

Transcript of Podcast 044: Orkney Islands

{Intro. A live folk band playing a jig-like tune}

{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a fortnightly series looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Brit with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'whys' behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

So, I've been in Glasgow for a couple of weeks now, and it's been pretty calm and casual, no issues. My main observation is that immediate neighbour resembles Boo Radley. In the sense that I know they exist because there's occasionally a light on in the flat but I've never seen them, don't know even who lives there, how many, etc, and people keep knocking on their door with no reply.

My flatmate moved in on Thursday and seems to quite like it, definitely in terms of size and ambience, but at the time of typing she's not really had enough time on her own in the area to really decide if she likes it a lot or not. She is quite happy though that we're in delivery range of a West African takeaway. Yes their jollof is better than mine, albeit also a slightly different texture.

We did rearrange the living room on Sunday, which is important to note as now we both have a proper table to do our work on. It does mean we no longer have a dining table, but the layout of the flat isn't conducive to both of us sitting around a dining table anyway. I still haven't got around to looking into building temporary walls around the table to create a better audio experience for my recordings, but that's something to work on going forward.

I've surprisingly not done much exploring yet around the local area; indeed my flatmate has already done more than me on that score. I have at least now been to Pollock Country Park, which is pretty big, although I didn't see any of the Highland Cows that are supposed to inhabit it, I've also done the parkrun at Queen's Park, which isn't as flat as I had first thought, but still flatter than Sheffield Castle's Parkrun, although that's not hard. And yes, on my second attendance I did do it barefoot and it was nowhere near as bad underfoot as I'd feared, though I'm not sure how it's going to be heading into autumn, with pathways scattered with fallen twigs and buds. We'll see.

For personal (but not personal to me) reasons, I was away from the flat over the past weekend; I took a night in a backpacker hostel in Edinburgh. True to my brand, I spent more on craft beer than I did on my accommodation, and I met up with my friend Clazz, who you'll hear more from later. Earlier on the Saturday though, I wandered around Falkirk, finally visiting The Kelpies which I missed when we passed through on our Hike Across Great Britain two years ago because they're kind of 'out of the way' compared with the rest of, well, Falkirk. One of my future podcast episodes will be on myths & legends and I'm going to talk more about them then, but in brief they're a couple of huge metallic horses heads that represent Scottish water spirits, who often took the form of horses when they mythered people. They're part of a larger landscaped park, including a couple of lakes, a wetland sanctuary, a large children's play area, and a canal basin, about two miles out of the town centre. And, in fact, two miles from anywhere except a motorway and Falkirk's football ground. Which is why we didn't see them on The Walk.

I'll probably also do a pod on Roman history up here in general, as it's a fascinating topic, featuring of course the Walls, but it's worth noting Falkirk is the most northerly the Romans ever officially reached in the world, in the sense it's the site of the most northerly military and residential settlements. There's speculation and limited evidence of at least trade, if not some military ventures, further north, but in terms of settled and/or conquered provinces, this is as far north as they got. It's ... a very different climate to coastal Italy, even two thousand years

ago, that's all I'm saying for now.

Of course that doesn't mean there isn't history further north, just that it's much less attested. This was the land of the Picts, a people about whom we as yet know so little about as to not even be sure who they were, what they called themselves, or what language they spoke, let alone anything much about their lifestyle and culture. Of course we can make guesses, but there's very little evidence of anything concrete. Maybe that'll change over time.

Going even further north, well, then we're onto the edges of European civilisation, and the vast, cold, seas that separate the islands on the edge of the continent with the islands on the edge of North America. One such group of islands are Orkney, and it kind of makes sense to talk about them in this podcast, given that it's where my last trip was, at the start of June, so it's high in my mind. Plus of course my niche is 'places less well known'. The North of Scotland has seen an uplift in tourism recently, especially as a result of Covid meaning Brits have been unable to go abroad so they're exploring places in the UK. That said, although the more remote areas are seeing more traffic, the majority of visitors seem to be headed either to the North Coast 500 road trip (a loop around the far north of Scotland that goes through some spectacular scenery), or to 'nearby' islands in the Inner Hebrides like Skye and Mull. Even now, places like the Outer Hebrides and Orkney feel just slightly 'too far' for many people.

The islands that make up the Orkney archipelago lie about 15km off the very northeast coast of Scotland, just north of Dunnet Head (the most northerly point of Great Britain). Indeed they provide the only reason really to go to John O'Groats – there's a passenger ferry from there to the island of South Ronaldsay. Cars (and, in this case, me) generally go to the capital (Kirkwall) from Aberdeen on a 6-hour ferry that occasionally continues on to Shetland, though there's also a ferry from Stromness to Scrabster, near Thurso, that only takes 90 minutes but Thurso is a long way up Scotland; the train even to Inverness takes 4 hours.

The island group covers an area of just under 1,000 square kilometres, and are about 80km end to end. There's about 70 islands in total, but the majority are very small and uninhabited. About 22,000 people live on the islands, though the main town and centre of the Orkney Islands is Kirkwall, towards the eastern side of the largest island (known as Mainland), and has 9,300 people in it. This suggests the population is a bit more spread out than you might expect.

I went there with the knowledge that I was always going to be comparing and contrasting with the Outer Hebrides (more on which in Podcast 22), although in truth I'd say there were far more differences than similarities; there's a bit of a shared history but for the most part they have a much more distinctive vibe. A better comparison might be to the Shetland archipelago, a further 80km north, but I've never been there. When I mentioned Shetland to some of the people on Orkney, very few of them had ever been there and there didn't seem to be any real desire to go either – 'it's great if you like oil and sheep, but apart from that there's nothing there' was the general consensus.

Much of what the two island groups (Orkney and the Outer Hebrides) share is a history. Both have been inhabited for over seven thousand years, and both have very strong Viking / Norse heritage – the flag of Orkney is, like the flags of South Uist and Barra over in the Western Isles, based on the Nordic Cross so familiar from the Scandinavian flags.

But let's go back to Neolithic times. I always wonder about the pre-Roman peoples of Western Europe. Looking through the lens of a 21st century human, I always wondered why so many of these ancient civilisations decided to base themselves on the very edge of the land, in what seem to us wild, desolate, and, above all, wet and cold places. If you had the whole of the British Islands to base yourself in, why would you choose the places with the worst, coldest, windiest, wettest, weather? Evidently though the climate was warmer in those days, plus of course much more 'life' happened by sea rather than land – travel, trade, etc, and in many ways Orkney would have been a very convenient place for sea travel across much of the Northern Atlantic – this is certainly how the Vikings later viewed them. In terms of trade routes, Orkney is at a crossroads between Scandinavia, the mainland of Great Britain, and the islands of the North Atlantic to the west and north.

There's evidence of people living there as early as the 3000s BC. Now, when I was a kid, when I could still count my years on my fingers, one of my great aunts gave me for Christmas one year a child-friendly

cartoon/picture book all about a historic site called 'Skara Brae', and for years it was the only thing I ever really knew about Orkney. It turns out it's one of the most important and largest tourist sites on the whole of the archipelago, and often sees cruise ship passengers loaded up into coaches for the 16 mile journey across Mainland; the car park at Skara Brae is pretty big and the site is, compared with the rest of the islands, rammed with people.

Except when I went, obviously, because of Covid.

It's not a huge place, but for what it is, it's pretty spectacular. It's on the western edge of Mainland, and is what remains of a neolithic village, and was re-discovered accidentally after a storm washed away some of the of the cliffside, revealing stone foundations. These were later protected from further storms and excavated, revealing 10 sunken 'round houses' built with flagstones. Although many of the items and trinkets they would have contained had been plundered or washed away over the years, what remains is a pretty well-preserved framework. Remember, this site is further back in history from the Pompeii deluge than we are from Pompeii - these are amongst the oldest houses in Europe, and only a little younger than ancient sites like **Ħaġar Qim** (hadjar'eem) in Malta and several sites in Turkey in age.

Doubtless the site was much larger when it was built. We, well geologists anyway, know the land has shifted somewhat over the millennia, and while always a coastal village, the nearby bay didn't exist and presumably a considerable part of the village has been unknowingly lost to the sea over time. That said, what remains is still pretty impressive, especially given its age. Note that you can't walk 'into' the houses; rather you go around the edge of them, on top, kind of overlooking them and are able to peer into them.

What we don't know is when or why it was abandoned, nor do we know a lot about the people who lived here. We do know they were heavily dependent on the sea, with evidence of both a seafood diet and a considerable use of oceanic products like shells and seaweed. We also know they used the interior of the island for agriculture and, just as the people there do these days, farmed cows and sheep.

Wikipedia tells me that Skara Brae is also the site of the earliest known record of *Pulex irritans*, the Human Flea, in Europe. I don't know how I feel about this.

A few miles SE of Skara Brae are a couple of other neolithic sites of importance, although there's no evidence of any direct connection between any of them. The most important two are both described as 'hengese', a word most of you probably associate with Stonehenge, down in southern England. And yes, it's the same form. A 'henge' is a particular kind of structural layout - think of it as being a defined circle of mostly flat land, surrounded by a ditch. Although the circle doesn't have to contain anything of any importance, the most common and notable tend to contain large stones or wooden structures.

The smaller of the two is at Stenness (pron 'stane-is'), where archaeological evidence suggests 12 stones stood in a circle. 4 stones remain, standing around 5m tall, with a slightly taller stone standing at the start of the path into it. The site dates from around 3100 BC, so contemporaneous with Skara Brae. This makes it the oldest stone circle in the British Isles, and thus amongst the oldest still surviving of its type in the world.

The site is just south of a point where two lochs meet, and the modern road up to Skara Brae goes over the channel on a small bridge. The land it stands on isn't particularly high compared to the water level either, so it's not as if the site had a commanding view of the surrounding environment. The reason for construction is unknown.

What is also unknown is whether whatever usage the site had ceased when a larger stone circle was constructed a couple of km north, on the other side of the loch channel. The Ring of Brodgar is believed to have originally contained 60 stones, of which 27 still exist. Unusually, these form pretty much a perfect circle, a fact which probably would cause the producers of the Ancient Aliens TV Series to orgasm in their underpants. It's just over 100m in diameter, which makes it one of the largest in the whole of the British Isles. It's on slightly raised ground overlooking the lochs, and in the empty evening air, even on a summer's evening, still exuded a sense of awe and mystery.

No-one quite knows when the Ring of Brodgar was constructed, although the latest theory is for a date around

the end of the 2000s BC. This would make it several hundred years after Skara Brae was believed to have been abandoned, which suggests that while there's no connection between the two, certainly there was settled life on the islands pretty much constantly over the period, so when people ask 'what happened to Skara Brae', the answer might well be the mundane 'they moved slightly further inland'.

Both Brodgar and Stenness have been ret-conned by later invaders, historians, and weavers of folktales as being places of mythical and ritual practice, of magical ceremonies and archaeological observatories, as sites of this age and provision often are. In truth, we don't yet know; we're still working them out.

All three of these sites, together with a fourth, the cairn and grave at Maeshowe, and a further series of scattered ancient solitary stones, cairns, and brochs in the area, make up the 'Heart of Neolithic Orkney' a UNESCO World Heritage Site. But such sites aren't limited to just this part of Orkney Mainland – the island of Rousay, not far off the coast of Mainland here, has many many such ruins (mainly cairns) and is a worthwhile journey on its own. Or will be once covid regulations have relaxed – the reason I didn't visit Rousay is because pretty much all the sites on there, like Maeshowe on Mainland, are 'indoors' (or otherwise covered) and on my visit were therefore closed. Still, it gives me an excuse to go back.

When it comes to more recent history, Orkney, along with neighbouring Shetland, was a Viking (and, subsequently, Norwegian) state until as recently as 1469, a couple of hundred years after the Outer Hebrides came under the control of the Scottish Kings. In this case, though, it seems they were offered as a dowry by King Christian I of Norway & Denmark (he had been King of Sweden too for a few years but that union hadn't worked out), to persuade King James III of Scotland to marry his daughter Margaret. That she was 13 and he about 17 at the time proves that this marriage was more about power than about love. Well, money, actually, it appears to have been more-or-less a tax/debt write-off scheme. Regardless, it seems that the islands were offered more as a security deposit than an actual payment, and would be returned to the Norwegian throne once King Christian came up with the necessary cash. He never did. A couple of years later James III formally took control of the islands personally. It must be said however that the feeling amongst historians is he probably would have done this anyway at some point. That said, there are still some people who feel the Scottish takeover was strictly speaking illegal.

Interestingly, in the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014, while the Outer Hebrides voted against independence they did so only with 53.4% of the vote. Orkney was the council area in Scotland with the highest No vote, with 67.2%. Some believe this was because they'd rather be independent themselves and they'd find it easier to get that independence from London rather than Edinburgh. Others have said, in a similar vein, Orkney's so far from both that wherever the capital is, it probably doesn't matter.

Note that with an independent Scotland, Edinburgh would be the nearest national capital from Kirkwall. As it stands, and discounting Tórshavn (pronounced Torsholm) because the Faeroes aren't independent, the nearest national capital is in fact ... Dublin, about 660km away. Oslo (at 780km) is nearer than London (850km) though.

The main obvious difference though between the Outer Hebrides and Orkney is shape. The Outer Hebrides are basically a line of islands that make it easy to explore in succession, but which does mean you don't have much a choice about which islands to visit. The only way to get between them is by the 'spine route', the long road and ferry hops that connect them all together. Orkney is more of a rectangle; there's one large island (known as Mainland) in the south-centre, and the other islands are kind of scattered around it. This means it's a lot easier to pick and choose which islands to visit.

Getting around Orkney is thus relatively easy, in a sense. There's both ferries and flights that connect them all to Mainland, that operate between once and about seven times a day, depending on route and season. The downside is, aside from a couple of specific weekly services, for the most part you have to go back to Mainland rather than being able to go between the islands directly. The only exception to this is some close islands that are served by the same routings (eg ferries taking in the islands around Rousay), but even here sometimes they only go in one direction so doing return journeys is logistically tricky.

This is true for both planes and ferries. One of the few things about Orkney that most people know is it's the location of the world's shortest scheduled aeroplane journey – between the islands of Westray and Papa Westray. The straight-line distance between the two terminal buildings (for a given definition of building) is

3km, and the flight time is around 90-100 seconds. The reason the flight exists though is because it's one leg of a three leg loop from Mainland; in the mornings the flight visits Westray first, while the afternoon leg visits Papa Westray first. I did not take this flight – I took the ferry from Westray to Papa Westray in the company of 6 schoolkids, one of whom sounded like they had a Northern Ireland accent – and my flight back from Papa Westray was direct to Mainland, on an 8-seater propeller plane that never got that high, and which felt like I was basically sitting in an airborne minibus – the pilot and co-pilot were literally in front of me and I could see the entire flight dashboard panel. I did however stand at Papa Westray airfield and watch an afternoon flight to Westray; it's the only time I've ever seen an entire flight from take-off to landing. Probably the only time I ever will.

I had intended to take that route at some point, headed back to Mainland, but the reason I didn't was because of one of the major problems with transportation in Orkney. More so with flights than ferries, but both are affected by the weather. Because all the airfields on the islands are visual navigation only, it's only safe to land on them in clear weather. Orkney gets a lot of fog; I ended up effectively trapped on Papa Westray for three days when I'd only intended to spend a night there. Technically I could have left by ferry, but because of Covid restrictions, Orkney Ferries had a policy of only pre-booked journeys being allowed on the main routes (ie the facility to buy a ticket on board wasn't currently an option). And their telephone line isn't staffed at weekends. And the ferry terminal on Westray is some 8km away from everywhere, at the very southern end of the island. I felt it was a long way to go to be turned away. And besides, Papa Westray's nice enough.

It's not very big. It's 7km north-south and at no point wider than 2km east-west. It does, however, have a surprising amount to see for such a small island. According to the map it even has a golf course, although I walked past the site of it three times (it's on the road to the ferry jetty) and, listeners, it does not have a golf course.

What it does have though is definitely worth the visit, and, surprisingly perhaps given its size, there's enough to keep you busy for longer than my original overnight stop would have given me. My plan had been to leave Papa Westray on the Saturday and overnight on another island (Eday), but the islands aren't going anywhere and Eday can wait for another trip.

The name is assumed to be Norse in origin. 'Westray', the name of the neighbouring island, means, er, 'West Island', which fits as it's on the west side of the archipelago – while not geographically the most westerly island, certainly the only thing west of it is open sea (the others are a bit further south), while the prefix 'Papa' is believed to refer to a settlement of monks there. There's a couple of other islands, both in Orkney and in neighbouring archipelagos, that have Papa or a related word in their name; there are many islands across the British Islands in general where monks have settled, eg Iona in the Inner Hebrides, and of course Lindisfarne (Holy Island) off the coast of Northumberland. And there are a couple of chapels and churches on the island indicating a long religious history, and while one (St Tredwell's Chapel) is little more than a ruinous foundation of stones on a mound by a lake, another (dedicated to St Boniface), dates from about the 12th Century and has been recently restored; indeed it's still used for services occasionally. It stands on the edge of the island, around halfway up, kind of behind the airfield and looking out towards Westray.

Although quite some distance away from the village now, the site of St Boniface church seems to have been the centre of a small ... I'm not going to say 'settlement' but certainly there's evidence of settled life here going back millennia even prior to the church. Indeed a short walk south from the church along the cliffs brings you to the Knap of Howar. This is a sunken house, very similar to those seen at Skara Brae but several centuries older – indeed at the time of podding the Wikipedia article on "List of oldest known surviving buildings" has the Knap of Howar as the seventh oldest surviving building in the world, dating from around 3700 BC. You couldn't realistically live in it now – for one thing it doesn't have a roof – but it's still preserved enough for you to clearly be able to see how it would have looked when it was habited. As it's sunken into the land, the walls are stable and clearly visible. There are in fact two buildings here, separate but linked; one was certainly the house, the other may have been a neighbouring house room, or it may have been a workshop. Presumably, just as at Skara Brae, there would have been other, similar, buildings nearby that may have been lost to the sea. The site itself is vaguely signposted from the main road, down a farm track and over a field, with just a small info board telling you all about it. Also, unlike at Skara Brae, you can wander inside the houses and get a feel for how they would have felt for the people who genuinely did live there – though at 1m90 tall I'd probably get annoyed at the incredibly low lintel above the front door. It's fenced off from the rest of the farmer's field in a small grassed area, so for those of you with a penchant for really getting hands-on with history, perfect to wild camp

next to. I'm not sure of the legal implications of wild camping at a scheduled ancient monument, but I guess as long as you don't damage the site, you'll be fine. Although I could have done, I did not do this.

Instead, I was staying what amounts to Papa Westray's 'hub' - though it calls itself a hostel, it serves additionally as the island's shop, cafe, pub, entertainment centre, and information booth. On the Saturday (the day I should have left) there was a coffee-and-cake gathering in the middle of the day (and the cakes were lovely, may I add), and then in the evening they opened the bar and had live music on. No singing, because of Covid regulations, but it felt rather strange after so long to even be indoors, drinking, listening to music, with lots of other people. And the place was crowded. There's only 90 people who live on the island, and even though a couple of other people there were 'tourists' like me, I'd say a good percentage of the residents were in that room that night. There was even, oddly, a film crew from the French TV channel France Cinq, who were apparently doing a documentary about a local pilot.

The main draw these days to Papa Westray though is the wildlife. At the northern end of the island is a large hill, called, impressively, North Hill, and it's around 50m in height, so not that large a hill really but given it descends to the sea on three sides by sheer cliffs, it certainly feels quite high. On top of the hill is a hut designed so you can sit and watch the birds fly by. Except on my visit, it was so foggy that I doubt you'd've been able to see a pterodactyl at 5 metres. Not that I'd have been able to recognise one even if I had, because you know my bird-watching skills and knowledge are roughly equal to that of a blind badger. In a bag. Dead. There's a footpath that goes along the cliffs at the base of the hill though that provides good viewing out to sea, and is the site of a small statue of a Great Auk, one of the most famous extinct bird species. Because we killed and ate them all. But this island would have been one of their better breeding grounds.

The neighbouring island of Westray also has a couple of cliffside footpaths, and, being a much bigger island, the setting and the views are pretty spectacular for a longer distance. The ferry from Mainland docks at the very south of the island, some 11km from the main village of Pierowall, and while there's a community bus service that links the two (it actually links with the ferry to Papa Westray which docks a couple of km north of Pierowall), but I decided to walk the island. I figured I had the best part of two days to see a lot of the scenery and I'd heard it was worth the time to explore.

While the bulk of the southern half of the island was spent on the main road (with the occasional car and tractor passing), I did wander off to the so-called Castle O'Burrian on the east coast not far from the ferry terminal. It's not a castle, it's a rock stack, but its steep sides resemble those of a castle, I guess. In case you don't know, a rock stack is a ... theoretical island of hard rock. They're often formed out of cliff erosion, where the sea erodes the softer rock around it, leaving a column of harder rock isolated from the mainland. They're generally quite small, and usually have sheer cliffs; not habitable by humans (though many have been used in the past as monkish hermitages), but incredibly popular with seabirds. The coastline of Scotland as a whole is littered with them - as I mentioned in the Outer Hebrides post, there's many around St Kilda which is why those islands in particular are home to so many North Atlantic seabirds. In Orkney the common birds are skuas and puffins. Lots of puffins. One of the few birds I can probably recognise, give they're quite distinctive.

More of the same can be found along the west coast of Westray. There's a footpath from Kirbest, halfway up, to Noup Head lighthouse at the very NW end of the island. There's a couple of tight sections, especially near the north end where there's a spot where one slip could mean a very rapid descent and the path is little more than your own walking style in width. There is a fence though. Occasionally. But much of the path is open country, grass with occasional flat boulders, easy walking where you can be as far away from the cliff as you feel comfortable with. And while steering clear from the edge is generally preferred, obviously the views from closer are quite stunning - rock stacks, birds, deep narrow valleys and inlets, and of course a view right out to sea where at times you can hopefully see whales and other sealife.

There's also enough spots on the path where you can set up a tent and just camp, and go to bed watching the sun set over the ocean. I didn't make it that far on my first of the two days I was on Westray; instead I camped out in the graveyard around the ruins of an old church - the Cross Kirk - halfway up the island on a south-facing coast near Kirbest. I'd planned to reach the western coastal path but the path to the Kirk was horrendously overgrown and by the time I reached the ruins I was knackered. I'd never camped in a graveyard before, but it felt fine. I just had a bit of trouble finding a truly flat piece of ground because, well, bodies. The church dates from the 12th Century and is a scheduled ancient monument. [cough] Given the population of Westray is just less than 600, most of whom live several miles from the Kirk, and given that the path both sides

was theoretical rather than absolute, I figured no-one was going to shout at me.

As for watching the sun set over the ocean, well that's what I set out to do. However, the Kirk is 59° 16' N, and this was late May. Sunset itself was around 10pm and it was light enough to read outside for the best part of a further hour. Not gonna lie, I got bored and went to bed first.

The reason I stayed longer on Papa Westray than I'd intended was because by the time I'd hiked up the path to Noup Head Lighthouse, then across the north of the island to Pierowall, I was pretty well dead. I think, with hindsight, I'd taken too much in my backpack (in terms of weight it was probably more than I'd had on my Hike Across Great Britain, though in part this was because I was headed to Glasgow & Edinburgh after my trip to meet with my friend Laura where we were going to see if we wanted to live in either city, and I was carrying two bottles of Nigerian Guinness for her to try. As it turns out, not only was she unimpressed with it, but the very first night she spent in the flat last week, we ordered West African takeaway food including three bottles of the stuff. Sometimes I wonder why I bother lol.

Anyway.

A similar path exists along the west coast of Mainland Orkney, from the settlement of Stromness all the way up to Skara Brae. Stromness itself is a small town with a nice-looking vibe; many of the streets are cobbled and have the feel of side-alleys. I stayed in a campsite on the southern edge of town and right by the sea lane where the ferries to Thurso and nearby islands like Hoy and Graemsay pass through; the coastal footpath gives you a good view of the edge of these islands before turning northwards. Although it feels less remote – you're never too far from a farm – it's in no way less spectacular. The most noted area is near the settlement of Yesnaby, where there are a couple of huge and imposing rock stacks as well as the ruins of WW2-era artillery. Similar wartime ruins exist near Stromness, in fact – the Ness Battery which was used in both WW1 and WW2, and was the site of several huge guns and some accommodation, and is now a tourist attraction.

And this, at the start of this episode I talked about the ancient history of Orkney, but of course there's a lot of more recent history too. The area of sea to the south of Mainland, penned in by the islands of Hoy, Flotta, and South Ronaldsay (amongst others), is known as 'Scapa Flow'. Because of its location, protected from the wilds of the sea by so many islands, and its size, it's served as a natural harbour since Viking times, but it really came to the fore in the wars of the 20th Century. It was used as the main northern base for the British Navy in World War One, with defensive fortifications added on the surrounding coasts. Further defences were added in World War Two after, very early on in the war, a German U-boat had the audacity to sneak in and sink a couple of British battleships.

Some of the defences are still visible and, would you believe, even used today, albeit not for the same purpose. To prevent further incursions by enemy vessels, a huge amount of rock and concrete was set in the sea to essentially block access to Scapa Flow. These became known as 'Churchill Barriers', after the then Prime Minister who ordered their construction, and they formed a wall between the islands of Orkney Mainland, Burray, South Ronaldsay, and a couple of smaller islands in between. There's now a road on them, so, just like in the Outer Hebrides, you can drive between the islands on a causeway. There's no pavement though, and the road is much busier than the one at either end of South Uist.

Much of the construction was done by Italian prisoners of war. Over 1,300 were brought here from Africa and they were set to work. Interestingly, on one of the small islands they were housed on at the time, they built a small Catholic chapel out of standard-issue military prefab Nissen Huts (the kind that, oh, you'd absolutely know them if you saw them. They look like half a very long cylinder). Although not fully completed by the time the war ended (not unlike the Churchill Barriers if we're being honest), it was deemed worthy enough to be preserved rather than dismantled, and now serves as one of the most popular tourist attractions in Orkney as a whole.

The reason is not (just) because of its history, but also, I guess through a combination of having a group of people with nothing else to do, and them wanting to make the best of a bad situation, being incredibly ornately designed and decorated inside, with lots of well-painted frescoes and design features. This is doubly impressive considering the tools and equipment they had to hand when they were building it – making unusual and unexpected use of food cans and parts of old cars.

And, replying to Clazz who you'll hear from in literally three paragraphs' time, it was the first place I visited on

my first full day on the islands. I arrived at 11pm on the Tuesday evening, and, after a little bit of hassle getting in to my hostel, spent two nights in Kirkwall. On that first day I went to the chapel and then to Skara Brae and the Ring of Brodgar, while on the second (the Thursday) I spent the morning looking around Kirkwall before getting the afternoon ferry over to Westray.

Kirkwall's quite a pleasant town. There's enough shops and services there to mean that trips to the larger towns of Inverness or Aberdeen don't need to be undertaken for everyday needs, and it acts as the central hub for the ferries so it's an easy day trip for weekly shopping if you live on one of the islands like Stronsay or Westray. Probably not North Ronaldsay though – that island is quite remote even for Orkney, and ferries and even planes are regularly cancelled due to weather. Kirkwall also has a couple of museums and a cathedral (no, that does not mean Kirkwall is a city, for reasons well-attested previously on this podcast), dedicated to the Viking Earl St Magnus, who was betrayed and executed by his cousin. Magnus' nephew took revenge a few years later and built the cathedral in his honour. Next to the cathedral are the remains of the Bishop's Palace and Earl's Palace. The Bishop's Palace came first, being built around the same time as the cathedral (we're talking the mid-1100s), and originally housed the bishop, while the Earl's Palace was built several centuries later, in the very early 1600s, by Patrick Stewart, 2nd Earl of Orkney, who by all accounts was a bit of an asshole and not at all like his much later, and unrelated, actor namesake. Who is unlikely to ever be executed for treason, as the 2nd Earl was. Both palaces had fallen into ruin by the end of the 17th Century.

According to current canonical lore, Kirkwall is also the birthplace of Groundskeeper Willie from the long-running Simpsons cartoon. Although he doesn't have an Orcadian accent.

So, to sum up, there's 70 islands in Orkney; I'd planned to visit maybe 6 or 7 of them, and in the end I saw 3. While this might feel like a failure to many people, I think I'm comfortable with what I saw and I certainly had experiences and adventures I wasn't expecting, and I think that's a perfect example of the way I travel and how I like to travel. And if you're wondering about whether I feel slightly awkward doing a podcast about an archipelago I spent only a week on and explored only a few of the islands of, here's a contribution from my friend Clazz, who blogs under the name of 'An Orcadian Abroad'. She grew up in Orkney, and spent many years of her life there.

She's never been to Eday either.

Clazz:

Hi. My name's Clazz, and I write a travel blog called 'An Orcadian Abroad'. An Orcadian is someone who comes from Orkney, so I've been asked to talk a bit about what it was like growing up on the islands. So, I'm going to take you right back to the beginning, because I wasn't actually born in Orkney. This doesn't actually explain my accent or lack thereof, but until a couple of years ago, Orkney's hospital was actually really small, and if they thought there might be any complications with the birth, you'd be flown down to Aberdeen hospital, so a lot of people in Orkney were actually born in Aberdeen. So this is what happened to my mum, which is why I took my first flight at about a week old when a thankfully healthy but very tiny me was flown back to Orkney. Not much has changed there as I'm still only about 5'1".

So, growing up in Orkney was great in a lot of ways as there's always been very little in the way of crime, so as a kid I had a lot of freedom. I grew up on a farm, no-one locked their cars or house doors, and there was always a fantastic community, there were always things going on, local events to attend. It's not quite an 'everyone knows everyone' type of scenario as Orkney has a population of about 20,000 people, which surprises a lot of people I meet. However the island I grew up on only had about a thousand people so it was a pretty close-knit community. And this became really apparent to me when I moved back a few years ago and kept bumping into people from my childhood, like old teachers, my old hairdresser, old shopkeepers, and they were all like really happy to see me and see how I was getting on, so in a lot of ways it was like I'd never left.

The only downside really was how remote it is. I was quite lucky in that I grew up on one of the islands that's connected to the Orkney Mainland, so I wasn't as cut-off as a lot of kids were. So in secondary school, the outer island kids stay in a school hostel all week, so it's almost like a boarding school for them, and they only saw their families at the weekends. Luckily I didn't have that, but I did have to get a bus to school at 7.30am [laughter].

As I grew older, the isolation became really apparent when I started getting into music, and the only way to really go to gigs was to take, like, a 300 mile pilgrimage to Glasgow, so I guess it sets you up quite well for independent travel. And people also take regular weekend trips to Aberdeen for shopping, because Orkney only has a couple of national shops. And although there's a good cinema, they tend to only get new films like a month after they come out, but, I mean, it's just sacrifices you have to make I guess. But one thing was that I never took any foreign holidays as a kid because with the additional costs of getting on and off the islands, it wasn't really a luxury that we couldn't afford – it definitely makes things like that so much more expensive, not to mention longer. I lived in England for a while, and it would take me an entire day to get up there to visit family and friends, so that wasn't ideal either. I think it's really the type of place you need to accept the lifestyle for if you were going to move there, and Orcadians notoriously don't really like change, or people trying to change a lot of things about the place, so if you wanted to get away from it all but also have it all, then Orkney's probably not going to be the place for you.

But one great thing about moving back is that I realised how much I'd taken for granted growing up there. So I'd visited most of the main sights a lot, but it was a great excuse to explore some more. So, the three places I always recommend to people are Skara Brae, which is Orkney's most popular attraction, but that's for a very good reason. I mean how often do you come across a five thousand year old village where the houses still have stone furniture in? It's just mind-blowing to me to be honest, and in all my travels I've never come across anything quite like it. And when I was a kid you used to actually be able to walk around through the houses as well, so that was really cool.

Another place I adore, which for some reason I never visited as a kid, but I guess because it was on the other side of the island to me, but the Broch of Birsay which is a tidal island that you can walk out to at low tide. There's also a Viking broch on the island because apparently you can't walk ten yards in Orkney without there being some history, but my favourite thing about the island is just how wild it is – it feels like you're on the edge of the world, and it's probably my favourite place in the world for wave watching. And there are puffins in the summer so that always helps. It's probably the best place in Orkney to see puffins as well.

And finally, I recommended this place to Ian too so I hope he enjoyed it – The Italian Chapel. So this was built by Italian prisoners of war who were kept in a camp on one of the islands, and they were employed to build the Churchill Barriers, which now connect many of the islands to the Orkney Mainland, including the island I grew up on. But it seems, despite being prisoners of war, they had a pretty good life in Orkney as many of them have returned to visit since. Anyway the chapel itself was built with two metal Nissan huts and whatever scraps they could find, and considering that, it is just an amazing place and astonishingly beautiful inside as well, so I always recommend that people visit that.

But really, there are endless things to do, and I've come to realise that more and more, because even after moving back there and seeing a lot more, I've now moved away again, and I've realised I've still barely explored any of the outer isles. And I think visitors are always surprised by just how much there is to do, because a lot of people just come for a day, or a couple of days, but you could honestly spend weeks there and not run out of things to do. But it's an amazing place to live; obviously there are some drawbacks and a certain type of lifestyle you have to accept. I don't live there any more but it will always be home to me.

{standard section separation jingle}

Well that's about all for this pod. Join me in another two weeks for another venture beyond the brochure. Until then, , and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro theme tune, same as intro, just a different bit of it}

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure was written, presented, edited, and produced in the Glasgow studio by The Barefoot Backpacker. Music in this episode was “Walking Barefoot On Grass (Bonus)” by Kai Engel, which is available via the Free Music Archive, and used under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}