

# ORKNEY HERITAGE SOCIETY



NEWSLETTER

1986

ORKNEY HERITAGE SOCIETY

PRESIDENT ..... Lady Grimond  
CHAIRMAN ..... Mr Iain Heddle  
VICE CHAIRMAN ..... Miss Mary Bain  
SECRETARY ..... Mrs Marjorie Linklater  
TREASURER ..... Mr Brodie Ross

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Mr W.L.P. Thomson (Literary Editor)  
Mrs Elizabeth Bevan, Dr R.G. Lamb, Messrs P. Leith, A.J. Firth,  
D. Lea, A.D. Welsh, A.J. Hicks and M.R. Hayes.

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.
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EDITORIAL**THE SCOTSMAN**

Wednesday, February 5, 1986

**ORKNEY SITES**

The list of known archaeological sites in Orkney has increased by 50 per cent to more than 1,000 since the appointment of a full-time resident archaeologist six years ago.

We reproduce above an item from "The Scotsman" which refers to the fortunate state of the heritage of Orcadians, for which the Society and Dr Lamb may take some credit. But, as Dr Lamb points out in his report, this achievement has not been won easily. We hope his argument, that archaeology is a suitable case for investment in Orkney, will be noted and acted upon.

It is obvious from such reports as the "Scotsman's" and recent TV coverage (not always commendable), that the attractions of Orkney and similarly isolated communities increase as industrialisation and the growth it demands in one place and kills in another, threatens the whole environment. Communities increasingly become places people want to escape from, whether as tourists, archaeologists or drop-outs.

Dr Lamb is well aware that the function of archaeology is not simply to promote tourism. That it does so is a welcome bonus added to the discovery of gifts from the past of great richness. Now our relative isolation, which has preserved these gifts for thousands of years, is the cause of the newest threat to our heritage. Isolation and the sparseness of population were undoubtedly factors in the choice of Dounreay as the site for a high-risk nuclear experiment. Only recently we discovered that an adjacent area had been considered suitable by some, for tests associated with the development of our atom bombs.

The case for expansion at Dounreay will be argued from the same assumption, though it will not be stated, that some communities are more dispensable than others, in the pursuit of what is claimed to be our civil and military nuclear needs. Such an assumption, as G.M.B. records, kindled the wrath of Ernest Marwick. The Treasurer's report refers to the measures Ernest took that his just wrath would not be forgotten. It is a sad comment on the times that we should remember one of the most gentle of men by his legacy of wrath.

FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Last year I pleaded that the war-time services and defences should be properly recorded for posterity, and I have been told that the Planning Department of O.I.C. is indeed working to record them all.

This year I intend to refer to our old home which was the cause of our getting interested in the award scheme of the A.P.R.S., to which our Heritage Society is affiliated. We saw the invitation to apply in the "Orcadian" and, after ensuring that the Mill of Eyrland was eligible, we duly joined the other 28 applicants throughout Scotland. This was the biggest number to date - more than DOUBLE the previous year!

Margot and I were delighted to receive our beautifully hand-scripted commendation in the Signet Library in Edinburgh from the hands of Lord Grimond.

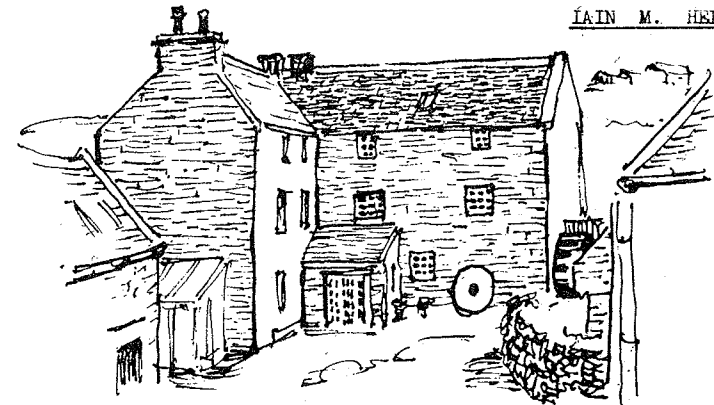
It was rather fun to see Miss Hedderwick, the award winner, with her architect and contractor, go to receive the award itself, and the representative of Grampian Regional Council with their architect and building director, who all went to get their commendation.

When our turn came, I took Margot's hand and led her up to the table, so that Jo actually gave the commendation to her.

The Signet Library is a lovely building, and the very beauty of the Hall, where the presentations were made, was most uplifting. The Chairman of the judging panel, Mr John Foster, showed slides of all the entries "before and after" and commented on them according to their merits.

The old castle at East Saltoun is actually a large house of three storeys and, being exquisitely converted, was the worthy award winner. The Bridge of Dee entered by Grampian Council was a dramatic improvement over what it had been. Greenside Park, St Boswells, won the other commendation for Mr Rodwell and his team. A certificate of Merit went to Mr Winkle for his farmstead at Lamancha, West Lothian.

Our commendation, as I said, is beautifully hand-scripted, and the wording, we felt, was delightful, and is deeply appreciated!



SECRETARY'S REPORT

At the Annual General Meeting in October 1985, the Rev. H.L. Mooney tendered his resignation as President and nominated Lady Grimond to take over that office. His resignation was received with regret and he was warmly thanked for having served so faithfully and with distinction for so many years.

Paul Sutherland also resigned from the Committee on account of now being at Edinburgh University and unable to attend meetings. In a letter he said that his year as a Committee member had proved of great interest to him and he would continue to welcome news of the Society's doings. Robert Swanney was not re-elected to the Committee and thus two vacancies were to be filled. Mr M.R. Hayes from Burray was proposed and seconded. Little more than a month later the Committee heard with sorrow of the sudden death of Mr Thomas Sinclair who had been a most helpful Committee member for several years. Several members of the Heritage Society attended the funeral in the Cathedral.

The Fereday Prize for the best historical project on an Orkney theme was awarded to Rognald Omand of Kirkwall Grammar School. His theme was Wartime Hatston and was judged admirable for historical research and presentation. Mr W.L.P. Thomson who organised the competition reported that entries had been sent in by all the Secondary Schools in Orkney.

Mr Maurice Sargent gave a talk with slides covering the ten years of his service as Director of Planning to the Orkney Islands Council - a decade of dramatic development with the coming of Occidental Oils (UK) to Flotta and the threat of Uranium-mining in Orkney. He also referred to the expansion of tourism as it affected the Planning Department and paid tribute to the co-operation in this and other spheres of the Resident Archaeologist, Dr R.G. Lamb. The talk was given in the newly refurbished office of the Archaeologist.

David Lea's Go-Orkney minibus was hired on April 27th to take members to S. Ronaldsay to visit Brigadier Dennison's "gazebo". It was a day of high winds and poor visibility, weather which deterred one or two who had booked seats. (In future outings will be by ticket paid for in advance.) Those who missed this highly enjoyable trip were the losers. Admittedly the magnificent panorama of the Islands North, East, South and West was less than perfectly clear, but everyone could admire the design and superb situation of this octagonal glass construction which, while commanding incomparable views, at the same time fits into the landscape. The entrance on the North side is protected by the slope of the hill; within, the insulation perfectly excluded the noise of the howling gale. A visit to the Italian Chapel revealed that considerable restoration work had been carried out. It was on to the Wireless Museum in St Margaret's Hope which proved to be of such absorbing interest that there was no time left for a visit to St Mary's Kirk in Burwick. The warm welcome and lavish hospitality at Grahamston was very much appreciated. Mr and Mrs Hicks were warmly thanked.

June 15th was the outing to Eday in the Golden Mariana. She left Kirkwall at 8.30 and returned there at 23.45 hrs. All agreed that within that time there had not been a single dull moment. The Vinguoy Trail, made possible in the first instance by the handing over of the Vinguoy Tomb to the O.I.C. by the landowner, Mrs Joy, has led to its restoration under the direction of Dr Lamb. The R.S.P.B. representative in Orkney and the local Co-operative on Eday have collaborated to ensure an interesting day, with suitable breaks for excellent refreshments, for tourists. There are several sites of archaeological and historical interest on the Calf of Eday which members visited.

July 18th. The OHS welcomed the Director of Historic & Ancient Monuments, Mr T.W. Band, to a social evening in the Office at 48 Junction Road. Mr Band gave an instructive and sympathetic address on Orkney's many sites of historic and pre-historic interest, referring to the criticism brought to his notice by the Heritage Society on the standard of presentation of these sites.

Finally, on 5th September, 1985, the Plaque on the Strynd was unveiled by Lady Grimond.

The most exciting and unexpected happening in 1985 was the news that the residue of Ernest Marwick's estate had been left to the OHS. The will had been drawn up in March 1977 at the time when the threat of Uranium-mining had been brought to our notice and the Society had undertaken to lead the campaign against any attempt to do test-boring in the Yesnaby and Stromness areas. Therefore the proviso in the will is that the money is left to us for the "express purpose of enabling the Society to finance and carry on the fight against the prospecting for or mining of the mineral Uranium in any part of Orkney." It then goes on to say, "If it becomes absolutely clear that Uranium mining is not going at any time to take place in Orkney, (the Society) to use the said residue of my estate.....to help to conserve the landscape, buildings and traditions of Orkney in whatsoever way seems best to the members of the Committee of the said Society." The Committee is considering how best to administer the income and the Treasurer has undertaken to take advice on the investment of the capital, which amounts to £28,000 with a further £1,000 due.

1986 events: A talk in March has yet to be decided. There will be advance publicity in the "Orcadian". In late May, when the short sea crossing by the Soutar Lass begins again, a visit to the Wick Heritage Museum is proposed and possibly a tour of some places of interest in Gaithness. In June or early July Rousay is suggested to look at Quendale and Trumland. Any other proposals for Heritage Society interest and promotion are welcome.

MARJORIE LINKLATER

TOMMY SINCLAIR

We are all saddened by the loss, in December, of Tommy Sinclair, who has been a valued committee member for a number of years.

Born in Sandwick and brought up at Creya in Evie, he attended Kirkwall Grammar School. After an apprenticeship with John Scarth, Millwright and Engineers, he did his National Service in the R.A.F. Returning to Scarth's he rose to foreman, and will long be remembered as a craftsman of the highest skill, who always had time to listen to others' problems. On leaving Scarth's he moved to the local Silversmiths, Ortak, where he was engineer in charge of the casting plant.

His many interests, which covered fields as diverse as photography, natural and local history, gardening, particularly shrubs, made his love of Orkney's heritage all the richer.

We extend our deepest sympathy to his wife Mona and their children arraine and Roy.

SANDY FIRTH

to be used, at least in part, for the support of the Church and its institutions. However, there is no evidence in the Bishopric Rental of 1492 to show that any of these properties were used in this way. For the next fifty years the affairs of Orkney were in turmoil culminating in the Battle of Summerdale, in 1529.

Then, in 1540, King James V visited Orkney. He was nobly entertained by Bishop Robert Maxwell whose dwelling was the Strynd. In fact, with this royal visit, the place was named "the King's Passage". It is probable that King James confirmed the charter of 1486 and no doubt bound over the magistrates to implement it in so far as it favoured the church. Well of course things didn't change as far as chicanery and corruption were concerned and the Strynd was acquired by the ancient Orkney family Halcro of Halcro, which, according to MacGillivray, "produced as predatory and immoral a crew as could be spawned in a degenerate age".

Throughout the 16th century, there were Halcros in every high office connected with the Church and the Burgh, but by the 17th century the main branch of the family died out. So the property at the Strynd, the buildings, now ruinous, passed to sisters of Hugh Halcro of Halcro - Jean and Sibilla. Jean married Alexander Mowat of Swinzie, and their share of the property was disposed to Alexander Baikie of Tankerness, from whom it went to his son James and thence to Robert Baikie who disposed of it to Robert Morrison. As Jean's sister Sibilla had married a Baikie (of Burness) her part of the inheritance also eventually passed to Robert Morrison, who rebuilt the houses in the Strynd in 1703. This date appears above the door of Mr Harrison's house, but it records simply the renovation of a far more ancient building.

Prince William Henry, third son of King George III visited Orkney in 1785 and stayed with his old shipmate Captain John Traill who entertained the Prince in his "modest little mansion in the Strynd". Some say that it was this visit which earned the narrow lane the name The King's Passage. Perhaps to Kirkwallians at that time all Princes were Kings (and geese were swans).

Various Ministers of the Kirk occupied the Strynd in the 19th century including the Rev. W. Logie, the minister of the first charge of St Magnus Cathedral; but in the latter part of last century, merchants and divines built commodious mansions for themselves elsewhere. The Strynd was allowed "to sink into the senility of unwanted old age". The ground floor of the rear wing was used by Dr Logie (son of the minister) to provide stables and a coach house.

Inside, more drastic destruction was perpetrated; there were two small fires, but mostly it was the "improvements" by various tenants - including the oak panelling torn from the walls (originally taken from the Cathedral), and the ornamental plaster-work destroyed from neglect of the roof - which are remembered to this day and mourned.

So now we swing into the 20th century and the buildings condemned after the Second World War. Liptons had bought the property using the site on the corner of Albert Street as a shop and offering the rest to the Town Council. But everyone knows what Town Councils were like in those days. The conservation of ancient and historic buildings came very low on their priorities. Enter the hero of the hour - Mr James Harrison. Well, he would not regard himself as a knight in shining armour ready to rescue a damsel (particularly one who had sunk into unwanted senility). He was looking for cheap premises on his return from the war in which to carry on his trade as a cobbler. He used only the smaller of two houses for his trade, but with his sensitivity and insight, he soon came to appreciate the unique character of the property. He believes that the Strynd was part of Earl Henry St Clair's castle. The massive walls - some of them 4 to 5ft thick and the huge fireplace still to be seen in the present Community Room - are indications of appendages to the dwelling of an Earl at the time when the Burgh of Kirkwall and the Bishop's land were jealously divided.

Ernest Marwick, to whom not only the Heritage Society, but Orkney entire, owes so much for his dedication to recording every aspect of our heritage, wrote about Jim Harrison in the Orkney Herald of 17 November 1959. A charming photograph accompanies the article, showing the young Jim Harrison at the door of his cobbler's shop. Above him is an old street gas lamp in keeping with the buildings, and in the background, the Well from ancient times. Fortune seemed to smile on Jim Harrison at that time. He was elected as a Town Councillor and had expanded his business to include saddlery. He will forever be remembered as one who revived interest in "The Ba'" after the war, he himself a craftsman, who mastered the art of making the Ba'. But disaster struck - a result of an injury at sea in the Battle of Tobruk - Jim's eyesight failed. He could no longer carry on his trade as a cobbler, and, with a young family, the bank threatening to foreclose, he was thankful to find a buyer. Thus, between the date of that hopeful article in the Orkney Herald and 1972, the Strynd changed hands. Mrs Laura Grimond, with characteristic vision, decided to use a bequest from her mother, Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, to purchase The Strynd and offer the buildings to the Heritage Society in memory of her mother.

Exactly ten years before the unveiling ceremony referred to above, the following entry appears in the Minutes of the Society (11th Nov., 1975): "The troubled saga of the Strynd House continues. At times it seems a cross between a Gordian knot and a curate's egg, with a whiff of the Augean Stables thrown in for good measure. Last I reported on the precarious state of the roof and the North gable. The necessary repairs were completed in January, and the contractor made a good job of them. The cost of £4600 was something we could ill afford, but we were greatly assisted by grants of £1000 each from Kirkwall Town Council and the Pilgrim Trust, and £500 from the Dalrymple Archaeological Fund, as well as an interest free loan from an anonymous well-wisher, to whom I have referred before. And the Kirkwall Town Council's Clerk of Works very kindly kept an eye on the work for us."

To this must be added that at least £2000 were raised by various sales, including the sale of prints showing the Strynd buildings from an original etching by Sylvia Wishart. Mrs Laura Grimond was the motivating force in this fund-raising drive, and her name is enshrined along with that of Lady Violet Bonham-Carter in the Community Room. There, at the same time as the unveiling of the plaque, a framed photograph of Lady Violet was hung with the accompanying inscription which pays tribute to both mother and daughter. There too, hangs a painting of the Strynd by Sheriff Barragale Keith, a gift from Lady Grimond, to remind us all of the peculiar charm of these buildings before their colour changed from pink to regulation grey!

The final episode in the rescue of the "senile unwanted Strynd" was the decision to offer the buildings to the newly created Orkney Islands Council. This offer was made on the understanding that the Council would convert the Strynd into a Community Room and special housing accommodation. The grant from the Historic Buildings Council fortunately obliged the Council to restore and exhibit the huge stone fireplace which is a special feature of the Community Room, otherwise there would be little to suggest the ancient and royal origins. Jim Harrison now lives there and is known as "Mr Strynd".

Several people have commented that the inscription above the archway is terse and uninformative. It is all that Lady Grimond wanted to be said.

The Heritage Society has to thank all who contributed to the very moving ceremony which Lady Grimond performed on 5th September - the Planning Department of the Orkney Islands Council, whose men worked with meticulous care to place the stone; and the Kirkwall Community Council, who paid for the inscription. They might have been less sympathetic if asked to pay for a memorial stone incorporating the gist of this potted history of the Strynd!

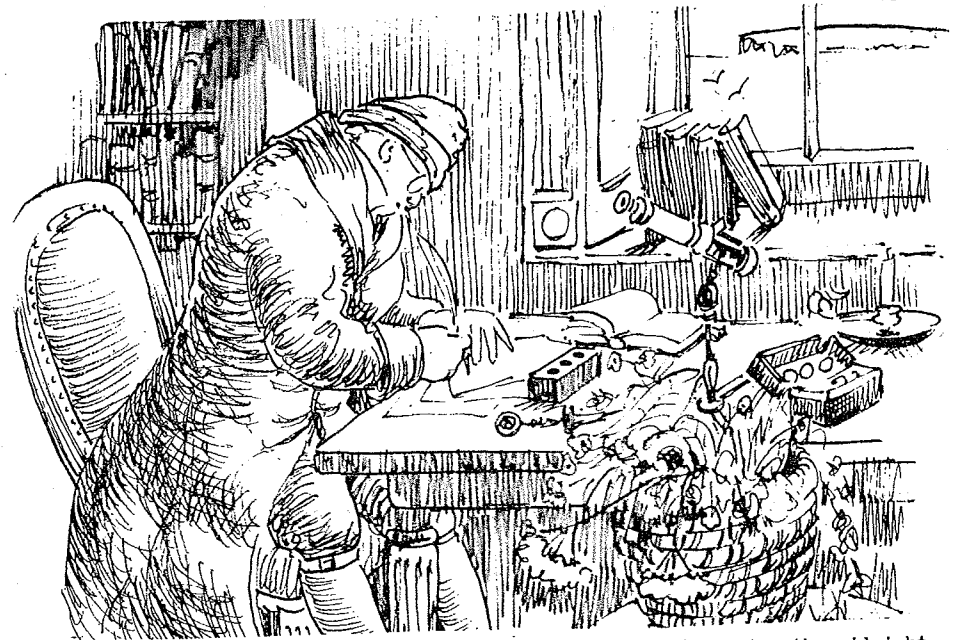
"THE DRUID OF BIRSAV"

Orkney has not lacked historians. No doubt long before the saga writers recorded the doings of the men of Orkney, there were poets and storytellers among the Picts and many generations of folk before them who passed the tales of the people down the years, in song and story. In more recent centuries there have been those who have written down the history of these islands, such men as George Barry, J.R. Tudor and Storer Clouston, and, in our own day, William Thomson, Ray Breday, Peter Anderson and others have added to the knowledge of our past. Yet few can rival the Rev. George Low for breadth of scholarship. Many people regard Low as one of Orkney's foremost naturalists, and rightly so, although only a small part of his work in this field has been published. However, he was also fascinated by the history of these islands and undertook a great deal of research in order to write an account of it. He translated the work of the Danish historiographer, Thormodus Torfaeus, and used it as his principal source. Only a fraction of his translation has survived, but this is of no great importance since his History of Orkney, of which Torfaeus was only one source, remains in its entirety in three manuscript volumes in the library of Edinburgh University. Apart from Torfaeus, he studied the Icelandic Sagas and a number of classical authors such as Tacitus, Eutropius and Juvenal. Nor did he neglect the Scottish historians, Boece and Buchanan, though he considered, with justification, a lot of what they wrote concerning the early history of Scotland to be inaccurate, and, whenever there was a conflict of opinion, he preferred the version given by the Norse writers. For more recent events he made use of whatever official documents were available to him, acts of parliament, royal decrees, treaties and court records. To conclude his work he wrote a "Description of Orkney" that is in itself a piece of social history of his own day.

There is no doubt that George Barry made use of Low's manuscripts when he wrote his own History of Orkney, a much briefer account than Low's, and there is a note among Low's papers recording the return of these mss. from Shapinsay, where Barry was minister. Barry no doubt acquired them from Rev. James Alison, minister of Holm, who had possession of Low's papers after his death before they were forwarded to Low's beneficiary, George Paton, the Edinburgh antiquary.

Low's interests did not stop at history and natural history. As a student of philosophy at St. Andrew's University his notebook shows that he had acquired a knowledge of many and varied subjects, including physics, astronomy (and even astrology), mineralogy and a little medicine. In addition, although not educated in the discipline, he became interested in antiquities and collected objects of interest from the past and present for himself and for his friends in Edinburgh. Many of these were acquired from ships that put into Stromness from expeditions to the Canadian arctic, with strange Eskimo artifacts. This interest was first aroused by the arrival in Orkney in 1772 of Mr. (later Sir) Joseph Banks with two eminent colleagues, Dr. Lind, an Edinburgh physician, and Dr. Daniel Solander, a friend and pupil of Linnaeus. They were on their way home from an expedition to Iceland and chose Low to act as their guide round Orkney. During their stay they did some excavating on the Links of Skail, where they dug up an ancient burial mound. Low's account of the event must be among the earliest accounts of an archaeological dig in Orkney.

What sort of a man was this George Low? A contemporary describes him as being "5 feet 5 inches high, stout made, spoke very quick without a stammer and had a strong melodious voice." At the time of Banks' visit he was tutor to a family in Stromness, somewhat irked by the time he was required to spend teaching a parcel of rather stupid children which would have been better employed investigating the natural history of the islands!



He nevertheless managed to pursue his studies by dint of burning the midnight oil after the rest of the household had retired and spent long hours looking at the minuter wonders of nature under his home-made microscope. His encounter with Banks introduced him to that other eminent naturalist and traveller, Thomas Pennant, and a correspondence between them led to Pennant's sponsoring a tour of Shetland, the account of which was published long after Low's death under the editorship of Dr. Joseph Anderson. Whilst on this tour - and after a considerable amount of canvassing - he was offered the living as minister of Birsay, later referring to himself in letters to Paton as the "Druid of Birsay". Now at last he felt free to pursue the interests which so absorbed him. His correspondence and friendship with Paton continued and from him he was able to obtain many of the books which helped his researches, and through him to meet many of the scholars of his day on his visits to Edinburgh to attend the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. A year of marriage ended tragically and he was plagued by ill-health and failing eyesight, many promises of publication of his manuscripts came to nothing and he died at the early age of 48 years, an obscure minister of the Kirk, in an obscure parish on a remote archipelago. Had his work been published in his lifetime he might have found fame, at least among the scholars of his day, but it was not until nearly 20 years after his death that his "Fauna Orcadensis" found a publisher, and almost a hundred years before the account of his Tour through Orkney and Shetland appeared. The only work of his that appeared at or near the time it was written was his contribution to the first Statistical Account, concerning the parishes of Birsay and Harray, now available in Storer Clouston's "Orkney Parishes". All the rest of his manuscripts have remained on the shelves of libraries and record offices or have disappeared altogether. Now at last it is intended that the Orkney Press should publish such of his works as are still available so that the public may judge the true worth of this remarkable man. As an introduction to this work, a smaller volume is being produced containing correspondence with Pennant and Paton together with the few facts that are available about his life both before and during his time in Orkney. It is hoped that his writings will add richness to the already rich store of literature which these islands have inspired.