

SOCIETY OFFICE BEARERS

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 H. Shearer, R. Robertson.
 C. Rowell, Professor R. Miller
 Captain A. Alsop,
 Mrs A. Wallace.

"An On-going Situation": Chairman's Report

An On-going Situation is current journalese for saying that the Heritage Society has achieved very little in 1978 and has faced many frustrations.

For instance the Orkney Islands Council has rejected all our proposals for use of Oil revenue for conservation. Furthermore our appeal for financial assistance towards the salary of a Resident Archaeologist has not even been considered, and yet Orkney is one of the richest fields in the country for archaeologists to explore: which they do in ever increasing numbers.

Unexpectedly, at the beginning of the year, Occidental Oils Ltd. offered a covenanted £3000 a year to the Orkney Heritage Society for archaeological purposes. It was not until April 13th that this offer was confirmed. The Heritage Society has undertaken to appoint a resident archaeologist there being at present no co-ordination and no one in Orkney to be responsible for records and artefacts. Furthermore rescue operations are constantly demanded when burial cists are unearthed in the course of agriculture, road-making or house building. The many University teams who come to excavate prehistoric sites in Orkney take their records and artefacts away with them.

This appointment has been under discussion for at least 4 years and Occidental's offer seemed like very good news indeed. However there is a hitch which we must hope is only temporary. The Oil consortium is unwilling to pay the fees of an archaeologist on the grounds that this should be the responsibility of the Department of the Environment. The D. of E. argues that the Islands Council should undertake this responsibility; understandably the O.I.C. put archaeology low on their list of priorities. A meeting between a representative of the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments (D. of E.) and the Oil consortium will, we hope, take place in July when, I firmly believe, the tangle of misunderstanding will be straightened.

A full statement of the situation on uranium appears in this newsletter. It will become necessary for this Society to decide whether or not to support the anti-nuclear campaign.

The Nevis Institute whose Report on Shetland has won acclaim recently are probably going to organise a "seminar" called "2010- When the Oil Runs Out" when alternative sources of energy will be discussed.

This may seem irrelevant to our Heritage but the overwhelming opposition of members to the threat of uranium exploration in 1977 indicates that this is a basic threat to all that we value in these islands.

Secretary's Report

The Westray mink farm inquiry took place in Kirkwall Town Hall in February. The Society gave evidence and made a closing statement, associating ourselves with other conservation bodies. Part I of the report, summarising the evidence submitted, has been issued. After amendments, the Reporter will make his recommendations to the Secretary of State, who will then decide the matter.

It will be recalled that the Society became involved in the mink application as a result of representations by members, following advertisement in the Orcadian. The Committee automatically examines proposals concerning listed buildings and conservation areas, but it has been agreed that the Society will ONLY

consider any other advertised applications, such as the proposed mink farm and offal-plant, if asked to do so by members.

As part of our work we have examined 16 planning applications since the last newsletter, including 2 in the Brodgar conservation area, the Ayre and Oakleigh Hotels, the Holm pub and Holland House, Papa Westray. This last was made the pretext for Chairman and Secretary to visit Westray and Papa Westray on 28th March, finding no objection to the Holland House proposals, and having an opportunity to see the mink farm site, just as described to our January committee meeting.

Mr Clunie Rowell who has recently retired from the post of senior lecturer at the Mackintosh School of Architecture, and who also ran a private practice has agreed to join our Committee, and contributes an article to this newsletter. He is organising architecture students to make records of mansion houses in Orkney.

Following controversy in the Islands Council over our request that trees in the proposed Gunn's Close car park be preserved, the Society sent in another letter; Thora Bain and myself attended the Planning Committee meeting to hear its reception. Mrs Christine Muir, chairing her penultimate planning meeting, gave our cause sympathetic reception. We are saddened by her death, but trust that our relations with the new Islands Council will continue harmoniously.

The Society has made representations about the unauthorised siting of a caravan at Cairston and supports Council moves to enforce its agreed caravan siting policy.

We have also negotiated for an exploratory excavation to take place in advance of rebuilding on the former Kirkwall gas works site.

Many members will by now have noticed rebuilding of the Strynd house, acquired several years ago by the Society as a result of generous donations. Many different proposed uses have been examined, but cost has been a deterrent. The Society has now given the building to the Islands Council on condition that it be restored to form accommodation for the elderly - a fitting conclusion to a long struggle by the Society.

We are trying to arrange with the Viking Society and Scottish Society for Northern Studies to hold a Viking Conference, having applied to the Islands Council for a share of the oil revenues for the purpose.

A matter on which members' views would be welcome is the future of Graemeshall, Holm. Although the building is listed because of its site, the Historic Buildings Council is unable to offer any grant towards upkeep, which the owner can no longer afford, and so is considering the sale of house and the antiques collection within. If this occurs it is likely that the antiques would be exported and the house left empty. Alternatively he has offered the property to the Islands Council on conditions which would make the deal an expensive one for ratepayers. The Society is sympathetic and hopes a suitable agreement can be reached.

This is necessarily a very inconclusive report, for although there has been no abatement in the work of the Society, it seems to be in the middle of several unfinished chapters in its story.

Progress of the Uranium Bill

This started life in March 1977 as part of a Provisional Order, which, if enacted, would have left no scope for appeal to the Secretary of State against any decision of Orkney Islands Council to withhold planning permission for prospecting or working of radioactive minerals, which if done without permission would have been a punishable offence.

The uranium clauses were ruled to be of such importance that they were to be considered in the form of a Parliamentary Bill, which when formulated was subject to overriding powers exercisable by the Secretary of State in the National Interest, and was thus already much weaker than the original order. On January 17th it was blocked by an objection by George Cunningham, M.P. (of 40%

notoriety in the Assembly Bill debate). When he lifted his objection a further one was made by James White, M.P., allegedly at the instigation of the Civil Service, using this device to force on it further amendments, which would oblige the Islands Council to consider applications, taking "regard to the desirability of avoiding substantial detriment to the environment or amenities of the area affected or to the agriculture or the fauna or flora of the area, or undue hazard to life or property", but allows an aggrieved applicant to appeal to the Secretary of State, who may cause a public local inquiry to be held, and whose decision would be final. These clauses were conceded by the Islands Council in order to enable the Bill to proceed to the Committee stage.

It is difficult to see on what grounds prospecting could long be resisted, since no one has argued that there would be severe environmental disturbance caused by mere test drilling, but if this were to occur, it would open the way for the South of Scotland Electricity Board to exercise their option to purchase the ground involved.

It is significant that in a letter to Alick Buchanan Smith M.P. on 30th November last, Secretary of State Bruce Millan writes "I have thought it right to place no obstacle in the way of the SSEB proposed programme of exploration for uranium in the North of Scotland"

A lawyer advises that the Bill now offers little advantage over normal planning procedures, except that it makes it a punishable offence to prospect for, or work radioactive minerals in Orkney without the Council's consent.

Mr Lapsley, the Islands Council's Chief Executive concedes that the Bill's advantages are limited, but says that it allows for publicity, and specifies that the environment must be taken into consideration, which gives it a "bit of an edge", and thinks it may be possible to claw back some powers at the Select Committee hearings, to be held in the House of Commons, starting on June 7th. Maurice Sargent and a scientist will appear for the Islands Council. It is likely that the SSEB, in conjunction with the North of Scotland Hydro Electric Board, and the Scottish Landowners Federation will participate with the aim of weakening the Bill yet more.

The dice are thus loaded heavily in favour of the SSEB getting the go-ahead for prospecting, and eventually all the way to full scale mining.

At a recent Committee meeting the Heritage Society agreed to ask if a representative could appear at the Select Committee to put the Society's strong views on the subject, but this may not be allowed. All our members are urged to write to Jo Grimond M.P. asking him to use his position to ensure that our views are heard by the Committee, in the hope that greater powers for the Islands Council can be written in to the Bill.

HELP!

1. Have you just been given copies of this newsletter for other members? If so, please help us distribute them to save the Society's funds for more important purposes. Any copies you cannot pass on please hand back so that someone else may do so.
2. When plans are circulated for your comments, please do not hog them to yourself- this is a democratic Society - but pass them on. There is only a limited time to collate and submit the Society's view, and, on recent occasions, hold-ups by some members have meant that the opportunity has been lost. It does not matter in what order members see the plans, but please make sure the next person will actually receive it.

If you do not wish to take part please let the Secretary know, otherwise help prevent circulation failure, a deadly disease.

WHAT ARE WE DOING TO ORKNEY? - Clunie Rowell.

I daresay we all have a private list called "Things Orkney Could Do Without". Besides mineral workings and more taxis, mine includes more trees, concrete blocks and flat roofs.

I love this open undulating landscape and the houses and farms scattered like currants in a well baked cake. There is just the right ratio of green to brown and more trees would spoil it.

The stone on Orkney had been described to me and I knew how it could pave roads, cover floors, build walls and clad roofs. I never knew how beautiful it was till I came to Stromness in 1965 and walked through the town. The shape of the street was entrancing. It was never parallel. It closed in and opened out and the levels danced up and down. It was filled with enticement and expectancy and the flags were lovely and clickety to walk on. No pavements here, or gutters or cat's eyes or traffic lights. But who had taken the flags and left in their place these concrete slabs?

The buildings linked arms and chuckled and were just the right height for the street. One could look up and out, right and left, and down, and all was eye sweet. There was a oneness about the place and it was to the stone that most credit was due.

It was stone lintels which said what size the windows should be and stone slates which determined the pitch of the roofs. The walls were that great variety of colours and textures because that is the nature of stone.

Then further along we came to new council houses and asked "Why in Heaven's name in that place and why these dull base materials?"

They don't link arms. They are self-conscious and out of place. In evening dress at a barn dance.

It is only in Orkney that I don't wish to see concrete blocks. Used elsewhere it has made good, sometimes superb, architecture. But always it has been allowed to say what it is - concrete. Concrete cast to precise dimensions, meticulously detailed and built with the joints exposed. It can be clean, sterile, impressive and beautiful.

The blocks I am talking about are these we see heaped on every building site here. They are built to be covered up in a cosmetic porridge which is miscalled "harling". They come out of the mould by the thousand and you simply phone in and say how many you want. Men boast about how many they can lay in a day and more blocks more money! It seems a poor sort of heritage to be handing on.

Unlike stone which grows more beautiful as time passes, these buildings will grow tawdry. Mosses and lichens don't like these walls and only algae will grow on them. At the risk of being thought gloomy I foresee peedie hair cracks forming in the coating and water getting in. Frost will do the rest and wall and coating will one day part company. This is building down to a price when we used to build up to a standard.

The last on my list was flat roofs. Now against Alpine cliffs or Finnish birches flat roofs can be exquisite - like that toothpaste - clean and tingling. Against the strict geometry of the architecture the cliffs look more impressively rugged and the trees more majestic. It is a matter of contrast and one simple way of making a building sit happily on its site.

Here on this soft undulating Orkney landscape, flat roofs, shiny coloured fascias and the like leave a building naked and embarrassed. Usually, and unfortunately, they stand conspicuous by the roadside.

Look at the farms and houses and mills round about, like outcrops of stone - hardly built by humans, the earth just scraped away and the buildings exposed. It is called organic architecture and it is wholly satisfying. The new schools seem especially out of place and lacking in fitness for purpose. Peering through a window you would expect to see men in overalls tending machine tools. Without charm or kindness, they have nothing to do with children.

We are surely concerned that what we are handing on is of a lower quality, visually and materially, than what was given into our care. Why, when you look for a picture postcard of Stromness, do you try to find one which doesn't show the new school, the council houses or indeed the new pavilion roofed bungalows? Because none of these buildings are Orkney as you like to think of it. When you think of the former Kirkwall Grammar School and how we have vandalised it you must feel guilty.

There is such a cheapjack tawdriness about so much of what we are doing, and when the only criteria are quickness and cheapness there is a plummeting in the standard of workmanship.

I say let us try and start another Stone Age in Orkney. The whole approach to building could change. We might even get seasoned timber again!

It needs care to build in stone. You need time to select the right piece and time to stand back and look. And usually something strange happens. You begin to enjoy work again and take a pride in it. Men have been known to take their wives out on Sunday to admire what they have built. It costs more but it is a sound investment. Also, would it not be possible to give supplementary grants when stone is specified - say from the Oil Fund?

The quarries are there, unflooded, and the stone easily extracted and in great abundance. We should use it as intended and once again we might make buildings we can be proud of - to use, and to hand on as our contribution to this Orkney Heritage.

Archaeological Items

John Hedges contributes the following, with which he has recently been concerned.

Broch of Gurness, Evie The Knowe of Gurness was discovered to be a broch in quite a romantic fashion. Robert Rendall was sitting on it one day, sketching the Rousay sound, when his stool leg went into a hollow. Minor excavation led him down the staircase against the inside of the Western side of the broch. Over subsequent years first the broch, then the outer settlement and, finally, the ditches were excavated; masonry was re-erected, the site grassed and the site museum built. At this stage the second world war intervened and everything came to a stop. After the war the site was put to rights but somehow the excavations were never published. Over the last six months I have made a start on this and, aside from the amusement of sorting through documents half a century old for information and tracking down the finds in their pre-war tobacco boxes and newspapers, the experience has brought home just how incredible the advance in archaeological techniques has been in recent decades and how untrue it is to look at the monuments open to the public and think we know a lot about the prehistory here.

Minor excavations.

Sandside, Graemsay Erosion revealed the top of a skull in a sand coast-line. Excavation by M. Whittall uncovered an extended burial in a cist, the sides of which were formed of several flags on edge. Analysis has shown the skeleton to have been of a man 5'8" tall and between 40 and 45; bones have been sent for radiocarbon dating. Through the courtesy of Bryce Wilson, Museums Officer.

Short cists. Over the last few years a number of short cists of consistent likeness have been excavated and recorded by the late Ernest Marwick, Evan McGillivray, Bryce Wilson, and myself. These cists are about 3' long, and 2' broad and deep and are totally unmarked, being usually discovered by the plough; it is possible that they occur in cemeteries. On removing the capstone all that is found is a handful of cremated bone in a pile and, perhaps, some ash. Recent finds of such cists have been particularly exciting in that it has been possible to send the bone for analysis and then radiocarbon dating.

Due to the summer holiday, project oriented way archaeology has been approached in Orkney we know next to nothing about small and unattractive sites. The situation is that there is no evidence on funerary practices from about 500 BC to 600 AD; by recording graves as they turn up, categorising them, and dating the bones, the situation should be remedied.

Future work

Deepdale stone. Excavation of the socket of the fallen stone had, regrettably, to be put off due to a late harvest- and after that absence writing up Gurness; investigation should be possible in May.

Horralsdshay Earth-house. The exciting possibility of a souterrain just north of Finstown will be investigated in six weeks starting the beginning of August. Although common this class of monument is enigmatic as to function and date and a major opportunity is at hand. Clearance around the entrance should indicate whether the earthhouse was once connected to a building.

Skaill Habitation Site, Sandwick. Not far from Skara Brae, storms two years ago revealed an extensive settlement site of later but unknown date. For probably a month in September and October the first of several seasons of excavation will be started. For almost any period we can think of, the excavation of a large settlement is going to add tremendously to what we know.

The Society's Summer Programme

JUNE 10th The Society's Outing to Hoy will be by boat, leaving Stromness at 10.30 a.m. for Lyness thence by minibus to Melsetter, where we shall be shown over the house by courtesy of Miss Seatter. At 2.30.p.m. the party will be taken by minibus to the North end of Hoy. Those who wish will be taken on to Rackwick, to walk back to Moaness in time for the boat home at 6.30.p.m. There will be an opportunity to see Lyrawa and Pegal Bays. Members are asked to bring their own refreshments. Cost about £3.50 each, depending on numbers coming. Cash with booking to Secretary or Chairman by JUNE 3 rd (any surplus will be refunded.)

JULY It is hoped to arrange a repeat of Professor Miller's very successful Bus Tour of last year. This would be open to the public and will be advertised in the Orcadian in due course.

AUGUST 2nd Excavations in Orkney - Ancient and Modern, an illustrated talk by John Hedges in the Orkney Arts Theatre at 8.00.p.m.

SEPTEMBER 28th is the date of the Society's Annual General Meeting at 7.30.p.m. in the Kirkwall Hotel Lounge. There will be a charge for refreshments. Please make every effort to ensure a large attendance.