

FEATURE

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Skara Brae, part of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney
UNESCO World Heritage Site by the Bay of Skail

The timeless secrets of Skara Brae

OLDER THAN THE GREAT PYRAMIDS,
IT LAY HIDDEN FOR CENTURIES
BEFORE EXTREME WEATHER
SUDDENLY UNEARTHED IT. BUT
COULD MYSTERIOUS SKARA BRAE
ON ORKNEY BE LOST ONCE MORE?

SITUATED off the northern tip of Scotland and on a latitude that is only 50 miles south of Greenland, Orkney is cursed with what the Scottish antiquarian Hugh Marwick deemed “one of the vilest” climates “under heaven”.

As one online tourist guide to the islands notes, “Travel to and from Orkney remains, to this day, at the mercy of the weather”.

Before the arrival of modern satellite technology, fog could – and frequently would – ground visiting air and sea craft for days. And a lingering and unsurmountable impediment to travel, and the most common disruptor of the islands’ ferry services, continues to be the storms that sweep in from the Atlantic and across the North Sea on the more inclement months of the year.

Months filled with days when the sun deigns to be visible for a brief few hours at best and leave the islands in near complete darkness are not uncommon.

Even on the mildest of summer days in June, when by contrast there is almost continual daylight, Orkney is rarely free from Force 3 or 4 gusts. Few

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► visitors, having taken the two-hour ferry ride from Scrabster on the mainland, would not agree with Magnus Spence, who in *The Climate of Orkney* (1908) concluded that: “No other region in Great Britain can compare with it for the violence and frequency of its winds”.

Since Orkney is largely treeless too, there’s not much by way of natural shelter to avoid the winds. Bracing is perhaps the politest word to use.

IT was, indeed, a severe wind that is supposed to have revealed the ruins of a prehistoric settlement on Mainland, the largest of Orkney’s islands. For centuries the village had lain completely buried under a sandy mound known as Skara Brae (or Skerrabra to the Orcadians) on the shore of the Bay of Skail. But its long slumber came to end one stormy night in February 1850.

That evening, gales and the raging waves of the Atlantic swept along the western shoreline, causing the sandbank to collapse, ripping turf off the upper knoll and generally leaving gaping holes where there was once solid ground.

In this instant, part of the island’s Stone Age past abruptly broke into a Victorian steam-driven present, as sections of Neolithic dwellings were left poking out into the air.

Or so the story goes. Contemporary meteorological reports seem to imply that there was nothing especially untoward about the weather for the dates in question. But then random heavy winds and crashing waves are what pass for normal on Orkney. Others argue that the ancient site was known long before 1850 and point to accounts of prehistoric discoveries on the island from at least 1769.

Still, whatever the truth of the story, the local landowner, William Graham Watt, the 7th Laird of Skail, initiated a series of excavations of the site in the 1860s. These included one led by South Durham MP James Farrer, dismissed in one history of Skara Brae as “a notorious but sadly unmethodical antiquary”, and another by the rather more meticulous George Petrie, an Orcadian antiquarian who was to present a detailed paper of his findings to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1867.

What they unearthed, though, was a cluster of four circular drystone wall dwellings dating from between 3200 and 2000BC and kitted out with astonishing, and remarkably well preserved, interior furnishings – beds, chairs, shelves and a hearth – and a plethora of tools, pottery, beads and pendants, all fashioned, like the buildings themselves, entirely in stone.

After all the initial excitement generated by Skara Brae, whose “dateless secrets” were even celebrated in verse, interest in the ruins seems to have waned after Petrie’s time. No formal excavations would be carried out again until the 1920s. What spurred this renewed archaeological interest in Skara Brae was seemingly yet another bout of violent weather.

Fearing that the ruins could be lost to the waves and the winds, a sea wall was erected to protect the site in 1925 and the Australian archaeologist Vere Gordon



Top: one of the circular Neolithic dry-stone dwellings and furnishings. Above: Skara Brae from the south, with hut 8 in the foreground. Right: site map



No other region in Great Britain can compare with it for the violence and frequency of its winds

Childe was appointed to conduct fresh surveys, coming across a further four dwellings in the process, taking the village’s total to eight.

Childe was fascinated by what made the inhabitants of Skara Brae abandon it at some time around 2000BC. Not only had these people seemingly walked away from their fine stone homes, they appeared to have left a good portion of their most valued possessions behind as well. The presence of the latter, he suggested, was “evidence of a hasty flight”. Others, in due course, would suggest that one feasible explanation for just such a flight could have been another earlier meteorological disaster. A storm, perhaps every bit as fierce as the one that later brought the village to light, laying waste to the island.

While such a theory has symmetry on its side, it receives short shrift from

modern-day archaeologists. Far from making a rapid exit, it is now believed that the islanders probably left gradually, and over many years. This move was most likely sanctioned by the evolving nature of their tribal society and shifts in the landscape due to coastal erosion.

Skara Brae itself originally stood some way inland before scouring tides claimed the ground before it. The weather, nevertheless, poses an ever-present danger to Skara Brae. Rising sea levels and increasingly violent storms connected to climate change could now wipe it away just as swiftly as the winds that unearthed it all those years ago.

Atlas of Vanishing Places: The Lost Worlds as They Were and as They are Today by Travis Elborough, is published by White Lion Publishing, priced £22

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VANISHING PLACES: SCOTTISH LOCATIONS THAT HAVE DISAPPEARED

ST KILDA

A community existed on St Kilda for at least 4,000 years, sustained largely by dense colonies of gannets, fulmars and puffins for food, feathers and oil.

Yet, by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, crippling shortages, a succession of crop failures, deadly diseases brought in by tourism, coupled with emigration and the upheaval of the First World War, left the St Kilda economy irreparably broken.

With their way of life no longer viable, the remaining 36 residents chose to be evacuated from the island on August 29, 1930.

Today, St Kilda is home to almost one million seabirds, including the UK's largest colony of Atlantic puffins, as well as its own unique subspecies of wren and mice, the latter double the size of a British field mouse.

THE 'VIKING SHIPYARD' AT RUBH AN DUNAIN IN SKYE

The isolated peninsula of Rubh an Dunain on Skye's south-west coast has several archaeological sites dating from the Neolithic period onwards. Among them is a man-made canal linking an inland loch to the sea – converting it into a dry dock and “shipyard”. In 2009, archaeologists discovered boat timbers dating to the 12th

century, a stone-built quay and a system used to maintain a constant water level in the loch.

The shallow waterway would have allowed for boats, such as birlinns, to exit at high tide. It is believed this was an important site for maritime activity – perhaps as a factory for producing or repairing vessels – spanning the Viking and later periods of Scottish clan rule.

In 2017, Historic Environment Scotland (HES) officially designated it as an historic monument.

BOTHWELLHAUGH, LANARKSHIRE

The former mining village of Bothwellhaugh stood on the banks of the Clyde, built in 1884 for workers employed by the Bent Colliery Company and their families. It was known as “the Pailis”, a fond colloquialism for the Hamilton Palace Colliery.

By 1911, the colliery's initial crew of 14 miners had swelled to a thriving community of 2,500 people. There was a church, two schools, a miners' welfare club and 450 homes. The coal produced here was high quality and sought after for industrial use, particularly as fuel for steam trains, with much of it exported to Argentinian railway companies.

The Flying Scot's record run to London is reputed to have used Pailis coal.

After the pit closed in 1959 – the last of the tenement rows were demolished in 1965 – those who worked and lived here moved on. While some were rehoused nearby in Bellshill, Motherwell and Hamilton, others



Above: St Kilda islanders just before evacuation in August 1930

Above right: Bothwellhaugh mining village in Lanarkshire
Right: Glasgow Central opened in 1879, its eight lines running through what had once been the heart of Grahamston

emigrated to Australia, Canada and the US. Strathclyde Country Park was officially opened in 1978. The Clyde was rerouted and the Calder Pond incorporated into the new Strathclyde Loch. The pit's bing was used to build the M74 motorway on the other side of the river.

The only remaining building is Raith Cottage, where it is hoped a heritage centre can be opened to share the history of the site.



ROSAL, SUTHERLAND

The outlines of more than 70 ruined buildings sit on a hillside overlooking Ben Loyal and the wild, remote lands of Sutherland. This was once Rosal, a small township in Strathnaver that, until 1814, housed a close-knit Highland community.

Elizabeth, Countess of Sutherland, who owned the land, sought to maximise financial opportunities and, with meat in high demand for the growing population in the south,

sheep farming promised far greater profits than the tenants could offer in rent.

The residents of Rosal were forced to leave, their homes and livelihoods swept away by the Clearances which transformed the cultural landscape across large swathes of the Highlands. The estate factor, Patrick Sellar, undertook his work with a merciless efficiency: he was tried for culpable homicide following the death of an elderly woman at nearby Badinloskin.



Archaeologist Horace Fairhurst carried out an excavation in 1962, recording 70 structures at Rosal, including longhouses, barns, outhouses, stackyards and corn-drying kilns, as well as the rigs and furrows where crops were grown.

GRAHAMSTON, GLASGOW

The village of Grahamston first appeared on maps of Glasgow around 1680, growing over the next 200 years from a row of thatched cottages into a commercial and industrial hub.

At its peak, there was close to 2,000 people and almost 300 businesses, said to include well known names such as philanthropist William Quarrier.

Before Glasgow Central Station was built, trains would arrive at Bridge Street on the south of the River Clyde. As the Industrial Revolution gathered pace during the 1870s, plans for a new rail terminus were proposed.

With the fate of Grahamston sealed, its residents – who lived between Union Street and Hope Street – were decanted and the buildings demolished. Glasgow Central opened in 1879, its eight platforms and eight lines running through what had once been the heart of Grahamston.

The western side of the village, including St Columba's Church, remained intact until the early 1900s, when the remainder was demolished to make way for a station extension. Today, only two buildings remain: Duncan's Temperance Hotel, now the Rennie Mackintosh Hotel, in Union Street, and the Grant Arms on Argyle Street.

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