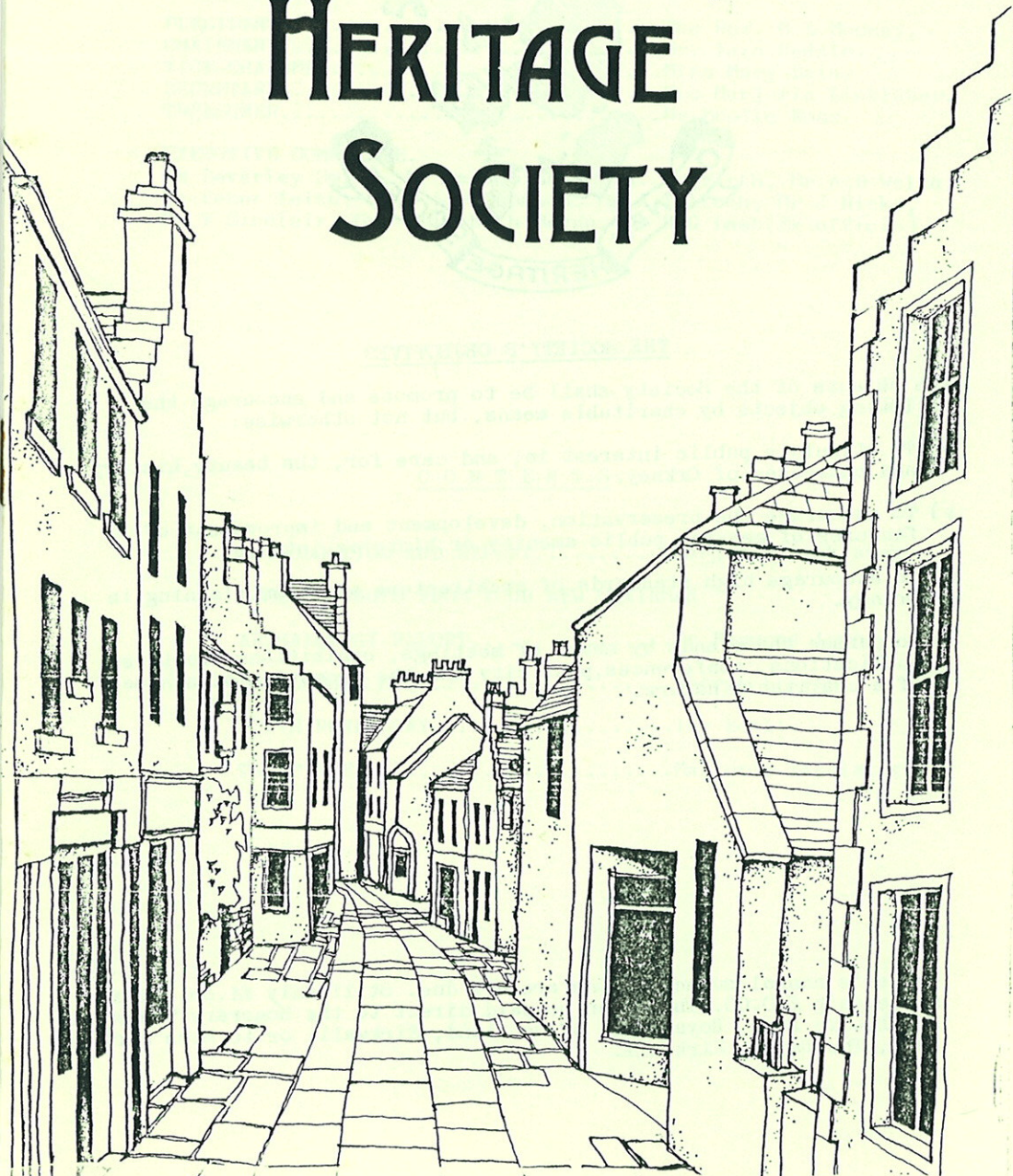


ORKNEY HERITAGE SOCIETY



NEWSLETTER

FEBRUARY 1984



THE SOCIETY'S OBJECTIVES

The objects of the Society shall be to promote and encourage the following objects by charitable means, but not otherwise:

- a) To stimulate public interest in, and care for, the beauty, history and character of Orkney.
- b) To encourage the preservation, development and improvement of features of general public amenity or historic interest.
- c) To encourage high standards of architecture and town planning in Orkney.
- d) To pursue these ends by means of meetings, exhibitions, lectures, publications, conferences, publicity and the promotion of schemes of a charitable nature.

Member's annual subscriptions are now due. Still only £1.00. Life membership £10.00. These can be paid direct to the Honorary Treasurer Mr. Brodie Ross, Royal Bank of Scotland, Kirkwall; or to Miss Mary Bain, The Dairy, Kirkwall.

ORKNEY HERITAGE SOCIETY

PRESIDENT.....The Rev. H L Mooney.
CHAIRMAN.....Mr. Iain Heddle.
VICE-CHAIRMAN.....Miss Mary Bain.
SECRETARY.....Mrs Marjorie Linklater.
TREASURER.....Mr Brodie Ross.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE.
Ms Beverley Smith, Mr David Lea, Mr A. J. Firth, Mr A. D. Welsh,
Mr Peter Leith, Mr W L P Thomson, Mr A Tulloch, Mr J Hicks,
Mr T Sinclair, Mrs Elizabeth Bevan, Dr R G Lamb (Ex officio).

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Iain Heddle, our new Chairman, is an Orcadian by birth and ancestry, but his career in building was centred in Colchester. His experience in restoration of historic buildings in East Anglia is already benefiting Orkney. He and his wife have, by their own labours, renovated the Mill of Eyrland which is now a unique and charming dwelling retaining the character of the old mill.

At the AGM when Mr Heddle was elected to the Chair, he paid tribute to Mrs Elizabeth Bevan the out-going chairman who guided the Society's affairs most ably over the past four years.

LOOKING BACK.

It is quite encouraging to note that the programme for 1983 outlined in last years Newsletter was more or less carried out. The "less" include the Outing to Lyness and a Talk on Planning. However the programme compiled from sound and visual archives, including the film "A Stone in the Heather" made in the final year of Eric Linklater's life was shown both in Kirkwall and Stromness and £50 was sent to the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh.

The outing to Westray was an unqualified success in the usual sublime weather which we have come to expect for the OIS Annual Outing. Last year started with the Rev Harald Mooney's talk "Recollections of Birsay" in the Strynd Community Room. This year we plan (at last) to commemorate the rescue of these historic and attractive dwellings from dereliction by Laura Grimond. With a legacy from her mother, Lady Violet Bonham Carter, Lady Grimond bought the houses in the Strynd and presented them to the Heritage Society. Eventually the Orkney Islands Council took over responsibility for their renovation.

The Lens from the dismantled lighthouse on the Brough of Birsay was delivered to the Heritage Society by the Commissioners of the Northern Lighthouses. The Curator of Tankerness House Museum has generously taken custody of this magnificent but somewhat embarrassing gift, embarrassing only because of its size and complexity.

Salmon/Lobster Complex on Lambholm. The Heritage Society objected to the siting of industrial building on the land adjoining the Italian Chapel. However the promoters of Salmon-farming off-shore on that side of Lambholm claimed that it was the only suitable site and their application for planning permission was upheld by the OIC. We sent a further letter urging restraints on height and extent of building and regard for landscaping which we hope will be observed.

Archaeology. The Archaeological Sub-Committee has a new Chairman, Ms Beverly Smith who has been working in Sanday during the summer (1983) recording the findings on Tresness, a site threatened by erosion. She was in charge of the excavation of the Broch of Howe for the latter part of the operation and on Tuesday 13 March she will be giving a talk on "The History of the Excavation at Howe" in the Kirkwall Community Centre, Room 4 at 8.00pm. Which brings us to....

LOOKING FORWARD.

Beverly's talk is the first Event of 1984. Next is an Outing in May to Lyness. Melsetter House in daffodil-time is the main objective. Details will be advertised in The Orcadian.

The June Outing will be on Sunday 10th June to the Island of Gairsay by kind permission and co-operation of the owner, Mr David McGill. Numbers will be limited to twenty so tickets will be available in advance.

The Conference to be held in Sanday from 4 - 9 April is explained by Dr Lamb in the Archaeology Report. A membership form is enclosed.

I have, for a long time, felt that the name of our Society, splendid as it is, slants at least a little bit backwards. In the past when a lot of lovely "old treasures" were built, labour costs were low for those who commissioned new buildings (and pitiful for those who did the work). Buildings then consisted of naturally produced materials and the very shortcomings of their use prevented any of the hideousities which pass for Architecture today. I do not advocate a return to primitive methods and materials but I very strongly state that most of the building styles of the past are preferable to an enormous part of the present trends. There are, of course, spectacular examples of beautiful modern design, but at the same time because of the faulty material or architecture, there is the almost weekly sight on television of whole tower blocks being demolished. During a lifetime in the building industry, I promised myself that I would never build one and I always sought contracts with some charm or restoration element in them.

I consider that it is vitally important to maintain the nature of our conservation areas and I am strongly in favour of encouraging people, who wish to improve their property, to do so with carefully designed additions which blend with and do not obliterate the original. There must be new buildings and landscape schemes; so let us be resolved to encourage the owners to select a shape and degree of charm which will raise such buildings and such schemes from mediocrity to be something which our descendants will look at with pleasure.

We must do our best to see that those people carrying out important works leave behind them something worthwhile which blends with the surroundings and even adds considerably to the area.

There have been several well designed new schemes completed during the last few years and I give three examples of those which I find visually pleasing, they are:- Glaitness School, the Harbour Authority building at Scapa and the Commodore Motel at Holm.

The greatest curse, in my opinion, is the prevalence of cement and sand harling or rendering (with few variations) to make it maintenance free. It is a necessary evil in the climate but can we please have more variations in finishes to get away from the black and white marble chips and the pink/white burnt flint?.

Constructive suggestions are infinitely preferable to simply damning the material and so I suggest that an exterior can look very pleasing, if it is set in white cement panels (and I do not mean it should appear to look like Ashlar Masonry). In East Anglia, for instance, there has been panelled plastering for centuries which then had a final colour applied to it. Again in the West Highlands, white renderings are rough and keep looking very appealing.

It is not only whole buildings which can look good when freshened up but the addition of a choice design or name on a commercial building can improve it immensely. Instantly I think of the new sign at Argo's Bakery in Stromness. This is a subject close to the heart of the Orkney Islands Planning Department and that is the place to go for advice. If a sign can improve one shop then, equally, gaudy and ill-fitting signs can ruin others.

I want to put in a plea for Arches instead of plain flat lintels. I love to see curves brought into designs. I like to see rainwater pipes blend with their backgrounds instead of sticking out like a sore thumb. I am pleased to see the increasing use of Roman and Pantiles which are so preferable to the mundane asbestos slates.

Finally, one thought more: not only the roof above the head but the pavement beneath the feet is important. I strongly uphold all efforts to keep the streets of Kirkwall and Stromness suitably paved with traditional stone slabs. Or even with hydraulically pressed concrete slabs (which do not break up). This is, or should be, mandatory in conservation areas, but the indiscriminate use of Bitumac for pavements outside these protected zones is ill-advised in my opinion. Bitumac, unless very carefully laid soon deteriorates in extremes of temperature. And whatever anybody says we do have frost in winter and quite high temperatures in summer.

These are my thoughts which I hope may be shared by Heritage Society members. As a builder first and foremost they are my priorities.

BOARDHOUSE MILL

Mr. George Scarth.

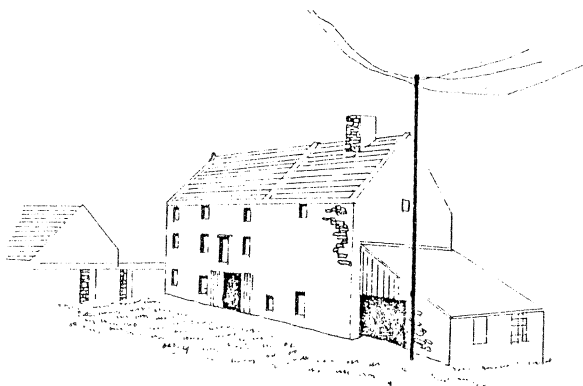
In a paper entitled "The Old Orkney Mills" given to Orkney Antiquarian Society in 1925 J. ~~Storer~~ Clouston lists 4 mills in the parish of Birsay, namely, Boardhouse, Kirkbuster, Sabiston and Seatter (this mill would have been on the burn of Swannay. Seatter was one of the crofts from which the occupier was evicted when the present day Swannay Farm was made). While Boardhouse may or may not have been the oldest of these mills it certainly would have been the most important, situated as it was in one of the most fertile districts in Orkney near the headquarters of the Stewart Earls.

The present Mill of Boardhouse was built in 1873, situated close beside it is an older mill which was built around 1760. This mill looks like a farm barn and there is no appearance of any kiln for drying grain. This is explained by the fact that in those days farmers had their own kilns and they took their grain to the mill for grinding only. This would be the mill referred to in a minute of a meeting in April 1833 on the subject of Lord Dundas' Orkney affairs where it is stated that "The tenant of the farm and mill of Boardhouse which was let to him in 1819 at a rent of £84 the half of which is understood to be the rent of the mill. The tenant stated that he required the rent to be greatly reduced and he offered £60. The factor stated that the tenant was careful and industrious. The tenant claimed that the mill needed to be re-roofed. He offered that if he got a reduction in rent he would re-roof the mill at his own expense. This was agreed."

When the present mill was built millwrights were taken from Aberdeen to instal the machinery. For some reason there arose ill feeling between the Birsay men and those millwrights, a fight broke out between the two sides and the millwrights got a terrific hammering. It is recorded that a Birsay man chased one of the millwrights out to the Point of Buckquoy where he caught him and gave him a thrashing. One can only speculate as to the reason for this ill-feeling. Could it have been that the local girls were falling for the charms of the incomers and that this aroused the antagonism of the young men of Birsay?.

The erection and running of a mill cost money and could only be done by the capitalists of the day - the great landowners. To recoup himself for his outlay and make some profit the mill owner charged "multure" (pronounced mooter in Orkney). In practise the mill owner did not work the mill himself but let it to a miller for a rent and the miller made his profit out of the mooter. Mooter is a certain percentage of the meal, it varied from mill to mill, but at Boardhouse the amount of mooter taken was 10%. This system of the miller being paid by him taking mooter prevailed until recent times and only came to an end about the late 1930's when the miller began to charge cash for grinding grain.

As I have said the mill belonged to the landowner - in the case of the Mill of Boardhouse the owner was the Marquis of Zetland and it was in 1924 that he sold the mill to the then tenant John Phillips at about the same time as he sold practically all his property in Orkney. A story is told of how just after the building of the mill a dance was held in the top loft (the mill is 3 storeys high). Shortly after this it was reckoned that the walls had shifted out slightly - due no doubt to the vibration caused by dancing. It was decided to bore holes in both walls (front and back) and 3 heavy bolts were put in right across the mill beneath the middle floor. The idea being that these would hold the walls together. A man was on top of a ladder with a heavy spanner to tighten up the nuts when the spanner slipped out of his hand and fell hitting the head of a man standing below. He was knocked unconscious and the tightening of the nuts was stopped and to this day they have never been tightened up, and, it might be added, the walls have never shifted.



BOARDHOUSE MILL BIRSAY

No article about a mill would be complete without at least a mention of the person who operated it, namely the miller. The first miller at the present mill was William Hepburn a joiner from Kirkwall who worked it for 13 years from 1873 to 1886. Little is known of him now except that he went to England where he took a farm and that he was visited there on one occasion by Mr. John Stanger of Boardhouse Farm. The next miller was Malcolm Firth who came from the Stromness area. He was miller from 1887 to 1909 a period of 24 years. After giving up the tenancy of the mill he along with all his family emigrated to Canada. There was in the same part of Canada at the same time a young man from the parish - George Duthie. After being there for some years Duthie decided to take a trip back home but before leaving Canada he visited Malcolm Firth and in the course of conversation Duthie asked him if he would not like to come back to Birsay for a visit. "Fact Geordie" came the reply, "I would rather go to hell than go back to Birsay". A well known local farmer heard this story and he told it to the then minister of the Established Church in Birsay and, "well" said the minister "it can't be such a bad place after all if it is no worse than Birsay".

In 1910, John Phillips, who came from Velzian in the Sabiston district of the parish, became the tenant and this began a family connection with the mill which lasted fully 60 years. It was as I have already said during John Phillip's time as miller that he became owner of the mill when he bought it in 1924. John Phillips continued as miller until 1940 when it was taken over by his son William who carried it on until 1972 when he sold it to Mr. Hamish and Mrs. Olive Flett of Boardhouse Farm. The next 10 years are unique in the history of the mill because a woman - Mrs. Flett - was the miller. She may well qualify for a mention in the Guinness Book of Records.

And so we come to the present owner of the mill, because in 1983 the Flett's sold it to Fergus Morrison who came here from the Borders. Mr. Morrison is a young man full of enthusiasm and of ideas for developing the mill. He intends to develop the milling of the meal and also oatmeal. He wants to encourage farmers to grow bere and hopes to expand the market for bere meal. There is already a market in Orkney and in Shetland. He has plans to expand into mainland Britain through Orkney Societies and through health food shops. He is developing side lines using the by products of the milling process. He makes dog feed which he claims dogs are very fond of, he also has oatmeal for making sowens. He is importing wheat and making wholemeal flour and he has made malt for brewing, from Orkney grown barley, in the traditional way. He intends to make the mill a tourist attraction in the summer season. Fergus Morrison is certainly not short on enthusiasm or ideas. I wish him well in all his lawful undertakings.

ARCHAEOLOGY

Dr. Raymond Lamb.

The Royal Commission on the Ancient Monuments of Scotland has now printed the comprehensive List of sites in Westray and Papa Westray, uniform with those previously done for Sanday and North Ronaldsay and Rousay, Egilsay and Wyre. During the good summer of 1983 it was possible to complete the field-work on Sronsay and Eday which will enable the List for that island group to appear in early summer of 1984. These two islands present both unusual difficulties and special interest by reason of their large number of off-lying uninhabited pasture islets. These archeologically are very rich indeed, and up to now have been neglected. A week was spent on Auskerry planning the structure there, and recording the very numerous sites, many of which have been observed over recent years by the farmer, Simon Brogan. We are fortunate that this island, so rich in wildlife as well as archeology, is in the hands of so sympathetic a man; while building up a serious sheep farm he has paid the most painstaking attention to every possible aspect of conservation.

Linga Holm also turns out to have extraordinary riches, most notably an upstanding Pictish house of "Buckquoy" type. Even the minuscule islet of Little Linga turns out to have two prehistoric house-sites - which raises interesting problems of the means of subsistence; was it sealing? Muckle Green Holm was suggested by Finnbogi Gudmundsson, in his definitive 1965 edition of Orkneyinga Saga, as the island named in the sags as Hellisey, on which monks were present. Hellisey was originally identified with Ellyar Holm, which is practically and philologically impossible, and later, by Hugh Marwick, with Eynhallow, which likewise rests upon a false assumption. The correctness of Gudmundsson's suggestion is now confirmed by the discovery on Muckle Green Holm of a large settlement-mound associated with a planned mediaeval field-system, which is almost certainly monastic in character.

The Eday Tourist Zone Scheme is making steady progress through OIC. The aim is to create, around the Stone of Seater, an area in which both wildlife and the upstanding prehistoric monuments will be displayed to the public, forming a tourist attraction which will directly benefit the Eday Community Co-op. The monuments themselves, including some fine chambered tombs, have been given into OIC's ownership by the landowner, Mrs Joy, and a scheme is now in preparation for the renovation of the first of these, the Maeshowe-type cairn on Vinquoy Hill, into a condition in which it can safely be entered by visitors. Unlike the guardianship monuments of the SDD, this and future monuments in OIC's management will not be displayed within neatly-fenced enclaves, but will be presented as elements within a total prehistoric landscape. This should be both more exciting for visitors and of greater educational value.

The most exciting research developments have been in the field of Early Christian studies. The archaeological recording of chapel sites has reached a stage at which it is possible to recognize a pattern, in which appears to lie the process by which Pictish Orkney was Christianised in the eighth century. The sites crucial to this are churches, dedicated to St. Peter, established on old broch sites. Combined with the evidence of stone sculpture and the scanty documentary evidence relating to Pictland generally, it can be seen that the earliest Church in Orkney was not the so-called "Celtic" Church of the West, but the mainstream Roman Church reaching Orkney through southern Pictland as a result of a mission originating in Northumbria. The date of this mission probably falls between 710 and 729, and it very likely was initiated from the monastery of Jarrow during the time St. Bede was living there. Further evidence of this activity is now being sought in late hagiographical texts, much neglected in recent years, by Miss Louise Scott, a student in the Department of Anglo-Saxon and Norse Studies at Cambridge University, who has undertaken this study for her dissertation. Miss Scott is being supervised by Dr. Isabel Henderson, the leading authority on the Pictish Church. There remains however enormous scope for future research in the eighth century ecclesiastical system in Orkney, which bears very directly upon the question of how the Norse settlement subsequently related to an existing social organisation; there has long been a suspicion that the island pattern, which appears to be fundamentally related to chapels, is a modification of or adoption of an older, Pictish, administrative or ecclesiastical system.

The Scottish Society of Northern Studies is holding its Annual Conference in Sanday from Wednesday 4th to Monday 9th April. Speakers will be drawn from America and Norway as well as from British Universities and from Orkney itself. The lectures will be given in Lady Hall and communal meals served there; accommodation will be arranged by the islanders, in the Kettletoft Hotel and private homes. There will be excursions to places of interest around the island. This is an informal gathering and the cost is deliberately kept low. It is hoped that many Orcadians will attend; a circular and booking form is now in preparation. Membership of the Society, details of which will be given on the form, costs £2.50 annually, for which members receive the useful journal, "Northern Studies".

RINNANSAY (North Ronaldsay)

Ivy Scott

Why I asked for the North Ronaldsay school I will never know. The Director of Education made it sound so remote, inaccessible and undesirable; but I turned down other job offers and declared the only school I wanted was North Ronaldsay. So in the worst Autumn of the century, battered and sea-sick, I arrived on "The Countess of Bantry" on a day the steamer could just work. The island was so flat, its highest point is only 50ft above sea level. We seemed to be sailing slowly down to a little pier cluttered with carts, horses, dogs and men.

My Headmaster was from Edinburgh and had a young wife and adorable little family, all kindness itself, as were the islanders and the schoolchildren, too good to be true and such keen workers with so many quaint expressions. They spoke to their elders as equals, whereas we addressed ours quite differently.

Lovely baking and cooking in all the houses to which we were invited - "Come wi wis!" We walked wherever invited and were well entertained in the cosy houses - a welcoming dram and amply laid tables, home baking and cooking to perfection, much interesting talk, often music and even dancing. Thus island nights flew past. Besides the homely interchange of visits among the houses there was the Memorial Hall for concerts and dances.

But the young men returning from the 1914-18 War nearly all had to go abroad for a job - Canada, U.S.A., Australia - and in these new lands they made their homes, coming back from time to time for long holidays. Their wish? To keep the island as it was, unique and different.

No place like it in all the world! I hope they can still manage it with an ageing population. So much depends on well organised communal work, eg the 6ft dyke surrounding the isle to keep the sheep out which is also a shelter for things inside and prevents sheaves etc. blowing onto the sea. In storms miles of it can be flattened and then every able-bodied man takes his share of restoring it to some height and strength. The dyke did not collapse till the water reached the top. Then above the sound of the storm you'd hear the rumble of stones being carried down the beach. From Rinnansay you looked up at the sea, not down, an awesome sight when mile long waves from the Atlantic came racing in. Yet fascinating to watch



NEW LIGHTHOUSE, NORTH RONALDSAY

IAN SCOTT '83

On one occasion a little schoolgirl of about eight was out watching the storm. She just got into her cottage and sneaked the door when stacks from the yard, henhouses etc. floated past the window. A great stretch of dyke went down that time ...

Rinnansay's greatest asset was the sheep-food for its people and warm wool for clothes. The lambs made lovely pets for the children. Its bird life was amazing, especially the numbers recorded in the migrating seasons. Many came to grief on the lighthouse, but many also survived to rest a while before the next lap of their journey. The red necked phalarope no longer nests there, nor the much commoner corncrake.

The kelp industry flourished for many years and was an added income. Now the children have to be told what the kelp pits were, where the dried tangles were burned to promote the chemicals, mainly iodine. It was shipped south and the laird got his share. The Trails did much for the island's welfare, even to restoring the old grinding mill which kept on doing its work all through the last war.

Now Rinnansay's breakfast is much the same as that of the rest of the country - truly Americanised - even to Breakfast TV.

Our family and their children, now living in the London area, are never HOME till they have been in North Ronaldsay. Last summer they hired two planes and spent one glorious day on the island. They were joined by an aunt, a retired nurse from Aberdeen who went with them all the way of their conducted tour and even at 87 climbed to the top of the lighthouse - one of the highest in the world - 120ft with 176 steps, same number as the verses in Psalm 121. The lighthouse was and is a very important part of the island's life.

North Ronaldsay is a little world of its own with a history going back a long way.

She is not any Common Earth
Water or wood or air
But Merlin's Isle of Gramarye
Where you and I will fare!

(From Rudyard Kipling's "Puck's Song")

TAIL - PIECE

Mrs. Marjorie Linklater.

La Route Noroise, and the French Connection.

L'été dernier, trois navigateurs de la Manche parlaient avec leur voilier sur les flots gris de la Mer du Nord pour une expédition originale. Leur sillages allaient à la recherche des traces de Rollon.

It was in fact on 15 July last year that three French navigators sailed into Kirkwall harbour, two men and a woman, all members of the Cercle Asgard in Normandy. This is a Society set up about ten years ago whose purpose is to establish links with their Norse heritage which originated in Orkney with Rolf the Ganger. His father was Rognvald, Earl of More who was the first Earl of Orkney Harald Fairhair having subdued Shetland, Orkney and the Hebrides and laid waste the Isle of Man. That was soon after the battle of Hafsjord in the year 872.

" Rognvald had a son called Rolf or Rollo, who in his youth took to the sea and became a Viking. He was so huge a man that no horse could carry him, and on his landward travels he had to walk. William Morris in his translation of the King's saga, gives the resounding name of Rolf Wend-afoot; but he is also known as Rolf the Ganger. He harried the lands in the eastern part of the Baltic without much offence to anyone who mattered, but a bloody raid in the Oslo fjord roused Harald Fairhair's anger, and Rolf was outlawed. In the customary manner he went west to Orkney and the Hebrides, and continuing his voyage to Normandy, compelled Charles the Simple, King of France, to give him land enough, about Rouen and the estuary of the Seine, for the hazardous beginning of a dukedom. As well as these rich fields Rolf acquired the daughter of Count Berenger, a girl with the friendly name of Poppa, and by her became the father of a son known as William Longsword. William was killed by a Count of Flanders, but left a son Richard, two of whose grandsons grew famous as Robert the Devil and Edward the Confessor. Robert the Devil, Duke of Normandy, fell in love with a tanner's daughter who responded to his passion with such good will that their son was doubly endowed, with appetite and genius too. He defeated Harald Godwinsson at the battle of Hastings, the rude by-name of his boyhood was forgotten, and he was called William the Conqueror. He acquired for himself and his successors the realm of England, and founded a dynasty that would sometime reign over a comity of nations spread across the world from the Polar Sea to the Antipodes." (Extract from "The Ultimate Viking" by Eric Linklater).

The sailors from Normandy left a copy of their handsome periodical Heimdal whose editor is the distinguished writer Georges Bernage. They also gave us a map of Normandy in which most of the place-names are shown to be Icelandic in origin.

With the aid of the newly-formed French Society in Orkney we are now in communication with M. Bernage and plans are afoot to establish the French Connection, possibly with a package tour to Bayeux.