



ORKNEY HERITAGE SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

1987

ORKNEY HERITAGE SOCIETY

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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.

C O N T E N T S

EDITORIAL	
FROM YOUR CHAIRMAN	IAIN HEDDLE
SECRETARY'S REPORT	MARJORIE LINKLATER
ST. MAGNUS	BARBARA CRAWFORD
ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORT	RAYMOND LAMB
150 YEARS ON... ..	PETER LEITH & DAVID ANDERSON
THE ICE-BOUND WHALERS	JAMES A. TROUP
EDWIN MUIR and BJARNI KOLBEINSON	G.M.B.
MAGNUS MAGNUSSON in EDAY	MAGNUS MAGNUSSON
TREASURER'S REPORT	BRODIE ROSS

EDITORIAL

Everyone interested in our heritage should support the Chairman's suggestion that the Hall of Clestrain should be restored. Even in its present state, looking for instance at the once magnificent stairway, enough of 18th century elegance remains to convince us that it is possible to repair the neglect of years. But the building has suffered a long neglect and it is a tribute to the craftsmen who built it that so much remains.

Are people proud or even conscious of good craftsmanship? The answer is that some are and some aren't, and an awareness that the former were a declining proportion of the population was one reason behind the formation of the Heritage Society.

This leads one to question whether the admiration of good craftsmanship should be just a cultural trip for an embattled few who sense a small achievement when the O.I.C., as it frequently does, makes an excellent job of restoring a building. These triumphs are diminished by the amount of post-war sub-standard building around us. Does the building have to be so bad?

Here lies a paradox. A belief continues that good buildings are the expression of great and laudable human emotions, even of goodness in particular communities. The truth is that most of the world's greatest architecture was built at the behest of tyrants, and, as Barbara Crawford points out, St Magnus Cathedral owes more than a little to political in-fighting. It was craftsmen who made these buildings great.

On the other hand, the appalling high-rise flats and our own post-war sub-standard building was the result of more concern for the welfare of ordinary people. But that concern has in every country conspicuously failed to produce a humane architecture. The missing element is the craftsman.

Can we in Orkney preserve the craftsman? Local politicians should look for every way to increase the employment of stone masons, carpenters and artisans of every kind. The financial climate may seem to be against this but the survival of the Hall of Clestrain on the one hand and the demolition of 20 year old council flats on the other shows that this is only in the short term.

FROM YOUR CHAIRMAN

Dr. John Rae was an explorer of whom Orkney is justly proud. In St. Magnus Cathedral is a very beautiful memorial to him and in Orphir is the house where he was born. The contrast between birthplace and memorial could hardly be greater in this part of the twentieth century.

The Hall of Clestrain, built around the end of the seventeenth century, is on the verge of becoming "just another ruin", but it has definitely NOT reached that state yet. Can I begin to arouse interest in saving this potentially elegant house? I am quite sure that if we can commence the process of saving it, future generations will think well of us.

Can we get Islands Councillors of a sympathetic mind to head in that direction?

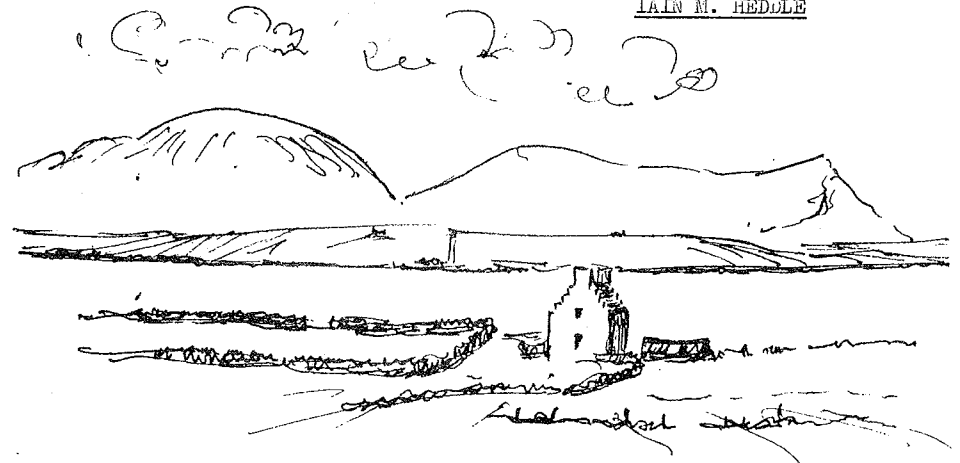
Can we find out what possible help can be obtained from a variety of sources within and outside Orkney, Britain and Europe and perhaps Canada?

I have visited the Hall and been all over it as far as possible with my wife and Ivan Craigie who is now the owner. He is keen to see it refurbished and given another lease of life, but simply cannot afford to do it unaided.

This once-beautiful building is in an exquisite position overlooking Hoy Sound and that is why it was an obvious target to be robbed by the Gow pirate crew in 1725.

It could be converted into flats for holidays or permanent residence as there are three floors, but it might be a bit large for a single residence. Lots of possibilities suggest themselves, but one I cannot accept is that it should become a total ruin. It has stood now for nearly three hundred years. Can we please help it to regain its pride and go on for another century or two?

IAIN M. HEDDLE



The high-light of 1986 was the launching of the Eday Heritage Walk by Magnus Magnusson on Friday, 30th May. An edited transcript of his speech delivered at the entrance to the Vinquoy Tomb is included in this Newsletter.

Second only to this event was the Outing to Wick Heritage Museum on Saturday, 17th May, followed by a tour of East Caithness guided by Donald Omand. In ideal weather twenty or so members of our Society crossed from Burwick to John o' Groats, thence by bus to the Museum. Here we were welcomed by the Chairman of the Museum Trust, Mr Iain Sutherland. We were quite unprepared for the range and high standard of this museum which is devoted entirely to the Herring Industry up to the Second World War. A row of fishermen's houses near to the harbour have been converted into a reconstruction of this great industry of which Wick was the centre, trading with the Baltic states and Europe. Not only the boats, gear and equipment of fishermen are here displayed, but complete coverage of trading, including coo-perage for barrels into which the Herring Lassies packed and salted the gutted herring. Charts and maps show how these girls travelled hundreds of miles throughout the year from all over the Highlands and further afield to process the "silver darlings". All this and the domestic lives of the fisher-folk meticulously remembered. Our guides (we were divided into three or four groups) were mostly descendants of these indomitable fisher-folk.

The afternoon tour of East Caithness, South along the East coast to Whalligoe - three hundred steps down the cliff face, and the women carried the catch to the top. Rings driven into the rock were used to moor the boats at various stages of the tide where they hung at the ebb. To Lybster, planned and built out of herring prosperity, a fine example of early town-planning; via the Camster Cairns to Watten and finally back to Wick.

The return from John O' Groats, in sharp contrast to the morning's crossing, left the majority of members firmly opposed to the short sea crossing for a jolly outing. One or two, however, actually enjoyed the turbulent seas.

John Gerrard, Director of the Scottish Civic Trust, gave a talk with slides on March 25th in the Strynd. His account of the work of the Trust throughout Scotland should have attracted more interest from members who would have enjoyed a fascinating and instructive evening. Mr Gerrard admired the restoration of the Strynd buildings to which he himself had contributed in the initial stages.

Finally, our Chairman, Iain Heddle, invited members to visit the Mill of Eyrland. His restoration of the Mill was accorded an award by the APRS (Association for the Preservation of Rural Scotland) and this year for the first time the water-wheel was turning, generating enough power for light and (minimal) heat. This was the most popular event in our calendar - 50 names were inscribed in the visitors' book.

Dounreay Inquiry. The OHS objected to the building of a Reprocessing Plant at Dounreay for the same reasons as those submitted opposing the SSEB at the time of the threat of Uranium mining in Orkney. Our spokesman then and on the EDRP (European Demonstration Reprocessing Plant) issue, was Ian MacInnes who presented his submission at the Inquiry in Kirkwall on 22nd May.

Museums. Mr Graeme Farnell of the Scottish Museums Council invited comment by the OHS on that part of his report relevant to the development of Orkney's museums, in particular Tankerness House Museum. He had been commissioned by the OIC to examine and make recommendations on this subject. His highly constructive ideas depended on an investment of £53,000 over five years with the gradual introduction of an entrance fee during the tourist season. A letter was sent to the OIC approving the report, but the outcome was that the Council, ignoring the various recommendations, agreed on one only - to demand an entrance fee - a counter-productive innovation.

The Fereday Prize. This competition which was inaugurated a couple of years ago as a tribute to Rae Fereday's constructive teaching and publications on Orkney's history, continues to attract many entries from secondary schools throughout the islands. This year the winner was Jeanette Thomson whose theme was The Boys' Ploughing Match. This is an annual event in S. Ronaldsay where Jeanette lives. So far the entries have been judged by the Rector of Kirkwall Grammar School and teachers of History in the school. It was decided that a panel from the OHS should judge the short list of 8 or 10 competitors out of the 70/80 entries.

An incredibly Useful Person was the headline in The Orcadian of 11th December 1986. This was the tribute from the Director of Planning T.W.Egging, to Dr Raymond Lamb, praising the imaginative ideas and practical assistance which our archaeologist gives to the OIC. (See Dr Lamb's report.)

1987 is the 850th anniversary of the founding of St Magnus Cathedral and is also the centenary of the birth of Orkney's poet Edwin Muir. The Heritage Society was asked by the organising committee to undertake the Edwin Muir celebration. He was born on 15th May 1887, his infancy and youth up to the age of 14 was spent in the island of Wyre. A pilgrimage to Wyre is planned for Saturday, 16th May. The full co-operation of the islanders is guaranteed. The Wyre band will provide music and the childhood poems will be read by inhabitants of Wyre - weather permitting these will be recited from the gable-end of the Bu where the Muir family lived. The pilgrimage will, it is hoped, raise funds for the Tribute to Edwin Muir which will be the first item on the St Magnus Festival programme - Arts Theatre, Friday, 19th June at 7 pm. A distinguished actor from Glasgow is not yet certain to come but George Mackay Brown is devising the programme.

Instead of the Talk which usually takes place in March, members are urged to attend a lecture by Dorothy Dunnett entitled Thorfinn/Macbeth on Wednesday, 25th March. Dorothy Dunnett's novel King Hereafter published in 1983 presents the theory that Earl Thorfinn and King Macbeth are one and the same. As a work of fiction the proposition was ignored by historians; however, her research was thorough and Mrs Dunnett is likely to deliver convincing evidence that her thesis is correct.

Outings. Donald Omand is such an outstanding guide that members will be pleased to know that he is willing to take us on a tour of West Caithness, probably in early June. It will be the short sea crossing again but return on the St Ola to Stromness, 8 pm. (Details later.)

Papa Westray - to visit the church of St Boniface. This will be in July and should coincide with the Westray Regatta to take advantage of special transport.

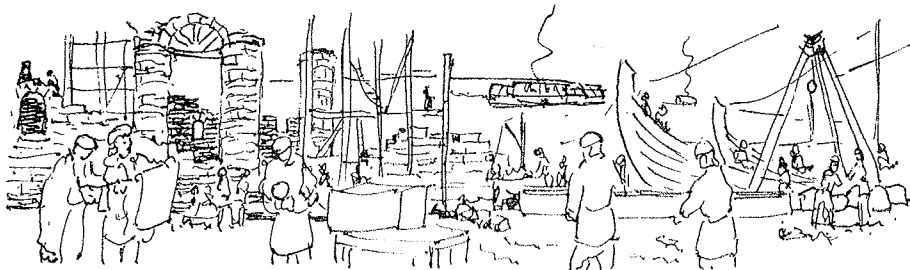
We hope these events will be well supported by members.

ST MAGNUS CATHEDRAL 850th ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE

The Orkney Islands Council's co-ordinator for the celebrations of this anniversary has called upon our Archaeologist to organise a Conference, proving once again that Dr Raymond Lamb is indispensable to the Council in every aspect of Orkney's archaeology, history and tourism. The Conference will be held in Kirkwall on Friday 24th - Wednesday 29th July, 1987.

To quote from the brochure: "This major international Conference is being held under the auspices of Orkney Islands Council as part of the celebrations commemorating the founding of St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall in 1137. The theme of the Conference will be the founding and building of the Cathedral as part of the European Renaissance of the 12th century. Speakers will cover the place of Orkney in the 12th century Europe, and ecclesiastical background in the North and the cult of St Magnus, learning and literature - in particular the St Magnus' sagas, and the architecture of St Magnus Cathedral in the context of the great Romanesque Cathedrals of Northern Europe.

Conference Leader: Barbara E. Crawford, M.A., Ph.D., F.S.A.,
Department of Mediaeval History,
University of St Andrews."



ST. MAGNUS

In the year when Orcadians are commemorating the 850th anniversary of the building of their famous Cathedral dedicated to their national saint it is appropriate to stop and ask: why was such a magnificent church erected in these islands? What was the inspiration behind such an expensive undertaking? Fortunately, because of the existence of the famous saga of the earls of Orkney, we are able to gain some understanding of the psychology and the politics which lie behind this remarkable achievement of the earldom family. Indeed, if it were not for the saga we would be as much in the dark about the reasons for the building of the Cathedral as the Faeroese are about the reason for the building of their Cathedral at Kirkubøer: the few sources that exist give them no clue as to the reasons for its building or for its abandonment, and there is even controversy as to the actual date of its foundation. But in Orkney we are luckier! It is possible to glean some insight into the inspiration and the means by which the Cathedral project got under way, and know pretty well when it happened.

Primarily of course there was the martyrdom of the noble scion of the earldom family, Magnus Erlendsson, earl from c.1106 to his death in 1115 or 1117. Straight away we come up against a problem concerning those very sources which I have just been gloating over. The account of Magnus' death on the island of Egilsay was written down after he had been elevated to sainthood and when a great deal of fervour and devotion and what we would today call superstition had gone into the spreading of his fame, the convincing of those opposed to the cult of this dead earl (of whom there were many) and the subsequent procedures to get his memory revered as a saint. We can not therefore expect the account of his death which was written as a piece of hagiography to give us a balanced and unbiased assessment of what happened at Easter in Egilsay. The supernatural, the heroic and the religious ideal are going to dominate and colour the account, and we will never understand exactly why Magnus met his death that day, although we can be sure that the essential details of how he died were well-remembered. Suffice it to say that he died bravely and in a very unusual way as far as quarrels between earls go.

But essentially Magnus died in the course of pursuing his and his family's dynastic ambitions against a rival earl who was his cousin, Hakon Paulsson. This is where the politics come in and they are basic to an understanding of the cousins' quarrel. The earldom of Orkney was divisible; that is, the eldest son of an earl had no claim to the whole of his father's inheritance, but was obliged to share it with his brothers or half-brothers, and their children. This led to many dispute and much violence over the period of the Norse earls. While the claims were brothers arrangements may have been reasonably amicable and we are told that the two sons of the great and powerful Earl Thorfinn lived peaceably for some years as joint rulers. But, inevitably, perhaps, the children had fewer interests in common and more to fight about so that relations broke down and Hakon, son of Paul, and Magnus, son of Erlend ended up as bitter enemies. We are never told exactly what their quarrel was about but it would certainly have been over the division of lands or the earldom rights in the islands which one of them felt was unequally apportioned. There were attempts by the best men in the islands to bring them together, but nothing is said to give the impression that Magnus was willing to renounce any claim for the sake of peace. He must have been standing out for his rights as firmly as his cousin. The meeting on Egilsay was arranged for the final ratification of the peace negotiations, that island being chosen most probably because it was the bishop's territory and therefore neutral ground as far as the earls were concerned. However the meeting ended in violence, and if we accept what the saga narrative says the murder of Magnus was due to the followers of Hakon rather than the earl himself, for they were the ones who said that they would not live with two earls in the islands. It is very difficult indeed to make any rational assessment of the circumstances surrounding the doomed earl's martyrdom. Perhaps we shouldn't try. But there are some very odd features about it.

Why, for instance, didn't Magnus attempt to escape? And what happened to the two boatloads of men he had with him? Why didn't they attempt to protect their earl? Was Magnus in fact deliberately seeking martyrdom like his famous contemporary Thomas a Becket? But Becket died for a cause. It can hardly be said that Magnus did. Unlike the saint-kings of Scandinavia he did not die in battle against a foreign invader or in the course of pursuing a tax policy on behalf of the church. Without seeking to belittle the noble gesture of Orkney's saint, it is rather difficult to know what he did die for.

But it is not so difficult to see how the cult developed in the years after his death. There was of course a big element of religious fervour involved, and we know that the twelfth century was the most

religious of all the mediaeval centuries. But that religious fervour was developed and fostered in the parts of the earldom where Magnus and his father had ruled. Moreover it was furthered and eventually completed by the next member of that branch of the earldom family to take up the claim to a share in the earldom, Kali Kolson, son of Magnus' sister, who adopted the name of Rognvald. So, in respect of the growth of the cult, and finally the building of the Cathedral an understanding of the politics of the earldom family is also vital. The requirements for elevation to sainthood were initially three-fold: the veneration of the local people, the support of the local bishop, and proof of miracles at the dead man's tomb. In the case of the first and third of these it is very noticeable in the Book of Miracles (compiled for the very purpose of proving Magnus' claim to sanctity) that there are several references to Shetlanders. This is remarkable because Shetlanders figure in the Orkneyinga Saga rarely. Why then are they so prominent in the accounts of the miracles done in the name of the dead earl? Because, I suggest, of the fact that Shetland was part of the earldom division which belonged to the Erlend branch of the earldom family. It was in Shetland, and in the North Isles of Orkney and in the East Mainland that local people would grieve for Magnus, and where resentment is likely to have grown because of the harsh treatment which was meted out by the victorious Earl Hakon, and where fervour would build up around the name of the dead earl. But in Orkney itself that fervour would not be easily expressed because of the antagonism of the surviving earl - of which the saga gives us several vivid examples. It therefore fell to the Shetlanders to proclaim loudly that succour could be obtained for the blind and the halt and lame at the tomb of the saintly Magnus first in Birsay, and later after the translation of his relics, in Kirkwall.

So, finally, we come to Kirkwall and the building of the great shrine to house the bones of the saint. Why in Kirkwall? What was wrong with the ancient seat of earl and bishop in the West Mainland, at Birsay where Earl Thorfinn had built a Cathedral in the previous century? It lay in the half of the earldom which was held by the Pauline branch of the earldom family, whose members were implacably opposed to the growth of any cult or the veneration of the earl of the rival line. So when Rognvald's father Kol urged his son to build a Cathedral to the memory of his murdered uncle if he won the earldom in 1136, it was in Kirkwall, in their half of the earldom, that he said it should be built, and to where the bishopric would be moved from Birsay. It was all planned that Kirkwall would thenceforward be the capital of the islands and the main seat of the earls - of the only earls, the victorious line of the holy saint Magnus. And so it turned out. Rognvald the incomer swept all before him in his campaign to win his inheritance, and the established line of earls, descendants of Earl Paul, just faded out of the saga. That must have seemed like a miracle itself; and the success of the venture was attributed to the support of the martyred relative who had proved such an asset in this political coup. It was on the wave of his success and the fervour for the family saint that Rognvald and his father Kol were able to achieve the founding and building of much of the Cathedral as we have it still today.

BARBARA CRAWFORD

From late September to early December of 1986 Broad Street was thoroughly dug up for a new drainage system, and we were able to walk about this part of the town without having to avoid motor-cars. The other advantage of the roadworks was that they gave a rare opportunity to study the waterfront of the mediaeval town. Kirkwall is arguably the finest surviving example of a mediaeval Norwegian town-plan, having its origins in a "kaupang" or market centre which was already in existence when Bishop William translated the relics of St Magnus from Birsay to Kirkwall some twenty years before the foundation of the Cathedral in 1137. The waterfront is the key area of such a town for studying the historical development, and much archaeological effort has gone into studying the harbour areas of Southampton, York and London when these have been affected by development. In 1978 a sewer was laid in Trondheim in the area corresponding to our Broad Street, and the mediaeval waterfront was considered important enough to merit a large-scale excavation project.

Unfortunately Orkney is no longer administratively part of Norway but a remote and unimportant appendage of Great Britain, so we are not able to give Kirkwall the treatment it really ought to have; however, by merely keeping watch on the trenches, greatly assisted by the helpfulness and knowledge of Charlie Millar and Bob Cross, we were able to gain much information for little cost. It did, admittedly, occupy most of my time for ten weeks, with unfortunate effect on other work, and there was a difficulty on those few days when unavoidably I could not be in Kirkwall, but SDD did eventually agree to give a small grant to enable Beverley Smith to provide the cover when I could not be there. Between us we were able to record what could be seen in all the trenches.

The original shoreline of the Oyce was a shallow-water frontage which would have suited the shallow-draught merchant ships of the Viking age, which were beached for loading. Merchants erected their booths above the shore, creating the frontage represented by Bridge Street - Albert Street - Broad Street - Victoria Street - Main Street. At this stage the "kaupang" would have had a layout not dissimilar from present-day Pierowall, which probably has a parallel origin but never developed into a town. We traced this shoreline from the Castle site at the head of Castle Street, crossing diagonally in front of the Tourist Office and turning southwards to run under Broad Street.

Opposite the Town Hall the shallow frontage had been turned into wharfage by making a vertical cutting in the bedrock. The bottom of this cutting was the natural, sloping bedding-plane; the rock had been neatly quarried away to give a smooth, sloping surface. This wharf had sufficient water around high tide to float a cog - the deep-draught trading-ship which came into use in the 13th century. A special reason for creating wharfage at this position could have been the unloading of stone for the continuing building works on the Cathedral.

From this location, the shoreline swung back eastwards across Broad Street until it disappeared under the pavement outside Tankerness House. There seems to have been a blunt spur of land projecting a short distance westwards into the Oyce; on the made-up foreshore off the end of this spur Tankerness House was later built.

South of Tankerness House came the unexpected discovery of a prehistoric settlement datable to the later part of the Iron Age. This site established on the margin of the Oyce and built out into the water was probably similar to Bretta Ness in Wasbister Loch, Rousay,

traditionally the site of a chapel, recently investigated by Mrs J. Marwick and shown to be an artificial islet occupied in the Pictish period. This raised new questions which at present cannot be resolved, concerning the early development of Kirkwall. If the Iron Age settlement had been abandoned and lain derelict long before the Norse kaupang developed, it no doubt would have served as a quarry, but its only further effect would have been to extend westwards the shoreline of the Oyce as the Norse found it. However the knowledge that at Bretta Ness the occupation of a site of this type extends through the Pictish period raises the possibility of some more direct influence. Bretta Ness traditionally had a chapel, and it was through development into church sites that many Orkney brochs have a continuity into the Middle Ages. The glimpses of the Iron Age structures obtained in the narrow trenches obviously do not provide enough information to allow this question of abandonment or continuity to be resolved.

Despite the present uncertainty, the possibility, however remote, of some continuity of this site into the Norse period, perhaps through the medium of a chapel, demands a new open-mindedness about the early development of the town which is worth expounding here. Kirkwall has traditionally three divisions: the Burgh was the area between Shore Street and the Papdale Burn, today centred on Bridge Street, while the Laverock extended southwards from the present Town Hall and along Victoria Street. The Burgh is regarded as the ancient core of the Norse market town and was controlled by the Earls, while the Laverock was the mediaeval ecclesiastical quarter and was under the sway of the Bishops. The rivalry between the Earls' and Bishops' parts of the town is perpetuated in the "Doonies" and "Uppies" of the Christmas and New Year's Day Ba' games. Between the Burgh and the Laverock was the Midtown, now represented by Albert Street and the northern part of Broad Street, although this name is not recorded before the 16th century. Beside the Papdale Burn at the margin of the original Burgh is the site of St Olaf's Chapel, which is identified as the church to which the relics of St Magnus were translated from Birsay in about 1117. This episode is related in the "Miracle Book of St Magnus" which forms chapter 57 in the standard text of Orkneyinga Saga: the relics were clearly stated to have been taken to "the church that was there" in Kirkwall, a market centre which at the time was not much built-up. The Cathedral was not begun until 1137; St Olaf's is the only known church older than it, and it would indeed point to the Burgh as the original Norse trading-centre. The possible early origins of a church here are hinted at by the name of the Papdale Burn itself.

It has been a tacit assumption that the development of the Laverock was consequent upon the foundation of the Cathedral. The possible presence of a pre-existing nucleus, Pictish and early Norse, therefore raises the intriguing possibility that Kirkwall may have developed out of two early centres, one represented by the St Olaf's site at the head of Tankerness Lane, a position at the very heart of the Laverock. The question cannot be taken further on present information.

Whatever the relationship of the Iron Age settlement to the mediaeval town, it appears that the waterfront along most of Broad Street lay a little further east than (admittedly on slender evidence) it is believed to do in both Victoria Street and Albert Street; that is to say, there was a broad subsidiary bay off the Oyce approximately between the positions of Tankerness House and the Castle. The Cathedral was established on the southern side of this little bay, close to the waterfront. When the wharfage was created, we can justifiably imagine a grand flight of steps leading up from the quayside to the west door. There is a tradition that ships were sailed "up to the steps of the Cathedral". Much more fun than arriving by motor-car!

THE STORY of the ORKNEY NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY and MUSEUM.

The Early Years. Like many country people, the people of Orkney have always shown great interest and knowledge in their history and in their environment, because this same environment has a considerable influence on their daily lives.

19th century Scotland was a time of great scientific enquiry, and it seems that in Orkney a need was felt for a society that could devote itself to the natural history of the County. It appears that considerable interest was shown in the founding of such a society, and, accordingly, on 28th December 1837 a public meeting was called in Stromness. In the Chair was the Rev. Dr. Charles Clouston of Sandwick, a notable amateur scientist who would hold the position of President of the Orkney Natural History Society for 48 years.

The Meeting agreed a draft constitution of which the main points were as follows:

1. The Society shall be called the Orkney Natural History Society, and shall have as its object the promoting of Natural Science by the support of a museum and by any other means in its power.
2. While special care shall be used to collect specimens for the museum of such objects in Natural History and Antiquities as Orkney can furnish the Society shall use all proper means to enrich its collections with specimens in Natural History and Antiquities from any other quarter.

The usual arrangements were made for the election, as Honorary Members, of "Gentlemen of reputation for Science or who have contributed handsomely to the Institution". We do not know how many attended this inaugural meeting, but the meeting of 29th July 1838 gives a nominal roll of a hundred and five members, from all over Orkney and beyond. The annual subscription was fixed at Two Shillings. In the early days, admission to the Museum Room was limited to committee members only, but later it was extended to include members and friends. Other visitors were required to pay sixpence each.

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, members were active in natural history and antiquarian studies, producing papers which were read to the Society and published in the local press. These included such titles as "Hints on the Geology of Orkney" by the Rev. John Gerard of South Ronaldsay, "The Ruins of Breckness: Ancient and Modern" by W.G.T. Watt of Skail, and "The Habits of Birds Frequenting Sule Skerry" by James Tomison. A selection was published by the Society in a volume entitled "Orkadian Papers" in 1905.

To house its exhibits, the Society rented, for two guineas a year, "Mrs Flett's large room", situated on an upper floor of Flett's Commercial Hotel, at the corner of Church Road and Victoria Street in Stromness. A woman was appointed to keep the room clean, her duties being strictly laid down, but later a man, James Sinclair, was appointed as Curator, at the salary of £3 per annum. When Captain Flett, the owner of the premises, gave notice that he was no longer prepared to renew the lease, the Society decided to acquire its own premises. At the same time the Stromness Town Council was also looking for premises, so the two bodies combined to erect the present building, opened in 1858, with the Museum upstairs and the Town Hall below. In 1929 the Town Council found new premises, and the Society took over the whole building, thus doubling the exhibition space. The association between the Town Council and the Orkney Natural History Society was a happy one, though in its initial stages both parties were hampered by shortage of money, and it was some time before the building was made fully fit for its purposes.

The Collections. From its early years the Society received many donations of specimens of a very wide-ranging character. The early Minutes record such items as:

- Model of an Eskimo sledge and dogs.
- Marble from the Parthenon at Athens.
- Gun screw from the Battle of Waterloo.
- Wooden door locks from North Ronaldsay.
- Dyewood from the wreck of an East Indiaman in North Ronaldsay.
- Four silver leaves from Napoleon's grave in St Helena.

In 1840 Captain Taylor of "Grenville Bay" donated "two bears' heads, plumbago, and coal specimen from Davis' Straits".

In its early years the Society included among its members two eminent Victorians - Hugh Miller, the celebrated geologist and author of "Footsteps of the Creator", who donated his important fossil, Homosteus milleri, to the Museum, and John Rae, the Orcadian Arctic explorer who discovered the fate of the Franklin Expedition. The Museum collections include their memorabilia.

The exhibition of birds, occupying the upper floor of the Museum, has been built up over the years from many donations, and is considered to be a particularly fine one. The first mention of the intention to form a collection of birds occurs in the Minutes of the Society in October 1839, when it was agreed "...to send to a proper bird-stuffer in the South what rare Orkney birds might be obtained, and also to make a vigorous effort to build up the Ornithological Department of the Museum with as much despatch as practicable". Various collections of eggs have been received, forming an almost complete collection of the eggs of Orkney breeding birds. Other valuable Natural History collections in the care of the Museum are the Magnus Spence Herbarium of Orkney Plants, the Robert Rendall Collection of Orkney Shells and Seaweeds, and the Lorimer Collection of Orkney Butterflies and Moths.

Collecting Policy. For many years the Society had sole responsibility for collecting in all aspects of Orkney history and pre-history, but this is no longer the case. The Society now sees its role as portraying the Natural and Maritime History of the islands - the areas in which its collections are strongest - complementing the archaeological displays at Tankerness House Museum in Kirkwall, and the Orkney Farm Museum in Birsay and Harray. In this, it has had the advice and help of Orkney Museums Service. By concentrating on fewer themes, these can be more deeply researched and better displayed.

The maritime history of Orkney is particularly rich. The Society has been fortunate over the years in being able to collect material on the Hudson's Bay Company whose ships called at Stromness for provisions and workers until the end of the 19th century. Stromness was also a regular port of recruitment for the Arctic whaling fleet, and one of the main Orkney centres of the 19th century herring fishing. Within recent years it has built up a display on the German High Seas Fleet, scuttled in Scapa Flow in 1919, which is currently of great interest to sub-aqua divers.

Over the years, the Society has built up an excellent archive of local history photographs. To the glass negatives of George Ellison and Willie Hourston have been added, through the good offices of the Orkney Library, collections of prints by R.H. Robertson and Tom Kent, giving a detailed and intimate view of Stromness in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the various aspects of Orkney maritime history. Two collections of photographs, including a fascinating journey through Stromness by an anonymous Victorian photographer, have been published.

Special exhibitions. Museum displays were static until 1966, when the Society began a regular programme of Summer Exhibitions on local history themes, such as "The Lighthouses of Orkney", "For Those in Peril" (Orkney Lifeboat History) and "Harvest of Silver" (the herring industry in Orkney). As well as greatly increasing visitor numbers, these have had the effect of systematically increasing the Museum's collections and store of knowledge.

Publications. Exhibitions have frequently been accompanied by informative booklets, adding the dimension of publishing to the Society's activities. A recent venture, in association with the Orkney Press, has been a "Guide to the Wrecks of Scapa Flow". "Reminiscences of an Orkney Parish", first republished by the Society in 1974, has been a perennial best-seller.

The Future. The Orkney Natural History Society has come a long way in the past 150 years - its willingness to adapt to new circumstances has ensured its survival where others have succumbed. The emergence of the Orkney Field Club and the Orkney Heritage Society, not to mention the activities of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Nature Conservancy Council, have allowed it to concentrate on the absorbing task of maintaining and developing its Museum. In this it has the close co-operation of the Orkney Islands Council, with whom it looks forward to a long and fruitful partnership into the 21st century.

Membership of the Orkney Natural History Society, a registered charity, is open to all - funds go directly towards maintaining the building and improving the care and display of exhibits. Current rates can be had on application to the Museum.

Peter Leith and David Anderson,
Orkney Natural History Society and Museum,
52 Alfred Street,
Stromness, Orkney.

EXHIBITIONS.

- 1966 Orkney Airmail Service.
- 1967 The 150th Anniversary of the Burgh of Stromness.
- 1968 Robert Rendall Commemorative Exhibition.
- 1969 Local Postcards.
- 1970 The 300th Anniversary of the Hudson's Bay Company.
- 1971 Old Stromness and Round About.
- 1972 The Orkney Croft.
- 1973 Sail and Steam.
- 1974 The Salving of the German Fleet.
- 1975 The Lighthouses of Orkney.
- 1976 Harvest of Silver.
- 1977 For Those in Peril.
- 1978 The German Fleet in Scapa Flow.
- 1979 Old Stromness - Photographs by R.H. Robertson.
- 1980 Stromness - Photographs by Tom Kent.
- 1981 Willie Hourston, Photographer.
- 1982 Days of Cord and Canvas.
- 1983 The Sunken Fleet in Scapa Flow.
- 1984 The Wreck of the "Svecia".
- 1985 The Sinking of the "Royal Oak".
- 1986 Eliza Fraser, Castaway.
- 1987 The Ice-Bound Whalers.

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Exhibition Booklets: The Orkney Croft
Sail and Steam
The Lighthouses of Orkney
The Salving of the German Fleet
Harvest of Silver - the herring fishing in Orkney
For Those in Peril - Orkney Lifeboat History

Reminiscences of an Orkney Parish by John Firth
Strommess - late 19th century photographs
Orkney Before the Great War - photographs by George Ellison
Guide to the Wrecks of Scapa Flow, compiled by David Ferguson
April 1987, The Ice-Bound Whalers, edited by James A. Troup
(the two latter in association with the Orkney Press)

THE ICE-BOUND WHALERS - edited by JAMES A. TROUP

As part of its 150th anniversary celebrations, the Orkney Natural History Society is publishing eye-witness accounts of a whaling tragedy which occurred in the same year as it was founded, in a volume entitled "The Ice-Bound Whalers".

The "Dee" and the "Grenville Bay" were among five British whalers locked in the Arctic ice during the winter of 1836-37. During the late spring and the summer of 1837 the ships limped back to Strommess harbour, manned by the remnants of their stricken crews. The diaries of crew members recall a grim struggle for survival as daily they witnessed the near destruction of their ships and the deaths of their companions from scurvy and frost-bite.

The account of the "Dee" was transcribed from the diary of David Gibb, and first published for his benefit in Aberdeen in 1837. The account of the "Grenville Bay" was written by two Deerness men, Robert Wilson and Thomas Twatt, and first published in "The Orcadian" in the late 1920s. It was brought to the notice of the Orkney Natural History Society by Miss Amelia Peterson of Polegate in Sussex, who sent a copy to the Museum with the following information:

"The following log was copied from the original writing in an old exercise book which belonged to my cousin Jessie S. Ritch with whom I lived. It is believed that the writer was her forebear.

"My cousin died in December, 1951. After making a copy of the log to which I felt entitled as her private books and papers came to me, I returned the log to her aunt Margaret Ritch as I felt it belonged to the Ritch side of her family in Orkney. We were cousins brought up as sisters, on our grandmother's side. "Margaret Ritch, her father's sister, died in July 1954. After I returned the book to her, she wrote me a letter saying, 'I remember one Deerness man living that came back from the ice. He was beadle in the church at the old school. I think it was the "Grenville Bay" they called the ship. He used to sleep in church and the precentor always kicked his desk to waken him.'"

Extract: ".....imagine one field of ice, of almost immeasurable extent, studded here and there with ice-burys towering to the clouds. In a small spot is fixed the "Dee", now reeling to this side and now to that, and every alternate roll attended with a crash, the sound of which more resembled the convulsive groans of an opening earthquake than the natural dashing of displaced water."

THE ICE-BOUND WHALERS, edited by James A. Troup, will be published on behalf of the Society by the Orkney Press, in April 1987, and will be available direct from the Museum.

Softback £4.95. Hardback £6.95. P. & P. 70p.

EDWIN MUIR and BJARNI KOLBEINSON.

It is remarkable enough that one small island, Wyre, should have produced two great poets, separated by seven centuries: Bjarni Kolbeinson and Edwin Muir. It is even more remarkable that they should have lived under the same roof.

Bjarni's father was an Orcadian chieftan based in Wyre, Kolbein Hruga, who so impressed himself on the islanders' imagination that he passed into legend as "Cubbie Roo", a giant whose exploits enthralled children at bedtime. As lord of Wyre, Kolbein Hruga would have lived at the chief farm, the Bu. And there, very likely, the young Bjarni spent his childhood. How marvellous it would have been, if autobiography had been a literary mode in the 13th century; for then we could have compared a poet's childhood of 700 years ago with the childhood of Edwin Muir, so vividly described in his Autobiography ...

Bjarni's most famous poem is The Lay of the Jomsvikings. He entered the church and became Bishop of Orkney. It was in his time that Earl Rognvald Kolson was canonised.

When Edwin Muir was two years old, his father moved from the farm Folly in Deerness to the Bu in Wyre. It was there that the small boy began to store in his unconscious mind the symbols which he deployed with such power and purity in the poetry he began to write in middle-age, in Europe.

Those two poets must both have lived in the Bu - not, strictly speaking, "under the same roof", for many a roof would have come and gone over the heads of the farming folk who stayed there continuously over twenty generations, family after family. But the changing buildings must have been rooted in the same foundations. And when they looked from the door on a quiet summer morning they would have seen "the black islands lying thick around", and a ship - either a longship or a steamer - that passed so slowly it seemed to be fixed on the horizon rim.

I don't know of any other case in all the history of literature of two poets sharing a hearth-stone and a view, with such a long stretch of time between.

The kind of poetry they wrote was certainly very different.

G.M.B.

MAGNUS MAGNUSSON IN EDAY

Ladies and Gentlemen. Welcome to this very auspicious occasion. I hope that you have noticed the weather. I had a word with a couple of friends yesterday (not Messrs Fish and McCaskill; it was two older friends, Messrs Thor and Odin) and asked them to guarantee nice weather this morning. I got it half right I hadn't realised that they weren't on Summer time yet. An hour ago it was just grand. I must say, the organisation involved getting you all here, and all these cars, is to me a notable triumph of mind over the kind of "natter" that was going on in the shop. But there will be an opportunity for me, I understand, to speak a little more after lunch to thank the island properly and to congratulate the island on this tremendous enterprise; but here and now perhaps we might just take the opportunity to think a little bit about this particular enterprise, the centre-piece of this Heritage Walk.

There are no signs that the Vikings broke into this monument as they did at Maeshowe. That achievement was left, not to my forefathers, but to the forefathers of Mrs Joy. It was her great-great-grandfather, Mr Robert Hebden, "The Bolter" as he is called, who, in 1857, when he was infected by the Victorian delight in antiquities, got Mr Farrow to come and help him to excavate this tomb. Well, "excavate" is a polite word for what they actually did. They broke into it pretty ruthlessly. If you imagine your breakfast boiled egg and in your right hand a good knife, and you go "whhchht" that's what they did to this tomb. They broke into it and they examined it to their satisfaction and then it was left. It silted up with stone and rubble, dead sheep and sludge and all kinds of other things for years and years.

Well now! Mrs Joy has made full amends for her forefathers, more than full amends. I don't think we can be too grateful to Mrs Joy for the immense generosity of the outright gift of this and other monuments in her lands, to the Islands Council; not just this monument here which forms the centrepiece of this tremendous enterprise, but the Standing Stone of Setter, the tallest isolated Standing Stone in the whole of Orkney, and the associated tombs. Now, last year the tomb was properly excavated, led by Mrs Jackie Marwick who "married into Rousay" as they say, and a full record was made by the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments, the Ancient Monuments mob down in Edinburgh of which I am Chairman. They gave their blessing and a little bit of help as well and then the broken tomb was repaired, reconstructed most elegantly by Alistair Scott and his son, Michael. Long before they invented "do-it-yourself", every islander had to be a D.I.Y. expert, and Alistair Scott is one of those people who can turn his hand to anything, who's become a skilled mason of antiques just by having to do it. He used imported grey Walliwall stone, much to the amusement, I suspect, of the local Scarfies who must have thought there was plenty of stone here. In fact, this was done in grey to differentiate between the red stone used by the original builders 4000 years ago. Now, laymen like me will know, "this is where the mending started" and the coping has this acrylic dome which allows light into it and keeps sheep from committing suicide.

And so, ladies and gentlemen, it's an enormous pleasure for me to be asked here to perform this little opening ceremony. I call it "a little opening ceremony", but I believe it is a very big opening ceremony, because I do believe that what is happening here at Eday is going to be a beacon for other local communities like Eday to follow. So it is with great pride and humility that I now formally declare the new Vinquoy open.

Financially, we have had a reasonable year, helped greatly by the income from the Marwick Bequest. During the past twelve months monies have been expended on employing a Computer Expert to set up the new computer which has been purchased with the help of the H.I.D.B. and the Orkney Islands Council. This, ofcourse, is money well spent, and once the system is fully operational then the archaeological records gathered by Dr Lamb will be stored, and ofcourse can be updated with relative ease.

Over the next twelve months, we would hope to make ends meet, although ofcourse we will have to continue to monitor expenditure closely. It has, however, been encouraging to see some new members over the past year, and hopefully further members can be recruited during the next twelve months. An ordinary membership costs only £3 per annum and this can be paid by completing the attached form and returning it to me.

BRODIE ROSS
Treasurer

To your BANK:

Your Address:.....

Date:

Please pay to The Royal Bank of Scotland plc, 1 Victoria Street, Kirkwall, (83-24-07) for the credit of Orkney Heritage Society (A/c No. 00 233 290), the sum of £3.00 (three pounds sterling) on 1st June, 1987, and annually thereafter.

thereafter.
This cancels all previous orders payable to the Society.

Signature.....

Name

Account No.