

ORKNEY HERITAGE SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER: DECEMBER 1978.

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I. MacInnes, J. Hedges, Mrs S. Flint.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT: Members will be quick to notice that the Society lacks a Secretary. This is a grave disability. Sue Flint's outstanding efficiency as Secretary for four years may have proved a deterrent to possible successors. We owe her a debt of gratitude and, while accepting her resignation with regret, recognise that it is not a bad thing for a society such as ours to change officials from time to time and not be dependent on a handful of dedicated conservationists who are not necessarily the only pebbles on the beach.

That's three negatives saying, tactfully, that the first thing the new committee agreed was a motion to be introduced at the next A. G. M. by which there will be a mandatory replacement of 2 or 3 committee members each year and a three year stint for each member with one year off before becoming eligible for re-election.

The main reason why there are no candidates for the Secretary's post is that everyone is too busy. However, there has come to my notice a possible area of recruitment among the wives of employees of Occidental Oils (UK) Ltd. Negotiations are in progress. Another possibility is the Man Power Services Commission. We have applied through the Job Creation Scheme for a full-time Secretary, whose services would be available to our newly appointed Archaeologist.

Resident Field Archaeologist: The saga of this appointment has been an accompaniment to every Newsletter circulated since I took office, superseding finally, the "Strynd Saga". Just as the Strynd restoration is now reaching a satisfactory fulfillment so the Archaeological Conundrum has happily been resolved. Not only has Oxy agreed to the use of their coveted £3,000 per annum for the salary of a Resident Archaeologist, but we have the assurance from the Scottish Development Department that £2,000 p.a. will be available for travel and subsistence. Furthermore the Royal Commission for Ancient and Historic Monuments in Scotland is giving every kind of assistance and guidance in this venture. This is most valuable because the first requirement on the list of duties circulated to applicants is, "To bring up to date the contents of the Royal Commission Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland (Orkney) Inventory by a. collecting reports of possible sites discovered: b. carrying out field surveys for new sites: c. noting present conditions of listed sites".

Incidentally there were 30 enquiries and 18 applicants for this post.

Our final selection is Dr Raymond Lamb. The selection panel was faced with a difficult task. There was a high calibre of applicants but we are confident that we have found the right man for the job.

Dr Raymond Lamb is no stranger to Orkney. He first came here in 1967 to assist in archaeological excavations at Skail in Deerness. He attended this excavation for the next five years. From an early interest in Icelandic Sagas he studied for two months as an undergraduate in Scandinavia and has acquired a reading knowledge of Scandinavian Languages.

His Ph. D thesis is a study, based on his own field work, of coastal sites in Shetland and Orkney. Dr Lamb has visited all the inhabited and a few uninhabited islands of Orkney. He reckons that in Sanday alone there are enough unrecorded sites for at least a year's study. In fact the up-dating of records calls for assistance. Dr Lamb who has been working for Warwickshire County Council, has made extensive use of the MSC. (Manpower Services Commission) already referred to, and from this source intends to obtain short-term staff where required. While with the Warwickshire Council he set up a County Sites and Monuments record; valuable experience for his present post.

-non- My question "Where does Archaeology begin and where does it end?" was answered by Dr Graham Ritchie, advisor on Ancient and Historic Monuments in Scotland, that, beginning as far back in Prehistory as possible (and beyond) it extends almost to the present time. Dr Lamb himself accepts vernacular farm buildings and other habitations as coming within his sphere of interest. He is particularly fascinated by the many ecclesiastical ruins and sites scattered throughout the islands.

He takes up his appointment on 1st February 1979.

North of Scotland Archaeological Services: John Hedges, who has given the Heritage Society guidance and advice on archaeological matters for several years, has established NOSAS at Binscarth. Since the May bulletin John has made archaeological history by excavating the Broch at Bu near Stromness in five weeks. He then went on to excavate a broch at Hoew, all this under the auspices of the Department of the Environment*. The HQ at Binscarth is most impressively organised for investigation, identification and display of artefacts from these excavations, and for recording. John has offered to work closely with Dr Lamb, and this, it seems to me, will make a superb team with great prospects for archaeology in Orkney.

*Department of the Environment is now part of the Scottish Development Department, SDD.

Heritage Society Events: June to November 1978.

June 10th, date of the annual outing, was a typical summer 1978 day. That is to say cold, grey with a strong N. Westerly whipping Hoy Sound into an unattractive turbulence of grey porridge. Not surprisingly a mere sprinkling of members turned up. However, as so often happens temerity was rewarded. We had a following wind south from Moaness in Hoy, and a running commentary from Rae Fereday, who has made a special study of Scapa Flow. His observations were complemented and extended by those of Mary Bain and Cecil Steer; the latter having first-hand knowledge of Hoy from his services with the RAF during the war. (He seems to have spent his wartime service on Hoy by design).

We were shown over Melsetter House by Elsie Scatter. She had taken the trouble to light a fire for us in the Weaver's Cottage where we eat our packed lunch.

Melsetter is a miracle of architectural design and, within, artistic imagination; inspired no doubt by the magnificent site. Elsie cherishes the furnishings which William Morris designed - carpets, curtains and also chairs and beds. These last were made by craftsmen in Kirkwall.

From there we visited the Battery at Longhope and the Martello Tower. It was an enormous bonus having as our guide Rae Fereday who published his "The Longhope Battery and Towers" in 1971. The Memorial to the heroes who were drowned in the lifeboat disaster of 1969 reminded us that this end of Scapa Flow remains in the forefront of action in peace as in war.

The sun broke through as we drove back to Moaness, just to show that weather should never deter anyone from the Annual Outing.

Next year, by the way, is to be an outing to Rousday.

The Bus tour of the Mainland in July was affected by the deplorable weather. Professor Miller conducted this and although numbers were small everyone agreed that this was a most successful tour. Sometimes a small group of interested people makes for livelier interest and discussion.

John Hedges gave an illuminating lecture on "Excavations in Orkney - Ancient and Modern" to a large and appreciative audience in the Arts Theatre on August 2nd.

Dr Graham Ritchie, here for the interviews arranged to select our Archaeologist, spoke to us on "The Stones of Stenness" the subject of a treatise prepared for the Society Antiquaries of Scotland. This, like all our events (provided these make no demand on physical effort) was well attended.

Finally, bringing this report up to date, Sue Flint gave us a talk, with remarkable slides, on the Faroes and Iceland.

Next Year:

We hope to arrange a Discussion on Planning: The Islands Planning Officer and Clunie Rowell might lead the debate. Also suggested is a Slide Show, following last year's Slide Circus which produced a remarkable collection of photographs of our architectural heritage.

Uranium Menace. The South of Scotland Electricity Board and the North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board have both lodged objections to the OIC Structure Plan which includes a ban on Uranium mining in Orkney. (See article by Sue Flint). There will ~~not be a public inquiry, that is to say~~ ^{but} members of the public will not be permitted to voice objections. It is difficult to foretell what pressures from the EEC will be brought to bear. The Heritage Society is prepared to lead whatever campaign is called for when the time comes.

A Personal Note from the Chair. I am tempted to promote an anti-uniformity drive. "Down with Porridge" I shall call it. My particular antipathy at present is towards the grey harling which covers every new and restored building in Kirkwall and everywhere else. The Orkney Islands Planning Department is not without guilt, although Spence's Court in Victoria Street marginally avoids censure being coated in milk-white rather than grey porridge. The wide variety of delicate tones of colour in the stone from which our town and rural houses were constructed indicates the possibility that uniform grey is the last colour or non-colour desirable in a Northern climate where grey skies from time to time predominate. Sue Flint's photographs of Faroese houses showed just how invigorating brightly-painted exteriors can be. In one area of Kirkwall the Local Authority have demonstrated this by repainting their Swedish houses in most attractive Scandinavian style.

Harling is no doubt here to stay, (although some will argue that with modern techniques it is now possible to seal stonework effectively making it far more impervious to damp than harling) but it can be washed with colour. Not lurid ochre, mauve or paprika perhaps (though I am one who admires the exterior of the Library building in Stromness) but subtle pastel shades, even deepish terracotta at intervals. On this or any other subject we, the editorial staff, welcome comment.

Planning Applications: Preliminary plan for car parking at the Ring of Brodgar (or Brogar) was rejected by the Committee. Instead of the concrete rectangle suggested by the Planning Department we propose a Mono-bloc/Grass area; a grass-covered surface with hard-standing beneath.

Other applications included extensions to the Balfour Hospital, and signs to be erected on the Royal Hotel. The hospital is not within a conservation area but is of general importance to the public. We appreciate the courtesy of having our views consulted.

The Stromness Draft Plan

"It is the Council's policy to enhance the historic and architectural heritage of the town..."

Brave words! And despite its limitations the Stromness Plan is indeed an admirable conservation document which deserves the wholehearted support of the Heritage Society.

The good intentions are matched with some good homework. The plan identifies the potential areas of conflict between conservation and other interests. Thus the centre and south of the town are to be insulated against further commercial and industrial development. Six acres between John Street and the South End have been pinpointed for priority restoration. They are well chosen. Then there is the proposal - already mooted by the Heritage Society - for the 'purchase, rehabilitation and resale of derelict buildings'. The plan also proposes a continuation of the Council's existing policy of acquiring and renovating old properties for use as local-authority housing.

On the debit side, there is a certain woolliness about some of the more specific proposals for conservation. For example, the Plan expresses 'an overall concern for the paving of the street', but fails to say how this concern might be translated into action. It is now 23 years since the old County Council abandoned its half-finished task of vandalising the flagged street; and the conservation of what remains is a matter of growing urgency which requires something more than a hand-wringing mention, especially in a plan which is supposed to cover the next five or even fifteen years.

A similar vagueness can be detected in the brief reference to the harbour front, and 'the preservation of many piers and slipways that play such a vital role in the character of the town'. The Twelve Piers of Hamnavoe (did the poet count them correctly?) certainly require more attention than this.

Money is the vital ingredient in the whole recipe, and it looks like being in very short supply. Twelve thousand pounds over a period of five years, plus 'possible use of Oil Revenues', scarcely represents a thrilling response to the challenge of this plan. Of course the Director of Planning would rightly point out that money will be available from other sources, such as the Historic Buildings Council and the housing fund, that a good deal of self help is envisaged, and that anyhow the provision of money is a political matter. All very true, but the fact remains that without a large injection of cash the Stromness Plan will be as well-meaning and effectual as a sermon against sin.

Outside the Conservation Area there is a plan to build houses (or to encourage house-building) on the fields above the Garson shore to the south of the New School. Problems of water supply and sewage have put severe constraints upon further building on the west side of the harbour, and there is a strong case for allowing Stromness to expand round the curve of the bay. Against this it could be argued that the essential character of the town is expressed in that harmonious contrast between the piers and houses rising from the harbour to the west, and the green farmlands on the eastern shore: a fitting reminder of the twin sources from which Stromness draws its precarious prosperity.

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ORKNEY ISLANDS COUNCIL STRUCTURE PLAN: Commentary and Interpretation.

The Plan has now been amended in the light of the 44 representations received concerning the first draft, (see the Society's first News letter of 1975). The period for lodging any further representations expired on November 9th. The publication contains a summarised report on a survey of Orkney, and outlines proposals for changes.

Amongst the many topics considered are landscape and conservation, including sites of special interest, nature reserves, environmental monitoring of Scapa Flow, ancient monuments and buildings of architectural or historic interest - all important amenities for local people and sources of attraction for visitors.

Included in the aims of the plan is a commitment "to ensure that the physical environment is of a high quality"; but the writer has more faith than most in the power of legislation for he states confidently "The existence of the Planning Acts, the Environmental Health Acts, and the Countryside Act ensure the protection of the Built and Natural Environment".

The O.I.C. aims to conserve important natural and man-made features of Orkney and to enhance the quality of life by fostering cultural and artistic activities.

Unacceptable industries are: oil-platform construction, oil-refining and uranium mining.

There is a flexible house siting policy which protects scenic views unspoilt coastlines and lochsides, and sites of historic, conservation or scientific interest. Acceptable house designs will be those compatible with existing features.

Many of the Countryside Commission's proposals for access to, as well as interpretation and protection of, the countryside are to be incorporated in local plans (see newsletter June 1976). There are proposals for improvements in refuse disposal and sewage treatment.

There seems to be no response to the Secretary of State's comment that he wished to see a policy for protection of Ancient Monuments (Newsletter May 1977) but in general the Plan seems sympathetic to the aims of this Society. Vigilance will be needed to see that these aims are implemented.

The above article summarises the points expected to be of interest to members. The whole document runs to 109 pages and can be viewed at the Local Authority offices and Public Libraries. Copies have also been sent to Clerks to Community Councils.

S. Flint.

Our Finances

The Society's audited accounts for the year ended 15 May 1978 were adopted at the Annual General Meeting on 28 September. Copies of the Accounts in the form of a statement of receipts and payments were distributed at that meeting and further copies are available to any Member on application to the Hon Treasurer at 4 Broad Strret, Kirkwall. Very briefly these accounts show that:

At 15 May 1977 we had Cash at Bank on
 Deposit Account (including £500 on interest-free loan) £2731

In the year we received:

Members Subscriptions and Donations	£131	
Strynd Appeal (Prints sold and interest)	47	
Fete Stall and Bus Trip for Jubilee Year Appeal £260 which we paid over to the Jubilee Fund £260	-	
Collections at our Meetings	149	
Interest on our Bank Accounts	144	471
		<u>3202</u>

And we paid out:

Insurance on Strynd Property	23	
Archaeological Excavation Expenses	212	
Printing, Stationery, Advertising Posts		
Sundry Expenses and Subscription	79	
Expenses of Public Meetings	36	350
		<u>350</u>

which left at 15 May 1978

Cash at Bank on Deposit Accounts (including £500 on interest-free loan)	1852	
Local Bond £1000 @ 10% for 2 years in Orkney Islands Council (invested 3 April 1978 and first interest due 30 September 1978)	1000	£2852
		<u>£2852</u>

It would be much appreciated if Members who have not yet paid their annual subscriptions for 1978/79 to the Hon Treasurer would now do so. The rates remain (at present) £0.50 annual, £0.10 junior and £10 Life.