

The Dark Isles

David and Ewan Whyte take a tour of Scotland's Orkney Isles to uncover tales of Vikings, treasure and golf's most ancient past.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID AND EWAN WHYTE

There's a popular saying on these islands: if you scratch its surface, Orkney bleeds archaeology.

Such is the passion for all things prehistoric that locals are loathed to let on that they have discovered something at the bottom of the garden. They know Heritage Scotland will soon be around, armed to the teeth with brushes, buckets and trowels to dig up yet another section of Orkney's incredible primeval past.

We had come to Scotland's Dark Isles to enjoy its golf but it was soon apparent that we would find much, much more. It seems the Isles of Orkney were five thousand years ago the centre of the known universe. Orkney seemed to be the New York City of Neolithic life.

Why were these relatively remote islands off the north coast of Scotland so popular with our prehistoric predecessors?

We met with Nick Card, director of a dig at the Ness of Brodgar, a site that has set the archaeological world alight.

"We need to turn the map of Britain upside down when we consider the Neolithic," says Card. "London may be the cultural hub of Britain today, but 5,000 years ago, Orkney was the centre of the British Isles. Most of this mound was manmade," gestures Nick as he points at a hole in the ground chock full of eager archeologists scraping away at the dark Orkney soil.

"The trench we've excavated so far is probably only 10 percent yet what's here. There's nothing else like it from the Neolithic period in the British Isles nor indeed that of Northern Europe."

What they are unearthing is a massive temple complex that is as big and as important as Stonehenge. Radiocarbon dating shows that the prehistoric complex

on the Ness was in use for around 1,000 years from at least 3,200BC to 2,300BC. And the finds have been spectacular - decorated stonework, polished stone tools and decorated pottery all alluding to the sophistication of our ancestors.

"If they were so advanced," I asked Nick, "Is there any evidence of prehistoric golf?" "We have discovered some strange objects called carved stone balls," he tells me and then deadpans, "You could be led to believe that they are the prototype of the modern golf ball."

I'd like to think so. But there is some evidence that Orkney was indeed at the forefront of golf in Scotland, perhaps not Neolithic but maybe more Elizabethan. The next morning we were up with the gulls and sailing for the Island of Westray. Westray is fittingly called the Queen of the Isles, the most fertile of all 70 of Orkney's islands and



SOUTH RONALDSAY

While North Ronaldsay had been unreachable, the South is. Interestingly, it is at the opposite end of the Orkney Isles located below Mainland. There, you will find an Italian Chapel built by Italian prisoners during the Second World War, as a testament to peace. South Ronaldsay Golf Club in St Margaret's Hope is reckoned to be

the most challenging of all the golf courses on these islands. Built by locals with 9-holes and 18 tees, it is raked by wind with lots of trouble in the form of a burn that somehow appears on most holes. Nearby, The Tomb of Eagles is another neolithic site well worth visiting - if you can shimmy through the entrance on a tea-tray on wheels.



SANDAY, SANDAY

Further north, and to the final frontier.

There were only a couple of courses more to discover but our flight out to North Ronaldsay ended in disappointment when the pilot turned round to tell us we were going back - it was too misty to land on the most northerly of Orkney's isles.

But we did manage to get to the outlying island of Sanday, which is surrounded by beautiful bays lapped by clear, turquoise waters. To get there, either ferry or fly from Kirkwall Airport. As far as check-in, baggage handling and boarding are concerned, it's a one-man operation. Loganair operates a vital service to these remote islands supplying them with everyday essentials. The company has been operating twin-otter, inter-island flights since the 1960's.

The flight to Sanday is short but offers a great chance to appreciate the beauty of these islands from above. The crew at Sanday Airport is yet another homemade outfit with the airport manager, Jim's wife, offering fire-

fighting support.

Just two miles up the road is Sanday Golf Club where a small reception committee was awaiting our arrival. Sanday's links are 100 percent natural and tended by sheep with the greens roughly mowed by members. These are the conditions golf's earliest enthusiasts encountered and this is how we can imagine this wonderful game of golf got going. The greens are protected from the livestock by barbed-wire fences which themselves form a tricky hazard.

I wonder if all eight of Sanday's members are adept at pitching and chipping though they told me if you hit the fence or post, there was no penalty - unless of course it bounced the wrong way. Putting on these rough and ready greens requires a somewhat firmer stroke than we're used to on today's silky smooth surfaces. So that was our round at Sanday and there are few golf courses in the world that can offer such an authentic experience.



skerries. The other things Westray is famous for are having the shortest commercial flight in the world from Westray to Papa Westray, taking a total of two-minutes, and the longest golf hole, at least in Scotland. At 731 yards from the centre of the tee to the centre of green, the 3rd at Westray Golf Club is a Par 6, one of only a handful in the world and with even an exceptional drive, it is usually another two hefty blows to get close to the green. I took an eight but into a stiff wind and felt relatively happy.

Westray Golf Club has only 21 members and two of them attend to the green keeping. Bill, our host for the day, takes care of the greens and his counterpart, Bertie, the fairways. They were all doing their bit, or so they say, to make Westray one of the best 9-hole courses on the islands. To be fair, the links on Westray close to the sea are as good as any you'll find on the mainland.

After the round, we stopped at nearby Noltland Castle, which overlooks the golf course. It dates from the 16th century, built by Gilbert Balfour of Fife who was connected with the court of Mary, Queen of Scots. An intriguing tale emerged from Jason, the neighbouring farmer who was kind enough to show us around his

cheesemaking factory.

"History tells us," Jason goes on with his mild, South African accent, "that Mary, Queen of Scots returned to Scotland from France in 1560 and was passionate about golf. The Balfours and other Scots noble families sailed to Westray in the late 1500's to attend a wedding and became stranded due to bad weather. So what did they do?" asks Jason with a smug twinkle in his eye, continuing, "They spent their spare time playing golf. And this makes Westray perhaps the oldest golf course in the world!"

I enjoyed his tale but Jason's dates seemed a bit out. There is evidence of the game being played at least 50 years earlier in the City of Perth in the form of the first recorded purchase of golf clubs in 1502 from a Perth bow-maker for none other than James IV, Mary's grandfather. It is clear that the Scottish nobles of the time were very keen on the game and most likely would have played upon the fine linksland of Westray. So, while it is perhaps not 'the oldest in the world', it is indeed one of the earliest courses in Scotland and certainly one of the oldest still in continuous play today.

Getting back to the 'Mainland' as they call the largest of Orkney's 70-odd islands, Orkney Golf Club sits above the town of Kirkwall commanding airy prospects and catching most of the wind that these islands capitalise on with world-leading renewable energy projects. It looks fairly innocuous

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Orkney Cathedral views of Kirkwall; Scara Brae; South Ronaldsay Golf Club; Orkney Seascapes.

but Orkney Golf Club is quite testing.

It is deceptively long on several holes and when the wind blows as it inevitably does, it is twice as challenging. This is a community course and well-attended by juniors, ladies and gentlemen alike, a great asset to the area. We came off feeling thoroughly tested and keen to get into town for a post-round pint.

The town of Kirkwall offers a colourful harbour and a maze of flagstoned streets and alleys that are fascinating to stroll along. Kirkwall feels positively cosmopolitan with dozens of excellent restaurants, shops and pubs huddled together in the narrow lanes. Being surrounded by sea, Orkney does offer an array of incredibly fresh seafood. But it is equally if not more so famous for beef. The best restaurant we discovered was just out of town called, The Forveran, where locally sourced meat is served simply so as to present its wonderful, fresh flavours. You should also try some mutton from North Ronaldsay where the sheep have adapted to eating seaweed giving their meat a distinct flavour.

Visually, the town of Kirkwall is dominated by St Magnus Cathedral, the most northerly cathedral in Britain established by the Viking Earls who ruled these islands a thousand years ago. We took a tour with custodian Fran Hollinrake who guided us to the roof top balcony to spy over the town, a tour not for the faint-hearted mainly because of the steep climb up. But the views are more than enough compensation.

We were on the road again, this time heading for Stromness Golf Club. En route we discovered even more neolithic sites. Skara Brae is by far the best preserved of its kind in Europe. This late Stone Age village dates back 5,000 years. It was only inhabited for around 600 years before a severe sandstorm sealed it away. In 1850 a similar storm revealed this time capsule to the world complete with storage shelves and beds. Nearby is the Ring of Brodgar erected between 2500 BC and 2000 BC, the last of the great Neolithic monuments built on the Ness.

St Andrews, Pebble Beach, Pine Valley - they're all visually spectacular golf courses as we all know. But my heart has a soft spot for the stunning scenery at Stromness. This imaginative, zesty little test of 4,500 yards consists of an intriguing design that turns with every puff of wind presenting a completely different set of challenges

OPENING PICTURE (PREVIOUS PAGE): The Dalat at 1200 Country Club & Private Estate.

LEFT PAGE: Dalat Palace Golf Club and the construction site.

each time you play. And we were so taken with the place we played it three times. Stromness town is equally charming with its narrow lanes leading down to the sea; there are lovely art galleries, shops and restaurants all worth exploring.

I'm sure our ancestors found a way to brew some warming alcoholic drinks for those cold Orcadian nights and this tradition continues today at the nearby (almost everything is within 30-minutes reach of each other) Orkney Brewery. Built in an old school house where you sit at desks to enjoy lunch complete with some sterling craft beer such as Skull Spitter, which is named after Torsion Einarsson, the 7th Viking Earl of Orkney.

On the subject of drink, one of Scotland's most celebrated whiskies is produced at The Highland Park Distillery just on the outskirts of Kirkwall about (you guessed it) a half hour drive away. Interestingly, now that a geographic sense has been set, it is well to note for whisky lovers the world over, that the name of this whisky does not refer to the area of Scotland known as The Highlands, but rather to the fact that the distillery was founded on an area called 'High Park'

“On the subject of drink, one of Scotland's most celebrated whiskies is produced at The Highland Park Distillery just on the outskirts of Kirkwall about a half hour drive away.”

distinguished from a lower area nearby.

An all rounded whisky, The Highland Park is known also to supply its malt to form The Famous Grouse blend (the other part being The Macallan). This year, they launched The Highland Park Ice Edition which has been awarded the Ultimate Spirits Challenge's (USC) highest award of excellence in the single malt Scotch category, achieving an amazing score of 99 out of 100 to earn the accolade of Chairman's Trophy.



THE HIGHLAND PARK ICE EDITION

Beautifully packaged in a bespoke blue tinted glass to reflect dazzling ice and evoke the distinctive crisp coolness of the Ice Realm, the bottle is encased in a mountain shaped, oak wood cradle accompanied with a wooden stopper. To explain the mythical tale around the Ice Edition, a booklet featuring a specially commissioned watercolour work by Scottish artist Andy Bowman to recount the story of the realm of the Ice Giants and their colourful battle against the Gods to rule the world accompanies this single malt whisky collection.

With a special worldwide release of only 30,000 bottles, only 20 bottles are available in Singapore at S\$400 (before GST) in selected whisky bars and specialist retail stores.

