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BIRSAY AS A CENTRE OF POLITICAL AND ECCLESIASTICAL POWER

Conference 2nd - 4th July 1982

Those who remember the week when Orkney celebrated the Impignoration in 1968 will relish the prospect of similar activities this year.

The quincentenary of the Impignoration, marked by lectures and excursions, was organised by Evan MacGillivray, Orkney's notable County Librarian. Before the week ended we all knew that Impignoration means Pledging; in this case the pledging of Orkney as part of the dowry of the ill-fated Margaret - daughter of King Christian of Norway and Denmark. She died at sea, poor lass, on her way to Scotland to marry James III in 1468 and was buried in S. Ronaldsay.

The Arts Theatre was packed for a week by audiences eager to hear learned discourses by eminent scholars on such aspects as the estimated value of the dowry - 50000 Rhenish florins: what a florin of the rhine was worth at that time; whether the King was entitled to the whole of the lands of Orkney; how much belonged to the Church, and what the Scots were up to. Much of all this was obscure even to erudite professors, but gave rise to heated discussion.

The Birsay Conference of 1982 is sure to arouse equal interest, not only in Orkney but far beyond the shores of these islands.

Dr. Raymond Lamb, our Resident Field Archaeologist, initiated the idea of such a conference and we've been working on it for more than a year, together with Dr. Donald Omand of the Department of Adult Education and Extra-mural Studies of Aberdeen University.

An appeal for funds received welcome support from firms and individuals. The HIBD, regarding the venture as an attraction for visitors, is also helping with finance, and we have co-operation in every way with various universities.

Birsay was one of the most important seats of the Norse Earls of Orkney and it was the place where the Orkney Bishopric was first established early in the twelfth century. There/

There is archaeological evidence that it had been a place of special importance from early Viking times and also in the preceding Pictish period. The Conference, which will be held in Kirkwall with visits to Birsay and to some comparable sites, will hear papers on the most recent excavation work as well as discussions of the controversial historical problems.

Speakers include C.A.R. Radford, Mrs. C.L. Curle, Barbara Crawford, Anna Ritchie, C.D. Morris, J. Hunter, R.G. Lamb, P. Anderson.

The conference fee is £10 (students £6.50) inclusive of excursions. Participants will be assisted in finding inexpensive accommodation in Kirkwall, and a British Rail fare concession will be available.

For details, please write to Dr. R.G. Lamb, Orkney Heritage Society, 48 Junction Road, Kirkwall, Orkney, KW15 1AG enclosing a large stamped addressed envelope.

M.L. & R.L.

Report from our Resident Field Archaeologist, Dr. Raymond Lamb

Norse sites in Sanday and Westray have been prominent this year and I hope that we shall see a lot of further work on these. Sanday was economically the richest of the North Isles in Mediaeval times as is clearly borne out in the rentals, and the condition of archaeological preservation there happens to be especially good. Work has now begun on sample-analysis of the remarkable "farm mounds", which appear to be the exact parallel of the North Norwegian "gardshauger" and unexampled elsewhere in Britain. Dr. Donald Davidson and Mr. Ian Simpson from Strathclyde University are now doing laboratory work on samples taken last summer, and this research will continue for the next three years. During this period it is likely we shall get a visit by scholars from Tromso University who have expressed interest in comparing our farm mounds with theirs.

Sanday also has an exceptionally fine early Viking site at Pool, which almost certainly has ninth-century occupation belonging to the very earliest phase of Norse settlement. Intriguingly, the site corresponds exactly to one of the six "huseby" locations suggested by Steinnes on the basis of rental evidence; without committing oneself to endorsing his rental-arithmetic, it has to be admitted that this is a remarkable coincidence. The section at Pool, which is extremely complex, was drawn by a team from Bradford University under Dr. John Hunter, a job which took several days. This record of the erosion-exposure has been shown to S.D.D. who have now accepted that this is a site of the very highest importance, but its excavation would require large-scale financing since it is a site which would not respond to small-scale digging. This will not be possible in 1982 but we hope that this project will stand a good chance from 1983 onwards.

In a year which will see only one new project in the whole northern half of Scotland, we are lucky to have this project in Orkney, although it is quite a small one. S.D.D. has agreed to finance, in May-June 1982, a limited excavation at Crosskirk, Tuquoy, Westray, on part/

on part of a very extensive and obviously rich Norse site which was identified during routine survey early last summer. The settlement must date back to early Viking times and is evidently the nucleus of a 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ -urisland "baer" - an establishment of quite exceptional size which must have belonged to one of the richest families in Orkney - which Hugh Marwick postulated here. The centre of interest next summer will be a massive stone building which is possibly a castle; its date is probably in the twelfth century, corresponding to that of the adjacent church, and its owners at that time were in all likelihood Thorkel Flettir and his son Haplidi, who played an important part in earldom politics leading to the establishment of Rognvald Kolsson as Earl. The excavation is being entrusted to Durham University, which is the leading centre of excellence for Scandinavian archaeology in Britain, and will be directed by Miss Oliven Owen.

Archaeology in Orkney; a personal view.

There cannot be many places in the British Isles where the local archaeological heritage is so appreciated. Few Orcadians cannot claim to have discovered for themselves archaeological remains. Any observant person walking along the coastline can see the remains of single buildings or whole settlements being eroded. For the more informed there is now the annual account of this destruction carefully recorded by Dr. Lamb. There are fewer Orcadians still who cannot direct the interested visitor to one or more of the local monuments. This awareness of the local archaeology may perhaps be attributed by the cynical to the simple equation that a Maes Howe or a Skara Brae means tourism and that tourism means money. Be that as it may, Orkney is fortunate that this awareness exists. There are many places within the world where sites are less conspicuous, less well preserved or less well known; where destruction often in the cause of progress has left little behind for the interested observer. In such places what few sites survive are not infrequently developed for their commercial potential rather than for the archaeology.

We are fortunate that in Orkney as in the rest of Britain the major monuments are protected by the government and are treated firstly as archaeological sites and secondly for their tourist potential. The provision of a small museum, and a well informed custodian, a published guide and a few photographs is the usual extent of the government's involvement. In recent times however, some of the most notable sites within the British Isles have remained closed, had restricted opening hours due to the introduction of part-time staff or only opened for part of the year. These are the unfortunate symptoms of a declining budget and once started, visitor numbers inevitably decline making further 'economics' feasible. Orkney has not escaped unscathed and in an area that depends so heavily upon tourism, however slight the reduction in facilities, there is cause for some concern.

The role of central government within archaeology is perhaps unclear. Amongst its main interests are: the care and maintenance of monuments, the protection of important/

important archaeological sites and the funding of archaeological surveys and excavations. To many people the most spectacular side of the work is not the essential routine work of the dedicated full-time staff, but the running of these excavations. However glamorous this may be, excavation is only a small part of their work. It is highly expensive and extremely destructive and is now (and rightly so) only carried out as a last resort.

With the present decline in funds there will be few new excavations where the findings are consolidated for public display. Long term research excavations like those at Birsay will be rare, and the complete excavation of particular sites such as that at Howe is most unlikely. The concluding season at Howe presents what is clearly going to be the last chance for some years to observe the workings of a large-scale excavation within Orkney. An unfortunate consequence of this is that there will be fewer opportunities for interested local people to learn at first hand about archaeology through one of the Govt. unemployment schemes. There will be few projects that will last long enough for such a scheme to be worthwhile. Within the present financial climate there can be no great increase in the level of government funds and the present policy of preservation and protection will continue. Limited excavation can be envisaged, but only as a last resort.

The proposed creation of a new government agency to administer archaeological funds is therefore of great interest. This body would include professional management and fund-raisers in an attempt to increase available income by developing the tourist potential of particular monuments. Provided that commercial enterprise does not mean that 'uneconomic' sites and projects are ignored, this body may do much to encourage visits to local monuments as a way of boosting funds. Whether the creation of this new board is the answer to the problems of decreasing revenue, only time will tell. However I feel that anything that increases public awareness of our archaeological heritage, whatever the ulterior motive, (within reason) should be given at least guarded support.

D. Haigh

(See "Beginning of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings in England", A consultation Paper H.M.S.O, £1.50. David Haigh of our Arch. Sub-committee is a member of N.O.S.A.S. and Rescue Arch. Secy. Laura Grimond reports that the Scottish A.M. Board have rejected this proposal but that the ideas it throws up could well be valuable and should be discussed.)

E.B.

News and Views

As you can see, this is an "Archaeological Special"! And appropriately so with such a prestigious conference in the offing. We make no apology, for to quote a Japanese proverb "to visit the past is to know the future". Many people have done much work already towards the Conference, notably Dr. Omand, Mrs. Grimond, Mrs. Linklater and Dr. Lamb. Our gratitude to all organisers and financial donors is perhaps best expressed by our/

by our interest. A background reading list is being compiled and "The Orcadian" will publish further information nearer the time.

Yet another item in this field: By kind permission of Mr and Mrs Harrison, the present owners of Trumland House, there have been deposited in the archives of Kirkwall Library, plans of excavations carried^{out} and financed in the Thirties on Rousay by Walter Grant, F.S.A.Scot., than the owner of Trumland estate. The drawings were by D. Wilson, ARIAS, F.S.A. Scot. Dr. G. Ritchie of R.C.A.H.M.S. visited Mr and Mrs Harrison in September last year to inspect the plans, compile a catalogue and have the material recorded and photographed for the benefit of interested parties in Orkney and elsewhere. We are grateful that he subsequently sent the Society a copy of the catalogue compiled by R.C.A.H.M.S.

Events

Since the previous newsletter, Society members with Dr. Lamb as guide have visited Sanday where a sunny and informative day was spent. Also an inspection was made of the excavation at Howe, Stromness, an event hospitably rounded off by Iain and Margot Heddle providing tea at the Mill of Eyrlund. Then the Howe "dig" was the subject of an interesting lecture given in Stromness by Beverley Smith and David Haigh of North of Scotland Archaeological Services.

Our last committee meeting perhaps constituted "an event" since it was held in the attractive common room in the Strynd where there is still a large stone chimney-breast reckoned to be part of Kirkwall Castle which was demolished in the 17th century. The history of the Strynd to date would make an interesting future article. Any offers?

Presently being arranged are a visit to Stromness Museum with Bryce Wilson and one to Liddle in S. Ronaldsay in early May. Both will be advertised in The Orcadian.

Logo

Regarding Society identity and recruitment, it has been agreed that an attractive, informative, well-designed enrolment form is necessary and to that end the committee is appealing in the first instance to the Society's artistic members to submit ideas for a suitable logo or "keynote" illustration epitomising Orkney and incorporating in essence the Society's aims. We are sure that this life-renewing season will inspire you to try your hand! Submissions should be sent to the secretary by April 16th, a date of significance in the Orcadian calendar historically. Dimensions should not be greater than 7cm by 9 cm.

Gift

As most members will know by now, the Society, through the thoughtfulness of the Northern Lighthouse Board, is the recipient of a remarkable piece of technology, the dioptric lens system from the Brough of Birsay. A museum note tells us that this "represents the perfection of 19th Century technology. Early lighthouses here and elsewhere were equipped with catoptric or 'reflecting' systems, consisting of oil burning lamps with copper reflectors covered by facets of mirror glass. The dioptric or 'refracting' lens system was adapted for use in lighthouses by Augustin Fresnel in the 1820s. A single lens of the required dimensions would have been too thick for use in a lighthouse/

lighthouse, absorbing too much of the light, but by using an 'annular' lens, which consisted of a small central lens surrounded by separate rings of glass held together by cement, Fresnel achieved a thin lens of sufficient height and width. The dioptric system of lighthouse illumination was perfected by the Stevensons, the world famous lighthouse engineers who erected all of Orkney's major lighthouses."

This is a most interesting and exciting gift from the N.L.B., from whom we previously received a chronometer and sundial. We are very concerned that it should be carefully preserved and protected and that it eventually be found a suitable home where its ingenuity will be seen and appreciated by future generations. Although several suggestions have been made, some proving impractical, there will be no decision until the most appropriate and safe venue is found. Mr. Wilson, Museums' Officer, is helping in this task and Mrs. Linklater has handled all the negotiations.

Magazine

"Orkney Heritage" sales have gone well but it should still be possible to procure a copy if you have not already done so. Several articles are already on hand for the next edition. It has been decided that some future issue, perhaps the third, will be given over to papers submitted to this year's Conference. Our continuing thanks are due to its Editor, Mr. William Thomson, and to all contributors, literary and financial.

The Good News

Just recently three new or restored Orkney Islands' Council housing schemes have been completed and occupied. It is gratifying to see these so much in sympathy with their surroundings. The Castleyard complex in Kirkwall provides a modern neighbourhood worthy of its position near the Cathedral, blending impressively in colour and design. A similar development in Stromness, planned by its original Town Council and named Rae's Close after the famous Arctic explorer, also succeeds in re-establishing the character of the town with its narrow streets. Here, however, the result falls short of the potential because of its unharmonious dash finish of black and white. A much more successful solution to this longstanding problem of finish has been achieved at the newly renovated South End houses a hundred or so yards further on at Login's Well - these with their stone courtyard are much admired. In the stone connection it is immensely encouraging that the Clestrain Quarry has been reopened. Can we now look forward to replacement of concrete with flagstone in our streets? A worthy area for apprenticeship and employment

It was welcome news also that the Council last year supplemented the Heritage Fund when its annually allotted sum was exhausted - it is to be hoped this policy can continue and expand, as upkeep of our conservation areas and listed buildings pays many dividends in a variety of ways.

The Bad News

"If we'd had these planning regulations 500 years ago, St. Magnus Cathedral would never have been built."

"The Structure Plan is out of date already."

Such statements as these came publicly recently from Orkney Islands' councillors, one an ex-committee/

ex-committee member of this Society. Though too ludicrous to merit discussion where space does not permit, they may have attracted some attention. In such situations Heritage Society members must speak up wherever possible in support of the Structure Plan. We were privileged to be fully consulted throughout its formation, begun eight years ago, and we can only be grateful for its protection as a framework within which to preserve and develop our heritage into the future. Its policies are generally agreed to be flexible and working well - there are in fact very few planning refusals.

What critics forget is that there have always been constraints of one kind or another. The fact that in the distant past these were more often naturally rather than officially imposed does not mean they were necessarily any fewer. Think of some of the limiting factors in the past:- stone the only readily available building material; climate dictating position, shape, size of windows, roof pitches, etc; taxes on window space in the 19th cent., no machines - only manpower!

The Cathedral itself, the building of which continued through the Norman to the Gothic period, was subject to greater restraints than any modern building and not the least of these was its need to satisfy man's religious aspirations.

It could well indeed be said that there was a case for a more strict plan to be implemented much sooner (though no doubt the public climate earlier was less conducive) so that we might not today be lamenting the loss of so much fine stone building throughout our concrete-block, stricken countryside.

A generally accepted precept goes as follows:-

"ingenuity flourishes better where restrictions are imposed" -
therefore let us not condone cant which proclaims the opposite!

Finance

The Society's audited accounts for the year ending May 1981 were adopted at the A.G.M. in October and copies of the accounts are available from the Treasurer at the Royal Bank, Kirkwall.

Subscriptions remain at £1 for adults, 10p for juniors and £10 for life-membership. Any member who has not yet paid or any one wishing to join might find the attached banker's order useful.

Our thanks go to Mr. Melville for all his work, to the auditor, Mr. J.C. Bevan, to Occidental Oils (UK) Ltd., Orkney Islands Council and the Scottish Development Dept for their continuity of support to our archaeological commitment, also to all who responded to our appeal for the Birsay Conference, a full list of whom will be published later.

----- E. Bevan.

Progress on the Mill of Eyrland - Iain Heddle

This meal mill, built in 1861/1862, ceased working in 1969. Situated as it is across the water from Stromness with a gently shelving sandy beach only 250 yards away, it was a fairly simple process during construction to bring the ship with the mill gearwheels close in at high tide, then dump the gear overboard so that it could be collected/

over/

collected by the building team at low tide and taken up the little lane to the mill. Oak for the internal lintels was collected from the sailing vessel "Albion" which was wrecked on Graemsay on January 1st 1861. Later on when the mill was working, the Graemsay folk brought their oats to the beach whence they were transferred to a cart in the water and from there to the mill. Those Graemsay folk certainly earned their oatmeal!

My grandfather and my uncles used to bring their oats here too. It was therefore with a great deal of pleasure that we were welcomed by James Linklater when he realised that the home he had lived in for forty years had fallen into friendly ownership. We agreed the purchase in 1971 and started to clear and clean the workings and kiln in 1972. All our work was done during "holidays" from the south until we moved here in May 1980 to occupy the one top room which was by then habitable, with electricity, bottle gas cooking but no drains or water.

Between 1972 and 1979 we had replaced every window and the external doors. We had formed doorways and floors to make the kiln accessible and the ground floor had been taken up, levelled off, damp-coursed and concreted. The floor-boards to the living area had been replaced and the stairs in this part had all been given new treads. Most of the timbers had been sprayed with preservative and strengthened where needed. The lum to the west gable had been demolished and rebuilt and the lean-to roof on the east side had been totally renewed using the original slates.

Since we moved in there have been dramatic changes, with the living unit now virtually completed including decoration, new stairs in the mill and the hall floor all complete with stone flags. Probably the biggest step forward in comfort was when our new storm porch was completed in March '81. Protecting both our doors it helps greatly and it has pleased us when so many people have kindly said that it looks as if it had always been there! Another great help has been the partial conversion of the little outhouse so that our car is garaged there. The lean-to stable beside the west gable has been demolished with the stone being used in the storm porch. It has been replaced by a greenhouse.

Our plans for the future include getting the wheel back into working order to give us some heat in the mill side. We have work in hand to form a simple foot-bridge to give us easy access to the ground to the north of the burn so as to form our vegetable garden. Our plans for the floor area below the bridge are taking shape and we hope to improve it again during this year with more stone-work and planting.

More Thoughts on Birsay Boundaries by Johina J Leith

In the book, "Orkney Heritage", Vol. I, on pages 93/94 we read about the division of the Birsay commons by Peter Spence. The boundary line between Birsay and Harray was briefly mentioned, and part of that ditch, though overgrown, can still be seen. I was brought up on that boundary and I remember it well. When I set out for school from Ferndale I had to take a few steps in Birsay to get to the public road and thence to the Dounby School that is no longer there. That school has joined the boundary ditch into oblivion.

From/

From the remains of the ditch below Ferndale the line can be traced, past the "slug slap" to Whulkhowe or Whalkoo. I can remember a piece of the ditch there as well. I don't remember the ditch at the Dounby side of the Brae o' Whulkhowe as that was cultivated before my time.

The Hillside road cuts off the East end of Viasmoss and the line goes on till it gets to the Market Green where Birsay, Harray and Sandwick meet, the Market Green being in Sandwick, Harray now marches with Sandwick, the border line going past the back of the school in the direction of Laxhowe. I think that faely dyke there is now more or less still complete. I am not certain where the road crossed the boundary line between Harray and Sandwick. When I was herding kye I can remember men looking unsuccessfully for the Harray-Birsay mark stone.

In a dry summer the kye had to be watered at Viasmoss, but Viasmoss has since been drained and has a changed appearance altogether.

Now going uphill past Ferndale and Willow Cottage, on the upward journey where the Hillside Road crosses the boundary near where the Beaquoyside road branches off, the line here can be seen as a "wiggle" on the map facing page 92 in Vol.I. The ditch here was part of the line also, and the old house of Mosseter was near it, but ^{that} field is now fenced and cultivated.

There is a brig on Hosen's land that is the mark where the line comes back again across the road, or rather it is the road which has crossed the line to begin with. From that "brig" the line goes more or less straight to the old house of Hosen, leaving the Hillside Road altogether.

There are now two houses of Hosen, both built since the line was drawn. The one on the northern side of the road is comparatively modern. The original Hosen would have been on the Birsay-Harray border, but the present one is in Birsay. All that remains of the original Hosen is a pigsty and even that is looking unused. The laid-out line was from "Hosen's Brig" to the "Ben Lum o' Hosen" and straight on to the Mid Looin.

There is a "laid out" Hill Road from that Ben Lum o' Hosen that is only used in parts now. The lower end as it leaves Hosen is overgrown and is more or less impassable, but it is clearly defined and fenced off on both sides. I have been told that it is the northern side of the road that is the boundary.

The "Hosen Market" used to be up near Hosen in Birsay, but it gradually came down nearer the "ale house" of Peerie Geoth until it was opposite Newhouse and was miscalled the Knarston Market in John Firth's book, "Reminiscences of an Orkney Parish".

The market was now in Knarston in Harray, but the title "Hosen Market" still applied. The market had crossed the boundary line after the ale! When the field was cultivated a few years ago, some stakes were found in the ground where stock could have been tethered, while, one supposes, the owners could go to the ale house for a "mug o' ale" and still be in sight of their animals if anybody showed any interest.

"Peerie Geoth" still stands, now used as a farm steading, where John Isbister's wife Mags looked after her customers and "Sir John", - so called because of his haughty manner. Someone asked "Sir John" the landlord, "Whit kind o' a market has it been the day?"/

day?" "'Deed a pair market, hids no been ae fight the day", was the reply.

A new ale house was built on a field bought off the farm of Dounby by Josie Mackay, a Highlander who married an Orkney lady. The farmer's name was Smith, hence the name Smithfield. The original inn was behind the present building and Alexander Oag started a boot and shoe shop nearby. (Those buildings still stood till fairly recently). It would be good for business to have the market near the ale house, so Josie marshalled public opinion into taking up a public subscription to buy a stance nearby with proper title deeds. Market Day was now to be the second Thursday of every month. Times change and farm stock is no longer sold in the Dounby Market Green, and a site owned by the community seems to be disappearing.

Just below Ferndale, on Nistaben's uncultivated pasture land is the remains of Hill Dyke. That dyke, I am told, went up past the front of Ferndale (which of course was not there). There was a bend in it that was called "The loop o' the Hill Dodie". Of course the "Slug Slap" was in the hill dyke farther down nearer Dale Cottage.

I am indebted to my brother Davie Kirkness for refreshing my memory of where the road crossed the boundary, and also about the untouched piece of boundary ditch.

KIRKNESS
20 Main Street
Mrs. M. Kirkness

