last year's excavation revealed a well-preserved Iron Age structure, which going by the finds, appeared date from 7th or 8th century AD. Despite the thickness of its walls - up to four metres in some places - the possibility that it was a broch was dismissed. Instead, it may be that the wall had been built up over time, with new layers added to try and add stability to the previous wall.

The lack of domestic evidence has more or less ruled out the possibility that the structure was a dwelling. Although Iron Age artefacts were found within the structure, these were high quality, high status items, more reminiscent of grave goods.

The promontory is littered with burial cairns which undoubtedly have some connection to the quantity of human remains found in and around the mound. Samples taken this year date from the Iron Age, so it would appear that the Iron Age builders were re-using a much earlier structure. Construction technique and the quality of stonework also seem to confirm this.

Speaking during the excavation, Graeme Wilson said: "This is the tip of the iceberg. We can now see in the floor of the Iron Age building on top here, other structures, other stones poking through from below. So we're fairly sure there's something else under here. Plus, we haven't really had time yet to examine the whole of the mound and we know from last year and the year before that there is a whole load of more structures out there, a lot of different things happening.

"Until we get a better and wider look at this whole site, we won't really be able to understand how it has developed and how it fits into Westray as a whole and Orkney."

The Quoygrew excavations continued in July and August, once again led by Dr James Barrett. Funded by Historic Scotland, OIC, OAT and the University of York, this season's work focused on buildings first discovered in 1999.

An extension to the main building was revealed this year - a room that seemed to have been a bedroom before the addition of an external door saw it become a workshop or outbuilding. With four distinct phases of occupation, the main building was found to have an internal dimension of 10m by 4.8m, with entrances in the centre of both the eastern and western ends.

A "new" building was also discovered about one metre to the west of the main building. Built on top of the viking middens, its date and function are as yet uncertain.

Quoygrew produced hundreds of artefacts this year - mostly pottery, soapstone and whalebone. The discovery of 25 sherds of Scottish redware pottery helped date the buildings to the Late Middle Ages (1300-1500). The second building may have been re-roofed and reused in later centuries, as implied by 16th and 17th century coins recovered last year.

Excavation of the Quoygrew farm mound did not continue this season, but radio-carbon results have given it a date of 780-1000AD. This confirms that settlement in this part of the site began in the Viking Age and that Quoygrew was occupied for approximately 1,000 years prior to its final abandonment in the 1930s.

Moving back into prehistory, an underground structure in Westray could provide some much needed clues as to the function of the monuments known locally as earth-houses.

Originally found around 20 years ago, the earth-house at Langskaill has remained largely untouched, giving archaeologists the opportunity to study the site first-hand.

Julie Gibson of OAT explained: "The structure doesn't seem to have been cleared out. One or two bones have been removed but they've been returned by the farmer.

"There are a number of earth-houses in Orkney but they're not in the least understood. We can't even really say for certain what time-period they are from, what they were for or what they were attached to, if anything. So the Langskaill earth-house, we are hoping, might give us an opportunity to clear up some of those questions."

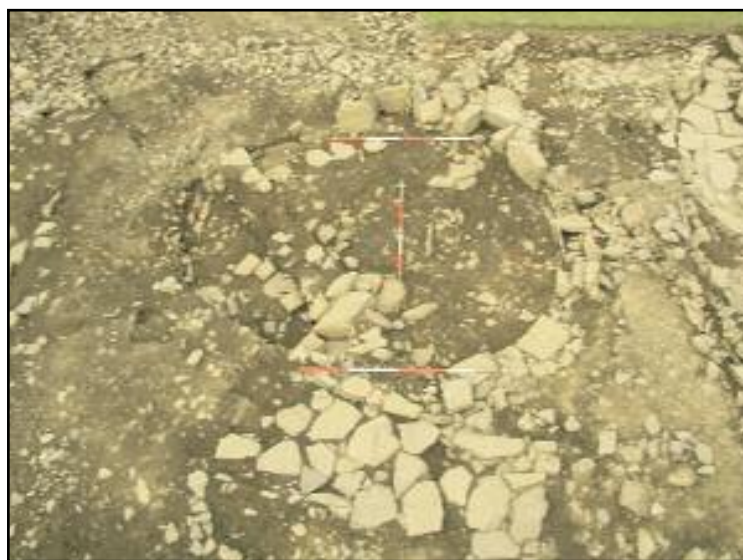
Back at Minehowe for a third year, the archaeologists were concentrating on the supposed broch remains in Roundhowe to the south-west of the Tankerness underground chamber.

Despite having a road built through it, Roundhowe's banked enclosure survived and seemed to confirm the 19th century declarations that the mound was a broch. The 2002 excavation results, however, did not.

Funded by Historical Scotland, OIC, OAT, Orkney College and Sheffield University, four trenches were opened across the enclosure and bank - none of which showed any evidence of prehistoric structures.

The mound itself turned out to be a natural knoll, rising from an area of marshy ground. From this, the small number of finds at the site, and the lack of settlement evidence, it became clear that whatever Roundhowe was used, it was not the site of a broch.

But although there was no evidence of man-made structures, the knoll had been "altered" at some point. As well as the bank that formed an enclosure on top of the knoll, a large ditch (five metres wide by 1.5 metres deep) had been cut around the base. This would imply that the knoll had some significance or purpose, but as the excavation drew to a close in September, Roundhowe's relationship to Minehowe remained unclear. What has become apparent, however, is that Minehowe and Roundhowe and their apparently ritual landscape had more in common with ritual sites in Ireland, such as Tara, rather than its Scottish counterparts.



The oval metalworking building unearthed at Minehowe in Tankerness

Also under the spotlight at Minehowe was the metalworking area outside the chamber's external ditch. More evidence of metalworking - crucibles, slag, furnace linings, a kiln - was uncovered, all of which seemed to be associated with a large (six metres in diameter) oval stone structure, thought to date from the 4th century AD.

"We think this was either a domestic structure associated with the metalworking, or perhaps an area where they finished off their creations," said Nick Card, "If they were doing the 'heavy industry' work outside, with kilns all round, the large sandstone blocks here were probably used as anvils."

Other finds included a whale-tooth sword pommel - found in one of the alcoves built into the wall of this structure - and several shards of Romano-British colour-coated ware. These, together with previous finds at Minehowe, confirm again the existence of trade-routes or contact between Orkney and mainland Scotland.

It is hoped to return to the metalworking area again in 2003.

The discovery of a kist at Nether Unstan in Stenness resulted in an excavation in Stenness, but unfortunately no contents were found within. Full results of this excavation are awaited.

Looking ahead to 2003, the research plan for the World Heritage, described as a "real feather in Orkney College's cap", is due to be published in September.

Compiled by Jane Downes, the research plan will identify gaps in current knowledge and outlines potential areas for future research to help better understand the monuments and their surrounding landscape.

But although focusing on an area of prime historical importance, the research plan will not restrict itself to archaeology.

"We are not only looking at the Neolithic archaeology," explained Jane Downes, "but the whole history of the area as well as aspects such as folklore. We are viewing it as a cultural landscape and recognising that people, from the Neolithic onwards, have encountered these monuments and have had some reverence for them."

With 2002 now drawn to a close, 2003 will see a new beginning for Orkney Archaeology Trust with a move to new premises in Kirkwall. The move, which will see all of Orkney archaeological services under one roof, is scheduled for around January 13.

The relocation of the Trust coincides with Orkney College's new post-graduate course in archaeology, which is due to start in February 2003. The course, which was delayed by external validation problems, came about after the need for housing the archaeology course was cited as one of the main reasons for a £1.3 million extension at the college.