

ORKNEY HERITAGE SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER: MAY 1979

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CHAIRMAN'S REPORT:

"Uranium Never. Orkney Forever." This message in huge letters greeted Mr. W. D. Campbell from the Scottish Office when he arrived at Stromness on his way to Kirkwall for the Examination in Public to discuss the objections from the Electricity Boards to the Orkney Islands Council's Structure Plan which seeks to ban uranium-mining in Orkney.

The uranium ban was not the only issue under scrutiny. The Orkney Islands Council added a policy on the Protection of Ancient Monuments to their Structure Plan, and very welcome too. The Heritage Society can claim a small victory here. When, over a year ago, the Secretary of State visited Orkney's rich archaeological heritage. Our Secretary at that time wrote immediately to the Scottish Office suggesting that this concern be translated into action. We also wrote to the Local Authority, and can claim, I think, that this Policy was engendered by the Heritage Society.

I leave the issue of uranium-mining to the article, freely culled from "The Orcadian" and written by our incomparable spokesman, Ian MacInnes, to say all that need be said on the subject at this time.

Inevitably we have been preoccupied almost exclusively with the "No Uranium" Campaign, which reached a triumphant climax on March 21st when over 1,000 protestors marched from the Harbour to the Council buildings in Kirkwall with banners to demonstrate, silently, Orkney's determination to oppose uranium mining. The Sub-committee appointed to organise the campaign was reinforced by representatives of the newly-formed Dunters. This is a group of environmentalists committed to local issues as they arise rather than the over-all conservation of Orkney's past (as well as present and future), which is written into our constitution. Their enthusiasm, and their experience, gained by some from the Save Our Seals campaign, has been invaluable.

SAFEGUARDING OF ANCIENT MONUMENTS:

The arrival of Dr. Raymond Lamb to take up his appointment as Orkney's Resident Field Archaeologist was not only an important event in the annals of the Society, it was also Providential.

Raymond arrived halfway through February, having spent ten days in Edinburgh on his way North to collect maps, seek out records etc. under the auspices of the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments in Scotland, and to discuss with the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments at the Scottish Development Department his future programme (the Department is responsible for £2,000 towards subsistence and travel of the Archaeologist).

Immediately, upon arrival, Raymond was pitch-forked into the hot seat (if that is not a mixed metaphor) as our representative on the Safeguarding of Ancient Monuments issue. He prepared his submission with admirable celerity and meticulous care. At the E.I.P. (Examination in Public) Dr. Lamb's experience with the Warwickshire County Council was immensely helpful, his expert knowledge on technical matters commanded the respect of officials and laymen alike. The policy finally reached by all the participants, including the National Farmers Union in Orkney, strengthens the hand of the Local Authority while at the same time safeguarding the farmer and landowner.

"ORKNEY MISCELLANY":

Important too, though not so dramatic as the life and death struggle on the uranium front, is the revival of the "Orkney Miscellany" or its equivalent. A friend and well-wisher has loaned £1,000 towards the publication by a Journal similar to "The Miscellany" - a series published by the Antiquarian Society and generally the vehicle of the learned papers presented to the society by its members.

Mr. W. Thomson, Rector of Kirkwall Grammar School presided over a gathering of interested people which included some who had been closely involved in the production of the Miscellany. It was decided not to attempt to resuscitate the original Miscellany but to launch a new journal to be known as "The Orkney Heritage". Under Mr. Thomson's guidance we can look forward to a publication worthy of Orkney's literary heritage.

VARIOUS OTHER MATTERS:

One interesting subject raised by the Chairman of the E.I.P., Mr. Campbell, was the possibility of using oil revenue for establishing a fund to purchase vernacular buildings, listed or otherwise of architectural value - old mills included - renovate and sell each at a profit which would become part of a "revolving fund" for further purchase. This was an idea which the Heritage Society sent to the Orkney Islands Council for consideration of possible use of oil-revenue.

So, having revolved back to oil, the Heritage Society has reason to be grateful to Occidental whose covenant has provided Orkney with exactly what is needed to fulfill the policy of the Orkney Islands Council to safeguard our rich archaeological heritage - again I refer to the Archaeologist.

A most interesting account of the disappearance of Kirkwall's lanes and closes will appear in the next issue of our Newsletter. "What is Happening to our Lanes? Where have all the Closes Gone?" reveals what the author calls "Official vandalism". Immediate action includes talks on Radio Orkney and we hope publication of the article in "The Orcadian". It will also be sent to the Historic Buildings Council.

FINALLY:

A very warm welcome to those who have newly joined the Heritage Society on the strength of our anti-uranium-mining campaign. We are not a militant group - banner-waving and slogan-shouting is not in our line - but the initiator and passionate opponent of this threat to Orkney's way of life, Ernest Marwick, would have stopped at nothing to defeat the aims of the Nuclear Energy powers who are behind the threat of mining here in Orkney.

THE ORKNEY SITES AND MONUMENTS RECORD

With very few exceptions, every county in England and Wales now has a full-time archaeological service either within the local authority or closely allied to it, and usually encouraged and financially assisted by the Department of the Environment. The most important task of these services is to create and maintain comprehensive and easily accessible lists and records of all the archaeological sites and monuments in their areas. Unfortunately, this development has hardly begun in Scotland, with only one regional council, Grampian, at present employing an archaeologist to do this work. The Department of the Environment (now the Scottish Development Department) has not stepped in to fill the gaps as it has done in England, for inexplicably, the amount of government money allotted to archaeology in Scotland is very disproportionately low compared to that allocated to England and Wales. This is particularly unfortunate, as the areas which are most important in national terms, are those of sparse populations and very low rates incomes, where it is unreasonable to expect the local authority to shoulder the burden of looking after what is, after all, a national resource. What is the long-term pattern of archaeological development in Scotland is not yet clear, but through the generous intervention of private industry, which has provided a need at present beyond the resources of government, we are able to make a start on a sites and monuments record for Orkney.

The importance of a sites and monuments record is fundamental. It is needed as the basis of any local authority planning control on the archaeological landscape. The Orkney Islands Council, like some of the more forward-thinking local authorities in England, has adopted an archaeological conservation policy into its Structure Plan; but if it is effectively to be able to monitor and control development pressures on the archaeological landscape, it will need a sites and monuments record. It is necessary, too, for the Scottish Development Department and other bodies concerned with rescue excavation and detailed survey, to have this Record as the basis of planning their programmes. Inevitably, more sites will be threatened than can be excavated or preserved, and the decision where to spend the available money, can only be taken after considering such questions as, "How many other sites like this threatened one, are there?" "Is this one a good one to excavate to tell us what we need to know about these sites?" At the moment such questions are difficult to answer, for a reliable and comprehensive body of information does not exist in an easily accessible form.

The Royal Commission Inventory, published in 1946 from work done twenty years earlier, is at present the only published list of antiquities in Orkney. It has serious weaknesses; in the first place, the fieldwork was not thorough enough, and a great many sites were missed. The work of the Commission in compiling Inventories is slow, and it will be the end of the century before the whole of Scotland is covered, so there is no foreseeable chance of the Orkney volume being revised. It is of course a fundamental weakness of any published list in book form that new sites will turn up, and the condition and understanding of known ones, alter after its publication; so the Inventory quickly ceases to be definitive.

This weakness is overcome by having a card index, such as the existing Ordnance Survey archaeological index, which is much more up-to-date than the Royal Commission Inventory, since it includes material from fieldwork in the later 1960's and early 1970's. The fieldwork programme, which was associated with a new edition of maps, is now completed, and the Ordnance Survey is running-down its Archaeology Division. So the existing index will be retained, but will not receive further revision; although more comprehensive than the Inventory, it is still far from complete.

Apart from the omission of material which simply escaped notice, both Royal Commission and Ordnance Survey had cut-off dates in the eighteenth century. This meant that many archaeological monuments of relevance to Orkney's more recent history, such as fishing-stations and World War II defences, were not included. And both the Inventory and the Ordnance Survey Index have the major disadvantage of being cumbersome to use. In the Inventory, it is possible to look up a site of which the name is known (this means the name as used by the Commission, by no means always the name by which the site is known locally); and as the book is arranged by parishes, one can look up all the sites in a particular parish. But the enquirer who wants to find every chambered cairn in Orkney, or every short cist, must plough through the whole volume. The Ordnance Survey index has similar disadvantages.

The standard solution to these problems, now widely adopted in England and Wales, is to have a "primary-numerical" card index - that is, an index in which every site is given a unique number, the numbers being allocated at random, simply in the order in which the sites are processed. No attempt is made to arrange the entries geographically or otherwise. In parallel with these cards, there is maintained a series of punch cards, each of these having provision for up to 10,000 perforations each corresponding to a site number. A punch card is prepared for each parish and island, each type of site, each period, and so on. The system, which is grandly called "optical co-incidence" by its manufacturer, and is not easy to explain in the abstract, is in fact very simple in operation, and enables an enquirer to find immediately the reference numbers of all the sites in which he is interested, whether these be all the sites on a particular island, or all the sites of a particular period. By superimposing the punch cards quite complex enquiries can be answered - questions such as, "How many brochs in the parish of Sandwick have been excavated?" "How many of them are scheduled as Ancient Monuments?"

It will take some time to get the system operational, but when it is, it will be able to answer the enquiries of the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate, of academic researchers, of school children wanting information for history projects, and of the Council's planning department.

Dr. Raymond Lamb

URANIUM: WHERE DO WE STAND NOW?

There are occasions, probably rare, when one glimpses the truth behind political clichés. This thought occurred to me after the Examination in Public and people asked me how it had gone. What they wanted to know was whether or not we're likely to have a uranium mine at the North End of Stromness. I would give in answer a quick assessment which listeners and readers will doubtless have made for themselves from the excellent local reports.

My assessment, for what it is worth, was the the Orkney Islands Council, the Farmers' Union, the Stromness Community Council and the Heritage Society had challenged everything, both alleged facts and assumptions, presented by the joint Electricity Boards. .

We had prepared for the Examination as best we could and during it had complemented each other in debate so that it sometimes looked like a rehearsed exercise. Had the Electricity Boards and the Orcadians been arguing about the same thing I should have said we had the better of the argument.

But doubts that we were arguing about the same thing crept into my mind as the Board's representative continued to plead an inhibiting ignorance because exploratory drilling had been refused two years ago. Thus when asked how close an open cast mine might be to houses no answer could be given. The depth of the uranium would decide whether mining would be open cast or deep and only drilling could give the required information. The quantity of dust, the amount of waste, the size of tailing piles and the amount of water required was not known. Nothing, it appeared, could be discussed except in a vague and hypothetical way because exploratory drilling had been refused. Were the Boards using the examination to show the need for exploration I do not know.

Invitations to engage in the imaginative exercise of drawing the area on a map of Orkney which might be covered by a mine and its attendant industrial complex were not taken up although every Orcadian who thought with concern about uranium mining had already done such an exercise. That, indeed, was why so many turned up to demonstrate. The collective imagination was appalled at the prospect and if inaccurate information was feeding the imagination the remedy was in the dissemination of factual information. There, the SSEB's representative did an honest exercise. They did their best to allay the kind of fears expressed by the farmers who claimed that uranium mining would ruin their industry. We were shown slides of uranium mines in France, where, indeed, farmland seemed to extend to the edge of the industrial complex. The reaction to these slides in the Orcadian mind was the opposite of that intended.

Far from allaying fears they were confirmed by this evidence of an alien intrusion into rural life. My ear caught the well modulated whisper of the chair-person of the Heritage Society "God, I can't bear it." A general air of scepticism prevailed of the kind a travel brochure advertising Tierra del Fuego as a sun bathers' paradise might provoke.

TWO SETS OF VALUES

Two sets of values were in opposition, those of the Green Man and the Robot, the Orkney farmer and the plutonium economist.

The latter's world is the hygienic environment of Dounreay and Hunterston and Windscale. A world closed to the ordinary man because of his ignorance of nuclear physics, and closed to others by the Official Secrets Act. A carefully-monitored world where personalities at times must be hidden behind masks and protective suits. These are the acolytes of a technology which has inspired more fear and hope in the world population than ever the priests of the Ring of Brodgar inspired in theirs.

The Green Man's world is not hygienic. He buries his dung as part of the life renewing process. His world is open to all and the only bridles on his speech are the tolerance and courtesy he has learned so that he can respect the feelings of others.

But the Green man's world is in retreat and in the area of immediate contact with the world of the robot, in this instance the mining of uranium in the fields of Orkney, there can be no accommodation between the two.

Suddenly in this area away from the architectural show-pieces, the nuclear power stations, of which the industry is proud, one is conscious of a reversal of images. In the context of mining and radio active waste the "safe," "hygienic," "energy creating" nuclear power industry becomes unsafe toxic and energy destroying. In contrast the sharn and gutter round a farm which dainty feet might avoid become a wholesome part of a life giving cycle, an energy producing process which has been going on since the last ice age.

80,000 YEARS AWAY

Many Orcadians now know all about 'tailings' how they emit radon gas which destroys into "daughters" (what would Shakespeare writing Lear have made of that metaphor). These tailings remain radio active for 80,000 years. We would bequeath covered piles of them to future Orcadians with instructions how to avoid them and how to keep the fences repaired. I must say the thought of communicating warnings to Orcadians living in the year 5,000 daunts me, but 80,000 years hence!

Strange that this imaginative effort, how to communicate with people 80,000 years hence, did not seem to bother those who found difficulty in drawing an 80 acre patch round the Mill of Cairston. Perhaps the difficulty was that the patch in question might be round Maeshowe or St. Magnus. The plutonium economy will not respect the monuments of the past, why should it if it fails to respect living communities of the present.

But I started by saying that there are occasions when one glimpses the truth behind political cliches. The one I had in mind was that only people can make democracy work.

3 POINTS TO REMEMBER

I would like to give three quotes from the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution* which I wish every Orcadian would learn by heart against the day of the next assault of the nuclear forces.

1. "We believe that a quite inadequate effort has been devoted to the problems of long-term waste management, and that there should be no substantial expansion of nuclear power until the feasibility of a method of safe disposal of high level wastes for the indefinite future has been established beyond reasonable doubt."

2. "Our consideration of these matters, however, has led us to the view that we should not rely for energy supply on a process that produces such a hazardous substance as plutonium unless there is no reasonable alternative."
3. "Our basic concern is that a major commitment to fission power and the plutonium economy should be postponed as long as possible, in the hope that it might be avoided altogether, by gaining the maximum time for the development of alternative approaches which will not involve its grave potential implications for mankind."

Had the Electricity Boards, the Government, and the Energy Minister of the EEC paid the slightest heed to the conclusions of the Royal Commission there would have been no talk of mining uranium in Orkney. That it is their moral and democratic duty to heed these conclusions is in my opinion beyond doubt.

In the demonstration of their resolve to exclude uranium-mining Orcadians are making democracy work and for once I see the truth behind the cliché.

- * Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution Sixth Report
Nuclear Power and the Environment - September 1976.

IAN MACINNES

SUMMER OUTING:

This will take place on Saturday, 18th August, 1979 to Rousay.

We offer a great variety of attractions, thanks to Frank Harris and the Rousay Film Society whose members will be helping with transport and other details of organisation.

There will be an opportunity to visit and be shown over Westness House (one of the first "official" visits). This is by courtesy of Mrs. H. Firth.

The Norwegian archaeologists who have been excavating at Westness for several years will be there and ready to show us the Viking Longship burial, also the site of Norse dwellings at the time of Earl Sigurd.

Rousay is rich in prehistoric monuments, and for those who regard the land - and sea-scape as our equally precious heritage, there are walks and even transport to the highest point on the island.

In the event of bad weather the Community Centre will be available with a film-show; and though you are asked to bring a packed lunch each, a cup of tea will be provided before setting sail for the return home.

Details of departure and return, and the cost of the Outing will be advertised in "The Orcadian" nearer the time.

Arrangements for the Outing are in the hands of Mr. Clunie Rowell Brodgar Farm, Stenness. Paid up members only will be entitled to the outing.

The 1979/80 subscription of £0.50 is payable to:

The Hon. Treasurer,
P. G. Skea, F.C.A.,
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