

ORKNEY HERITAGE SOCIETY NEWSLETTER
JUNE 1976

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Groundwater, Mr. P. Leith,
Mrs. M. Linklater, Mr. I.
MacInnes, Mr. E.W. Marwick,
Mr. J.W. Ravenshear, Mr. H.
M.L. Shearer. Co-opted:
Mrs. L. Grimond and Mr. J.
Hedges

THE 1976 PROGRAMME OF ACTIVITIES

Tour: On Saturday, 19 June, the Society will sponsor a tour that will include the Old Kirkyard in Stromness, Breckness House north of Warbeth and the Birsay Church. Mr. Ian MacInnes will lead the party in Stromness and at Breckness House; Rev. Mooney will be in charge at Birsay. The tour will be by private car. Those members wishing to join in Kirkwall should meet promptly at 2 P.M. at the Phoenix Theatre parking lot. Those who prefer to start in Stromness should be at the Old Kirkyard at 2:30 P.M. It is envisaged that the tour, which will take place regardless of weather conditions, will last until about 5:30 P.M. Members may bring their friends. Anyone wishing transportation or having spare room in his car may phone Miss Bacon at Orphir 289 or Mrs. Flint at Orphir 270.

1976 AGM: This year the Society will hold its AGM on Tuesday, 28 September, at the Orphir Community Centre. The 1975 meeting attracted more members than ever before, and it is hoped that members will not only attend but will also bring prospective members.

Slide Show: In the autumn the Society plans an Orkney-oriented slide show in the Arts Theatre in Kirkwall. The date has not yet been chosen but will be advertised in The Orcadian well in advance of the event.

GENERAL REPORT

Strynd House: The future use of the Strynd House, while still not settled, has entered a new phase. At an Executive Committee meeting last November it was agreed that the OHS should offer that section of the property owned by the Society to the Orkney Islands Council (OIC) for conversion into flats for the elderly. Mrs. Grimond indicated that, should the OIC accept the offer, she would arrange for her section of the property to be used by the OIC for the same purpose. At this writing, the Council has accepted the offers in principle, subject to a feasibility study as far as costs go and to the availability of funds. As flats for the elderly, the Strynd House would have the advantage of creating homes in the centre of the town near the shops and yet give a fair degree of privacy.

Weight Restriction Order: In January of this year the Committee reviewed the proposed OIC Weight Restriction Order drawn up to limit the use of certain roads in Kirkwall and Stromness to vehicles of 4 tons and under, with some necessary exceptions. The Committee was instrumental in having the Council include Broad Street and Palace Road in the list of roads so restricted.

Planning Forum During the early part of this year, the OHS followed with some disquiet the divergence of opinion that was growing between the public and the local government on the subject of planning policies for Orkney. To try to increase the fund of information on the general subject of planning, the Society, on March 25, sponsored a public forum on planning. Mr. Tony Burton, Director of the Planning Exchange, was the principal speaker, and the meeting was chaired by Mr. John Towrie of the Council of Social Service. The Planning Exchange, based in Glasgow, is a nongovernmental organisation that acts as a center for information on planning in Scotland and is supported by grants from such sources as the government, county and regional councils, and the Ford Foundation. It can supply planning material and comparative information to local governments on how different areas of Scotland are handling their planning problems.

Mr. Burton, an expert on the subject of public participation in the formation of planning policies, explained how the structure plans of England had been devised -- Orkney's Structure Plan is the first in Scotland to be submitted to the Secretary of State for Scotland -- and how public participation can and should affect the final form of the structure plans adopted. There followed a session of questions and answers, most of which revolved quite naturally around the Orkney Structure Plan. The meeting was well attended and the Orkney Islands Council was well represented by 10 councillors, Mr. Maurice Sargent and Mr. Robert Ross. The Society hopes that the forum will go far toward bringing about a better understanding between the public and the local government on the subject of planning for Orkney's future.

Listed and Conservation Area Buildings: The Committee continues to review and make suggestions on all plans for changes to Listed Buildings and buildings in the Outstanding Conservation Areas. Recently the Committee has arranged for Committee members to meet on the last Thursday of each month with Mr. Maurice Sargent of the Orkney Department of Planning and Development to review those applications that have been submitted during the month. This arrangement does not prejudice private Committee meetings to discuss the various plans, and it is hoped that this arrangement will also foster a closer relationship with the OIC Planning and Development Department.

Archaeology Officer: The Committee has been trying for more than a year to arrange for Orkney to have its own Archaeology Officer. It had suggested to the Department of Environment that such an appointment would be of great benefit to Orkney and should, at first, be for a three year period, hoping that the position would then become permanent. Unfortunately, though the Department of Environment gave every indication of eventually approving and financing the position, progress was very slow, indeed. Last October the Department promised "progress shortly," but despite several letters from the Committee asking for progress reports the Department failed to communicate with OHS until 19 May, when Dr. D.J. Breeze stated:

"I am afraid that due to recent cutbacks in Government spending it will not now be possible for this Department to finance the appointment of an Archaeology Officer for Orkney as detailed in Mr Shearer's letter of 12 September 1975. However, it is hoped to carry out a survey of Monuments in various parts of northern Scotland in the near future and that Orkney will form one such area. A survey on these lines will go a long way to fulfilling the duties of the proposed Archaeology Officer."

LOCAL PLANS

While the Structure Plan paints the planning authority's intentions with a broad brush, as described in the 1975 NEWSLETTER, the Local Plans will supply the detail for specific areas. As with the Structure Plan, provision for their preparation, which may run concurrently with that of the Structure Plan, is contained in the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act, 1972.

A Local Plan must consist of a map and a written statement formulating the authority's proposals for the use of land in the area to which it applies. It may also include proposals for traffic management and any other matters prescribed by the Secretary of State. Accompanying diagrams, illustrations and descriptive matter constitute part of the Plan. A Local Plan must be consistent with the Structure Plan proposals, even though the latter may not have been approved by the Secretary of State.

The local planning authority must give publicity to the results of its Survey and opportunity for public representations. (This is the stage that the Orkney Islands Council has reached in its preparation of Local Plans for Kirkwall and Stromness.) After preparation, each Plan must be made available to the public, with an opportunity for lodging representations, which in due course would become the subject of a local inquiry, and would be considered by the Secretary of State before he gave approval to the Plan, modified if necessary. Later alterations to any Local Plan can be initiated by the Secretary of State or, with his approval, by the OIC as our planning authority.

S.F.

THE STRUCTURE PLAN AND THE SITING OF PRIVATE HOUSING

On 13 March 1975, after the first draft of the Structure Plan became available to the public, the Society sent a letter to the then County Clerk and General Manager, Mr. H.A.G. Lapsley, which read in part, "In regard to housing, while fully supporting the principle that private housing be controlled, and ribbon development avoided, my committee feels that the proposed restrictions are somewhat too rigorous, in view of the area available considered in relation to the probable volume of planning applications."

From events that have since occurred, it appears that one of the most controversial sections of the Structure Plan has been that outlining the policy on the siting of new private houses. Much has been said and written on the arguments for and against that section of the Structure Plan dealing with the matter. The policy has been somewhat modified since the OHS letter was sent to Mr. Lapsley, but the Society's comments still hold true. There is no doubt that some controls must be placed on the siting of new private homes. However, limiting private house sites -- except for those exempted for reasons of local employment, family cohesion, farm-related problems, or on a one for one basis at derelict house sites -- to stated towns, villages and communities would seem to be "too rigorous."

On 20 May 1976, at the first public inquiry on a private house siting application, Mr. Maurice Sargent stated that nearly 100 applications for permission to build private houses on individual sites had been made during the first year of the new Orkney Islands Council's administration. This figure excluded private houses in such estate development as Papdale private. Mr. Sargent's statement was used to prove the current pressure of private housing on land use and the need to confine future private housing to stated towns and communities, except for those exemptions listed above.

That more people are applying for permission to build single private houses is not in question. Given 100 a year as the current rate of such applications, it is about 4 times that of 5 years ago. Nevertheless, except perhaps for the areas immediately around Kirkwall and Stromness, there is still no proof of "pressure on land use." Orkney has approximately 375 square miles of land and 540 miles of paved roads. Should each of the past year's applicants wish to build on one-acre plots in "isolated areas" --and not all did -- the pressure on land use would still have been slight.

Certainly, areas of proven historical, scenic and scientific importance should be protected from ruinous public and industrial intrusion as well as from poor siting of private housing, and those building private homes in "isolated" areas should accept the extra costs that might be necessary in order to install roads, electric lines, telephones, and properly controlled sewerage systems. Still, circumstances as they now exist in Orkney or will in the foreseeable future do not seem to indicate that an individual should have to prove a need in order to build a private home beyond the confines of designated towns and communities.

For the record, data available from the minutes of the Development, Planning and Control Committee of the Council for June 1975 - March 1976 indicate the following totals on applications for building new private houses on individual sites. If an applicant was refused permission on one site but granted permission for another site, that applicant is counted only among the "permission granted" figures. The figures below include applications for sites in Kirkwall and Stromness as well as in all landward areas and on the outer islands.

Building warrants granted 38
Outline planning only granted 24
Applications (outline planning and/or building)
refused and not appealed 12
Applications refused but still on appeal 3

M.A.B.

POSSIBILITY OF URANIUM MINING IN ORKNEY

The Orkney Structure Plan has been accepted by the Orkney Islands Council and is now before the Secretary of State for Scotland. Part III, Chapter Twenty One, 4.3, says, "The mining of Uranium in the vicinity of Stromness would have a very considerable effect on the landscape owing to the amount of spoil that would be produced. Careful planning controls to mitigate this disruption of the environment would have to be exercised." It would seem the Orkney Islands Council is now in the position of accepting uranium mining in the Stromness area as a desirable development.

The uranium is wanted by the South of Scotland Electricity Board as fuel for the steam generating heavy water reactor for which it recently gained planning permission for erection at Torness near Dunbar. This site is capable of expansion to hold up to 6 such reactors, and the Board plans to build 4 more at Hunterston. In England, the Central Electricity Generating Board plans 4 similar reactors at Sizewell in Suffolk.

Because of the low concentration of uranium in the ore (4 parts in a million is comparatively rich), and the need to enrich it in the ^{235}U isotope (7% of natural uranium), it requires about 1,000 tons of ore to yield 1 ton of fuel. The initial charge for a reactor would be about 160 tons of the uranium, with an annual reload

of 31 tons. From this it can be calculated that, in a 25-year lifetime, each reactor would require the excavation of a hole 400,000 cubic yards in size -- say, $\frac{1}{4}$ mile long, 100 yards wide and 30 feet deep. Taking into account waste, topsoil and overlying rock, considerably more material than this would have to be removed. Large areas would also be required for processing, slurry ponds, tailing piles and access roads. Tens of thousands of gallons of water per day, which could not be supplied from the Stromness reservoir, would have to be found and then disposed of after contamination. Many heavy vehicles would require to be on the site and in the vicinity. Dust produced by site work on Flotta has already been blown onto the Mainland; therefore, large areas of the West Mainland could be expected to receive dust, with its bonus of radioactivity from mining operations in the Yesnaby-Stromness area.

It has not been made clear who would carry out the mining activity; it is unlikely that such activity would fall within the competence of the SSEB itself. More likely the Board would have to contract the work to a large established mining company.

The area concerned stretches from the Yesnaby Cliffs -- a site designated of special scientific interest (SSSI) -- to Cairston, adjacent to the Outstanding Conservation Area of Stromness. If the mining were allowed in any part of the Yesnaby-Stromness area, it would almost inevitably spread until the whole workable deposit had been exploited. It is difficult to conceive how the Yesnaby SSSI could survive, and there would be intense pressure on the similarly designated areas of the Lochs of Stenness, Harray and Skail. Some effect would also be likely on the Brodgar Conservation Area.

Apart from the problem with areas so designated in the Structure Plan, The Orkney Islands Council will also have to reconcile uranium mining with its stated intentions of resiting Stromness Academy on land it has already bought at Cairston, and of defending the integrity of the Stromness Outstanding Conservation Area.

The adverse effects of radioactivity from uranium mining on agriculture, water supplies and inhabitants in wide areas surrounding the mining projects are just beginning to be appreciated in the United States and Australia. It is to be hoped that the Council will make itself conversant with these new findings before coming to a final decision on uranium mining in the Yesnaby-Stromness area.

S.F.

MEMBERSHIP DUES

Members are reminded that dues were increased as of 1 May 1976. Annual dues are now 50 pence a year; life memberships, £10. Automatic remittance would be appreciated. Dues may be sent to Mr. P.G. Skea, 4 Broad Street, Kirkwall.

We record with deep regret the death of two members of the Society. Dr. Stanley Cursiter was a founder member. We are most conscious of all he did during his lifetime to conserve for future Orcadians that which is most beautiful and valuable in Orkney. The encouragement he has given us will be a continuing source of inspiration to the Society. Dr. J.W. Leith contributed much to our discussions and decisions; his wisdom and sound advice will be sadly missed.